

Katie Burrage (1865–1914) Groundbreaking Academic and Occupational Therapist

By Bernie Zelitch



This unmarked photograph is almost certainly of Katie Burrage. She is pictured wearing a robe in her 1899 graduation portrait adorned with a floral corsage for the occasion. The logotype of J&E Powell Studio, run by John and Annie Powell, is embossed in the lower left corner of the image. The studio was located at 55 South Whipple Street, Lowell, MA, near Lowell Cemetery. Courtesy of the Annie Powell Collection.

Katie Burrage rode the wave of the Progressive Era to become the first female graduate of the first technical college in New England and a pioneering occupational therapist.

Katie was born in Lowell, on July 22, 1865, the oldest of Hamilton and Mary H. Davis Burrage's seven children. Her father, son of a Boston carriage maker, worked as paymaster at the Lowell Bleachery near the family home at 856 Gorham Street. The family ancestor, Charles Burrage, immigrated from England to the United States in 1637. Katie's great-great-grandfather, Henry Fletcher of Chelmsford, died a hero in the Revolutionary War while her maternal grandfather, Sidney Davis, was well known in Lowell real estate. The family accrued enough wealth to spend summers on the Maine seacoast along with other high-society families and to attend debutante balls. Their religious, political, philanthropic, and civic commitments appeared regularly in newspapers. They were active in the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Republican Party, the Humane Society, soldiers' charities, and the First Unitarian Church.

The Burrage children were independent and accomplished. At age 30, Katie boldly journeyed alone by train to visit brother, Guy, in San Francisco, where he was stationed following graduation from the Naval Academy. He eventually became a vice admiral.

When she was 14, the artistic Katie may have taken instruction from well-known French immigrant, Pierre Millet, an accomplished sculptor. The Lowell School Committee board of education selected Millet to teach a free clay-modeling class at its classroom on Dutton and Broadway Streets. Katie taught sculpture at the same location following her 1883 graduation from Lowell High School. It was her art skills that ultimately defined her career at what was then Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), in Boston.

LOWELL CEMETERY

established 1841

At the state-chartered Lowell Textile School (LTS) initial graduation on June 3, 1899, Katie was a prominent stand-out as the only woman graduate. She was 33 years old at the time and at least 10 years older than her classmates. LTS President Alexander G. Cumnock (1834–1919), who is also buried at Lowell Cemetery, singled her out in his speech calling her “one of our Lowell girls”:

“I am glad to say tonight that one of the graduates of the school of design is a woman, one of our Lowell girls. This school is open to all women of Lowell, and you will have the same opportunities that the boys have. There [are a] variety of trades a woman can enter, besides typewriting, if they will come to this school.” (Lowell Textile Journal, 1899)

Katie pursued art and design for an additional year receiving an advanced degree. Unable to find work in her area of expertise, she commuted to Boston and distinguished herself as an art teacher. Her reputation as an exceptional educator was cemented at North Bennet Street Industrial School. Her curriculum attracted the attention of Dr. James Jackson Putnam, world-renowned neurologist at MGH. In 1908, he recruited her to lead a practical art workshop for neurological patients. The program was later expanded to include orthopedic and dermatological patients (a euphemism to describe patients afflicted with syphilis).

Under Katie’s leadership, the workshop continued for seven years, and in an unusual practice at the time, featured patient instructors. Reminiscences by Dr. Putnam, MGH Director (1908–1934) Frederick A. Washburn, and MGH Head of Social Work Ida M. Cannon recounted her exemplary teaching skills and positive affect. All three noted the beneficial clinical outcomes of her workshops and placed her clay-modeling classes in the newly designated “occupational therapy” program. This predates other practitioners credited with formalizing the profession by several years.

Katie Burrage died on May 16, 1914, at 48 years old and is buried in her family plot on Hyacinth Path in the Lowell Cemetery.

