

Hidden HERstory—Helen Stevens

by Marina Wells

Helen Stevens, Boston University B.A. Class of 1905, was a chemist and educator who taught at Boston University for over four decades. She offered stern guidance to students and helped shape the department as it came into being in the early twentieth century.

In her first years at BU, Stevens most likely took chemistry courses with other students in the sciences across the river at MIT. Eventually, in 1904, she likely attended BU's inaugural chemistry classes when they were first offered at a "cramped" location at 12 Somerset Street in Boston [1]. This was part of a number of changes that took place in her final months as an undergraduate in 1904. In that year, Lyman C. Newell also joined the faculty, who many cite as the founder of the department. Stevens would work with Newell until 1933, and during this period they would play an important role in incorporating chemistry into the College of Liberal Arts. As part of the nascent department's growth, it moved to the roomier building at 688 Boylston Street, which featured several working laboratories from having been the former site of Harvard Medical School. In 1935, the Biology department moved out of the same building, opening up further space so that Stevens and others gained further access to offices and labs. In these years, according to BU's annual report in 1919, "The chemical laboratory has accommodations for over two hundred students and is adequately equipped for both elementary and advanced work. The chemical museum connected to this department contains more than five hundred specimens suitable for lecture illustrations." [2] Stevens, Newell, and other chemists benefitted from a growing respect for the discipline and its necessary equipment during these years at BU.

Stevens was a part of several different types of changes at the university. In 1904, she led one of the promenades as part of the very first "faculty-sanctioned" dance at BU. The *Boston Globe* reported in 1904 that this was a new feature, and that the college had previously been known for its strictness as a Methodist institution. The *Globe* reported that Stevens wore a gown of pink silk muslin and pink roses. It was quite an affair to have such an event at the formerly conservative Methodist university, and it seems that Helen Stevens marched at the forefront.

Amid all of the changes of the early aughts, Stevens graduated from Boston University with her AB degree in 1905. In the following years, she taught in the



Helen Stevens helped create the Chemistry Department at Boston University.

surrounding area, in Granby, MA; North Brookfield, MA; Nashua, NH; and Somerville, MA. She also began working as an assistant to Professor Newell in the Chemistry Department at BU. Hired as the second employee in the department in 1909, she and Newell built up the department over the next decade—she is listed as "Assistant in Chemistry" within the College of Liberal Arts—until the department's second faculty member was hired in 1920 [3]. In 1921, she received her M.A. degree from the university, completing her thesis, "A Scheme for the Identification of the Carbohydrates." She cites Newell in her acknowledgments as having suggested this idea and consulted on every step, in addition to several other professors. Despite her integral role within the department, she would never be promoted to full professor.

Yearbooks from the 1920s suggest Stevens had a strong interest in both chemistry and the success of her students, with an exacting approach that surely lent itself to chemistry. In the 1921 BU HUB Yearbook, her profile is accompanied by the quote, "For if she will, you may depend on it." In several yearbooks over the next decade, she was described in the following words:

"When we were freshmen we used to be 'scared' of Miss Stevens till one day we simply could not do a thing in lab. We went to her in fear and trembling and discovered we had been all wrong. After that, did we go to her to solve our difficulties? Well-I-I." [4]

HELEN MARY STEVENS

303 Central Avenue, Needham, Mass.

A.B., Boston University, 1905; A.M., 1921; Α Φ.
Assistant in Chemistry.

Under Miss Stevens' tutelage, the workers in the Chem Lab are taught to walk the straight and narrow path. *Id est*, exactness seems to be her motto. Things run with amazing clockwork behind those forbidding glass doors on the second floor of our establishment, and it is due, we are sure, to her ceaseless vigilance. Somehow she doesn't seem to fit with chlorines, salt solutions and sodium nitrate, but there surely is no accounting for tastes.



Helen Stevens' portrait is featured in this reproduction of the 1929 Boston University yearbook.

"Behold the guardian angel of reagent bottles, the skillful wielder of mortar and pestle, the cool, clear-eyed arbiter of the unbalanced equation. May those who through her tuition have found the means to acquiring chemical equilibrium, project their discovery as successfully as she, into their extra-chemical existence." [5]

"Miss Stevens is a thorough-going scientist, and employs laboratory methods even in her hours of leisure. It is reported that she raises geraniums according to the strictest schedule, and we are wondering if those geraniums ever have a fervent wish, occasionally, to indulge a little in irregularity. However, it appears that flowers flourish marvelously under her deft supervision, and we hence infer that students are much akin to blooming rosebuds." [6]

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Clearly, the judging but affectionate writers of these yearbook profiles knew Stevens as a tough teacher who held her students to a high standard, and who throughout her meticulousness always had their success in mind. Clearly an enthusiastic chemist, she was also a member of the American Chemical Society

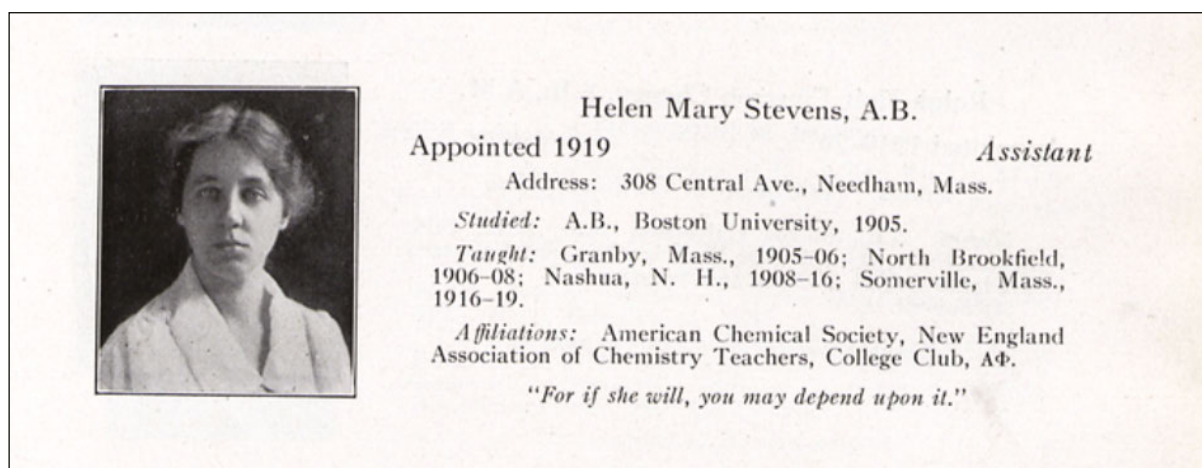
and the New England Association of Chemistry Teachers. Elsewhere in the community, she was active in the Needham Evangelical Congregational Church at least until 1932, when she and her sister Marion Stevens donated furniture in 1932 in honor of their late parents. Eventually, Helen would retire from her position at BU in 1953 after 44 years of work for the university. She also spent many of her years at BU as the advisor to BU's chapter of Alpha Phi, one of the oldest women's fraternities in the nation. In the final decade of her career, she reached the level of Associate Instructor. Surely an unsung hero, Helen Stevens might be credited with leading the Chemistry Department into its success at midcentury, placing her emphasis on students, and laying the foundations for its status as a rigorous research institution today. 🌐

References

1. Norman N. Lichtin, *Boston University's Department of Chemistry: A Brief History of the Period* (1989).
2. *Boston University The Year Book 1919* (Boston University, 1919), 121. Accessed Aug 2 2021. https://www.google.com/books/edition/General_Catalogue/bSZFAQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=stevens.
3. *Boston University The Year Book 1919* (Boston University, 1919), 32. Accessed Aug 2 2021. https://www.google.com/books/edition/General_Catalogue/bSZFAQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=stevens.
4. *BU Yearbook*, (1924), 32.
5. *BU Yearbook* (1927).
6. *BU Yearbook* (1928).
7. *BU Yearbook* (1929).

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Helen Steven's portait is featured in this reproduction of the 1921 Boston University yearbook.

HERstories project at <https://www.bu.edu/arrows/art-rfp/>.

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In November 2021 Boston University's ARROWS: Advance, Recruit, Retain & Organize Women in STEM (<https://www.bu.edu/arrows/about/>) program did seek proposals from visual artists in all media for five site-specific projects to be installed in different STEM departmental spaces around campus. One of these installations is to honor Helen Stevens and her hidden story became part of that project aiming to recognize

and celebrate women in the STEM fields who are associated with Boston University.

For a "brief history" of the department, see Norman N. Lichtin, *Boston University's Department of Chemistry: A Brief History of the Period 1904-1973* (1989).

Helen Stevens' thesis for her MA in chemistry is accessible through Open BU, "A Scheme for the Identification of the Carbohydrates."

Helen Stevens is also mentioned briefly in the Campus History of BU by Sally Ann Kydd, but which features some incorrect information.



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