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Article Summary: Fletcher's letter, based on her experience on the Omaha Reservation, recommends that the government recognize the individual needs of different Indian groups. She describes the daily life of the Omahas and offers practical strategies that would help to ensure their adaptation to reservation life.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Alice Cunningham Fletcher, Wajapa, Susette La Flesche Tibbles, Thomas Henry Tibbles, Joseph La Flesche, Henry L Dawes, Francis La Flesche, George Wilkinson

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Photographs / Images: Wajapa, Susette La Flesche Tibbles, and Thomas Henry Tibbles; Joseph La Flesche's sketch, "Make Believe White Man's Village"; Joseph La Flesche; Alice Fletcher and others doing allotment work on the Winnebago Reservation



“I Plead for Them”

*An 1882 Letter from
Alice Cunningham Fletcher
to Senator Henry Dawes*

Edited by Valerie Sherer Mathes and Richard Lowitt

In September 1881 Alice Cunningham Fletcher headed west on a tour that introduced her to Lakota country. Thomas Henry Tibbles, his wife Susette, and Wajapa, a prominent Omaha Indian guided her.¹ By early November she was back in Omaha and almost immediately she moved to the Omaha Reservation, where she was asked to assist the tribe in securing land titles, and where she wished to study the tribe's home life. In doing so, Fletcher launched a career that would gain her recognition as an outstanding American anthropologist.²

Unlike many other tribes, the Omahas had accommodated fairly easily to the ways of the dominant white, Euro-american culture. Never at war with the United States, they had accepted reservation life, ceding their ancestral lands to the federal government in 1854 and 1865. Both treaties included provi-

sions for allotment of land in severalty to individual Omahas.³ Instilling the concept of private property ownership was a major key in the “civilization” of Indian peoples, who traditionally held land communally. The allotment process began in 1868 and gradually the cultivation of crops, once reserved to women, became a major occupation for men.

When Fletcher arrived on the reservation in 1881, she found the one thousand or so Omahas actively engaged in agriculture and living in three villages. The southernmost village, named “the village of the ‘make-believe’ white men” by other Omaha Reservation residents, was under the leadership of the remarkable and controversial half-French, half-Indian, Joseph La Flesche. As a “progressive” La Flesche encouraged his followers to build frame houses, cultivate the soil, and send their children to school. His acceptance of farming, allotment of reservation land in severalty, education, and eventually citizenship, however, in no way meant that he intended to abandon the old ways. These lifestyle changes were implemented “through accommodation to Omaha traditions, not through assimilation to

white ways.”⁴ La Flesche continued to hunt buffalo while engaged in commercial farming, and practiced polygamy, although he sent his third wife away as a compromise, keeping his first two, and adopted Christianity. He also raised his children to respect the Omaha ways.

Fletcher soon learned that tribal members were fearful that like their kinsmen, the Poncas, they could easily be removed against their will to the Indian Territory.⁵ Following the removal of the Poncas in 1877 several Omaha men, desirous of owning their lands in severalty, took the allotment certificates for their individual lands and houses to lawyers in nearby white communities, only to find that their land carried no patent rights because Congress had never approved the allotment schedule. Besides being fearful, tribal members felt forsaken and betrayed by white people and government officials whom they had always respected.⁶

No sooner had Fletcher arrived on the reservation than she found herself involved with the concern of the tribal leaders in securing full and clear title to their allotted lands. On behalf of tribal members, she drafted a petition calling for a grant of land in severalty. The

Valerie Sherer Mathes, professor emerita of history at the City College of San Francisco, is the author of Helen Hunt Jackson and Her Indian Reform Legacy. Richard Lowitt, professor emeritus of history at the University of Oklahoma, is the author of a biography of George W. Norris. They are co-authors of The Standing Bear Controversy: Prelude to Indian Reform, soon to be released by the University of Illinois Press.

The Omaha Tribe



Wajapa (left), Susette La Flesche Tibbles, and her husband, Thomas Henry Tibbles, guided Fletcher on her 1881 western tour and introduced her to the Omaha Tribe's life and culture. Plate 29, *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington D.C.: 1911); NSHS-RG2026-38A; NSHS-RG1289:19-2.

petition noted that tribal members had worked their respective lands anywhere from three to ten years, cultivating from five to fifty acres. Many had built houses on their plots and others endeavored to construct permanent homes for themselves and their families. But all labored “with discouragement of heart, knowing that our farms are not our own and that any day we may be forced to leave the lands on which we have worked.”

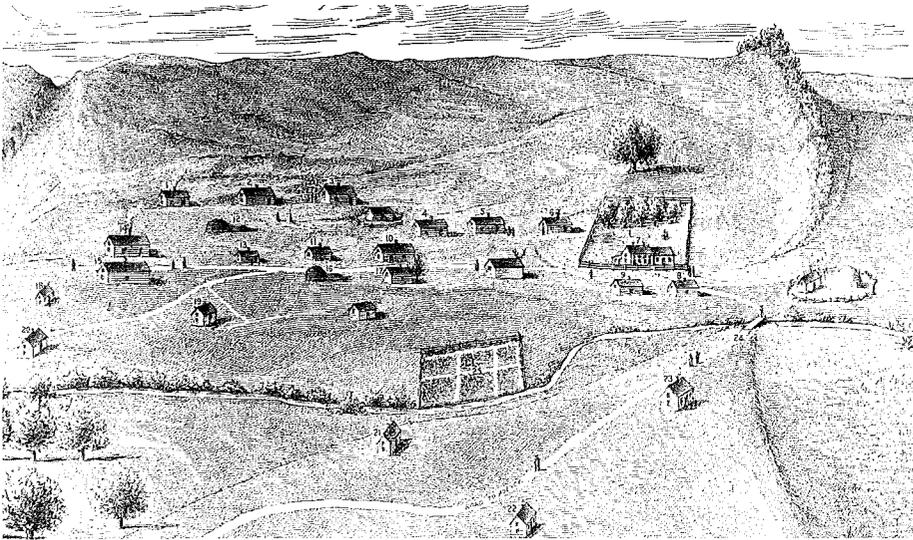
The petition was signed by fifty-three tribal members, many of whom appended statements expressing their concern. The longest, most perceptive, and most eloquent was by Joseph La Flesche, who claimed “the reason you do not look upon us as men is because we have not law, because we are not citizens.” As citizens, tribal members would have access to courts to seek resolution of their difficulties and to punish those who committed offenses.⁷

The petition to the U.S. Senate was posted by Fletcher on December 31, 1881. Senator Henry L. Dawes, chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs, favorably remarked on the petition and

prompted the following response by Fletcher on February 4, 1882.⁸ The lengthy letter she wrote is significant because, in addition to expounding her own views on what she deemed good for the tribe, she presents a valuable picture of the daily life of the Omahas, a portrait that emerged two decades later as a significant study of the Omaha Tribe that she wrote with Francis La Flesche, a son of Chief Joseph La Flesche.⁹

Fletcher's hard work culminated in the passage of the Omaha Allotment Act of 1882, the prototype of the General Allotment Act of 1887 (the Dawes Act), which became the cornerstone of late nineteenth-century federal Indian reform. It provided for the allotment of reservation lands to individual Indians in severalty, to be held in trust for twenty-five years. Upon the receipt of an allotment, tribal members became citizens. Unfortunately, this attempt to force private property ownership and agriculture upon Indians was a dismal failure. More than ninety million acres of Indian land were lost when the surplus was sold to settlers.¹⁰

The only author to mention specifically the letter published below is Frederick Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 26. Hoxie does not discuss its contents, but makes the point that Fletcher learned about the Omaha Tribe from “the inner circles.” Neither Joan Mark in *A Stranger in her Native Land* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) nor Judith Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) cites this holograph letter. Both authors in footnotes mention a February 1882 letter from Fletcher to Dawes, but cite no date and make no mention of its contents. Thus it is safe to say that this lengthy, handwritten letter has not received the attention of scholars interested in the career of Alice Cunningham Fletcher, or in the history of the Omaha Tribe. It can be found in box twenty-five of the Henry Laurens Dawes Papers in the Library of Congress. For clarity the editors have occasionally added or removed punctuation.



The "Make Believe White Man's Village" of Joseph La Flesche (right) who advocated adaptation to white culture without abandoning traditional Omaha ways.
NSHS RG1289; 20-3:RG1289:19-2

Omaha Reserve Nebraska
Feb. 4, 1882
Hon. Henry L. Dawes
U.S. Senate. Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

Your forcible remarks upon the presentation of the petition of the Omahas asking for titles to the farms on which they had worked and your chairmanship of the Com. on Indian Affairs makes me venture to address you concerning these Indians.

It is now some months since I came to the Omahas. My scientific study has taken me directly into their homes where I have become as a familiar friend. The daily life of the people has been fully open to me and I have been able to note their present attainments and to discern much of the struggle by which it has been gained. Their condition is mainly the result of their own endeavors. They have received but little outside encouragement and this has fostered a manliness that is hopeful for the future. It seems as though a point has been reached where further advance depends upon judicious legislative action on the part of those in authority.

The statistics which I attached to the petition were greatly condensed and can hardly give an adequate idea of the toil of the people. Upon the Omaha Reserve there are only about a dozen houses that have ever been built by the government for the Indians, and these are very poor and are hardly fit to live in, being shingled with cotton wood which has no staying quality and finished inside by rough cotton wood boards, not even planed, no plaster or ceiling, only the rafters. The numerous houses that dot the valleys were built by the Indians untutored

hands. The story of the building of these houses is realistic and pathetic. To live in a house meant advancement, and at great cost of labor because entirely unskilled, untaught by precept or example, the logs have been cut, drawn by the ponies to the site, and the structures reared as best could be. In some instances frame houses have been built and the Indian carpenter who helped paid by ponies or produce. I have met with no instances of gratuitous aid. Windows and doors were purchased in some way in a neighboring town. There have been several promises made by officials that houses were to be built, and lumber has been cut and drawn to the mill but it has lain and rotted. "I feel ashamed when my agent speaks of building houses, for I remember my lost lumber," said an Indian to me, as I sat in his ample and tidy mud lodge and he answered my question as to why so good a farmer had no house. To one driving through the Omaha and adjoining Winnebago Reserves, the contrast between the houses of the two tribes is marked. The Winnebagos have dwellings made of brick and a wooden upper story. There are ample windows and doors and a substantial chimney. These residences, however, were built by the Government and represent no effort or care on the part of the Tribe. They did not lift a finger to gain their seemly houses. The log houses and cottages, some costing as high as \$200.00 on the Omaha Reserve stand for individual effort. If they are ruder, they are also better in their influence. When more desirable structures supercede them the people will be ready to derive substantial benefit from the change.

The invisible line that marks off an Indian Reserve arrests all familiar incentives to progress. Beyond the fateful boundary our busy world of thought and action hardly finds an echo. No thoroughfares cross the hills, no trains come and go, no mill

The Omaha Tribe

bell breaks the silence. There is nothing to even so much as mark the days or hours. Civilization is shut out by legal enactment, and a few government officials are expected to be substitutes for the numberless little and great forces, both social and civil, which foster and hold our strong unshackled life. Yet we expect the people we have hemmed in to adopt a mode of life they have hardly seen in outline even, and to become like the Race whose contact has thus far brought disaster to the Indians tradition and customs, both religious and social. We have been more or less successful iconoclasts among the Indians, but as up builders we have greatly failed. We have permitted our worst vices to spread among them, and have been slow to present the ideals which hold these vices in check at home. This may sound over drawn, but living on an Indian Reserve among the Indians brings to the serious student the Indians side of the picture. It seems clear that Ethnological ignorance lies at the root of much of our mistaken action toward this Race. This cannot now be wholly rectified but some notable errors might be set right. Among these, that of treating the Indians all alike— simply as Indians, not as men or communities—in varied stages of advancement. Taking the Omahas as an example, if the men who have practically homesteaded their allotments of land could be given titles to their lands so that they could feel their tenure secure, a legitimate

impetus would be given to the entire tribe. There would be a fixed, industrious, class—with recognized positions based upon positive attainment. The beginning of organized society would become a fact and future progress be almost inevitable. Other steps in civilization would follow, for when the ambitions and powers of a people are stirred, opportunities for their exercise will be needful in order to secure a healthful and desirable condition.

Among the tribes I have studied, it would be a mistake to seek to make them cattle raisers before they are farmers. The Indians have always more or less cultivated corn, beans & a few other products. They therefore take easily to our more improved methods of agriculture. America had no native animals capable of domestication that could be to the autochthones [indigenous or native peoples] what the corn and sheep have been to our Race. There is, therefore, no soil of heredity, so to speak, on which to cultivate the care and nurture of animals. The Indians have as yet no love of cattle or in fact any animal, horses and dogs being no exception. Their way upward is by means of farming. All the lines of their past history indicate it, and a careful observation of their life and habits seem to confirm it. The Indian loves the land and will work upon it. These facts I recall to your mind that they may emphasize the urgency of giving these Indians who have



Following passage of the Omaha Allotment Act and the Dawes Severalty Act, Alice Fletcher (left) served as allotting agent for the Omahas, 1883–84, and the Winnebagos, 1887–89. This photograph is identified as allotment work on the Winnebago Reservation. NSHS RG4420:3-1

Nebraska History – Spring 2003

actually farmed, titles to their lands. To these men, patents would be a real advantage, but not to those who have as yet given no persistent labor to the lands, & proved themselves in sympathy with civilization.¹¹

I am not in the least versed in political words, and I beg that you will excuse any lack of formality or excess of zeal. I have looked closely into the life of these Indians. I have not learned them from the outer, but from the inner circle, and because I thus know them, see their needs, see their possibilities, see their limitations, I plead for them. I have nothing to gain or to ask for myself. In my scientific dissection of their home life and historical impulse, my heart cannot forbear to respond to their living cry. For humanity's sake I urge their just request to you and through you to those who have the power to grant the titles. Do not withhold them too long, discouragement is so hard to bear.

It gives me pleasure to inform you that in your efforts in behalf of this tribe you will find a ready and intelligent co-worker in their own Agent Dr. [George] Wilkinson. From several conversations and from observation of his mode of procedure since he has been in office, I discern him capable of leading this people toward their new future. He desires that titles may be given to those who have earned them, that avocations & trades be made possible to those who are fitted for them; and the people as fast as practicable be made ready for citizenship. It is most fortunate that at this juncture a man so well adapted to this place has been put in the position of the Government Officer.

Since the petition went to Washington, I have gathered many of the signers into a night school at the Mission. Three evenings in the week, old men and young men are busy trying to conquer the difficulties of Arithmetic, Reading, and Writing. They all work well, and are striving to be better prepared to meet the new era toward which they look with so much hope and desire.

I have today written to the Secretary of the Interior calling his attention to the need and desirability of educating young men as physicians.¹² Owing to the changes in the Indians mode of living, their own hereditary diseases, and those contracted from the White Race, these people are in want of medical skill. It seems almost needless to say that for many years to come the bulk of a Tribe will be more easily reached by a native physician than by a white man. Many lives are lost, or sacrificed by the lack of proper care. Among the Omahas I have found one or two young men who indicate ability and show perseverance in study. I have asked the Secretary if the Government can educate them as physicians. I beg you, if you can do so, to lend your aid to this most urgent need, of native trained physicians.¹³

May I also ask you to obtain seeds for vegetables and flowers, hardy annuals. I believe there is some way of obtaining them from the Department. I would at once like to use my influence to secure a wide cultivation of vegetables and give flowers to

the homes. The health of the Race demands a generous use of vegetables. The change of life, from the long summer and winter journeys over the prairies to living in one locality year in and out is very great. So also is the substitution of the close log house for the airy tent. Vegetables are essential to ward off certain results that must follow this great transition, particularly winter vegetables. The people suffer greatly from sores that are denominated scrofulous. They arise, so the most careful observers are disposed to think, from the meager diet of the people. Once they had plenty of game, lived an outdoor life, ate many roots that disappear where ground is cultivated. Now they have no game, they can afford but a limited supply of beef, their bread is not made in a healthful manner. Why, I will not take your time to explain, altho it is important, and in order to make healthful tissue they need vegetables to relieve a diet that works mischief even were it ample, that is, exclusively bread & meat. They will have sores from impoverished tissues until they can have a more varied diet to abet the work of the physician.¹⁴

I would like to start the Indian women in the culture of flowers. Blooming fragrant beds about a house, help to make neatness and order desirable. The influence of flowers is gentle & humanizing. The lovely wild blossoms spring up and greet us with a glad surprize but the flowers we tend and train call forth a constant regard that helps to make us carefree and considerate. They bring to our door the beauties we may each leave our daily avocations to look for in the meadow or the woodland.

The avocations of the Indian women are greatly changed. She is no longer the exclusive out door worker—and that she may not suffer in body and mind, I would open to her the healthful pursuits of the vegetable and flower garden. Change of living involves change of food & change of pleasure.

In the death of Mr. Goddard of Boston mankind has lost a friend—those to whom that home was open, where a welcome and a brave good word were never wanting, have such a double loss.¹⁵ The Indians lost a friend of the generous and judicious kind. In her sorrow I could hardly refer you to my friend Mrs. Goddard, but if you would care to know of my work, Prof. F. W. Putnam, Curator of the Peabody Museum Cambridge Mass. will acquaint you of my study and reasons why I am here, and what I am trying to accomplish.¹⁶

The only excuse I can offer for so long a letter is that I have said but little concerning that which bears the weight of the life or death of a Race which confronts the onward march of our citizens.

With respect
Yours truly
A. C. Fletcher

Hon. Henry L. Dawes
U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C.

Notes

¹ Wajapa was a friend of Joseph La Flesche. Fletcher's biographer, Joan Mark, *A Stranger in her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), described Wajapa as "the emotional focus of Fletcher's journey." Nightly, Fletcher and Wajapa, whose grandfather had been an Omaha chief, communicated with each other as Susette translated. For more on Wajapa, see Mark, 48–59.

² For Alice Fletcher and her six-week trip to Lakota country, see Thomas Henry Tibbles, *Buckskin and Blanket Days* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1969), 236–47 and Mark, *Stranger in her Native Land*, 53–64.

³ For the treaties, see Charles J. Kappler, comp., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1904) 2:611–14; 872–73.

⁴ Benson Tong, *Susan La Flesche Picotte, M.D.: Omaha Indian Leader and Reformer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 18, see also 10–20. For additional material on Joseph La Flesche see Norma Kidd Green, *Iron Eye's Family: The Children of Joseph La Flesche* (Lincoln: Johnsen Publishing Co., 1969 esp. 17–55, and Clyde A. Milner II, *With Good Intentions: Quaker Work Among the Pawnees, Otos, and Omahas in the 1870s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 154–60.

⁵ The literature on Ponca removal is extensive. See, for example, John M. Coward, *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1830–1890* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 196–223; Valerie Sherer Mathes, "Ponca Chief Standing Bear: Catalyst for Indian Policy Reform," *South Dakota History* 30 (Fall 2000): 249–76; Mathes, "Helen Hunt Jackson and the Campaign for Ponca Restitution, 1880–1881, *ibid.*, 17 (Spring 1987): 23–42; Mathes, "Helen Hunt Jackson and the Ponca Controversy," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 39 (Winter 1989): 42–53; Coward, "Creating the Ideal Indian: The Case of the Poncas," *Journalism History* 21 (Autumn 1995): 112–21; Robert W. Mardock, "Standing Bear and the Reformers," in *Indian Leaders: Oklahoma's First Statesmen*, ed. H. Glenn Jordan and Thomas M. Holm (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1979), 101–13; James T. King, "A Better Way: General George Crook and the Ponca Indians," *Nebraska History* 50 (Fall 1969): 239–56;

Stanley Clark, "Ponca Publicity," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 29 (March 1943): 495–516; and Earl Hayter, "The Ponca Removal," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* 6 (July 1932): 263–75.

⁶ For concern about securing land titles, see Judith Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 99; and Mark, *Stranger in her Native Land*, 69–70.

⁷ The petition was published as Senate Miscellaneous Document 31, 47th Cong., 1st sess. See also Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe," *Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1905–06), 636–39 for the petition and a sampling of the appended comments. It also appears without the comments in *Congressional Record*, 47th Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 11, 1882, 342.

⁸ For Dawes's remarks on the petition and the Omahas' concern for owning their land in severity, see *Congressional Record*, Jan. 11, 1882, 342–43.

⁹ The classic study "The Omaha Tribe," by Fletcher and La Flesche, appeared as an annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for 1905–06, but was not published by the Government Printing Office until 1911.

¹⁰ The Omaha Allotment Act, which passed August 7, 1882, gave every member of the tribe a parcel of land ranging from 40 to 160 acres. See Kappler, *Laws and Treaties*, 1:212–14, for the text of the act. The Dawes Act appears in *ibid.*, 33–36.

¹¹ Fletcher perhaps has overstated the Omahas' desire to farm. Scholars writing of this period of Omaha history have noted, "For Omaha men, whose only previous horticultural labor had been helping women relatives clear small patches of bottomland for gardens, breaking the tough prairie sod was decidedly distasteful." Margot P. Liberty, W. Raymond Wood, and Lee Irwin, "Omaha" in *Handbook of North American Indians: Plains*, parts 1 and 2, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2001) 1:401–02.

¹² Samuel J. Kirkwood, former governor of Iowa (1860–64) was appointed secretary of the interior on March 8, 1881, and was succeeded on April 17, 1882, by Henry M. Teller.

¹³ Whether Fletcher succeeded in getting male doctors is unknown, but she did succeed in help-

ing one of the La Flesche daughters become the first Indian woman physician. Susan, the youngest of four daughters born to Joseph La Flesche and his Indian wife, Mary Gale, carefully tended to Fletcher from July to October 1883 when Fletcher was bedridden with inflammatory rheumatism. At Fletcher's encouraging, Sara Thompson Kinney, president of the Connecticut Indian Association, a branch of the Women's National Indian Association, funded most of Susan's medical training at the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia, where she graduated with honors in 1889. She became the government physician at the Omaha Agency Indian school and medical missionary for the Women's National Indian Association. See Benson Tong, *Susan La Flesche Picotte, M.D.* and Valerie Sherer Mathes, "Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte: The Reformed and the Reformer" in *Indian Lives: Essays on Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Native American Leaders*, ed. L. G. Moses and Raymond Wilson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993) 63–90; Mathes, "Susan La Flesche Picotte: Nineteenth-century Physician and Reformer," *Great Plains Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1993): 172–96; and Mathes, "Iron Eye's Daughters: Susette and Susan La Flesche, Nineteenth-century Indian Reformers," in *By Grit and Grace: Eleven Women who Shaped the American West*, ed. Glenda Riley and Richard W. Etulain (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997): 135–52.

¹⁴ Scrofula is a chronic disease of the lymph glands, forming external ulcers, usually hereditary and not contagious. Scurvy is a more likely disease stemming from a diet lacking in vegetables.

¹⁵ Delano A. Goddard (1831–82), editor of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, was a strong supporter of the Ponca cause, writing numerous pro-Indian editorials. His wife Martha Le Baron Goddard, d. 1888, was a book reviewer and poet and wrote for the *Worcester Spy*, as well as assisting her husband on the *Advertiser*.

¹⁶ Frederick Ward Putnam (1839–1915), director of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard, mentored Fletcher by introducing her to anthropology as a rigorous discipline. He was a leading figure largely responsible for the growth of anthropological museums, for the acceptance of anthropology as an academic discipline worthy of study, and as a popularizer of the subject.