

## “If Men Should Be Wanted”

1907–1908

Early in 1908, Oswald Garrison Villard, the progressive editor and publisher of the *Nation* and the *New York Evening Post*, replied to a letter of invitation from the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, known as NAWSA, the Reverend Doctor Anna Howard Shaw. She asked him to speak at a suffrage convention in Buffalo, scheduled for October 15, a date, Villard replied, that was too far in the future for him to commit. On top of that, to “prepare an elaborate address” was out of the question, he said, as he was already “taxed to the limit of my strength.” But in the letter, Villard also proposed a fresh idea that had started to gain ground in Europe: the formation of a prosuffrage club composed exclusively of men.

These would be not just any men, Villard suggested, but those with the stature to rival his own as the wealthy scion of an illustrious American family of reformers and industrialists. Villard envisioned a group of at least one hundred members and many vice presidents meant to function mostly in name—those who could “impress the public and legislators.” That would mean men with influence in all the important avenues of thought and power, those self-assured enough to ignore the ridicule that public support for women’s suffrage was bound to draw. Such a membership, Villard said, could entice others in the same political, professional, social, and charitable circles to plunk down a dollar in annual dues and heighten their interest in the suffragists’ cause or at least lessen their derision, something much of the New York press did its best to foster. Villard initially reasoned that to do no more than announce the names of influential men willing to associate themselves with the women’s movement in such a direct and public way would attract good publicity and bring useful direct and subliminal support. “I have wanted to suggest this for a long while,” he wrote to Shaw, “but have feared that if I did suggest it the work of organizing would be placed upon my shoulders, and I cannot undertake a single additional responsibility, not even one that requires merely the signature of letters.”

In approaching Villard to address the convention, Shaw had been acting on word from Villard's mother, the suffragist Helen Frances Garrison Villard, known always as "Fanny." His mother had let it be known that her accomplished son was willing once again to stump for the cause. He had done so in his "maiden speech" in 1896 to the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association. Twenty-five at the time, three years after his graduation from Harvard, Villard was pursuing a master's degree and served as a teaching assistant to "The Grand Old Man" of American History, Professor Albert Bushnell Hart. Villard used the occasion of his suffrage association speech to push for getting women the vote and to urge Harvard to start admitting women as a way to prepare them for their duties as citizens.

He was by no means the first American man to publicly support women's suffrage. Frederick Douglass, the prominent abolitionist, had done so in a newspaper column as early as 1848, the week of the first Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, which he attended. His last public act the day of his death, February 20, 1895, was an appearance during a secret meeting in Washington, DC, of the Women's Council. Anna Howard Shaw and his lifelong friend, Susan B. Anthony, had both escorted him to the platform, where he was roundly applauded. And William Lloyd Garrison, Villard's maternal grandfather, addressed the fourth women's suffrage convention in Cleveland in 1853. A bold handful of other prominent men had also spoken out or written over the years.

In 1902, by which point Villard had succeeded his father, Henry Villard, as publisher of both the *Post* and the *Nation*, he joined other male supporters of suffrage in "An Evening with the New Man," a Valentine's Day-themed event at that year's NAWSA national convention, in Washington, DC. Their appearance prompted some of the earliest headlines announcing men's support for the women's cause. In the *Washington Post* it was

MEN CHAMPION CAUSE:  
WOMAN SUFFRAGISTS NOT ALONE IN THEIR BATTLE

And in the *Washington Times*:

NEW MAN'S VIEWS ON WOMAN SUFFRAGE

Shaw's reply to Villard on February 6, 1908, made a point of reminding him of the great joy his remarks at that convention had given Anthony, who had died March 13, 1906, as had his "splendid stand for helpful reforms." Yet in his earlier letter, Villard had already told her that it was not another convention speech that

he had in mind. He was offering to use his considerable influence in “an appeal to the Legislature, if men should be wanted for that purpose.”

Such a proposal was not much of a reach for a man of Villard’s lineage. His father was a former reporter and war correspondent who made his money in railroads and bought the *Post* and its supplement, the *Nation*, in 1881. He also played a key role in the history of the railroad and the development of electricity in the United States. As owner of the Edison Lamp Company and the Edison Machine Works, which eventually became General Electric, the elder Villard subsidized Thomas Edison’s research for years. The younger Villard’s “close and binding” relationship with his mother was also clearly an influence. Fanny was a valued suffrage campaigner. “It gives me joy to remember,” she once said, “that not only my father, William Lloyd Garrison, but also my good German-born husband believed in equal rights for women.” It was a position her son had also embraced.

At the time of the younger Villard’s proposal to Shaw, the militant British suffragette Anne Cobden-Sanderson was winding up a much-publicized US speaking tour that took her to Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City between late October of 1907 and early January of 1908. Villard’s *Evening Post*, like all the major newspapers, gave her ample coverage. During those three busy months on the road, Cobden-Sanderson spent almost as much time insulting her American hosts as she did recounting her own harrowing saga of arrest and incarceration for demonstrating in front of the House of Commons a year earlier. Her conviction had put her away in the clothes of a jailbird in Holloway Prison, where for a month she scrubbed the floor of her eight-by-twelve cell and subsisted on weak tea in the morning, six ounces of bread throughout the day, and two baked potatoes with a cup of cocoa at night. She was quick to note to her American audiences that her prison record obliged her to slink over the Canadian border to enter the United States to avoid possible deportation had she been faced with the obligatory question of port officials: “Have you ever been arrested?”

Throughout her visit, in both public remarks and comments to reporters, Cobden-Sanderson scoffed at the comparatively slow pace of the US movement’s progress. Britain, she said, was “years ahead of American women in our fight for equal rights.” This she attributed in part to the new militancy of its women, an approach that her American counterparts had not yet embraced. American suffragists, she said, favored club life over action. Not the British. “We believe in doing real things not in talking about them,” she said, adding that her American sisters behaved in a manner far “too ultra-refined” to do the hard work that eventual victory demanded.

Cobden-Sanderson reserved her harshest critique for the American society dame who “steeps herself in the degradation of luxury. She adorns her person until I often am reminded of a Turkish harem. She measures all humanity by its clothes, as her husband measures all his fellow men by their wealth and their ability to acquire more wealth.” She scoffed at the poor judgment American women showed more generally, at the superficial way they evaluated leadership and thought about the world. (Months later, after her return to England, she would say that American women demonstrated “timid conventionality of thought” and the inability to grasp a profound idea.) She singled out the wealthy antisuffragist as one who “has no time to think of the vital questions of the hour, no civic pride, because she is too busy adorning her person and steeping herself in the luxury which deadens the soul to know what really is going on in the great pulsing world of the ‘under dog’—the stratum of humanity beneath her own.” To a reporter for the *New York Times*, she said, “I don’t want to be uncomplimentary, but really, I don’t believe the average American woman would know what to do with the ballot if she had it. She has had no political training whatever, and, as I have said, she doesn’t care for public affairs.”

Villard, however, cared greatly about such matters, and on December 3, 1907, he had concretized a commitment to suffrage among his many causes. He joined the committee formed to lead the campaign to win support from the lawmakers in Albany. “After reading your note to my mother in regard to the onerous duties of the Cooperative Legislative Committee,” he wrote to its leader, Anne Fitzhugh Miller, who also headed one of the state’s largest political equality clubs in upstate Geneva, “I shall be glad to become a member of it.”

The major event of Cobden-Sanderson’s US tour came on December 12, 1907, when some four thousand people crowded Cooper Union to hear her speak at what was billed as the inauguration of “the greatest suffragist crusade in the history of New York.” The movement paragon Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had recently returned to the United States from England, where she had been working with her British suffrage sisters. Blatch introduced her British guest as “The Cobden” and proclaimed her a “martyr to the great cause of women.” In response, the *Sun* reported, “The house shook with applause.” From the podium, Cobden-Sanderson said the size and enthusiasm of the gathering had restored her hope for the American crusade. This time she denounced those women who did not want the ballot as “parasites at the top” and again railed against the superficiality of their “idle luxurious lives.” Press reports of the event devoted more column inches to repeating the British suffragette’s already well-reported insults than to her fresher remarks. They also devoted several

Oswald Garrison Villard  
No. 20 Vesey Street  
New York

December 3, 1907.

Miss Nannie Miller,  
Geneva, N. Y.

My dear Miss Miller:

After reading your note to my mother  
in regard to the onerous duties of the Cooperating Legislative  
Committee, I shall be glad to become a member of it.

Yours very truly,

Oswald Garrison Villard

Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to Anne Fitzhugh Miller, December 3, 1907. (Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897–1911; Scrapbook 6, 1907, p. 25; December 3, 1907; Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division)

paragraphs to expressions of disappointment that a widely rumored attempt to deport Cobden-Sanderson from the stage had not materialized.

Two nights later, the *New York Tribune* covered her speech at a gathering of the Interurban Woman Suffrage Council at Memorial Hall in Brooklyn. The reporter chided the dozen men in attendance for their subservience, noting that two of their number had been reduced not only to walking the aisles for contributions but to strong-arming the other men present into offering up dollar bills along with the loose change in their pockets. The event's female organizer had even sent them onto the platform to collect from the seated dignitaries, including the prominent Democrat John S. Crosby, who presided. Crosby "did not deign to make a speech," the *Tribune* said, and "looked miserable indeed" after he misidentified the woman designated to second the resolutions. The headline:

EVE BACK IN THE GARDEN:  
MERE MAN QUAILS AT INTERURBAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE MEETING.

As for Cobden-Sanderson's remarks, the newest was a comment that she had never met so many timid people so afraid of consequences.

In a letter to Shaw, Villard put a positive spin on the British guest's repeated barbs. "So far as Mrs. Sanderson is concerned," he wrote, "while we regret her tactlessness, I cannot but feel that her visit has done some good, and that a certain amount of criticism of our American workers is justifiable." More than that, something Cobden-Sanderson had emphasized throughout her speaking tour as another huge failing of the US movement seemed to have lodged itself in Villard's eardrum. She spoke several times of the failure of American women "to enlist the sympathy of the men of America." In Britain, she told the *Boston Globe*, "Nearly all of our most distinguished men are in favor of the emancipation of women."



Cobden-Sanderson's observations, along with the emergence of organized men's groups in Britain early in 1907, were the foreground to the grand idea Villard presented in his letter to Shaw of January 7, 1908. "This leads me to one subject that has long been on my mind," he wrote. "Why could not a Men's Equal Suffrage Club be started here?" With the right secretary to recruit the membership and then charter and publicize the organization, he felt sure that such a group could be formed with "some excellent names on it."

Soon after, a snide editorial in Villard's *New York Evening Post* described as "rather startling" Cobden-Sanderson's contention that the smug self-satisfaction of American women had complicated the work of the suffrage movement and added to its mission the need to first "create the very foundation of discontent on which all striving for reform is based."

Shaw's reply to Villard's proposal came a good month after she received his letter. The idea for a men's organization, she told him, was one the women's movement had contemplated more than once over the years but had been wont to act upon. Hesitation, she said, always came down to the "undoubted fact" that the men who could do the most good for suffrage, those whose "influence and interest would enable them to draw to such a society others whose names would be really helpful," were far too occupied with other matters to be of any real use. So many men, she explained, did not consider women's suffrage a vital issue and those who did tended not to be in good standing with the men whose own positions would make them valuable as allies. Better not to attempt such a plan, she wrote, "unless the names secured would be in themselves helpful. Any others

might constantly involve us in all sorts of *isms*, and we have more of them now than we can ward off with some of our over-zealous women.”

Another issue she did not mention was the ingrained opposition of serious, respected men like Woodrow Wilson, then the president of Princeton University with its all-male student body. Around this time, an interviewer paraphrased Wilson as having said that women did not really want the franchise, and it would not be an unmixed blessing for the rest of the world if they had it. The interviewer added Wilson’s words in quotation marks: “It may be true that women in various parts of the world would have to fight against severe odds, but in America, at least, they are almost too much protected. Not that I would have this otherwise, because I think a woman should have all the protection that is legitimately possible.” Women, as a rule, Wilson said, favor goodness over ability “and are apt to be not a little influenced by charm of manner.” He also said that because women did not exercise their right to the ballot in many of the states where the franchise had been granted, he thought the cause soon might become “a dead letter.”

Yet NAWSA, on the strength of Villard’s proposal and its own deliberations, was ready to reconsider. Since Villard was “so occupied with business,” Shaw proposed letting the women draw up plans for the league for his review. The women would work to secure the names of prospective charter members from across the country. They would also undertake all the administrative chores but “would not assume to have any control whatever over the organized group after the names were collected.”

Villard replied to Shaw a week later, nudging her plan for the League closer to his own vision of it. Forming a New York State organization first would be the best course, he argued, and suggested a number of prominent men whose names would get such a group off the ground. But even before that, the League would need its own secretary. “It would be stronger than if it were organized by your National Association,” Villard said. “I am sure that we can get plenty of helpful practical men here who will not be carried away with *isms*, and whose names would really carry weight.”



Villard began putting out feelers for a secretary. As coconspirator, he engaged Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who later was said to have agreed to “the share the ignominy” of organizing such a League “provided someone turned up who would do the work.” The rabbi had recently returned to New York from a pastorate in Portland,

Oregon, where he had developed a reputation as an outspoken reformer. He had been a prime candidate to lead Temple Emanu-el, the flagship synagogue for all of Reform Judaism, but stunningly withdrew because of the board's insistence that it preapprove all sermons as a condition of the offer, a galling stipulation to a seventh-generation rabbi in a line that stretched back two centuries to his native Hungary. Wise not only rejected the idea but he publicly condemned it. He then established his own New York congregation, the Free Synagogue.

During Wise's early childhood his father moved the family to Brooklyn, where he had accepted a pulpit. In school, at City College and then at Columbia, Wise excelled in Greek, Latin, and literature. Affairs of state and social justice engaged him as much as Jewish life and faith. Emblematic of this dual passion was an essay he wrote, at age fifteen, about Abraham Lincoln, which his brother Otto Irving Wise published in the first issue of the *Literary Review*, a publication he started in 1889. The essay compared Lincoln's role as "Great Emancipator" to the role Moses played for the Hebrews.

Wise's outspoken interest in women's rights dates back at least to 1906 in Portland, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to the suffragist and historian Eva Emery Dye, responding to her invitation to speak on the subject. So it is not surprising that in the summer of 1908, he sent Villard a clipping about a witty address that the British author and humorist Israel Zangwill had delivered at Oxford. This was more than a year after the British men's league for women's suffrage had been formed. Zangwill pointed out how "pretty girls" had taken over the leadership of the British movement, undoing in the process the long-standing and thoroughly unattractive caricature of a movement stalwart. It was an image, Zangwill said, that he and a few other "ugly, elderly, masculine and eye-glassed" men had taken upon their selves to restore. "One of these noble beings stands before you, absolutely incarnating the ancient ideal," he said, adding, "I am a suffragette." Zangwill went on to decry the notion that gender should be the criterion for shutting anyone out of the polling booth. "Why is Florence Nightingale's opinion of the candidate for her constituency less valuable than the chimney-sweeper's?" he asked. "We suffragettes demand votes for women, not because they are women, but because they are fellow citizens. The sex of a voter is no more anyone's concern," he said, "than the color of the voter's hair." He based his assertion on "the purse," on the obligations of women as taxpayers. Taxpayers ought to be able to vote. Grasp that, he said, "and you will escape tangling yourself in a whole network of fallacies."

Other left-wing intellectuals joined Zangwill in these views, among them Bertrand Russell, who stood as a Suffragist candidate in a by-election at Wimbledon



in 1907. As a group, the British League was neither partisan nor militant. It grew from an initial thirty-two members to nearly ten times that size. In the kinds of movement engagement its members chose, mostly publicity and propaganda, it led the way for its American counterparts. The British men wrote and spoke at meetings and rallies, marched in parades, and acted as street-level organizers. The composition of the American and British groups also bore similarities. In Britain, the league included former government ministers, clergy members, military leaders, academics, and writers such as H.G. Wells, Thomas Hardy, and E.M. Forster, whom, along with Zangwill, the antisuffragists—the “antis”—were quick to attack in letters to the editors of the *London Times* and *Irish Times*.

Mary Augusta Ward, the British novelist who wrote under her married name as Mrs. Humphry Ward, responded in print to counter Zangwill’s position. She saw no contradiction in saying both “that women have often shown a disinclination to vote when suffrage of different kinds was open to them,” as had been the case in some of the American states where women had the vote, and that for both men and women to be voters “might become a political danger” in Socialist hands. Zangwill replied that Ward’s problem was that as both a novelist and a woman, she knew the other members of her sex too well “and despises them for their weaknesses, their follies, and their caprices,” drawing “the conclusion that her own sex cannot be trusted with a vote.” Ward told Zangwill he was far too fixated on the importance of the parliamentary vote. It was only the “political machinery” that mattered, she said, and each of the sexes had its own more important role to play in its workings.

Villard thanked Wise for the clipping and replied, “I have been advocating for nearly a year past the formation of a man’s society for Woman’s suffrage, and



A 1908 campaign button of the British Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage. (LSE Collections, UK)

certainly think we should be at it next fall. Won't you keep your eyes open for a young man who would take the position of secretary? If we can find him the rest should be comparatively easy." As it turned out, Villard's appeal was not the only such recruitment invitation Wise received in this period. In early September of 1908, Harriot Stanton Blatch invited the rabbi into the "inner circle" of the Equal Franchise Society, a group then being formed by the socialite Katherine Duer Mackay, wife of Clarence Mackay, the cofounder of American Telephone & Telegraph. Blatch described this new society as "an important suffrage committee" bent on finding "the best way to push on woman's suffrage in our backward country."

Noteworthy is that the request to Wise came not from Mackay but from Blatch. This was a clear sign of how closely tied Mackay's society was to NAWSA, as was another organization then coming into being, the Political Equality League, founded by another socialite, Alva Belmont, who had become engaged with suffrage earlier in the year after the death of her second husband, Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont. It had become a movement strategy to cultivate lady members from society's higher social strata in an effort to draw favorable public attention to the suffrage cause. As Villard had pointed out to Shaw, the more these groups appeared to be separate from NAWSA, to be distinct bastions of support, acting in concert with the main body but independently, the better for the movement over all.

As to the specific purpose of Mackay's group, the *New York Times* described it in terms much blunter than Blatch's. This by-invitation-only initiative directed at men as well as women, a *Times* article noted, would "take the organized work more into the ranks of society than it has yet been." More evidence of the impact of NAWSA's nascent strategy came with the December 4 Carnegie Hall appearance of another celebrated suffragette, Ethel Snowden, the wife of the British MP Philip Snowden. A front-page headline in the *New York Times* acknowledged how the usual crowd for a suffrage event was changing:

#### SOCIETY WELL REPRESENTED AT MEETING ADDRESSED BY ENGLISH SUFFRAGETTE

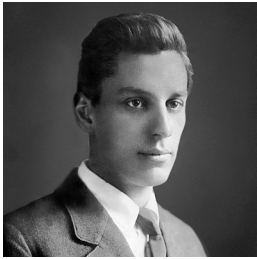
The article included the names of all the illustrious husbands seated with their wives in the boxes and noted that two men, Rabbi Wise and the Reverend Charles Aked of the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, were among the featured speakers. Aked, like Wise, was an obvious choice to address the crowd. Only a month earlier, his lengthy examination of the emergence as a political force of the "remarkable" suffrage movement in England had appeared in the *North American Review*.

Although women occupied the top leadership positions in Mackay's new Equal Franchise Society, the third and fourth vice presidencies went to William M. Ivins, the president of the City Club, and Colonel George Harvey, the wealthy Democratic Party kingmaker who was editor and publisher of both the *North American Review* and *Harper's Weekly*. Other prominent men listed among the Society's founders included Wise and John Dewey, the philosopher and Columbia professor; Rollo Ogden, the *Evening Post* editorialist who, in 1919, would become chief editor of the *New York Times*, and Charles Sprague Smith, another Columbia professor and the director of the People's Institute.

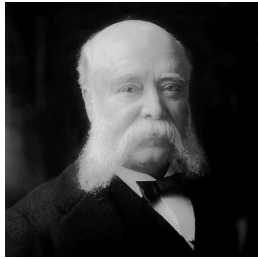
In a splashier spread two months later, the *Times* found reason to reintroduce Mackay's group, this time playing down its social cachet to emphasize its seriousness of purpose. "Although organized and managed by women known for their prominence in society," the *Times* said, "it is a practical working organization with all of its members laboring for the desired end—the ballot for women on equal terms with men." As if it were not already abundantly clear, a well-placed sidebar to the piece confirmed the value to the movement of having important men in these ranks. It featured statements not from Mackay or her nearest women lieutenants, but from the professors, the rabbi, and the editor-cum-kingmaker, under a headline that affirmed the women's wise choice to include them:

WELL-KNOWN MEN ADVOCATE IT  
GEORGE HARVEY, RABBI WISE, AND OTHERS  
CONTEND THAT WOMEN SHOULD VOTE

Each offered a succinct explanation of his prosuffrage stance. Smith dismissed the arguments against women's suffrage as "very light weight," adding that the extension of the vote to women was "as inevitable as the next sunrise, a part of the great forward social movement we are now experiencing." Harvey dismissed the antisuffragist notion that voting women would do the community ill. "How do they account for the fact that whenever and wherever equal suffrage has been established reversion to partial suffrage, as a result of the experience, has never in a single instance been decreed or even suggested?" Dewey argued that "the principle of indirect influence by charm and personality" was inherently immoral and actually one of the chief reasons for supporting women's suffrage. Wise said he wanted to help right a flagrant wrong. "As long as women are shut out from citizenship and the exercise of the ballot, which is the symbol of citizenship, ours is no democracy," he wrote, "—that is, rule of the people."



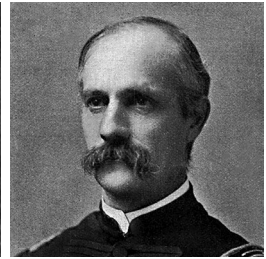
Max Eastman



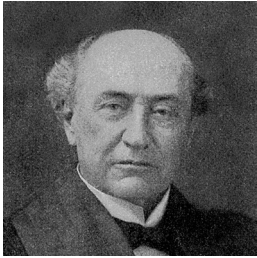
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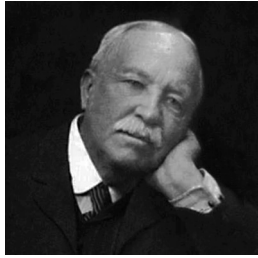
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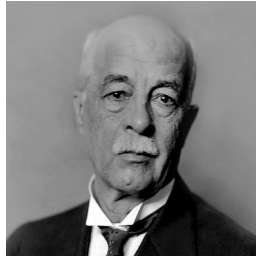
Samuel J. Barrows



David J. Brewer



William Dean Howells



Rollo Ogden



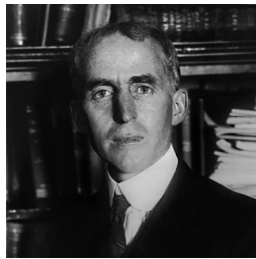
Finley Peter Dunne



John Wesley Hill



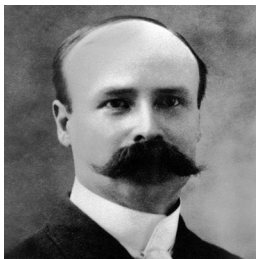
George Foster Peabody



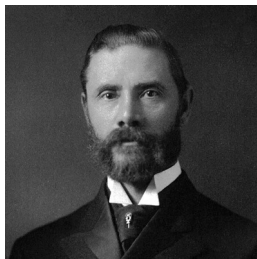
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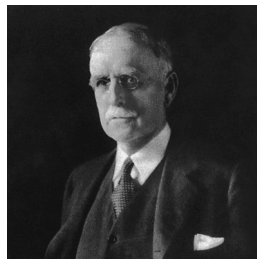
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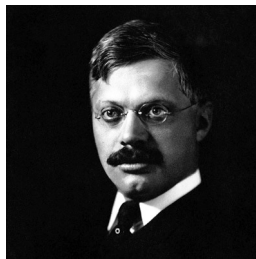
Nathaniel Schmidt



Charles C. Burlingham



Arthur Levy (Leeds)



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