

## BERNICE MARKS STEARNS: AN EARLY VANGUARD FOR EQUAL RIGHTS by Chet Kerr

On April 6, 1917, an article appeared on the Society Page of the *New York Herald* announcing the wedding of Miss Bernice Marks to “Mr. Robert B. Stearns of Irvington, N.Y., son of Mrs. Isaac Stern.” The article noted “Mr. and Mrs. Stearns will pass their honeymoon in the South” and, upon their return, they would make their home in Irvington.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Stearns’ father was Isaac Stern, who co-founded the Stern Brothers department store in 1867 and who became one of New York City’s leading—and wealthiest—dry-goods merchants. Befitting his success, Isaac Stern built a mansion at 858 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan<sup>2</sup> and, in June of 1891, purchased a 94-acre estate in Irvington, which he named *Cedar Lawn* and which extended from the east side of North Broadway all the way to Mountain Road.<sup>3</sup> Over the next decade, the Sterns remodeled the existing mansion into a large, turreted castle and constructed a separate, grand guesthouse in the middle of their property. This country estate, which today includes the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the Irvington High School and Middle School campuses, the Dearman Park development, and the northern portion of the Irvington Woods,

remained in the Stern family for almost ninety years.

Isaac Stern died on December 5, 1910, and, under the terms of his will, left his “country residence”—Cedar Lawn—to his wife, Virginia, and his son, Robert. At the time, Robert Stern was twenty-three years old and a recent graduate of Yale University. After his father’s death, Robert worked as a banker in Europe for several years, but ultimately returned to the United States and took up residence at Cedar Lawn.



Miss Bernice Marks

By the time of his marriage to Bernice Marks in 1917, Robert had changed his surname to *Stearns*, possibly in tribute to his Phillips Academy Andover headmaster, Alfred Stearns; possibly to ease his pathway into certain parts of the New York and European business worlds by anglicizing *Stern*. In 1923, Robert co-founded the financial firm Bear Stearns and went on to have a long, successful career on Wall Street.<sup>4</sup>

Bernice Marks came from a politically active and progressive family. She was a 1913 graduate of Vassar College, which during her tenure was described as a “hotbed of suffrage and socialism.”<sup>5</sup> Her father, Marcus M. Marks, had retired at the age of forty-five to devote his time to civic and philanthropic

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efforts; he acted as a labor mediator and arbitrator, he was appointed to the Immigration Commission by Governor Hughes, and he served a term as Manhattan Borough President.<sup>6</sup> Her mother, Esther Friedman Marks, was a leader in the fight for women's suffrage, a founder of the Women's City Club of New York, a pioneer in the birth-control movement, and a member of the National Advisory Council of the National Woman's Party (NWP).<sup>7</sup>

Following her wedding and move to Cedar Lawn in the early summer of 1917, Bernice Stearns quickly became an active member of the Irvington community by participating in campaigns to support the Irvington Library and the sale of Liberty Bonds on behalf of the Women's Liberty Loan Committee. Like her mother, Bernice Stearns was also a supporter of the NWP, which had broken from the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1913 to take a more activist, national approach on the issue of women's suffrage and equal rights.<sup>8</sup> Following the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote, the NWP turned to working toward an Equal Rights Amendment to the Federal Constitution.

Working in parallel to this effort, in 1922 Bernice Stearns and other members of the

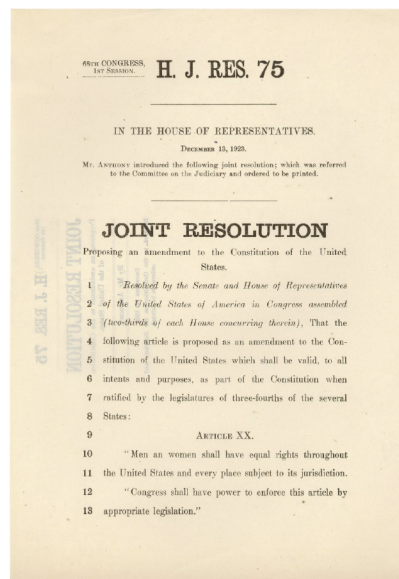
NWP in New York were successful in having a Women's Equal Rights Bill introduced in the New York Senate, which would have removed restrictions on women's rights to own property, enter into contracts, sue for divorce, obtain custody, and serve on juries.<sup>9</sup>

Building on the work of the early supporters for women's suffrage who had long been active in Irvington,<sup>10</sup> Bernice Stearns used her social position within the community to be a vocal advocate for equal rights for women in Irvington, the County of Westchester, and the State of New York. On June 15, 1922, she hosted more than 100 women at Cedar Lawn to discuss the Women's Equal Rights Bill pending before the New York Senate and to

hear presentations by Alva Belmont and Louisine Havemeyer, national figures who had co-founded the NWP with radical suffragist Alice Paul.<sup>11</sup>

Over the next several years, Ms. Stearns presided over numerous meetings and events at her Irvington home and elsewhere throughout the state addressing the unequal treatment of women under the common law, and she remained an outspoken advocate for equal rights for women as

the State Vice Chairman of the NWP and an active member of the Republican Party. At the national level, she campaigned for



**Proposed Lucretia Mott Amendment.**

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was introduced in Congress in 1923 to amend the Federal Constitution to provide equal rights for women.<sup>12</sup> In that role, she also led delegations to meet with the Republican Governor Nathan Miller in 1922 and with the Democratic Governor Al Smith in 1924.<sup>13</sup>

At a time when many men and women resisted changes in the traditional roles of women in society, Bernice Stearns was willing to step forward and speak out for dramatic reform. While the efforts to pass

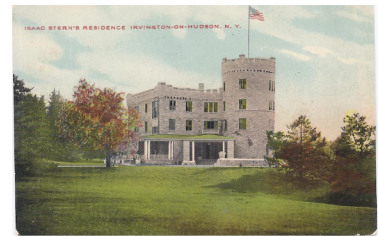
the Women's Civil Rights Bill in New York and the Lucretia Mott Amendment in Congress ultimately proved unsuccessful, Ms. Stearns' outspoken advocacy and her willingness to put her social position at risk to advance a cause she believed in is an example to all.

—Chet Kerr

*Editor's Note: In order to preserve the pagination of this issue's print version, the author's source notes can be found on an addendum following text page 11.*

### A WALK THROUGH TIME: A HISTORY OF THE STEARNS PROPERTY AND A WALK THROUGH THE IRVINGTON WOODS

On Sunday, September 30th, village resident Chet Kerr, co-chair of the Irvington Land Trust, led a program co-sponsored by the Irvington Historical Society and the Irvington Woods Committee.



Cedar Lawn, the Stern Castle.



Chet and walkers on the trails.

His slide presentation traced the former Stearns property from the days of early Native Peoples to its inclusion in Philipse Manor to *Ridgeview*, the mansion built by Augustus C. Richards, and to *Cedar Lawn*, the name given the estate in 1891 by Isaac Stern, co-founder of the Stern Brothers department store chain and one of the era's wealthiest New York City merchants. (His son, Robert, changed the name to *Stearns*.)

Following the lecture, Chet led a guided walk across the high school campus—noting the former site of the turreted castle Stern fashioned from *Ridgeview*—past the location of the Stern's guesthouse, *Rockholme* (in today's Dearman Park), and along trails in the Irvington Woods that were formerly part of the estate.

Refreshments followed at the O'Hara Nature Center.

—Ginny Read

## ADDENDUM: NOTES TO "BERNICE MARKS STEARNS"

1. *New York Herald*, April 6, 1917, 5 (col. 3).
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3. Indenture dated June 12, 1891, between Mary Caroline Richards and William L. Richards, Executors under the will of Augustus C. Richards and Isaac Stern, recorded at Liber 1236, 371.
4. "Robert B. Stearns," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_B.\\_Stearns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_B._Stearns).
5. "Vassar Students Are Now Radicals," *New York Times*, May 9, 1909, 8; Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *After the Vote Was Won* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 79; "The Suffrage Movement at Vassar," *Vassar Encyclopedia*, <http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/interviews-reflections/the-suffrage-movement.html>; "Early Suffragists Got Their Start at Vassar," *Miscellany News*, 137, no. 6 (October 10, 2003): 10.
6. *Who's Who in American Jewry* (The Jewish Bio. Bureau, Inc., 1926).  
419; "M.M. Marks, Once Borough President, Dies", Jewish Telegraphic Agency, <https://www.jta.org/1934/08/28/archive/m-m-marks-once-borough-president-dies>.
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8. Nancy F. Cott, "Feminist Politics in the 1920s: The National Woman's Party," *Journal of American History* (June 1984): 7.
9. "The Bill of Rights Meeting," *Irvington Gazette*, June 9, 1922, 1 (col. 1).
10. Connie Kehoe, "Local Women in the Suffrage Movement—100 Years Ago," *Roost* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 2.
11. "Woman's Bill of Rights Meeting at Cedar Lawn," *Irvington Gazette*, June 16, 1922, 1 (col. 3); "The Equalizing Bills Before the State Legislature," in The Consumers' League of New York, *Bulletin* (New York: The League), 1, no. 3 (March 1922): 4.
12. "Colorado Pageant Given by Women's Party," *Irvington Gazette*, October 12, 1923, 4 (col. 6).
13. "Mrs. R.B. Stearns Attends Republican Convention," *Irvington Gazette*, September 29, 1922, 4 (col. 3); "Equal Rights Deputation to Governor Smith," Library of Congress Photo, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000194/>.