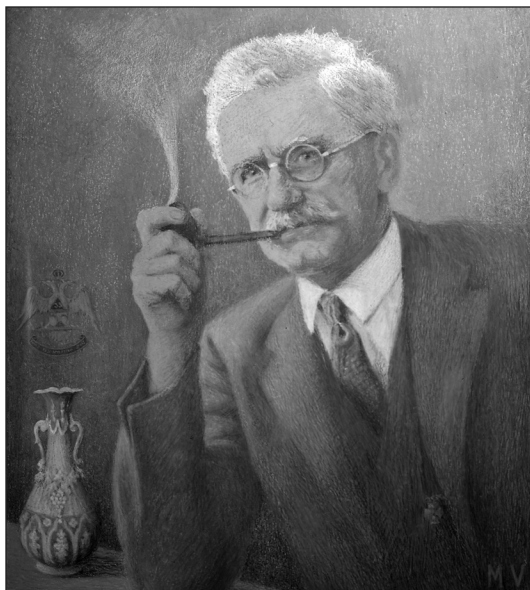


The socialist founder of the Bennington Museum: A framed portrait of John Spargo by Sister Mary Veronica, formerly Elizabeth McCullough Johnson.

Bennington Museum collection



John Spargo 1876-1966

The socialist founder of the Bennington Museum: activist, muckraker, and ‘a man of many feuds’

Anthony Marro

John Spargo, who at the time was a well-known socialist organizer, activist, and muckraker, came to Bennington in the winter of 1909 expecting to die. He was suffering from asthma and a severe case of pneumonia that was complicated by emphysema and, he later told people, also a serious heart problem. His doctors had told him that he had only a few weeks to live.

Spargo was 33 at the time, and had been brought north from New York by train with his family. His wife, Mary Bennetts Spargo, had ridden in a passenger car with eight-year-old George and two-year-old Mary while Spargo himself was stretched out on a cot in the baggage car. It was a sad time because their younger son, also named John, had died a few weeks earlier from the same sort of lung infection that was threatening to kill Spargo. They had been brought to Bennington by Mary Sanford and Helen Stokes, two wealthy socialists who had been students of Spargo's at the Rand School of Social Science in Manhattan and who were part of a conservative wing of the party whose members — because they seemed to spend more time discussing politics in drawing rooms than organizing workers or

staging protests — often were referred to as “Parlor Pinks.”

Sanford and Stokes had what back then was known as a “Boston Marriage,” two women living together without financial support from a man, and often — but not always — as lesbian lovers. They had met a few years before in Manhattan and would remain inseparable for the rest of their lives. They wanted the last days of their teacher and friend to be as comfortable as possible, which they could afford to arrange, and so they moved him and his family from a small apartment in Yonkers, just north of New York City, to one of Sanford’s several homes in Old Bennington.

Stokes was an artist who belonged to one of the richest families in America at the time. The Berkshire “cottage” in Lenox, built by her banker father, Anson Phelps Stokes, was the largest private home in the country.

Sanford, who had Bennington roots, wasn’t as wealthy as Stokes but had inherited a good deal from her father, Samuel Sanford, whose United Shirt and Collar Company in Troy had been a large and profitable enterprise. The Sanfords had summered in Bennington Centre (as Old Bennington was known then) for many years. They owned the large brick home at the corner of Monument Avenue and Bank Street that still exists, and Samuel Sanford, in addition to his main business in Troy, had been the owner of the Walloomsac Inn. When her father died in 1896, the 37-year-old Mary Sanford, a Vassar graduate who had been dragged into the unhappy role of her father’s housekeeper when her mother had died fourteen years earlier, took her money and “without one regret” left Troy almost immediately for Manhattan. She eventually ended up in Greenwich Village, which even then was known for its Bohemian lifestyles and radical politics.

Samuel Sanford had left the brick house to his sister, not to Mary. But because she wanted to continue to spend her summers in Bennington, Mary Sanford used her new wealth to build the large home at the northeast corner of Monument Circle that she called “the Priory.” The smaller home just to the west of it she used during winter visits because the main house was too large to heat with the furnaces of the time; and — being a tiny woman but a skilled equestrienne — the large carriage barn with six stables for her horses and room for several carriages that now serves as the offices and social center for the Old First Church. She also built the small house just south of the carriage barn as a caretaker’s cottage, and she bought the Old Academy Library building and the adjacent house at what now is 34 Monument Avenue. It was there she installed Spargo and his family rent-free.

Spargo in fact would die in that house, but not until August 17, 1966, when he was 90 years old. In the fifty-seven years in between, Spargo — who made a fairly astounding recovery in the fresh air of Vermont — would make Bennington first his summer home and then his only home, and would



*John Spargo at his hearth at "Nestletown," his home in Old Bennington.
Special Collections, University of Vermont*

metamorphose from a socialist activist into a Goldwater Republican while insisting he hadn't changed his political principles at all. He also went from being a muckraker who wrote passionately and powerfully about the evils of child labor to a writer of Vermont history and folkways, focusing on such topics as Bennington pottery, covered bridges, and catamounts. And he went from being an advisor to presidents on international and labor affairs to curating a small-town museum while cultivating large flower gardens at the home he eventually bought from Mary Sanford and that his wife had named "Nestledown."

In his new life, Spargo became a frequent lecturer and prolific author, and was active in the local Masonic Lodge and Episcopal Church. He also became known in Bennington for being outspoken, feisty, and a man of many feuds. Biographer Markku Ruotsila, who is admiring of Spargo in many ways and who calls him "utterly honest and courageous," nonetheless describes him as "blunt and acerbic to a fault" and "never a popular man." In later life he could be just as fierce in his opposition to what he considered an inappropriate proposed monument in front of the Old First Church as in an earlier life he had been about criminally unsanitary conditions in which milk was being transported from farms to the cities. Another biographer and admirer, Kenneth Hilton, wrote in his Ph.D dissertation that Spargo became increasingly stubborn and irascible in old age, saying that he "always had a streak of conceit and dogmatism, and in his old age it grew worse." According to Hilton, "He feuded with museum directors, tyrannized assistants, and picked fights with the local newspaper." He managed to have many of his writings published

in the *Bennington Banner* even while accusing its owner and editor, Frank “Ginger” Howe, of “many stupidities and absurdities.” It is not known if his decision was based on yet another feud, but in 1963 he donated all his papers and his autograph collection — which contain much material about early Bennington — not to the Bennington Museum but to the Wilbur Collection of Vermontiana in the Special Collections Department of the Bailey-Howe Library at the University of Vermont.

Although he had been a major figure in the socialist movement when he first came to Bennington, by the time of his death he had been relegated to little more than a footnote in the histories that were being written. He had left the party in 1917 because of its opposition to American involvement in World War I, which he favored, and had attacked it with some vitriol in later years. Spargo’s socialism had been rooted in what he said were Christian beliefs although it is not clear that — despite having been a Methodist lay minister and active in the Bennington Episcopal Church — he was particularly religious. He was a Marxist but not a Bolshevik, and an advocate of social progress through education but not through revolution. That caused him to oppose those socialists preaching violence and sabotage, including William “Big Bill” Haywood of the International Workers of the World, whom he helped drive out of the party before leaving it himself. He was active in socialist causes in America for sixteen years but then opposed them for fifty. And not everyone agreed with his assertion to a third biographer, Gerald Friedberg, that “The only intellectual produced by American socialism was myself.” Franklin Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, in talking about the Stokes family’s activism, for an oral history project at Columbia University, said that “John Spargo, who belonged to that wing of the Socialist Party, was crazy.”

Whatever the case, he in fact had been a popular lecturer and author of a great many books and essays, including a best-selling book about child labor, *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, and a well-regarded biography of Karl Marx. He had been a teacher at the progressive Rand school; a leader of the more conservative wing of the Socialist Party; and a friend and confidant of three presidents (Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover) as well as many labor leaders, muckraking journalists, and other important figures of the day, including Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes and financier Bernard Baruch. At the time of his death Spargo was also respected for his work as a past president of the Vermont Historical Society, which J. Kevin Graffagnino, a much later VHS executive director, said he had transformed from “a sleepy antiquarian club to a modern historical institution.” More importantly, he was credited as having been a principal founder and then the long-time director and curator of the Bennington Museum, which now is acknowledged as one of the finest regional museums in the country.

His accomplishments were all the more amazing given that he had started out as an impoverished and barely educated child laborer in England who went to work at 10 to help support a family that included a younger step-brother and step-sister as well as a father who was a drunk and a step-mother who was both indifferent and abusive. He had started working part-time in a shoemaker's shop but at 13 had quit school entirely to work full-time, first in a foundry and then — like his father and grandfather — in the tin mines and the granite quarries of Cornwall. As a child, he later wrote, he was “often hungry and never happy.” But while working as a stone mason over the next decade he also managed to turn himself into a Methodist lay minister, a newspaper editor and columnist, a forceful public speaker, and a self-educated leader of the British trade union movement. By the end of his life he had achieved much in many different fields, and had done it in spite of a lifetime of physical hardships that included asthma, emphysema, a serious spinal injury that caused long periods of intense bed-ridden pain, many painful tooth and gum ailments (he had all his upper teeth pulled in 1925), and a physical and possibly mental breakdown in the summer of 1927 that Ruotsila says may have been a stroke. Mary Spargo described it as a “serious mental breakdown” and Spargo himself said that it had plunged him into a “frightful cloud . . . of physical collapse and mental chaos.”

John Spargo was born on January 31, 1876, in the small village of Longdowns in Cornwall, the southwesternmost county in Britain. There had been Spargos in that area since the fifth century, but while he came from an old family (his mother's maiden name was also Spargo) it wasn't a wealthy one. In fact, the dire poverty of his childhood was like something in a Dickens novel, while his early manhood could have been a success story penned by Horatio Alger. Spargo's parents divorced when he was two and — when his mother left for America — he spent five years living with his father's sister until his father married again.

When he was 10 he heard William Gladstone, who served as Britain's prime minister four separate times, speak to a group of miners. While he later said he could not remember just what Gladstone had said, he was powerfully impressed by the impact his speech had on the miners, and became determined to learn to speak to large crowds. Indeed, he would literally talk his way out of poverty and obscurity. In his early teens he taught Sunday school and took up lay preaching, then joined debating societies. He did this while working as a granite cutter at Barry Docks in South Wales. By the time he was in his early twenties he had become a labor organizer and activist who was appearing with the most prominent socialist speakers on platforms all over Britain, as well as an editor of the local newspaper, the *Barry Herald*. His obituary in the *Bennington Banner* said that “His sentences were flawless and the extent of his



John Spargo, front, center, is pictured with colleagues in 1905 at the Rand School of Social Work in New York City.

*Special Collections,
University of Vermont*

vocabulary was astounding. Even the simplest statement was a delight to the ear of his listener.”

Spargo was short, just five-foot-seven, with a prominent nose, and bad teeth, but great upper body strength because of his time swinging a sledge in the granite quarries. By the time he left for America in 1901 he would have the bushy mustache and pompadour hair style he would wear for the rest of his life. Over the years Spargo gave several contradictory explanations for his decision to emigrate to America, but it may have been a sudden decision sparked both by his marriage to Prudence Edwards and an offer by his dead mother’s second husband to give him a job and part ownership of a small newspaper, tobacco, and candy shop on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. He and Prudence arrived in New York on February 14, 1901, Valentine’s Day, virtually penniless (he later said they had \$11 between them) and in the middle of a raging blizzard, only to find that the husband of Spargo’s mother had himself died unexpectedly two weeks before and had left his entire estate to a housekeeper-nurse. There was no job and no place to stay. Tired and cold, the Spargos found their way to the tiny apartment of a fellow socialist, where Prudence shared a bed with the man’s wife while Spargo slept in the back room of a saloon owned by another socialist comrade.

Spargo quickly fell in with a crowd of New York socialists that included Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and John Reed. He got a low-

paying job as an editor of the *Funk and Wagnalls Jewish Encyclopedia*, became a contributing editor to two socialist magazines, *Socialist Spirit* and *The Comrade*, and — just as he had in Britain — set out to give lectures. By September he was giving more than twenty speeches a month in the New York City area. Eventually Caroline Rand, a wealthy backer of socialist programs, started providing him with a monthly stipend of \$120, which lasted from the summer of 1901 until sometime after her death in 1905.

During those early years the Spargos lived in three different tiny apartments in the tenement district of Manhattan's East Side. Despite the stipend he traveled often because much of his income came from lecturing in distant places. According to Markku Ruotsila, "It was well known that on many of his trips Spargo cavorted with a number of attractive ladies, and he quickly built a reputation not just as an effective socialist organizer but as a womanizer of some note." Ruotsila also wrote that, like his alcoholic father, Spargo had taken to drink.

Prudence died of tuberculosis in March 1904, and a year and ten days later Spargo married Mary Amelia Bennetts, a British-born socialist who had been working in a carpet mill. Described as a "mousy" woman in looks and personality, she was later quoted by a friend as having said, "John married me because he needed a cheap nursemaid." Whatever the reason, they had three children of their own, one of whom died young and another died during World War II when the gas tank of a blowtorch he was using while working in a Navy shipyard exploded. John and Mary remained married until her unexpected death from a heart attack in 1953. Another child was Mary Spargo, who for a time was a staffer on the U.S House Un-American Activities Committee and who as a reporter for the *Washington Post* wrote the first stories about the committee's investigation of Alger Hiss. The son from Spargo's first marriage, George, was 75 when he died in September 1977 in a fire at "Nestledown," which he had inherited from his father.

During his New York years Spargo went from being a manual worker to a sort of tweedy professor, writing, lecturing, and teaching at the Rand School, which while not technically a socialist school had many socialist ties. He saw better schools as the key to a better society, and advocated not only broadening curriculums to include home economics, weaving, gardening, arts and crafts, and music, but called on schools to provide nutritious breakfasts and lunches, as well as basic medical, dental, and eye care. He became an advocate of civil rights and women's suffrage, and was an early advocate of the arts and crafts movement, which he felt would allow workers to take a sort of pride in their work that was lacking in many routine factory and quarry jobs. He also opposed the Boy Scouts as militaristic.

After 1909, Spargo began spending his summers in Bennington,

returning to the city every fall. He became involved in the creation and development of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, which in the years just before World War I had more than a hundred chapters at major schools like Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, and Berkeley, and at many smaller liberal schools like Grinnell, Oberlin, and Swarthmore. According to Kenneth Hilton, during one six-week period in the winter of 1915 Spargo spoke to more than 15,000 people at 25 different colleges.

But by this time, Spargo and the Socialist Party already were on a collision course. The reason was the start of the war. Many of the union workers in the party were Germans, who opposed American involvement in the war, as did the party itself, which took an inflexible anti-war position. Spargo argued that Germany's invasion of Belgium was a crime against socialist principles, and that in opposing American involvement in the war the party was losing touch with American life. In the spring of 1917 he resigned from the party, saying he had been "compelled to tear my life up by its roots." This caused a serious split with many former friends who, according to the *Banner*, accused him of being as traitor and a Judas. These included his one-time benefactor, Mary Sanford, who tried to evict him from her Old Bennington home, which he refused to leave and eventually purchased.

Ruotsila says that Spargo wanted to join the armed services but was prevented by his severe and chronic asthma. But he was sent to Europe by Woodrow Wilson as part of a delegation intended to try to persuade workers groups in Britain, France, and Italy to maintain support for the war and not stage wartime strikes. While the others returned home in August 1918, Spargo stayed in Rome where he took a job writing pro-war propaganda for the U.S. government and became friendly with Benito Mussolini, whose socialist newspaper *Il Popolo d' Italia* printed much of his work. In 1919 Spargo published *Bolshevism: The Enemy of Political and Industrial Democracy* in which he staked out a position as a staunch anti-communist.

In the years between the wars Spargo grew increasingly conservative, coming to believe that the improvement of the lot of the common man was more likely to be brought about by an enlightened free-enterprise system than government programs. He built friendships with Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover and characterized Franklin Roosevelt's presidency as an "ugly, alien spirit of irresponsible dictatorship." Eventually, an autographed picture of Senator Joseph McCarthy ended up in his study and in 1964 he championed the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater, although by that point his political influence was minimal. As Kenneth Hilton concluded in his thesis, "If any single 'monument' stands today to the life and works of John Spargo it is the Bennington Museum located in Old Bennington," and not a political legacy.

That second career had its start one day in 1923 when Spargo and his

daughter Mary were walking home from downtown Bennington. Along the way they stopped to chat with the Rev. Thomas Carty, the pastor at St. Francis de Sales Church. Father Carty was boarding up the windows of the original stone church, which had been erected in 1855 and abandoned in 1892 when a much larger church had been built to replace it. The diocese was going to sell the old building, Father Carty said, and Spargo (who by now was the president of the Bennington Battle Monument and Historical Association), decided that this might be the right place for a museum to house to association's growing collection of artifacts, manuscripts, and relics. The bishop of Burlington agreed to sell the church for much less than its appraised value, and Spargo in turn promised that the Catholic cemetery behind it would be cared for. With major financial help from Edward H. Everett and James C. Colgate, the building was bought and deconsecrated, major renovations were completed, and the Bennington Museum opened its doors on August 16, 1928, with Spargo as its first curator-director.

Spargo would remain in the job for the next 26 years, overseeing dozens of fund-raising efforts, several major expansions, and many important acquisitions, including Spargo's own impressive collection of Bennington pottery, which he donated to the museum. And Spargo went from writing about Bolsheviks and child labor to trying to solve the mystery of the naming of Mount Anthony (he concluded it had been named for Peter Anthony, a hermit-like farmer and trapper who lived on the western slope and had died after a bad fall there in 1788); the founders of Bennington ("That they were men and women of narrow minds, steeped in bigotry and even fanaticism, can hardly be questioned"); the early potters and pottery of Bennington; and many other aspects of state and local history.

He became increasingly active in St. Peter's Episcopal Church, although one person who knew him well told Gerald Friedberg that while Spargo "knew the bible backwards and forwards," he was not particularly religious. He eventually became a 33rd Degree Mason, about which he was very proud. And after his wife died, Spargo developed a relationship with a younger red-haired woman who called him her "Little Boy Blue." Museum staffers were said to have kept track of the relationship through a worker who pilfered ripped-up letters between the two from Spargo's wastebasket and took them home and taped them together again.

He finally retired from the museum in 1954 when he was 78. He lived for twelve more years, with a sharp mind and a serious interest in national affairs, but with many health problems as well. In those last years his hearing and eyesight were seriously impaired and he was suffering from arthritis, emphysema, asthma, and back pain. An ardent baseball fan, he listened to every game he could tune into, particularly Yankee games. When he no longer

could read them himself he had the *New York Times* and the *Bennington Banner* read to him from front to back.

Spargo died on August 17, 1966, and was buried in the Bennington Center Cemetery behind the Old First Church. When he wrote his Ph.D dissertation six years later, Kenneth Hilton took issue with those who saw Spargo's shift to conservatism as evidence of "inconsistency and perfidy" and argued that on the contrary they were the result of the same values and principles — "an odd mixture of Victorian morality, Cornish individualism, (and) Gladstonian Liberalism" — that Spargo carried with him through his entire life.

The epitaph on his tombstone reads *Labor Omnia Vincit*, which means "Work Conquers All." It was the motto of some of the earliest U.S. labor unions, including the precursors to the modern-day American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. □

Notes

This article was based on many sources, including the files of the *Bennington Banner*, and two biographies, *John Spargo and American Socialism* by Markku Ruotsila, and Kenneth Hilton's Ph. D. dissertation, "A Well-Marked Course: The Life and Works of John Spargo." It also was based on several interviews with Spargo and others that were conducted by Gerald Friedberg for his own Harvard Ph.D thesis "Marxism in the United States: John Spargo and the Socialist Party of America."

It also drew from many of Spargo's own books, pamphlets, monographs, newspaper articles, and essays, including *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, *The Jew and American Ideals*, *Bolshevism: The Enemy of Political and Industrial Democracy*, *The Potters & Potteries of Bennington*, *Notes on the Name and the Family of Spargo of Mabe Parish in Cornwall*, *The Founder of the Town* (about Bennington's founder, Samuel Robinson), *The Romance of Mount Anthony*, *Ethan Allen – Our Flamboyant Hero*, *Our First Printer* (about Anthony Haswell), *The Catamount in Vermont*, *Covered Wooden Bridges of Bennington County*, *Ballad of Jesus, Son of Mary*, *The Truth About a Memorial – A Personal Statement by John Spargo*, and *The Story of David Redding, Who Was Hanged*.



Two nearly identical dolls made by Grandma Moses show the diversity of her needlework abilities. She originally gave them to her granddaughters when they returned from the funeral of Anna, Grandma's daughter and the girls' mother.

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All images from the Bennington Museum Collection, photographed by James Cummings

Grandma Moses: Early Quilts and Needlework

Patricia L. Cummings

The name “Grandma Moses” to most people conjures up the memory of an aged artist who rose to national fame in the last two decades of her life in the twentieth century. Celebrated for her untutored style of painting, sometimes called folk or primitive art, Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860-1961) created more than 1,500 landscape paintings, as well as hand-painted tiles, during her most productive decades. Less well known is her artistry in quilts and embroideries before she was “discovered.” These include a “King’s Crown” bed-size quilt, patchwork pillows, and needlework pieces she referred to as “pictures.”

After I became aware of her paintings titled “The Quilting Bee” (1950), and “Waiting for Santa Claus” (1960), both of which feature quilts as part of the design work, I wondered whether Grandma Moses had made any quilts herself. It was a delight to discover a few examples of her quilts and