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Alice in Jamesland

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Alice in Jamesland

The Story of Alice Howe Gibbens James

SUSAN E. GUNTER

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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Dedicated to the memory of
Alexander Robertson James
and Frederika James
and to Michael James

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Introduction

I FIRST DISCOVERED ALICE HOWE GIBBENS JAMES, a vibrant woman who played a key role in the lives of two famous American geniuses, psychologist and philosopher William James and his younger brother writer Henry James, as a possible biographical subject when I transcribed her unpublished letters for my first book, *Dear Munificent Friends: Henry James's Letters to Four Women*. As I looked further into available archival sources, however, I discovered that while the remaining material was provocative, Alice and her descendants had destroyed most of her letters and diaries. In 1999 I abandoned the project.

During the course of my research for my two editions of Henry James's letters, I met Roberta A. Sheehan, a William James scholar, and learned that she had access to over three hundred letters written by Alice as well as Alice's father's 1859 shipboard diary from the William James III of Santa Fe Collection. When Dr. Sheehan learned of my interest in Alice, she allowed me to read these valuable documents, which are deposited at Harvard's Houghton Library. As I read over Alice's letters, I realized that while gaps still existed in the record I had more than enough material to write her biography.

Understanding her life reveals new insights into the Jameses, a frequently

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analyzed family constellation. One way to understand an important historical figure (in this case, figures) is through the lens of a nearby observer. As Henry James claimed in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, an intelligent observer, the *ficelle*, provides the best narrative point of view. Alice is that ficelle for the Jameses.

According to a recent biography of William James, his wife, Alice Howe Gibbens, was central to his work.[1] William James believed that one cannot understand a philosophy unless one understands the philosopher's temperament. In his case, knowing his wife allows further understanding of who he was. His philosophical theories postulate an overflow both of empirical evidence and in the way we conceptualize reality. Part of the overflow in his life was his close relationship with Alice, a relationship that has not yet been fully explored. The couple's extant letters to one another, her many letters to her children, and Henry James's and sister Alice James's letters to her all show her key role in her marriage and in the James family. She spent long evenings with her husband taking dictation and reading aloud, steadied him emotionally, provided a lively family life that became a rich source for his renowned text *The Principles of Psychology*, and encouraged him to investigate spirituality and religion. William sometimes referred to her maturing intellect: she was always abreast of his evolving projects and a valued fellow reader. Current attention to him reveals the richness of his ideas, which Alice called his "Truth." She believed his work would someday change intellectual history, and her relentless drive for his success helped make that event come true.

Not only does she cast light on William's daily life and his evolving work, Alice holds a mirror up to the complex, brilliant James family. She played a key role in facilitating the relationship between William and Henry, working steadily to keep them in touch with one another. The triangular relationship involving Henry, William, and Alice evades traditional binary oppositions, but it provides a rich vein for a biographer. After her husband's death she became an important friend for Henry. She had a loving, rewarding relationship with the aging Henry James Sr., a minor public figure in his day, and she supported the talented but troubled youngest James brother, Robertson. Moreover, the letters between her and her sister-in-law Alice, today a feminist icon, suggest that the two women became valued friends, together illuminating William's character. Alice

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Howe Gibbens James was a steadfast center for this idiosyncratic family, although sometimes she was nearly overwhelmed by its demands.

Some earlier biographies of James family members, most notably those of Henry, Alice, Garth, and Robertson, are psychoanalytic in nature, revealing important insights. While it is true that James family members were frequently ill and depressed, not the least of them William, the group also had strengths, including humor and a great sensitivity to their cultural milieu. In Alice's case it is not possible to write another psychoanalytic biography, given the wanton destruction of her and William's letters to one another. However, conclusions are possible concerning her character and her positioning within the family. She was so fundamentally sound that she brought out the group's healthier qualities.

Who was Alice Howe Gibbens, the woman who married William James? An idealistic and fundamentally serious young woman, she was uniquely suited to join this clan, as she brought psychological soundness and unshakeable personal convictions to her union with the Jameses. A bright woman who lacked formal education beyond high school, she welcomed the opportunity to expand her education through her immersion in William's philosophy and Henry's fiction. She possessed a highly developed ethical sense, derived from religious teachings (Congregational and Swedenborgian) and from antebellum America's antinomian, perfectionist credos. All her life she followed the natural arc of nineteenth-century humanitarian movements, many of them in support of have-nots. By age ten she was a devoted abolitionist; at age twenty-five a member of Boston's Radical Club; in her thirties a supporter of the labor union strikers and anarchists involved in the Haymarket Square Riot; in her forties a fan of liberal British prime minister William Gladstone; and during her final years a committed supporter of Italian anarchists and accused murderers Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, even visiting them in prison. Though over time she occasionally manifested elitist attitudes, she never completely gave up her commitment to social reform or her drive to educate herself. A voracious reader all her life, when she was nearly seventy she enrolled in nursing classes to prepare herself as an international humanitarian aid worker, a role she longed to assume. Her letters vividly illustrate her ongoing personal development and growth. While Alice Howe Gibbens James followed nineteenth-century traditional paths

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of wife and mother, her story providing insights into what such roles entailed for upper-middle-class women, within those boundaries she kept her humanitarian beliefs, which evolved as she encountered experiences, finally acting upon them at the end of her life in pragmatic fashion.

This narrative focuses on Alice's daily life and her interactions with James family members, set against the backdrop of larger cultural and historical events: New England small-town life, the abolitionist movement, the Nicaragua passage, the California gold rush, Yankee occupation of the South during the Civil War and the subsequent cotton fraud scandal, expatriate life in Europe after the Civil War, the Haymarket Square Riot, the *Dreyfus* case, Queen Victoria's funeral, the San Francisco earthquake, World War I, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, and other seminal events. This approach gives the James family and Alice greater historical resonance. At times the story Alice tells conflicts with other accounts of the Jameses, as for the most part I have presented events through her point of view. I mediate her view through other sources, however, including family correspondence and diaries, because many of her extant letters to her children present a generally optimistic view of events. Combining her insights with other sources and interpretations yields rich readings of Alice and this complex clan. Now that her letters are available to others, future scholars will be able to augment, verify, and further interpret these valuable primary documents.

Initially, I believed that Alice was victimized by the patriarchal values held by Henry James Sr. and by his eldest son, William. But as I learned more about her and the critical role she played within the family, I realized that she lost none of her own strength when she married. While a demanding husband and five children submerged her at times, she maintained her inner balance. By some lights she could be called an opportunist. She was relatively poor as a young woman, so marrying into an upper-middle-class family gave her greater opportunity. In addition, the marriage allowed her a wider scope for refining and developing her ethical understanding, because she knew that William was a man of principle. And her marriage, though often stormy, was fulfilling. William James loved her passionately.

Biographies, while factually based, are always stories, re-creations of what might have happened. There were stories all around Alice, stories of Jameses with blighted lives and Jameses whose genius revealed itself

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in varied ways. Her story is one of moral conviction, work, renunciation, and passion, the fascinating tale of a woman sometimes nearly eclipsed by those around her who retained enough of her own identity to script her tale in letters. In the autumn of 1907 William James gave a talk at the Harvard Annex, Radcliffe College. Alice was in the audience that day, and she wrote to Henry, by then her confidant, of her feelings.

> He [William] gave a most exquisite little address to the Association of College Alumnae at Radcliffe on the test of the higher education "The power to know a good man when you see him." It was wise, impressive and exquisitely formed.
>
> I thought as I listened to him that it was the only test which I have ever successfully passed—but perhaps I flatter myself and I was just born with a vocation for Jameses![2]

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I Stirrings

ALICE HOWE GIBBENS WAS BORN on 5 February 1849 in a beautifully proportioned Federalist Greek Revival home on King Oak Hill in Weymouth, Massachusetts. She was the first of Eliza Webb Gibbens and Dr. Daniel Lewis Gibbens's three daughters. Her mother came from a long, respectable line of Weymouth Whites and Webbs, her father from a Boston Irish Protestant family.

In 1849 Weymouth, formerly called Wessaguscus, was a patriarchal New England village thirteen miles southeast of Boston that was slowly being transformed by the shoe-manufacturing industry.[1] The community prided itself on having invented the town meeting, a particular form of New England local governance that has been viewed as the purest form of democracy. Alice's maternal ancestors played responsible roles in the town. One ancestor helped make the rules for managing swine running at large and for protecting the alewives, the small fish that swarmed the town's Back and Fore rivers, important matters in an economy based on farming and fishing. Her maternal grandfather, lawyer Christopher Webb, had been a fence viewer (making sure neighbors took care of their sides of a fence), a state senator, a representative to the Massachusetts General Court, and a selectman. Also, as overseer of the town almshouse he ensured that the poor had their daily ration of ale and cider.

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Living and dying in the same Congregational parish, Alice's ancestors led narrow lives of service, piety, and rectitude. The faded tombstone in North Weymouth Cemetery to Alice's great-great-grandfather testifies to the beliefs that ruled the community:

> In
> Memory of
> Capt. JAMES WHITE
> Who departed this life
> March the 1st 1793:
> As corn maturely ripe is gather'd home
> So his remains are brought into the tomb
> To sleep in silence till that glorious day,
> When Christ his light shall roll the front away.

Eliza Putnam Webb, Alice's mother, was a quiet, devout young woman who shunned public gatherings, attending only church functions and funerals. Somehow she met Bostonian Daniel Lewis Gibbens Jr., perhaps in neighboring Braintree, where Daniel's father had clerked in a retail store before moving to Boston to open his own establishment. Daniel Lewis Gibbens Sr. became a successful merchant, a pillar of Boston's First Congregational Church, a colonel in the Boston militia, and a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. His son Daniel Gibbens graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1847.

On 28 October of that same year Old North Congregational Church minister Joshua Emery married Daniel Gibbens and Eliza Putnam Webb. It was a union of polar opposites. A boisterous extrovert, Daniel was reputed to have been a wild, hard-drinking youth; he and his brothers caused their respectable parents considerable worry. Eliza, on the other hand, was grave and gentle, a woman ill suited to live with such a burly, excitable man. In 1848 Gibbens was admitted to the Massachusetts Medical Board. He became Weymouth's physician, and the couple established residence in North Weymouth in the home traditionally occupied by the town's doctor. The large, comfortable, post-and-beam house had an imposing front porch bordered by four two-story-high columns. It boasted many shuttered windows and four fireplaces, two up and two down. A white

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marble mantel decorated with an ornate bow topped the parlor fireplace, and a narrow, steep, curving staircase led from the parlor to the upstairs bedrooms. At an elevation of 163 feet the house commanded an impressive view of the Fore River and Boston Harbor. The King Oak and Queen Oak, both hundreds of years old, dominated the property.

The Weymouth of Alice's childhood was densely wooded with oak, red cedar, hemlock, beech, wild cherry, buttonwood, and tupelo. Berry bushes and vines grew everywhere, and flowers bloomed through the mild springs and summers: orchid, lady's slipper, violet, saxifrage, aster, arbutus, and hepatica. Even the rocky ledges were colorful, painted with spreading lichen.

When she was old enough, Alice rode with her father in the doctor's coupé, a horse-drawn buggy, when he called on his patients. Nineteenth-century small-town doctors were an integral part of the community: there were no medical specialists. Dr. Gibbens was a diagnostician, internist, surgeon, gynecologist, obstetrician, oncologist, psychiatrist—the list was nearly endless. Mid-nineteenth-century doctors often prescribed bloodletting, cupping, purging, and herbal remedies, depending in part on the community's beliefs. Gibbens's success in treating patients rested largely in his ability to inspire confidence, as many rural people preferred folk-based treatments that had no basis in scientific fact.[2] His medical degree from Harvard provided his formal credentials, but that was not enough. He had to convince his patients he could cure them. Perhaps it helped to bring his pretty little daughter along with him.

Alice loved her trips with her father, inventing an imaginary playmate, "Johnny Greene," an engaging boy who accompanied them. As the township was long and narrow, about nine miles long and two and a half miles wide, their trips took hours. Through her father's work Alice became acquainted with illness and death early in life. At age five she went to a playmate's funeral. Eliza Gibbens wanted her daughter to see "how completely my little friend had gone away."[3] Both parents encouraged her to view life realistically, a trait that would serve her well.

Alice's father settled into Weymouth quickly, promising to follow the path of his wife's proper ancestors. His marriage to the daughter of the Webbs and Whites allowed him an entrée into the community. In 1849 he was appointed to a committee formed to petition the legislature for a

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boundary division in the town. By 1850 he had taken a leading role in that civic group. In 1851 he was on the town school committee, chaired by Joshua Emery. Prominent community service could do nothing but help his medical practice. On 11 June of that same year Eliza Gibbens gave birth to a second daughter, Mary Sherwin. Gibbens seemed destined to a successful career and an agreeable small-town life. While the family attended Weymouth's Old North Congregational Church, Daniel Gibbens took both of his daughters to be baptized in his father's Boston church, Alice on 29 November 1849 and Mary on 19 April 1852, facilitating future ties for the girls with his own family.[4]

But despite her father's initial efforts to conform to Weymouth, Alice was not to have the predictable Yankee girlhood her mother had enjoyed. Not long after his arrival Dr. Gibbens resumed his former bad habits. Reportedly, he began to drink again. Although he was a sociable and intelligent man, his flaw was a damning one in antebellum America. Temperance was just one platform in the Evangelical United Front, but it sometimes aroused strong community feelings.[5] In 1826, at a meeting moderated by Alice's grandfather Christopher Webb, a strong advocate of the temperance movement, Weymouth passed an ordinance that the temperance committee should "admonish any persons in said town who are addicted to intemperance and endeavor to effect a reformation and if that shall prove ineffectual then to report such persons to the Selectmen that their names may be posted and all persons forbidden to sell them any spirituous liquors as the law directs."[6]

Evidently, Dr. Gibbens could not control his addiction, so in 1854 Eliza and Daniel Gibbens and their daughters were forced to leave King Oak Hill. Eliza and Daniel's marriage began to fall apart. Dr. Gibbens moved in with family members in Wrentham, Massachusetts, and left his wife and daughters behind in Weymouth with the Webbs and Whites.[7] Besides losing his wife's companionship, he lost two beautiful daughters. When Alice was five and Mary three and a half, Eliza took them to Wrentham to have a daguerreotype made. They held hands for their portrait, two little girls wearing calico dresses with pink fabric bows at the shoulders and red beaded necklaces.[8] Alice lost her rides in the doctor's coupé and her companionship with her father. Her only remaining intimate male companion was Johnny Greene.

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In 1855 Alice's life changed dramatically again and, by her own account, for the better. The same bug—gold and the chance for a new life in the West—that had bitten so many New England men, including a Weymouth contingent, and lured them to California's gold fields bit Daniel Gibbens. Two of Eliza's brothers had already gone. The doctor decided to homestead in the Santa Clara Valley. Perhaps it was a way to reunite his family in a place where they could start over. He booked passage for all of them to California on a boat operated by Cornelius Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Company from New York down the Atlantic Coast to San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua, and across Nicaragua, a twelve-mile stretch, in horse- or mule-drawn coaches. From there they traveled on another boat up the Pacific Coast to San Francisco Bay.

According to extant records, Alice may have sailed on the *Northern Light*.[9] The Vanderbilt ships, all large boats, were notorious for their deplorable conditions. Provisions were purchased in New York and packed in ice, so before long passengers were served spoiled meat. Ships frequently carried more passengers than were listed, so sometimes they slept on cabin floors or benches or on deck to escape the stench below. Passengers were advised to bring along six dozen cooked eggs, ten pounds of crackers, one pitcher, two tumblers, one chair or camp stool, one dozen towels, one or more cakes of soap, and one life preserver. A contemporary newspaper account described a similar Vanderbilt ship, the *Ariel*, as a "'filthy, nasty, pigstie.'"[10]

Despite the terrible physical conditions on the ship, Alice had the chance to see a tropical wilderness, a world very different from the world she had seen from the doctor's coupé. Large sea turtles swam along the coast, and during the passage across Nicaragua she could see trees and plants with bright green foliage, "oranges, lemons, limes, pineapples, cocoanuts, bananas, and bread fruit," big aquanno (iguana) lizards, snakes, brilliant butterflies, bright-plumed birds, river sharks, and, best of all, monkeys swinging in the trees.[11] The Nicaraguans with their dark skin and straight black hair were altogether different from Weymouth natives.

One day the Vanderbilt boat anchored near Nicaragua's swampy marshes, and Alice witnessed a battle between filibusterer William Walker, an American desperado and profiteer, and his soldiers and the country's Legitimist forces.[12] The rest of her life she remembered her fear at seeing dead

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bodies lying deserted in the heat. Soon after the Walker skirmish cholera broke out on the ship. Dr. Gibbens knew of the danger of cholera—it can lead quickly to severe dehydration and death. The doctor boiled his family's drinking water and kept them inside until after sundown. No one was allowed to go ashore. One night Eliza went on deck to converse with a fellow passenger, huddling under her cloak to keep warm. That same night the woman died of cholera, only four hours after contracting the disease, and her body was slipped overboard. A few days later Eliza contracted the disease, the last passenger afflicted. She nearly died, but although her recovery was slow, it was complete.

After crossing Nicaragua the family set sail again, this time most likely on either the *Brother Jonathan*, the *Nevada*, the SS *Cortes*, or the SS *Sierra*.[13] The family reached San Francisco Bay with all alive. The Valley, as Alice called it, held countless riches, though none of them could be measured in gold. She thought she had found the paradise she had studied in Old North Sabbath school. Daniel Gibbens claimed a ranch in the Santa Clara Valley, just across the Arroyo San Antonio from Rancho San Antonio, south of the small settlement of Mountain View. Their homestead lay in a vale covered with coastal live oaks and sycamores, willows marking the streambeds. Deer, elk, and bears roamed the area.

Sometimes Alice and her sister Mary attended a little school not far from their home where Eliza's sister, Nannie Webb, taught them briefly.[14] Often, though, her busy parents left Alice to her own devices. She made new friends, one of them Katharine "Kate" Putnam, who remained a friend all her life. The girls played about the huge coastal oaks, where they shared a playhouse furnished with wooden plates and toys. Some days Alice trapped western quail and tried to make them her pets. Crests with four distinct feathers adorned their heads, and their plumage sported a rich mix of color. Usually, they nested on the ground under bushes or trees. With as many as twenty-four babies hatched in one nest, the young birds made easy prey for a determined child.

Once Dr. A. Kellogg, who lived in San Francisco, took Alice up Telegraph Hill, a magical visit for her. He explained the sights and the names of the plants that grew there. Later he wrote her a long letter full of nature lore and "quite the kind of letter that a man who has time on his hands may write to a little girl of seven by whom he has been charmed and whom

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he knows to be quick-minded and engagingly curious about everything around her."[15] Alice's years in California increased her natural eagerness to understand the world.

The Santa Clara Valley did not always seem like paradise to Daniel and Eliza. The rattlesnake that Eliza killed on her front doorstep sickened her. Moreover, Dr. Gibbens's weakness overtook him, and he started drinking again. More than one night he came home drunk and depressed, and Eliza had to hide his pistol and razors from him. Some nights he did not come home at all. Another evening a gang of toughs and derelicts, driven from San Francisco by a vigilante committee, peered in her window. She ran for her errant husband's pistol and placed it on the table beside her. Too afraid to go to bed, all night long she sat and sewed in her chair, her lamp burning.

On 23 January 1857, about a year after arriving in California, Eliza gave birth to her third daughter, Margaret Merrill. Some women pioneers had the help of Spanish midwives, and Dr. Gibbens could have helped his wife if he had been sober that day, but no record remains concerning the circumstances of Eliza's delivery. Her second sister's birth was a joyous event to Alice: it was as if an angel had come during the night.

But, like his doctoring, Daniel Gibbens's ranching venture failed, and not only because of his personal weaknesses: western landownership proved more complicated than he had anticipated. Land litigation was common in the 1850s and 1860s, especially for the large Spanish land grants. Most of them had never been surveyed. Boulders, streams, and large trees designated the boundaries, but these features altered over the years. The original grantees' lax methods of recording, transferring title, and selling land added to the confusion. Dr. Gibbens's claim to the ranch proved useless. By 1860 a family named Murphy had acquired his land after the Gibbenses returned to New England.[16]

Before she left for Weymouth, Alice buried her little china dog beneath a live oak tree. Many years later the oak was felled in a storm, cracking and splintering to reveal a child's toy in its heart.[17] Alice's son Henry read her burial of the loved dog as emblematic of her "ever generous self-immolations," but it may be that she simply wanted to leave part of herself behind. Alice immortalized her experience in a poem written in a childish hand entitled "The Valley." Its last stanza frames her farewell:

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And to the high mountains and the
Low green vallies I must bid a last
Fair well to the home I had loved so long fair well.

The next autumn Kate Putnam wrote to tell Alice that the only things left in their playhouse were their wooden plates.

While she must have felt the tension in her parents' relationship during her California years, Alice treasured her memories of Mountain View. Decades later, her daughter, her son-in-law, and her eldest son tried to find the Gibbens house but were unable to locate the site. Some of the great live oaks had been cleared, and the plain was dotted with orchards and market gardens. Nothing remained of Alice's heaven on earth.[18]

The return to Weymouth brought another breakup of Alice's family. The oppositions that had attracted Eliza Webb and Daniel Gibbens, her shy reserve and his uncontrollable conviviality, proved obstacles to marital compatibility. Not only was the marriage troubled, but the couple was nearly bankrupt after their California sojourn. Eliza and her daughters moved in with Eliza's mother, Susannah White Webb, in her one- and-a-half-story farmhouse near the Fore River, a house belonging to Great-grandmother Nancy White, who was still alive. It had a central chimney and brick ovens, and the railroad ran very close to their property.[19]

Temporarily, Daniel Gibbens went to Charlestown, the area near Boston where Bunker Hill is located. He wrote Alice letters about his neighbors, a goat, deer, a donkey, and a clever pony that would put its foot in a person's hand.[20] He urged his two older daughters to study botany and learn everything they could about plants by observing the shapes and textures of the leaves. While living in Charlestown he attended the Chauncey Street First Church with his mother, seeking solace from minister Rufus Ellis. Alice visited her father and her grandmother Mary Gibbens in Boston often during this separation. She remained deeply attached to her father despite his failings. During these separations Grandmother Gibbens adjured Alice and Mary to write to her son: "How often have you used your Pencils in notes to your Papa? I am certain, one hour once a fortnight devoted in writing to him would give your dear Father much pleasure, and like every other action of your lives, which affords another happiness,

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will also make you happy."[21] She also reminded her granddaughters to help their mother.

In Weymouth Alice returned to her former life, attending Old North Congregational Church and going to school. Evidently, she had lost nothing from her travels, because she was at the top of her class. Because of the family's difficult financial circumstances the Gibbens women had to make do for themselves most of the time with the help of one maid. Alice helped her mother with housework, sewing, and mending, as Mary Gibbens had advised. She kept happy memories of these times: one Christmas her uncle George Webb gave her a storybook entitled *Violet*, and she and Mary received dolls.

By age ten Alice had developed a social conscience and a sense of moral authority that remained with her all her life. Childrearing practices had changed during the shift from Puritan traditions to the reform period. Rather than punishing children to try to counteract their inherited depravity, evangelists encouraged parents to concentrate on their children's moral development. In some households this view persisted well into the 1850s, but only a few children became morally precocious.[22] Alice was one such child. Perhaps, too, her awareness of her father's weaknesses made her more sensitive to the plight of others.

Some of Alice's beliefs derived from her Congregationalist heritage. Congregationalists were descendents of the Separatists and Puritans who had settled the area. Each Congregational church governed itself, determining its affairs without interference from bishops or presbyteries. Congregations maintained a strong commitment to religious and civil liberties as well as to education. After the eighteenth century's Great Awakening, led by Jonathan Edwards, Congregational churches either kept to the Puritan tradition as Edwards had reenvisioned it or became Unitarian. Those congregations that remained within the Congregational wing became increasingly liberal as the nineteenth century unfolded, a number of them involved with abolitionist and antislavery movements.

After Alice read Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 best seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the ten-year-old girl became an ardent abolitionist and was stunned at John Brown's execution in 1859.[23] His raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry and subsequent conviction and hanging made him a martyr for antislavery advocates.[24] Before and during Alice's childhood Weymouth

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was a hotbed of abolitionist activity. William Lloyd Garrison made several speeches there, as did Wendell Phillips, and town forums hosted a variety of meetings on the topic of slavery. Even Frederick Douglass made an appearance there not long after his escape to the North.[25] When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Alice empathized with the soldiers who fought for this great moral cause. She decided to sleep on the floor because they slept on bare ground. Sometimes she shredded lint for bandages. Just as she once admired John Brown, she and her sister Mary now adored President Lincoln.

Led by such diverse spiritual crusaders as Garrison, Theodore Lane, and Arthur and Lewis Tappan, the abolitionist movement exerted great moral suasion in New England in the years before the Civil War, its impact on culture and society at least as great as its political influence. The movement was an outgrowth of Protestant evangelicalism, Romantic beliefs in the perfectibility of human nature and the subsequent ability to transform character, the new nation's belief in fundamental republican principles, Transcendentalism, the voluntary associations, and other cultural movements. For a time leaders like Garrison concluded that all human institutions, not just slavery, were based on coercion and thus corrupt. Some of these nonresistants, as they were called, supported a sort of Christian anarchism or antinomianism and demanded the end of all human government, substituting in its place a biblical millennium.[26] Other reformers sought a solution in communitarian movements, small self-contained cells that could be governed by moral principles.[27] Many of the early female abolitionists later became leaders of the first feminist movements. The fervor that characterized Alice's interest in the abolitionist movement remained with her all her life. Though she never became a feminist, she had been imprinted with a perfectionist sensibility.

Alice's solace in knowing that her father was nearby, even though he no longer lived with her, ended in the fall of 1859, when Daniel Gibbens took passage as ship's doctor on the *Manhattan* for Liverpool, England. During his journey he wrote to his girls and to his Gibbens relations but not to Eliza. His shipboard journal entries reveal that while he missed his three daughters intensely, he never mentioned his wife. Wrestling with his soul all the way to England and back, he found a temporary peace at

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sea. Outwardly gregarious, inwardly Daniel was a solitary metaphysical searcher, relying on the works of Emanuel Swedenborg and Prentice Mulford to comfort him.

Swedenborg was an important eighteenth-century Swedish scientist who later became an influential religious writer and mystic. He had a strong following in the mid-nineteenth century, his American advocates including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry James Sr. In fact, in 1845 Emerson called the era "the Age of Swedenborg."[28] Swedenborg's gentler, more optimistic theology provided some New Englanders with a welcome corrective to their native Puritanism. The official arm of Swedenborgianism in America was the New Church, and it fit nicely with antebellum sectarian movements like perfectionism and millennialism. It had an influence out of proportion to its size, as other deviations from mainstream Protestant beliefs could be traced in part to Swedenborgian impulses.[29] Mulford, a humorist, telepathist, and inspirational spiritual teacher, wrote books on living and natural religion that had wide appeal.

A compassionate physician, Gibbens followed Swedenborg's precept, expressed in a passage copied at the end of his diary: "Charity itself consists in acting justly and faithfully in whatever office, business, and employment a person is engaged, and with whomsoever he has any connection."[30] Those who do their work excellently, no matter what that work is, fulfill their purpose on earth. Gibbens dressed wounds, administered rhubarb oil to the seasick, and ordered gruel for weak passengers. He learned to understand and sometimes respect people from different backgrounds. He pitied the "ignorant Irishman" returning with his three motherless children to the old country who wished himself and his children dead. His refusal to wash or feed his ailing child bothered Gibbens, who feared the child would soon be with its mother. He empathized, too, with one old man named Murty who refused to go below deck at night because he thought the other passengers would kill him. The next night Gibbens and one of the mates persuaded Murty to go to bed by taking him down themselves and charging the passengers *not* to kill him. Later they took away his pocketknives, made him a bed in the pump house, and locked him in.

Gibbens felt he understood himself better toward the voyage's conclusion, but in one of his most disturbing moments on the ship he dreamed

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that Alice was dead and in her casket. As he approached his destination his anxiety and discontent returned. On 6 January 1860 he mused that "the breaking asunder of the tenderest ties of life—might if anything could afford just pretext for melancholy reflection." And when on 7 February he wrote, "There be but little to hurry me anywhere," it would be impossible to think he believed Eliza Gibbens awaited him with open arms. Despite his anxiety at returning to an estranged spouse, he found an inner peace he had never experienced.

When Dr. Gibbens returned to Boston in 1860, he did not move back to Weymouth. Alice, her mother, and her sisters remained at the Webb house, while Daniel returned to his mother and again sought help from Rufus Ellis of First Church. The world around Alice and her father was changing: the country was on the brink of a long and bitter war. Two of her cousins enlisted in the Grand Army of the Republic, but her father remained in Boston, still wrestling with his demons despite the progress he had made at sea. Ellis felt Dr. Gibbens had improved. Gibbens gave him a sermon case as a New Year's gift, Ellis thanking him: "It is plain you have felt the Guiding hand of our loving & Almighty helper." The minister credited Gibbens's mother, Mary, with her son's spiritual transformation.[31]

But his transformation did not mean that Daniel and Eliza reunited. In 1862 Ellis recommended Dr. Gibbens for a civil post in Yankee-occupied New Orleans under Gen. George F. Shepley, then military governor in Louisiana. Gibbens accepted the post, and on 28 November he notified Alice and Mary of his safe arrival in the South. He had been wretchedly seasick during the voyage. While at sea he witnessed a Yankee vessel chasing a rebel steamer. He reported that upon reaching the city he found "a gloom about the streets that is very apparent."[32] Many of the inhabitants had fled, leaving the city to the Northerners.

Gibbens longed for worldly recognition that he could share with his girls. From his own accounting and letters written to him, he was a successful administrator. In 1864, two years after his arrival, he sent the family his picture. Holding a newspaper and sporting a full beard, he looked dignified, portly, and prosperous. That same year someone gave him a pair of handsome diamond cuff links and a set of shirt studs, perhaps a bribe of

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some sort, though at the same time General Shepley wrote a letter praising Daniel's judgment and integrity.[33] It seemed his fortunes finally had changed for the better.

During his absence an old man told Alice she looked exactly like her father had looked when he was fourteen.[34] She could take comfort in knowing that the Gibbens girls were not the only fatherless children in Weymouth. So many New England men had left their homes in 1861, nearly countless numbers wounded and dying on the battlefields serving their country, that fatherless families were the norm in some communities. On 11 May 1865 Alice received a loving letter from Gibbens. He expected to return to his family in the middle of June, later than anticipated. Though he complained of Louisiana's oppressive heat, he confessed he was sad to leave a city where he had made friends and at last found rewards at his work.[35] But eleven days later she learned he was not coming home in June: he was going to Mobile, Alabama. Her wait was not over.

In 1865 Mobile was at the center of the cotton fraud scandal that marked the Civil War's conclusion. Approximately 1.2 million bales of cotton that had been confiscated by the federal government remained in the South. The cotton represented a source of income needed to help defray the expenses of a costly war, but the Treasury Department agents responsible for overseeing the sales were not always honest.[36] By November 1865 $2 million of Alabama cotton money remained missing.[37]

Daniel Gibbens became an employee of the federal Ninth Agency, charged with gathering cotton from eleven Alabama counties. When he left New Orleans for Mobile, a city newspaper congratulated him "upon his prospects of improving his pecuniary resources."[38] He spent months in Alabama overseeing cotton sales.

The postwar South was now in ruins. Yankee army wagons traveled everywhere over the unpaved dusty streets, which were lined with oyster shops and coffee stores.[39] The women trimmed their clothes in the Confederate colors of red and white, sometimes sporting white marabou feathers with red edges on their hats, and talked about the Confederacy.[40] One day Gibbens passed two girls in the street. One remarked to the other in a nasty voice, "'Dear me, you don't meet anybody but Yankees and niggers.'"[41] Mobile observed a somber Fourth of July that year because its white citizens refused to celebrate this national holiday. After all, they had tried to secede

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from the nation. The military fired a thirteen-gun salute, and the blacks paraded with a troop escort, but otherwise the city was quiet.[42]

The sights along Mobile's wharves were a wonder to the doctor. One day he saw a flatboat that housed an entire family, a not uncommon sight in 1865. On one end of the boat there was a furnace on which food could be cooked, and in the middle of the boat a tentlike awning covered the family's beds. Next to the beds a cow was hemmed in by a rude slat enclosure. The far end had room for a large chicken coop. Discouraged by the war's vicissitudes, this Southerner had packed his family and all his worldly goods onboard and fled down the river to Mobile. Gibbens also saw a large steamboat that operated as a floating theater, with the performers living onboard; it was almost as large as the Boston Museum.[43]

The doctor did well financially in Mobile, sending Eliza a draft for $100 in July. He even speculated in chickens, providing the capital to buy fowl in Mobile and sell them in New Orleans.[44] Again in August he sent money to Weymouth. He promised to buy Alice a Steinway piano and a melodeon when he came home, and he asked Eliza to look for a house.[45] In her last letter to her husband she enclosed an advertisement for a house with a gas furnace, barn, and garden only three miles from Boston. Gibbens bought a ticket north on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad for 7 November 1865.[46] He would be with his family by Thanksgiving.

The Gibbens women managed reasonably well during Daniel's absence. A daguerreotype of the three Gibbens daughters taken during this time shows Alice as a pretty girl with classic features, her dark hair pulled tidily behind her head. She remained a talented student in both academic and musical studies. Now her mother could afford to give her extra singing and dancing lessons. Both Eliza and Daniel Gibbens were avid readers, so their daughters grew up valuing books. Alice read Chaucer, Milton, Washington Irving, and New England historian William Prescott. Her father sent her John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and encouraged her interest in music.

Alice had a penchant for sobriety: she felt that she looked more natural when she assumed a grave expression. But despite her desire to appear a mature adult, she sometimes indulged in adolescent pranks with her sister Mary and her cousin Samuel Webb. Confessing her hilarity in a Sunday

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evening letter to her father, she added, "'It does not seem wrong to me to have a good laugh tonight—do you think so?'"[47] Daniel Gibbens encouraged her to always try to be cheerful, even if her thoughts felt like a cold nor'easter, as his did at times.[48] When her aunt Maria Gibbens taunted her with being "prim and old-fashioned," Alice tried waltzing with a young gentleman from Harvard, though she hated waltzing. She did not hate all dancing or parties or Harvard students, but she felt shy with the opposite sex, perhaps because she spent so much time in the company of women. While she liked dancing with her sister Mary, she wished for a wider social life.[49] "I dearly love to go where I can dance and hear music. In fact I think I should love to go into company and to parties, but I don't know as I never tried it."[50]

By the time Alice was sixteen she had become interested in specific young men, and they were interested in her. Despite her shyness and sobriety she had beaux. Perhaps that very shyness added to her charm. Her first boyfriend was her Boston cousin Frederick Hammond Gibbens, the son of Dr. Gibbens's half-brother Samuel Hammond Gibbens. In the summer of 1865 Fred kissed Alice. "But that young gentleman, having come at last to a just appreciation of my many and manifold excellences, moved also by my surpassing loveliness, He gave me a—kiss." At the end of the letter she wrote the word "cousin" over and over in a circle radiating around her name.[51]

It was not long before Alice's interest in young men and theirs in her began to disturb her mother. Another boyfriend was a Weymouth swain, John Lund, who courted Alice until the town gossips spread the rumor that they were engaged. When Alice went to visit Brookline friends, the talk ended, to her mother's relief. Proper Mrs. Gibbens also warned her daughter to stay away from Cambridge Class Day, part of graduation ceremonies at Harvard College.[52] Class Day had started as Valedictory Exercises, a student-run commencement ceremony attended by faculty and guests that was separate from the official graduation. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, these exercises had gained the reputation for being a drunken brawl; the Harvard Corporation had to hire a police guard by day and a watch at night for several days to control participants.[53] Around 1838 the event became Class Day and included afternoon dancing, at first square dancing and later waltzing and drinking.[54] A Winslow Homer drawing

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published in 1858 shows Harvard students dancing wildly on the green at this occasion.[55] Meeting a rioting student might pose a danger for Alice.

Despite her growing interest in boys, she continued her studies. The high school's demanding four-year curriculum included arithmetic, algebra, bookkeeping, geometry, rhetoric, astronomy, French, Latin, English grammar, chemistry, declamation, and composition. In 1863 and 1864 approximately forty students attended North Weymouth High School. Some of the young men had already graduated into the school of life; they were away fighting with the Union army. The principal, Mr. L. Z. Ferris, frequently provoked Alice with his fine rhetorical distinctions and his attitude toward young women: he thought female pupils should always smile. One day he tried to explain the difference between the words "surprise" and "wonder." "'Take this example now: If I see a girl never have a smile on her face, it would at first be surprising, but if it has continued for some time, the surprise would cease, though it would always be a wonder.'" Somber, independent Alice wanted to tell him she did not always feel like smiling. With her father, though, she revealed her quick wit and the fundamental optimism underlying her serious exterior.[56]

The end of the war and of her long separation from her father promised better times for Alice Howe Gibbens. Soon she would have a Steinway piano, a new home closer to Boston, and two reunited parents.

When the train pulled into the station from Mobile, Alabama, on 7 November, Daniel Gibbens was not onboard. On the eve of his departure he learned that he had been detained as a material witness in the trial of his boss, Bostonian T. C. A. Dexter. A military commission had charged Dexter with stealing 3,426 bales of cotton and with selling an appointment as special cotton agent in Choctaw County, Alabama, for $25,000.[57] Dexter tried to stall by appealing to have the trial moved to the U.S. District Court, but to no avail.[58] Forced to wait until December to testify before the tribunal, Dr. Gibbens returned to his old habits of substance abuse. This time he had been inhaling sulfuric ether or taking valerian or another narcotic.[59] He suffered delusions that the authorities were coming to arrest him, imagining he heard them coming in the house where he boarded. Three days before the trial he asked his friend J. F. Bailey to give his watch, diary, and ring to his mother.

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On 2 December, two days before he was to testify, Gibbens spent the evening in his boardinghouse. At eleven o'clock he sat at a table, writing. When Bailey came in after a visit to Judge Andrews, Gibbens gave him a pencil to keep. Then he unlocked his trunk, peered inside, and remarked that none of them had ever expected to be away from home so long when they packed. The next morning, 3 December 1865, Daniel Lewis Gibbens was discovered in his room lying in a pool of blood, his throat slashed and his razor by his side. The surgeon called in could not save him. He asked for water and mumbled something about disposal of his possessions and about Uncle Joe. With his last breaths he said, "Lord, Lord." A telegram went to Eliza Gibbens in Weymouth, and two days later the *New Orleans Times* ran the headline "Melancholy Suicide at Mobile." A hasty autopsy showed he had taken ether before his death.[60]

Eliza Gibbens collapsed when she heard the news, forcing sixteen-year-old Alice to become the head of her small family. She nursed her devastated mother, cooked meals, and cared for her sisters.[61] Since Daniel Lewis Gibbens is not buried in North Weymouth Cemetery with the Whites and the Webbs, Rufus Ellis may have taken charge of his body and burial when his remains arrived in Boston.[62] On 12 December 1865 the *Boston Daily Advertiser* carried a small notice of his death: "Died: In Mobile, Ala., 3d inst., Dr. Daniel L. Gibbens, formerly of this city, 41." After his burial Alice decided to write to Mobile, seeking answers to her father's suicide.

On 27 December Bailey wrote to Alice of the circumstances surrounding her father's last days.

> I would that it had never devolved upon anyone much less myself to narrate to you the particulars of the sad and deplorable event. I would that your Father could have realized the wish dearest his heart to have come to you in all the vigor of his manhood, at this happy "Christmas tide" to have clasped you all to his noble heart in affectionate embrace, to have been made glad in your happy welcome & to have unfolded to you one by one his plans of future happiness; but even bright anticipations were not to be realized and alas how are our hopes withered by the rude blasts of affliction & our joy turned into sorrow.[63]

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There exists no written record of Alice's feelings at the time of her father's death, but as an adult she almost never mentioned his name in her letters, and then only when a medium reported contact with a "Giblin" at a séance.

When Daniel Gibbens's estate was probated, it contained over $24,000, nearly the amount of the bribe involved in the cotton fraud case.[64] While Henry James II later claimed that Gibbens could have saved this large sum from his salary and from fees he earned notarizing documents, the claim seems implausible. He earned $4,800 a year at his job, an amount reported by a Gibbens relative.[65] From that sum he sent money home and paid his expenses. Assuming that he saved half that amount yearly, it seems unlikely that he could have earned the remaining $17,000, approximately $200,000 in today's currency, from legal fees.

The war over and her father gone, Alice returned to her previous life, at least overtly. She continued her visits to Boston to see her father's relations, and she followed her domestic pursuits: on 20 June 1867 the *Weymouth Gazette* reported that Alice Gibbens exhibited a hanging cushion at the Grand Fair, held that year at the town hall. Only her inner life had changed.

In 1867 Weymouth decided to erect a memorial to honor its Civil War dead.[66] The news became a steady drumbeat in the town, as subsequent issues of the paper made constant reference to the evolving plan. The memorial would draw the citizens of Weymouth together and provide an outward sign of the town's grief. By December 1867 an official committee had been formed. The *Gazette* carried a notice asking for the names of the deceased who had "lost their lives during the war of the Rebellion" so that they could be inscribed on the monument, which was to be erected in North Weymouth Cemetery.[67] The monument would feature a granite shaft and base, inscriptions, stone steps, and other embellishments. The names of the ninety-nine Civil War heroes would be recorded on tablets made from the finest white Italian marble.[68] For weeks the paper posted the names to make sure that no one would be forgotten. But for the Gibbenses, mourning remained a private affair. Daniel Gibbens was not one of the honored dead.

On the grand and glorious Fourth of July of 1868 all Weymouth gathered at Old North Church for the parade to North Weymouth Cemetery.

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There were flowers, bands, dedicatory prayers, speeches by various officials, veterans, and a procession including "Widows and Children of Deceased Soldiers." Weymouth dedicated its monument in one of the most lavish ceremonies the town had ever seen.[69] That same month nineteen-year-old Alice Gibbens, her mother, her two sisters, and a Webb relation, Helen Merrill, sailed for Europe.

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