

SELMA WESSELHOEFT



1846-1930

Born: Jun. 29, 1846 in Boston, MA

Died: Apr. 28, 1930 in Cambridge, MA

Appointment(s):

New England Freedmen's Aid Society
(NEFAS)

Hilton Head, SC

Jan. 1864 – Dec. 1865

Selma was born June 29, 1846 in Boston, Suffolk Co., Massachusetts to Dr. Robert Ferdinand Wesselhoeft (1796 Bremen-1852) and Emilia Carolina Hecker (1801 Saxony-1891 Boston) of Germany. Her parents were married 1833 in Bremen, Saxony, Germany and arrived in New York City on September 24, 1840. Selma had 3 brothers and 2 sisters and in 1847, the family lived in Brattleboro, Windham, Vermont. Selma's father was a famous homeopathic physician and was naturalized May 5, 1847. In the 1860 census her mother was a widow living in Dorchester, Norfolk, Massachusetts with six of her children.

Selma was appointed as a teacher for the freedmen of Hilton Head by the New England Freedmen's Aid Society in January 1864 and sponsored by the Dorchester FAS.¹ She remained in the same position for two years.² On September 29, 1886, Selma and her sister Mrs. Minna (Wesselhoeft) Otto, now the widow of Otto Moritz who had been killed in October 1861 at the Battle of Ball's Bluff in the Union Army of the Civil War, purchased 21 Marlborough Street from Lorenzo Kettle. Their mother, also a

¹ Freedmen's Aid Society. *Freedmen's Record*, Vol I, Jan 1865, 'Teacher's List', Hilton Head, p3, p61.

Also Vol I, 1865, Nos. 4,5,6,7,8,11 & 12 Apr-Dec 1865 Hilton Head, SC

-New England Freedmen's Aid Society. "First Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the Barnard Chapter of the FAS of Dorchester, 1865".

<https://ia800209.us.archive.org/8/items/annualreportofex00barn/annualreportofex00barn.pdf>

-New England Freedman's Association. "Teachers Sent to South Carolina in 1864-65".

<http://www.bronstontours.com>

² Spruill, p 86.

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widow, lived with them until she died in October 1891. Selma and her sister Minna founded Wesselhoeft's Home and Day School for Girls in Boston at their home in 1892.³ The sisters were still operating the school in 1895, but closed the school in 1896 and sold it to another freedmen's teacher, Elizabeth Ware Winsor who moved into the house along with her mother and sister. Elizabeth married Henry Greenleaf Pearson in September 1898 and became well-known for the book she edited which is a classic study of the Port Royal Experiment: Letters from Port Royal, 1862-1868. What a small world the connected family of freedmen's teachers was!

Miss Wesselhoeft travelled frequently, listed as a 37-year old teacher on the passenger manifest of the ship 'Parthia' which returned from Liverpool, England to Boston on September 17, 1883 from a sojourn in Queenstown, Ireland. On August 8, 1896, Selma departed the United States aboard the ship 'Patricia' to Hamburg, Germany with her sister Minna to do research and study in Geneva, Switzerland. They had been living in Geneva since October 1, 1896 when they both needed a passport to return home in two years, so they applied at the Consulate in Geneva, Switzerland. Her application described her as being 5'3" with blue-gray eyes, brown-gray hair and a dark complexion, 61 years old.⁴ Since Selma was born in the United States, she just needed to provide her birth certificate, but her sister had been born in Germany. She was just a child when the family immigrated to the United States, so never thought about citizenship. She now needed proof of her father's naturalization, but was unable to provide that document to the Consulate. Eventually the problem was resolved and both sisters were issued U.S. passports. Selma also travelled to Kingston, Jamaica and returned to the port of New York aboard the 'Turalbia' on May 2, 1923.⁵

Selma worked with Dr. Ernst Foerstemann to translate his 1901 academic commentary in German on the Maya Manuscript in the Royal Library of Dresden, Germany. Her English version of his work was published by the Peabody Museum in Boston in October 1906.⁶ Selma, along with Minna Wesselhoeft and Mr. Walter Wesselhoeft, were all subscribers to the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston in 1892 to which Selma had donated a crayon portrait of Minna done by Seth Cheney. From 1902 until at least 1908, Selma, residing at 30 Walker Street in Boston and Mrs. Walter Wesselhoeft of 26 Garden Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts were active in civil service reform and dues-paying (\$1 p/yr) members of the Women's Auxiliary of the

³ U.S. Bureau of Education. Report of the commissioner of Education, Vol 2. 'Education Report 1892-93.', Table 5, p 1912. U.S. Govt Printing Office, 1895.
https://books.google.com/books?id=V1s6AQAAAMAJ&dq=Selma=Wesselhoeft+papers&source=gb-navlinks_s.

⁴ ancestry.com Passports.

⁵ Ancestry.com Passengers

⁶ Foerstemann, Ernst Dr and Miss A;M: Parker; Trans by Selma Wesselhoeft. Commentary on the Maya Manuscript in the Royal Library of Dresden. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol IV, No2. Cambridge, Mass: Peabody Museum, Oct 1906

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Massachusetts Civil Service Reform Association.⁷ Selma's papers and correspondence are held at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe University and Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Selma died on April 28, 1930 in Cambridge, Suffolk, Massachusetts. Selma's obituary was published in the Boston Herald newspaper on Tuesday, April 29, 1930.

A private funeral service will be held for Miss Selma Wesselhoeft, founder of the Miss Wesselhoeft School for girls on Marlboro St. in Boston, who died yesterday at 41 Concord Ave, Cambridge in her 84th year. She was born in Boston. With her late sister, Miss Minna Wesselhoeft, she started the school at 21 Marlboro Street. For the past few years she had been living with her nieces, Misses Lucy and Katharine Searle of 41 Concord Avenue.⁸

⁷ Massachusetts Civil Service Association, Women's Auxiliary. Issues 3-36, pp ii,27,2931-2

⁸ *Boston Herald*. Apr 29, 1930, p 17. "Obituary". Accessed 2 Jul 2019 online at newspapers.com