

## “He May Sneer at the Course We Are Pursuing to Gain Justice”:

### Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, *The Sibyl*, and Corresponding about Women’s Suffrage

Laura J. Ping

In the fall of 1863 Wallkill, New York resident Dr. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck was arrested for failure to pay her road tax. Hasbrouck, a water-cure physician and dress reformer, had achieved prominence within reform circles as the editor of the biweekly reform newspaper the *Sibyl*. The *Sibyl* primarily promoted the dress reform movement, which placed comfortable clothing at the center of women’s fight for equality, but many articles also reflected Hasbrouck’s passionate support for the women’s suffrage movement. One of Hasbrouck’s most ardent arguments was that women should not be required to pay taxes if they were unable to vote. It violated citizenship. By 1863 Hasbrouck, in protest, had not paid her road tax for more than two years. Consequently, the local commissioner of highways notified her that in order to settle the debt she would have to work ten and a half days on a road crew, a common punishment for tax evaders.<sup>1</sup> On September 9th of that year Hasbrouck arrived at the appointed patch of road. She had been instructed to bring her “best” shovel and so, she wrote in the *Sibyl*, she did; it was a fire shovel designed for scooping ashes from a fireplace. The road overseer replaced it with a standard shovel and instructed Hasbrouck to begin filling a wagon with debris. She did not comply. Instead Hasbrouck stood, leaning on her shovel, talking, and “calling the attention of other workmen from work.”<sup>2</sup> At one point she sat down and began tossing pebbles into the wagon. Finally she occupied herself by reading a newspaper. After the fifth day Hasbrouck did not return to work, resulting in her arrest.<sup>3</sup>

1. Cherise Kramarae and Ann Russo, *The Radical Women’s Press of the 1850s* vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 1991), 244.

2. “Spunky Female,” *Weekly Wisconsin Patriot* (Madison), November 7, 1863.

3. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, “Our Road Assessment,” *Sibyl*, September 1863, 1169; Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, “Our Protest Against the Road Tax, and the Reasons Why We Worked it as We did. Also

Newspapers across the United States reported this incident, but these articles do not reveal for how long Hasbrouck was imprisoned or if her punishment included a fine.<sup>4</sup> She wrote more explicitly of the incident in the *Sibyl*. “Remember we did not go there to do a man’s day’s work or to work out a man’s tax,” Hasbrouck wrote.<sup>5</sup> Her deliberate insubordination proved a point; women would not accept taxation without representation. But Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck’s protest against women’s disenfranchisement went beyond simply agitating local officials. In the pages of the *Sibyl* Hasbrouck used her experiences fighting for suffrage to expose her readers to the hypocrisy of demanding women to fulfill the obligations of citizenship without allowing them equal rights.

Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck was born in 1827 in Warwick, Orange County, New York, the fifth of eight children. Her father worked as a farmer and distiller of apple brandy. Although few details are known about Hasbrouck’s childhood, local historians noted from interviews that her family often hosted gatherings in their home. During these events young Lydia was the center of attention. She was intelligent and independent; neighbors noted her fearlessness. In 1849, at age 22, this vivaciousness was likely what gave Hasbrouck the courage to abandon fashionable dress in favor of the short dress and trousers worn by dress reformers, also known as the “American Costume.”

During the 1850s and 1860s the American Costume was adopted by the faction of dress reformers who dedicated themselves primarily to improving women’s health. Although Hasbrouck never explained how she learned about dress reform, based on the year of her adoption it is likely that she read about it in health reform publications. The design had first been promoted in 1849 by the hydropathic newspaper the *Water Cure Journal* as an alternative to fashion. Many reformers feared that corsets and the long, heavy skirts typically worn by middle-class women caused irreparable

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Why We Should Not Be Fined,” *Sibyl*, September 1863, 1172; *Daily Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), October 12, 1863, 1.

4. In the September 1863 issue of the *Sibyl*, Hasbrouck made a case for why she should not be fined, but did not offer details about the amount or if she intended to pay the fee. See Hasbrouck, “Our Protest Against the Road Tax.” Mainstream newspapers only mention Hasbrouck’s arrest, not the penalty. See *Lancaster Inquirer* (PA), October 16, 1863, 1.

5. Hasbrouck, “Our Protest Against the Road Tax.” One newspaper indicates that the story originated with the *Boston Post* but a does not reveal the date of publication. A newspaper search through Genealogy Bank shows that this story was reprinted in the *Lancaster Inquirer* (PA) and the *Daily Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME).

damage to their bodies.<sup>6</sup> A similar garment, the bloomer costume, would famously become associated with the women's rights movement in 1851 after Elizabeth Smith Miller, daughter of abolitionist Gerrit Smith, adopted it full time. Miller then introduced the design to her colleague Amelia Bloomer, for whom the costume was nicknamed. For Miller and Bloomer dress reform symbolized women's equality.<sup>7</sup> For Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck dress reform was initially about comfort. Within a few years of abandoning fashionable dress, however, Hasbrouck's clothing became the catalyst that pushed her into campaigning for women's rights.<sup>8</sup>

Some time around 1850 Hasbrouck sought entrance to the S. S. Seward Institute, a free, coeducational high school, in Florida, New York.<sup>9</sup> While Hasbrouck was a strong applicant, the faculty admissions committee rejected her application because of her alternative dress. This decision devastated Hasbrouck who recalled, "Up to this time I loved the physical freedom of my dress. I had thought but little of women's political freedom or her unequal rights before the law. I had never suffered for them, and enjoyed too many other privileges to feel their lack." The school trustees, familiar with the Sayer family, assured her that there was an opening in their program if only she would "dress in harmony with fashion." Hasbrouck refused.<sup>10</sup>

This experience marked a turning point for Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck. In an interview published in 1881 she recalled that, "This treatment anchored me into the ranks of women's rights advocates, and as I left [the S. S. Seward Institute] I registered a vow that I would stand or fall in the battle

6. See "Woman's Dress," *Water Cure Journal* 7–8 (1849), 121–22; "The Female Dress," *Water Cure Journal* (January 1850), 28; Rachel Brooks Gleason, "Woman's Dress," *Water-Cure Journal* 11 (February 1851), 30–31 in Melissa Doak and Melissa Karetny "How Did Diverse Activists Shape the Dress Reform Movement, 1838–1881?" *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000*. Alexander Street Press. In October 1851 the *Water Cure Journal* published an image contrasting a reform garment called the "American Costume" with French fashions. The figure shown wearing the American Costume was actually Amelia Bloomer in the bloomer costume. See "The American and French Fashions Contrasted," *Water Cure Journal* 12 (October 1851), 91.

7. Gayle V. Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power: A Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), 81–82.

8. Hasbrouck noted in an 1881 interview that she adopted the American Costume for her personal comfort. See Clark and Rutenber, *History of Orange County, New York*, 196.

9. According to a biographer of William H. Seward, Seward founded the S. S. Seward Institute at Florida, New York in 1846. George E. Baker, *The Life of William H. Seward with Selections From His Works* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1855), 15.

10. Clark and Rutenber, *History of Orange County*, 196–97.



Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck (n.d.), photograph courtesy of the Middletown and Walkill Historical Society Precinct, Middletown, NY

of women's physical, political, and educational freedom and equality."<sup>11</sup> She then enrolled at Elmira High School and Central College and in 1853 began training as a water-cure physician at the Hygeio-Theraputic College in New York City. After her graduation in 1853, Hasbrouck began traveling the country writing and lecturing on temperance and health reform. In 1856 she combined her career as a water-cure physician and her dedication to dress reform when she established the biweekly reform newspaper the *Sibyl*.<sup>12</sup>

The *Sibyl* was dedicated to "reforms in every department of life," but also served as the main source of information for members of the recently organized National Dress Reform Association (NDRA). The NDRA's mission was to educate the public on the ways that fashionable clothing damaged women's health.<sup>13</sup> The *Sibyl* was integral to spreading this message, recruiting followers, and reporting on dress reform conventions. It also created a long distance community among women who were geographically isolated from other reformers.<sup>14</sup>

In some ways the rhetoric used in the *Sibyl* was not unique among nineteenth-century reform periodicals. Hasbrouck, like other female editors, relied on a "sisterly editorial voice" when addressing her readers. She referred to them as "sister" or "brother," and they reciprocated with "Sister Hasbrouck" or simply "Lydia." This communicated that Hasbrouck and her readers shared a bond through reform. Hasbrouck also fostered intimacy by allowing readers glimpses into her personal life, such as her marriage to John Hasbrouck and the births of her children. In 1860 she wrote about the death of her two-year-old daughter.<sup>15</sup> To her subscribers Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck was more than simply a name on the page, she was a friend to whom they could confide. One correspondent from Jamestown, New York confessed in a letter to Hasbrouck: "I can not feel that I am writing to a stranger." The two had been once introduced at the Glen Haven hydropathic hospital, the reader recounted, but she was so moved by Hasbrouck's writings that even if they had never met "I should reach

11. *Ibid.*, 196–97.

12. Clark and Rutenber, *History of Orange County*, 196–97.

13. Harriet N. Austin, "Tracts of the National Dress Reform Association, no. 1 (1856), New York Historical Society, New York, NY.

14. Kathleen M. Torrens, "Dress Reform Rhetoric in the *Sibyl*, 1856–1864," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1997), 102.

15. *Ibid.*, 105.

the hand of my spirit over hill and dale—from my easy sanctum to your editorial chair, and grasping yours, hail you as a sister—one with whom I am glad to labor.”<sup>16</sup>

Letters like these reveal the intimate relationship that Hasbrouck shared with her readers. The newspaper also offered like-minded women a chance to share their experiences with one another. Most of these women were drawn to the *Sibyl* because they were interested in dress reform and Hasbrouck explained to her readers that altering their clothing would demonstrate intelligence and independence.<sup>17</sup> Hasbrouck knew from her own experience, however, that simply altering one’s dress was not enough to enact widespread change. Her task was to convince her female readership that dress reform was a gateway to women’s suffrage.

Hasbrouck kept her writings on dress reform and suffrage separated; these subjects were never discussed in the same article. Yet in her discussions of politics Hasbrouck used women’s weak bodies as a metaphor for their lack of rights. “Woman’s strife for public power in the political or lucrative arena, must ever remain crippled, until she shows to the world that she has strength to sustain an individualized character,” Hasbrouck wrote in 1856. “She must not knock at the door of legislation with shattered nerves, and prostrate muscles, caused by her cringing homage to custom, if she would be acknowledged an equal there.”<sup>18</sup> This argument placed Hasbrouck at odds with the leaders of the women’s rights movement, who she openly criticized for dismissing dress reform.<sup>19</sup>

During the early 1850s key figures within the women’s rights movement followed the example set by Elizabeth Smith Miller and Amelia Bloomer and adopted the bloomer costume. Many of these women returned to fashionable clothing, however, when it became obvious that crowds were attending lectures to see a woman wearing pants rather than to support reform.<sup>20</sup> Hasbrouck deemed this reasoning inexcusable and through the *Sibyl* targeted this position, arguing that the failure of the

16. A. A. B., “Worlds of Encouragement,” *Sibyl*, November 11, 1856, 69–70.

17. Hasbrouck’s writings often explained that if women adopted dress reform they would demonstrate independence and intellectual equality to men. For examples see Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, “To The Reform Public,” *Sibyl*, July 1, 1856, 4; Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, “Our Position Defined,” *Sibyl*, August 1, 1856, 20; Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, “The Reform Dress,” *Sibyl*, October 1, 1856, 53.

18. Hasbrouck, “Our Position Defined,” 20.

19. *Ibid.*, 20.

20. Fischer, *Pantaloon and Power*, 101–04.

women's rights leadership to sustain dress reform reflected poorly on their ability to successfully crusade for other reforms. "It seems to us that persons of such frail powers to sustain principles, are not very reliable to stand as leaders of such important reforms as are embodied in the Woman's Rights movement of the day," Hasbrouck wrote. If women were going to establish their equality, they must remain resolute in their dedication to reform.<sup>21</sup> Many of Hasbrouck's readers, however, lived in rural areas and were not participants in an organized women's rights movement. As a result, she offered suggestions for how average women could protest their inequality. Refusing to pay their taxes was one way that women could demand equal rights as American citizens.

Women's citizenship was poorly defined during the nineteenth-century. While women were subject to laws, could be naturalized, and were protected by the courts, a woman was not entitled to all of the privileges of citizenship.<sup>22</sup> During the first half of the century, New York State property laws were based on English Common Law and thus married women were subject to coverture, meaning their legal identities were attached to their husbands. Any property that a woman owned at the time of her marriage legally became that of her spouse. Property ownership and the resulting taxes were key to a man's legal and political power. Women's rights advocates recognized this and fought for the right to own property independently from their husbands. When New York State passed the first married women's property act in 1848 it was assumed that the vote would soon follow. When it did not and women instead found themselves paying taxes to a government that they had no influence over, an organized political effort followed.<sup>23</sup>

Women could not protest their disenfranchisement by refusing to serve on juries or report for militia service because these civic duties were not open to them. They could, however, protest taxation. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck's support for tax boycotts reflected a strategy employed by suf-

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21. Hasbrouck, "Our Position Defined," 20; Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, "Traitors to the Cause of Dress Reform," *Sibyl* (1857) in *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1900*, eds. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1997), 143–44.

22. Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Rights to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), Location 78. Kindle.

23. Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 136–37, 153–54.

fragists state-wide.<sup>24</sup> For example, in 1858 Lucy Stone refused to pay her taxes in Orange County, New York resulting in a portion of her household goods being sold. Similarly, in 1864, a New York editor noted that the property of an anonymous “strong-minded woman” had been seized to pay her tax bill.<sup>25</sup> Hasbrouck’s own experiences protesting taxation mirrored those of her colleagues in suffrage, but she used the *Sibyl* as a tool to defend herself and inspire her readers.

Hasbrouck first wrote about her quarrel with the tax collector in 1859. In her retelling of the event for the benefit of the *Sibyl*’s readers, Hasbrouck recounted that she had been “determined to make our collector all the trouble we could,” although she noted that she did not arm herself as some men might do if their property was threatened. To keep the tax collector, Mr. Hoyt, out of their home Hasbrouck noted that she and her family “locked our doors and kept them locked, save we passed in and out to do our duties.”<sup>26</sup> The tax collector found one door open, however. He entered the house and stole a clock. The family quickly locked the door to the dining room where they were sitting. Enraged, Mr. Hoyt threatened to break down the door, but the Hasbroucks ignored him and sat down to dinner. Eventually someone Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck referred to simply as “H,” perhaps her husband John Hasbrouck, convinced Hoyt to leave after he had also stolen a bag of flour.<sup>27</sup>

The value of the clock and flour did not satisfy the debt, however, and Hoyt later returned to the Hasbrouck home and stole the trousers from Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck’s reform dress. He then advertised their sale in local newspapers. The proceeds would be used to pay the balance of her taxes. This action was likely also an attempt to humiliate Hasbrouck. Unfazed, she reported on the incident in the *Sibyl* noting, “He may sneer at the course we are pursuing to gain justice; he may act the part of a vulgar sneak to drive us from it, but he will find that he has mistaken the metal [*sic*] of the one he has to deal with, if he has the faintest hope to gain any vantage ground by the course pursued.”<sup>28</sup> One of Hasbrouck’s subscribers

24. Kerber, *No Constitutional Rights to Be Ladies*, Location 1813, 1828. Kindle.

25. “News Items,” *Mirror* (Bloomerville, NY), 1858, n.p.; “The Strong Minded Woman,” *Courier and Union*, February 27, 1864, n.p.

26. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, “Taxing Women: The Collector’s Sale Did Not Come Off, Etc.,” *Sibyl*, March 15, 1859, 524.

27. *Ibid.*, 524.

28. *New Albany (IN) Daily Ledger*, March 14, 1859, 3.

chided the collector in a letter to the editor calling him "our funny collector" and challenged his manhood for resorting to the theft of a woman's clothing. Hasbrouck added that from now on her pants would be sacred property.<sup>29</sup>

While she made a joke out of Mr. Hoyt's actions in her newspaper, the theft of her possessions furthered Hasbrouck's position that society treated women unfairly. Hasbrouck questioned the right of a tax collector to take her belongings. The theft made every enfranchised man accountable to her family. "No man who is a voter can justly pass this subject by and say, 'I don't make the laws, you can't blame me,'" she wrote in the *Sibyl*.<sup>30</sup> Nor could they argue that women had not expressed interest in voting. Women had petitioned the state legislature for the vote and had been "met by sneers and vulgar witticisms." Women's taxes helped build colleges, she seethed, but women could not attend these schools. Taxes built hospitals, but women were not allowed to practice medicine there. A woman could pay for a home, but was not guaranteed ownership to it if her husband died. As a college graduate, hydropathic physician, and property owner, Hasbrouck took these issues personally. Women may technically be citizens, she told her readers, but they were still legally and socially inferior. Her conflict with the tax collector proved this.

In the following years Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck earned a reputation for refusing to pay her taxes. In 1860 she chose to work off her road tax by driving a cart and in 1863 she agreed to work on a road crew, but ultimately walked away from her position.<sup>31</sup> Hasbrouck described her experiences protesting disenfranchisement to show readers that that they too could challenge laws, and she remained dedicated to suffrage even as the country was faced with civil war.

During the Civil War many of Hasbrouck's contemporaries set women's rights aside to focus on abolition, but Hasbrouck remained steadfast to dress reform and suffrage. Although there are fewer issues of the *Sibyl* available from the war years, in part because after 1861 it was published as a monthly periodical, those obtainable show that the war only heightened

29. Hasbrouck, "Taxing Women," 524; "Our Funny Collector," *Sibyl*, March 15, 1859, 525.

30. *Ibid.*, 524.

31. "Quill and Scissors," *The Flag of Our Union* (Boston, MA), December 1, 1860, 5; Hasbrouck, "Our Road Assessment," September 1863; Hasbrouck, "Our Protest Against the Road Tax," *Sibyl*, September 1863.

Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck's political commentary. In addition to dress reform, she published articles on the Emancipation Proclamation and letters from her friend Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, a suffrage activist who worked as a surgeon for the Union Army. A frequent contributor known as Louisa Cone wrote letters addressed to well-known Confederate citizens criticizing slavery and southern culture.<sup>32</sup> Hasbrouck also published articles arguing for the immediate emancipation of slaves, but she was no abolitionist. Her writings made it clear that she resented Republican lawmakers who placed abolition ahead of suffrage. "We will see whether the freedom of white women, [lawmakers'] wives and daughters, are as dear to them as the southern slave," Hasbrouck wrote. The war only heightened her concern that women were being overlooked. In 1861 she wrote President Lincoln asking that he appoint women to jobs vacated by men leaving for war.<sup>33</sup> Many women did hold government jobs during the Civil War, but there was no guarantee that this would lead to increased rights after the war. Women should serve as nurses, run businesses, and work farms to aid in the war effort, Hasbrouck suggested to her readers, but never lose sight of the larger fight for women's equality. In particular, she urged women to continue to boycott tax payments, writing "that so long as men held women as inferiors, and unworthy of citizenship, and of no account politically, save when the tax-roll was called, we should demand, as Jeff Davis does, to be 'let alone,' and let men pay the fiddler who gives all the golden music to them."<sup>34</sup> When it came time to pay her taxes in 1862, Hasbrouck noted that the taxman suggested she should agree to "pay under protest" and save them both the conflict because of the war. "What care you," Hasbrouck responded through the *Sibyl* "or any other man, for my protest, so long as you get my money?"<sup>35</sup>

Although the Civil War strengthened Hasbrouck's dedication to women's rights, she was unable to continue publishing throughout the war.

32. For examples see the *Sibyl*, April 1, 1863, 1133–35.

33. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck to Abraham Lincoln, March 8, 1861, House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/35751> (accessed October 21, 2016).

34. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, *Sibyl*, February 1862 as quoted in Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck, *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 349.

35. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, "Uncle Sam's Legal Theft," *Sibyl*, February 1862 in Kramarae and Russo, *The Radical Women's Press of the 1850s*, 245.

The *Sibyl* folded in 1864 due to lack of funds. Presumably with so many men engaged in fighting and extra money going to the war effort many people could no longer afford their subscriptions. With her newspaper sales declining, Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck spent the early 1860s splitting her time between editing the *Sibyl* and practicing water-cure. From 1861 to 1863 she ran a hydropathic hospital out of her home. In 1863 she was elected president of the National Dress Reform Association, but that too disbanded in 1865.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the failure of the *Sibyl*, Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck remained a dedicated activist. In 1880 New York State passed a law allowing women to vote for and hold school offices and Hasbrouck campaigned for women's elections. She wrote an article for both the local Democratic and Republican daily newspapers asking that they consider nominating at least one woman for a school board position. When neither party complied Hasbrouck published an invitation in the newspapers for a meeting at her home. The attendees were members of the Prohibition Party and nominated an entirely female ticket, including Hasbrouck, for school board. All five women were elected. One hundred and fourteen women voted in the election, and the victory made Hasbrouck and her colleagues the first females to hold public office in New York State.<sup>37</sup> The election of women to the Middletown school board was an important victory for the suffrage movement.<sup>38</sup> For Hasbrouck, it was a climax in her fight to achieve rights as a propertied woman and taxpayer.

Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck died in 1910 at age eighty-three, seven years before New York State passed universal suffrage. Her obituaries summarized her achievements—hydropathic physician, dress reformer, newspaper editor—but they failed to capture Hasbrouck's vehemence for women's rights.<sup>39</sup> Hasbrouck believed that women would never simply be given

36. Clark and Manning, *History of Orange County*, 197; Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power*, 118.

37. "Middletown's Female Elect.: How a 'Woman's Rights' Woman Grasped the Duty of the Hour," *New York Herald*, March 14, 1880, 9; Endres and Lueck, *Women's Periodicals in the United States*, 350; Clark and Manning, *History of Orange County*, 196; "Middletown's Female Board of Education," *Bloomfield (NJ) Recorder*, Marcy 19, 1880, n.p.

38. Historian Linda Kerber notes that while suffragists saw women's election to school boards as a step toward universal suffrage, lower class women were typically excluded from voting. Thus suffrage was not universal, but rather a privilege enjoyed by middle-class and propertied women. See Kerber, *No Constitutional Rights to Be Ladies*, Location 2194. Kindle.

39. For examples of how Hasbrouck was remembered in obituaries see "Noted Woman Doctor Dead," *Montrou Falls (NY) Free Press*, September 1, 1910; "She Wore Bloomers for Fifty Years,"

suffrage. It was up to them to demonstrate their capabilities and, if that failed, to agitate. For Hasbrouck, one of the greatest offenses women faced was the expectation that they pay taxes without being offered the vote. Through her refusal to pay taxes and the subsequent articles published in the *Sibyl*, Hasbrouck showed readers that one did not have to be part of an organized movement to fight for suffrage. Ordinary women could take action in their everyday lives.

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*Brooklyn (NY) Daily Star*, August 26, 1910; "Dr. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck Dead," *Baltimore American*, August 26, 1910.