

**THE NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR  
THE SUPPRESSION OF VICE  
(1873 - 19 ? )**

**Records, 1875 - 1947**

**Charities Collection - CC 9**

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**ACQUISITION:** In 1911 the Boston's Children's Aid Society gave its entire library to the Simmons College School of Social Work Library. This library included the annual reports of many local and international welfare and charitable organizations. With the passage of time this collection took on historical significance and in 1991 it was transferred to the Simmons College Archives.

As part of a donation in 1988 and 1989, Donald Moreland, a local social worker and collector of social work history, gave the Simmons College Archives a large number of annual reports, pamphlets and other material related to various welfare and charitable organization. Because this donation is not a discrete collection, it and materials transferred in 1991 from the School of Social Work Library were combined to form the Charities Collections. The Simmons College Archives Charities Collection consists of numerous small collections. Accession numbers for the individual collections are assigned during processing.

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**HISTORY:**

The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (SSV) was founded in 1873 by Anthony Comstock and his supporters in the Young Men's Christian Association. The SSV was incorporated by the New York State Legislature on May 16, 1873 with Morris K. Jesup as acting Chairman. Its objective as stated in the Act of Incorporation was :

"The enforcement of the laws for the suppression of the trade in and circulation of obscene literature and illustration, advertisements, and articles of indecent and

immoral use as it is or may be forbidden by the laws of the State of New York or of the United States." (63rd Annual Report, p. 19)

The SSV attacked a variety of issues during its first twenty years. Comstock targeted abortionists, becoming the first effective enforcer of the anti-abortion laws passed during the 1850s and 1860s. He arrested the publishers and vendors of pornographic books that bore erotic titles. Having eradicated the most common street pornography, Comstock change his focus and struck at improper reading materials, indecency in arts and gambling.

The campaign against pornography extended to all reading material available to the public. Changes in printing technology in the mid-nineteenth century made cheap books readily available. While most of these publications were not indictable as pornography, Comstock attempted to arouse public opinion against them, and arrested dealers of literature that he deemed obscene.

Comstock developed his ideology about the effects of obscenity on children during the early years of his anti-obscenity crusade. "Pornography produced disastrous effects to the pure life and heart of youths. They are becoming weak-minded, vapid, lazy and defiant" he argued (6th Annual Report 1880, p. 11).

The SSV worked with other preventive societies established during the same time period in New York City, such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (1866), the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1872), and Society for the Prevention of Crime (1878). Each of these four preventive societies specialized in regulating a specific social vice. Each organization saw itself as an enforcer of law and occasionally usurped police power and adopted extralegal measures in their course of action. Comstock, as a leader and agent of the SSV in its early years, arrested pornographers, abortionists and gamblers. When the U.S. Post Office made him a special agent in 1873, the SSV's powers of prosecution were magnified and it gained influence nationwide.

The members of the SSV believed that as social deviancy became increasingly institutionalized and organized, the use of extralegal action was justified. Moreover, New York City's nineteenth century police force was the object of frequent public condemnation for corruption. These preventive societies also claimed that they were purely non-sectarian and non-partisan, but the first annual meeting of the SSV for example was held at Howard Crosby's Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church, and Crosby himself was an attendee and guest speaker at the SSV's annual meeting.

The SSV also differed in method and strategy from other nineteenth century anti-vice and moral reform organizations in that they adopted their own private unregulated methods to secure their regulatory goals. Also they were given vague law enforcement responsibilities by the state, something foreign to other reform groups. Another factor that distinguished these preventive societies from other reform groups was the absence of female participants.

The SSV was supported by many members of New York City's upper class, and over eighty percent of its financial supporters were of the upper or upper-middle classes. Under Anthony Comstock's leadership the SSV survived into the twentieth century. In 1947 the SSV changed its name to the Society to Maintain Public Decency.

All information taken from:

New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. 6th Annual Report of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. New York: New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, 1880.

New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. 63rd Annual Report of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. New York: New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, 1936.

Society to Maintain Public Decency. 74th Year Book: 1947 report of the Society to Maintain Public Decency. New York: Society to Maintain Public Decency, 1948.

Beisel, Nicola, "Morals versus art : censorship, the politics of interpretation, and the Victorian nude", American sociological review, vol. 58, no. 2 (April 1993), p. 145-162.

Gilfoyle, Timothy J., "The Moral origins of political surveillance: the preventive society in New York City, 1867-1918", American quarterly, vol. 38, no. 4 (Fall 1986), p. 637-652.

#### **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE:**

The records of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (SSV) consist of the Annual Reports of the Society from 1875-1946 (with gaps), and correspondence from SSV to its constituents (1911, 1913). These records are arranged chronologically.

The Annual Reports contain information which describes the activities of the SSV, such as the suppression of vice campaigns which the Society helped organize, the forming of SSV branches in other states, and a fight against lottery and policy gambling shops. The Reports also contain statistics on the number of arrests the SSV made, the stocks that were confiscated, and a list of subscriptions and donations. In addition, there are treasurer's reports, SSV's Act of Incorporation, and addresses by various guests of the SSV such as Rev. Joseph Cook of Boston, Thomas L. James (former Post-Master General), Peter B. Olney (former District Attorney of New York County), and Reverend F.D. Huntington, D.D., Bishop of Central New York. The Annual Reports also contain

correspondence from beneficiaries of the SSV's services, declaring their support for the SSV in its fight against vice.

Correspondence consists of two form letters which were enclosed with Annual Reports sent to supporters of the SSV.

**CONTAINER LIST:**

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