

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Public Expectation vs. Free Love:
Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick's Controversial Affair

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Abstract

American society had many expectations when it came to marriage, the family, and gender roles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By exploring the status of women in marriage during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, one can see particularly how the cult of domesticity, views of the “New Woman”, and the study of eugenics played pivotal roles in public expectations towards marriage. This paper focuses on Frank Lloyd Wright’s relationship with his mistress Mamah Borthwick to determine how cultural attitudes regarding domesticity, the New Woman, and eugenics influenced public opposition to their relationship from the very beginning. This paper will be using medical journals on eugenics from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, secondary sources about the cult of domesticity, the “New Woman”, and about the relationship. The primary sources I will analyze are Frank Lloyd Wright’s *An Autobiography*, newspapers, and letters from Mamah Borthwick to Ellen Key. This project is a microhistory of one non-traditional relationship and how it became a lightning rod for public debates over marriage in a period of rapid cultural change.

Introduction

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a period of rapid cultural change. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, there were new societal ideas and concepts that were clashing with traditional ones. These radical ideas caused a lot a controversy among media outlets and the public. One of the new concepts was the idea of free love. The idea of free love was the concept that men and women could form a relationship based on the belief that the state had no authority over sexual matters and “practicalized” that belief in the form of a “free union”. Many who supported this idea thought that marriage was a social institution that confined them to society’s expectations of domesticity, motherhood, and being submissive to their spouse. The concept of free love was seen as a major threat to true womanhood and the cult of domesticity.

This threat to true womanhood was the reason why Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick’s relationship was seen as controversial and immoral to the public eye. As a famous American architect and interior designer, Frank Lloyd Wright designed more than 1,000 structures in his lifetime and was the founder of organic architecture and the Prairie style in domestic architecture. Some of Wright’s most well-known works include the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Japan, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, New York, and Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin, which will be discussed in this paper. Wright and Borthwick’s non-traditional relationship caused uproar among the public because of Frank Lloyd Wright’s status as a well-known architect. The media was hungry for any sort of news regarding this scandalous relationship despite the couple stating that they would like to be left alone. Eventually public outrage died down for a bit because the media was unable to get any additional information about the couple’s affairs. This was the case until tragedy struck Taliesin. When the media got wind of the Taliesin fire and murders, the controversy of Wright and Borthwick’s relationship

flourished again. After Borthwick's death, she was still seen as the ideal "New Woman" because of the legacy she left behind. Unlike Borthwick, Wright retreated back into the societal institution of marriage, despite being against society's obligation of domesticity. The reason for this retreat is because it was convenient for his role as an architect in order to receive more commissions. Because Wright was seen as a public figure, his relationship with Borthwick was used for the center of all debate against the idea of free love. American society had many expectations when it came to marriage, the family, and gender roles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By understanding the status of women in marriage during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, one can see how the cult of domesticity, the New Woman, and the study of eugenics played a pivotal role in the public's expectations towards marriage and more particularly Wright and Borthwick's relationship. This relationship was notorious because to many it violated these expectations; it hence became a lightning rod for public debates over marriage in a period of rapid cultural change.

Literature Review

American society had many expectations when it came to marriage and motherhood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through secondary literature on the cult of domesticity, the "New Woman", eugenics, and on the couple, one can see what these controversies were, and why the public responded the way it did towards Wright and Borthwick's controversial affair.

In Wendy Hayden's *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism*, she argues that the nineteenth-century was a time when more and more women were starting to rise up and challenge Victorian ideals of morality by reaching out to the public to speak out about women's rights, abolition, and suffrage. One of these new ideals that

challenged nineteenth century Victorian morality was the notion of free love. Free love was the belief that the state had no authority over sexual matters and “practicalized” that belief in the form of a “free union”.¹ In other words, couples who practiced this belief did not believe in the social institution of marriage and decided to live together as an unmarried couple. However, this idea was looked down upon by society. When couples decided to act on their intention to enter into a sexual relationship without church or state validation they defied laws by entering into a “free union” and could be arrested. The free love movement, which denounced marriage, encouraged sex education, and promoted an agenda that included women’s sexual self-ownership, began in the early 1850s and continued until the early twentieth-century.² The movement was advocated strongly by nineteenth-century free love feminists and spanned across the United States. Hayden argues that these feminist ideas influenced science as much as science influenced feminist ideas and that the scientific and that the medical community was aware of what feminists and free love thinkers were advocating. This paper talks about how Wright and Borthwick’s belief of free love was seen as immoral.

To truly analyze how the cult of domesticity and the idea of true womanhood influenced the public’s opinions towards Wright and Borthwick relationship I looked at *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860* by Barbara Welter. This article talks about the key attributes of True Womanhood on which women were judged by. Women were not only judged by themselves but also by their husband, their neighbors, and by society as a whole. These four key attributes can be split up into four cardinal virtues. They were “piety, purity, submissiveness, and

¹ Hayden, Wendy. *Evolutionary Rhetoric: Sex, Science, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Feminism*. Vol. 9780809331024. Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2013. P. 1.

² Hayden, 2.

domesticity.”³ All four of these attributes were deeply desired for woman because they were considered the virtues that made a woman a good mother, a daughter, a sister, and a wife. Piety or religion was the main attribute of a woman’s virtue. The reason why piety was at the core attribute of True Womanhood is because it “did not take a woman away from her ‘proper sphere,’ her home. Unlike participation in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive, less a True Woman.”⁴ Purity was just as important as piety for young women because “its absence was seen as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was no woman at all but a member of some lower order.”⁵ Women who were not pure before marriage were seen as “fallen” to men, therefore women were told their entire lives that they must preserve themselves because if they do they are promised happiness in return. To women, “marriage was an end to innocence...she was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it.”⁶ This is where the third attribute comes in. The marriage night was the single most important event in a young woman’s life. The reason for this importance is because “When she bestowed her greatest treasure upon her husband, from that time on she is now completely dependent upon him an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own.”⁷ Submission to their husbands was an important feminine virtue that was expected of all married women. These previous virtues all add up to the virtue of domesticity. “The true woman’s place was unquestionably by her own fireside – as a daughter, a sister, but most of all as a wife and a mother.”⁸ Once married, a woman’s main obligation was to become a mother.

³ Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74. doi:10.2307/2711179. P. 152.

⁴ Welter, 153.

⁵ Welter, 154.

⁶ Welter, 158.

⁷ Welter, 154-155.

⁸ Welter, 162.

Becoming a mother was important to women because “The corollary to marriage, with or without true love, was motherhood... It anchored her even more firmly to the home.”⁹ Women were seen as useful in society when they had many children and it gave them a certain amount of prestige. Without these four attributes, a woman was seen as nothing. But if she acquired them she was the definition of a True Woman and was promised happiness. This source is useful in order to differentiate between the idea of the New Woman and the traditional idea of True Womanhood. By comparing the two, it is easier to analyze why the public was so outraged by Mamah Borthwick’s persona as a New Woman.

Women often felt like they could not live up to the idea of the true woman. Because of this struggle some women challenged the traditional idea that was expected of them. This challenge managed to evolve the True Woman into the New Woman. The idea of the New Woman came from the fact that women thought that they either could not live up to the idea of the True Woman or because they were unhappy with the expectations that society place upon them.

The source that I will be discussing is *The Rise of the New Woman* by Jean V. Matthews. This source talks about how women began to rise up because they were becoming restless with the obligations and traditional virtues that society placed upon them. These new women began to organize themselves. One example of one of the organizations of the New Woman is the suffrage movement that begins near in the mid-nineteenth century. Another issue that this source discusses is how the New Woman was supposed to survive without the support of men. Because women were supposed to be supported by their husbands the new women had to figure out to make a living:

⁹ Welter, 162.

“By the turn of the century many ‘new women’ profoundly distrusted marriage...marriage seemed to mean a life of drudgery, invalidism, a dwindling of personality, and a submergence in others.”¹⁰

However, many new women felt obligated to marry eventually because of economic security even if they were unhappy. This source is useful because it helps to explain why Mamah Borthwick fell into the social institution of marriage when she married her first husband and why she was the personified version of the ideal New Woman.

Even though the True Woman and the New Woman had completely different goals they were both heavily influenced by eugenics. Eugenics was the science of improving the human population through selective breeding in order to create desirable characteristics to make the “perfect race.” In Wendy Kline’s, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*, she argues how and why eugenics became an appealing solution to the problem of moral disorder. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, eugenics had popular and professional support. Kline also argues that eugenics links the two issues of race and gender, which was a major concern to the white middle class in early twentieth-century America.¹¹ It was concerned because social changes, such as the free love movement, threatened to possibly undermine the established race and gender hierarchies that the cult of domesticity and true womanhood enforces. The general public was still heavily influenced by the long-standing ideals that true womanhood and the cult of domesticity presented. They believed that any threat to (white) race would be “racial suicide” to the white middle class. The “new woman” was one of the threats to the race because it challenged the

¹⁰ Matthews, Jean V. *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930* / Jean V. Matthews. American Ways Series. 2003. P. 96-97.

¹¹ Kline, Wendy. *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from The Turn of The Century to the Baby Boom (1)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. P. 2.

social order by demanding rights and privileges reserved to white men.¹² However, “new women” such as Margaret Sanger also used eugenic ideology to further the rights of women, while still improving the race. What both the new woman and true woman had in common was that they both had a “vision of the future in which reproductive decisions were made in the name of building a better race, though they may have disagreed on how to achieve that goal.”¹³ This paper reflects on how eugenics plays a role in how the public reacted to Wright and Borthwick’s relationship. It will also touch on how Borthwick and Wright was influenced by feminist Ellen Keys’ work which mentioned how free love would improve the race rather than it being a threat.

In order to analyze Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick’s controversial relationship, this paper looks at a variety of secondary sources that have already been written about it. Many of these sources start out by explaining how the relationship started, the controversy it stirred up among the public and how the relationship ended tragically. Also, many of these secondary sources end up using each other as sources and/or using the same primary and secondary sources as.

The first secondary source that is used to research the relationship is Anthony Alofsin’s *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost Years, 1910-1922*. This source is helpful because Alofsin’s research is very thorough. He uses many of the same reliable primary and secondary sources used in this project. Alofsin quotes Frank Lloyd Wright’s *An Autobiography* many times throughout the book. He also uses letters from Mamah Borthwick to Ellen Key, and letters from Frank Lloyd Wright to Darwin Martin and Reverend William Norman Guthrie to help put his argument together. Another reason why this is a very useful source is because it talks about Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick’s relationship and the role Taliesin plays in it. This

¹² Kline, 10.

¹³ Kline, 15.

source is also helpful because it features how the media saw the lovers in both America and in Europe.

The next source *Death in a Prairie House: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders* by William R. Drennan focuses heavily on the relationship of Wright and Borthwick mostly to answer the questions of why Wright decided to leave his wife and children and why Julian Carlton decided to set fire to Taliesin and murder seven people, including Borthwick and her two children John and Martha Cheney. Drennan's book is a useful source because it not only talks about how Wright and Borthwick's relationship started and ended but he also analyzes how Wright shifted his views from seeing his first wife Catherine as the perfect "True Woman" to then desiring Mamah Borthwick, the ideal New Woman. Drennan discusses how and why Wright changed his views and he also discusses which outside forces had an influence on both Wright and Borthwick's controversial ideals. One of these outside influences was the Swedish feminist Ellen Key. This secondary source confirms my analysis that Ellen Key's idea about love and marriage is definitely one of the core aspects on which Wright and Borthwick's relationship was founded upon.

In the edited volume *Taliesin 1911-1914*, contributors focus on Taliesin from 1911 up until 1914. Critical essays by Neil Levine, Scott Gartner, Anthony Alofsin, and Narciso G. Menocal, offer a different view of why Taliesin was built and what the building's true meaning is. These authors explain the building's Welsh background and its importance to its architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Taliesin was seen as Wright's "self-portrait, as well as an expression of his aspirations for a life that he would dedicate to art in the company of Mamah Borthwick Cheney."¹⁴ They also talk about the outside influence of feminist Ellen Key and how her ideas

¹⁴ Menocal, Narciso G., and Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Taliesin, 1911-1914* / Narciso G. Menocal, Editor. Wright Studies; v. 1. 1992.

impacted Wright and Borthwick's thought during this period. They argue that these free-thinking ideas of free love that Wright and Borthwick shared was symbolized by Taliesin.

In the next source, *9 Commentaries on Frank Lloyd Wright* by Edgar Kaufmann the most relevant chapter to this paper's topic is "Frank Lloyd Wright and 'The Sovereignty of the Individual'". This chapter describes both Wright and Borthwick as individualistic people. It also goes on to explain how by looking at certain events one can see that Wright continued to believe in the ideas that Borthwick believed in long after her tragic death. This chapter also provides insights into Mamah Borthwick, who was a well-educated woman who was never really interested in marriage or motherhood. In fact, she denied the marriage proposal by her first husband, Edwin Cheney, many times before she accepted:

"Mamah Borthwick had left home to work as teacher and librarian, and for five years, it has been said, she rejected the marriage proposal of a former schoolmate, Edwin Cheney, whom she finally accepted. Although she bore him two children, she often left them in the care of her sister or others, and seemed more interested in intellectual pursuits."¹⁵

This source helps strengthen the point on how Borthwick was seen as a New Woman. Even though she did eventually get married it is obvious to see that she was unhappy with her lifestyle. The is most likely the reason why she requested a divorce from her husband and left her two children to start a relationship with Wright even though she would be heavily criticized for her actions by the public.

The last source that this paper uses to analyze Wright and Borthwick's relationship is Ron McCrea's *Building Taliesin: Frank Lloyd Wright's Home of Love and Loss*. This source focuses heavily on the meaning Taliesin held for the couple. Like the other sources, it also focuses on how the relationship began and how it ended tragically. However, unlike the other sources McCrea

¹⁵ Kaufmann, Edgar, and Architectural History Foundation. *9 Commentaries on Frank Lloyd Wright / Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.* 1989. P. 64.

uses Taliesin to really go in depth about the couple. Taliesin was seen as the crowning jewel and the center point for the couple's affair. Wright designed Taliesin for the couple to escape together in peace. It was seen as the building of their love so much that media outlets began to call it the "castle of love", "love-shack", or even the "love-bungalow".¹⁶

All of these secondary sources are critical to understanding Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick's relationship. Without them, it is difficult to understand how this non-traditional relationship was seen as controversial to the public and how it became a lightning rod for public debates over marriage in early 20th century America.

The Relationship

By the time Frank Lloyd Wright began his relationship with Borthwick, he was already a famous international figure who was well known for many architectural feats. However, Wright had been married to his first wife since June 1, 1889. Unlike Mamah Borthwick, Frank Lloyd Wright's first wife, Catherine Lee Tobin, also known as "Kitty" to close friends and family, was the ideal picture of the True Woman in society's eyes and even to Wright himself when he was courting her:

"She served as a model for the ideal of feminine beauty, a veritable Gibson Girl in the flesh. Moreover, she was vivacious, bright, charmingly opinionated, refined, and rich...Catherine was a prize catch...In Catherine, he (i.e. Wright) seemed to have located just such perfection in a potential life partner..."¹⁷

Even though the cult of domesticity mainly focuses around women's virtues, men were also obligated to play a part. This means that Wright could not escape so easily just because he was a man. Just like motherhood was an obligation to women, fatherhood was an expectation for men

¹⁶ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1911-1914.

¹⁷ Drennan, William R. *Death in a Prairie House: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. P. 26-27.

who had children. Wright never got used to the idea of fatherhood and this was just a start of the division between him and his first wife, Catherine. Wright states in his autobiography:

“The architect absorbed the father in me – perhaps because I never got used to the word not the ideas one...Architecture was my profession. Motherhood became hers. Fair enough, but it was a division.”¹⁸

Wright had many opinions about fatherhood beyond this quote. At one point in his biography he states, “‘Fatherhood?’ An institution I suppose in the interest of bigger and better domesticity.”¹⁹

This quote by Wright makes it very clear that he is just as unhappy as Borthwick was by society’s expectations of parenthood through the virtue of domesticity. Wright and Catherine both lived in suburban Oak Park, Illinois with their six children, Lloyd, John Lloyd, Catherine, David, Frances, and Llewellyn. It was here at 428 Forest Avenue that Wright decided to build his home where he would both live with his family and where he did his draft work. During his time in Oak Park, Wright flourished in his work and was already a prominent figure in architecture by 1900. However, while his work life thrived his home life with Catherine did not. Wright became more immersed in his work than his family life and he started to drift farther away from Catherine. The reason for this is because she immersed herself more into her work as a homemaker and a mother, whereas Wright became more impressed with women who challenged societal norms instead of being content with their lot in life. This is why Wright turned his attention to Mamah Cheney, his neighbor, and the wife of Edwin Cheney.

How early the affair began between Wright and Borthwick is difficult to pinpoint. It is fairly certain it must have occurred when Edwin Cheney commissioned Wright to design them a home. During this time, Wright was drawn to Mamah right away. Mamah Borthwick Cheney was the complete opposite of Catherine Wright. She was more focused on her intellectual

¹⁸ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P. 109-113.

¹⁹ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P. 113.

pursuits than her obligations of being a wife and a mother of her two children John and Martha. Borthwick was very well educated in languages and literature. She had earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan in 1892, picked up a master's degree in teaching, and later worked as a librarian in Port Huron, Michigan. It was after she received her education and her mother's death when she finally agreed to Edwin Cheney's repeated marriage proposal's. She was thirty years old at the time.²⁰

By 1909, both Wright and Borthwick made the relationship public knowledge when they both told their spouses about the affair. Mamah asked her husband Edwin for a divorce, which was given to her with no trouble at all. This situation was highly unusual for the time. Not only was she a woman that managed to successfully divorce her husband, but she was still able to have custody of her two children whenever she desired to see them. This arrangement was highly unusual. After she received her divorce she changed her name from Mamah Borthwick Cheney to Mamah Borthwick, which is how I will refer to her throughout the rest of this paper. However, unlike Mamah, Catherine denied Wright's request for a divorce. Catherine was confident that Wright would return to her despite his obvious decision that he did not care for her anymore. According to the Chicago Tribune in 1909 when Wright eloped with Borthwick, "Mrs. Wright worshipped her husband – and still does..."²¹ When asked about how she felt about the elopement between Wright and Borthwick she still heavily defended he husband. She told the press:

"You don't understand the man. He will control his infatuation for her and come home. I heard from him on Friday and he desires to be home, and will be here as soon as his business affairs permit."

²⁰ Drennan, 42.

²¹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 8-9, 1909.

By this statement, it is clear that Mrs. Wright was in firm denial, at least to the press, claiming that Wright would come home because he was only doing “business” abroad. In another statement she made to the press, Mrs. Wright reiterated her devotion to Wright:

“My heart is with him now. He will come back as soon as he can. I have a faith in Frank Lloyd Wright that passeth understanding, perhaps, but I know him as no one knows him. In this instance, he is as innocent of wrongdoing as I am ... Whatever I am as a woman, aside from my good birth, I owe to the example of my husband...I stand by my husband right at this moment. I am his wife.”²²

She is most likely defending Wright because his actions also reflect back upon her. In turn, this tainted her image of the True Woman because she was unable to make her husband happy.

Therefore, not only does society scrutinize Wright’s scandalous behavior, but also her behavior as well. In the last statement, she shows two of the four virtues that true women must follow; submissiveness to her husband and domesticity by remaining in the home while Wright is away. However, a few years later Wright stated in the *Chicago Tribune* on December 26, 1911 that his marriage “was a mistake which neither of them ought to have been allowed to commit...he had found his life in his art and that Mrs. Wright had found her life in her children.”²³ Wright’s statement goes to show that he did not care about society’s expectations of him as much as Catherine did. He just wished that the press and the public would leave him and Borthwick in peace.

Despite Wright’s wishes to be left alone, the news of this relationship reached a huge number of people, both nationally and internationally. Many people were outraged because the couple was not following the traditional obligations that society expected of them. Borthwick received criticism from the public because domesticity was one of the four attributes that was expected of women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Part of this

²² Drennan, 52.

²³ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 26-27, 1911.

obligation included motherhood. When Wright and Borthwick eloped to Europe in 1909, they both left their children behind in order to be together and to escape the public's scrutiny. By leaving her two children behind to flee to Europe with Wright, Borthwick was condemned by the public, which saw this act as a sin against the cult of domesticity.

It would not be until 1911 until Wright and Borthwick would return to the United States from Europe. While Wright was living in Tuscany, Italy he began to reminisce about the Wisconsin valley that he had grown up in as a child. He began to draft a new architectural design and later sent the blueprints to contractors in the small village of Spring Green, Wisconsin. The blueprint that was sent were for Taliesin. Taliesin is one of Frank Lloyd Wright's crowning jewels of architecture. It may just seem like another one of Wright's buildings, but it is so much more than that. Meaning "shining brow" in Welsh because of Wright's Welsh ancestry, the building has rightly been called Wright's "'architectural self-portrait,' and his 'alter ego.'"²⁴ Wright designed and built Taliesin as a home for the couple to escape in once they came back from Europe. It was also depicted as a symbol of the Wright and Borthwick's love for one another. Even Wright himself acknowledges the connection between Taliesin and his love for Borthwick by stating, "Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other Yes, there was a house that hill might marry and live happily with ever after."²⁵ This interpretation shows that even Wright himself was implying that him and Borthwick will be able to be happy together in peace just as Taliesin and the hill were. However, the public did not interpret it the same way as Wright and Borthwick did. For the longest time, Taliesin was seen as controversial to the public because it was the physical depiction of Wright and Borthwick's relationship. "I began to build Taliesin," Wright said, 'to get my back against

²⁴ Drennan, 62.

²⁵ Drennan, 62.

the wall and fight for what I saw I had to fight.”²⁶ This defensive statement by Wright makes finally makes sense once the cult of domesticity, the idea of the “New Woman”, and eugenics are put in context with his relationship with Borthwick and the public’s response to it. The public more or less saw Taliesin as a “love shack” or as a “love bungalow” for the couple to practice their immoral relationship. “The villagers confess they are hazy as to the exact meaning, but are quite definite in their belief that it is something awful...that will blight the fair name of their community.”²⁷ The community was genuinely concerned because they feared the unknown. All they knew was that Wright was in a relationship that was seen as immoral and wrong and that his famous persona would bring attention to Spring Green if the village accepted it. Therefore, they rejected it because society and the media saw it as immoral and the village did not want to be put in the same immoral spotlight. Therefore, when the couple first arrived there in December of 1911, the residents of Spring Green expressed the concern, “that if their disapproval was nothing to him they would find more effective means of compelling him to abandon his plan of making his hill top bungalow a permanent home for himself and Mamah Borthwick.”²⁸ The village residents considered having law enforcement try to forcibly remove the couple from Taliesin.

The sheriff of Spring Green reported to the *Chicago Tribune*:

“I don’t know yet just what charge can be brought against him...I am in doubt however, whether any of the reports can be proved...the citizens who consulted me do not want to take the law into their own hands. I told them I would do my best to thwart any attempt at tarring and feathering. I don’t believe Wright’s neighbors intended to do anything of the sort. They want him to leave and they think he can be compelled to go by legal means or else send away this woman he is reported to be living with.”²⁹

²⁶ Drennan, 61.

²⁷ *The Day Book*, “Wright and His ‘Art Housekeeper’ Snowbound in House of Happiness.” December 27, 1911.

²⁸ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 26-27, 1911.

²⁹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 26-27, 1911.

This statement by the sheriff shows the level of concern that the village of Spring Green had towards having a scandalous relationship that they have been hearing about for years in the newspapers and having it come to their own neighborhood. Despite the public's protest to law enforcement, the sheriff refused to charge Wright because there was nothing he did wrong in the legal sense and he would only do so if there was an actual charge brought up against Wright. It is also key to note that because the sheriff knew that the public could possibly take action in their own hands he made sure to warn them that he would not cooperate with any tarring and feathering. Wright's response to the villager's reactions is that he had no intention of purposely bringing scandal to their village when he decided to build Taliesin in Spring Green. He states:

“The newspapers have caused all this trouble. They have spread abroad the impression that Mamah Borthwick and I are depraved persons. We are not. We are living our lives as we see fit. And further, if any attempt to eject us from our cottage is made I stand ready to use force to resist that attempt.”³⁰

Wright's statement to the public was a powerful one. He wanted to get the point across that his relationship was not going to affect the villagers in any way, shape, or form. After a couple years, the public outrage in Spring Green died down. That is until tragedy struck Taliesin.

Mamah Borthwick

Mamah Borthwick was seen as a representative for following the lifestyle of the New Woman. Drennan thinks that it is key to point out that Borthwick heavily resembled Wright's future wives, Miriam Noel and Olgivanna Hinzenberg, compared to Wright's first wife, Catherine, who was seen as the ideal True Woman. Mamah Borthwick was the exact opposite. Mamah Borthwick Cheney was considered “artistic in temperament and had a capricious

³⁰ *The Day Book*, “Wright and His ‘Art Housekeeper’ Snowbound in House of Happiness.” December 27, 1911.

personality.”³¹ Some other terms that the media and public would use to describe her are that she was individualistic, cosmopolitan, and restless suburban outsider. Borthwick was always more interested in her intellectual pursuits in language and literature compared to domestic obligations. It was not a woman’s place to be interested in their education because it was not an obligation placed upon her in one of the four virtues of the cult of domesticity. “Women were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuits take them away from God.”³² However, Borthwick ignored these warnings and was very interested in becoming stimulated intellectually. For a decade, her life consisted of “picking up a master’s degree in teaching and wandering off to Port Huron, Michigan, working there as a librarian for five years.”³³ After this she later married Edwin and had two children. Shortly after she became a mother, she started to take classes at the University of Chicago. She developed literary aspirations of her own and soon became more interested in her intellectual pursuits than society’s obligations of motherhood and domesticity. Because she was so focused on her intellectual pursuits instead of a domestic lifestyle, Wright became attracted to her:

“...her relative indifference toward her son and daughter, who, even while nominally in her care, had been routinely foisted off on a series of nurses and boarding school. Unlike Kitty (i.e. Catherine), she had largely freed herself from her offspring to pursue the world of ideas – including Wright’s ideas...”³⁴

These ideas made her want to give up the lifestyle she was currently living in. One could even say that she did not want that lifestyle in the first place.

Compared to Wright, Borthwick had a completely different experience than Wright when she filed for divorce and decided to elope with him to Europe. She was able to receive a rather

³¹ Drennan, 43.

³² Welter, 154.

³³ Drennan, 42.

³⁴ Drennan. 42.

painless divorce from her husband, Edwin Cheney, and she was still able to see her children John and Martha whenever she wished. This arrangement worked out perfectly for her because of her desire to translate and to be free of a domestic lifestyle all while being with the one she loved.

During her time spent in Europe, Borthwick became engaged in translating works for Swedish proto-feminist, Ellen Key. Key was a free love advocate whose works were translated by Borthwick herself during her time in Europe with Wright. Key argued that:

“The treatment of the movements which have the deepest influence on sexual morality are: the evolution of love, its freedom and its selection; the claims of the right to and an exemption from motherhood; of collective motherhood, of free divorce, and of new marriage law.”³⁵

From this argument, we can see all of the same arguments that both Wright and Borthwick used when defending their beliefs against the public’s opinions. These arguments spoke on a personal level to Borthwick and she admired all of Key’s work because it described exactly how she was feeling and it put these feelings into a framework that she could now use to explain her own actions. Borthwick became so close to Key that she sent multiple letters to Key during her time at Taliesin. These letters are the only available source of Borthwick’s own voice and it finally gives her a voice on her relationship with Wright. In one letter Borthwick writes:

“I am grateful indeed for your words of friendship and I trust I may live my life and I believe I am living it so that may not be ashamed of it as a testimony of faith in the beauty and purity and nobility Ellen Key’s words.” Borthwick goes on to sign the letter with, “Your loving disciple, Mamah Bouton Borthwick.”³⁶

From this letter, it is easy to see how devoted Borthwick is to the feminist’s work. Key strongly advocated that all of her disciples follow their beliefs and their relationships, “even in the face of

³⁵ Key, Ellen. *Love and Marriage*. New York: Putnam, 1911. P. 56.

³⁶ Borthwick, Mamah, and Alice T. Friedman. "Frank Lloyd Wright and Feminism: Mamah Borthwick's Letters to Ellen Key." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 2 (2002): 140-51.

public censure.”³⁷ Which is exactly what Wright and Borthwick did whenever the public scrutinized their relationship. However, despite Borthwick translating Key’s work and being as devoted to her as she was, Key was known to keep all of her followers a certain distance away from her. According to Twombly:

“Borthwick had apparently written to Key in an earlier (now missing) letter to ask if she could visit her in Sweden. Key, with characteristic ambivalence, seems to have encouraged Borthwick to make the trip but then changed her mind, forcing Borthwick to back pedal in order to restore harmony.”³⁸

It is clear from this that Borthwick was definitely willing to contact Key despite Key not wanting her to. Borthwick probably felt indebted to Key because Key helped her out during a stressful time when it seemed like the whole world was against her and Wright.

Frank Lloyd Wright:

Before Frank Lloyd Wright met Mamah Borthwick, he abided by society’s standards of domesticity. As previously stated, he married his first wife, Catherine, who was seen as the ideal “true woman” who followed the four virtues of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. During his marriage, Wright entered into a domestic suburban lifestyle and he had six children with Catherine. By adhering to society’s desires, Wright became increasingly popular within his community, nationally, and internationally through his architectural commissions. However, as time went on Wright decided to act on his innate principles, especially those that related to marriage and home life. In 1905, Wright even began to change his appearance and his conventional neighbors and probably Catherine herself started to notice that he was becoming less and less of the ideal Oak Park citizen. He started to let his hair grow, Hubbard-style,

³⁷ Twombly, Robert C. "Frank Lloyd Wright in Spring Green, 1911-1932." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 51, no. 3 (1968): 200-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4634331>

³⁸ Twombly, "Frank Lloyd Wright in Spring Green, 1911-1932," 143.

stopped going to church and even brought some new guests over that did not fit into suburban standards.³⁹ Eventually, his newfound ideals are what led him to Mamah Borthwick. He was no longer interested in the ideals his wife structured her life around. Instead, he was interested in someone who advocated for emancipation from the domestic lifestyle that was forced upon them by society. This unhappiness with the virtue of domesticity was expressed more and more when he was explaining his reasoning for wanting a divorce:

“Everything, personal or otherwise, bore heavily down upon me. Domesticity most of all. What I wanted I did not know. I loved my children. I loved my home. A true home is the finest ideal of man, and yet – well, to gain my freedom I asked for divorce.”⁴⁰

Wright would not be granted this divorce by his first wife until many years later. In 1909, he still decided to pursue his newfound principles and ideals by leaving his wife and six children to go to Europe with Borthwick. The public was scandalized with Wright’s decision and his work commissions began to decline dramatically. However, Wright did not care what the public thought about his relationship with Borthwick and he was persistent on defending the free love ideal that their relationship was founded upon.

The Role of Eugenics

Eugenics played a huge role in defining the standards of society by dictating who could marry whom. Both the True Woman and the New Woman were heavily influenced by eugenics. Eugenics was the science of improving the human population through selective breeding in order to create desirable characteristics to make the “perfect race.” By controlling marriage, society could then control who reproduced with whom, so the race could continue to remain pure. For

³⁹ Drennan, 40.

⁴⁰ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P. 175.

example, in Davenport's bulletin, he states the three main laws to restrict marriage because of eugenics. He states:

“the laws of biological import restricting marriage fall into three groups: (1) laws limiting the physical and mental condition of the consorts, (2) laws limiting consanguinity; and (3) laws concerning miscegenation or the mixture of races.”⁴¹

In Reed's article, *Laws of human Breeding and Applied Eugenics*, he states that “eugenic, means ‘well born’ and, as applied to marriage, signifies the union of one man with one woman as husband and wife, not merely for the perpetuation of the species without reference to quality, possible progeny.”⁴² This illustrates how state laws prohibited the intermarriage between the races because it would be detrimental to the white race. Therefore, individual happiness in marriage does not apply to everyone because many people believed that interracial marriage was morally wrong. It is possible that Wright and Borthwick believed this too. Even though they are mostly strong advocates of marrying for love, eugenics was the standard science at the time. Meaning that in both the cult of domesticity and the New Woman idea, eugenics was still an important aspect in shaping both even though they are completely different from one another. When discussing women being free to be able to choose their own father for their children. Margaret Sanger states in *Women and the New Race* that “it will work in wondrous ways.” She argues:

“It refuses to bring weaklings; refuses to bring forth slaves...It withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit...Instinctively it avoids all those things which multiply racial handicaps...We shall see that it will save the precious metals of racial culture, fused into an amalgam of physical perfection, mental strength and spiritual progress.”⁴³

⁴¹ Davenport, Charles Benedict. *State Laws Limiting Marriage Selection Examined in the Light of Eugenics* / by Charles B. Davenport. Bulletin (Eugenics Record Office); No. 9. 1913.

⁴² Reed, C. A. L. *Marriage and Genetics: Laws of Human Breeding and Applied Eugenics*. Galton Press, 1913.

⁴³ Sanger, Margaret. *Woman and the New Race* / by Margaret Sanger; with a Pref. by Havelock Ellis. 1920.

This piece of evidence explains that “new women”, like Borthwick, believed that the idea of being able to choose who you want to be with without being married is okay because the white race would not be affected in any sort of way. Borthwick and Wright, however, mostly got their ideas from Swedish feminist, Ellen Key, who advocated free love and its effects that it would have on the race. In her book, *Love and Marriage*, the word “race” is mentioned a total of 110 times. One of the main aspects of this book is that she strongly advocates that eugenics and love can coincide peacefully next to each other and will actually strengthen the race. She states: “Above all it is the extension of the instinct of love through the racial sense which will secure the ennobling of the race without sacrificing individual happiness.”⁴⁴ To advocate her point even further she adds:

“scientific reasoning lays stress upon the point that if mankind is to abandon monogamy, which has possessed such enormous advantages, then this must be done with a conscious purpose, to further the development of the whole race, not the passions of the individuals.”⁴⁵

In this case, the main danger will affect the purity of the race during this time period. Therefore, Key believes that if eugenicists back up her argument, people and society will begin to change their standards of what is moral and what is immoral. When Wright and Borthwick eloped together, society thought this as immoral because they were breaking the established race and gender hierarchies that the cult of domesticity and true womanhood enforces. Even though they were both Caucasian and were in a “free union” relationship that would bring forth no children, the general public still saw this as a threat to the race.

⁴⁴ Key, Ellen. *Love and Marriage*. New York: Putnam, 1911. P.143.

⁴⁵ Key, P. 153.

The Taliesin Murders

One of Wisconsin's largest mass murder happened on Saturday, August 15, 1914 at Taliesin. It was here that seven people dear to Frank Lloyd Wright were brutally murdered while Wright was away on the Midway Gardens commission in Chicago. Julian Carlton, a servant who was recommended to Wright by a trusted friend, staged his surprise attack on Taliesin with a well thought out plan. "He waited until the noon hour, after everyone was seated at opposite ends of the house to eat lunch. Everyone who could put up a fight was grouped, accounted for, and off guard."⁴⁶ While everyone was eating, Carlton went to Borthwick and the children, John, eleven years old, and Martha, eight years old, first. The mother and children were away from the rest of the workers and were seated at the opposite end of Taliesin. Therefore, no one was able to help them. They were struck with a long-handled shingling hatchet and Carlton began to pour gasoline over the three bodies. This is where the fire began on one end of the house:

"afterward only a few charred remains of John were found, not enough to provide a death certificate...The first person to reach Mamah Borthwick was Wright's brother-in-law Andrew Porter. He found her body ablaze and thought it had been saturated with gasoline. It was 12:45."⁴⁷

From here Carlton then moved to the other end of Taliesin where the dining room was located. It was here where the workers, five men and a thirteen- year old boy were eating their lunch. Carlton, moving quickly, saturated a rug with gasoline, placed it against the dining room door and set it ablaze. According to Draftsman Herbert Fritz, one of two survivors, he remembered a bubbly liquid coming under the door and then the room burst into flames. With only two ways out Fritz crashed through a window, breaking his arm.⁴⁸ Unlike Fritz, the others were not as

⁴⁶ Mccrea, Ron. *Building Taliesin: Frank Lloyd Wright's Home of Love and Loss*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2012.

⁴⁷ Mccrea, 189.

⁴⁸ Mccrea, 189.

lucky. Because the only exits were the dining room door and the window that Fritz jumped out of, most of the trapped workers ran through the burning door. It was here that Carlton was waiting with his axe as the workers funneled through the door. Those who did not make it out were foreman William Weston's thirteen-year old son, Ernest, handyman Thomas Bruncker, draftsman Emil Brodelle, and gardener David Lindblom. As Taliesin was on fire, many of the Spring Green residents rushed to put it out. Wright states in his autobiography:

“In thirty minutes the home and all in it had burned to the stonework or to the ground...The living half of Taliesin – violently swept down in a madman's nightmare of flame and murder. The working half remained. Will Weston saved that.”⁴⁹

Wright was working on a commission in Chicago at the time when he received a phone call that Taliesin had caught on fire. He instantly stopped what he was doing and caught the next train to Spring Green. However, this was the only information he received at the time. Wright was not prepared for what he would see in the newspapers on his way back to Taliesin. Many of the newspapers that came out on the day of the attack also did not know many of the details of the attack. While Wright was reading them, one fact was certain, Mamah Borthwick “she for whom Taliesin had first taken form”⁵⁰ was one of the victims.

Once Wright had finally made it to Taliesin, he was devastated by what he had to confront. With all but the working half of Taliesin destroyed, his lover, her two children, and his friends murdered, Wright was in one of the darkest moments of his life. As the evening approached, Wright cut down Mamah's garden and put the flowers into a box. His son John helped him lift Mamah's body into the casket and place the coffin onto the wagon that Wright and Mamah had ridden in together. Wright drove the wagon to a quiet churchyard nearby, while his son John followed. When they arrived, they lowered the flower-covered casket into the

⁴⁹ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943.

⁵⁰ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P.185.

ground. Frank then asked his son to leave him. Wright describes what happened during that moment. He states:

“I wanted to fill the grave myself...Dimly, I felt coming in far-off shadows of the ages struggling to escape from sub-consciousness and utter dark. It was friendly. And no monument yet marks the spot where she was buried. All I had left to show for the struggle for freedom of the five years past that had swept most of my former life away, had now been swept away. Why mark the spot where desolation ended and began?”⁵¹

Wright returned to Taliesin shortly after. Wright mentions that the tragedy of losing Mamah left him out of sorts and he fell into a depression. He mentions in his autobiography, “As I looked back at that time I saw the black hole in the hillside, the black night over all. Days strangely without light would follow the black nights. Totally – she was gone.”⁵² For many months he had wanted to see no one except the people that worked there. The only thing that was bearable at the time to him was to immerse himself into his work because it kept his mind off the tragedy. Eventually, Wright overcame this dark period in his life. While questioning over and over “Why Taliesin?” he finally decided to put the past behind him and immersed himself into rebuilding a “new” Taliesin. He started with rebuilding the places of Taliesin where the tragedy had struck the hardest. “Steadily, stone by stone, board by board, Taliesin II began to rise from the ashes of Taliesin I.”⁵³ Taliesin II was a new start for Frank Lloyd Wright. He believed that the new Taliesin created a new image for himself and he felt as though his work became alive for him once again.

⁵¹ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P. 186.

⁵² Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P 187.

⁵³ Wright, Frank Lloyd. *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*. First ed. 1943. P. 189.

Change of Image

After this tragedy, the media, who was once quiet for a couple of years and had left the couple in relative peace, was finally able to bring the controversial relationship up again. After Taliesin fire and murders newspapers across the nation began printing the story on their front pages. Wright stated in his autobiography that after the tragedy “one consequence of the ugly publicity given the terrible tragedy hundreds of letters had come to from all over the country. I tied them up together into a bundle and burned them.”⁵⁴ Wright continued to ignore the media and the past tragedy in order to move forward with his life.

Unlike Wright, Mamah Borthwick has been forever been captured as a personified new woman because that is the legacy she left after her death. In December of 1914, Wright would meet his future second wife Maude (Miriam) Noel. Almost a year after tragedy struck Taliesin, Miriam was living with Wright at Taliesin II.⁵⁵ In 1922, Catherine realized that Wright was never going to come home to her and finally granted him a divorce. However, one of the terms of the was that he would have to wait a year in order to marry his mistress. Wright and Noel got married the following year in 1923. Noel failed to mention to Wright that she was addicted to morphine and within six months, she left him, and Wright decided to file for divorce in 1925. However, little did Wright know that for the next fifteen years she would make Wright’s life awful through foreclosures, lawsuits, arrest, and endless physical abuse. Even after her death due to neuroses and drug addiction in January 1930, the executors of her estate had Wright arrested for a \$7,000 trust deficiency.⁵⁶ Shortly after filing for divorce, Wright met his third wife Olgivanna (Olga) Lazovich Hinzenburg. In 1925, she and Wright were living at Taliesin and

⁵⁴ Wright, 191.

⁵⁵ Drennan, 161.

⁵⁶ Drennan, 162.

Olgivanna was pregnant with their daughter Iovanna. In 1928, Wright and Olga were married. Despite, being against the institution of marriage and being a free love advocate himself Wright retreated back into the societal institution of marriage. However, Wright showed that he continued to advocate Mamah Borthwick's and work after her death. For instance, when the *Little Review* published Borthwick's translation of Ellen Key's tribute to Romain Rolland, Wright heavily praised these publications.⁵⁷ The most likely reason for Wright's retreat back into a domestic lifestyle is because it was convenient for his role as an architect in order to receive more commissions and to stay out of the public eye.

Conclusion

As we can see, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a period of rapid cultural change. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, there were new societal ideas and concepts that were clashing with traditional ones. The radical idea of free love and the new woman clashed with traditional ideas of the cult of domesticity and, caused a lot a controversy among media outlets and the public. This concept that men and women could form a "free union" relationship was based on the belief that the state had no authority over sexual matters. Many who supported this idea thought that marriage was a social institution that confined them to society's expectations of domesticity, motherhood, and being submissive to their spouse. The concept of free love was seen as a major threat to true womanhood and the cult of domesticity.

This threat to true womanhood was the reason why Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick's relationship was seen as controversial and immoral to the public eye. Since Wright was famous American architect and interior designer, this non-traditional relationship caused uproar among the public because of Frank Lloyd Wright's status. The media was hungry for any

⁵⁷ Kaufman, 64.

sort of news regarding this scandalous relationship despite the couple stating that they would like to be left alone. Eventually public outrage died down for a bit because the media was unable to get any new information about the couple's affairs. This was the case until tragedy struck Taliesin. When the media got ahold of the Taliesin fire and murders, the controversy of Wright and Borthwick's relationship flourished again. After Borthwick's death, she was still seen as the ideal "New Woman" because of the legacy she left behind. Unlike Borthwick, Wright retreated back into the societal institution of marriage, despite being against society's obligation of domesticity. Because Wright was seen as a public figure, his relationship with Borthwick was used for the center of all debate against the idea of free love. American society had many expectations when it came to marriage, the family, and gender roles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By understanding the status of women in marriage during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, one can see how the cult of domesticity, the New Woman, and the study of eugenics played a pivotal role in the public's expectations towards marriage. Frank Lloyd Wright's relationship with his mistress Mamah Borthwick was a lightning rod for public debates over marriage in a period of rapid cultural change.



Figure 1. Mamah Borthwick Cheney, mistress of Frank Lloyd Wright. Reproduced with permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.



Figure 2. Taliesin before the fire and murders, circa 1913. Elevated, exterior view of Taliesin. Taliesin is located in the vicinity of Spring Green, Wisconsin. Reproduced with permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.



Figure 3. Remains of the living quarters of Taliesin as seen from the courtyard after a fire destroyed most of the building. Several people stand in the courtyard looking at the damage. Circa 1914. Reproduced with permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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