

Some Sources for Northwest History

THE DIGHT PAPERS

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THE PAPERS of Charles Fremont Dight, recently presented to the Minnesota Historical Society, touch upon many subjects of interest in the field of local history. Dight was an eccentric and colorful individual, and his painstaking zeal in saving all his correspondence makes his collection a reservoir of information on a variety of subjects. He settled in Minneapolis in 1899, when he joined the Hamline University medical school faculty. He taught pharmacology in the University of Minnesota for a brief period, but he attracted public attention only after he was elected alderman on the Socialist ticket during the First World War. His aldermanic service was characterized by vitriolic attacks on the saloons, appeals for government ownership of public utilities, and plans for reform in city government.

Dight's name became associated in the news during this period with the curious house he had built in 1911. It was popularly called a "birdhouse" or "tree-top house," although actually it was no higher than the second story of the neighboring residences. Lacking the customary foundation or basement, it was built on iron supports, and the first floor was reached by a spiral iron staircase. The front porch was built to encircle a large tree about which a bench was fastened. It was located near Minnehaha Creek across from the Longfellow Gardens at 4818 Thirty-ninth Avenue South.

The unique character of the house added interest to Dight's reputation. In 1914, when he was a candidate for alderman, newspapers commented on the fact that ward meetings could be held under the house or under the trees and that he could address his constituents from the balcony. The *International Socialist Review*, in announcing the election of "Comrade Dight" as Minneapolis alderman, published a picture of him on his porch. A New York coffee importer who saw a picture of the house in the *New York Times* in 1925

wrote Dight for advice, as he hoped to build a birdhouse with almost "invisible supports." Dight had taught anatomy in Beirut, Syria, in the 1880's after graduating from the University of Michigan. His travels abroad gave rise to the local rumor that he got his architectural ideas from the Orient. His license to practice medicine in the Ottoman Empire was displayed in the house, adding color to his background.

In the 1920's Dight's passion for reform centered about the eugenic movement. He was the most enthusiastic founder of the Minnesota Eugenics Society, and his labors were largely responsible for the law of 1925 providing for voluntary sterilization of institutionalized feeble-minded. He continued to work for a broader law until his death in 1938.

He had no private medical practice in Minneapolis. From 1901 to 1933 he was employed as medical director of the Ministers Life and Casualty Union. By frugal living and wise investments he made a considerable fortune, which he bequeathed to the University of Minnesota as a trust fund for the study of human genetics. The annual income of about forty-five hundred dollars supports the Charles Fremont Dight Institute for the Promotion of Human Genetics, which was organized in July, 1941.

The Dight Papers, which fill thirteen filing boxes, include a few letters and other items relating to medical teaching in the early 1900's in Minnesota and to Dight's efforts to popularize medicine, but his real accomplishments were in the social, not the scientific field. He advanced a plan for socialized medicine in New Hampshire in 1893 and accepted the position with the insurance company because it fitted his socialistic principles. His interest in politics led him to follow carefully Socialist activities in the state, and his papers contain rare copies of the political platforms of a number of the party's divisions in the early 1900's. Dight astounded fellow aldermen at his first city council meeting by promising "to vote in advance against all saloon licenses to be proposed during his term." This stand brought him many congratulatory letters, among them one from W. J. Calderwood, a leader in the Minnesota temperance movement, in which Dight was much interested.

Dight served on the city council committee to assist the Minnesota Public Safety Commission in establishing potato stations in Minneapolis as a war measure in food price regulation. Municipal action was encouraged, and Dight's interest became so widely known that he received a letter from a Cass Lake merchant in March, 1918, asking for aid in disposing of several carloads of potatoes. The city council recognized his public service by naming a Minneapolis street for him in 1918.

His correspondence on the eugenic movement includes masses of letters from people throughout the state, many provoked by Dight's frequent letters to the editors of the Minneapolis newspapers. Over three hundred of his letters were published from 1921 to 1935; they aroused wide comment among those concerned with eugenics. Among the letters relating to the subject in his papers are some from Dr. William W. Folwell and the Mayo brothers. Dight's name was known in national eugenic circles. He wrote to Adolf Hitler in July, 1933, praising the German sterilization program, and he received in response a printed card with Hitler's signature, extending thanks for his friendly greeting. He corresponded with Alexis Carrel, Margaret Sanger, and Mrs. J. Borden Harriman on various aspects of the eugenic field. The Dight collection is a repository of information on the history of the Minnesota Eugenics Society. The charter, minutes of meetings, lists of members, treasurers' reports, correspondence of officers, and records of business conducted were kept by Dight with his personal papers. He was the one president of the society during its active period, and he preserved its archives when interest in its objectives faded.

The Dight Papers are so comprehensive and complete that they reveal Dight's career in the minutest detail. He participated with characteristic enthusiasm in the activities to forward such diverse projects as technocracy, communal farm colonies, a just tax league, the Unitarian Society, and the temperance movement. He was an inventor of sorts, but his consuming interest was to impress upon people "the importance of race betterment through eugenics," and to this aim he dedicated his life.



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