

# Educating Women for Self-Reliance and Economic Opportunity: The Strategic Entrepreneurialism of the Katharine Gibbs Schools, 1911–1968

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*Established in 1911 as a simple owner-operated commercial school in Providence, Rhode Island, the Katharine Gibbs School expanded over the decades to acquire an international reputation for excellence in secretarial training. This essay examines the origin, development, and ultimate demise of the chain, placing it within the context of the expansion of office work and the growth of clerical education. In presenting a secretarial career as an attractive option for women, the school developed a gender-specific message that was very much in keeping with the vocationalism that became a major component of women's education in both public high schools and proprietary institutions. Promoting the career secretary as a desirable career path for women, Gibbs used class and gender-based marketing to separate itself from competitors. Thriving at a time when educated women had few opportunities, the school declined when the feminist upheavals of the 1960s sparked a new ethos of workplace egalitarianism and widening cultural definitions of self-fulfillment for women.*

In December 1940, when the Duke and Duchess of Windsor sought to hire a social secretary, they selected a graduate of the Katharine Gibbs School.<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, Barbara Walters, Nelson Rockefeller, John Lindsay, Edward Kennedy, F. Lee Bailey, and American-born Queen Noor of Jordan also relied on the secretarial talents of “Gibbs Girls,” as did top administrators at Warner Brothers, MIT, Lever Brothers,

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<sup>1</sup>“Mt. Vernon Girl Gets Job as Windsors' Secretary,” *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1940, 63.

American Express, and the Walt Disney Corporation.<sup>2</sup> Some Gibbs graduates rose from the typing pool to positions of leadership and prominence themselves. The Under Secretary of Agriculture in the Reagan administration, a vice-president at Estée Lauder, and the managing editor of *People* magazine all began their professional training at Katharine Gibbs.<sup>3</sup>

Established in 1911 as a simple owner-operated commercial school in Providence, Rhode Island, the chain expanded to additional locations in Boston, New York, and suburban New Jersey by the middle decades of the twentieth century. As it grew, the name “Katie Gibbs” entered the American lexicon, shorthand for “la crème de la crème,” or the “Tiffany’s of secretarial schools.”<sup>4</sup> Lauded as the “most famous secretarial school in the world,” it was often seen as a kind of “Harvard for secretaries,” or “the Ivy League of the shorthand circuit.”<sup>5</sup> *BusinessWeek* hailed Gibbs grads as “the secretarial elite.”<sup>6</sup> Into the 1960s, the school thrived on its reputation of gentility, exclusivity, and excellence, graduating upwards of fifteen hundred students per year and fielding annual placement requests often more than six times that number.<sup>7</sup> Especially for those born and bred in the northeastern United States, the school and its eponymous founder took on iconic status, fondly remembered by women of a certain age and social class.

Despite such stature, the Katharine Gibbs chain of schools has been understudied by historians. While fleeting references do appear

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<sup>2</sup>Fred Mumford, “Katharine Gibbs: A Proven Asset for Women,” *Montclair (NJ) Times*, Jan. 24, 1985, S1; and “Jobs Exceed Students at Secretarial Finishing School,” *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1976, 66.

<sup>3</sup>Shira Dicker, “Top Secretarial School, at 75, Trades White Gloves for Computer,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1986, C12. See also assorted Gibbs publications, *Gibbs Girls at Work*, *Gibbs Graduates on the Job*, Ms. 2011.019, box 4, folder 3, Katharine Gibbs School Records (John Hay Library Special Collections, Brown University, Providence, RI, hereafter cited as KGS-Brown); and Rosemary C. Hilbert Personal Collection (hereafter cited as KGS-RH). The Hilbert files were created by former faculty and staff at the Montclair, NJ, school and later transferred to Gibbs College, Livingston, NJ.

<sup>4</sup>Phyllis Meras, “45,000 Girls Are Glad Katie Sold Her Jewels,” *Providence Journal Magazine*, March 23, 1969, Available in clipping file, KGS-RH.

<sup>5</sup>R. Magruder Dobie, “How to Educate a Secretary,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Feb. 12, 1949, 30; and Elizabeth Shaughnessy Oelrich, *The Position of the Female Secretary in the United States from 1900 through 1967: An Historical Study* (PhD diss., University of North Dakota, 1968), 229.

<sup>6</sup>“Katie Gibbs Grads Are Secretarial Elite,” *BusinessWeek*, Sept. 2, 1961, 43.

<sup>7</sup>Martha Weinman Lear, “The Amanuensis: Evolution and Revolution of the Secretary Over Half a Century,” *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1961, SM28.

in general histories of vocational and clerical education,<sup>8</sup> there has been no comprehensive scholarly study of the institution, a product, perhaps, of the ignominious fashion in which the schools met their demise or the result of a corporate failure to collect and respect the archival record. This essay aims to place the Katherine Gibbs schools within the context of the vocationalism that became a major component of women's education in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

In presenting a secretarial career as an attractive option for women, her schools developed a gender-specific message that was very much in keeping with educational trends of the times, an approach to preparing women for the workforce that historians have termed a "curious dialectic of opportunity and constraint."<sup>9</sup> Building on the scholarship of John L. Rury, this essay will demonstrate how this private postsecondary institution used a message of self-reliance and economic independence for women at the same time that it directed, if not limited, their career aspirations to the clerical field.

Three historical developments drove the success of the Gibbs schools: the dramatic expansion of white-collar clerical employment that began at the end of the nineteenth century; the widening, but at the same time culturally restricted, range of opportunities open to American women; and the growth of clerical education, both in public high schools and private commercial institutions. While increasing numbers of women saw opportunities for themselves as they entered the labor force in the 1900–1930 period, these opportunities were both gender specific and class based. Educational training responded to changes in the labor market, as larger numbers of high school students, especially girls, came to view high school as a means to getting a better job. Especially in a white-collar environment, having a proper education divided women from others. As the work of Ileen DeVault and Lisa Fine has demonstrated, white, middle-class women found a certain prestige associated with working in an office environment and saw themselves very differently from women employed in manufacturing or domestic service.<sup>10</sup> Rury has written about the role of schools in reinforcing gender roles in the 1900–1930 period. His work focused

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<sup>8</sup>For examples of references in general histories, see Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 130; and Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 328.

<sup>9</sup>John L. Rury, *Education and Women's Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870–1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Lisa M. Fine,

on changes made to high school curricula, especially in the area of clerical education, and he documented the appeal that clerical education had to native-born white women as opposed to immigrant and African American girls. Harvey A. Kantor has also explained the class-based appeal of commercial courses. While the vocational education movement was primarily aimed at the working class, commercial education courses drew a largely middle-class clientele.<sup>11</sup> Janice Weiss has written about the private commercial schools of the late nineteenth century, which the clerical curricula of the public high school ultimately hoped to supersede and replace.

This essay aims to fill a gap in the existing secondary literature because it focuses not on public high school commercial education but on a particular institution that aspired to separate itself from both public high schools and private competitors. Targeting her schools only to high school graduates, Gibbs used class- and gender-based marketing to create a postsecondary model of “higher education” that both high school and college graduates could benefit from. In contrast to other commercial schools, she restricted enrollment to women only, using language that was seemingly empowering but also clearly constraining at the same time.

Section one of this essay will look at the historical and cultural factors that led to the expansion of white-collar office work and drove clerical education for women. Section two will give a brief biography of Katharine Gibbs and explain what motivated her to become a successful female entrepreneur. Section three and its subparts will examine the carefully crafted ways Gibbs attempted to differentiate her schools from competitors, both commercial schools and high school business programs. In key ways, she presented her school as “the right kind of school” for a certain kind of woman—white, refined, native-born, middle and upper-middle class. The concluding two sections will explain how the decline and demise of the school after 1968 was linked to the emergence of a new political ethos of workplace egalitarianism and widening cultural definitions of self-fulfillment for women.

### The Expansion of Office Work and the Emergence of Clerical Education

Secretaries or “keepers of secrets” were originally men. In mid-nineteenth-century America, an office clerkship was originally seen as a

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*The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago, 1870–1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup>Harvey A. Kantor, *Learning to Earn: School, Work, and Vocational Reform in California, 1880–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 59–65.

kind of apprenticeship. As a clerk, a young man could learn how the office functioned and potentially advance to the management of a small firm. Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* reveled in such a position, where he would be earning the magnificent salary of \$10 dollars per week.<sup>12</sup> Stenography had a long history of male practitioners, for its original inventors were all men.

Labor shortages during the Civil War opened the door to female clerks for the first time, when women were hired by the Department of the Treasury in large numbers. The most important factor in opening the office to women, however, was the invention and widespread use of the typewriter in the 1860s and 1870s. With their smaller fingers, women were seen as more manually dexterous and better suited to operating the new machines.<sup>13</sup> Christopher Latham Sholes, the machine's inventor, acknowledged the pathbreaking nature of his invention: "I feel that I have done something for the women who have always had to work so hard. This will enable them more easily to earn a living."<sup>14</sup>

The typewriter made stenography even more valuable in an office setting, as dictation no longer had to be written out by hand. By 1885, new and different ways of note-taking joined older methods, most notably John Gregg's invention of what came to be known as shorthand. Other factors contributed to the creation of the modern office. The scope of business concerns expanded from local to regional to national and ultimately to international. Accounting and record-keeping saw major changes by the turn of the century, and new types of office equipment, such as dictation machines, adding machines, and comptometers, contributed to the new emphasis on speed, efficiency, and scientific management.<sup>15</sup> In this atmosphere, having one's own secretary came to be seen not only as a real convenience but also as a measure of success.<sup>16</sup> Shortages in all categories of office work continued

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<sup>12</sup>Horatio Alger Jr., *Ragged Dick* or, *Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* (1867; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1962), 214.

<sup>13</sup>Francis X. Clines, "An Ode to the Typewriter," *New York Times*, July 10, 1995, D5; and Margery W. Davies, *A Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870–1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 53–58.

<sup>14</sup>Lynn Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool: A Retro Guide to Making It in the Office* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 16.

<sup>15</sup>On the evolution of the secretary's role, see Davies, *A Woman's Place is at the Typewriter*; Oelrich, *The Position of the Female Secretary in the United States*; Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*; and Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*.

<sup>16</sup>Sharon Hartman Strom, "Light Manufacturing': The Feminization of American Office Work, 1900–1930," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 43, no. 1 (Oct. 1989), 57.

into the mid-1920s.<sup>17</sup> These new jobs were also relatively well paying—a skilled “typewriter” in the late nineteenth century made as much as \$7 per week, a dollar more than an ordinary office clerk.<sup>18</sup> By 1910, the average wage for office workers in Boston was \$11, compared to \$8 earned by 60 percent of store employees.<sup>19</sup>

By the opening years of the twentieth century, the clean, safe, and “prestigious” environment of the office increasingly came to be seen as an appropriate venue for female employment, especially for the daughters of native-born, white families who would not consider domestic service or factory work. Office work was seen as a middle-class job that offered a ladder of opportunity and a variety of workplace settings from which to choose. Unlike traditional female fields like teaching and nursing, office jobs did not require years of specialized education, and these jobs carried higher status than sales clerking, another popular area of female employment at the turn of the century. In 1890, 80 percent of the workers hired to tabulate the federal census were women, and after 1910, the federal government opened more clerical exams in the civil service to women.<sup>20</sup> Sears, Roebuck and Company was one of the first large firms in the country to use female stenography pools outfitted with dictating machines. Labor shortages during World War I eliminated any vestigial prejudices against women working in business and accelerated the movement of women into office work.<sup>21</sup> Available data document these trends. In 1890, 60 percent of American stenographers and typists were women. These numbers rose to 77 percent in 1900 and 90 percent by 1920. By 1900, 27 percent of all clerical workers (broadly defined) were women. This percentage grew to 52 percent by 1930.<sup>22</sup>

Specialized vocational training for the new office environment accompanied these developments, and preparation was initially available to both men and women. As early as the 1840s and 1850s, private commercial schools emerged to teach bookkeeping, penmanship, and stenography to aspiring students. Within the next few decades, courses in typing, filing, and using new office machines were added to the curriculum. These commercial schools were known by a variety of names:

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<sup>17</sup>“Demand for Women in Office Work Now Exceeds the Supply,” *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1924, 9.

<sup>18</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 21.

<sup>19</sup>Jane Bernard Powers, *The “Girl Question” in Education: Vocational Education for Young Women in the Progressive Era* (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>20</sup>Strom, “Light Manufacturing,” 56.

<sup>21</sup>Davies, *A Woman’s Place Is at the Typewriter*, 51–70.

<sup>22</sup>Janice Weiss, “Educating for Clerical Work: The Nineteenth-Century Private Commercial School,” *Journal of Social History* 14, no. 3 (March 1981), 416.

“business colleges,” “secretarial” schools, or “schools” of typing, stenography, or filing taught individually as discrete skills. Most were small, owner-operated ventures; others were sponsored by office equipment manufacturers. All offered short, focused courses that ran for four to six weeks and offered little in the way of general business knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

By 1871, more than 150 such schools were operating across the United States; by the early 1890s, as many as five hundred may have existed.<sup>24</sup> Chicago, for example, which had five business colleges in 1880, had forty by 1910.<sup>25</sup> Some of today’s well-known universities began as commercial business schools. Bryant University now located in Smithfield, Rhode Island, began in 1863 as part of a chain of commercial schools founded in Providence by Henry Bryant and Henry Stratton. Within a decade, the ambitious founders operated more than forty schools across the country.<sup>26</sup> Post University in Waterbury, Connecticut, started in 1890 as the Matoon Shorthand School and offered courses in typing, bookkeeping, business writing, and shorthand to support the training needs of industries in the central part of the state.<sup>27</sup> Berkeley College, a career-focused for-profit with multiple campuses in New York and New Jersey, was founded as a secretarial school in East Orange, New Jersey, in 1931. In the decades that followed, it purchased the Dover Business College (another secretarial school) as well as the Claremont Secretarial Schools to become the accredited, degree-granting institution it is today.<sup>28</sup>

Women took their places as students, teachers, and founders of these institutions. From only 4 percent female in 1871, the percentage of female students grew to 10 percent in 1880, 32 percent in 1895, 36 percent in 1900, 46 percent in 1910, and 64 percent in 1925.<sup>29</sup> Some of these students became quite famous. After studying “phonography” for eight months, Alice C. Nute (d. 1898) became a partner in one of the leading shorthand firms in Chicago. By 1877, she was recognized as one of the best stenographers of the time.<sup>30</sup> In 1879, Mary Foot

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>24</sup> Oelrich, *The Position of the Female Secretary in the United States*, 48; and Weiss, “Educating for Clerical Work,” 411–413.

<sup>25</sup> Fine, *The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> See Valerie Quinney, *Bryant College: The First 125 Years* (Smithfield, RI: Bryant College, 1988), 9; also <http://www.bryant.edu/about/history-and-traditions>.

<sup>27</sup> “History,” Post University website, <http://www.post.edu/about/history>.

<sup>28</sup> See official website of Berkeley College, [http://berkeleycollege.edu/about\\_-berkeley.htm](http://berkeleycollege.edu/about_-berkeley.htm); also “Berkeley College, the Garret Mountain Campus” at [http://berkeleycollege.edu/files\\_\\_bc/GarretMountain.pdf](http://berkeleycollege.edu/files__bc/GarretMountain.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Weiss, “Educating for Clerical Work,” 417.

<sup>30</sup> Oelrich, *The Position of the Female Secretary in the United States*, 41.

Seymour (1846–1893) established the Union School of Stenography in New York City. Ultimately the proprietor of four schools, she is also credited with launching a publication known as the *Business Woman's Journal*.<sup>31</sup> Gertrude I. Johnson (1876–1961) and Mary T. Wales (1874–1952), classmates at the Pennsylvania State Normal School at Millersville, taught at Rhode Island Commercial School in Providence before collaborating to open their own school in 1914. Their venture survives today as Johnson and Wales University.<sup>32</sup>

These private business schools dominated instruction in commercial education for decades. Scholars of vocational education have argued that their very success caused public high schools to develop their own offerings in commercial business education.<sup>33</sup> Although commercial subjects were conspicuously absent from the provisions of the Smith-Hughes Act, the 1917 legislation that provided federal money to make vocational training more widely available, the popularity of commercial courses resulted in the expansion of high school curricula even without federal funding. The percentage of public high school students enrolled in commercial classes went from 21.7 percent in 1900 to 57.7 percent in 1934.<sup>34</sup> Commercial courses were especially popular with women. As early as 1920 in the eastern states, half or more of the girls entering high school elected some business subjects in preparation for office work, which was quickly becoming the largest source of employment for female high school graduates.<sup>35</sup> As Rury has demonstrated, public schools increasingly encroached on the domain of private business schools, as educators claimed that high school programs were superior to those commercial ventures offered. From 1890 to 1920, the proportion of all commercial students enrolled in private business colleges dropped from about 80 percent to less than 50 percent. Business students enrolled in public schools increased from less than 20 percent to about 45 percent of the national total.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Jonathan W. Zophy, "Business," in *Handbook of American Women's History*, ed. Angela Howard Zophy and Frances M. Kavenik (New York: Garland, 1990), 98.

<sup>32</sup>*Herstory: The Founding Mothers of Johnson and Wales University*, produced and directed by Marian T. Gagnon (Providence, RI: Ocean State Video, 2003), DVD.

<sup>33</sup>Herbert M. Kliebard, *Schooled to Work: Vocationalism and the American Curriculum, 1876–1946* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 139.

<sup>34</sup>Karen Graves, *Girls' Schooling During the Progressive Era: From Female Scholar to Domesticated Citizen* (New York: Garland, 1998), 206.

<sup>35</sup>Geraldine Joncich Clifford, "Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse," in *Work, Youth, and Schooling: Historical Perspectives on Vocationalism in American Education*, ed. Harvey Kantor and David B. Tyack (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), 267.

<sup>36</sup>Rury, *Education and Women's Work*, 149–150.



Prestigious male colleges and universities also began to experiment with business curricula in the same period. These were not secretarial courses, however, but comprehensive professional degree programs aimed at future corporate managers and leaders. In 1911, Columbia University began a three-year, coeducational Secretarial Studies program within its Extension Division, but male business students were generally directed to the full baccalaureate degree business program. Most Ivy League business schools did not open their doors to women until the 1970s.<sup>37</sup>

Elite women's colleges were conflicted about the addition of business curricula. According to historian Barbara Solomon, women educators at such schools remained ambivalent about the new emphasis on vocationalism in education because it was precisely the absence of such courses that made their institutions parallel to the most highly regarded schools for men.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, some women's colleges did begin to offer secretarial programs in the early 1900s. These included Connecticut College, Cedar Crest, Rockford, Skidmore, and the College of Saint Elizabeth.<sup>39</sup> Secretarial work was considered an excellent opportunity, even for female college graduates, and more college women entered the secretarial field than any other area besides teaching.<sup>40</sup>

### Katharine Gibbs and the “Self-Directed” Woman

Such was the environment in which Katharine Gibbs began her foray into the world of vocational education for women. The daughter of a wealthy and socially prominent Irish Catholic family, Katharine (née Ryan) was not reared to be a teacher, stenographer, clerk, or entrepreneur. Born on January 10, 1863, in Galena, Illinois, a bustling port city in the Mississippi River valley, she grew up in a twenty-four-room mansion situated on six hundred acres and was raised in an atmosphere of gentility and grace.<sup>41</sup> Her immigrant grandparents had achieved

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Clayton, “A Journey from Preposterous to Indispensable,” *Christian Science Monitor* 92, no. 219 (Oct. 3, 2000), 18; and Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 37; and Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Solomon, 150–156; and Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 80–85.

<sup>39</sup> Oelrich, *The Position of the Female Secretary in the United States*, 85.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Biographical sketches of Gibbs were included for decades in the various Gibbs School publications. For an example, see “In Appreciation of Mrs. Katharine M. Gibbs,” *Gibsonian*, 1934, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown. Rosemary C. Hilbert also drew on related materials in *The Vision of Katharine M. Gibbs (1863–1934): Educator, Careerist, Feminist* (master's thesis, Caldwell College, 2005). Rose A. Doherty, a former faculty member and dean at the Boston school, also published

great success by supplying groceries to homesteaders, and her father was a prosperous meat-packer who sat on the board of the local bank.

The Ryan family valued education. Katharine's two brothers were educated at Georgetown and Notre Dame, while she and her older sister, Mary, were sent "out East" to receive a finishing school education at the Academy of the Sacred Heart (now Manhattanville College), New York City's oldest independent school for girls. Its curriculum stressed character development, cultivation of manners, and exposure to the arts, along with the serious study of philosophy, literature, history, French, math, and science. This was a high school education that included no vocational training of any sort; rather, graduates were prepared for marriage, motherhood, and entrée into the best social circles.

Katharine Ryan did just that when, in 1895, she married William Gibbs, the son of a Massachusetts watchmaker who had achieved financial success as a rancher and gold prospector out west. The couple moved to an upscale area of Rhode Island known as Edgewood. William became a jeweler at one of the most fashionable stores in Providence, while Katharine spent time in social activities and nurturing her two young sons. Friends remembered her as a "soft-spoken, retiring, and kindly" woman who managed her home "graciously." The family—which came to include Katharine's unmarried sister, Mary, after the death of the Ryans—was well known among the business, professional, and academic elite of Providence and Cranston.

An unexpected turn in fortune, however, pushed the forty-six-year-old Katharine toward the path for which she is best remembered. When a freak yachting accident took her husband's life in 1909, she was left a widow with two young sons (ages 9 and 11) and an unmarried sister to support. Legal issues complicated the personal and economic challenges that confronted her. Not only had William died intestate, but various complex questions also tied up her parents' estate for a number of years. Therefore, Katharine Gibbs became a displaced homemaker long before sociologists had defined the term.

The challenge confronting the Ryan sisters was to find a socially acceptable way of supporting themselves. For a time, Katharine attempted to use her artistic talents as a dressmaker and clothing designer, but marketing and selling her creations proved difficult for a woman of her social class. For her part, Mary joined the increasing number of native-born white women seeking to prepare themselves for clerical work. Enrolling in a small Providence commercial school, she proved herself to be so "motivated, hardworking and gifted" that

the school's proprietor approached her about buying the business.<sup>42</sup> Family lore has the sisters pooling their resources, selling their jewelry, and borrowing \$1,000 from Brown University faculty friends to purchase the enterprise. To prepare themselves for their new venture, the sisters enrolled in a certificate-granting stenography program at Simmons College in nearby Boston.

Attending Simmons was a significant choice. Incorporated in 1899, Simmons Female College was the legacy of John Simmons, a prominent Boston clothing manufacturer and real estate developer. Concerned about the education of his own daughters, Simmons endowed the college "for the purpose of teaching medicine, music, drawing, designing, telegraphy and other branches of art, science, and industry best calculated to enable the scholars to acquire an independent livelihood."<sup>43</sup> With a curriculum that combined traditional liberal arts subjects with technical proficiency, Simmons offered bachelor degrees and certifications in a variety of areas, notably secretarial studies.<sup>44</sup>

Armed with this training, Katharine Gibbs and Mary Ryan entered the thriving and competitive world of commercial business education. Although there were already four commercial business schools in downtown Providence by 1911, the city remained an especially appropriate locale for the budding institution. Opportunities in office work proliferated in Rhode Island, the most densely populated state in the nation at that time. Providence, the capital, was an important port city, railroad terminus, and major manufacturing center, home to numerous textile, jewelry, and toolmaking plants.<sup>45</sup>

Initially, the new school was advertised and known by a variety of names: Syllabic Shorthand School, Gibbs Private School for Secretaries, Gibbs Private School of Stenography, and, ultimately, Providence School for Secretaries. Marketing was not originally targeted at women. Legend has it that the first student was a man. The labor shortages of the war years appear to have inspired a change in tactics, however, for by 1917 the school was advertising "Secretarial Training for Educated Women." In response to these wartime needs, the Ryan sisters opened a Boston School for Secretaries that year, with some sources suggesting that they were asked to do so by the American Red Cross. Entering the Boston market was both a

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<sup>42</sup>"Nobody Ever Called Her Katie," *Gibbsonian*, 1985, 6, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>43</sup>"A Brief History of Simmons College, 1899–1999," <http://www.simmons.edu/news/archives/a-brief-history-of-simmons-college>.

<sup>44</sup>"College for Women Workers," *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1902, 27.

<sup>45</sup>Quinney, *Bryant College*, 23.

risky and courageous venture, as the city already had a number of successful commercial schools—Burdett College, Hickox Shorthand School, and Chandler Normal Shorthand School—all in operation for decades.<sup>46</sup> The contemporary popularity of commercial schools is evident from this roster. Undeterred by such competition and having established a reputation for her brand, Gibbs opened a third school in 1918, this time in New York City. Advertisements now heralded the “Katharine Gibbs School of Secretarial Training for Educated Women” and highlighted its multiple campuses. The name was incorporated in 1928.

Katharine Gibbs remained the active head of all three schools—Providence, Boston, and New York—until her death in May 1934. In her later years, she lived on Park Avenue in New York City along with three live-in servants and, according to the 1930 census, was earning the annual equivalent of \$1.1 million in today’s dollars.<sup>47</sup> Her obituary in the *New York Times* called her “one of the leading educators of young women for business,” and noted that more than ten thousand women had graduated from her schools since their inception twenty-three years earlier.<sup>48</sup> After her death, leadership of Gibbs passed to her son Gordon and his wife, Blanche Lorraine, herself a 1930 graduate of the Boston school and a former secretary to Katharine. Mary continued in her position as treasurer and CFO until her retirement in the early 1940s. Gordon continued the school’s expansion. A Chicago school operated for a few years in the 1940s, and in 1950 the school opened its first suburban campus in affluent Montclair, New Jersey. The Gibbs schools remained under family leadership until 1968, when a series of corporate owners struggled to craft a new identity for the chain as feminist upheaval challenged gender segregation in the workplace.

### Drivers of Change for Women and Work

Economic necessity was the original motivating factor behind Gibbs’s work. Equipped with only a high school education—albeit a highbrow one—her schooling was decidedly nonvocational. She is never known to have taken a class in marketing. Yet this struggling widow—described as “energetic and indefatigable” by associates<sup>49</sup>—used her sense of breeding and social class, as well as her own understanding

<sup>46</sup>Doherty, *Katharine Gibbs & Her School*, 30.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>48</sup>“Katharine Gibbs, School Head, Dies,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1934, 21.

<sup>49</sup>“In Appreciation of Mrs. Katharine M. Gibbs,” *Gibsonian*, 1934, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

of the gender-role expectations of the time, to create what many once considered to be the most famous secretarial school in the world. She obviously enjoyed the challenge of entrepreneurship, for she continued as a leader of the schools well after she had achieved not only financial security but a high degree of financial success.

Gibbs was never known for her political views or for her public embrace of the suffrage or women's rights movements. Her extant personal writings are slim. According to her granddaughter, Katharine was "rather reserved" in public and would never have actively lobbied or protested. She voted in elections once the franchise was granted, but could not be described as a "suffragette." It was a well-known fact within the family, however, that Katharine had a strong belief that "women were intellectually the equal of men and should be considered full participants with men in all areas of life."<sup>50</sup>

Driven by this idea and mindful of her own experiences, Katharine Gibbs developed a firm conviction that all women needed to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of life. Insofar as she spoke to women or discussed so-called "women's issues," she spoke in these terms. This was very much in line with the ideas of other progressive women activists, who believed that women needed to care for and take responsibility for other women. She often reminded her students of the need to deal with life "courageously."<sup>51</sup> A Gibbs graduate, she explained, "enjoys the security of knowing that she need never be dependent on circumstances... that she herself is in firm control of her own future." Wealthy women needed to heed this call as much as any other, for inherited wealth, she warned, could be "the most uncertain of all forms of protection."<sup>52</sup> Her goal, therefore, was to create "self-directed women." The mission of her schools was "to provide educated women with the necessary specialized training for a future of self reliance and economic opportunity."<sup>53</sup>

In this way, Gibbs's thinking was in line with that of other women activists, social workers, and educators anxious to prepare women and girls for entrance into the workforce. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, women like Anna Dickinson, Mary Livermore, Virginia Penny, Caroline Dall, Annie McLean, and Jennie Cunningham Croly repeatedly advocated vocational training as a solution to women's problems. "Teach girls to learn a trade as well as boys," advised labor leader Ernestine Rose, "and then they would be

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<sup>50</sup>Rosemary Hilbert, telephone interview with Laurie Gibbons Button Lyons, Oct. 10, 2004, notes in KGS-RH.

<sup>51</sup>Reprinted in KGS Catalog 1968–1969, 72, KGS-RH.

<sup>52</sup>Katharine Gibbs in KGS Catalog 1922–23, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>53</sup>KGS Catalog 1942, 9, KGS-RH.

independent.”<sup>54</sup> The type of vocational training these women advocated, however, clearly differed for immigrant, working-class, or middle-class women. Rose’s definition of vocational training was very different from that of Gibbs, who targeted her schools to a particular subsection of the female population.

Gibbs explained that the purpose of her school was to provide “sound business training” to two types of women: those who aspired to a public career and those who “set for themselves the private task of administering a home.”<sup>55</sup> She gave students practical advice that could be of value in any life setting, be it business or domestic. Her words were clearly nonthreatening, almost like those of a kindly grandmother speaking broadly about a wide range of issues. Success in any venture lay in “giving more than is required.” It demanded “enthusiastic spirits and high standards of accomplishment.” Successful women were not clock watchers, but those who “have always given a little more than was actually required of them under all circumstances.” No mother could satisfy herself by saying she would give her child twelve hours of daily care and no more. The same applied to the business world, she explained. “Measure the service to be given by the need for it.” Do not limit it by rules and hours alone.<sup>56</sup> She urged graduates to be enthusiastic in all things and not to separate their work from their interests. “Think of your lives as a whole,” she wrote. The goal should be to “live both happily and successfully.”<sup>57</sup>

By 1930, as she had achieved quite a level of success, Gibbs’s messages came to be increasingly career focused. According to associates, she had two overriding preoccupations: to increase workplace opportunities for women and to provide them with the skills and training to seize those opportunities.<sup>58</sup> Yes, there were obstacles, she admitted. “A woman’s career is blocked by lack of openings, by unjust male competition, by prejudice, and, not least, by inadequate salary and recognition.”<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, she urged her graduates “to think in terms of

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<sup>54</sup>Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 171–72.

<sup>55</sup>Richard McMullan, “A School Grows in Boston: 1967 Reminiscences,” box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>56</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “The Little More—and How Much It Is,” *Gibbsonian*, March 1930, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>57</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “Accomplishment,” *Gibbsonian*, Jan. 1930, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>58</sup>Erwin H. Schell, “In Appreciation of Mrs. Katharine M. Gibbs,” *Gibbsonian*, 1934, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>59</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “Expect Great Things,” *Gibbsonian*, March 1935, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.”

possibilities rather than difficulties.”<sup>60</sup> Accomplishment, she wrote, came from two things: “knowing definitely what you want and setting out to get it.”<sup>61</sup> One of her most quoted lines was “Expect great things.”<sup>62</sup> She was confident of this even in the Depression years of the mid-1930s. Great opportunities are ahead, she predicted, “but only those who have the courage and the vision to expect them will profit when they come.”<sup>63</sup>

While Gibbs promoted a message of female empowerment and opportunity through education, that message was clearly circumscribed. A certain kind of education was most valuable for women, and certain kinds of jobs would provide the best access to the world of work. At a time when discrimination blocked opportunities to women in fields like medicine, law, and engineering, Gibbs—rightly or wrongly—promoted the idea that secretarial training could open doors to a wide range of business careers for women. Gibbs shrewdly recognized the gender-based restrictions of her time and capitalized on these restrictions as a marketing tool. Prejudice was not an obstacle for women, she insisted. The true obstacles were “lack of inspiration, courage, and determination ... the lack of training.”<sup>64</sup> These limitations especially hampered college-educated women because a college degree was no guarantee that a woman could find a job.

Without the type of training her schools could provide, even a college-educated woman lacked the skills to succeed in business. Gibbs’s assessment was supported by contemporary evidence. In 1922, a young woman told the *New York Times* how she and her college classmates had come to the disturbing realization that “nine jobs out of ten offered to girls just starting out in the business world today require stenography.”<sup>65</sup> Writing in the *Rotarian* in 1938, Dr. Henry C. Link, a pioneer in the field of employment psychology, warned parents to beware of “student casualties” due to the wrong kind of education. Young girls with degrees in sociology or political science, for example, “found themselves prepared for nothing in particular,” and he advised parents that their daughters needed a “more practical, more disciplined

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<sup>60</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “Beginnings,” *Gibbssonian*, December 1929, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>61</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “Accomplishment,” *Gibbssonian*, January 1930, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>62</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “Expect Great Things,” *Gibbssonian*, March 1935, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>63</sup>Katharine Gibbs, “Expect Great Things,” *Gibbssonian*, May 1935, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>64</sup>Katharine Gibbs writing for *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1920, in “85 Years of Excellence: Gibbs through the Decades, 1911–1996,” box 4, folder 1, KGS-Brown.

<sup>65</sup>“Her Eternal Youth,” *New York Times*, July 2, 1922, 74.

education.”<sup>66</sup> Even college girls with degrees in chemistry faced these hardships. In 1939, a group of educators and employers concluded that the “average undistinguished girl chemist” was better off learning “auxiliary skills” like typing and shorthand.<sup>67</sup> Gibbs’s advertising capitalized on such stories. “Unwilling to devote more time to specialized training,” college education may have given women “a well-trained mind” but not a “sound business understanding.”<sup>68</sup> A 1941 advertisement presented the school as the “choice of thoughtful fathers anxious to see their daughters fortunately placed in the business world.”<sup>69</sup> As late as 1965, a school administrator touted the successes of a recent college graduate once she added “good, basic secretarial skill” to her résumé. The student herself proudly acknowledged that doors began to open to her because “of what I can DO.”<sup>70</sup>

### “The Right Kind of School”: Status and Class Consciousness

The secret to Gibbs’s success was her determination to distinguish her schools from other institutions offering business, stenographic, or “secretarial” training. Various factors may have led Katharine to craft the successful formula she did. Perhaps it was her own education at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, or what she was able to glean from her limited time at Simmons College, which combined training in secretarial studies with liberal arts. Perhaps it was the experience of her sister, Mary, who appears to have recognized the dubious quality and character of many of the commercial schools with which the sisters would have to compete. Certainly her class background played a role, as did the leisured, genteel world in which she had been raised and in which she lived her entire adult life. She seems to have been a master at exploiting the class divisions and ethnic prejudices that riddled all layers of American society through the middle years of the twentieth century.

Gibbs sold status consciousness along with gender-based vocational training. She presented her schools as places of culture and refinement for women of culture and refinement. This appeal to status consciousness was heightened in the 1930s, when the Gibbs coat of arms began to be used in advertising, admissions, and other promotional materials. The crest, granted in England to Sir Henry Gibbs of Warwickshire by the Herald’s College in 1619, graced the stationery

<sup>66</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 39.

<sup>67</sup>“Sidelines Stressed for Girl Chemists,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1939, 25.

<sup>68</sup>Gibbs, “Expect Great Things,” May 1935.

<sup>69</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 40.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.



of the school and adorned yearbooks, literary magazines, and other items for decades.<sup>71</sup>

In so doing, Gibbs capitalized on the class biases of American society, especially in the field of clerical work. As historians have demonstrated, women office workers were segmented according to educational levels, class origins, and racial background.<sup>72</sup> Although they rarely said so explicitly, office employers before 1930 searched for native-born, white workers from English-speaking homes. There was systematic employment discrimination against African Americans.<sup>73</sup> The stratification of the field was apparent early on. In 1892, S. S. Packard, president of the fledgling Business Education Association, linked the shortcomings of mass market commercial schools to the types of students they attracted:

It is very apt to be the case that persons who apply for instruction in our shorthand schools are girls that have very little culture, who do not live in the best homes, who have not been used to the best society. They come to us for the purpose of getting something with which to earn a living. How are you going to tell a girl to comb her hair, who is going to tell her that she is uncomely, uncleanly, that even the odor of her person and garments are not pleasant, that persons do not like to sit at the same table with her? Shall we throw these girls out, or shall we take them and do a little for them?<sup>74</sup>

Mary Ryan would agree with this assessment. When she attended business school in Providence, she was upset by the “rough and tumble clientele” the school attracted and she could never be sure of “sitting next to a lady.”<sup>75</sup> The Gibbs experience promised to be different. An early advertisement was blunt in making its appeal: “The school is especially adapted to meet the needs of those to whom attendance at a large commercial school would be distasteful.”<sup>76</sup> Marketing materials made much of the fact that “only young women of personality and ability”<sup>77</sup> and “background and intelligence”<sup>78</sup> would be selected for

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<sup>71</sup>The Gibbs coat of arms graced the stationery of the school and was highlighted in publications and other promotional pieces for decades. See, for example, the promotional piece, “Welcome to Katharine Gibbs,” 1986 and the *Gibbsonian*, 1985, KGS-RH; yearbooks emblazoned with the school crest, boxes 1 and 2, KGS-Brown; and anniversary panels documenting the history of the school, box 4, KGS-Brown.

<sup>72</sup>For an example of these arguments see DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor*, and Fine, *The Souls of the Skyscraper*, esp. chaps. 5–6.

<sup>73</sup>Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 294–304.

<sup>74</sup>Weiss, “Educating for Clerical Work,” 414.

<sup>75</sup>85th Anniversary Alumni Primer, box 4, folder 4, KGS-Brown.

<sup>76</sup>Doherty, *Katharine Gibbs & Her School*, 21.

<sup>77</sup>Katharine Gibbs School ad, *New York Times*, June 20, 1937, 128.

<sup>78</sup>KGS Catalog 1937, KGS-RH.

Katharine Gibbs training. According to catalogs, “dignity and good taste” were the “essential attributes of the Katharine Gibbs student.” Applicants were promised that the student body was carefully selected “for its contribution to the atmosphere of the school,” and parents were assured that students “were carefully selected from the best families.”<sup>79</sup> According to admissions materials, schools were designed to appeal to “discriminating” young women, and careful selection standards ensured that women would have the “opportunity for congenial and stimulating companionship ... with girls of common interests, individual initiative, and fine cultural background.”<sup>80</sup> In stark contrast to the marketing materials of postsecondary institutions today, the homogeneity of the Gibbs student body was considered a strength, not a weakness. Soon after it opened in 1950, three students at the Montclair school wrote glowingly about their experiences, highlighting the “marked feeling of unity and comradeship among the girls. We have much more in common than if we were in a more diversified type of school.”<sup>81</sup>

Women were drawn to the school because of the aura of exclusivity it created and engendered in its graduates. Students were told that they were women of “poise, confidence, and bearing,” qualities that would always mark them in any situation as women “of special distinction.” A Gibbs education, it was promised, conferred on young women “prestige and high standing.” Gibbs graduates, it was claimed, have “a certain distinction of bearing that sets them apart.”<sup>82</sup> A New Jersey resident who graduated from the Boston School in 1921 admitted that such messaging is what drew her to Gibbs. Despite not wanting to sound “snobbish,” she told a newspaper reporter that she was “proud” to have gone to Katharine Gibbs.<sup>83</sup> Decades later, another graduate responded to the same label. “I know I’ve become a snob, but this place teaches you that you’re the best.”<sup>84</sup>

The most prestigious women’s colleges made connections with the “genteel” Katharine Gibbs School, and marketing materials highlighted the fact that graduates of the nation’s best women’s colleges—

<sup>79</sup>Richard McMullan, “A School Grows in Boston.”

<sup>80</sup>KGS Catalog 1939–1940, 25, box 4, KGS-Brown; and *The Platen* (year book of the New York school), 1938, 9, box 1, KGS-Brown.

<sup>81</sup>Joan Cook, Mary Cronin, and Comer Fisk, “The New School,” *Gibbsonian*, Spring 1951, KGS-RH.

<sup>82</sup>These sentiments were repeated in school publications. See, for example, KGS Catalog 1970–71, 7 and KGS Catalog 1968–1969, 72, KGS-RH.

<sup>83</sup>Carmen Juri, “At Age 96, Gibbs Alum Is from the Old School,” News clipping from *The Star Ledger* (Newark, N.J.) KGS-RH.

<sup>84</sup>Melinda Beck, “Katie Gibbs: Seventy-One and Still Typing Strong,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 1982, box 5, folder 47, KGS-Brown.

Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Skidmore, Wellesley, Smith, and Bryn Mawr—all chose to attend Gibbs en route to a career.<sup>85</sup> Because Gibbs had established her three schools in cities that housed Ivy League universities—Brown in Providence, Harvard in Boston, and Columbia in New York—students were told they would have the chance to mingle in the social world of the academic elite. Planned social and cultural activities, such as teas, receptions, coffee hours, ski trips, alumnae champagne parties, and formal dances at the best hotels were regular features of institutional life. Gibbs graduates were prominently featured in literally thousands of debutante, engagement, and wedding announcements in the *New York Times* social pages, and the school developed a reputation as a school for the daughters of the rich. In the words of one graduate, “We always heard it was a WASP finishing school.”<sup>86</sup>

This was perhaps the best-kept secret of the carefully manufactured Gibbs persona. Katharine Gibbs was an Irish Catholic, baptized Catherine Mary Ryan. Yet at some point early in her life, certainly by the time of her high school graduation, she began to refer to herself as “Katharine.”<sup>87</sup> Although a later convert to Catholicism, her husband, William, was a Protestant, and Gibbs was an English Protestant name. Status consciousness may have been the reason she decided to use the name “Gibbs” to promote her school in the ethnically and socially conscious world of Providence and the Boston environs.

Class-based marketing was used in other ways. Early on, Gibbs moved her young institution from its original location on Westminster Street in Providence to Churchill House on Angell Street, “the address” in the city at the time, where all the “coming out” parties and dancing classes were held. Other locations were selected with the same care. The Boston school was housed in a number of mansions in prestigious Beacon Hill and Back Bay, including the old Sears mansion in which Henry Cabot Lodge married Emily Sears. The New York school occupied several sites on Park Avenue, ultimately moving into the new Pan Am Building (now the MetLife Building). When Gordon Gibbs opened the first suburban school in 1950, the location was also carefully chosen. A sophisticated residential center for people working in New York City, Montclair, NJ, was geographically well situated near other wealthy towns in the northern New Jersey suburbs. The school building was an 1877 mansion that

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<sup>85</sup> See Gibbs publications, especially colleges and private schools represented in the KGS Catalog 1922–23, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown; and Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 328.

<sup>86a</sup> “Jobs Exceed Students at Secretarial Finishing School,” 66.

<sup>87</sup> Doherty, *Katharine Gibbs & Her School*, 9.

boasted a full-fledged ballroom. It was located in “a gracious suburban setting” blocks off the main business district in a quiet neighborhood of elegant homes.<sup>88</sup>

The atmosphere, furnishings, and decor of the schools were similarly tasteful and refined, with an atmosphere regularly described as “traditional, staid, gracious and prim.” Catalogs proudly noted that attention to ambience was deliberate, asserting that “atmosphere and environment are essential factors in the education of young women.” Classrooms and lounges were described as “comfortable, attractive, and inviting.” Bouquets of fresh flowers adorned the common areas, and hallways were full of antiques or replicas of antiques. The use of sterling silver tea services, trays, and flatware lent an aura of graciousness and exclusivity to various school functions. Prominently displayed in all locations were oil portraits of Katharine Gibbs created by Wilbur Fiske Noyes, a painter of major society figures and business leaders.<sup>89</sup>

Katharine Gibbs is also credited with inaugurating the nation’s first boarding schools for secretarial training, promising women “happy away-at-school experiences with thoughtful preparation for secretarial careers.”<sup>90</sup> This was not only a clever marketing tactic but also a way to boost revenue, for resident students increased revenue threefold. In Boston, the school acquired a series of mansions in prestigious Back Bay, where student rooms were furnished “in keeping with the homes from which the school attracts its enrollment.”<sup>91</sup> Students at the New York school lived at the Barbizon Hotel, the famous Upper East Side institution that for decades was home to aspiring actresses and celebrities. Promotional literature affectionately described the “Barb” as a “delightful” residence where Gibbs students dined privately and could enjoy such facilities as a pool, gym, library and solarium.<sup>92</sup>

Gibbs students also had access to a “study abroad” program, another marketing strategy. For a few years prior to the onset of World War II, the school leased the Rosedon mansion across from

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<sup>88</sup>All quotations referring to school facilities are from KGS catalogs. Until the last years of Gibbs, KGS catalogs regularly devoted a section to a detailed description of the ambience of each school. See, for example, KGS Catalog 1942, 17; KGS Catalog 1949–1950, 31–47, KGS-RH. A separate brochure, *The Katharine Gibbs Idea*, also described the facilities at each school, KGS-RH.

<sup>89</sup>Artifacts from the Gibbs schools, including silver trays, tea sets, punch bowls, and the oil paintings of Mrs. Gibbs are housed in box map case, drawer 14; box 8, box 10, box 12, and box 13XXX, KGS-Brown.

<sup>90</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 40.

<sup>91</sup>KGS Catalog 1942, 17, KGS-RH

<sup>92</sup>KGS Catalog 1949, 39–40, KGS-RH.

the famous Princess Hotel in Hamilton, Bermuda. Traveling to Bermuda on “the finest liners,” the girls continued their secretarial classes at Rosedon for a five-week winter session. They enjoyed meals and recreational activities at the Princess and a schedule that included “teas, picnics, and sightseeing trips.” A *New York Times* piece announcing the Bermuda program explained it best: “The students are young women from 18 to 22, most of them daughters of wealthy families.”<sup>93</sup>

### “The Right Kind of School”: Dress for Success

The curriculum at Gibbs gave detailed attention to deportment, behavior, manners, and standards of grooming. Such standards, in place for decades, reinforced its gender-based identity. Here again, Katharine Gibbs drew lessons from the commercial schools with which she initially had to compete. Because of their relatively low tuition and appeal to a mass market, behavioral regulations were, by necessity, a common feature of early commercial schools. As one institution explained, “gentlemanly deportment’ ... is capital in trade and must be cultivated here.” Improperities such as “whispering, laughing, or spitting” were frowned upon.<sup>94</sup>

When women moved into clerical work in ever-larger numbers at the turn of the century, “ladylike deportment” became a matter of great concern. Because many questions arose as to the proper display of the female body in an office setting, advice books began to appear as early as 1916. The “new woman” of the period needed to strike a delicate balance somewhere between spinster and seductress, schoolmarm and temptress. In 1924, Eleanor Gilbert, author of *The Ambitious Woman in Business*, quoted one employer who advised that the secretary “must look like a lady. I don’t want her painted, rouged, perfumed to such an extent that it will be an offense to me and my patients.”<sup>95</sup> Professional literature reflected the attitudes of the time. In 1931, one employment agency advised, “If her blouse is not absolutely fresh her chances are lessened. We take it as an indication of other slipshod qualities.”<sup>96</sup> Others expressed similar sentiments. An attractive appearance reflected “an interested, fastidious, alert, and well-ordered mind. ... Any girl beginning her career, or any woman well in one, would do well to keep this fact always in mind. For given two

<sup>93</sup>“Gibbs School in Bermuda,” *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1935, 5.

<sup>94</sup>Weiss, “Educating for Clerical Work,” 409.

<sup>95</sup>Eleanor Gilbert, *The Ambitious Woman in Business* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1916), 147–48; and Davies, *A Woman’s Place is at the Typewriter*, 152–53.

<sup>96</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 54.

candidates, the prize invariably goes to the girl who looks like a winner.”<sup>97</sup> The National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs agreed. “Personal adequacy ... dress, grooming, posture, carriage, voice, diction, business etiquette [and] poise” were all critical to the secretary’s success.<sup>98</sup>

The Gibbs curriculum addressed these issues head on. According to promotional literature, the “executive secretaries” professionally trained by Gibbs were marked by certain personal qualities: “appearance, conduct, confidence, disposition, health, intelligence, and personality.”<sup>99</sup> A feature of the first-year program was the Personal Assets course, designed to develop personality and self-reliance. Lectures were given on health, hygiene, nutrition, exercise, skin care, and, most important, “on the problems of dress, such as color, fashion trends, and suitability.”<sup>100</sup>

Long before “dress for success” became a standard in the business world, Gibbs materials advised students that “Your wardrobe reflects not only your personality but also your social awareness, your good judgment, and your sense of the appropriate.”<sup>101</sup> Strict dress codes were in force for decades, and detailed booklets outlining these standards continued to be published into the 1990s. “Do’s” and “Don’ts” were clearly organized by category of feminine apparel. Dress was expected to conform to the “accepted standards of better business offices,” and neatness and good grooming were essential at all times. No student was allowed to appear in public without stockings, and students needed to keep an extra pair with them at all times should an unsightly “run” or tear appear. In the years when such things mattered, seams in stockings had to run perfectly straight. When sleeveless dresses and blouses were worn, “care” had to be taken “to avoid any suggestion of bareness.” Students were required to wear white gloves to and from school and while outside buildings during lunch hours. Hats were required to be worn, and shoes were to have at least a one-inch heel. Hair needed to frame the face, not “fall into it.” Until the late 1920s, makeup was not allowed to be worn. Perfume, initially verboten, came to be allowed if “only the lightest of scents” were used.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 53–54.

<sup>99</sup> “The Executive Secretary: Her Qualifications and Requirements,” KGS-RH.

<sup>100</sup> For a description of the Personal Assets course, see KGS Catalog 1939–1940, 34–35, KGS-Brown; KGS Catalog, 1942, 34, KGS-RH; and KGS Catalog, 1949–1950, 18, KGS-RH.

<sup>101</sup> “Wardrobe ABC’s for Gibbs Girls,” KGS-RH.

Nails were to be manicured and well trimmed so that students could strike the keys on the typewriter properly.<sup>102</sup>

Girls received instruction in how to drink tea, which utensils to use, how to set a table, and how to be a proper hostess. They learned “the right way to walk, to talk, to excuse themselves and also to do their job with pride.”<sup>103</sup> Students could be dismissed for “nonconformity with the general spirit and regulations of the school” or for conduct that reflected “unfavorably upon the school or its students.”<sup>104</sup>

### “The Right Kind of School”: Secretarial Training for Educated Women

Gibbs was also able to exploit the very real stratifications that came to exist within the clerical field itself. Clerical workers may have been “the elite of working class women,” clearly distinguishable from domestic servants or factory girls, but even within the clerical profession a clear pecking order evolved. Writing in 1917, office management expert William Leffingwell complained about girls “from the wrong background” who attempted to use typing as an entrée to stenographic or secretarial work. “To be a good stenographer,” he wrote, “requires a much higher grade of education [than] many of them possess. The stenographer must be able not only to run a typewriter but also to spell and use the English language better, as a rule, than her employer ... she must have tact and diplomacy.”<sup>105</sup> Over time, a “secretary” came to be distinguished from those who had discrete office skills alone. A 1924 survey by the Carnegie Institute of Technology further outlined these differences. While stenographers were “diligent, faithful human machines,” secretaries were distinguished by “their initiative, responsibility, interest in work, and executive ability.”<sup>106</sup> In the words of another business professional, “A stenographer ... is paid to do; a secretary is paid to think.”<sup>107</sup>

A redefinition of the term *secretary* was at the center of Gibbs’s plan to market commercial education for women. It may be argued that her schools were the first to train women to be *secretaries* rather than typists,

<sup>102</sup> *The Executive Secretary: Her Qualifications and Requirements; Student Dress and Grooming Codes*, box 4, folder 1; box 5, folder 44; and box 5, folders 10, 11, 12, and 13, KGS-Brown.

<sup>103</sup> Juri, “At Age 96, Gibbs Alum Is from the Old School.”

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, KGS Catalog 1949, 56; and KGS Catalog 1965–1967, 50, KGS-RH.

<sup>105</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 285.

<sup>106</sup> Davies, *A Woman’s Place is at the Typewriter*, 130.

<sup>107</sup> Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 4.

stenographers, or file clerks. Challenging the argument that secretarial positions were “stenographic and mechanical” alone, she insisted there was a “great and unsatisfied demand for secretaries of a high type.” She saw the professional secretary as a broadly educated individual with unparalleled proficiency in the English language and the ability to think abstractly. Graced with middle-class manners and character traits—poise, loyalty, good judgment, initiative, and integrity—she would have the opportunity to advance rapidly in “business, professional and journalistic fields.”<sup>108</sup>

Gibbs was never an intellectual, but it may be argued that her ideas fit squarely within a decades-long debate that raged among educators as vocational training became firmly entrenched in the public high school curriculum. Was the purpose of education purely utilitarian, or should it foster intellectual and moral growth? Was it possible to “harmonize” academic and practical subjects?<sup>109</sup> This is what Gibbs proposed to do. For Gibbs, becoming a secretary implied mastering an expanded curriculum that included not only the usual subjects of typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, business English, and office practice (filing, indexing, spelling) but also areas rarely explored by women—business law, economics, personal finance, banking, and investments. The capstone of this curriculum was a collection of courses that might best be labeled as “cultural arts.” These included traditional subjects like history, literature, government, fine arts, and theatre appreciation. According to Gibbs, this combination of technical skills and the liberal arts was essential because progress in a career was determined not only by training but by “those inner qualities of mind and character that denote the cultured person.”<sup>110</sup> Future advancement in a career would be predicated on “familiarity with the essentials of good literature, knowledge of our civilization’s historical background, comprehension of political and economic principles, and appreciative acquaintance with the fine arts.”<sup>111</sup> This was the program she designed for her schools. It was tightly structured into one- and two-year courses of study, with the preferred program always the two-year route.

Faculty were also chosen with great care, frequently drawn from surrounding colleges in Providence, Boston, and New York. Medical

<sup>108</sup> Katharine Gibbs, foreword to *Katharine Gibbs Handbook of Business English* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), vii, box 3, KGS-Brown; Katharine Gibbs, *The Best Recommendation*, June 1930, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown; and KGS Catalog 1968–1969, KGS-RH.

<sup>109</sup> Kliebard, *Schooled to Work*, 233–34.

<sup>110</sup> KGS Catalog 1942, 8, KGS-RH.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*



doctors, lawyers, and docents from local art museums joined a highly credentialed staff, many with MBA, MA, and PhD degrees. Among the celebrated lecturers associated with the school were Lillian M. Gilbreth, the famed industrial psychologist and efficiency expert, and esteemed Columbia University professors Mark Van Doren and James P. Shenton, who taught literature and history, respectively.<sup>112</sup>

In creating this program, Gibbs's clear intention was to distinguish her school from its many competitors, most of which offered only six- to eight-week stenography or typing courses, had no admission requirements, and imposed limited proficiency standards. The unsavory reputation of early commercial schools is well documented. "The amount of fraud and the variety of crookedness in the teaching of shorthand ... in Boston is amazingly large," noted the author of an 1890 letter to the *Phonographic Journal*.<sup>113</sup> An 1891 report in the *Chicago Herald* echoed these same sentiments: "Young girls with little or no education to fit them for any employment demanding discretion, knowledge of English grammar or simple mathematics, have been crowding by the thousands into cheap so-called typewriting and stenographic 'colleges,' and after a few months crude endeavor are let loose upon the business world believing that they can take the place of experience, education, and responsibility."<sup>114</sup> A 1916 ad for the New York City School of Filing lured applicants with a promise that "supervisory jobs" might await those who had completed its four-week program.<sup>115</sup> "Painful disappointment," one exposé concluded, has been the lot of many.<sup>116</sup>

Reports about the limitations of commercial schools continued for decades. In 1916, author Eleanor Gilbert complained about "so-called" business schools that claimed to train students in both stenography and typing in thirty days, then "foisted" their graduates on a "luckless business office."<sup>117</sup> The authors of *The Girl and the Job* (1919) offered a "word of warning" to young girls about the shady practices of some less-than-reliable business schools "sending representatives to the homes of graduates to solicit pupils." They also described a questionable system by which recent graduates were placed into jobs

<sup>112</sup>Richard D. McMullan, "Fifty Years and Only the Beginning," *Gibbsian*, 1968, 6, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown; and representative faculty listings in KGS Catalog 1949–1950, KGS-RH.

<sup>113</sup>Quoted in Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 38

<sup>114</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 38; and Weiss, "Educating for Clerical Work," 414.

<sup>115</sup>Kessler-Harris, *Out To Work*, 175.

<sup>116</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 38.

<sup>117</sup>Gilbert, *The Ambitious Woman in Business*, 247.

for a brief period and then, without warning or rationale, replaced after a few months “by a girl just graduated, who, too, had been promised a position by the school.”<sup>118</sup> The expansion of commercial courses in public high schools throughout the first half of the twentieth century also created fierce competition for secretarial positions. In the words of one historian, the proliferation of such courses “meant that every literate person became a potential clerk.”<sup>119</sup> As the demand for office help grew during World War II, there was a perceptible gap in quality between the quickly trained and the well trained. An article in *Independent Woman*, the journal of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, drew attention to these differences, advising those wanting to be secretaries that it was very important to attend the “right kind of school.”<sup>120</sup>

From early on, therefore, Katharine Gibbs was determined that her school be considered the “right kind of school.” Claiming she would admit only a particular type of girl—one “who has the incentive and the serious purpose required for secretarial work”—she described her schools as providing “secretarial training for educated women.”<sup>121</sup> By this she meant that she would accept only high school graduates, leaving out the ill-prepared, immigrants, and those unable to afford her programs.

The Katharine Gibbs School came to be known for its rigorous curriculum, high standards, and “no nonsense ambience.”<sup>122</sup> “Excellence in all you do” was the school motto. In a frequently reprinted essay, Katharine Gibbs advised her students about “The Importance of Being First,” even in the smallest tasks.<sup>123</sup> Faculty remembered her as a woman who “instinctively recoiled from mediocrity.”<sup>124</sup> Gordon Gibbs explained that his mother “set her standards high, demanding the best in equipment, the best in instructors, and the best in students.”<sup>125</sup> In the words of one student, “There was surely something about the whole atmosphere of the ... school that made me want to put my best foot forward.”<sup>126</sup> For decades, the Gibbs schools were known as places that graduated highly skilled secretaries.

<sup>118</sup>Helen Christene Hoerle and Florence B. Saltzberg, *The Girl and the Job* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), 13.

<sup>119</sup>Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 286.

<sup>120</sup>Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 38.

<sup>121</sup>Display ad, *New York Times*, July 28, 1918, 17; and KGS Catalog, 1965–1967, 5.

<sup>122</sup>“Jobs Exceed Students at Secretarial Finishing School,” 66.

<sup>123</sup>*Gibsonian*, May 1932, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>124</sup>Erwin H. Schell, “In Appreciation of Mrs. Katharine M. Gibbs,” *Gibsonian*, 1934, box 5, folder 44, KGS-Brown.

<sup>125</sup>Gordon Gibbs, *The Platen*, 1938, 9, box 1, KGS-Brown.

<sup>126</sup>Cook, Cronin, and Fisk, “The New School.”

Placement services were provided to all graduates, with placement rates of 96 to 98 percent. For decades, requests for Gibbs graduates outstripped supply.<sup>127</sup>

Until the era of corporate takeovers in the 1970s, the curriculum was standardized, regardless of location. The average workload was fifty hours per week, twenty-five in class and twenty-five of homework. Students were required to take spelling tests drawn from lists of frequently misspelled words and, until the 1990s, high-speed typing examinations were a hallmark of Gibbs training.<sup>128</sup> A single erasure or punctuation change in a letter could elicit a failing grade.<sup>129</sup> The constant drilling and stringent testing supported Gibbs's definition of what a secretary was meant to be. Their purely technical skills should be so automatic that their minds would be "free to cope with the broader aspects of their jobs."<sup>130</sup> A 1923 graduate who had previously attended college proudly recalled that she had never worked as hard during her college years as she had in this "business school for ladies."<sup>131</sup> Another put it even more simply: "This was no joy ride."<sup>132</sup>

### Roots of Decline: New Visions for Women

Following the departure of the Gibbs family from leadership in 1968, the Katharine Gibbs School was led by a series of different corporate owners. Despite various attempts at rebranding and expansion into new geographic markets, the institution closed all branches in 2011, exactly one hundred years after its initial founding. The decline of the Gibbs brand may be traced directly to the societal upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when feminists used the secretary as the classic symbol of the exploited and underemployed woman. As the career secretary came to be scorned as the star of the "pink-collar ghetto," the Gibbs brand became an unfortunate victim of its own success at gender-based vocational training and niche marketing. America's most famous secretarial school could not withstand modern feminism's ideological assault on sex stereotyping in the workplace. With increasing numbers of young women encouraged to raise their

<sup>127</sup> See Gibbs publications for alumni placement records: *Gibbs Girls at Work*, *Gibbs Graduates on the Job*, box 4, box 5, folder 45, KGS-Brown.

<sup>128</sup> *The Platen*, 1938, 12, box 1, KGS-Brown. Sample textbooks may be found in box 3, KGS-Brown.

<sup>129</sup> Carol Hymowitz, "Purple Eye Shadow, She Isn't from Gibbs," *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 1984, 1.

<sup>130</sup> "Katie Gibbs Grads Are Secretarial Elite," 43–44.

<sup>131</sup> *Gibbsonian*, 1963, KGS-RH.

<sup>132</sup> "Katie Gibbs' Grads Are Secretarial Elite," 43–44.

expectations and enter law, medical, or professional school, training in secretarial skills seemed strangely at odds with the times. Gloria Steinem seemed to point a pistol at the very heart of the Gibbs empire with her succinct barb at the 1971 Smith College commencement: “What if an entire generation of women refused to learn how to type?”<sup>133</sup>

As the best-known secretarial school in the nation, the Katharine Gibbs School became a favorite feminist target. The popular press raised questions about the school’s mission and message. A 1974 article chastised the school, claiming that despite women’s liberation Katharine Gibbs “continues to teach a program that has shown only minute change since the first school opened in 1911.”<sup>134</sup> In 1977, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* dismissed the school as a place that “develops girls to serve their masters.”<sup>135</sup> According to the *Wall Street Journal*, “women’s liberation” was gaining in popularity, but the schools Katharine Gibbs operated endured as “bastions of submissive femininity.”<sup>136</sup> *Ms.* magazine perhaps put it best when, in 1981, it bluntly asked if Katharine Gibbs, “a secretarial school,” could “hold its own in the MBA market.”<sup>137</sup> By the early 1980s, the well-bred and genteel women who had long been the school’s target market had a much larger field of professional opportunities open to them, and such women were clearly not receptive to the message that the position of executive secretary could be a stepping stone to management. In 1979, a marketing executive for Gibbs admitted that many of the women who may once have gone to Gibbs after college were now going directly to law school.<sup>138</sup>

Katharine Gibbs founded an institution that met the needs and aspirations of women at a particular time in American history. *Tenax propositi* (“Hold fast to your purpose”) was the Gibbs family motto.<sup>139</sup> The very success of the school in cementing that identity made it difficult to adapt as society changed around it. Its iconic identity as a secretarial school for women made it virtually impossible to shed one

<sup>133</sup> Steinem quoted in Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 194.

<sup>134</sup> Jean Perry, “You’ve Come a Long Way Katie Gibbs,” *New York Daily News*, May 21, 1974, 38.

<sup>135</sup> “Here’s a School that Develops Girls to Serve Their Masters,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 21, 1977, 23.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Susan McHenry, “‘Katie Gibbs’: Can a Secretarial School Hold Its Own in the MBA Market?” *Ms.* 10 no. 4 (Dec. 1981), 56–60, 76.

<sup>138</sup> Peril, *Swimming in the Steno Pool*, 207.

<sup>139</sup> The motto appeared often in school publications. See, for example, the back cover of the *Gibsonian*, 1985; and “Welcome to Katharine Gibbs,” promotional piece, 1986, KGS-RH.

identity and take on a new one, despite the various struggles of its corporate owners to do so. The school had outlived its purpose, a vestige of a different America that held a different vision of opportunity and fulfillment for women. As equality of opportunity became the watchword of 1960s America, women's education for the workplace was expected to be no different from that of men's.

## **Conclusion**

The story of the Katharine Gibbs School deserves our attention for several reasons. On the most basic level, it challenges us to explore more deeply the role that proprietary schools have played in the American educational landscape. It also illuminates a particular period in American history. As larger numbers of women entered the workforce in the opening decades of the twentieth century, vocational training became an increasingly important component of women's education, and education served as a critical dividing line separating one group of aspiring female workers from others. This was especially true in the attractive and expanding field of clerical work, where both public high schools and private commercial institutions competed for students. Promoting the career secretary as a desirable and prestigious career path for women, Katharine Gibbs created a distinctive class- and gender-bound institution that moved women into economically sustaining, rewarding, and potentially upwardly mobile positions at a time when educated women had few opportunities for economic livelihood. Well aware from her own life experiences of the precarious nature of female dependency, Gibbs spoke to the needs of women like herself—genteel, cultured, and conventional—anxious to hold on to and secure their future financial stability. The school thrived until exclusivity was no longer fashionable or necessary to establish a credential for secretarial work. The feminist movement of the 1960s undermined, if not ridiculed, the image of the career secretary. As feminists challenged American women to raise their expectations and seek equality with men in the workplace, the Gibbs brand collapsed, unable to shed the persona it had so carefully and shrewdly designed for itself.