

Ingersoll in soprano

# Helen Hamilton Gardener

**H**elen Hamilton Gardener was born Alice Chenoweth in Winchester, Virginia, in 1853, to a slave-owning Methodist preacher who emancipated the people he held in bondage and later served as a Union scout at the personal behest of President Abraham Lincoln, much to the dismay of his Virginian friends and neighbors. Young Alice grew up lionizing those who sacrificed for their ideals, no matter the cost.



*Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, ligula suspendisse nulla pretium, rhoncus tempor fermentum.*

After watching her older sisters and sisters-in-law bear and bury babies, Alice decided that traditional marriage was not for her. So, at the age of nineteen, she moved to Cincinnati to become a teacher. By twenty-one, she was the youngest school principal in Ohio. Her skill and beauty brought her to the attention of the Ohio commissioner of

common schools, who began paying an inordinate amount of attention to the schools in Sandusky, where she was then living. By the summer of 1876, newspapers across the state published stories about the affair the young principal was having with the married school commissioner. Alice lost her job and was run out of town. It would be nearly fifty years before she again received a regular paycheck.

Over the next six years, Alice questioned why men and women were held to such different standards when it came to sex, and she began writing down her ideas. “A man is valued of men for many things, least of which is his chastity,” she later observed. “A woman is valued of men for few things, chief of which is her chastity. This double code can by no sane or reasonable person be claimed as woman made.” She came to believe that the Bible was the root cause of women’s oppression and of the sexual double standard. From afar, she followed the career of Robert Ingersoll, the Civil War veteran and lawyer, who was known as the “Great Agnostic” for his passionate lectures, which drew crowds of ten thousand and more. If Ingersoll could make a living by speaking out against Christian orthodoxy, why couldn’t she?

## Transformation

In 1883, Alice moved to New York City and changed her name to Helen Hamilton Gardener, leaving the public record of her affair far behind. She sent Ingersoll, a man who was known to welcome all callers, drafts of her writing, no doubt accompanied by a charming cover letter. Ingersoll assured her that she “had written something valuable” and “at once declared it must be read in public.” He even helped arrange Gardener’s first public talk, held in January 1884 at New York City’s Chickering Hall, and traveled to Manhattan to introduce her. Ingersoll was then at the pinnacle of his national fame, and his presence guaranteed an inordinate amount of press coverage and ticket sales for a young woman lecturer no one had ever heard of before.

“It is thought strange and particularly shocking by some persons for a woman to question the absolute correctness of the Bible,” Gardener began her debut lecture. “She is supposed to be able to go through this world with her eyes shut, and her mouth open wide enough to swallow Jonah and the Garden of Eden without making a wry face. It is usually recounted as one of her most beautiful traits of character that she has faith sufficient to float the Ark without inspecting its animals.” But Gardener was not like these other women. “I claim that I have a right to offer my objections to the Bible,” she announced. Newspapers across the

Helen Hamilton Gardener

country covered this remarkable lecture and dubbed Gardener “Ingersoll in Soprano.”

[More on Helen Gardener](#)