

*A visitor to the Burlington courthouse on Main Street will pass by two poster boards denoting important events in our courthouse's history. These events piqued my curiosity, and so I began to research some of the stories in depth. As a result, in conjunction with the Burlington Free Press, I am happy to present "The Chittenden County Courthouse Chronicles." This monthly column begins with the case of Woodhouse versus Woodhouse, Alienation of Affection to be followed next month by a history of the Chittenden County Courthouse (did you know that court cases were once held in Ira Allen's living room in Winooski Falls?) Thanks for reading!*

### **Chittenden County Courthouse Chronicles**



By Connie Cain Ramsey

#### **“Alienation of Affection” Woodhouse versus Woodhouse December, 1922**

Dorrit Stevens, the daughter of a poor soap salesman, grew up in Burlington in the shadow of a South Willard Street mansion. The mansion was located on the corner of Cliff and Willard Street, and was the summer home of Lorenzo Woodhouse, a wealthy New York City banker and financier.

Lorenzo and his wife Mary Kennedy Woodhouse had a young son, Douglas, who in 1917 caught the eye of the beautiful Dorrit at a UVM dance.

Dorrit and Douglas shared a long and loving courtship, meeting up several times daily at the Stevens home. When Douglas left to join the army he sent love letters, candy, flowers and music to Dorrit regularly. Dorrit met up with Douglas at his army base, the reunion of the two lovers proved so powerful that they decided to get married on the spot.

The fire of their love would soon be doused by a very upset and angry Mary Kennedy Woodhouse, who objected to her son's marrying outside his own upper class. She and her husband were sure that Dorrit Stevens was a gold digger looking to cash in on their family fortune.

#### **Out of Sight, Out of Mind**

Lorenzo and Mary never spoke a word to their new daughter-in-law, nor was Dorrit allowed entry into any of the Woodhouse domiciles. Lorenzo stepped up the pressure on his son's marriage by forcing him out of his job at the Merchant's Bank (owned by Lorenzo), and cut off his access to a lucrative trust fund from a previous inheritance. Douglas and Dorrit were left virtually penniless.

With nowhere to turn but his parents, Douglas appealed to them to restore his position in the family. They agreed – but with one caveat – Dorrit would stay out of sight and out of mind. Douglas acquiesced, and joined his parents in visits to New York where they wined and dined at the Crystal

Room at the Ritz. Douglas was invited to winter in their Florida home, but without Dorrit. She was not permitted to join him. He accepted his parent's offer.

In Florida, Lorenzo and Mary hatched a plan to break up their son's marriage. They introduced Douglas to Lillian McClellan, a divorced Washington DC society girl. The Woodhouses showered Lillian with affection and money, and pushed Douglas to ask her hand in marriage. But once Lillian found out that Douglas was already married, she wanted no part of a relationship until he was free to marry her.

Back in Burlington, Dorrit found out that Douglas had gone to Reno, Nevada to seek a divorce. She felt his mind had been "poisoned" by his parents and the lure of the family's wealth and lifestyle. Furious with Lorenzo and Mary, Dorrit turned to the court system, and set in motion one of the most spectacular cases in Vermont (and US) judicial history.

### **David vs Goliath**

The court case between the soap salesman's daughter and the wealthy financier's son became a national spectacle. Standing room was at a premium at the redstone, Church Street courthouse as the Woodhouses' New York City attorneys squared off against a young Burlington lawyer named Warren Austin. The "David versus Goliath", million dollar "Alienation of Affections" court case of Woodhouse versus Woodhouse, Judge Sherman R. Moulton presiding, had begun.

The jury was read all 188 of Douglas' love letters, and listened to Dorrit speak about the terrible betrayal with "honesty in her eyes". Douglas never attended, choosing to remain in Reno.

After 40 hours of deliberation the jury of twelve male Vermonters, seven of them farmers awarded Dorrit \$464,000 (6.3 million in 2014 dollars). The largest award of its kind in US history.

The case empowered women and made a hero of young Austin who already had a reputation as a champion of women's suffrage. His success won the admiration and respect of Vermont voters and launched a successful career in politics that included becoming US Senator and Ambassador to the United Nations.

The ultimate winner was the US court system and the integrity of our country's judges and jurors. The highly-paid New York lawyers proved to be no match for the young Vermont lawyer, nor the Vermont jury that rendered the verdict. The privileged class would find no special privilege within the hallowed halls of a Vermont courtroom.

*Bob Boyd and Jack Ramsey contributed to this article.*

*If you have any questions about this case, or would like a tour of Chittenden County Courthouse please contact me at 651-1720 or [Connie.Ramsey@state.vt.us](mailto:Connie.Ramsey@state.vt.us).*

Dorritt Stevens



Woodhouse

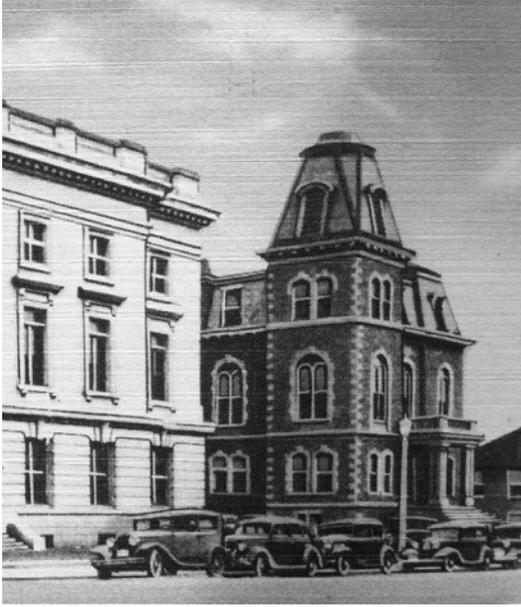


Warren Austin



The Woodhouse Summer Home (on the corner of Cliff and Willard)

As printed:  
<http://bfpne.ws/1fx9Sd6>



The Redstone courthouse on Church Street (It burned down in 1982)

Sources:

NYT

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=FA0D10FA345A1B7A93CAA91789D95F468285F9>

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<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1928&dat=19221205&id=jKcgAAAAIBAJ&sjid=TmkFAAAAIBA&pg=3466,4229101>

San Antonio Evening news (**honesty in her eyes**)

<http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/39251760/>

[www.newspapers.com/newspage/27622022/](http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/27622022/)

... And she fought single - handed but with honesty in her eyes Many and many ... and what came after of the beautiful Dorrit Van Deusen Stevens Woodhouse

Sunday Morning Star (**honesty in her eyes**)

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2293&dat=19230128&id=b-ZfAAAAIBAJ&sjid=OAMGAAAAIBA&pg=4457,5213610>

• [The Chillicothe Constitution-Tribune > 8 December 1922 > Page 1](#)

... [www.newspapers.com/newspage/7401238/](http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/7401238/) S.--The jury in the \$1,000,000 alienation suit brot by Mrs. Dorrit Siemens Woodhouse ... Mrs. Woodhouse', who was known as the most beautiful girl in Burlington,

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... [www.newspapers.com/newspage/9540880/](http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/9540880/) THE CffILLICOTHE CONST1TUTIO UNITED PRESS NEWS SERVIC E BY WIRE ... The jury in the \$1.000,000 alienation suit brot by Mrs. Dorrit Slevens Woodhouse ... Woodhouse, yesterday returned a verdict for \$465,000 in her favor.

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