

LOOKING BACK

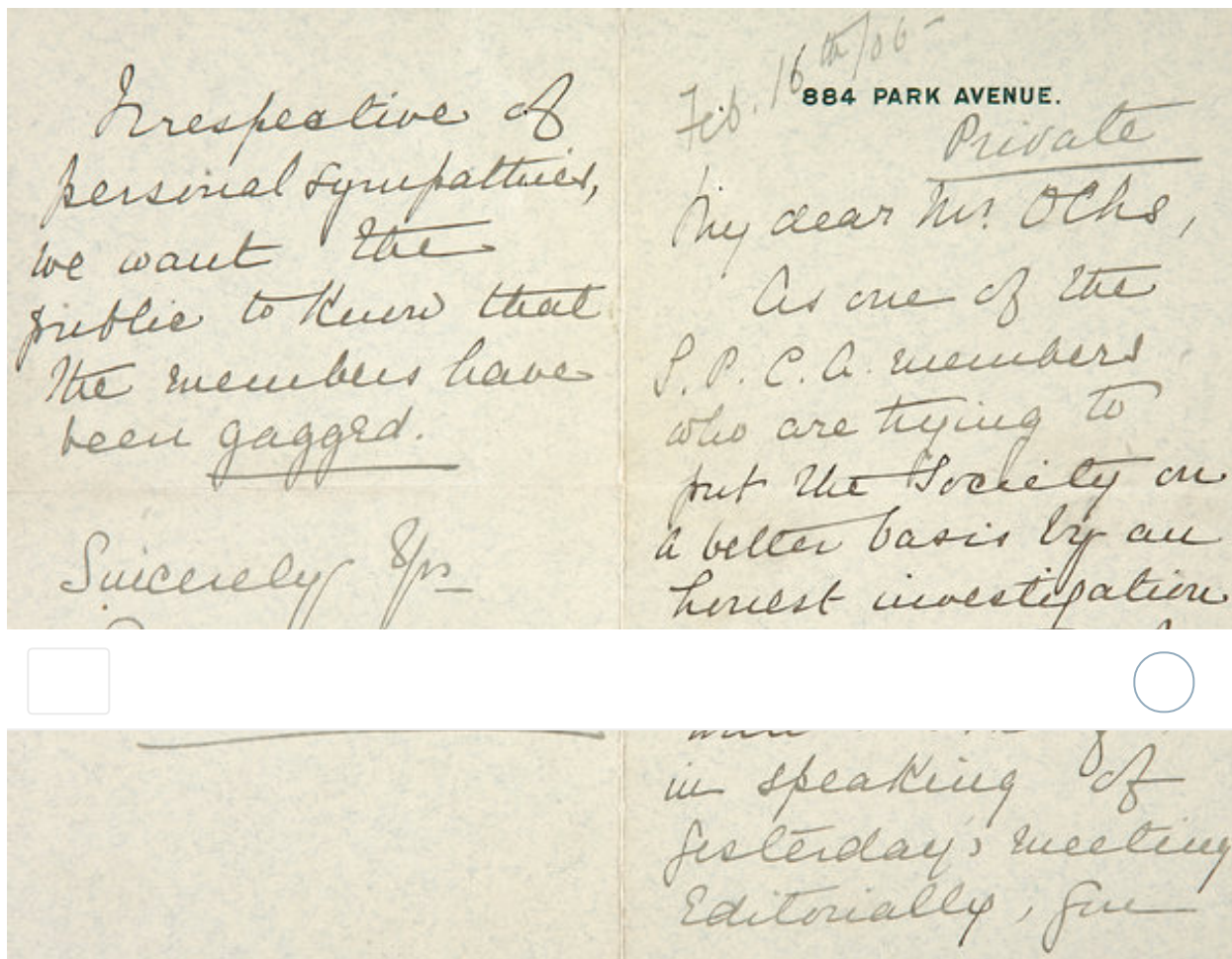
1906 | 'The Members Have Been Gagged,' Edith Wharton Says



By DAVID W. DUNLAP

MAY 5, 2016

Times Insider shares historic insights from *The New York Times*. In this piece, David W. Dunlap, a metro reporter, looks back at a particularly memorable letter sent to *The Times's* publisher.



The front and back of Edith Wharton's four-page note to Adolph S. Ochs.

TONY CENICOLA / THE NEW YORK TIMES

Edith Wharton loved animals.

But she hated John P. Haines, the president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Mrs. Wharton and other members of the society believed that Mr. Haines was at least inept, if not corrupt, in his management of the agency.

After an especially stormy meeting on Feb. 15, 1906 — a meeting so charged [that it was front-page news](#) in The New York Times — Mrs. Wharton took pen in hand at her townhouse on Park Avenue and East 78th Street.

She addressed a private letter to Adolph S. Ochs, the publisher of The New York Times:

“My dear Mr. Ochs,

“As one of the S.P.C.A. members who are trying to put the Society on a better basis by an honest investigation of its methods, I write to ask if, in speaking of yesterday’s meeting editorially, you will bring out as forcibly as possible that the two motions carried yesterday by Mr. Haines & his friends have resulted in cutting off all investigations and silencing the members for one year.

“The best service that can be done by the Press to those desirous of reforming the S.P.C.A. is to lay emphasis on these facts, & also on the fact that Mr. Haines voted for both motions, & that at least four of those voting with him (by his own admission) were employés of the Society.

“Irrespective of personal sympathies, we want the public to know that the members have been *gagged*.

“Sincerely yrs,

“Edith Wharton”



Edith Wharton

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What brings her to mind this week is the [fire on Sunday that consumed the chapel](#) near Madison Square Park in Manhattan where she and Edward Wharton were married in 1885.

Both Whartons were devoted to animals; she to dogs and horses, he to cows, sheep, ducks and hens.

“Dogs — small dogs and preferably Pekinese — were among the main joys of her being, and had been since she was a child,” R. W. B. Lewis wrote in “Edith Wharton: A Biography” (1975).

The Times’s account of the stormy meeting noted Mrs. Wharton’s assertion that the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Paris and Rome — of which she was also a member — “did far better with less money than the New York society.” The article reported that opponents of Mr. Haines had adjourned to the Whartons’ home to draft a statement that “in smothering further criticism, the society is put on record as fearing to face charges of negligence and inefficiency.”

(Actually, it is hard to square Mrs. Wharton’s letter with the account in The Times of the same day, since it had already done the things she asked Mr. Ochs to do. It’s as if she hadn’t read the paper yet. Perhaps she had let her home delivery subscription lapse. Don’t let this happen in your household! [Choose The Times subscription that’s best for you. Starting as low as 99 cents.](#))



The meeting in which John P. Haines was “hotly assailed,” which Edith Wharton attended, inspired her to write a personal note to the publisher of The Times.

“Haines Hotly Assailed in S.P.C.A. Meeting,” The Times’s headline read. “Mrs. Cadwalader Jones Tells Him He’ll Regret the Day / Employes Appear to Vote / Both Sides Say Meeting Was Packed — Haines Must Go or the Society Collapse, Reformers Declare.”

Of course, The Times offered balance in its account, noting that Mr. Haines enjoyed the support of Miss Irwin Martin, the vice president of the Toy Spaniel Club. “She wanted to vote that no further evil reports of the management be listened to,” The Times said.

In the end, the reformers won. Mr. Haines resigned on March 8. Nine days later, the Whartons sailed for Europe.

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