

The Trajectory of An Opportunist, And The Writing Of History: The Real Life of Elizabeth J. French (1821-1900)

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The Canonical View of Elizabeth J. French

Below are some selections from recent academic works mentioning Elizabeth J. French (1821-1900), the Spiritualist medium and electro-biologist, and/or her daughters May French Sheldon and Belle French Patterson.

1. “The best-known 19th-century American women in (electrotherapy) was Elizabeth J. French (1821-1900) of Philadelphia, New York and Boston, who exhibited her electrotherapeutic appliances at the Centennial in 1876 and wrote several books on electrotherapy, including *A New Path In Electrical Therapeutics* (Philadelphia, 1873). In 1875, Mrs. French had patented an Improvement (sic) in electro-therapeutical appliances. At the time of the Centennial she was listed as the widow of Joseph French, a civil engineer.

Born Elizabeth Poortman in Mechanicsburg, PA, she studied and practiced medicine with her father, but upon marrying French she moved her practice to New York. By the time of her death, according to her New York Times obituary, she had achieved “almost world-wide” fame in electrotherapy “receiving commendation from the most distinguished members of the medical profession in her age and time.

Her marriage was evidently unhappy, as Dr. French had left her husband long before his death in 1871. Her temperance work might indicate that he drank. In any case, by 1860 she was living in a boardinghouse in New York City. Interestingly enough, many years later she was buried, not with her husband, but in the same Philadelphia cemetery plot as Thomas Culbertson, one of her fellow boarders in that house.

Two of her three children also had distinguished careers. May French Sheldon, noted African explorer, first woman fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, owned publishing houses in Boston and London. Belle French Patterson became a physician. Dr. French spent her last years in Boston living and practicing with this younger daughter.”¹

¹ Autumn Stanley. *Mothers and Daughters of Invention*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers Press, 1995 p. 120.

2. "May French shared a similar world-view but found a different way to make the primitive serve her feminist purposes. She was born in Beaver, Pennsylvania, to a wealthy and prominent family whose wealth came from sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations. In the 1860s, the family took an extended trip to Europe to round out the education of the two girls and also perhaps to lessen the traumatic impact of the Civil War."²

3. "(May French's) father was Colonel Joseph French, a civil engineer and mathematician whose family made its fortune as planters of sugar, cotton and tobacco. She was exposed to literature and female professionalism by her mother, Elizabeth J. Poorman -- a well-known and successful practicing medical doctor, spiritualist and specialist in holistic fads of the day such as water-cure therapy and electro-cranial diagnosis. Both May and her two sisters received informal medical training at their mother's knee, and though she never made a living as one, French-Sheldon would often list "doctor" among her accomplishments as an adult."³

4. "May French (1847-1936) was born in Beaver, Pennsylvania to a wealth and prominent family. Her mother was a respected physician, among the first generation of women to practice medicine in this country. Her father derived his fortune from sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations. In the 1860s, May and her sister Belle French Patterson, were educated by private tutors and then taken on an extended trip to Europe to round out their education."⁴

The origin of much of this scholarly material seems to be May French Sheldon's biographical blurb -- no doubt written by her -- from *The Congress of Women: Held in the Women's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, USA, 1893*⁵, which reads:

"Mrs. May French Sheldon was born in Bridgewater, Pa., May 10, 1847. Her parents were Col. Joseph French, a civil engineer of note and a grand nephew of Isaac Newton, and Elizabeth J. Poorman French. The daughter was educated in New York and abroad, and in 1876 married Eli Lemon Sheldon, American-born, but later a banker and publisher in London, England. Mrs. Sheldon is widely known as the translator of "Salamambo" and as the author of a number of successful novels short stories and essays. She is the owner of the publishing

² Louis M. Newman, "Coming of Age, But Not in Samoa", in Dolores Janiewski and Lois W. Banner, eds. *Reading Benedict/Reading Mead*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2004.

³ Tracey Jean Boisseau. *White Queen: May French Sheldon and the Imperial Origins Of American Feminist Identity*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004., p.8

⁴ Louise Michele Newman. *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origin of Feminism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University, 1999, p. 107.

⁵ Chicago, Monarch Book Company, 1894, pp. 131-4

house of Saxon & Co., of London, which issues "Everybody's Series." She has studied art and produced a number of portrait busts, and has also made a study of medicine under European specialists. In 1891 she undertook an exploring expedition into Africa, unattended by any white man or woman, and succeeded in circumnavigating Lake Chala, an exploit which has attracted universal attention. Her exhibits of objects of interest from the region visited received medals in three departments of the Columbian Exposition. She has been elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain, and is a member of the Writer's Club, of the Anthropological Society, Washington, and of similar organizations of note."

This semi-factual promotional material, in combination with the NYT's and Philadelphia Inquirer obituaries for Elizabeth J. French, and a promotional piece by Alice C. Royle on May French Sheldon in *Womanhood* for November of 1901⁶, are the raw genetic material out of which these significantly distorted, sometimes completely erroneous, and elided view of Elizabeth J. French and her "distinguished" daughters has been made.

The actual lives of Elizabeth J. French and her children were markedly different.

The Real Life of Elizabeth J. French And Her Children

Elizabeth J. Poorman was born in Mechanicsburg, PA, to John Poorman (1768-1834), a reasonably prosperous farmer and son of a farmer, and his wife, who may have been Elizabeth Harper, in 1821.

John Poorman was dead by 1835, and it's safe to assume that Elizabeth J. Poorman married Joseph French, an engineer circa 1847, because we find the Joseph French family, in the 1850 US Federal Census, living in Ward 4 Allegheny City, in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in an extended family arrangement that includes Joseph (occupation "engineer"), Elizabeth, their children Mary (age 3) and Isabella (Belle, newborn), as well as members of Elizabeth J. Poorman French's family: mother Elizabeth (age 56), sister Eliza A. (age 28) and sister Rebecca (age 18). The sheer size of the household is noteworthy, and certainly speaks to Joseph French's earning power-- but decidedly NOT to independent means.

⁶ "A Southerner by birth, and the daughter of the late Col. Joseph French, the mathematician, while her mother was the celebrated Dr. E. J. French, all her young life was associated with gifted men, Washington Irving being a frequent visitor and one of the first to instill great thoughts into his youthful listener's mind....She was educated in Italy... She has always been a good classical scholar...." (p. 392).

The Washington Irving reference can safely be ignored, I think. I have been unable to locate any Joseph French who was, in the time period, a recognized mathematician, and the Col. Joseph French who does appear in the historical record significantly was an Iowan born about 100 years too early to be May's father.

This snapshot is actually one of the end of Elizabeth J. French's married life⁷. By the end of 1852, or early 1853 at the latest, E. J. French had effectively left her husband in Pittsburgh, and moved -- quite probably with her lover Thomas Culbertson -- to New York, more or less permanently.

We know this to be the case because, in early 1853, Elizabeth French was aggressively marketing her abilities amongst the NY Spiritualists, as **a spirit medium**. Thomas Culbertson (her assistant⁸, promoter, and almost certainly her lover) enticed both Robert Owen (in 1855) and Benjamin Coleman (in 1860) -- two giants of Modern Spiritualism -- to laud French's gifts in print, but it was the way French handled George Doughty, a well-heeled resident of Queens, that first brought Elizabeth French into the public eye: as the alleged defrauder of Doughty and his family, to the tune of some \$15,000 1853 dollars. The Brooklyn *Eagle* and NYT⁹ covered the story in some detail as the scandal rose to the status of a formal court case complete with "insanity by spiritualism" overtones, but French's name was for the most part kept out of the papers¹⁰: she is referred to only as "the female medium."¹¹

Although it is hysterical anti-Spiritualist propaganda, J. W. Daniel's summary of this scandal in his *Spiritualism versus Christianity* (1855) is worth repeating, as against the garbled and opaque coverage in the *New York Times*, with which it aligns as to matters of fact:

⁷ I cannot locate Joseph French in the 1860 census. We know he was not living with his children, who were in a boarding house in NYC with their mother and their mother's lover in 1860. In the 1870 census, French (occupation: superintendent of waterworks) is living in a boarding house in Pittsburgh. Modern documents suggest he died in 1871, but I can find no record of his death.

⁸ Contemporary participant accounts of French's seances, such as remain, invariably have Thomas Culbertson acting as French's assistant -- the role Spiritualist debunkers assign to the 'confederate' in fraudulent practices. See for example Professor Halleck's description of the French seance in November of 1860, at "the residence of Mrs. E. J. French, at No. 8, Fourth Avenue", in *The Spiritual Magazine* for April of 1861 (p. 174).

⁹ The NYT coverage does provide some detail that is interesting in reconstructing the event, in the absence of the court records. Among the payments received by E. J. French from Doughty in 1851 or 1852 was a \$5000 payment for the rights to an un-named patent. As it happens, one J. Culbertson of Cincinnati was awarded a patent in 1846 for a brick-making machine, and Thomas Culbertson and George Scott were awarded a patent in 1850 for an improved brick press. Thomas Culbertson's involvement in the brick-making business in the later 1840s is discussed at length in W. R. Yates' *Joseph Wharton: Quaker Industrial Pioneer* (1987). The Culbertsons, if my reading of the periodical literature is correct, were in NYC in the later 1840s, attempting to raise money for their inventions. Whether this is our Thomas Culbertson (who had a brother, J., Benjamin Coleman tells us), and whether the patents are the ones at issue in the Doughty case, will not be resolved until the court records are obtained, but the coincidence is striking.

¹⁰ There were a number of prominent New York jurists among the leaders of the New York Spiritualist community.

¹¹ The case reached the New York Supreme Court, which had to claw back assets Doughty had transferred to E. J. French, in the name of Doughty's estate and heirs.

“Mr. George Doughty, a respectable farmer of Flushing, Long Island, “possessed of considerable property, having his interest excited by the reports of the doings of the mediums...resolved to seek out one of the professors of the spiritual doctrines, and make himself acquainted with the mysteries they pretended to disclose. With that intention he proceeded to the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he was introduced to a professed medium, a lady named Mrs. French, whom, after a short acquaintance, he invited to visit him and his family on Long Island; and from that time -- some two years ago -- up to within a recent date, she has been a constant visitor at the farmer’s house, where she was, at the wish of the unfortunate man, treated as one of the family....Such was the influence she acquired over the farmer, and the strange delusion under which he labored, that she induced him to adopt her as his daughter, and finally to make over to her nearly his entire property.

“...By threats of violence, [Doughty] compelled [his wife] to make an assignment of her interest in his affairs to him; after which he proceeded to convert his effects into cash -- which amounted to about 15,000 dollars in all -- and this he immediately paid over to the medium...upon which the latter took French-leave and departed, going, it is reported, back to Pittsburgh.¹²

“...Since the family of poor Doughty were thus left to grieve in comparative poverty, the successful medium has occasionally made her appearance in New York. She sometimes rides in a splendid carriage, and parades herself....

“Encouraged by her unparalleled success, she continues to officiate in the capacity of a medium. At the present time a Mrs. French, from Pittsburgh, occupies a room next door to the private sanctum of the editor of the *Spiritual Telegraph*!¹³

“He honors her with the following notice:

“Mrs. E. J. French, clairvoyant physician, has taken an office in our establishment, 342 Broadway, where she proposes to hold her seances for the investigation and treatment of diseases, etc., and where she will be happy to meet all who may be in need of her services.”¹⁴

At the time, the *New York Times* referred to her only as “a medium”. But, the *Baltimore Sun* blew her cover, reporting in March of 1853 that:

¹² Thusfar, J. W. Daniels purports to be transcribing an article from the *Brooklyn Eagle* for February 25, 1852.

¹³ Samuel Brittan.

¹⁴ J. W. Daniels. *Spiritualism Versus Christianity*... New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856 pp. 202-3.

“Mrs. E. J. French, the female "medium", denies through the *Pittsburg Gazette* that she defrauded Mr. Doughty of New York (who has become insane, as is alleged, through spiritual rappings) out of \$15,000. All the money, she says, she ever obtained from him, was with the knowledge and consent of his family. She doubts his insanity, expect it be on the subject of slavery, and adds that the Doughty family were all cured of the small-pox, through the agency of her magnetic powers.”¹⁵

French lay low after the Doughty affair, but continued to practice a wide variety of mediumship: trance, physical manifestations, drawing, direct writing. She worked within the vibrant NY Spiritualist community, advertised in Spiritualist papers, and in many ways was a pioneer of various forms of mediumship: particularly, materializations and painting.

In 1857 or 1858, French met and took under her wing one Emma Harding, an English actress who'd been brought to the US to perform on Broadway in 1856, and who -- at the time she met French -- was living on the margins of the NY spiritualist community, editing the periodical of the *Society for Diffusion of Spiritualist Knowledge*.

French, according to Emma Harding's memoirs, moved Emma and her mother Ann Sophia Floyd (then known as Ann S. Harding) into the boarding house French lived in with her three daughters, and her lover Thomas Culbertson, and began to instruct Emma in aspects of mediumship. This relationship was to be fateful, and important, for both woman, as Miss Emma Harding became, successively, Miss Emma Harding, then Mrs. Emma Hardinge, then Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten: all incarnations of the famous Spiritualist speaker, propagandist and author, and one of the founders of the Theosophical Society.

In the US Federal census for 1860, French is listed in the house -- with the Hardings, Culbertson and her daughters -- as a physician.

¹⁵ Baltimore *Sun*, March 25, 1853, p. 1.

2		Annular	1
3	1088	1082 1079 Laurie Whitney	25
4		Mary Ann Fugan	20
5		Anna Clark	40
6		Thos Culbertson	49
7		E J French	40
8		Elizabeth P	15
9		Mary L.	13
10		Belle F. "	10
11		Ann S Harding	66
12		Emma "	29
13		Hattie Ordway	24

Excerpt from the 1860 census, showing Thos Culbertson (6), E J French (7), Elizabeth P. French (8), Mary (May) L. French (9), Belle F. French (10), Ann S. Harding [Ann Sophia Floyd] (11), Emma Harding [Emma Hardinge Britten] (12), and Hattie Ordway [Dr. Hattie E. Green, electro-physician of Chicago, Illinois] (13), living together in a boarding house in lower Manhattan. Cuthbertson's occupation is undecipherable.

French's decision to live -- we presume openly -- with her lover¹⁶ while her husband was still alive and her marriage still legally binding was not, as one may think, particularly

¹⁶ Emma Hardinge Britten students will note the tension between Emma's obvious knowledge of E. J. French's domestic arrangements, and her strident anti-free-love position, in public forums. Throughout her life, EHB and her network -- the Countess of Caithness, in particular -- will puff French as and when required, and EHB in particular brings her readers back to French's mediumship quite often. No mention is made, of course, of French's private life.

daring or risky, at this time.¹⁷ In fact, it was positively trendy, in the late 1850s, to engage in this sort of extralegal relationship, because the NY Spiritualist community was a hot bed of what was at the time referred to as “free love”: the selection of one’s mate without regard to existing marriage bonds, based on “spiritual” and physical affinities, and in many cases the repudiation of marriage as an oppressive and unnatural institution.¹⁸

As a “physician” rather than a “medium,” French was free to pursue a wider variety of money-getting schemes. From her offices at 341 Broadway, French offered

“THE NERVE-SOOTHING VITAL FLUIDS, A new Medicine Purely Vegetable. PREPARED ENTIRELY BY SPIRIT-DIRECTION, THROUGH MRS. E. J. FRENCH, MEDIUM, . . . &c. MRS. E. FRENCH, LATE OF PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, CLAIRVOYANT AND HEALING PHYSICIAN, Office 341 Broadway, opposite Telegraph Building. Hours, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and 2 to 4 p.m. All morbid conditions of the human organism delineated and prescribed for with accuracy hitherto unknown in the annals of Mesmeric Phenomena.”

¹⁷ A death notice in the New York Herald for December 6, 1861, reads: “French. -- In Jersey City, on Thursday morning, December 5, after a short illness, EMMA AMELIA, daughter of Mrs. Elizabeth French, widow of Henry French, aged 6 years and 5 months.” The husband’s name is wrong, and E. J. French will not be a widow until 1871, but the notice is tantalizing none the less, as Emma Amelia would have been born in 1855: a year or more after our E. J. French took up with Culbertson.

¹⁸ I continue to be astounded by the extent to which the free-love camp of American Spiritualism -- touching as it does canonical figures like Horace Greeley as well as figures like Victorian Woodhull -- is ignored by modern historians.

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No letter will be answered unless it contains money or P. O. stamp.

Mrs. E. J. FRENCH,
Clairvoyant and Healing Physician.

Office 780 Broadway, second floor, front room.—
The morbid conditions of the human organism de-
tected and prescribed for with unparalleled suc-
cess.

TERMS—For examination and prescription \$5,
when the patient is present, if absent \$10. All
subsequent examinations \$2. Terms strictly in ad-
vance. In order to insure prompt attention some
of the leading symptoms must be given when send-
ing a lock of hair.

Hours from 10 to 1 and from 2 to 4, except Sat-
urdays and Sundays.

French was very much a practicing physical medium¹⁹ at the time, despite -- or perhaps enabled by -- the brass nameplate with "physician" on it, outside her door. Benjamin Coleman, the dean of London spiritualists and one of the driving forces behind *The Spiritual Magazine*, describes in an essay in that periodical for October of 1861, a series of seances -- some explicitly coordinated by Thomas Culbertson -- he participated in with French in February of 1860, writing that:

"My stay in New York being limited, I begged Mr. Culbertson to arrange a sitting for me either on Friday or Saturday. Mrs. French, being consulted, said she was engaged professionally (that is, as a physician) on Friday, and she had promised to take her family to the theatre on Saturday evening, it must, therefore, be one evening in the following week, and as she entirely deferred to the dictate of the spirits, she would be told by them, and would then send to inform me of the day. I continued my conversation with Mr. Culbertson, who was showing me a number of the earliest (spirit-induced) drawings (of French), and explaining the circumstances under which they were obtained, when Mrs. French, entranced, again entered the room, and advancing to me, said, 'My name is Jemmy -- I have

¹⁹ In various places, Emma Hardinge Britten credits French with spirit materialization and the detection (not to say the conjuration) of elemental spirits, in addition to French's direct-voice mediumship, drawing mediumship and conventional rap-and-knock skills.

not the pleasure, sir, of knowing you, but you are very well known in the spirit world; and hearing you express a desire to see our drawings, I am sent to say that we shall be glad to see you at eight o'clock on Saturday evening. We cannot promise much, but we will do the best we can -- good day, sir;" and with a formal bow she retired. Mr. Culbertson said the engagement was binding on her, and would supersede the intended visit to the theatre, and as the result enables me to record one of the most wonderful facts developed in Spiritualism, and witnessed by myself, my readers will no doubt think the change of purpose an advantage.

On the evening fixed I went, accompanied by Judge Edmonds²⁰, who had not seen this new phase of spirit power...."²¹

By day a fee-taking mesmeric physician and patent medicine dealer, and after hours a private (that is, not a fee-taking) medium, living with her daughters in a Spiritualist boarding house and surrounded by the NY Spiritualist safety-net: this is E. J. French's life in the early 1860s. Mary is in her mid-teens; Belle and Elizabeth are tweeners. There is no private tutor, as far as can be determined; no luxurious lifestyle funded by the wealth accumulated from plantations; no European tours.²²

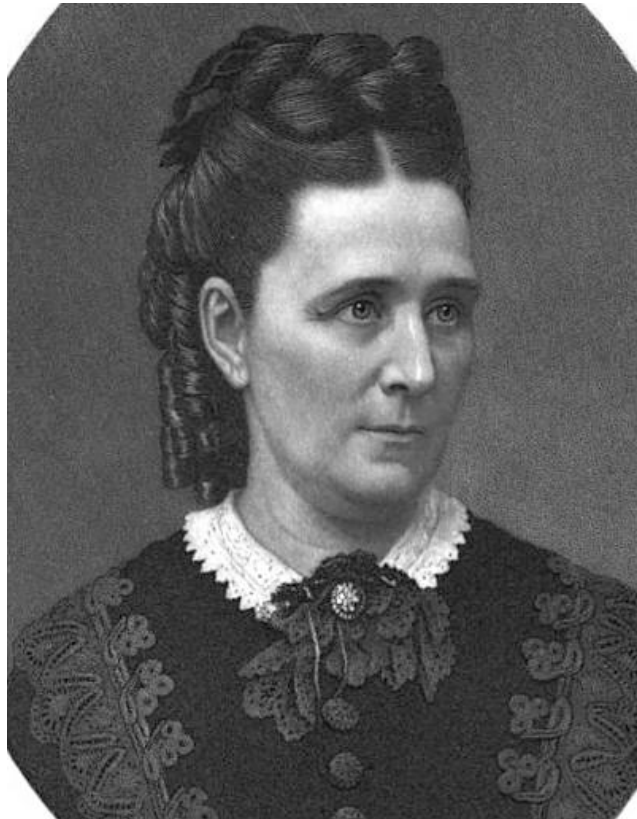
By the end of the 1860s, many female media like French had moved on to other fields, or were attempting to. Her friend Emma -- by 1870 Emma Hardinge Britten -- had moved out of trance lecturing (her mainstay in the late 1850s and early 1860s) into an ultimately-unsuccessful attempt in 1860-62 to establish herself as the director of a philanthropic institution for "outcast women", had returned to the UK in an attempt to launch a career as a secular lecturer (and failed), had written the book that made her famous, *Modern American Spiritualism*, and by 1872, was settled in Boston with her husband William Britten, where she edited a short-lived occult periodical and practiced -- As Dr. Emma Hardinge Britten -- a brand of galvanic medicine very much like that of Elizabeth J. French.

²⁰ Though it cannot be proved, it seems entirely plausible to me that French was shielded, during the Doughty affair, by Edmonds.

²¹ Benjamin Coleman, "Spiritualism in America: IV" in *The Spiritual Magazine*, V2, No. 10, October 1861, p. 436.

²² The May French in immigration records who toured Europe as a small child, in the early 1850s, is the daughter of a Major French and the sister of a Susan French. Those facts may not have been apparent to scholars viewing transcriptions of the actual records.

French, by the early 1870s, was ensconced in Philadelphia²³, and involved in the movement of the moment to which middle-class money and attention were flowing: temperance. She carried with her to Philadelphia her mainstay -- galvanic medicine -- and in 1873 published what she no doubt thought would be her practice-founding book, *A New Path in Electronic Therapeutics*. On the back of that book, and her involvement in the pristine cause of temperance, began to promote herself via the popular media.



EJ French circa 1873.

²³ As was Thomas Culbertson, “gentleman”, living in central Philadelphia at the time of the 1870 census. In the 1870 US Federal Census, one Elizabeth J. French and May French are living in Cleveland, Ohio with one Belle Patterson, her husband Columbus Patterson (age 32, coal dealer) and the Patterson’s young son Harrie (sic), newborn. May and Elizabeth J are noted by the enumerator as “at home”, not as “visiting”. May is as yet not married, so if these are our Frenchs (and there is some indication they are not) the first marriage that modern scholars attribute to her took place, it took place after 1870. In October of 1872, if not earlier, E. J. French is installed at 1609 Summer Street in Philadelphia, advertising herself in local papers as “Prof. E. J. French” and offering instruction of various sorts, including in “The Chemistry of the Kitchen” at her home.

She became “Professor”, and then quickly “Dr.”. But the author of *A New Path in Electronic Therapeutics* (1874, “fourth edition” 1877) is in transition. Merely “Elizabeth J. French”²⁴ as author, but just above and below her by-line we find reference to “Prof. French.” She is not yet a Dr. (and indeed, as far as state licensure is concerned, she never became a doctor).

The book, like Emma Hardinge Britten’s *The Electric Physician* (1872) before it, is referenced by people who appear not to have examined it. It was self-help oriented, and was, at the time, not seen as in any sense a medical textbook²⁵. As the reviewer of the *American Journal of Homeopathic Materia Medica* wrote:

“The work of Mrs. French is intended for popular use; but treats of at least one point which no physician can pass with indifference, viz: Cranial Electric Diagnosis. The experiments conducted in the old world by Dr. Ferrer, with a physiological and anatomical purpose, were years ago anticipated it would seem, for a diagnostic purpose by an American lady physician, who has made her discoveries the basis of a highly successful practice for a long period.”²⁶

Whether her practice was successful is, I think, more than an open question. Certainly, she was committed to the attempt. In 1875, she was granted a US patent (167162) for a particularly-shaped electrode for galvanic medicine “consisting of a triple strip...formed of strips of zinc, copper and brass”:

²⁴ There is a multi-page, largely fabulating, testimonial from Emma Hardinge Britten to Prof. Elizabeth J. French’s skill as a doctor, claiming (very opaquely) that French cured her of a serious voice-related illness. The illness is fictional, and Hardinge Britten makes no mention of the fact that she was, in effect, French’s housemate for more than a year.

²⁵ The *Scientific American* in its January 31, 1874 issue says:

“This work is lucidly written, and contains much that is new and even surprising to the reader, especially the accounts of the diagnosis of diseases in various parts of the body by applying the voltaic current to different parts of the cranium. Dr. French also publishes a lecture on alcohol and sells an electric baking powder.”

The coupling of “electric” diagnosis of disease with the focus on the cranium as the diagnostic region will be seen by Spiritualist and occult scholars for what it in fact is: a blending of mesmerism and phrenology, wrapped in what was at that time high technology. The final sentence is code -- it damns French, for *Scientific American* readers of the time, irremediably.

²⁶ J. C. M. “Book Notices”, *American Journal of Homeopathic Materia Medica*, April 1874, p. 315.

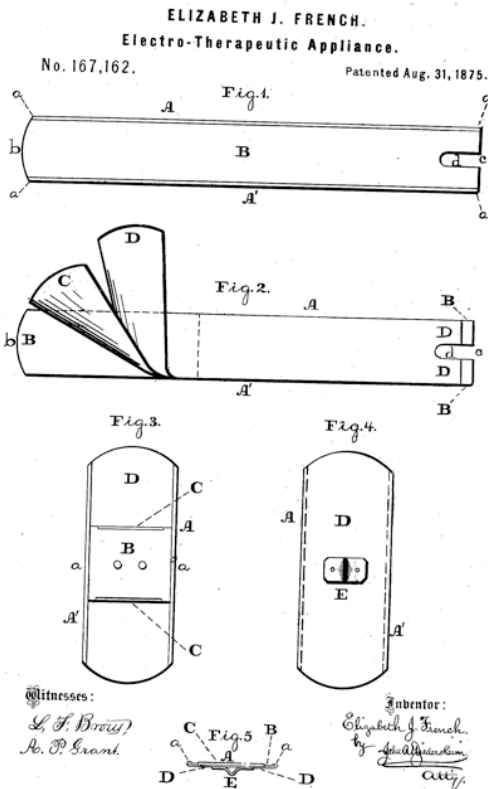


Illustration from E. J. French's patent application.

And she made -- as modern historians dependent on Centennial materials point out -- various attempts to market her apparatus, as distinct from her method: another common sales tactic of galvanic physicians and electro-biologists.²⁷

But French did not make galvanic medicine pay. As we follow French's peregrinations from the mid-1870s²⁸ until the mid-1880s in the newspapers of the Eastern states, what we find is not a successful and prosperous physician tending her practice in Philadelphia, but a more-or-less constantly touring lecturer, following the paths of the Eastern US Spiritualist circuit, delivering -- more often than not -- hygiene and domestic science lectures.

²⁷ To my mind, what puts French's galvanic medical works above the run-of-the-mill electro-biology tracts of the period is that she is not primarily concerned with selling an apparatus (as for example is Emma Hardinge Britten in her *The Electric Physician*) but rather for making her case for the 'science' behind her work.

²⁸ French is installed as the president of a Temperance Union Home for alcoholics, at 1021 South 17th Street, in Philadelphia, in 1874. I suspect this was her final attempt to find employment in Philadelphia sufficient to meet her needs, and prevent a return to the lecturing circuit.

PARLOR LECTURE.

Dr. ELIZABETH J. FRENCH,

Discoverer of "Electro Cranial Diagnosis." TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, and FRIDAY, 3 p. m., at Parlor A, GRAND HOTEL. Dr. FRENCH will give the second and last course of Parlor Talks on PHYSIOLOGY and HYGIENE, to ladies. These talks embrace the description and functions of the principal organs of the body, with practical instructions how to preserve health and beauty, demonstrated by a life-size manikin, and are pronounced by thousands throughout the country invaluable to both young and old.

Tickets for the course, \$5; can be obtained at the door, or at Dr. French's rooms, Grand Hotel, where she can be consulted professionally NEXT WEEK ONLY.

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Cincinnati Daily Gazette, 4-14-1877, p. 1.

Mrs. Dr Elizabeth French delivered a free lecture in the Methodist church on Saturday night to a moderate good house. The subject of her lecture was "Enlightened Motherhood." She had a manikin with which she showed and explained the different organs and parts of the body to the satisfaction of every person present. Mrs. French will also deliver a lecture on temperance every night this week at 7.15. Let everybody turn out and have an old time temperance revival. The subject of her lecture this afternoon will be "The Respiratory System—Beauty of Form and the Complexion."

Wheeling (West Virginia) Register, 4-4-1881, p. 4.²⁹

We need to be clear about this: French is traveling to live, lecturing for as long as her sponsors or the crowds pay, before moving on. Sometimes she is able to stay put for a while -- she spends nearly six months, for example, in San Francisco, from December of 1878 until April of 1879 -- but for the most part she is on the road, more or less continually, from the publication of her "great medical work" until the end 1889. This pattern is common, particularly amongst women plying their trade in Spiritualism and related disciplines: periodic attempts to establish bases of operations and steady localize incomes that do not require travel, followed by periods -- sometimes measured in decades -- of itinerant lecturing and teaching, in order to earn their living.

This life -- the itinerant medical lecturer -- in particular befell many galvanic medical practitioners, including Emma Hardinge Britten, who dropped the profession in 1875, to

²⁹ It was common for female lecturers on medical or scientific topics to drift -- intentionally or otherwise -- into what we would now think of as sex education. Judging from contemporary newspaper coverage of her lectures, French may have done this more aggressively than other lecturers, including holding periodic "females-only" sessions.

re-enter the ranks of Spiritualism as a propagandist, lecturing and publishing as a Spiritualist and occultist for the remainder of her life. Regardless of its practitioners' various intents, the various species of galvanic medicine and electro-biology were understood, by the mainstream medical consumer of the time, to be quackery, and it was very difficult indeed to make such a professional focus pay, except in cities where there were few other practitioners, and a relatively large community of people for whom mesmerism was a matter of science.³⁰

After 1890 or so, we see press mentions of Elizabeth J. French begin to cluster, exclusively, in the papers in the greater Boston area, and her discourse takes on a different tone, as exemplified in this poem of French's from a February 1890 edition of *The Springfield Republican*:

³⁰ This is not to say that she did not make efforts to present herself as affluent and well-connected. When she returned to Philadelphia for a spell in June of 1878 after her time in California, she (I am sure) arranged for the following to be inserted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for June 19:

“Dr. Elizabeth J. French, a lady whose reputation among her fellow citizens of Philadelphia has been due, not only to her eminent professional standing, but also to her prominent connection with the charitable undertakings hgat have so largely benefitted from her liberal purse, is at the St. George Hotel. Dr. French is accompanied by Mrs. Stanford, the wide of Governor Leland Stanford, and her family, and by Mrs. Hopkins, the widow of Mr. Mark Hopkins, of the Central Pacific railroad, one of the men who counted his wealth in millions.”

What is perhaps not apparent to a modern reader of this passage is the presence, in that moment, of French's older Spiritualist network: both the Stanford family and the Hopkins family were deeply involved in Modern Spiritualism.

EVENING SONG.

[Written by ELIZABETH FRENCH for The Sunday
Republican.]

Little babe, so sweet and fair,
Lay thy head on mother's breast,
Thou shalt slumber safely there;
Mother's arms are baby's nest.
Close enfolded thou mayst sleep,
Mother-love safe guard will keep.

Gently fall the eyelids white;
List—the soft breath comes and goes,
With the slowly-fading light
Baby sinks to still repose.
Sleep, my darling, sleep and rest,
Mother's arms are baby's nest.

Heaven keep thee, baby fair!
Heaven grant thy hours may be
Sheltered from disturbing care
In a sweet security.
Sleep, my babe, lie still and rest,
God will guard thee—He loves best.

In 1887 or thereabouts, French apparently had a conversion experience -- perhaps, an entirely genuine one. She became, if we can credit church materials, a Christian Scientist³¹, and quite naturally began gravitating to Boston, where she was, by 1891, the Secretary of the Ladies Loyal Relief Organization³². She moved to Boston permanently no later than 1894.³³

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³² As yet untraced, but savoring of a survival from the relief leagues of the Civil War period, many of which became womens' civic associations after the war.

³³ Her obituary in the Philadelphia Inquirer notes she was "for the last six years a resident of Boston." The Boston papers have her "visiting her friend, Mrs. A. L. Bliss of Locust Street" in July of 1894, Belle French Patterson is licensed to practice medicine in Massachusetts on December 26, 1894. All that, I believe, grounds the dating.

The notion that Elizabeth French's father was a physician (completely erroneous) has its root in the Inquirer's obituary. In fact, its wording is telling as compared to the modern scholars I quoted at the outset: "Dr. French was born in Mechanicsburg, Pa., in 1821, and was the daughter of a physician. From an early age she worked with her father in Mechanicsburg, but after her marriage removed to New York, practicing there and in Philadelphia for many years."

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Christian Science Journal, Volume 1, 1887, in section entitled "Christian Scientists' Professional Cards"

There is no indication in the public record that either Elizabeth or Belle were practicing medicine in Boston from the start of 1895 until Elizabeth's death, in Belle's rooms at the boarding house at 195 Huntington Avenue³⁴, in January of 1900. Belle appears in the public record not at all during this period, and Elizabeth appears on the coattails of her daughter May, lecturing in Boston, if she appears at all.³⁵

At her death, the *New York Times* publishes an obituary that in light of her life must certainly have been written for its whitewashing effects:

³⁴ In Clark's Boston Blue Book for 1895, Dr. E. J. French and Mrs. French-Patterson are listed at that address. Dr. Belle French Patterson is listed in Clark's Boston Blue Book for 1901 as at that address. In both the 1890 and 1900 census, Columbus Patterson is to be found, at home, in Michigan, with his wife Isabella. This leads me to suspect the 1870 record showing Pattersons and Frenchs cohabiting in Cleveland, Ohio, despite the statistical probabilities.

³⁵ Her association with Hattie Ordway appears to be active. French's secular essays -- some of which have a socialist flavor -- are being published, in Chicago, in pamphlet form, in 1899 and 1900, and I can only imagine that Ordway is the motive force behind that.

DR. ELIZABETH J. FRENCH DEAD.

**She Was Distinguished as a Physician,
Writer, and Lecturer.**

BOSTON, Jan. 11.—Dr. Elizabeth J. French, one of the most distinguished women in the medical fraternity of this country, died at the home of her daughter, Dr. Belle French Patterson, on Huntington Avenue, this afternoon, after a short illness.

Dr. French was born in Mechanicsburg, Penn., in 1821, the daughter of a physician, and from an early age worked with her father at the place of her birth. Later, after her marriage, she removed to New York, and continued in practice there and in Philadelphia for many years, and for the last six years in Boston, with an office on Huntington Avenue.

Her special line of work was in the medical and therapeutic uses of electricity and electro-cranial diagnosis, in which she established a fame almost world-wide, receiving commendation from the most distinguished members of the medical profession in her age and time.

Dr. French was a strong advocate of temperance, having lectured extensively on this subject, and being the originator of the Women's Praying Band. She also was the author of several books on her special medical work and upon temperance.

She is survived by two daughters, the elder being May French Sheldon, the first female Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of England, having achieved distinction in African exploration and as an author and translator. She now resides in London.

The younger daughter, Dr. Belle French Patterson, is a practitioner and lecturer on health topics, residing in Boston, making her home with her mother and continuing the work begun with her mother.

NYT Obituary, January 12, 1900.

Correcting The Distortions

In summary, here are the necessary corrections to prevailing modern lines on Elizabeth J. French and her daughters May and Belle.

Modern Line	Historical Record
Elizabeth J. French the daughter of a physician.	Elizabeth J. French the daughter of a farmer.
Elizabeth J. French a world-famous doctor.	<p>Elizabeth J. French a marginally successful spiritualist mesmeric healer and galvanic medical practitioner.</p> <p>Elizabeth J. French named in a significant fraud case in the early 1850s, the substance of which she does not deny.</p>
Family of Elizabeth J. French affluent; children raised in affluence; educated abroad	<p>Family middle-class; father employed. Family dispersed in early 1850s; Elizabeth and children live in boarding houses with Elizabeth's lover and Spiritualist associates in the 1850s and 1860s. Children educated in the US, no doubt haphazardly.</p>
May and Belle's father a mathematician and "colonel."	May and Belle's father a middle-class engineer.

Modern academic portrayals of Elizabeth French are frequently wrong: in fact, and in connotative tone. Elizabeth J. French, like so many of her important female contemporaries, was a working opportunist, attempting to make mesmerism, Spiritualism and associated disciplines pay, at a practical, work-a-day level. That is, from my perspective, an interesting story that deserves treatment from feminist scholars, particularly given the plain fact that Modern Spiritualism was driven, publicly and privately, as a movement largely by women.

And like not a few of her contemporaries -- Cora Richmond, Emma Hardinge Britten, Helena Blavatsky -- she learned what paid by stepping over the line into illegality and scandal, only to draw back and adopt safer practices with little or no chance of exposure or threat of scandal.

French was not an orthodox or pioneering medical pioneer of any sort, but she was a female pioneer in a much more interesting discourse: that of the occult revival in the second half of the nineteenth century. She was an old-school mesmerist, who followed that thread into Modern Spiritualism and then into galvanic medicine, and finally into Christian Science at the end of the century. In so doing, her life threads its way through many of the discourses that offered intelligent articulate women opportunities to earn, develop a public following and a personal brand, and learn -- to their dismay, often -- about the hard, heart-breaking work of getting a living in the metaphysical trades.

More work remains to be done on Elizabeth French's three children and their lives from 1860 onward. Elizabeth P. French, in the boarding house in 1860, disappears entirely from the record thereafter; May is invisible after 1870, at present, until married to Eli Lemon Sheldon in London³⁶; Belle, far from being a "well-known physician," is similarly difficult to pin down until she receives her medical license in Boston in 1894. That all three children suffered hardship of one sort or another seems likely; that May and Belle (whom I credit with writing E. F. French's obituaries) developed a capability for fabulation similar to that of their mother, seems plain to me.

As more and more primary material is recovered and digitized, I expect that two things I hope to have demonstrated in this short piece will become commonplace: (1) contemporary academic 'scholarship' will in many cases be shown to have diverged very far indeed from historical fact, through repetition of secondary materials, and no doubt without intent; and (2) the extent to which Modern Spiritualism permeates other disciplines' canons-of-notable-figures will become increasingly apparent to mainstream academics.

³⁶ There are similar distortions in the standard academic potted histories of May French Shelton, most of which are due to uncritical acceptance of roughly contemporary materials designed to puff Shelton and her work. The "publishing house" she and her husband are variously asserted to have owned, for example, apparently had no more concrete existence than an imprint and an address, and published only -- so far as is known -- the work of May French Shelton and her husband, who wrote popular books under the pseudonym Don Lemon. May French Sheldon's papers at the Library of Congress ought to be looked into, carefully.