
Bessie L. Moses

1893-1965, BALTIMORE CITY

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Until 1936, American women had little access to birth control. The rigid Comstock Laws, proposed by antivice reformer, Anthony Comstock, and passed by Congress in 1873, tightened the existing law against obscenity and specified that birth-control information and items could not be mailed or imported. Although this censorship prevented couples from limiting family size and posed sometimes life-threatening health problems for all women, the poor were most vulnerable. Limited incomes and large families significantly reduced standards of living and quality of life. Untold numbers of women, particularly poor women, attempted to terminate unwanted pregnancies through illegal or self-inflicted abortions. They paid heavy tolls in morbidity and mortality.

In 1916, Margaret Sanger opened America's first birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, New York.⁹ A decade later, a group of liberal leaders determined to save women's lives opened a similar clinic in Baltimore and chose Dr. Bessie Moses as its first medical director.

Bessie Moses was born in Baltimore during the waning days of horsecars and kerosene street lamps. After attending public schools, she graduated in 1915 from Goucher College and then studied biology at Johns Hopkins



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University. Moses wanted to study medicine, but discouraged by her family, she spent the next two years teaching biology and zoology at Tulane University and Wellesley College.

Moses persevered, however, and by 1922, she had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Johns Hopkins Medical School, followed by an internship in obstetrics and gynecology. Starting private practice in Baltimore in 1924, she would practice without interruption until the day before her death in 1965 (Guttmacher 7).

When Baltimore's birth-control clinic opened in 1927, it was Moses who saw the first patient. For the next twenty-nine years, she was the guiding spirit of that clinic, remaining positive despite the worry that Comstock laws might close the clinic. But Moses drew strength from her meetings with Margaret Sanger and frequently mentioned that Sanger's courage had reinforced her own.

In 1932, Moses testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee of the United States Congress in an effort to repeal the Comstock Laws:

...We have found by bitter experience that women already in ill health, not advised (about birth control), kept returning to the hospital, pregnant, and had to have abortions performed in order to save their lives. Many of these women died prematurely because of pregnancies superimposed on their already diseased bodies.

.. After the opening of our Baltimore Clinic, we soon discovered that the only supplies which we could get were made abroad and that it was against the law to import them. ..We have no law in Maryland, but we are, much to our distaste, daily breaking the Federal Law by receiving supplies by mail and express.

... Unless scientific articles and books on contraception are sent freely through the mails to doctors and medical schools, it will be impossible for medical students and physicians to be properly informed concerning the harmless and safe methods of contraception. ..We resent, as physicians, any limitation on the part of the government to our right to procure any medical articles, books or instruments from any source. (Moses)

Despite Moses's efforts, not until 1936 did a federal court, rather than the United States Congress, rule that the Comstock Act did not apply to birth control. That same year, Moses published *Contraception as a Therapeutic Measure*, a popular work that met great demand. A year later, the American Medical Association endorsed birth control as an essential health service. By 1940, the Baltimore Birth Control Clinic became the Maryland League for Planned Parenthood.

In addition to her tenure at the clinic, Moses taught obstetrics and gynecology at various Baltimore hospitals and at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. She also offered marriage education courses at Goucher and Hood College.

During her distinguished career, Moses garnered many awards, including Planned Parenthood's Laske Award in 1950. Also, the Federation of Jewish Women's Organizations of Maryland recognized her work. Finally, a posthumous induction into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame gave her a permanent spot in the annals of Maryland history. Bessie Moses died in 1965, the same year the Supreme Court ruled as unlawful states' prohibiting couples from using birth-control devices. #

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HISTORY

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