

Emily Sibley Watson (1855-1945)

Emily Sibley Watson was a Rochester grand dame who lives on in most people's imaginations, if she lives on at all, as a staid and starched dowager. However, archival materials tell a different and vital story, one about a vibrant girl who grew to be a devoted daughter, wife and mother, steadfast friend, intrepid traveler, and compassionate and generous philanthropist. At the same time, as materials have migrated from one generation to the next and into widely separated archives, there are limits to our understanding and interpretation. Still, it is a story filled with adventure, celebration, and tragedy, and its arc overlaps and intersects with the growth of the city famous for Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and George Eastman. She remains one of Rochester's least well-known individuals, overshadowed by the accomplishments of her father and son¹, but her gifts to the community have put Rochester on the cultural map for over one hundred years.



Emily Sibley Watson
in later life



Hiram Sibley

Born in 1855, Emily Sibley Watson made her arrival around the time that her father, Hiram Sibley, was consolidating the Western Union Company. The youngest of four children, and one of only two to survive beyond the 1860s, her life bore only slight resemblance to that of her elder sister, Louise Sibley Atkinson (1833-1868). Louise spent her earliest years in rural Monroe County, traveled exclusively within the New York/New England region, went to school in Canandaigua, and fretted about expenses. Emily, twenty-two years younger, was born into immense wealth and privilege and access to the highest levels of culture and society.

When the family went abroad during the Civil War, their father went on to Russia to meet with officials about the possibility of extending telegraph cables through Russian Alaska and across the Bering Strait to Russia², while ten-year-old Emily went to school in Berlin and Paris and visited museums and castles. Her brother, Hiram Watson Sibley, was being educated in Germany as well, while Louise remained in Rochester with her husband Hobart Atkinson and their two daughters. Emily's friends came from similarly elite (by Rochester standards) families, many of whom were made wealthy by their Western Union investments.

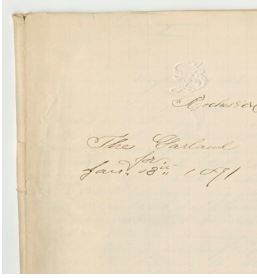
In 1868, not long after the family returned home from Europe, sister Louise's chronic illness became acute, and she died, leaving daughters Elisabeth, age 11, and Marie, age 4. The two girls and their father moved in with Emily's parents, at 400 (then 220) East Avenue.



Hiram Sibley house

¹ Emily Sibley Watson's father was Hiram Sibley, whose instrumental efforts in acquiring and consolidating telegraph lines led to the formation of Western Union in the 1850s. Her son, James Sibley Watson Jr., was a physician and an accomplished filmmaker whose two most noteworthy works were *Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and *Lot in Sodom* (1932). His literary endeavors centered on the publication of the modernist *Dial* magazine from 1920-1929.

² Papers of Hiram Sibley and the Sibley family are in the archives of the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation at Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. Some papers are also held by the Local History Division of the Rochester Public Library. A recent discovery has been a related group of family letters, papers and photographs held by the two archives at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York: Photography Study Center and the Moving Image Stills, Posters, and Paper Collection.



The Garland
for Jan. 13th, 1891
George Eastman
Museum

Emily’s teen years were occupied with learning the niceties that would serve her well as a leader of society. Horseback riding, dances, and calls paid and received were the standard fare of girls in the 1860s and 1870s. Like the author Louisa May Alcott, with whom she was undoubtedly familiar, teen-age Emily had literary aspirations.³ These survive in the form of a “magazine” and related papers now in the collection of the George Eastman Museum. *The Garland*, a compilation of sentimental stories and clever verse, was written by Emily and her friends using floral pen names—Emily’s was “Daisy.”



Emily Sibley and
Classmates

Photographs suggest that she was an accomplished equestrienne. Letters from friends emphasize her sweet nature and her kindness. Emily was sent to New York City in the early 1870s to be “finished” at Mme. Da Silva and Mrs. Bradford’s Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies and Children. An 1873 family trip to Europe solidified her taste for travel and adventure, and when she returned from Europe she was ready to commence her life as a society matron in the footsteps of her mother, Elizabeth Sibley.



Isaac S. Averell
George Eastman
Museum
Film Archives

Her pleasant looks, her intellect, her warmth and her father’s wealth all made her a sought-after prize for young Rochester men, but her heart was not won over until she attended a dance where she was introduced to Isaac Seymour Averell, an Ogdensburg, N.Y. banker’s son.⁴ Five years older than she, he came from a distinguished and well-connected family, was naturally engaging, and seemed to have a promising future. They married in April, 1876, and their first child was born nine months later in Nice, France. Baby Elizabeth Louise was followed later that same year by James G. Averell.



Emily Averell in her
wedding gown, April
1876, Rochester
Historical Society



Emily Averell with
Elizabeth Louise Averell



Emily Averell with
James G. Averell

³ *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott was first published in 1868 to great acclaim, and *Little Men* followed in 1871. The editor of the “Current Literature” column on page 2 of the July 6, 1871 *Democrat & Chronicle* wrote, “There is scarcely a household in the country in which Louisa M. Alcott is not a welcome visitor,” and mentions *Little Men’s* availability at Scrantom and Wetmore’s bookstore on State Street.

⁴ This chapter of Emily Sibley Watson’s life is detailed in her 1875 diary, now in the University of Rochester’s Memorial Art Gallery archives and available on line at <http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compound-object/collection/p277601coll5/1750/rec/106> , accessed October 25, 2016.

The couple settled in Rochester, living variously on Alexander Street and Gibbs Street, and Ike, as he was called, soon became the president of the Bank of Monroe⁵, with his father-in-law the largest stockholder.⁶

However, something went badly awry. Correspondence between Hiram Sibley and other family members indicated that Ike's debts necessitated that his father go to New York and bail him out. It was clear that Hiram Sibley's hopes that Ike would prove to be as reliable a son-in-law as Hobart Atkinson were not to materialize. When Hiram Sibley died in 1888, references to the 1883 codicil in his will cutting Isaac Averell out appeared in newspapers throughout the country.⁷ Letters of apology from both Emily and Ike to Hiram Sibley spoke of Ike's misuse of his wife's assets. Paintings were sold by Ike to Emily, perhaps for funds to pay his debts. The marriage did not appear to be salvageable, and Rochester's most powerful family was willing to suffer the scandal of divorce in order to mitigate any further damage to their finances or to their dear ones.

By 1884, Isaac Averell was no longer listed in the Rochester City Directory, and his wife and children were touring Europe with the elder Sibleys and were beyond his reach.⁸ William Miller, Ithaca architect, was putting the finishing touches on a new home for Emily and her children at 9 (now 11) Prince Street, a property that backed up to the elder Sibleys' East Avenue estate.⁹ While her divorce would not be final until 1891, Emily Averell was for all practical purposes a single parent, albeit with substantial resources and support.¹⁰ The decade of the 1880s continued tragically. The failed marriage was followed within two years by the death of her beloved nine-year-old daughter Louise from diphtheria in 1886, a disease that claimed her brother's adored son, young Hiram, less than two weeks later at age ten. In 1888, her father's death followed.

However, all was not grim. A childhood friend, James Sibley Watson, had long admired her and had grown closer to her during these years. The son of her father's partner, Don Alonzo Watson, young Watson and his sister returned home with Emily and her family from their 1883-84 European voyage, and he traveled elsewhere with her, including trips to Colorado and Wyoming in 1889. After completing the required residency in California that enabled her to divorce Isaac Averell, Emily was finally free to marry Watson. Their marriage was consecrated on April 6, 1891 by Rev. Algernon S. Crapsey of St. Andrew's Church.¹¹



Emily and James Sibley Watson
facing toward 11 Prince Street
April 6, 1891
George Eastman Museum Film Archives

5 *Rochester City Directory 1879*, (Rochester: Drew, Allis, and Company, 1879), <http://www.libraryweb.org/rochcitydir/images/1879/1879a-b.pdf>, p. 57, accessed October 26, 2016.

6 "Biographies of Monroe County People," <http://mcnygenealogy.com/bios/biographies023.htm>, accessed October 25, 2016.

7 See, for example, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of July 25, 1888, p. 6

8 Hiram Sibley took his family to Europe in from 1883 to 1884. The previously-mentioned *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article of July 25, 1888, asserts that "[Averell] turned out to be a son-in-law not after Mr. Sibley's liking, and he took his daughter to Europe a few years ago that she should not be annoyed by her husband." Census and voting records locate Isaac Averell in San Francisco, California, where he later remarried and had another son.

9 "A Chapter For Ladies. Mrs. Averill's Magnificent Home in Rochester. Mr. W.H. Miller of Ithaca, the Decorator and Furnisher," *Ithaca Daily Journal*, June 25, 1884. Thanks to Cynthia Howk of the Landmark Society of Western New York for alerting us to this article.

10 "Town Talk," *Democrat & Chronicle*, January 5, 1891, p. 5.

11 "Watson-Averell," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 8, 1891, p. 7



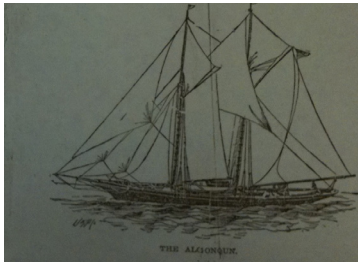
Portrait of James Sibley Watson, Sr. by George M. Haushalter. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Michael L. Watson,

Marriage to James Sibley Watson proved to be satisfying and adventurous in equal measures, starting with a wedding trip that began and ended in Spain and included a trek across the mountains of Morocco from Tangier to Tétouan, complete with a cook to prepare elegant meals in a tent. In 1893, accompanied by Emily’s surviving child, J.G.Averell, the Watsons once again visited North Africa, this time on a leisurely journey down the Nile by house-boat with longtime friends—lawyer, historian and politician James Breck Perkins and his wife Mary Martindale Perkins. Both trips are documented and expanded upon in the Voyages section of this website.

In 1894, a son was born to Emily and James Sibley Watson, James Sibley Watson, Jr. (1894–1982). His first twenty or so years were spent sailing with his parents aboard their ocean-going yachts, the Algonquin, the Lasca, and the Genesee, visiting the Caribbean, the Baltic, the Mediterranean, and Scandinavia, with many other stops along the way.¹²



Portrait of James Sibley Watson, Jr., by George M. Haushalter. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Michael L. Watson, 2005.¹³



Algonquin



Lasca



Genesee

His older half-brother, J.G., was away at boarding school when Sibley was born, and then at Harvard College, where he studied architecture. Both boys were lovers of the arts and sciences; sadly, J.G. did not have the many years that were given to Sibley to pursue his passions. He contracted typhoid fever and died in 1904, at the age of 26, one year after the death of Emily’s beloved mother Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Tinker Sibley’s Christian faith and extraordinary generosity influenced her daughter to enrich the lives of others. Both women were devoted to St. Andrew’s Church and its minister, Reverend Algernon Crapsey.¹³ They made regular monetary contributions to the church but attended as well to the needs of the Crapseys and their many children. Crapsey’s dedication to social justice was consistent with the Sibley women’s engagement in the lives of individuals and the greater community. Elizabeth’s philanthropy has been discussed elsewhere on this site. Her daughter’s quiet philanthropy took the form of tuition payments for needy college students; support of musicians like violinist David Hochstein and conductor Hermann Dossenbach; assistance to arts organizations like the Rochester Art Club as well as to artists in the community; and generous contributions to churches and hospitals, including the Sibley and Watson wings of the now-defunct Genesee Hospital. However, the most enduring and transformational gifts were the foundations that she helped to lay, literally and figuratively, for two of Rochester’s most important cultural institutions, the Memorial Art Gallery and the Hochstein School of Music and Dance.

¹² For documentation about all of these trips, as well as information about James Sibley Watson’s childhood, see the Baby Book in the Memorial Art Gallery archives, which is scanned and accessible on the New York Heritage Digital Collections website, <http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p277601coll5/id/4825/rec/4>, accessed October 26, 2016. Thanks to Anastasia Watson Markson for donating this important heirloom. Images of the Algonquin, Lasca and Genesee courtesy of University of Rochester Department of Rare Books, Special Collections & Preservation.

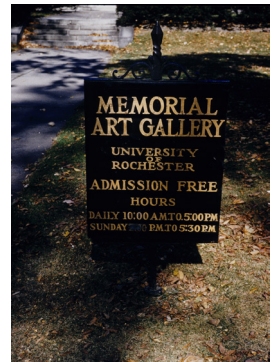
¹³ Reverend Crapsey’s papers are also housed in the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation at the University of Rochester’s Rush Rhees Library. His daughter, Adelaide Crapsey, was one of America’s most noted poets.



The Memorial Art Gallery (MAG) opened in 1913 on the campus of the University of Rochester, Built as a memorial to her deceased son, James G. Averell, the original 1913 building was designed after the Malatesta Temple in Rimini, Italy, which young Averell had visited in his travels. MAG was one of the earliest museums in the world whose founding gift came from a woman,¹⁴ and Emily played an active role on the Board of Managers. The founding of the Gallery fulfilled three goals: it provided the Rochester Art Club with a permanent home for exhibitions of its members' work; the University of Rochester could house an art collection

and substantially enhance its art history offerings; and the community of Rochester could be significantly enriched by an art museum, one of the hallmarks of highbrow culture in progressive American cities.

The president of the Rochester Art Club, George Herdle, was one of Emily's protégés and was named the first director, to be followed by his daughter, Gertrude Herdle Moore, who remained close to Emily for the duration of the founder's life. In its early years, admission was free and children's classes provided so that the lives of even the very youngest could be touched by art. Thirteen years later, a Fountain Court with side galleries was added as a gift from Emily and her husband. While few funds were available for acquisition until the 1930s, the Watsons and their friends and family were generous donors and lenders of artwork. Until she died, Emily played an active role on the acquisitions committee and in helping to underwrite MAG's financial stability. Its relationship with the University of Rochester has been renegotiated over the years by MAG and University administrations, but her intent was to keep the museum and its collections in good hands and under sound management. This has been the case for over a century.



Both art and music were valued by Emily's parents. Her older sister Louise took music and guitar lessons at Ontario Female Seminary; brother Hiram W. Sibley was musically inclined and established what has become an internationally renowned music library at the Eastman School of Music.¹⁵ Their father was an enthusiastic supporter of Swedish soprano Jenny Lind's appearances in Rochester,¹⁶ there were trips to New York and elsewhere to see great performances, and Emily's son James Averell studied violin in Rochester and played with orchestras in prep school. One of J.G.'s violin teachers, Rochester Orchestra conductor Hermann Dossenbach, relied on Emily for funds to support his orchestra and to travel to New York and Europe.¹⁷ She herself was a member of the Tuesday Musicale, an influential women's organization that promoted music in Rochester.



J.G. Averell & Hermann Dossenbach, in front of 11 Prince St., George Eastman Museum Film Archives

¹⁴ Victor J. Danilov, *Women and Museums: A Comprehensive Guide* (New York: Altamira Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁵ Louise Sibley in Canandaigua, New York to Elizabeth Tinker Sibley in Rochester, New York, December 9, 1850, Box 10 Folder 24 D.226, Sibley Papers Addition, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York. Hiram W. Sibley's music collection was the founding gift of the Sibley Music Library in 1904 [<http://www.esm.rochester.edu/sibley/history/>], accessed October 28, 2016].

¹⁶ Hiram Sibley in Rochester, New York to Elizabeth Tinker Sibley in Cleveland, Ohio, July 23, 1851, Box C338, Letters from Hiram Sibley to his wife (11/5/1821-9/29/1881), George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York.

¹⁷ Hermann Dossenbach's papers are held by the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation. Letters in A D.72, Boxes 1-9, reflect Emily's generosity in sending checks for performances and trips, as well as assurances that she can be relied on for support "when necessary" (For example, see March 8, 1902 Box 1 Folder 1, Dossenbach (Hermann) Papers.)



Poster for Hochstein Memorial Concert, April 5, 1919
Rochester Public Library

Nothing musical may have been as close to her heart, however, as her involvement in the life and career of David Hochstein (1892-1918).¹⁸ Their connection began sometime after 1904, the year that her older son, J.G., died. His musical gifts may have resonated for her in the talent of young David Hochstein, the child of immigrants and the nephew of anarchist Emma Goldman. Fifteen years younger than J.G., the two could not have been born in more different circumstances. Emily helped to create for young Hochstein the privileges that she could no longer provide for her son. With George Eastman, she guaranteed Hochstein’s access to the best teaching in America and Europe, as well as the best instruments. Sadly, she could not control the interference of World War I—David Hochstein died in the Battle of the Argonne at 26, the same age as J.G. at his death.

There were many parallels between the creation of the David Hochstein Music School Settlement, now the Hochstein School of Music and Dance, and the Memorial Art Gallery. While the original home of the school was not a new structure, it was Emily’s gift that allowed David Hochstein’s home on Joseph Avenue to be purchased to create a memorial to him. Like MAG, community outreach was mission-critical: the school was referred to as a “settlement school,” which linked it to the prevailing trend of establishing settlement houses as educational and cultural facilities in immigrant and low-income neighborhoods. On June 7, 1921, an announcement appeared in the *Democrat & Chronicle* telling of the gift of \$1,000 to the David Hochstein Music School Settlement by Hiram W. Sibley, Emily’s brother.¹⁹ The first board included a MAG board member, Mrs. Henry Danforth, as well as others with connections to the Watsons and MAG.²⁰ From its inception, instruction was provided by faculty from the D.K.G. Institute of Musical Art, the predecessor of the Eastman School of Music. Like MAG, the David Hochstein Music School Settlement, now called the Hochstein School of Music and Dance, can look back on nearly a century of existence in which it has touched and transformed thousands upon thousands of lives with connections to the performing arts.

Awareness of Emily’s quiet gifts to the community are only now being celebrated, as during her lifetime she asked for no thanks and no public commemoration. At its Centennial in 2013, MAG renamed a gallery on the second floor for her; a sculpture that she commissioned for the Gallery’s opening, *Memory* by William O. Partridge, overlooks the space.²¹ It is a draped figure of a woman holding in her arms an urn, presumably containing the ashes of a loved one. On the base is a bas-relief portrait of Emily’s son, J.G. Averell, and this text: “He loved Life and Beauty and Honour His Mother Dedicates this Building to his Memory.” As well, Emily has recently been elected to the Rochester Music Hall of Fame for her dedicated support of David Hochstein and her generous gift of the music school to the Rochester community.



Memory by William Ordway Partridge, Gift of Mrs. James Sibley Watson, 13.12

18 The only book that has been written about Hochstein is Grace Kraut’s 1980 *An Unfinished Symphony: The Story of David Hochstein* (Lawyers Co-operative Pub. Co.). However, the oft-cited tale of Emily’s first encounter with Hochstein as he played the violin in the Warner home next door on Prince Street may not be accurate as told, since the Warner family did not move to Prince Street from Troup Street until 1911, according to the 1910 and 1911 Rochester City Directories, after Hochstein had graduated from East High School, his musical talents had been discovered, and Emily was said to have begun to support his studies.

19 “Gives \$1,000 to School,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, July 7, 1921, p. 16

20 “Hochstein School of Music Opening,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, Sept. 12, 1920, p. 41.

21 *ARTiculate*, January-February 2014, https://issuu.com/creative-workshop/docs/articulate-jan-feb14_4a880caa2cdc7b page 10, accessed October 27, 2016.

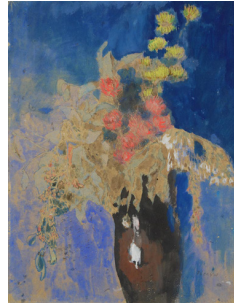
During the teens and twenties, Emily’s son James Sibley Watson, Jr., married, took over publication of the *Dial* magazine, moved back to Rochester, and raised his family. His accomplishments, which will be addressed in another essay, brought his mother into a remarkable circle of writers and artists. In her sixties and seventies, she met poets E.E.Cummings and Marianne Moore, and through the *Dial*, if not in person, artists such as Picasso, Gaston Lachaise, and Archipenko. Her collection expanded to include three paintings by Claude Monet, a painting by Henri Matisse, amongst many other works that are now owned by the Memorial Art Gallery. It was often her practice to expand MAG’s collection by purchasing works from MAG exhibitions and donating them to the Gallery.



The Golden Carnival by Willard L. Metcalf. Gift of Emily Sibley Watson, 13.7



Girl with a Tricorne (Vénitienne) by Henri Matisse. Gift of James Sibley Watson, 24.38



Flowers by Pablo Picasso. Gift of Emily Sibley Watson, 31.29



The Rocks at Pourville, Low Tide by Claude Monet. Gift of Emily Sibley Watson, 39.22

Travel, support of the arts, family, and quiet philanthropy filled her later years. Declining health confined her to her Prince Street property, filled with memories of her youth and adulthood, joys and tragedies. Ever mindful of the needs of others until the end, Emily was mentioned in an anecdote recounted by *Democrat & Chronicle* columnist Henry Clune.²² During the war, young enlisted men were quartered in the Rochester Theological Seminary building on Alexander Street. Every morning, they marched down Prince St. toward the Armory on Main Street, watched from a window by an elderly woman. The woman’s heart went out to these “young stalwarts,” as Clune described them, and she became concerned for their comfort during these months of training. A “sizable check” was sent to the commanding officer, and shortly the young men’s Christmas was brightened by improvements to their living situation. The elderly woman was, of course, Emily Sibley Watson, doing what she had done many times throughout her life: helping to make the lives of others—whether individuals, organizations, or the community—more bearable, more secure, and richer, with no expectation of thanks or celebrity for her efforts.

Imagine Rochester without MAG and without Hochstein, and it will become apparent that Emily Sibley Watson’s generosity transformed and enriched the quality of life in this upstate New York community. It is now our opportunity to share her life more generously and, as often happens, more questions arise. Was she a suffragist? Did she know Susan B. Anthony? What were her political views? Currently, we can only find limited answers. In a newsy 1906 November post-election letter from Geneseo, NY, where he was riding with the elite Genesee Valley Hunt, her husband wrote, no doubt tongue-in-cheek:

²² “Seen and Heard: They Pass in Review,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, January 22, 1944, p. 19.

You probably know more about the doings of Rochester than I do. How do you Democrats feel now? By the way, are you going to rear that boy [James Sibley Watson, Jr.] in the pestilential theories of Democracy and Tammany? Roberts is just enquiring about him and you and expressing regret that you are not here. He is a staunch Republican and I don't dare tell him you are what he considers an unrepentant rebel.²³

In 1915, the *Democrat & Chronicle* documented her participation on an anti-suffragist membership committee led by her friends Mrs. James B. Perkins and Mrs. Rush Rhees, wife of the president of the University of Rochester.²⁴ Without further evidence it is hard to draw legitimate conclusions about her politics. Regarding Rochester's icon of women's rights, Susan B. Anthony, the only connection thus far between the two is that Emily's sister-in-law, Margaret Harper (Mrs. Hiram W.) Sibley, as well as other friends of Emily, hosted a party celebrating Anthony's 79th birthday in 1897.²⁵

Tantalizing tidbits like these encourage us that further information will come to light. For now, we must remain satisfied with accepting that she was a product of her class and her times, while we acknowledge all that she accomplished within those constraints. We join the unidentified *Democrat & Chronicle* editor in appreciation of "her genuine desire to use her wealth for the enrichment of the life of all her Rochester neighbors and for the alleviation of their distress."²⁶

[Images published in this article are from the permanent collection and archives of the Memorial Art Gallery unless otherwise attributed.]

²³ James Sibley Watson Sr. in Geneseo to Emily Sibley Watson in New York City, November 8, 1894, Box C 338, Letters to Mrs. James S. Watson 9/30/1894-12/18/1894, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York.

²⁴ "Women Do Not Want to Vote, Membership Committee," *Democrat & Chronicle*, October 30, 1915, p. 17.

²⁵ "Woman's Future in Politics," *Democrat & Chronicle*, February 7, 1897, p. 13.

²⁶ "Made Community Richer," *Democrat & Chronicle*, February 10, 1945, unsigned editorial, p. 6.