

New Jersey's Lost Infidel: The Life and Works of Tamar Davis, 1821-1866**By Paulie Wegner****DOI: 10.14713/njs.v12i1.356**

*“‘Tis vain, all vein-he’s there arraigned
Because he dared to think,
And speak the thought his mind contained,
Nor would from peril shrink.”¹*

The newspapers were not kind following Tamar Davis’s arrest for counterfeiting in 1860. Accounts reported that the author, whom editors printed was “remunerated beyond her claims by publishers in New York and Boston,” had altered one-dollar notes by adding a zero.² Yet each printed account of the arrest included different barbs about who Davis was. The *Camden Democrat* attested that her arrest was the result of “insanity, induced by spiritualism.”³ Meanwhile, the *Massachusetts Weekly Spy* simply called her a “pretender to literature.”⁴ It seems strange for the editors, many of whom simultaneously praised Davis as a notable literary woman, to react so violently toward her at the first glimpse of trouble. However, for a self-described “infidel,” who newspapers argued “generally espoused the contrary side of all political opinions,” the indignation of newspaper editors must have been not only expected, but in fact the greatest reward.⁵ Through thorough examination of the fiery writings of Tamar Davis, a glimpse of a voice not frequently heard in American history can be uncovered. It is an opportunity to examine not only important

¹ Tamar Davis, “Lines in Memory: Of the Conviction and Imprisonment of Abner Kneeland, for Blasphemy, by a Boston Judge and Jury, in 1838,” *Boston Investigator*, December 18, 1861, 2.

² “Miscellaneous,” *Massachusetts Weekly Spy*, December 26, 1860.

³ *Camden Democrat*, December 15, 1860, 2.

⁴ “Miscellaneous,” *Massachusetts Weekly Spy*, December 26, 1860.

⁵ “Personal,” *Massachusetts Weekly Spy*, December 26, 1860.

topics such as Freethought, anti-liquor laws, and the impact of slavery through the lens of a woman in antebellum and Civil War-era New Jersey, but the life of one of the state's most unique writers.

Tamar Ayars was born on January 23, 1821, to Auley (December 16, 1790-March 19, 1853) and Phebe Ayars (December 2, 1796-June 21, 1852) in Salem County, New Jersey, where she would spend much of her life. Both of her parents were lineal descendants of Robert Ayars, one of the earliest European settlers in West Jersey.⁶ Ayars, born in England around 1650, emigrated to the United States in 1664 and settled in New England. When Stephen and Anne Mumford united with five dissident members of the First Baptist Church of Rhode Island in Newport to form the Rhode Island Seventh Day Baptist Church on January 3, 1672, Ayars would be among those that would eventually convert.⁷ The core tenets of the new church required that Baptists observe the Sabbath, or Saturday, as a holy day to God. The Ayars's family biography, published in 1918, mentions that it was perhaps through the Mumfords themselves that Robert and his family would be converted as he "came to America at or about the same time [Mumford] did, and with whom he had business relations, he and his wife Ester uniting with them in making an indenture to Wm. Phillips, Kt., of Boston in 1687."⁸ In 1684 or 1685, Ayars and his family moved to the new Quaker settlement of West Jersey and settled near the south side of the Cohansey River on eight hundred acres in what is now known as Shrewsbury Neck. He would later purchase 2,200 acres covering part of the present site of Shiloh, New Jersey. Frank D. Andrews, the compiler of the family biography wrote, "We may believe he was a consistent member and leader in the

⁶ Although they are distantly related, Phebe and Auley both counted Robert Ayars as their ancestor. Phebe was a sixth-generation descendant from the line of Robert's first-born son Isaac, while Auley was a fifth-generation descendant coming from the line of Robert's seventh child, Caleb.

⁷ Stephen and Anne Mumford were members of the Baptist Church of Tewkesbury and migrated to Rhode Island likely due to the persecution enacted by Charles II against the Baptists, Puritans, and other Protestants. See, Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of the Seventh Day Baptists* (Nashville, Broadman Press, 1992), 127-128.

⁸ Frank D. Andrews, *Robert Ayars and His Descendants* (Vineland: Frank D. Andrews, 1918), 5.

[Sabbatarian] sect he embraced; faithful in the performance of duty, reverent, thoughtful, devoted to his family and his God.”⁹

The founding document from 1811 for the Marlboro Seventh Day Baptist Church in Bridgeton, New Jersey, sported among the signatures of the parishioners that of Phebe, as well as her sister, also named Tamar Ayars, who died on August 8, 1832.¹⁰ The founding document declared a separation from the Shiloh church necessary “for the accommodation of our brethren and the glory of God if our hearts deceive us not,” but more practically because they wanted a church closer to Upper Alloways Creek Township.¹¹ Although the Marlboro records do not differentiate between Phebe’s sister and daughter, Tamar might appear only once in the entry for June 7, 1829, in which it declares the sisters, “Patience Ayars, Tamar Ayars, and Eunice Moore agreed to sweep and sand the floor every two weeks for a year of free gratis.”¹² One surprising name omitted from the church’s founding document was Tamar’s father, Auley, whose disappearance from the church records might be due to remaining with the Shiloh church or, perhaps, from having not married Phebe yet. Though Tamar Davis wrote little about her early life experiences and family, it is apparent that she was raised in a uniquely religious and familial location. Both the Shiloh and Marlboro church records feature many descendants of Robert Ayars, which formed a tight-knit community due to their communal denominational beliefs.

On November 21, 1840, when Tamar was 19 years old, she married Richard Bond Davis, who was prominent farmer in the area.¹³ Although early copies of the paper are scarce, she

⁹ Andrews, *Robert Ayars and His Descendants*, 6.

¹⁰ Although few records exist of Tamar Davis writing about her early life, a reasonable assumption can be made that Tamar was named after her aunt. See, Andrews, *Robert Ayars and His Descendants*, 33.

¹¹ *Historic Records of the Marlboro Church: Read at the Celebration of Its One Hundredth Anniversary, May 1911*, (Marlboro: Marlboro Seventh Day Baptist Church, 1911), 3.

¹² *Historic Records of the Marlboro Church*, 14.

¹³ Richard B. Davis, born November 15, 1814, does not appear much in historic newspapers. He is listed as an executer occasionally in the *Bridgeton Chronicle*, but references to his profession are difficult to discern. See, H. Stanley Craig, *Cumberland County (New Jersey) Marriages*, (Merchantville: H. Stanley Craig, 132), 125.

evidently began writing for the local newspaper, called the *Bridgeton Chronicle*, but it would be through her first book published under her own name that Davis would begin to attract national attention.¹⁴ Her earliest known writing came in January of 1851 in a Sabbatarian newspaper, *The Sabbath Recorder*, discussing whether it was correct to state that man was still the image of God. Later that year, Davis published *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, which was highly promoted in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, *Daily Union*, and *Alexandria Gazette* newspapers. As what she calls “the pioneer in the field of [Sabbatarian Church] research,” Davis’s work was massive.¹⁵ It encompassed 255 pages of church history from across the world, including chapters on church activity located in Armenia, the Indian subcontinent, and Ethiopia. Interestingly, though her later work would be highly critical of all organized religion—especially the Sabbatarians—this volume is not only tame in her review of their history but even in some ways praises the work of the Seventh Day Baptist church.

Though little is known about Davis’s education, it is readily apparent that she had the makings of a historian.¹⁶ In the introduction to her book, Davis refers to writing only the facts, describing, “It has been my aim to collect, collate, and condense facts, as much as appeared consistent with perspicuity. I have not taken any new stand with regard to the Sabbath question.”¹⁷ Davis’s book, a mixture of oral history, church documents, and folktales, was clearly not meant to

¹⁴ The earliest writings of Tamar Davis in the *Bridgeton Chronicle* that were located come from 1852, though copies of the newspaper from 1851 were unable to be located. The earliest article taken from the *Chronicle*, titled “Genius,” appeared in the May 27, 1852, copy of *The Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*. See, Tamar Davis, “Genius,” *The Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, May 27, 1852, 1.

¹⁵ Tamar Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1851), X.

¹⁶ Later in Tamar’s life, she would write historical fiction for the *Bridgeton Chronicle* focusing on the local history of Salem and Cumberland County, such as *Money Digging on Tinden’s Island: A Tale of Local Interest* (1853), *Anna’s Trial* (1858-1859), and *The Legend of the Fortescue* (1859). The latter two stories came under the title “Tales of the Jersey Coast.”

¹⁷ The “Sabbath question” that Davis refers is the debate over whether the rest day observed in the bible ought to take place on Saturdays, as advocated by the Seventh Day Sabbatarians, or on Sunday, as advocated by most other protestant groups. See, Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, IX.

be solely theological, but more so a secular depiction of how the Sabbatarian sect had grown since inception. Surprisingly, though almost all of Davis's life and career as a religious skeptic has been forgotten since her death, her status as the original historian of the Sabbatarian church has remained as this work continues to be cited by religious scholars today.

Davis's church history can also be used to understand some details about her personal religious experiences because she wrote extensively about the Marlboro and Shiloh churches. She described the Sabbatarian churches of New Jersey as "large and efficient bodies [...] distinguished in early times, and when the denomination was in infant state, for wealth and respectability of character, and for pastors of eminent piety and worth."¹⁸ Of the four churches described in New Jersey, it is one located in Shiloh, Cumberland County, which receives the most attention from Davis, which makes sense when recognizing that it was the oldest church in that region, founded in-part with help from her ancestor, Robert Ayars, and that her family broke away from the church to the newer Marlboro Church, which only received a small mention.¹⁹ Davis, initially positive of their teaching, wrote that the pastors of the churches "however deficient they might appear in the graces of elegant diction, were distinguished for sound reasoning and plain sense. Their zeal was tempered with moderation; their piety with rationality."²⁰ However, she lamented the changing circumstances of preaching, where new pastors were "disposed to harp on opinions and debatable points." This new method of preaching and setting aside of plain edification, she surmised, would eventually lead to a "general dearth of religious feeling."²¹

In the book, Davis mentioned nonbelief only once, in the story of Reverend Joseph Maxson, of Newport, Rhode Island, who allegedly had a neighbor "notorious for infidel principles

¹⁸ Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, 166.

¹⁹ Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, 178.

²⁰ Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, 173.

²¹ Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, 174.

and unchristian conduct,” who would refuse to listen to the preaching of Maxson. As the neighbor was returning home one day, the story remarked that he found what appeared to be a dropped bible, with the verse, “’Twas for me, thy soul death tasted, seeking me, thy worn feet hastened; let such labor not be wasted” inscribed into the front cover. Davis wrote that he was so stricken by the words that he began to read the bible in hopes of finding the passage, which ultimately led to the poor nonbeliever being converted.²² The inclusion of the story is humorous, considering Davis’s later writings on nonbelief, but the exclusion of any rebuttal against the story shows that she was not yet committed to her later beliefs.

It is not exactly known what may have caused Davis, who so fervently wrote about the important work of the Sabbatarians, to change her opinion. Perhaps it was the death of her parents, Phebe in 1852 and Auley the following year, that either challenged her original upbringing or allowed her to freely express her thoughts without familial pressure. More likely, however, was the vitriol that her work, which highly praised the work of the church, aroused in the Sabbatarian church leaders.

On May 25, 1851, at a meeting of the Eastern Association of Sabbatarian Churches in Berlin, New York, I.D. Titsworth, a member of Shiloh’s church, rose to his feet just as the three-day event was drawing to a close to read aloud a proclamation that he had prepared. He stated,

“Whereas Mrs. Tamar Davis, of Shiloh, N.J., has recently written and published a book purporting to be a History of the Seventh-day Baptist denomination; which book contains various historical inaccuracies, and also a number of improper personal criticisms upon the talents and abilities of several of our ministers, one of which we regard as being an unjust and ridiculous assault upon Bro. Wm. M. Jones-therefore *Resolved*, That this Association

²² Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, 149-150.

deems said book unworthy of a place in the libraries of Seventh day Baptists, or others, as a history of our people.”²³

Of this assumed attack on the character of Jones, the truth is certain. Though Davis would demand Titsworth to point to her criticism, she did refer to the Jones as “a man of inferior abilities and attainments, and one disposed to meddle with subjects above his capacity or information.”²⁴ This attack by not only church leaders, but ones as local as Shiloh, left Davis stung by this assessment of her writing. She responded in a letter to *The Sabbath Recorder*, published on June 26, “A book teaching on every page that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God, is declared to be a worthless production.” She demanded that the paper, which had early published that her book was “a worthless production and not entitled to confidence,” give definitive reasons for “that unjust and illiberal criticism, and show from the book itself that it is a worthless production.”²⁵

To this, the editor of the paper replied that they did not own the book but had only the chance to see it when traveling up the North River in New York a few weeks before printing their concerns. In investigating the book, they claimed to have “soon saw [...] the marks of great haste in the preparation of the book [...], that we came to conclusion that it was not worthy of being received by the public as a reliable history of our denomination.” They finished their statement with a sharp rebuke of Davis’s criticism, writing that from this examination, “Hence [came] our criticism, of which the authoress so loudly complains.”²⁶ No further replies or articles were printed from Tamar Davis, though, as already mentioned, her work remains a widely cited history of the Sabbatarian churches.

²³ “Eastern Association,” *The Sabbath Recorder*, June 5, 1851, 202.

²⁴ Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, 142.

²⁵ Tamar Davis, “History of the Sabbatarian Churches,” *The Sabbath Recorder*, June 26, 1851, 6.

²⁶ The editor claimed to base his criticism of her information on the churches “with which we were intimately acquainted are noticed.” See, Davis, “History of the Sabbatarian Churches,” 6.

Whatever the cause of Davis's disillusionment, Davis's first public brush of criticism for organized religion came through a letter and poem sent to the *Boston Investigator* that was published on June 9, 1852. First published by Abner Kneeland in Boston in 1831, the *Boston Investigator* was the first American newspaper to focus solely on the discussion of Freethought. Historian Susan Jacoby, in her book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, described Freethought as,

“Often defined as total absence of faith in God, Freethought can better be understood as a phenomenon running the gamut from the truly antireligious – those who regard all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence in every aspect of society - to those who adhere to a private, unconventional faith revering some for God or Providence but at odds with orthodox religious authority.”²⁷

During the history of the newspaper from 1831-1904, the subscribers would include deists, agnostics, and atheists that ranged from ordinary citizens to popular orators like the “Great Agnostic,” Robert G. Ingersoll. By the end of Kneeland's tenure as publisher, the paper would be sold by 243 agents and include a subscriber base of 2,500 in twenty-seven states and territories.²⁸ However, very few subscribers of the newspaper stand out as much as its founder, Abner Kneeland.

Kneeland was an interesting individual. Born in Gardner, Massachusetts in 1774, Kneeland became a lay preacher for a Baptist church shortly before converting to Universalism and becoming a minister. Over time, he would break away from the Universalist Church altogether in favor of Freethought and pantheism, or the belief that the wider universe is the same as a supreme deity. After editing Christian magazines in Philadelphia and New York, Kneeland created the *Boston Investigator* in 1831, with early years sporting a rather notable publisher in John Quincy

²⁷ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2004), 3-4.

²⁸ Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith*, 337.

Adams, the sixth President of the United States. Kneeland's writing sparked anger, even resulting in a fiery blasphemy trial in 1838, which resulted in Kneeland being sent to jail for 60 days. He was the last figure to be committed to jail by a court in the United States for the charge of blasphemy. Prominent figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Lloyd Garrison signed petitions against his incarceration but were unsuccessful in reducing his term in jail. Even with his infamous reputation, Kneeland's paper was successful and attracted significant talent as correspondents.²⁹

In her first submission to the *Investigator*, Davis sent in both a poem and a statement. Her poem, titled "Missions," criticized the religious missions that cared less about relieving the sorrows of the poor than in converting the locals to the missionary's form of religion. In her poem, Davis wrote that caring for the sick and weak "is a mission for the wise, diviner than to stand and teach of wonders, marvels, mysteries, and all things beyond human reach, the hopes and dreams of vapid faith, or what a Hebrew legend saith." She finished her poem by suggesting that the only way to clear the human heart of being led by falsehoods is through "bidding superstition's power depart."³⁰ Davis's other piece in the issue, titled "Infidels," which received a prominent position on the first page of the issue, gave insight into the views of her small town in New Jersey. She told the story of two or three friends debating whether being called an infidel was an injustice. One friend, Davis asserts, offered that any particular infidel was a "mean, vulgar, low, black-hearted wretch." To which she reported, the other friend, likely being a stand-in for herself, asserts the words of Christian philosopher Lord Francis Bacon in saying that "atheism leaves to man reason, philosophy, reputation, honor laws, natural piety, [...] while superstition destroys all these and

²⁹ In addition to advocating for Freethought, Kneeland also argued for women's rights, a 10-hour workday, and was an early proponent of birth control. See, "Kneeland, Abner (1774-1844)," Boston Square Library, Accessed August 15, 2023, [Kneeland, Abner \(1774-1844\) | Harvard Square Library](#).

³⁰ Tamar Davis, "Missions," *Boston Investigator*, June 9, 1852, 2.

erects itself into a tyranny over the understands of men.” The initial friend then rebuts, saying that they might be correct, but “in this community at least; a robber, or murderer professing religion on the scaffold is tolerable to one who chooses to think for himself in matters of faith.”³¹ This story, though the veracity of it cannot be ascertained just from the writings of Davis, likely does represent the natural response of citizens to religious skepticism of Salem County in the 1850s. At least a criminal believed in the power of God.

From this anecdote, Davis’s view of her religious skepticism comes into focus. She describes her self-appraisal term “infidel” as “dissentients from the fashionable creed, whether that of Buddha, Mohammed, or Christ [...] which implicated no stain on the moral character, since even the Atheist is possessed of all the feelings, instincts, and sympathies that are requisite to lead him to virtue.”³² She places the crux of her criticism on followers of unproven superstition, which she condemned for imprisonment, torturing, or killing philosophers who dared to think or not supporting populist movements, such as the renouncing of the peasants by Martin Luther. Among the infidels that Davis placed in high regard were Socrates, Galileo, Lord Byron, and Thomas Jefferson. She finished her piece with an argument against the priests of Europe, who served to suppress the freedom of the people through supporting the divine authority of kings. While Davis never wrote a description of whether she was a deist, agnostic, or atheist, this piece served as her coming out moment in discussions of religious skepticism.

Davis’s submission was evidently well-received. The editor of the *Investigator*, Horace Seaver, wrote of the submission, “This lady is a stranger to our columns, but after the very sensible communication and the beautiful poetic gem which she has kindly furnished [...], we hope to have the pleasure of hearing from her often, and if she will allow us, of considering her a permanent

³¹ Tamar Davis, “Infidels,” *Boston Investigator*, June 9, 1852, 1.

³² Davis, “Infidels,” 1.

contributor.”³³ Though no personal correspondence from Davis has survived, she soon began writing a litany of articles discussing her thoughts on the failures of organized religion.

However, just as Davis was beginning her career as a correspondent for the *Investigator*, she would be drawn into two very public disputes. The first of these would concern one of the most important novels published in the nineteenth century. On July 7, 1852, the *Boston Investigator* declared,

“Mrs. Tamar Davis, of Allawaystown, New Jersey, is preparing a work for the press, designed to be the counterpart of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but illustrative of the condition and character of the freedmen in the Free States. The scene will be laid in New Jersey, where there are several villages occupied exclusively by colored people. Mrs. Davis, as our readers are aware, is our able female correspondent; and interesting subject on which she proposes to found her book, will be treated, we have no doubt, in a superior, faithful, and instructive manner.”³⁴

The declaration of her intention to write a response to Harriett Beecher Stowe’s iconic book would reach much farther than the newspapers she wrote for and her native New Jersey papers, such as the *Trenton State Gazette* and the *Newark Daily Advertiser*, but also to national publications like the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and the *New-York Observer*. Her decision angered many since the announcement offered no clarity on which point of view it would be written. As a farming resident of southern New Jersey, on the border of Delaware, a state that would not completely

³³ Horace Seaver was born in Boston in 1810 and began working at the *Boston Investigator* as a compositor at the age of 28, while writing articles under the name “Z”. When Kneeland resigned, he became editor for the next 50 years. After his death in 1889, Robert G. Ingersoll gave the funeral oration. See, Annie Laurie Gaylor “Horace Seaver,” Freedom From Religion Foundation, Accessed August 17, 2023, [Horace Seaver - Freedom From Religion Foundation \(ffrf.org\)](https://ffrf.org/horace-seaver); “Facts and Scraps,” *Boston Investigator*, June 9, 1852, 2.

³⁴ “Counterpart of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” *Boston Investigator*, July 7, 1852, 2.

abolish slavery until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, Davis was just as likely to promote the institution as she was to condemn it.

In fact, of the few writings that appear before the publication of her 1851 book on the Sabbatarian churches, it is apparent that Tamar Davis did not believe in the equality of enslaved or free Blacks. On January 9, 1851, Davis published an article in *The Sabbath Recorder*, titled “Equality Among the Races,” in which she argued against the title. She wrote, “Let the slave laws be abolished; let the negro be raised to every political privilege; but even then he will not be equal with the Caucasian.”³⁵ Davis would later argue that she was not prejudiced against Blacks and that she knew “at whose door the sin of their degradation lies.”³⁶ However, it is apparent that at no point did Tamar Davis ever write about the possibility of equality being attained, nor did she ever forcefully deny the institution of slavery. A four-part series of articles, written in the *Cecil Whig* in 1862, on the effects of abolition in New Jersey would continue to promote openly racist depictions of free Blacks in New Jersey, stating that their gradual release from bondage only served at the detriment of Caucasian women. In short, Tamar Davis was no friend to the abolition movement.

Though the newspapers wrote that Davis was to publish a novel, the only story to seemingly survive appeared in the *Cecil Whig*, a Maryland-based newspaper that she wrote as a correspondent for.³⁷ The story, titled “Northern Prejudice Against Persons of Color,” revolved around a fugitive slave servant girl in New Jersey, named Susy, who was poorly treated by a family of religious abolitionists. Clearly, the vignette is supporting the work of slavery since she even

³⁵ Tamar Davis, “Equality Among the Races,” January 9, 1851, 1.

³⁶ Tamar Davis, “‘Negroes in the Free States’: Reply to ‘Norfolk’ and John Porter,” *Boston Investigator*, April 6, 1853, 1.

³⁷ Tamar Davis, when referring to the story, also mentioned the Alabama-based *Constitutional Union*, but copies of the paper from that time were unable to be found. Only one article from the paper was republished in the *Boston Investigator*. See, Davis, “‘Negroes in the Free States’: Reply to ‘Norfolk’ and John Porter,” 1.

wrote that Susy would “willing have bartered her liberty for the privilege of loving and being beloved.”³⁸ In response to critics of her work, Davis argued that the story described the hypocrisy of New Jersey, and in particular Seventh-Day Baptist, abolitionists that claimed to care about the well-being of enslaved peoples, but in practice treated free Blacks poorly when taken into service. In evoking the name of Thomas Jefferson, Davis asked her critics to “point out one State in the Union in which negroes are regarded and treated as men.”³⁹ Davis would take the allegations of love for slavery harshly, though it is apparent that her work helped their cause.

The *Cecil Whig* even wrote to their Southern readers that they “will confer a favor by giving publicity to this notice” because this piece would rectify the work of “Mrs. Stowe [who] has drawn such horrible pictures of slavery, [through Davis portraying the allegedly true] condition of those negroes, who have fled for refuge to the strong holds of abolitionism.”⁴⁰ The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* after the publication of her piece, wrote, “She has written a book to prove slavery a beautiful and lovely state of society, and is a determined opponent of the Temperance movement.”⁴¹ In response to these allegations, Davis would write to the paper to force an apology, which they published on September 6, 1856. They also included her full letter, in which she wrote, “I never [wrote a book praising slavery] and I challenge the world to produce such a book.” She also took exception to their earlier negative appraisal of her status as a mother and wife, writing, “That I ‘boldly publish’ my opinions should not be a reproach with those, who contend for the largest liberty in that respect, or is freedom of speech and opinion only to be tolerated only on the popular side.”⁴² Though, as forceful as her rebuttal was to the newspaper, the fact remains that her

³⁸ Tamar Davis, “Northern Prejudice Against Persons of Color,” *The Cecil Whig*, August 7, 1852, 1.

³⁹ Davis, “‘Negroes in the Free States’: Reply to ‘Norfolk’ and John Porter,” 1.

⁴⁰ “A Set-Off To ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’,” *The Cecil Whig*, June 19, 1852, 3.

⁴¹ “A Consistent Woman,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 6, 1856, 3.

⁴² “Apologetic,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 6, 1856, 2.

work was used by supporters of slavery to reinforce the validity and morality of their views, regardless of her intention. Though not mentioned in the literature on the pro-slavery responses against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Davis's novella is one of the few northern examples that can illustrate the proslavery forces of a regional stronghold like southern New Jersey.

A secondary issue that she became embroiled with was the Maine Liquor Law of 1851. The Maine Liquor Law, one of the earliest temperance laws passed in the United States, restricted the sale of alcohol except in the case of medicinal, mechanical, or manufacturing purposes.⁴³ Tamar Davis entered the controversy in 1853 and wrote that while she did not denounce the Temperance movement, she disagreed with the anti-democratic nature of the law. In her view, restricting the availability of liquor to all Americans based on the idea that some could not restrain themselves was unconstitutional. To support this argument against the bill, she wrote a well-received pamphlet, titled *A Book for the Million*, which was published by Samuel Harris at Bridgeton, New Jersey.⁴⁴ Of course, Davis's role in denouncing the Maine Liquor law was controversial. In response to an article by "Morrey Jr." in the *West Jersey Pioneer* that decried the "assumptions of one woman" in Davis against the pro-Maine Law judges, Davis responded,

"If man in general sense is lord, then men as individuals must be lords-and wonderful lords they are, to be sure. Look yonder, Mr. Morrey one of your lords has just tumbled beast-like and drunken into that gutter. See, there is another being led into jail for crime. There, in that oyster cellar a whole gang of those lords are drinking, gambling, swearing, and

⁴³ Henry Stephen Clubb, *The Maine Liquor Law: Its Origin, History, and Results, Including a Life of Hon. Neal Dow* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1856).

⁴⁴ No copies of *A Book for the Million* are known to exist, but parts of the pamphlet were republished by the *Salem Sunbeam*. See, Tamar Davis, "Review of the Maine Liquor Law," *Salem Sunbeam*, November 4, 1853, 1.

committing every species of debauchery. Don't look at them with disgust or scorn, you active, intelligent women!"⁴⁵

However, her disdain for the Maine Liquor Law did not mean that Davis was against providing help toward an alcoholic neighbor. In a piece for the *Investigator*, titled "The Temperance Reform," she wrote that the act of "kindness has taken the wretched inebriate by the hand, made him feel that somebody cared for his welfare, and strengthened and supported him in the hour of temptation."⁴⁶

Before further examination into her career as a columnist, it is important to mention her success as a novelist. While she was notable for writing poems and columns for newspapers across the United States, Davis perhaps gained the most profit through her fiction writing. This included publishing novellas for the *Philadelphia Dollar Newspaper*, which were featured heavily in advertisements for the paper and drew from her experiences in southern New Jersey. These included *Eda, the Foundling* (1858); *Angela, or the Triumph of Love* (1859); *John Glenny, of Pleasant Valley* (1863); *The Emigrant Families* (1864); and *Wheel of Fortune; or, Chances and Changes* (1865). Her fiction work included romances, as were popular for women writers of the time, but varied to dramas and tales about the ongoing Civil War. For example, her poem, "The Young Hero," celebrates the (likely fictional) valiant efforts of the 10-year-old son of Captain Jonathan Mayhew Wainright, who aboard the *Harriet Lane* held off an attacking force of Confederates who had just killed his father until he was captured.⁴⁷ Though some evidence exists that Davis's novels were published into books in New York and Boston, no examples have been

⁴⁵ Tamar Davis, *Bridgeton Chronicle*, September 23, 1854, 2.

⁴⁶ Tamar Davis, "The Temperance Movement," *Boston Investigator*, July 27, 1853, 1.

⁴⁷ Davis's poem is likely a work of fiction as none of the reports note Wainright's son among the wounded or killed. See, "Wainwright, Jonathan Mayhew," *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White & Company, 1893), 359.

found to corroborate this claim. Even with her success as a fiction writer, it is likely in part due to the controversial nature of her columns and ultimate demise that Davis's work remained neglected in discussions of notable New Jersey authors.

Even while Tamar Davis was growing regionally famous for her fiction writing, she continued to write columns for the *Investigator*, which included philosophical observations, historical memorandum, or engaging with topics of the day, such as her references to the works of Herbert Spencer. At times, she wrote humorously about what life was like for a skeptic in New Jersey. For example, she once wrote an article about a liberal woman, likely a stand-in for herself, taking a stagecoach with a few other people when one of the gentlemen argued that Thomas Paine and Voltaire were bad men. The woman responded that she never "supposed that they were exempt from the weaknesses of our common humanity, [...] but did you ever understand that they roasted witches, like our pious Puritan ancestors, hung, or otherwise prosecuted the Quakers?" To this, the old man remained silent, which led the woman to continue, "If they did not, then they must be very good men, in comparison with the clergy." The party then grew quiet before the old man brought about a new subject.⁴⁸ Other times, her writing grew more serious in reporting the negative effects of organized religion, such as poor neighbors being sent away to an alms house to die instead of being supported by the church or young women taking in by a religious family being expelled from the church after being sexually assaulted.

A rather contentious example of Salem and Cumberland County's refusal to interact with her ideas can be seen in the correspondence from November of 1852. In the piece, Davis wrote that when she began taking the *Boston Investigator*, no one there had ever seen a copy before. She soon began lending out the paper to different individuals, though each was reluctant to accept it.

⁴⁸ Tamar Davis, "Incident in a Stage Coach," March 22, 1854, 2.

One man, whom Davis described as “if we can call an animal a man,” refused to take the paper, though he agreed with its arguments, for fear of disrupting and facing the wrath of his wife at home. Only one of the three men she described had taken a copy home but only after initially refusing. Davis delighted in telling the *Investigator* that a woman near the Post Office, who had offered to receive her mail for her, had been cautiously interested in the paper. Davis, in response to the woman openly refusing to accept the paper, purposefully forgot the paper in the woman’s care, which led to the woman’s curiosity taking hold. Soon after, the woman began sending for her own copy of the paper.⁴⁹ Through these incidents in southern New Jersey, which she described as “one of the strongholds of superstition,” Davis evidently created quite a stir. A week before sending the *Investigator* her letter, she wrote that she was approached at her home by four reverends, one from her local town and three strangers, that had heard of this open critic of religion. Though she wrote that the subject of religion was not broached, the party began discussing the fossils found in the nearby marl pits, to which one reverend was left puzzled over whether they were placed by God during the creation or left as a byproduct during the flood. To this Davis said nothing based on the premise that “it would be discourteous to their character as guests to make any remarks that might compromise their profession.”⁵⁰ Aside from not trying to bruise the pride or reputation of the men, Davis simply knew quite a bit more about fossils than them. This would translate to her another aspect of her writing for the *Investigator*.

A separate section of Davis’s writing for the *Investigator* was science columns, though these were mostly written under the pseudonym “T.D.,” likely understanding that even “enlightened” individuals would not take kindly to women writing on scientific matters. Davis,

⁴⁹ This story is similar to the story of Reverend Maxson that Davis included in her earlier history book. However, where Maxson had been hoping to convert the nonbeliever by leaving behind a bible, Davis leaves behind a Freethought newspaper.

⁵⁰ Tamar Davis, “Correspondence,” November 3, 1852, 2.

who seemed to be a polymath, was enthusiastically interested in not only the study of literature and theology but also geology, biology, and chemistry. She wrote a thirteen-part column on chemistry between June and September of 1861, a six-part column on the physiology of plants between November of 1861 and January of 1862, and a three-part article on “The Theory of Life” in 1859. While extensive, the work is predicated on secondary-source research with little practical experimentation, but it is still rather interesting to read for the time they were published. However unique Davis’s articles were, her career would soon falter dramatically following an incident in 1860.

On December 14, 1860, the *Salem Sunbeam* declared that Salem Police Officer, John H. Cogill, had finally caught the culprit of a forgery scam that had caused quite a stir in the community. Cogill was a hardy man who had recently been appointed as the Sergeant-at-Arms for the New Jersey State Senate. Two months after that day in December, he would watch as President-elect Abraham Lincoln spoke to the New Jersey legislature for the only time. He had been in charge of security.⁵¹ For some months, bank bills, which were accepted by businesses as regular issues of the Millville, Gloucester County, and Union Bank of Delaware, were “altered with pen and ink and type and red chalk, from 1’s and 2’s to represent 10’s.” The *Sunbeam* contends that the alteration was “very clumsily done; and it is astonishing how any businessman [...] could be deceived so as to receive them as genuine.” The culprit, contended the *Sunbeam*, was none other than that “literary writer of some celebrity,” Tamar Davis, though the paper gives no information on what evidence they had to charge her. Cogill, though a police officer for Salem County, was

⁵¹ John H. Cogill (1818-1895) was born in Long Island, New York, and brought to Salem, New Jersey, before 1840. He was a prominent Democrat in Salem and was soon named as a Police Officer for the city. He was named the Sergeant-at-Arms for the New Jersey State Senate in January of 1860. For his hiring of six policemen to protect Lincoln during the president elect’s visit in 1861, Cogill was reimbursed eighteen dollars. See, *Acts of the Eighty-Fifth Legislature of the State of New Jersey and Seventeenth Under the New Constitution* (Freehold: James S. Yard, 1861), 479; *Biographical, Genealogical and Descriptive History of the First Congressional District of New Jersey* (New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1900), 124.

said to have traveled to adjoining Cumberland County where she was then residing to have her indicted at both counties' courthouses. The trial for each was then set for the following term.⁵²

But was this the full story? An alternate explanation for her arrest was printed in an article in the *Boston Investigator* on May 29, 1861. The author, "F.N.D.," did not deny that Tamar Davis passed an altered ten-dollar note but claimed that she subsequently refunded the note and did not know its character at the time. However, he wrote, a "meddling police officer, assisted by a very pious justice of the peace, determined to fasten the whole upon her-she being, as they asserted an Infidel, and capable of doing anything."⁵³ The reasoning behind their vitriol toward Davis, according to the author, was that she was about to undertake a tour promoting Freethought throughout the United States. These intentions seemed not to halt after her arrest. In an 1861 notice to the *New York Herald of Progress*, after a correspondent of theirs, C.M. Stowe, argued that a lecturer that would take cheese as payment for literary services in Ohio would do well, Davis responded that she was currently lecturing before the Sunday Institute in Philadelphia and that she would accept an engagement in Ohio on the terms proposed and would also "state to other Liberals, or Spiritualists, or Friends of Progress, in sugar-making countries, that I will take sugar at market prices in return for lecturing."⁵⁴

The backlash to her arrest was immediate. The *Philadelphia Press* described the author as illiterate. According to them, the "editor of the Bridgeton newspaper states that her manuscript was of a wretched character, although her vigor and rapidity of style compensated for the tedious labor of correcting her copy."⁵⁵ The *Camden Democrat*, likely drawing from the report by the

⁵² The article claims that Richard B. Davis, Tamar's husband, attributed her actions to "insanity, mainly produced by the pernicious teachings of modern 'Spiritualism,' of which she was a victim." However, the paper gives no response from Tamar Davis, herself. See, "Passing Altered Bank Notes," *Salem Sunbeam*, December 14, 1860, 2.

⁵³ F.N.D., "A Bigoted Persecution," *Boston Investigator*, May 29, 1861, 1.

⁵⁴ "Lecturing for Cheese and Sugar," *Boston Investigator*, October 23, 1861, 203.

⁵⁵ It was true that Davis had a unique writing style that likely came from her informal southern New Jersey education. For example, her reply to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1856 was originally printed without any

Sunbeam, claimed that her fall into crime was due to “insanity, induced by spiritualism,” which was ridiculous due to Davis’s repeated articles decrying supernatural movements, such as spiritual rapping.⁵⁶ Yet, Davis would at first seem successful in winning back her freedom.

According to the records of the Salem County Court of Oyer and Terminer, Davis was indicted of December of 1860 for three charges of “forging, altering, and falsifying counterfeit bank notes.” During the April term of the court, the jury found Davis not guilty and released her, though this victory in court would not last long. By December of 1864, Davis would once again find herself under indictment in the court for forgery. Though the court records do not indicate the arguments or events inside the court, the report notes that the jury found Tamar Davis guilty, and sentenced that “she be imprisoned within the State Prison of this state in solitary confinement for the term of one year and stand there committed until the costs of this prosecution be paid.”⁵⁷ According to a newspaper report in the *West-Jersey Pioneer*, Davis arrived at the New Jersey State Prison in January of 1865.⁵⁸ During this period of trials, Davis’s husband would die in 1864 and by 1865, advertisements for the sale of the farm of Richard and Tamar Davis would appear listing that she had been declared “a lunatic.”⁵⁹ It is unknown if she was freed from the prison after being declared insane, but Tamar Davis would ultimately die on August 14, 1866, at her daughter’s home in Marlboro. She was only 45.⁶⁰

punctuation. As part of their apology, they wrote that they felt that it would be imprudent to bring her writing into convention as she “no doubt, has her reasons for any little mannerism in which chooses to indulge. See, “An Authoress Arrested for Counterfeiting,” *The Philadelphia Press*, December 18, 1860, 2; “Apologetic,” *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Camden Democrat*, December 15, 1860, 2.

⁵⁷ City of Salem, New Jersey, Records of the Court of Oyer & Terminer, 1854-1869, Indictments of Tamar Davis.

⁵⁸ “Sad Case,” *West-Jersey Pioneer*, January 28, 1865, 1.

⁵⁹ According to the sale notice, the Davis farm was in “a good state of cultivation,” where “fruit of all kinds is growing on the premises.” Among the buildings listed were a dwelling house, barn and wagon house, and a well of good water. Samuel J. Ayars was listed as the guardian of Tamar Davis. See, “Public Sale of Real Estate,” *West-Jersey Pioneer*, August 05, 1865, 2.

⁶⁰ At least one source would offer that she had died from an addiction to narcotics. A column from “The Rambler” in the *Bridgeton Evening News*, wrote, “I believe, (and I knew her habits well) added greatly to the misfortunes of her late life by the excessive use of narcotics.” See, “The Rambler,” *Bridgeton Evening News*, November 3, 1897, 2.

Despite her incarceration and accusations of guilt, Davis was not in a state of poverty at her death. According to her probate record, Davis was listed as owning six chairs, a bookcase with books, a feather and straw bed with pillows, one sheet, one blanket, three quilts, and a rocking chair. These items, along with her personal savings, amounted to a total of \$1290.78, roughly \$25,000 in today's currency.⁶¹ While a full description of Davis's imprisonment and death is not available, as there are no obituaries or personal writings that have been found, there is a unique connection with an interesting literary source.

Only one month after Davis's death in September 1866, the New Jersey State Prison began publishing the *Sunbeam*, a newspaper that was the first paper to be completely written, edited, and printed by the inmates of a prison.⁶² It is an incredible resource, largely unused by general historians, that described first-hand accounts of criminality, poverty, and the results of catastrophic war. The first column of this newspaper, however, sported a flowing poem, titled "The Prison Cell," that argued against the supposed horrors of the prison cell. In responding to her children who come to visit her and decry the horrors of her position as an inmate, the author of the poem wrote,

"In a prison cell was the gospel taught,
In a prison cell was the Pilgrim wrought;
And nature her marvels did there unbind
To Galileo's immortal mind;
There thousands more of the true and tried
Have prayed and suffering sanctified.

⁶¹ City of Trenton, New Jersey, Record of Wills, 1864-1867, Book 28, 5711Q, Last will and testament of Tamar Davis, 1867; Microfilm.

⁶² The New Jersey State Prison's *Sunbeam* ran from September 1866 to May 1867. The small paper has widely been neglected by historians, though the author of this paper is working to rectify the issue.

Oh, trust me, child, 'tis the truth I tell,

There are places worse than the prison cell."⁶³

At first, this may seem to have no connection to the deceased writer but following a series of letters asking to the identity of the author, the editor, Godfrey Emery Godley, wrote in the October 6 issue of the paper that the author was written by a prisoner the previous year. That prisoner, whose term of service expired in June 1865, was "well known to the literary world, and had won an enviable reputation both as a prose and poetical writer." He concluded by saying that the author is "since deceased."⁶⁴ Through these characteristics, it seems apparent that "The Prison Cell" is perhaps the last published work of Tamar Davis.

During the tumultuous stretch from 1860 to 1865, and perhaps reflecting on her arrests and imprisonment, Davis began working on several poems meant to reflect on notable Freethinkers or liberal figures that had suffered for their beliefs. These individuals included Voltaire, Abner Kneeland, Robert Taylor, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Historian Eric Leigh Schmidt, in his book *The Church of Saint Thomas Paine: A Religious History of American Secularism*, argued that American Freethinkers often idolized Freethinkers in a similar vein to religious figures. While Davis's poems are not as religiously vivid as the scavenging of Thomas Paine's bones or Positivist Rites, they still represent the trend that Schmidt's theory proposed. To Davis in the 1850s and 1860s, these figures were more than just her literary ancestors, but martyred saints that deserved respect and recognition. Before her arrest, Davis's poems on figures such as Thomas Paine were bright and expectant, such as when she wrote,

"And long shall live the glorious name of Paine!

⁶³ Tamar Davis, "The Prison Cell," *The Sunbeam*, September 22, 1866, 1.

⁶⁴ Godley, who was serving time for bigamy, co-edited the paper with a man named Dr. David D. Wickham, who was convicted in 1860 of manslaughter in the death of Helena T. Cole. See, "In reply to...", *The Sunbeam*, October 6, 1866, 2; "Conviction of Dr. Wickham," *The Jeffersonian*, January 3, 1861, 2.

While Justice, Truth, and Gratitude remain;
So long as men with generous thought endued,
Admire the great and reverence the good,
So long as nations glory in the fate,
That brought disunion of the Church and State.”⁶⁵

Now, her work was more melancholic. Her poem on Wollstonecraft brought a feminist edge to her work that had not been there before. She wrote, “But [Wollstonecraft]-superior to this-above public opinion, [...] didn’t serenely move, for woman to demand an equal state, an equal freedom, equal right with man, equal in all things by great Nature’s plan.”⁶⁶ Though access to her thoughts and feelings about the arrest are not available, perhaps Davis was placing her pain amid these other notable Freethinkers that had suffered for their beliefs, though sadly no one would be there to write of her after she had passed.

In 1865, shortly before her death, Tamar Davis went to a séance to hear from the spirit of Daniel Webster. According to Davis, the medium made a grand speech, but as she wrote, “How was I to know that came from the spirit of that great man?” Answers to her follow up questions were unappealing to Davis, who finished writing of her experience by saying that “material evidence from the other world (admitting it can be given) out to be as sure and positive as we find it to be here, but I have never found it to be so.”⁶⁷ Spiritualism, a nineteenth-century religious movement that believed individuals could retain consciousness after death and contact the living, had long been a source of distaste for Davis. Earlier in 1853, Davis wrote heavily against what she called Spiritual Rapping, in which spirits were said to communicate with the living through tapping

⁶⁵ Tamar Davis, “The Reformer and Patriot,” *Boston Investigator*, January 26, 1853, 1.

⁶⁶ Tamar Davis, “Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Boston Investigator*, January 15, 1862, 286.

⁶⁷ Tamar Davis, “Spirits, &c.,” *Boston Investigator*, April 12, 1865.

against a hard surface. She connected the supposed insanity caused by that phenomenon to the “religious insanity” of religious conversion experiences, such as that of the Methodists. She wrote, “I attended a meeting of that kind when a child, at which two women became racing mad, and many others had their intellects partially disordered.” She finished her article by writing that “other causes than ‘Spiritual Rappings’ are at work to produce insanity in the minds of the weak and imbecile.”⁶⁸ Later that same year, Davis engaged in debate in the *Bridgeton Chronicle* with a nonbeliever of Spiritualism, attempting to get him to argue that he did not believe in the Bible, since she argued that spiritual manifestations were inherent to the text. She wrote, “If he does not [believe in the Bible] there may be consistency in this doctrine. If he does, he must believe in spiritual manifestations.”⁶⁹ Her goal in the paper was not to attempt to get him to believe in Spiritualism but recognize the hypocrisy of belief in one without the other.

Once Davis died in 1866, much of the world seemed to simply forget about her. There were no obituaries in any of the newspapers that she had once written for. Her books were not reissued, and poems not republished. Her papers, correspondence, and drafts were not saved. She simply became a relic of an earlier time. Only on rare occasions was her name mentioned with her skeptical writing after she died. In 1872, a visitor to the farm of David Ackley noted that it was the former residence of the “gifted authoress Tamar Davis.”⁷⁰ Joseph H.C. Applegate, giving only his initials as J.H.C.A., described how they had first visited her in 1857 due to her literary fame.⁷¹

⁶⁸ In the article, Davis wonders how many of those who have become insane due to the “Rapping Delusion” had been “previously [held] a strong predisposition to insanity on their part, the consequence of religious revivals and similar excitements.” See, Tamar Davis, “Religious Insanity,” *Boston Investigator*, January 5, 1853, 1.

⁶⁹ Tamar Davis, “Spiritual Manifestations,” *Bridgeton Chronicle*, June 18, 1853, 2.

⁷⁰ J.H.C.A., “Surprising,” *West-Jersey Pioneer*, May 10, 1872, 2.

⁷¹ Joseph H.C. Applegate (1832-1909) was one of the founders of the *Bridgeton Evening News* and a “writer of no mean pretension.” During the Civil War, Applegate published a series of letters in the *Bridgeton Chronicle* as private serving in the Union Army. In 1907, he published a memory of his marriage fifty years earlier, where he remarked that after the wedding, “we drove over for a brief call on the then renown Mrs. Tamar Davis, an authoress then or more than local repute.” See, J.C.H. Applegate, “Wedding Ceremony of Fifty Years Ago,” *Bridgeton Evening News*, July 10, 1907, 1; *The Monitor-Register*, July 9, 1909, 1.

He remarked that she was a “very superior woman” who possessed a “fertile and not unbrilliant imagination, large, and comprehensive reasoning power, and a well-balanced organization.” Tempering her nonreligious beliefs, Applegate wrote, “Of the moral excellence or faults of her literature we say nothing; they are their own best interpreter; but her name is public property and therefore record our regret that such marvelous worth in view of the utter failure of her life.”⁷² Like most notable Freethinkers, Davis would also be assumed to have died under the belief that they had changed their minds last minute in some desperate bid to reach heaven, though the truth of this statement was never written down. Besides the memory of Tamar Davis’s home from Applegate and a mention of her daughter Huldah in 1897, the only mentions of the life and works of Tamar Davis would come from religious scholars citing from her first book without any mention of her later skeptical writing career.

Davis’s work is enthralling, yet much of it remains hidden. During her arrest and trial for counterfeiting, a few of her contemporary Freethinkers wrote to the *Investigator* to speak of her character. A “J.K.” from Quinton Bridge, New Jersey, wrote on May 20th to argue that “few have suffered more for their devotion to an unpopular cause than she has, though she is one of those who rather shrink from, than court notoriety.” Yet, this letter also includes mention that much of Davis’s work came under an assumed name. One work, he wrote, “passed through ten editions in three months,” yet no one had ever mentioned her name in connection to it. Another work had brought “admiration for vigor and originality.” “J.K.” finished his letter to the *Investigator* by proclaiming that the “State of New Jersey cannot boast another woman with a tithe of her talent.”⁷³ On June 5th, the *Investigator* included an addendum to Davis’s article on Chemistry by adding,

⁷² J.H.C.A., “Surprising,” *West-Jersey Pioneer*, 2.

⁷³ “J.K.”, “A Name Left Out,” *Boston Investigator*, May 29, 1861, 43.

“We have been credibly informed [that she] is the author of a celebrated work which appeared anonymously, some years ago, in England, and which, like the letters of Junius, has been attributed to several savans [sic] of high literary fame. We are very much gratified to number among our correspondents so accomplished a writer, and hope to have the pleasure of presenting in our columns many contributions from her pen.”⁷⁴

Apparently, the work was well-known for the time because subscribers even began to guess the identity of the mysterious novel. William P. Lippincott added as an addendum to a letter denouncing Confederate sympathizing subscribers to guess the title of Tamar’s mysterious work. The name of the book he asks about is censored, but the editor’s note writes in response that “We do not feel at liberty to answer our friend’s question any further at this time than to say, that according to what we consider positive evidence in the case, he has correctly guessed the title of the book in question.”⁷⁵ Only a guess can be made as to which book they might have been referring to, though it seems apparent that Davis’s story is even deeper than imagined.

What is ultimately missing in much of Tamar Davis’s writing is the in-depth look at the personal aspect of her life that would normally come from her papers or a diary. Her marriage to Richard B. Davis produced three children, Artelia, Huldah, and Casimer (1851-1891).⁷⁶ Huldah is mentioned as marrying Charles King of Woodstown, though it was written in 1897 that “twenty years or more ago [...] Mr. King was bereft of his estimable wife and never since married.”⁷⁷ Of these children, only Casimer can be proven to have followed in his mother’s skeptical footsteps. He appears as an agent for *The Truth Seeker* magazine in 1890-1891, which between the end of

⁷⁴ “Things in General,” *Boston Investigator*, June 5, 1861, 54.

⁷⁵ William P. Lippincott, “Reply to ‘Dutchman,’ and Some Others,” *Boston Investigator*, July 10, 1861, 90.

⁷⁶ Gilbert Cope, *Genealogy of the Sharpless Family, Descended from John and Jane Sharpless, Settlers near Chester, Pennsylvania, 1682*, (Philadelphia: Bi-Centennial Committee, 1887), 548.

⁷⁷ “The Rambler,” *Bridgeton Evening News*, 2.

the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century was the most important and influential Freethought magazine in the United States. However, Casimer might have also followed in his mother's footsteps on mental instability. On August 23, 1891, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* printed that Casimer Davis, "an old resident of Woodstown, who has been terrorizing the women of that place, was adjudged insane and sent to the Trenton asylum."⁷⁸ By November 1st, the paper reported that he had died of apoplexy.⁷⁹

In the 1880 census, Casimer is listed as living with his brother-in-law, Charles J. King, in Pilesgrove, Salem County. His occupation is listed as a harness maker that had been unemployed for 10 months.⁸⁰ The 1860 census lists Richard B. Davis (44) as a farmer with a real estate value of 2,500 and personal estate of 265. Tamar (39), Artelia (17) as a servant, Hulda (perhaps Huldah) (16) as attended school within the year, and Casimer P. (9). By 1885, he was still living with Charles J. King in Pilesgrove, and probably in Woodstown. Artelia R. Davis was listed in the 1850 census as living with her grandparents, Auley and Phebe Ayars. Auley was listed as a farmer with a real estate value of 1,550.⁸¹

In the preface to her 1997 book, *Women Without Superstition: "No Gods-No Masters,"* historian and activist Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote, "The work of women Freethinkers to liberate minds and governments from religious dogma has all too often been ignored or relegated to footnotes by historians of Freethought."⁸² In the years since this statement, some progress in reclaiming the lives of these notable women has been undertaken. Figures such as Elizabeth Cady

⁷⁸ "Jersey News of All Sorts," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 23, 1891, 3.

⁷⁹ "Jersey News of All Sorts," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 1, 1891, 2.

⁸⁰ 1880 census, Pilesgrove, Salem County, 144, page 14, line 11-14. 1860 census, Upper Alloway Creek, Salem County, Page 4, lines 22-26. 1885 New Jersey State Census, Pilesgrove, Borough of Woodstown, page 18.

⁸¹ Artelia eventually moved with her husband, Francis Norman Davis, to Texas, where they would raise a large and politically active family. See, 1850 Census, Stoe (Stow) Creek, Cumberland County, Page 18, lines 28-32. With John Ayars (70) and Lucinda C. Ayars (60).

⁸² Annie Laurie Gaylor, *Women Without Superstition: "No Gods-No Masters,"* (Madison: Freedom From Religion Foundation, 1997), XIII.

Stanton, Margaret Fuller, and Ernestine L. Rose have gained renewed attention, with Rose even receiving a biography in 2022 by Joyce B. Lazarus.⁸³ Larger synthesis of the role of women in the movement includes Laura Schwartz's book, *Infidel feminism: Secularism, religion and women's emancipation, England 1830–1914*, which discussed women in the British Freethought movement, although a complete history of their contemporaries in America remains largely unwritten. Tamar Davis, like many other American women Freethinkers, has long been neglected by historians. She does not have any books written about her, nor does her skeptical work appear in any footnotes. Perhaps there is one main reason why Davis's memory was forgotten soon after her death. Unlike other prominent freethinking women, Davis did not live in major urban hubs of secular thought or interact with other figures. Instead, she lived in the secluded backwater of southern New Jersey. Tamar Davis, poet, novelist, scientist, even perhaps an inventor or businesswoman (she put out ads selling a "just patented" sewing machine in 1859), not only deserves more consciousness in American history, but demands it.⁸⁴ She was not a "pretender to literature" as her enemies labeled her, but someone who was waiting for literature to catch up to her.

⁸³ A contemporary article that mentions Tamar Davis among the excellent quality of the women correspondents of the *Boston Investigator*, including Ernestine Rose (1810-1892), an early feminist and one of the first Freethinkers to openly call herself an atheist, and Margaret Chappellsmith (1806-1883), a socialist lecturer, who focused on communitarianism, currency reform, and women's rights. See, "Correspondence," *Boston Investigator*, July 31, 1861, 116.

⁸⁴ The advertisement states, "Don't buy a SEWING MACHINE until you see the new kind, just patented, for fifteen dollars, and sold by Mrs. Tamar Davis," which might just make Davis an agent instead of the inventor. See, "Take Notice!" *West-Jersey Pioneer*, August 13, 1859, 3.

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