

Jessica Blanche Peixotto (by Caitlin Hartley¹)

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Jessica Blanche Peixotto was unquestioningly a trailblazer for women's education during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In tandem with a time of rapidly changing societal attitude towards formal women's education, she was the second woman to receive a Ph.D. and the first woman to hold a full-time faculty appointment at the University of California. Unwavering in her devotion to social justice and her education, she was aptly portrayed in the citation of her honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 1936: "Chosen counselor of the State in matters concerning the protection of children and the care of the unfortunate; social economist marshaling stubborn facts in the service of mankind; comrade among students, inspiring teacher, true lover of humanity." This is her story.

Jessica Peixotto was born in New York City on October 9th, 1864 to wealthy businessman Raphael Peixotto and his wife Myrtilla Jessica Davis. As the only daughter of five children, the roots of her gentle resistance to gendered norms can likely be attributed to her upbringing.

In pursuit of a more prosperous economy, Raphael Peixotto moved his family to San Francisco, CA in 1870, when Jessica was only six years old. The Peixottos were an influential Jewish family who cultivated an environment of both intellectual and public commitment in their home. Her father, Raphael, was an early employee of Levi Strauss and served as the President of the still-standing Temple Emanu-El synagogue. He was successful in his business ventures and eventually became an executive at *The Emporium* department store, now known as Macy's. Even though Raphael only had an elementary-level education, he strived to excel and self-educate in his work, likely influencing young Jessica in the pursuit of her academic endeavors.

Following Jessica's graduation from San Francisco's Girls' High School in 1880, she desired to continue her education at Berkeley, known then as the University of California. However, despite Raphael's pursuit of knowledge and encouragement for his sons, he did not believe that it was appropriate for her to do so. She acceded to his wishes but still advanced her education during the following decade by studying music, art, writing, and foreign languages with private tutors in her home.

In 1891, Jessica finally convinced her father to let her take classes at Berkeley as a nondegree student. His change of heart was presumably influenced by the swift increase in women's acceptance in higher education at that time; in the 1890s, women's enrollment at the University increased almost ten-fold. At Berkeley, she excelled academically and befriended her brother Ernest's friend, Frank Norris. Norris took to Peixotto and her air of independence and progressiveness quickly, expressing his admiration when she led a movement to shorten skirts to shoe tops – of course, to the scandal of the faculty. Adamant that her talents were being wasted by not obtaining a degree, Norris drastically changed Peixotto's career path when he helped convince her father to allow her to formally enroll as a degree-seeking student. She completed her requirements in only three years and was awarded her Bachelor's degree in 1894.

This was only the beginning for Jessica Peixotto. Driven by intellectual challenge and a desire for meaningful post-college work, she enrolled in graduate studies in 1895 under the renowned political historian Bernard Moses. His teachings ignited her passion for socialist political economics, and with his

¹ Caitlin Hartley is a 2020 graduate from the University of California, Berkeley with a major in Economics.

encouragement, she went to study at the Sobronnes in Paris for a year where her brother Ernest was studying art.

As an unmarried young woman in her early 30s, she reflected on her views of patriarchal culture in France in a letter to Millicent Shinn:

Perhaps it is because I am a woman and an unmarried one too, that I am impressed this way about la belle France – The position of woman, mental, rather than anything else, makes your heart ache. To see a French demoiselle is certainly to be translated into the middle ages. These creatures, who are mere puppets being prepared as convention bids, for the matrimonial market, are at least one hundred years behind in the evolution of spirit. (Peixotto, letter to Shinn, page 5)

Conceivably influenced by this experience in France, Peixotto remained unmarried. This likely allowed her later opportunities that were not granted to women who had to contend with beliefs of married women's domestic role.

She returned from Paris and completed her dissertation, *The French Revolution and Modern French Socialism: A comparative study of the principles of the French Revolution and the doctrines of modern French socialism*, in 1900, becoming the second woman to receive a Ph.D. at the University of California after Millicent Shinn in 1898.

In 1904, she became the first woman to hold a full-time faculty appointment at the University of California when President Benjamin Ide Wheeler hired her to teach two courses in the newly founded economics department: "Contemporary Socialism" and "History of Socialism." She was in a unique position for the role, having demonstrated her academic achievements under Moses, garnered respect due to her family's social prominence, and circumvented the limits associated with a marital role – contradicting Wheeler's belief that women's education was in place to make women "more serviceable as wives and mothers."

In 1907 she was promoted to assistant professor of sociology but was averse to the label of sociologist. She employed rigorous analytical methods in her work and believed sociology was too abstract an approach to social matters, and so at her request her title was changed to assistant professor of social economy in 1909. She was subsequently promoted to associate professor of social economy in 1912 and professor of social economy in 1918, becoming the first woman to hold the rank of professorship at the University and remaining in this position until she retired in 1935. Peixotto achieved her appointments despite continuing bias against women as students and faculty members on the campus. Although a reserved woman, she voiced her displeasure at male faculty hired after her who passed her in rank, driving her successive promotions.

Peixotto was keenly interested in immediate social problems and spearheaded the development of social economics at the University, which grew into one of four major components of the economics department. Speaking to her humanitarian nature, she was concerned by poverty and its structural sources, despite being raised in a family that faced few economic constraints. She offered courses that included Contemporary Socialism, Control of Poverty, The Child and the State, the Household as an Economic Agent, and Crime as a Social Problem.

Peixotto was an engaged member of many influential organizations focused on promoting child and family welfare. These included, but were not limited to, the Berkeley Commission of Public Charities

(1910 – 1913), the Committee on Children and the Committee on Research on the State Board of Charities and Corrections (1912-1924), the Council of National Defense as a member of a subcommittee of Women in Industry and the Committee on Child Welfare of the General Medical Board during World War I, and the Committee on Child Welfare in 1918. At the University, one of Peixotto's major accomplishments was the development of the Heller Committee for Research in Social Economics in 1923. She was also Vice President of the American Economic Association in 1928.

Besides advocating for her own merits to be rightfully recognized, Peixotto worked to bring more women into both the student body and faculty. She was successful in hiring Lucy Ward Stebbins in 1911, Barbara Armstrong in 1919, and later Emily Noble, Martha Chickering, and Emily Huntington, all who went on to have notable impacts in the development of economics and at the University. Berkeley was unique in having so many women faculty during this time period, pushing the department towards more socially progressive studies. Following Peixotto's retirement in 1935, no women were hired in the economics department until the mid-1970s.

With her background and drive, Peixotto was at a key point in history to push through glass ceilings in women's education. Echoing the sentiment of many economists today, she believed that policy should not be made until sufficient knowledge was obtained and her work was incredibly important to the field of social investigation to influence practical policy. She unwaveringly devoted her life to the University and the betterment of society, truly embodying her motto of making science serve humanity and winning "her place among that group of remarkable women who have done so much for their country."

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