

A young woman's declaration of independence in the 1910s



Isabel Cooper a few years before her independence

In November 1913, Isabel Cooper went before a Kings County New York Commissioner of Deeds and signed a "General Release," freeing her Aunt Mary Cooper from guardianship and any financial or legal responsibility for her. This was not an act of rebellion, it was the accepted legal move for a ward, reaching majority, when there was money or property involved in a guardianship.

With her signature, Isabel may have gained control of a small inheritance, but much more importantly, she became a free-acting adult. She was just past 21.

Isabel's first taste of independence was freshman year at Bryn Mawr College. But she had come home after a year. Then she spent several years studying art at Columbia Teacher's College and in summer courses in Lyme, Connecticut. She was meeting interesting people and ranging further and further from the staid life she led with Aunt Mary and her aunts Harriet and Joanna.

The aunts were Isabel's father's sisters. After James Cooper died in the Klondike, when Isabel was five, the three raised Isabel and her younger

brothers Jim and Leslie. The aunts were single, Victorian women, and devout Christian Scientists. Isabel's two hard-to-manage brothers were mostly off at boarding school, leaving her home with the aunts, and attending a nearby day school.



Isabel's childhood home, 40 West 96th St., NYC

Aunt Mary was, Isabel wrote later, a martinet. It was Mary who sent her to Bryn Mawr, and then who decided, for Isabel, where she would attend art school. Mary's choice replaced the one Isabel had made. Isabel wrote later that she agreed, but "with rather bad grace." None of the three aunts was a mother figure. Isabel remembered later that even from her closest Aunt Joanna she got "no embraces or gestures of tenderness".

In 1911, the family moved from their large row house at 40 West 96th Street, just west of Central Park, to an apartment in Harlem, renting out the house. What had been close quarters with three middle-aged aunts became even closer quarters in just a few rooms for a free-spirited 19-year-old.

Then in July 1913, Aunt Joanna, the only one Isabel was close to, and the one who nurtured her artistic interests, died at 53. It was time for independence, and she arranged it about as soon as she could.



Site of the Studio Club, a residence for single women artists, 35 East 62nd Street, Manhattan

Around the time she signed the General Release, Isabel moved away from her surviving aunts to the Studio Club, a YMCA residence for single women artists, at 35 East 62nd Street. She lived there from from 1913-1915. At the Studio Club, though under the watchful eyes of a house matron, and subject to regular lectures on Christian propriety, Isabel got a further taste of freedom and independence. She was with other young women artists, not older ladies. She could come and go freely (within curfew hours), and she was immersing herself in art. It was the start of a remarkably modern, adventurous life for a woman raised in a Victorian, Christian household by middle-aged aunts.

It's easy to imagine her folding closed the General Release and putting in her handbag. And she preserved it from then on, and placed it in a glassine sleeve in the scrapbook she made to give highlights of her life and career. Her declaration of independence.