

“Guard Well the Gains”

Laurel C. Thayer, Self-Supporting Workingwomen, and the “Ladylike” Struggle for Waged Equality in the Early Twentieth Century

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Archives and public records are “tricksy” places for women. Women’s writings have often been ignored, or deemed unworthy of archival space. Recovering their voices, legacy, and agency can require not only “reading along and against the grain” but also turning to alternative sources. Women who took charge of the expanding state in the Progressive Era wrote with tremendous frequency as part of their jobs as friendly visitors, public health field workers, social workers, probation officers, and the like. This is how I initially encountered Laurel C. Thayer and a number of other professional and semi-professional Hoosier women, through my research on the Indiana Girls School. Their record keeping and signatures served to commit some 5000 young women and girls, ages 10-20, to custodial state care between 1873 and 1929. Digging into the state archives, one encounters a rich and complicated record of women’s efforts to assess the home and working conditions of other Hoosiers in

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the Progressive Era. Their reports, investigations, letters, and ongoing case notes bring these workingwomen into focus, even if we gain only a limited understanding of their subjects. In the case of Thayer and a few others, their commentary on their work conditions periodically slipped into the official records, and it affords us even greater insight into their lives as workingwomen in this time period.¹

In 1917, Indianapolis mayoral candidate Charles Jewett was courting the city's female vote as he spoke to the Marion County branch of the Indiana Woman's Party.² Jewett promised to bring women into city government by establishing a women's court, hiring female probation and police officers, and working to feminize social and outreach services. He told his audience: "If I am elected mayor of Indianapolis, I shall depend on the women to share the great responsibility for a better government, a cleaner city, a decent city and efficient service in the departments of government."³ Women like Laurel C. Thayer (1874-1944) responded with enthusiasm. Thayer—the daughter of abolitionists, a long-time member of the National Consumers League, and a self-supporting workingwoman—shared Jewett's zeal and welcomed his appreciation of women's work to improve urban life. She operated from a vision of governance born of suffragist and reformist principles that she had long pursued in her work as a news reporter, social worker, and probation officer.

In 1923, the *Indianapolis Star* ran a half-page profile on Thayer that reveals some of the tendrils of influence that shaped her life and work. The article framed her as part of a family tradition of artistic endeavors and social consciousness. Thayer's maternal great-grandfather had emancipated his slaves in 1823. Her mother, Maria Conwell Thayer, enjoyed a regional reputation as a singer. Her father, long-time publisher and editor William Thayer, was a radical abolitionist. The laudatory article documented Laurel Thayer's early employment as a music teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan, her history as a news reporter, and her long career and vocation as a social worker in Indianapolis. The reporter singled out her admiration for Jane

¹On the difficulty of locating women's histories in archives, see, for example, Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana, Ill., 2010); Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, N. C., 2005); and Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven, Conn., 2013).

²The Indiana General Assembly passed a partial suffrage bill in 1917, allowing women to vote in municipal elections. Jennifer Kalvatis, "Indianapolis Women Working For The Right To Vote: The Forgotten Drama Of 1917," M.A. thesis, Indiana University, 2013.

³"Mrs. Wagner Is Made Chairman of Woman's Party," *Indianapolis Star*, May 25, 1917, p. 9.

Addams. Thayer was quoted: “Jane Addams was my early girlhood ideal of womanhood, I have longed to follow in her footsteps.”⁴

Laurel Thayer’s generation came of age during a transition from an empire of benevolence that relied on the surplus labor of middle-class and elite women to a professionalized charity and social-work labor force that was tasked with bringing modern scientific approaches and efficiencies to their work. Thayer, like Addams and other workingwomen in this era, instrumentalized this emerging world of professional charity work to evade the clutches of the “family claim” that turned women away from public life and professional accomplishments to settle on “the domestic stewardship of the traditional family.”⁵ Thayer followed the Chicagoan’s lead in staking out a career in social work among the city’s outcasts, and worked to secure fair wages for workingwomen and suffrage for all women. Thayer argued, “If only social justice could be applied to our social and economic problems, there would be no need for charity.”⁶

Thayer pursued her commitments to workingwomen’s rights, suffrage, and her probation work from her liminal position as a semi-professional workingwoman shaped by the “ladylike” expectations that both con-

⁴“Well Known Indianapolis Women,” *Indianapolis Star*, February 4, 1923, p. 47.

⁵Addams’s relationships with Mary Ellen Starr and Rozet Smith also suggest that historians may need new paradigms for understanding non-heteronormative relationships in the first half of the twentieth century. If Thayer ever considered marriage, those considerations were not preserved in her correspondence or other writings. Lillian Faderman, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America—A History* (New York, 2000), 118-35; James Salazar, “Character’s Conduct: The Democratic Habits of Jane Addams’s ‘Charitable Effort,’” in *Our Sisters’ Keepers: Nineteenth-Century Benevolence Literature by American Women*, eds. Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2005), 257; Victoria Bissell Brown, *The Education of Jane Addams* (Philadelphia, 2003), 192-94, 361; Shannon Jackson, “Toward a Queer Social Welfare Studies: Unsettling Jane Addams,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams*, Maurice Harrington, ed., (University Park, Pa., 2010), 159-80; and Rodger Streitmatter, *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of 15 Extraordinary Same Sex Couples* (New York, 2012), 33-43.

⁶On professionalizing charity work in Indiana, see Ruth Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Robert Barrows, *Albion Fellows Bacon: Indiana’s Municipal Housekeeper* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000); Elizabeth Agnew, *From Charity to Social Work: Mary E. Richmond and the Creation of an American Profession* (Chicago, 2005); Alexandra Minna Stern, “We Cannot Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow’s Ear’: Eugenics in the Hoosier Heartland,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 103 (March 2007), 3-38; Kendra Clauser-Roemer, “‘What Indiana Can Do’: The Influence of Female Field Workers on the Indiana Committee on Mental Defectives, 1915-1924,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 106 (September 2010), 246-71; Stern, “Improving Hoosiers: Indiana and the Wide Scope of American Eugenics,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 106 (September 2010), 219-23; Brent Ruswick, *Almost Worthy: The Poor, Paupers, and the Science of Charity in America, 1877-1917* (Bloomington, Ind., 2013), 197; and “Well Known Indianapolis Women,” *Indianapolis Star*, February 4, 1923, p. 47.

strained and enabled Indiana's women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article examines the underpinnings of Laurel C. Thayer's identity as a workingwoman in the opening decades of the twentieth century, as well as her insistence on fair and equal treatment for waged workingwomen and their professional and semi-professional counterparts. It explores her efforts to carve out a career for herself in city reform work; to maintain her place at the table once there; and to ensure equitable compensation for women probation officers. Her career would prove to be an uphill battle complicated by ageism in the workplace and by shifting approaches to state and municipal governance occasioned by the Great Depression. Finally, this article interlaces Thayer and her struggle as a social worker into a broader discussion about the history of women's waged labor and about how to shape women's history in the state and beyond.

Barbara Springer's 1985 dissertation, "Ladylike Reformers: Indiana Women and Progressive Reform, 1900-1920," has cast long shadows over subsequent historical discussions of the work and lives of reform-oriented Hoosier women. Springer argued that "Hoosier female reformers' ideas about themselves and their place in society reflected their conservative, middle class values."⁷ This paradigm of "ladylike" reformers has proved true in many respects, as many Hoosier women demurred from the realm of politics through the opening years of the twentieth century.

Between 1870 and 1919, municipal suffrage was intertwined with municipal housekeeping efforts, reflecting an understanding that women's domestic roles as mothers and wives equipped them to be allies in city reform and governance. One vector of the movement was the longstanding suffragist complaint of "no taxation without representation," a concern which resonated with many Hoosier women even if the state's most ardent municipal housekeeper, Albion Fellows Bacon, did not warmly support

⁷James Madison concurred: "The campaigns for women's suffrage and for prohibition were largely middle-class reform movements and generally not radical in their goals or methods. They brought modest and gradual change." Peggy Seigel's work on Fort Wayne's suffragists reveals cautious, even reluctant, organizing. Nancy Gabin, however, has challenged historians to re-consider Hoosier women's history in the state. Barbara Springer, "Ladylike Reformers: Indiana Women and Progressive Reform, 1900-1920," Ph. D. diss., Indiana University, 1985, p. 5; James Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 222, and *Hoosiers: A New History* (Bloomington, Ind., 2014), 222; Peggy Seigel, "Winning the Vote in Fort Wayne, Indiana: The Long, Cautious Journey in a German American City," *Indiana Magazine of History* 102 (September 2006), 220-57; Nancy Gabin, "Fallow Yet Fertile: The Field of Indiana Women's History," *Indiana Magazine of History* 96 (September 2000), 213-49.

women's suffrage. In 1912, Elkhart physician Leulla Hukill threatened a tax resisters' campaign to push the state either to exempt women from paying taxes or to allow them taxpayers' suffrage. The state's 1917 attempt to pass a limited suffrage bill came, in part, as a response to such concerns.⁸

Some prominent Hoosier women renounced the realm of politics altogether. Lois Marshall, the wife of the popular Indiana Democratic governor and future vice-president of the United States Thomas Marshall, staked out a conservative terrain for women. The *Indianapolis Star*, a Republican Party organ, reported that Mrs. Marshall "talked with uncharacteristic frankness, declaring that the sphere of woman is the home, and that affairs of the state and nation should be left in the hands of men."⁹ Her strong, public reaction had been prompted by the petition of the Indiana Federation of Women's Clubs to the state legislature seeking to grant women the vote on school board elections, a piecemeal approach to voting rights that was being followed elsewhere in the country.¹⁰ The *Star* noted that Lois Marshall had been "among the few Indianapolis women who were asked for an opinion . . . who did not favor the step and declare themselves ready to support the movement." In contrast, city physician Amelia Keller affirmed her support for women's suffrage in school board elections and beyond, but she conceded that many conservative women in the community were "not yet quite ready for full suffrage."¹¹ Indianapolis suffragist and member of the city's Charity Organization Society, Harriet Noble, opined that "the women who do not favor suffrage either do

⁸Barrows, *Albion Fellows Bacon*, xix; "Warm Support for the Cause of Suffrage," *Indianapolis News*, April 24, 1912, p. 5; "Hoosier Suffragist Puts up Plea of Revolutionary Sires," *Daily [Rushville] Republican*, December 19, 1912, p. 3; "Woman's Franchise League Will Go to the Statehouse Monday and Ask Suffrage Amendment to Constitution," *Indianapolis News*, March 1, 1913, p. 11.

⁹"Suffrage Rapped by Mrs. Marshall," *Indianapolis Star*, February 7, 1910, p. 12.

¹⁰Karen M. Mason, "Mary McDowell and Municipal Housekeeping: Women's Political Activism in Chicago, 1890-1920," in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads*, eds. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet (Bloomington, Ind., 1997), 60-75; Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2001), 63-86; Tiffany Lewis, "Municipal Housekeeping in the American West: Bertha Knight Landes's Entrance into Politics," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14 (Fall 2011), 465-92; Maureen Flanagan, *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871-1933* (Princeton, N. J., 2002); Juliana Tutt, "'No Taxation Without Representation' in the American Woman Suffrage Movement," *Stanford Law Review* 62 (May 2010), 1473-512.

¹¹"Suffrage Rapped by Mrs. Marshall," *Indianapolis Star*, February 7, 1910, p. 12.

not think or do not have the right spirit.”¹² Two years later, Indianapolis mayor Samuel “Lew” Shank, along with local trade unionists and socialists, applauded the right of women to vote at a larger suffrage convention in Indianapolis. Shank argued that “the women who don’t want to vote don’t have to, but the women who do want to vote should.”¹³ In 1916, the *Indianapolis News* noted that local women were determined to revive the issue of partial, or municipal, suffrage to allow women the right to vote on issues that concerned the home and that might involve taxes. The paper noted that the decision was tactical and that Hoosier suffragists remained dogged in their efforts to gain the full franchise. Referring to one suffragist, the reporter wrote that “she looked not a whit less belligerent than she did two years ago.”¹⁴ Keller, Noble, Shank, and others recognized political fissures between themselves and some of their Hoosier sisters. Hoosier suffragists and reformers, male and female, were forced to make critical, tactical assessments regarding how much legal reform they could expect, and how quickly those changes would occur.

Wage-earning women powered much of the Progressive-Era Hoosier state, staffing its offices, compiling field reports for state charities and corrections agencies, and striving to improve the lives of dependent women and children, the mentally ill, and others in need. Many of these women co-opted the label of “ladylike,” with the respectability it entailed, to pursue careers with paychecks. Springer noted the “horror” with which many Hoosiers, male and female, greeted the prospect of career women, but Thayer and many others embraced the opportunity to fulfill their ambitions and the ability to be self-supporting.¹⁵ Career women seized on social work and reform, teaching, and nursing as respectable, ladylike outlets for their energies and talents, and sought to use their work identities to challenge

¹²Noble was a graduate of Vassar College, a feminist, and part of the growing cadre of Indianapolis women who worked for their support. She was chair of Butler University’s English Department in the late nineteenth century. Ruswick, *Almost Worthy*, 73-75; Heidemarie Weidener, “A Chair ‘Perpetually Filled By a Female Professor’: Rhetoric and Composition Instruction At Nineteenth-Century Butler University,” in *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*, eds. Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon (Pittsburgh, Pa., 2007), 70-74.

¹³Jennifer Kalvatis points out that many Hoosier women eagerly embraced municipal suffrage when granted to them in 1917 by the legislature. Kalvatis, “Indianapolis Women Working For The Right To Vote,” 1; “Expects Registration of 100,000 to 110,000,” *Indianapolis News*, September 28, 1917; “117,501 Can Vote in City Election,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 23, 1917; “Governor to Sign Woman’s Vote Bill,” and “The Women’s Victory,” *Evansville Press*, February 23, 1917, pp. 1, 4.

¹⁴“Women Wish Power Immediately to Help Solve Problems that Affect the Home,” *Indianapolis News*, November 21, 1916, p. 1.

¹⁵Springer, “Ladylike’ Reformers,” 30, 54 n2.

social inequalities. Consequently, the appearance of political moderation should be understood as a pragmatic political tactic rather than a deeply held position born of a conservative, middle-class upbringing or a similarly conservative adult outlook. Other Hoosier women challenged and vexed the notion of what a lady should be and do, seeking to expand the boundaries of the term. Their work reflected an active vision of political participation in Progressive-Era Indiana.¹⁶

The career of Laurel Thayer's friend, West Hammond suffragist Virginia Brooks (1886-1929), illustrates the capaciousness of ladylike identity when deployed by Hoosier suffragists and reformers. Brooks's primary political orbit centered on Chicago, given the proximity of West Hammond to the city, but she was nonetheless very much a product of and participant within the political culture of the Hoosier state. In 1911, the *Indianapolis Star* reported that "Miss Brooks of Hammond" had offered a very frank and discomfiting discussion about social vice in Hoosier communities—an address that was sure to keep her from being invited back to speak to club women.¹⁷ The following year, the paper ran a front-page article highlighting Brooks's fight to end political corruption at the municipal level in Hammond and West Hammond, and her inspiration for suffragists in Indiana. She "sounded the keynote of what woman suffrage advocates proclaim will be a campaign fought to the finish at the first state convention of the Woman's Franchise League of Indiana."¹⁸ She spent much of the 1910s working and organizing in Hammond, but her target was the Illinois city of West Hammond, often described as a place hobbled by the elite's political graft.¹⁹

In 1912, Brooks stood for election to the West Hammond School Board. Her campaign was a referendum on the political machinery of the village and the exorbitant taxation of property. It was also a direct assault on local saloon owners, three of whom served as councilmen. On

¹⁶In 1916, suffragists in Indiana and across the nation pressed the Democratic Party to adopt a suffrage platform, vowing to work against the party should it fail to do so. "Will Ask Democrats for Suffrage Plank," *Indianapolis News*, June 12, 1916, p. 12; Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2006), 14.

¹⁷"Miss Brooks of Hammond," *Indianapolis Star*, November 15, 1911, p. 6.

¹⁸"Graft is Scored by Miss Brooks in Ballot Plea," *Indianapolis Star*, April 4, 1912, p. 1; "Virginia Brooks. Politician," *Huntington (Indiana) Herald*, January 31, 1911, p. 6.

¹⁹"At a mass-meeting in the Indiana City Miss Brooks united the reform factions of the north and south sides in West Hammond for a new attack on the old village board." See "New War Stirs West Hammond," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 14, 1911, p. 6.

Election Day, her female supporters, labeled “Amazonian guards” by one newspaper, threw a male heckler into a drainage ditch “saying unladylike things.”²⁰ In a bold headline, the *New York Times* reported: “Suffragists Fight to Win. Throw Male Foe in the Ditch, Hit Others, and Elect Women.” The paper predicted that “many anti-Brooks workers will probably appear to-morrow with decorated faces as evidence of their defeat, politically and physically.”²¹ Brooks won the election, launched herself into a campaign against the “social vice” of prostitution, and became a crusader for suffrage. Brooks and her followers exceeded the limits of ladylike behavior during the election; later, they pushed its boundaries by their robust attacks on graft and corruption in midwestern cities. Brooks earned the nickname “Joan of Arc of West Hammond” as a result.²²

Challenges to the boundaries of ladylike comportment did not mean that Brooks or Thayer or their Hoosier contemporaries would have demurred from the cultural capital adhering to the term. Rather, “ladylike” and “unladylike” proved to be capacious categories that accrued new meanings and possibilities over time, resulting in the possibility for alternate political deployments of the term. Claims to the social capital of ladylike behavior could at times mask attacks on political and social norms, and function as a strategy (often one of many) deployed by political activists and self-supporting women.²³ Consequently, “ladylike” needs to be understood within specific local struggles of the time period and not as a culturally inscribed or ossified concept. Laurel Thayer embodied a pragmatic ladylike activism as a social worker and workingwoman in this time period.

Laurel Conwell Thayer was born in 1873 to William Wild Thayer and Mariah Conwell. William Thayer (1829-1896) was not a man of means so much as a man of ideas and convictions. In the 1850s, he had been a “movement publisher” with the radical Boston publishing firm of Thayer & Eldridge, “the leading antislavery book publishers in the country” ac-

²⁰“Suffragists Deck Opponent,” *Daily Free Press* (Carbondale, Ill.), April 24, 1912.

²¹“Suffragists Fight to Win,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1912, p. 24.

²²“The ‘West Hammond Joan of Arc’ to Lecture,” *The Lyceumite and Talent* 6 (March 1913), 48, and *Virginia Brooks: 20th Century Joan of Arc* (n. p., 1913), Redpath Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Iowa.

²³Jessica Pliley explores the limits and possibilities of using social capital for social change in Ohio’s suffrage movement. See Jessica Pliley, “Voting for the Devil: Unequal Partnerships in the Ohio Women’s Suffrage Campaign of 1914,” *Ohio History* 115 (2008), 4-27.

ording to scholar Ezra Greenspan.²⁴ The pair published the controversial and bestselling third, revised edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1860).²⁵ They also published the abolitionist firebrand John Redpath's *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown, with an Auto-Biography of His Childhood and Youth* (1860), with proceeds going to John Brown's widow.²⁶ William Thayer's commitment to abolition and to radical, egalitarian politics continued after the war. From 1865 to early 1867, he edited *The Right Way*, the organ of the Impartial Suffrage League, which was devoted to securing the franchise for African Americans, male and female, and for white women.²⁷ When the paper folded in March 1867, he solicited employment from his readership, noting that he "would like to secure an engagement as Editor on some newspaper where a 'radical' pen would find appreciative employment."²⁸

After *The Right Way* closed and his first marriage ended, Thayer moved to the Midwest with stints in Missouri and Minnesota, where he worked as a newspaper editor at the *Hannibal Courier* (1867) and the *St. Joseph Union* (Duluth, Minnesota, 1868), with short runs at other papers. Writing about his time in Hannibal, he was unabashedly proud of his radicalism and refusal of "polite politics": "While I was on one side fighting rebels, I was on the other keeping the most influential radical paper in Missouri straight up to the duty of maintaining the standard of pure radicalism, in preventing any drifting into political party corruption merely for the sake of temporary party supremacy." His articles and editorials castigated the South for the war, denounced any compromise with the rebel region, and

²⁴William Wild Thayer, "Autobiography," pp. 11-13, unpublished manuscript, Manuscript Department, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis; Ezra Greenspan, "An Undocumented Review of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* in the *Liberator*," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 24 (Spring 2007), 201-202; John McKivigan and William Wild Thayer, "The Reminiscences of William Wild Thayer, Boston Publisher and Abolitionist," *Massachusetts Historical Society* 103 (1991), 138-56.

²⁵Ted Genoway, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: America's Poet during the Lost Years of 1860-1862* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009), 38-39, 74-75.

²⁶A notice appeared at the front of the work: "A large percentage on each copy sold is secured by contract to the family of captain John Brown, and every purchaser thereby becomes a contributor to a charitable object, which appeals to all freemen with a force that is irresistible." Greenspan, "An Undocumented Review of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*," 201; Genoway, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War*, 36-38.

²⁷Thayer wrote that "the paper put [President Andrew] Johnson into such a rage that he issued an autograph order forbidding the military in the south to circulate" the paper. Thayer, "Autobiography," 19; Victor Howard, *Religion and the Radical Republican Movement, 1860-1870* (1990; Lexington, Ky., 2014), 122, 189.

²⁸William Wild Thayer, "Editor's Farewell," *The Right Way*, March 2, 1867, p. 3.

extolled the virtues of racial equality. While working at the *Kansas City Journal*, he began corresponding with Maria Conwell, aunt to the wife of one of his reporters. They wed in 1872.²⁹

Laurel Thayer's mother, Maria Howland Conwell (1836-1919), was a descendant of Betsy Ross, and one of thirteen daughters.³⁰ Conwell's family had helped to settle Laurel, Indiana, in the early years of the state, and her minister father was a man of some means. After their marriage, the Thayers settled in St. Paul, Minnesota. They named their only child after the town that Conwell's father had helped to found.³¹

Thayer's upbringing was bookish, filled with ideas and words, and surrounded by music and the arts.³² There is no sense of material deprivation in Thayer's accounts of her family's life together, but certainly no sense of excess either. William Thayer's career steadied after Laurel's birth, and the family settled into life in St. Paul, where he worked as a city news reporter through the 1880s. By the end of decade, his health faltered and the family returned to Indiana in 1890. They appear to have been comfortable on her father's income from editing, publishing, and map work. After her father's death, except for a brief three-year period, Laurel Thayer was the sole support for her mother and herself. She joined a generation of young women whose waged work in urbanizing America provided not only a sense of purpose but also essential upkeep for themselves and often for their families. For Thayer, work also served as a central part of her identity.

Laurel Thayer was a careful steward of memory and publicity, of her father's legacy, and of the record of her social work contributions to Indianapolis.³³ She kept clippings of the articles she wrote, those written about her, and those that should have included her as an important contributor to

²⁹Laurel Thayer appears to have had very little contact with her father's first family. See Thayer, "Autobiography," 11, 22, 24, 30.

³⁰"The First American Flag," *Indianapolis News*, February 22, 1898, p. 5; "Personal and Social," *Indianapolis News*, February 7, 1911, p. 7; and "Mrs. Maria C Thayer Dies," *Indianapolis News*, July 28, 1919, p. 1.

³¹Thayer, "Autobiography," 11.

³²McKivigan has noted that Thayer's autobiography is a portrait in the striving culture of the petite bourgeoisie of Boston in the antebellum era, and I would argue of the young nation. McKivigan, "Reminiscences," 139-40.

³³See Oswald Villard to Laurel Thayer, April 28, 1938, microfilm, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library.

social work and reform around the state.³⁴ After her father's death, Laurel spent the rest of her life working to preserve his memory and to shape it for publication. She contributed a short addendum to his 1892 memoir, in which she offered a glimpse of her childhood and a window into how she understood her parents' legacies. Thayer noted her father's retirement from newspaper work due to his failing health; afterwards, she wrote, "he entered upon years of partial invalidism, years lived heroically, years lived with high resolve, though, by the world, unhonored and unsung." Her mother Maria, "formerly a concert singer...entered the business world to better support her little daughter and invalid husband." Between 1883 and 1886, Maria Thayer sold musical instruments and sheet music in a shop bearing her name. By 1886, the business was in trouble, with creditors seeking redress through the courts. In her addendum Laurel concluded, "A proud, sensitive spirit like my father's could not but suffer keenly because of the necessity for my talented mother to become the breadwinner." None of Laurel's surviving writings about her family explore her mother's struggles as a working parent or as a small-time proprietor, and there is no extant record of how Maria Thayer felt about losing her business.³⁵

Thayer notes that her father's "altruism never diminished, even in the days of his own physical affliction and bitter disappointment."³⁶ No matter the cause of his disillusionment, father and daughter remained staunch Republicans. Identification with the party of Emancipation was important to Thayer before and after women gained the franchise, and certainly contributed to her identity as a workingwoman as it did for other reformers in the time period. Thayer understood her workplace difficulties in the 1920s to be a result of her "true Republicanism." Rebecca Edwards notes that in the decades before women gained the vote, Republicans argued that wives, mothers, daughters, and schoolteachers were agents

³⁴Invariably, Thayer augmented the public record of newspaper writings in her private journals, correcting and supplementing the record as she collected. Historians have the added benefit of Thayer's extensive commentaries and newspaper clippings about her work life.

³⁵Two different versions of Laurel Thayer's addendum to her father's autobiography are held by different archives. See Laurel Thayer, addendum, p. 5, undated, microfilm, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library; and Laurel Thayer, addendum, folder 1, Laurel Thayer Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis. (Future references to the addendum will note when the Boston Public Library version is being cited.) While the Boston version references Maria Thayer's role as a breadwinner, the Indiana edition does not. For accounts of Maria Thayer's trouble with creditors, see business notices "Globules," *Saint Paul Globe*, March 18, 1886, p. 2; "Special Term Day: Court Notes," *Saint Paul Globe*, September 25, 1887, p. 2.

³⁶Thayer, addendum, Boston Public Library, p. 2.

of moral reform and that their realm of influence ought not be limited to the home. The party sought to broaden their appeal by casting women as wives, mothers, and workers. Catherine Rymph points out that after the franchise Republican women worked to “downplay differences between male and female politics” and to embrace a gender-neutral model of political participation as a means of exercising party power.³⁷

Laurel Thayer was a third-generation workingwoman. Her paternal grandmother, Sophornia Voax Thayer (1804-1868), had taken in boarders after the death of her husband Richard (b. 1799) in 1833.³⁸ While waged factory work and domestic service positions were plentiful in the antebellum period, Sophornia took in boarders and tended to neighbor children as she cared for her own young children.³⁹ William Thayer celebrated his mother’s efforts, remembering in his autobiography that she “supported us by sewing and making skirts.” Later in the same work, he noted: “I crushed my ambition because of my sense of duty to earn money for the support of my mother.”⁴⁰ In contrast, he never referred to his wife Maria’s employment in his writings. There are only two extant mentions of her as a workingwoman, one in her 1919 obituary and the other in her daughter’s addendum to her husband’s memoir. Maria’s labor nonetheless sustained the family until Laurel followed grandmother and mother alike into the world of employment. Laurel Thayer would knit together the strands of her family fabric—social justice activism, the arts, and waged work—into a rich tapestry of a life, one that elucidates the complexities of ladylike behavior and politics in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴¹

Thayer belonged to a growing cohort of professional and semi-professional workingwomen who chose careers over matrimony and maternity,

³⁷Typewritten manuscript entry, November 15, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers; Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1997), 19, 33, 76-87; Rymph, *Republican Women*, 4-6; and Melanie Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924* (Urbana, Ill., 2001).

³⁸Richard Thayer and Sophornia Voax were married in March 1829; William Wild Thayer was born in September. Shortly after their marriage, Richard was injured from a fall while working as a house painter. He died four years later in 1833. Thayer, “Autobiography,” 11-13.

³⁹On the decline of working-in as a preference for self-supporting women, see Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (Cambridge, U. K., 2000).

⁴⁰Thayer, “Autobiography,” 3-5.

⁴¹“Mrs. Maria C. Thayer Was the Last of a Family of Thirteen Sisters,” *Indianapolis News*, July 29, 1919, p. 7.

and whose wages sustained their homes.⁴² Between 1870 and 1920, the life course of workingwomen generally meant that they were single when they started out as workers, and that they focused on family when their children were little. Many women returned to wage labor as their children aged but also as life circumstances—spousal death, disability, and/or desertion—required them to re-enter the workforce. But as the state's interests in family life and social problems grew in the Progressive Era, its rehabilitation and social control efforts also increased and became professionalized. For many women, social work, broadly construed, now became both an outlet for their energies and a means of self-support. Sharon Wood has noted the changing ideals in the lives of female professional social workers: "At a time when middle-class women's respectability was tightly bound to an ideal of domesticity, these women sought lives of movement, change, and independence, embracing an ideal of self-support and productive labor."⁴³

Like other growing cities, Indianapolis relied on the municipal house-keeping of women to help "civilize" and Americanize the urban landscape. Hoosier politicians appealed to women's maternalism and civic pride, urging them to work "for a better government, a cleaner city, a decent city and efficient service."⁴⁴ Many women did go to work to accomplish the goals of the Progressive-Era state, serving as social workers, probation officers, court matrons, and field workers for various state commissions.

Social work was an umbrella term for a wide array of reform efforts with a broad focus on the state's citizens. The foci of social workers' efforts were diffuse: children, the homeless, criminals, delinquents, unmarried

⁴²Claudia Goldin, "The Work and Wages of Single Women, 1870-1920," *Journal of Economic History* 40 (March 1980), 81-88; Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Julia Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station, Tex., 1997); Eileen Boris, "Reconstructing the 'Family': Women, Progressive Reform, and the Problem of Social Control," in Noralee Frankel and Nancy Schrom Dye, eds., *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington, Ky., 1991), 73-86; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N. J., 2004); Anna Irga, *Wives Without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900-1935* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2006), 45-62; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana, Ill., 2007); Val Johnson, "The Rest Can Go to the Devil: Macy's Workers Negotiate Gender, Sex, and Class in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Women's History*, 19 (Spring 2007), 32-57; Mark Hendrickson, "Gender Research as Labor Activism: The Women's Bureau in the New Era," *Journal of Policy History*, 20 (October 2008), 482-515; Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920* (Urbana, Ill., 2009); Eileen Wallis, *Earning Power: Women and Work in Los Angeles, 1880-1930* (Reno, Nev., 2010).

⁴³Sharon E. Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2005), 55.

⁴⁴"Mrs. Wagner Is Made Chairmen of Woman's Party," *Indianapolis Star*, May 25, 1917, p. 9.

mothers, workers and their labor conditions, the elderly, and more were all subject to the attention, oversight, and regulation of new agents of urban and state order.⁴⁵ “Child saving” efforts, for example, underwent dramatic changes as new casework and social science methodologies became normative nationally. Indianapolis was the second municipality to adopt a juvenile court for young offenders in 1903, and in 1909 the state declared that annual written licensing exams taken under the auspices of the Board of State Charities would be required for “child caring work.”⁴⁶

Well-heeled society women acted, for the most part, as volunteer labor. While they grabbed headlines and held luncheons, their less-financially flush sisters went to work day in, day out, answering a vocational call while securing a paycheck. Workingwomen were financially pressed by the wage gap and by the cumbersome expectations of ladylike respectability: clothing, housing, travel, entertainments, and club memberships.⁴⁷ Their wages were stretched to provide for their full support (and in Thayer’s case, for her mother’s care as well). Although their ability to provide for their material upkeep was much better than that of their working-class counterparts, these women nevertheless faced financial hardships. For Thayer and others, such problems were exacerbated by the shifting fortunes of city and state politics.

Thayer graduated from Indianapolis’s Shortridge High School, and went on to earn a degree from the state’s normal school for teachers in Terre Haute. She later attended Indiana University, Bloomington, where she majored in economics. Her parents moved with her to Bloomington. William died in 1896, the week she moved into the university; Maria lived with Thayer until her death in 1919. Between 1904 and 1907, Laurel was a graduate student in music in Ann Arbor, where she taught music on the side.⁴⁸ In 1909, she returned to Indianapolis and gave up music

⁴⁵See, for example, Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1995); Karen Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women: Case Records and the Professionalization of Social Work* (Urbana, Ill., 1998); Anne Meis Knupfer, *Reform and Resistance: Gender, Delinquency, and America’s First Juvenile Court* (New York, 2001); Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal’s Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945* (Toronto, Can., 2006).

⁴⁶See Indiana Department of Public Welfare, *The Development of Public Charities and Correction in the State of Indiana, 1792-1910* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1910), 44-46.

⁴⁷Daniel Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle Class Identity* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1999), 57-86; Kim England and Kate Boyer, “Women’s Work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings of Clerical Work,” *Journal of Social History* 43 (Winter 2009), 307-340; Wallis, *Earning Power*, 11-34.

⁴⁸Laurel Thayer was an accomplished soprano like her mother. See “Among the Local Musicians,” *Indianapolis News*, November 5, 1904, p. 22.

professionally. Instead, she worked as a journalist covering the city's social events, local women's club news, and the burgeoning field of social work. She became a member of various local women's clubs and organizations, particularly those focused on improving the city and augmenting social services. In 1911, Thayer joined the fledgling Indiana chapter of the National Consumers League as its secretary. She parlayed her connections with local newspapers into an almost full-page write-up on the group penned that same year. In her article, she chronicled the origins of the movement in New York and explained both the successes and failures of the League in organizing workingwomen and consumers. Thayer highlighted the need to educate the public and to work for legislation that would provide for safe work conditions, no night work or overtime, and for equal pay for equal work. These concerns would occupy her professional and personal life for the next two decades.⁴⁹

In the 1910s, Thayer's profile as a journalist and her connections to various women's clubs and reform organizations combined to open doors for her, in city hall and beyond. In 1916, she started working for the courts as a probation officer, though the title was unofficial. The position reflected her growing involvement in city reform work. The work made use of her investigative skills as a journalist and of her city connections. In 1918, she formalized her work with the city, becoming a city court matron for women in Marion County. The local press reported "that her duties will be those of a probation officer."⁵⁰ For the next several years, however, Thayer worked as a probation officer without the formal title, which reflected the state's patchwork of laws and approaches to social legislation.⁵¹ It is in her career as a probation officer that Laurel Thayer's struggle as a self-supporting woman comes into focus.

⁴⁹Typewritten manuscript entry, June 22, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers. Other Indiana newspapers also noted the need for better wages for workingwomen and connected the issue to suffrage. "Indianapolis Women Enlist in the White Label Fight," *Indianapolis Star*, June 11, 1911, p. 14; "Woman's Wonderful Era in the World's Work," *Evansville Press*, May 28, 1907, p. 2; "Coming Now Ready or Not; A Warning Blazoned that Woman Suffrage Can No Longer Be Denied," *Evansville Press*, February 28, 1912, p. 4.

⁵⁰Newspaper clipping, November 17, 1917, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁵¹Penal reforms and innovations were often initiated off of the books in Indiana with a trial period of activity undertaken in Indianapolis and in some state institutions prior to any legislative mandate. This included the vasectomies that Dr. Harry Sharp performed at the Indiana Reformatory well before legal sanction in 1907. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York, 2014), 66-67; Alexandra Minna Stern, "From Legislation to Lived Experience: Eugenic Sterilization in California and Indiana, 1907-1979," in Paul Lombardo, ed., *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era* (Bloomington, Ind., 2011).

First appointed to probation work in 1919, Thayer leveraged her earlier employment as a news reporter to shed light on the need for adult probation in the city and state. Adult probation was for small-time offenders and was considered a rehabilitative rather than punitive sentence. Understood as a progressive reform, it eschewed retribution for minor offenses and allowed for the supervision and rehabilitation of the wayward without state custodial care.⁵² Probation was intended to help support offenders while they remained in their communities, and worked toward restitution and rehabilitation. Reformers argued that probation would save taxpayers from the care and keeping of prisoners. Thayer's work included routine visits with probationers at their homes, at her office, and sometimes at her home. She was charged with keeping careful case records on her probationers, their jobs, and home life. Thayer also routinely spoke before various civic groups, describing "the home conditions of [the men and] women brought before the city court, the causes of their delinquency," and her efforts to help them.⁵³

Thayer had joined a growing cohort of female probation officers around the country who straddled the fields of social work and the law. Nationally, more men than women worked as probation officers, but in Indiana, women substantially outnumbered men in the profession between 1921, when the first state report was issued, and 1931. This imbalance was repeated in other areas of the state's social work and institutional apparatus, which depended on the work of women to accomplish its goals and to perform the bulk of its field labor.⁵⁴

Thayer's blueprint for probation work in Indianapolis followed the one she had carefully laid out for the Indiana branch of the National

⁵²The state's long-serving secretary of the State Board of Charities, Amos Butler, time and again championed the Progressive nature of the Hoosier criminal justice system from indeterminate sentencing to parole and probation. Amos Butler, "The Treatment of the Misdemeanants," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 5 (September 1914), 451-55; "The Operation of the Indeterminate Sentence and Parole Law. A Study of the Record of Eighteen Years in Indiana," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 6 (March 1916), 885-93; "What Prisoners Should Be Eligible to Parole and What Considerations Should Govern the Granting of It?" *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 12 (February 1922), 549-53; and "The Indiana Plan of Supervision," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 105 (January 1923), 122-24.

⁵³Clauser-Roemer, "What Can Women Do," and "Miss Thayer to Speak," *Indianapolis News*, January 13, 1919, p. 13.

⁵⁴In 1925, for example, the state employed sixty women as probation officers and only thirty men. See *Fifth Annual Report of the State Probation Department of the State of Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1926), 2.

Consumers League: public education and legislation.⁵⁵ Thayer spent much of the 1920s writing articles, speaking to church and civic groups, and working with national organizations. Her quarterly reports reflected those efforts, with such speeches recorded as part of her regular work. Typically she spoke on the need for probation, its low cost to taxpayers, and the conditions that encouraged crime and delinquency.⁵⁶ Her efforts were designed to inform the public and build a case for more formal and systematic probation work. During this period, she began a campaign to have an adult probation law for the county and the state. Her dogged and strategic maneuverings paid off, as the state adopted a law providing for formal adult probation in 1926.⁵⁷

During most of her career as a probation officer, Thayer was also responsible for the city and county efforts to identify and commit the “psychopathic” to custodial state care. She kept a detailed account of her social work with those individuals as well. Adding to her public efforts on behalf of new probation laws, Thayer also worked for legislation to commit the mentally ill to a special hospital rather than a prison. Once again, her efforts received recognition in the local press.⁵⁸

Despite contemporary praise and later recognition for Thayer’s work, her tenure as a probation officer for the municipal court proved turbulent. Her struggles to gain equal pay for equal work bedeviled Thayer throughout her tenure as a probation officer, as she struggled to have women recognized for their work and compensated commensurately with their male counterparts. Her crusade jibed with her earlier organizing efforts for the Indiana branch of the Consumers League. In 1912, she had helped

⁵⁵“Consumers to Organize,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 26, 1911, p. 16; and “Await Consumers’ Exhibit,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 22, 1911, p. 24.

⁵⁶A 1917 article by Marion County Criminal Court judge James Collins, as well as the annual state reports on adult and juvenile probation, echo Thayer’s vision of the merits of probation. James Collins, “The Probation System of the Municipal Court,” *Indiana Bulletin of Charities and Correction* (March 1917), 142; Florence Riddick Boys, *Eighth Annual Report of the State Probation Department of the State of Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1929), 3; Laurel Thayer, “Report of Probation Officer for Women—City Court, January 1 to October 1, 1924,” Folder 1, 1922-1924, Marion County Board of Public Safety, Indiana State Archives (hereafter MCPBS); Thayer, “Addresses Given on Probation by Laurel C. Thayer of Municipal Court, 1925,” Folder 1, 1922-1924, MCPBS; Thayer, “Addresses Given on Probation by Laurel C. Thayer of Municipal Court, 1926,” Folder 2, 1925-1928, MCPBS.

⁵⁷By 1941, Thayer was remembered as “the mother of probation.” Foster Boruff, ed., *Women of Indiana: A Work for Newspaper and Literary Reference* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1941), 246, 265.

⁵⁸“Psychopathic Ward Need is Outlined by Judge Wilmeth,” *Indianapolis Star*, February 17, 1924, p. 13; “No One to Sign Commitment Papers; Woman Still in Jail,” *Indianapolis News*, October 22, 1924, p. 12.

to prepare a report on and recommendations regarding the conditions for workingwomen in the state. The *Indianapolis Star* had noted: "Miss Laurel Thayer gave the report of the investigating committee which covered conditions under which women employees labor in the large shops. The report recommended equal pay to men and women, a minimum wage board, pay for 'overtime' work and attention to the physical welfare of the employees."⁵⁹ Now, Thayer used her connections to secure gender equitable wages for her own probation work, pegging her position as a probation officer to that of a police sergeant. In 1921, she received a substantial raise when the city passed an ordinance that fixed her salary "the same as a police sergeant."⁶⁰

The passage of the adult probation bill in 1926 brought upheaval for Thayer, as she found herself increasingly at odds with the new department and its work culture.⁶¹ She had been the prime operative securing the bill's passage and had been reassured that she would officially be appointed as a probation officer, but the legislation, as finally adopted, failed to grandfather her into a position, placing her in professional and economic limbo.⁶² As she navigated reinstatement into probation work, she was transferred to the police department, which she rightly understood to be a demotion. She wrote in her journal: "By a strange irony of fate, the woman who brought the new probation law is the only one to suffer by reason of it."⁶³

In January 1926, Thayer filed suit in court, arguing that her transfer to police service had been illegal. Her official report for February to June of that year chronicled her struggle with the county and her inability to reconcile herself with the transfer. In January she recorded that she had been "reduced to police woman." The language of her personnel file confirms her impression that the transfer was a demotion. In an otherwise sparse employment file, the record indicates that on January 4, 1926, Thayer was "reduced to policewoman."⁶⁴ She took a two-week leave of absence as she sought redress and reinstatement in court.

⁵⁹"Mrs. Nicholson Commends Consumers' League Work," *Indianapolis Star*, February 11, 1912, p. 30.

⁶⁰"Increase for Miss Thayer," *Indianapolis News*, March 21, 1921, p. 10.

⁶¹"Five Officers to Be Employed," *Indianapolis Star*, May 24, 1927, p. 1.

⁶²Manuscript entry, November 27, 1926, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁶³Manuscript entry, June 22, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁶⁴Another notation for January 19 indicates that the action was rescinded. See Laurel Thayer, employment record, Folder 1, 1922-1924, MCBPS.

In May, Thayer took a month of “vacation” and attended the National Probation Association’s meeting in Cleveland—“paying my own expenses and on leave WITHOUT PAY,” as she noted in her official report.⁶⁵ Once reinstated, she did not find the homecoming she had sought. She returned to the department she had advocated for, not as a probation officer, but as a clerical worker charged with paperwork, stenography, and more. For Thayer to regain her former position as a probation officer, she needed to take a written exam, and secure well-connected allies. As before, the local press supported her efforts. The *Indianapolis Star* penned a strongly worded editorial that praised Thayer and her work by name and decried the partisan politics creeping into probation work: “It would be a waste of taxpayer money to pay three or four political misfits to attempt to carry on work for which they are not adapted.” Moreover, the paper inveighed, “If the places are to become political plums instead of opportunities for real constructive welfare work it would be better if the law had never been enacted.” Thayer, the *Star* argued, had set a high standard, working alone for years, and with the best of outcomes, given the workload and conditions.⁶⁶ Thayer also used her extensive network of city hall contacts to help her navigate the new landscape, but politics plagued the new office of probation work. Thayer found herself in an untenable economic position, as she recorded in her journal: “TODAY I MUST ASK A LAWYER FRIEND TO ENDORSE MY NOTE FOR \$200.00 in order that I may renew one bank note, pay \$100.00 on the mortgage note due June 15 and have enough to live on until the county council makes an appropriation due since May 16.”⁶⁷

On the eve of her reappointment to probation work, Thayer discovered that her allies and foes alike in the mayor’s office had been considering her for work she considered beneath her experience. She bristled in her journal: “Then it dawned on me that these men had discussed giving ME the position which combines probation knowledge and shorthand or stenographic work.”⁶⁸ Stenographic work was indeed beneath her experience, and she may have perceived the slight as being both gendered and ageist. In July 1927, her fears were realized. While she was finally allowed to re-

⁶⁵Emphasis in the original. Laurel Thayer, employment records, Probation Report, February to June 1926, Folder 2, 1925-1928, MCBPS.

⁶⁶“Our Model Probation Law,” *Indianapolis Star*, May 11, 1927, p. 6.

⁶⁷Emphasis in the original. Manuscript entries, June 13 and 18, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁶⁸“Thayer Appointment Is First Official Act under New Adult Probation Law,” *Indianapolis Star*, July 24, 1927, p. 2; manuscript entry, June 16, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

turn to the probation department, she was appointed as probation officer and clerk but was to serve mainly as a clerk-typist.⁶⁹ The job in title and position, not to mention in salary, was a demotion from her former position as a probation officer, wherein she had exercised tremendous discretion. Thayer's writings from this time period are peppered with resentment and grievance. "It is most humiliating to have a new worker who has not lived here and does not know of my ten years service to think I am only a stenographer," she wrote. She also resented when her paperwork was criticized, retorting "Did I ever qualify as a clerk or ask to be appointed as a clerk? I did not."⁷⁰ Thayer was indignant when younger, less experienced workers asked her to type or asked to share her office space. She was advised by a confidant: "I must be lenient with younger workers realizing that as modern youth, they have had the truing and environment of the youth of to-day, not of my own time, and therefore we must not expect them to act or re-act as tho they belonged to the older generation."⁷¹

Thayer, who had long been given wide berth to work as she saw fit, also worried about her ability to fit into the new bureaucratic office culture.⁷² She believed that she was being pushed out of a department that had been built on her success but now seemed uninterested in her presence—"given more work, for less pay," in an effort to force her to quit. Her discomfort was physical as well. Reduced to being an office worker, Thayer's importance and comfort on the job diminished, and she was expected to work hours on end sitting at a "type write," something she hated doing.⁷³ When her new office chair arrived, it was not the comfortable and slightly more expensive chair that she had picked out, but instead a "straight backed mahogany chair" that caused her considerable back pain. Her complaints about the chair went unheard: "So it goes with the usual indifference to the health and comfort of a mere woman." While Thayer struggled to get her former position back, she watched as a new male appointee replaced her and enjoyed cooperation from the municipal judges.

⁶⁹Manuscript entry, November 15, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers; "Miss Thayer Made Probation Officer for 4 City Courts," *Indianapolis Star*, July 14, 1927, p. 1.

⁷⁰Manuscript entries, January 9, 1928 and November 27, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷¹Manuscript entry, November 15, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷²Thayer noted that it was "necessary to readjust myself as a part of an organization. I have never worked in a business office for more than a month—the most unhappy month of my life." See manuscript entries, November 11, 15, and 17, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷³Rather than type her own application for her former position, she paid a typist \$1.50 to do it for her. See manuscript entry, June 20, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

She rued in her journal, "All of which I have wanted and dreamed of for years...Naturally, I regard all these things with mixed emotions. Others are reaping what I have sown."⁷⁴

Thayer's papers reveal her particularly strong response to a newspaper article praising the city's probation work and singling out someone other than herself as the primary architect of the new law. She tore into the account, denouncing it for failing to acknowledge how much she had contributed to the law's passage prior to the involvement of political appointees or other men. "My position in this regard was strategic," she wrote. "How would Mr. [Homer] Borst or anyone else have known the facts had I not first told them thus revealing the conditions that made a new law imperative?" Younger workers, male bosses, and political appointees all benefitted from her hard work and insight, and they paid little respect to her accomplishments or needs. Thayer also saw this acclaim for her male colleague as a threat to her place in the public memory: "He has had many accomplishments in the field of social service, this is my one contribution to my community and to the state and yet how determined is he to rob me of the soul-satisfaction that is mine in knowing that I started this movement and stayed with it to the glorious triumphant finish."⁷⁵

The instability in Marion County courts and the vagaries of local politics also jeopardized Thayer's financial wellbeing. She scraped along with a diminished paycheck after her reinstatement. Previously, she had received \$90.83 every two weeks; now she received just \$38.53. The financial strain took a toll. She needed money to satisfy her creditors and to live on. She also needed the guarantee of a steady, well-paying position. In her journal, she noted that while a friend "would like to see me in a different environment . . . [he] realize[d] the financial impossibility of [my] living without employment or of going elsewhere unless to fill a position definitely engaged."⁷⁶ Noting the difficulty of her workplace condition and the strain it placed on her, she remarked, "This was a challenge and I took it. Why? Economic necessity."⁷⁷ Her pride was wounded, but it was her unstable finances that forced her hand.

⁷⁴"Episode of the Chair," typewritten manuscript, November 25, 1927, p. 26, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷⁵Manuscript entry, January 2, 1928, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷⁶Manuscript entry, May 30, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷⁷Emphasis in the original. Manuscript entry, January 2, 1928, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

Thayer spent several months turning from one lawyer to the next, from one judge to the next, looking for either reinstatement to her old position or a new position as a temporary probation worker until the county and the courts reconciled their understanding of the new legislation. Each time she was either reassured that relief was around the corner, or that someone was in her corner. Weeks turned into months, as she did more work for less pay and under increasingly hostile conditions. Out of patience, and nearing financial ruin, Thayer turned to the courts again: in May 1928, she filed suit to reclaim damages of \$1,640 for back wages. In her previous legal appeal, she had fought to have probation work aligned with that of various police department positions as a means of ensuring gender parity in pay. Now Thayer, having finally been reappointed to probation work, was earning less despite doing more work. Her lawsuit sought the difference between her old wages and her new lower salary.⁷⁸

In June, after her filing her suit, Thayer went to the county council meeting with paperwork in hand, and promises that she would be compensated for her six unpaid weeks of work. It was not to be. The courts failed to post notice ten days in advance of the meeting notifying the public that there would be an appropriation to cover the back wages owed. Thayer wrote, "I left the Court House for the moment utterly crushed. AND THIS IS MY REWARD FOR MY SERVICE TO THE STATE."⁷⁹

The courts eventually ruled in Thayer's favor, but her settlement failed to alleviate her financial distress. She rued privately: "Judgment was given me in superior Court 2 for \$1,800 back salary due me from the Jewett administration. Mr. Harry Yockey, former city attorney was my lawyer. He charged \$600.00 after agreeing to take the case for one fifth; he later went back on this and charged one third. It was not easy to hand over \$600.00 of my hard-earned money. But I had not our agreement in writing." She detailed the complicated negotiation of bank notes and extended loans needed to accomplish her task of repaying her creditors: "It took all of the remaining amount to meet indebtedness, and it was several months before I could pay off the last

⁷⁸Manuscript entry, November 17, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

⁷⁹"Increase for Miss Thayer," *Indianapolis News*, July 14, 1927, p. 3; "Sues for Salary Differences," *Indianapolis News*, May 18, 1928, p. 34; and manuscript entry, June 22, 1927, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

\$100.00 because of the amount Mr. Yockey exacted.”⁸⁰ Thayer’s career was bedeviled by money and politics alike as she perennially faced pay cuts, slow payment, reassignment, and demotion as state- and county-level positions switched party affiliations and as new political appointees, mostly men, came and went.

At the end of December 1934, the Democratic *Indianapolis News* reported that Thayer and two other female probation workers were to be replaced. All three women were Republicans. The *Indianapolis Star* understood that the move was designed to even the political landscape of probation work, as all of the current probation workers were members of that same party. The *Indianapolis Times* noted that the new hires, also three women, were hired in “a patronage move of the administration.” This reorganization originated with newly elected Democratic governor Paul McNutt, who sought to expand the number of patronage positions as he streamlined government departments. McNutt has been credited as the “architect of Indiana’s welfare state” for unifying the state’s correctional and social service networks as he sought “to use the powers of the state’s government to provide Hoosiers with a greater sense of security—or safety—from economic hardships.”⁸¹ Facilitating this transition meant transferring local autonomy over social work agencies to the state. McNutt temporarily assumed oversight of the state’s social welfare bureaucracy as he reorganized, furloughed, and hired new workers. County judges had previously appointed probation officers; now they were appointed by the governor.⁸² McNutt reasoned that if county judges answered to him, so too should probation officers.⁸³

McNutt’s efforts to reorganize state government were widely seen as being autocratic and political.⁸⁴ Local groups, including the Indianapolis League of Women Voters, argued that “any move at this time to replace probation workers in the municipal court by political appointees will be

⁸⁰Manuscript entry, September 18, 1928, folder 1, Thayer Papers.

⁸¹Dean J. Kotlowski, *Paul McNutt and the Age of FDR* (Bloomington, Ind., 2015), 127-28, 136-38.

⁸²Carina Warrington, *First Annual Report of the State Probation Officer of Indiana* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1922), 5.

⁸³“M’Nutt Completes Reorganization Plan,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 13, 1932, p.1; “Fight Probation ‘Politics’ Move,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 13, 1933, p. 22.

⁸⁴Dean Kotlowski argues that Indiana was part of a nationwide effort to modernize state-level governance. Kotlowski, *Paul McNutt and the Age of FDR*, 130, 136-38.

directly in opposition to the spirit of the probation law.”⁸⁵ In response to her furlough, Thayer wrote that “as if struck by a bomb, our staff of probation officers were at first stunned then we rallied,” with each worker reaching out to “some powerful friend.” Thayer, still well-connected within the capital city’s news and political circles, reached out to both for support and aid. The day after she was furloughed, the *Indianapolis News* published an editorial decrying partisan politics creeping into probation work.⁸⁶ Other papers joined in and protested the patronage move. Thayer’s efforts and connections, however, were not enough to win back her position. She turned once again to the courts in search of redress. She did not ask for reinstatement, but rather sought to have back wages of \$608 paid to her for 1932, 1933, and part of 1934. In July 1935, the court ruled against her and others, arguing that “public employees have no right to expect back pay” for wages owed to them if the county had not appropriated the funds in the first place. Thus, no matter what wages were promised to an employee as part of their employment contract, if the state legislature did not provide enough funds, workers could not sue for the difference. Marion County’s economizing, forced by the Great Depression, would be borne on the backs of workingwomen in various city-county offices. The following year, a specially appointed judge sided with Thayer and many others, ordering the county to pay the back wages. By then, Thayer had already turned to other waged social work in the city.⁸⁷

After she left probation work, Thayer continued to work for social justice, including women’s right to equal pay for equal work. While she awaited a final verdict in her case against the municipal court, Thayer spoke at the National Women’s Association of Lawyers and argued for the need to appoint probation workers based on a civil service exam

⁸⁵“Women File Protest to Probation Change,” *Indianapolis News*, April 13, 1933, p. 1. In the notes for her unfinished history of adult probation in Marion County, Thayer listed other groups contesting McNutt’s decision: the American Legion, Indiana Church Federation, Council of Social Agencies, and Federation of Women’s Clubs. Thayer, “History of the Adult Probation Law and Adult Probation in Marion County, Indiana,” vol. 1, manuscript, dated April 13, 1933, Laurel Thayer Papers.

⁸⁶“Halt Probation Courts Shakeup,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 13, 1933, p. 20; “Probation Work,” *Indianapolis News*, April 13, 1933, p. 8.

⁸⁷Thayer clipped and kept articles chronicling her efforts to sue for her back wages, keenly tracking all publicity concerning her work and life. In an unusual twist, Thayer did not comment on any of the articles in her clip books or in her manuscript about probation work in the city. “Sues for Back Wages,” *Indianapolis News*, April 1935, “State Tax Board Denies Back Pay,” *Indianapolis News*, July 20, 1935, clippings, folder 2, Thayer Papers.

and not patronage. The gathering focused on the status of women's social and wage equality under the National Recovery Act. Keynote speaker Florence Thackery, one of Indiana's pioneering female lawyers, warned that "women must guard well the gains they have made toward social and economic equality with men or they will find it has slipped away from them." Women were already being forced out of business and professional life, she argued, with married women having it the hardest. Wage inequality had been set into the National Recovery Act's wage guidelines, and Thackery dismissed the idea that the differences were small and meaningless. Rather, "to many girls and women this distinction is the difference between just living and a state of economic insecurity" and struggle. Insisting on equal pay for equal work was a matter of dignity and survival for all self-supporting workingwomen, including Laurel Thayer.

For most of her working life, Laurel Thayer was a faithful writer, with regular bylines appearing in state and local papers and in the newsletters and records of the various organizations to which she belonged. She also left written records in the files of thousands of probationers and in her correspondence with various city officials and offices as she performed her duties. Her public and private writings chronicled her vision of reform work, her life as a workingwoman, and her efforts to have her work valued and compensated. After 1935, Laurel Thayer slips out of historians' sight. Her pen went quiet, and the remaining records are skeletal. The nation's economic turmoil and the state's revamping of its social services had conspired to push her out of probation work for good. She turned to social work with children. Whether she enjoyed the work or found it meaningful, we do not know. She died in 1944.

Laurel Thayer straddled two worlds: one shaped by an educated middle-class upbringing and the other shaped by the lived experience of relying on waged work for her upkeep. Her polite, ladylike responses were oftentimes strategic, masking thinly veiled critiques, and ambitious, determined plans to gain suffrage, enact new legislation, and demand equal pay for equal work. Indiana's professional workingwomen, like those in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, and elsewhere, were pragmatic, deploying and re-deploying a politics of respectability and ladylike behavior to gain access to political circles and to help advance the cause of suffrage and social reform. Throughout her adult life, Laurel Thayer worked to guard her gains well and strategically vexed the meaning of "ladylike" in order to normalize her choice to pursue a career as well as long-term involvement in Hoosier politics.