

# GERTRUDE STANTON (1863-1931): THE FIRST WOMAN LICENSED TO PRACTICE OPTOMETRY IN THE UNITED STATES

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doi 10.14434/hindsight.v5i1i.28765

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## ABSTRACT

*Dr. Ella Gertrude Smith Ayer Stanton Jones (1863-1931), better known as Gertrude Stanton, was the first woman licensed to practice optometry in the United States. A native of Iowa, Stanton began her career as a teacher, but eventually moved to Minnesota where she received training and began to work as an itinerant refracting optician or optometrist, building her professional reputation through clever marketing. In 1901, shortly after the passage of the first optometry licensure law in Minnesota, Stanton applied for and received a license by exemption. Stanton went on to become an in-store optometrist at Dayton's Department Store and eventually set up her own storefront where she employed her daughter and ran an optical business run entirely by women. During her career, she participated in optometry and professional associations and public service projects and was active in her community. Thrice married with three children, Stanton's abiding popularity with her patients and the public as well as her financial success despite leading an unconventional life for a woman at the turn of the twentieth century is a testament to her fierce independence, indomitable spirit and impressive business acumen. This article, constructed from meticulous research in archival records, paints a detailed portrait of Stanton's life and career as an optometric pioneer.*



DR. GERTRUDE STANTON, Minnesota.

Portrait of Gertrude Stanton. From the *Opt J Rev Optom.* 1906;28:368.

## KEYWORDS

*Gertrude Stanton; Gertrude Smith; Gertrude Ayer; Women's History; History of Medicine; Optometry History; Minnesota; Professional Licensure*

Dr. Ella Gertrude Smith Ayer Stanton Jones was the consummate marketer. Better known as Gertrude Stanton, she was the first woman licensed to practice optometry in the United States. In many ways, this was purely due to fortuitous chance – she lived in Minnesota, the first state to license optometrists, and she promptly responded to the request that “all persons practicing optometry in the state of Minnesota are requested to make application to the secretary of the State Board of Examiners in Optometry, accompanied by an affidavit, that they were engaged in the practice of optometry, on or prior to the thirteenth day of April A.D. 1901, remitting their registration fee at the same time.”<sup>1</sup> By June 11, 1901, sixty-five acceptable affidavits had been received. Four of these were from women. The first, number 27, was from Gertrude Ayer.<sup>2</sup>

Ella Gertrude Smith, called Gertie, was born either February 17 or 26, 1863, in Howard County, Iowa, the second of at least seven children born to John Taylor Smith and Lucy Ann Olmsted.<sup>3,4,5</sup> On October 30, 1880 she married Roswell Eugene Ayer (called Eugene). Eugene was the son of Darius Ayer and Lydia Tennent.<sup>6</sup> The union produced three children: Arthur Darius in 1881, Sarah (Sadie) Taylor in 1884 and John Herbert (called Herbert) in 1891.<sup>7,8,9,10</sup> It appears the marriage was not an altogether pleasant one. In 1890, Gertie received a teaching certificate in Dakota Territory,<sup>11</sup> but by 1891 she was back in Iowa for the birth of her third child, John.<sup>10</sup> In October 1895, the local newspaper, *The Twice a Week Plain Dealer*, reported that Eugene Ayer and family were “obliged to vacate” their home.<sup>12</sup> Two months later, they

reported “Eugene Ayer left last week for Dubuque where he will seek employment. If unsuccessful, he expects to continue south.”<sup>13</sup> Gertrude apparently decided to take matters of earning money into her own hands. By 1899, she had taken some courses and was working as “the Willmar [Minnesota] oculist.”<sup>14</sup> She left her children with her parents in Iowa<sup>15</sup> and started traveling around southern Minnesota, advertising herself as “Gertrude Ayer, M.O. – Expert Refractionist.” She would place advertisements in local newspapers and distribute handbills announcing her imminent arrival. She advertised free eye exams,<sup>16</sup> including phrases such as “this is your opportunity to correct your visual defects and preserve your eyes.” She strongly believed in educating patients properly, distributing circulars with descriptions of refractive errors and muscle imbalances. However, she also believed in the power of dramatic marketing, as the circular ended with “In order to avoid any of the above deviations, lay aside your false pride and have your visual defects properly corrected by a competent optician. The longer you allow your natural prejudices to delay this correction, the longer will be the score you will have to settle, at some day, with abused natural laws.” At the time, optometry was a bit of the Wild West—with no licensing or registration required, many peddlers sold eyeglasses from their wagons. Gertrude met this allegation head-on, frankly stating “Madam Ayer is not a spectacle peddler, but a finished and competent optician...”<sup>17, 18</sup> She traveled by horse and buggy and drew attention by providing straw hats for her horses—something that had never been seen in many small towns.<sup>19</sup>

By 1900, Gertrude had met and started working with Dr. Charles Stanton in Redwood Falls, Minnesota.<sup>20,21</sup> Dr. Stanton was one of the first to bring x-rays to Minnesota, and continually fought allegations of being a “quack.” He fought this with testimonials from cured patients as well as offering “large volumes” on loan. He frequently used the phrase “Dr. Stanton don’t care a rap . . . whether he treats your case or not.”<sup>21,22</sup> At some point, Gertrude and Eugene were divorced. She later claimed that he had died, leaving her a young single mother (taking several years off her age) with three young children. In fact, Eugene did not die until 1937 and their children stayed with her parents.<sup>15,23</sup> However, she realized that a young widow would tug at the heartstrings more than a divorcée with help from her former in-laws.

Optometry was a profession on the brink of professionalism in 1900. Many states were considering licensing and registration as a way of regulating optometrists and safeguarding the public from unscrupulous peddlers. Drs. J.W. Grainger, H.M. Hitchcock, F.A. Upham, C.A. Snell, and Alexander Swening were instrumental in the passage of the nation’s first Optometry Practice Law in Minnesota in 1901. The law defined optometry as “the employment of subjective and objective means to determine the accommodative and refractive states of the eye and the scope of its functions in general.” The law further stated that every person beginning to practice optometry in the state would have to pass an examination before the Board of Optometry. There was a stipulation written into the law that allowed for anyone currently practicing optometry at the time the law was passed to be exempt from the examination so long as an affidavit was filed within six months. There were 363 people who filed acceptable affidavits.<sup>1,2,24,25</sup>

The aforementioned doctors debated at length about the scope and breadth of the examination. They decided upon a combination of a written and practical examination, covering “such several subjects as are applicable to the practice of optometry.” The examination proved to be quite challenging, with an average pass rate of about 50%. The doctors were, in fact, so disappointed with the quality of some of the candidates that in 1909 they instituted a “preliminary examination,” which was comprised of seven questions including definitions, arithmetic, and a short essay. If candidates did not receive at least 75% on the preliminary examination, they were not permitted to sit for the comprehensive examination.<sup>26</sup> Many doctors who had originally been licensed by affidavit later chose to prove their competence by taking the practical examination. Dr. Ayer was not among them, and never did attempt to prove her competence by sitting for the examination.<sup>27</sup> However, in most of her early marketing materials she did refer to herself as the “expert optician” and promoted the fact that she was “thoroughly educated and competent.”<sup>28</sup>

On December 4, 1901, Dr. Ayer married Dr. Charles Stanton, the “famous electromagnetic healer” in Estherville, Iowa.<sup>29,30</sup> At the time, he had a new practice in St. James, Minnesota and Gertrude joined him there while still traveling throughout southern Minnesota. He was also an optometrist, as Minnesota license number 16 was issued to “C.M. Stanton” of Minneapolis.<sup>2,28</sup> It is likely that, during this time, the couple would have had business or social involvement with George Dayton, a prominent banker and merchant in Worthington, Minnesota. Although no proof of this relationship can be found, in 1902 Mr. Dayton moved his

business to Minneapolis and purchased a dry good store which would become Dayton’s Department Store.

Mr. Dayton was a very forward-thinking entrepreneur and had promised his customers to expand the store in space and services. In 1903, space on the second floor of the new addition to Dayton’s Dry Goods, on Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis, was leased to Mrs. Gertrude Stanton for her optical service.<sup>31</sup> The office opened to patients on Wednesday, March 18, 1903.<sup>32</sup> Gertrude Stanton then became one of the nation’s first commercial optometrists. (P. 7, Figs. 1 and 4) Her husband, Dr. Charles Stanton, may have practiced with her, but virtually all the advertising was in her name only.

She had a particular interest in treating women and children. She—and Dayton’s Department Store—promoted her as “the only woman optician in the Twin Cities.” She frequently advertised “Children’s Day,” offering a 25% discount for children on Saturdays. Less commonly the same discount was offered on “Old Folks’ Day.” All work was guaranteed, and examinations were free. Advertising was usually presented as coming from Dayton’s—“there is no better place in the city to have your eyes examined than at our Optical Department.”<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Gertrude Stanton soon became involved in organized optometry. She served as a founding member of the Northwestern Optical Association and was also involved in the Minnesota State Association of Optometrists.<sup>28</sup> By 1905, she had risen to first vice president of the Northwestern Optical Association.<sup>33</sup> She had attended Illinois College of Ophthalmology and Otology, receiving her first degree around 1893, and in 1905 was honored for being the first female graduate and received a Doctor of Optics degree.<sup>28,34,35</sup>

Her husband, Dr. Charles Stanton, succumbed after a battle with tuberculosis and died on January 3, 1906, but Gertrude continued to practice and remained active.<sup>36,37</sup> She was extremely popular in the community and, in 1907, she won the grand prize in the Minneapolis Tribune’s “popular vote contest.” In order to vote, readers had to pay for a newspaper subscription or classified ad coupon book. Dr. Stanton won by thousands of votes and generated over \$90,000 for the newspaper.<sup>38-40</sup> Her prize: a 1907 Oldsmobile. (Figure 6) Perhaps not coincidentally, Dr. Stanton had been the subject of a very favorable article in the same newspaper just a few months before calling her “loquacious” and “charming,” giving us an insight into her personality.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 6. Dr. Gertrude Stanton in her 1907 Oldsmobile, won in a Minneapolis Tribune popularity contest. Image courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society. HE3.1r285

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**Sure Signs of Success**

In less than one year Dr. Gertrude Stanton, our woman optician, has on file more than 1,000 prescriptions that she has written and filled for her patrons—this signifies satisfactory work. Examination free. Bring your repair work. Glasses tightened and adjusted free. Second Floor, New Part.

**SILK LEADERS OF THE NORTHWEST**

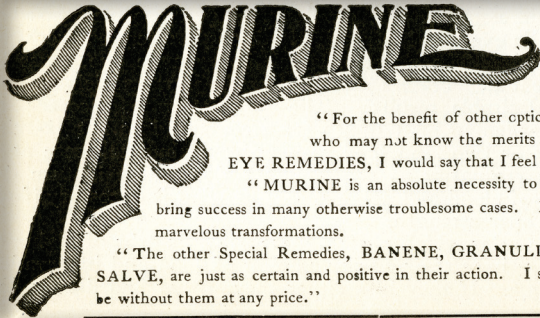
**Dayton's Daylight Store**

Formerly Goodfellow's.

Seventh St. and Nicollet Av.

Geo. D. Dayton, Pres. J. B. Mosher, Vice-Pres. D. D. Dayton, Treas. R. E. Esterly, Credit Man, Frank H. Carleton, Director.

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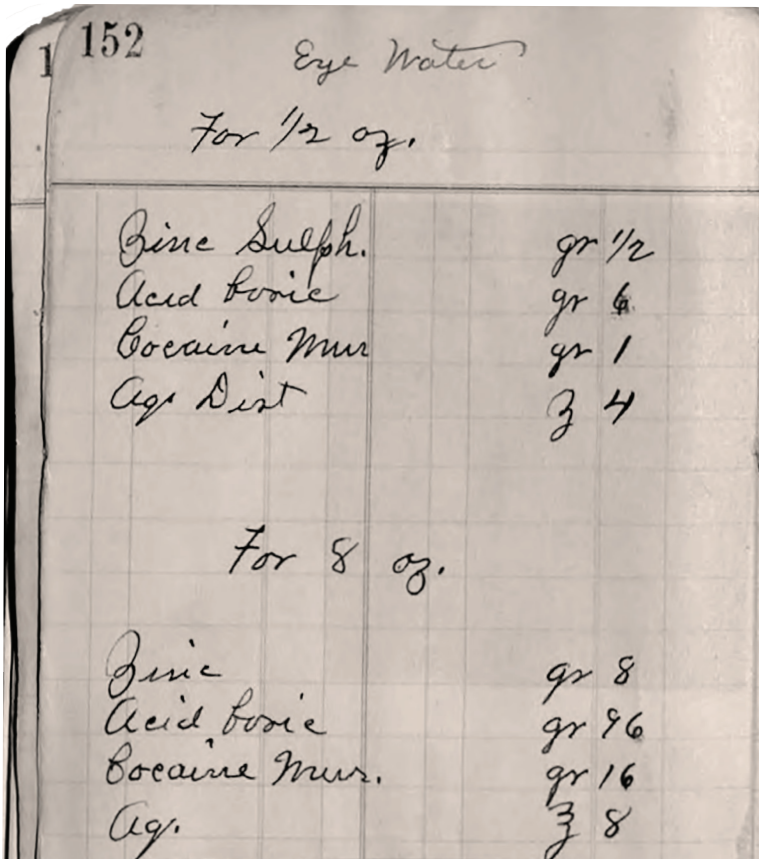
Dr. Gertrude Stanton, in charge of Dayton's Optical Parlors, Minneapolis, Minn., says

"For the benefit of other opticians and the general public who may not know the merits of the various MURINE EYE REMEDIES, I would say that I feel that they are indispensable.

"MURINE is an absolute necessity to the busy optician, and will bring success in many otherwise troublesome cases. I have seen it work many marvelous transformations.

"The other Special Remedies, BANENE, GRANULINE and MURINE EYE SALVE, are just as certain and positive in their action. I sell them all and would not be without them at any price."

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**SHE WINS SUCCESS AS AN OPTICIAN**

**Dr. Stanton of Minneapolis Is the Only Woman Practicing Her Profession in the Twin Cities.**

"SHE first talks people blind and then they have to buy glasses that they may see." This is the way the father of Dr. Gertrude Ayer Stanton, the only woman optician in the twin-cities, laughingly describes his daughter's methods. There is no doubt that Dr. Stanton is a talker—she is too much of a woman not to enjoy the sound of her own voice—but she is an interesting talker and her varied life has given her a fund of experiences and anecdotes to draw upon. One cannot spend seven or eight years in the small towns of Iowa or Minnesota without

different courses offered at the optical schools, she entered the office of an oculist and learned the mechanism of the eye in a practical way. In the same manner she became an assistant to one of the well known opticians in Chicago, that she might learn something of the practice while she was still studying the theory. The harder a problem was, the more interesting Dr. Stanton found it, and she confesses now that a difficult, compound case sets her nerves quivering with pleasure. Dr. Stanton does not consider her studies finished, now that she is a successful practitioner, and she often slips away from her work to carry some experiment farther or to learn what some of the masters of her profession can teach her.



DR. GERTRUDE AYER STANTON.

meeting characters who belong between the covers of a book, and there are more David Harburs and Mrs. Wiggses than one might think.

Dr. Stanton did not take up the work of an optician until she was left a widow with three small children. She had always been fond of books, a student for the love of study, and as she had spent much time in the family of a prominent optician it was natural for her to turn to that profession when it became necessary to do something. She entered upon her studies with the persevering thoroughness that has brought her success, and when she failed to find what she wanted in the

"Isn't it strange that more women do not take up the work of an optician?" she said the other day. "There are only three registered with the state association, Miss Margaret Little of Rochester, Miss Helen Hitchcock of Redwood Falls, and Mrs. A. M. Petri, formerly of St. Paul, who has now gone to California. You know an optician has to be licensed just as a physician does to practice in Minnesota. The work of an optician is so interesting, her chances of helping others are so unlimited and her opportunity of making a financial success so assured that I cannot but wonder why more do not take it up."

The financial part of a question is always the most interesting to the majority of people, for it is the measure by which success is gauged. Dr. Stanton counts that day poor which does not find her with \$25 on the credit side of her books, and when she was travelling she occasionally made over \$100 a day. Such an income means work and hard work, for in every dollar there are 100 cents' worth of labor, either mental or physical.

Dr. Stanton followed her own methods and it was her custom to announce her coming arrival in a town a month in advance. She usually made a center from which she radiated, visiting the farm-houses first and then the villages. She drove her own team and always went armed and as she frequently took country produce in exchange for consultations her trim wagon sometimes assumed the guise of a peddler's cart with pumpkins, potatoes, chickens, butter and eggs and always a sack of oats for her horses. But no matter how decorated the wagon was, the little black satchel which rested between her feet was always full of silver dollars.

Dr. Stanton came to Minneapolis early in the summer and she has almost abandoned traveling, although there are times when she yearns for the feel of the reins be-

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Marketing was one of Stanton's great strengths and she found every opportunity to engage with the press, turning her unique status as a woman practitioner into a professional advantage. Her journal is filled with newspaper clippings and detailed notes: 1. Page 152 of the journal held at the Minnesota Historical Society features a recipe for "eye water" containing cocaine, often used as a mydriatic. 2. Murine ad featuring Stanton testimonial, from the Optical Journal, 1905;26(7):360. 3. Dayton's Department Store ad, featuring special callout for Stanton's optical department, Minneapolis Star, Friday, 12 Feb 1904, p. 3. and 4. Profile in the "Women's Section", Saturday, 2 Jan 1904, p.5, and 5. Stanton's portrait after her election as fourth vice president of the AOA in 1918, the Optical Journal, 1918;42(1): 37.

She also continued her involvement with organized optometry. In 1908 alone, she served on the Reception Committee for Minnesota State Association of Optometrists and the Membership Committee for the Northwestern Optical Association,<sup>28</sup> and was elected President of the Alumni Association of the Northern Illinois College of Ophthalmology and Otology.<sup>42</sup> She also presented a paper on "Indications in Retinal Fatigue" at the joint annual meeting of the Northwestern Optical Association and Minnesota State Association of Optometrists. This paper was also published in *Optical Review*, a periodical publication of the time.<sup>43</sup> In 1909, she prepared the souvenir programme for the joint meeting of the two organizations.<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Stanton married again, on December 8, 1909, to a Swedish immigrant, Joseph Jones.<sup>44</sup> According to census records, he was employed as an "optician and repairer." Dr. Stanton's youngest son, Herbert Ayer, continued to live with them and work with his mother.<sup>45,46</sup> During this time, Dr. Stanton's daughter, Sadie, got married to Edward Amesbury.<sup>47</sup> Sadie also pursued a study of optometry, attending DeMars Optical School and the Northern Illinois College of Optometry.<sup>48</sup> As well as being active in optometric associations, Dr. Stanton was active in community organizations. She was a member of the Automobile Club, the Zuhrah Ladies' Club (associated with the Shrine Club), and the Order of the Eastern Star.<sup>49</sup> In 1911, she was also a charter member of the Minneapolis Women's Rotary—the first all-female Rotary club in the country. After Rotary International refused them admission because of their sex, they separately incorporated and are still active today.<sup>50</sup> Dr. Stanton bought the records of prominent Minneapolis optometrist C.A. Snell in 1913. Dr. Snell placed a large advertisement in the newspaper informing his patients of his retirement and the transfer of his records to Dr. Stanton. The advertisement states "The former patrons of Dr. Snell are assured they will receive that courteous and careful treatment at the hands of Dr. Stanton which he bespeaks for her."<sup>51</sup>

Between her optometric commitments, social engagements, and charitable work—not to mention her practice—her life must have been very busy. Her daughter Sadie passed the Minnesota Examination for Licensure in 1915 on her first try with a very respectable 79%. The new Dr. Amesbury joined her mother in practice at Dayton's.<sup>28,52</sup>

The pair moved to a new, larger location within Dayton's on April 12, 1917.<sup>48</sup> In 1918, the American Optometric Association (AOA) Congress was held in St. Paul, Minnesota. Dr. Stanton served as chair of the Ladies' Reception Committee and planned a very ambitious social program for all the women (primarily wives) attending the Congress. She used her connections and resources, such as the Women's Rotary Club, to assist in entertaining the women. At this meeting, she was also elected fourth vice-president of the AOA.<sup>28</sup> (P. 7, Fig. 5)

During World War I, Drs. Stanton and Amesbury provided services as consulting optometrists in the examination of applicants for commissions into the United States Army Medical Corps and training camps. For such service, in 1919 they received a letter of thanks from Ralph Perry, President of the Board of Examiners for the Medical Corps. It is unlikely that there were many other women who were able to provide such service.<sup>28</sup>

Although not involved in the women's suffrage movement in the United States, Drs. Stanton and Amesbury were vocal about

the opportunities that optometry provided for women. In 1912, she wrote an article entitled "Qualities Required of a Woman in Optometry" for the *Optical Journal and Review*. Some of her statements in the article are remarkable for the time: "Women have entered such extraordinary pursuits that seemingly there is no field where men succeed that a woman may not achieve success also." In the article, she points out certain traits that are required of optometrists: "It is the young woman who has a fondness for tools and who can readily repair a sewing machine or typewriter when it gets somewhat out of gear, who will take up optometry and acquire with ease the basic knowledge of the profession." She continues, "one must be alert and alive to what is going on in the world." She also mentions those traits that are more common in women, stating: "sympathy, tact and magnetism are usually present to a greater degree in women than in men. If a woman has these qualities, and also a ready good humor and a naturally cordial manner, she is eminently fitted for success, always providing she has had the proper training for her work. The one big stumbling-block in her pathway, probably, is the lack of confidence which people generally have in a woman in any line of work that requires brains, skill and experience. A woman is obliged to build up confidence often, whereas a man finds it given him readily."<sup>53</sup>

It is hard to believe that the article was written over 100 years ago, as she continues, "Another thing, they do not know how to charge for their work. It is a woman's failing to underestimate the value in dollars and cents of what she does, and I presume it is attributable to her lack of experience and natural diffidence. It is essential, of course, that not only the actual cost of an article, but that one's experience, one's expenses and one's brains should enter into the fixing of prices for whatever one puts on the market. When women learn to put a fair price, neither exorbitant nor too low, upon their work they will have made progress toward establishing themselves substantially in business."<sup>53</sup> One can only wonder what Dr. Stanton would have thought of vision plans and their impact on the profession—for both women and men.

By 1920, both Dr. Stanton and Dr. Amesbury were divorced from their husbands.<sup>54</sup> Their optical shop was known and recognized for employing only women, even including women grinding the lenses. In 1923, Drs. Stanton and Amesbury left Dayton's and moved into new offices across the street, in the Wilmac Building.<sup>55</sup> (Figure 7). It is unclear what precipitated the move—perhaps space issues, or perhaps the growing disagreement within optometry about ethical practice. In 1923, the AOA proposed a radical new code of ethics. The code was not adopted, but its very proposal indicates the degree of discontent and disagreement within optometry at the time. Some of the statements of the proposed code directly contradicted many of the common avenues previously practiced by Drs. Stanton and Amesbury: "We agree... to make examination of the eyes the paramount feature, not the sale of glasses. ... To charge for, and to collect, a reasonable fee for eye examinations. ... We believe that organized optometry can best be served by group publicity, as also by magazine and newspaper articles in which the author does not seek to present his own personality. ... We agree to discontinue the use of handbills, billboard advertising, billposter advertising, ... and signs reading, 'Eyes Examined (or tested) Free.'<sup>56</sup> Dr. Stanton was always very proud of her ethical practices—she frequently advertised that she only recommended glasses when there was actually

a need—so she was undoubtedly concerned about remaining professionally ethical in all respects given the changing climate.

Between 1925 and 1930, Dr. Stanton gradually started to retire. She would visit her son Herbert in California for extended periods of time and had a summer home on Lake Minnetonka. She continued to participate in an active social and community life and advocate for optometry, including making presentations to California Optical Societies and organizations when she was visiting her son.<sup>28,57,58</sup> On March 25, 1931, during a visit with her son in Atascadero, California, Dr. Stanton passed away. The official cause of death on the death certificate was “mitral regurgitation and chronic interstitial nephritis,” with a contributory condition of hypertension.<sup>3,59</sup> News of her death was printed in several journals and newspapers. Nearly all of them portrayed her life as she had created it—married at age seventeen, widowed with three children before age 25, and stumbling upon optometry as a means for supporting herself. Even her death certificate portrays only part



Figure 7. Office of Dr. Gertrude Stanton, Optometrist, 301 Wilmac Building, 719 Nicollet Avenue, Minneapolis. Image courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society. R5 r1.

of the story, as she is listed as the wife of Charles M. Stanton—the one of her three husbands to whom she was married the shortest amount of time, but perhaps the one she was closest to, as she retained his name both professionally and socially.<sup>60-62</sup> Dr. Stanton was truly a trailblazer in optometry. She was never willing to allow her gender to be an excuse. In her words from 1912, “Optometry needs women, and women, in my opinion, who can make themselves successful in it, will find a substantial and satisfying profession to follow.”<sup>53</sup>

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the research staff at the Minnesota Historical Society – Gale Family Library for their diligence in providing access to Dr. Stanton's papers.

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