
*If the Newcomb Walls Could Talk:
The Story of June Wall*

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In May 2013, the Newcomb College Class of 1963 gathered in New Orleans to celebrate their fifty-year reunion at the Under the Oaks ceremony. As alumnae reminisced about their college years, one woman recalled that during the spring of 1963, a first-year student, whose name she could not recall, had died from a botched abortion. The comment sparked my curiosity to not only uncover the student's identity, but to know more about Newcomb women's experiences with abortion during the era when the procedure was illegal.

When we think about who had access to safe abortions before 1973, it is easy to assume that class played a central role in determining which women had access to safe abortions and which ones were vulnerable to unsavory abortionists who were more interested in making money than ensuring that women received good medical care. However, in the decades prior to *Roe v. Wade*, women's ability to procure safe abortions was much more complicated. Women needed to have access to a social network in order to know which providers were reputable and which providers performed the procedure incorrectly or failed to sanitize their medical equipment. In the case of the Newcomb student, her economic privilege did not guarantee her a safe abortion, and the presence of a strong social network could have prevented her death by guiding her through the grapevine of providers who operated illicitly in New Orleans in the 1960s.

Abortion Access and Referral Networks

During the 1950s, it became more difficult for American women to obtain hospital abortions, causing the black market provision of the procedure to rise. This had disastrous consequences for women's health. Between 1951 and 1962, the number of abortion deaths nearly doubled in New York City. This primarily affected poor women of color, who were four times more likely than white women to die from an abortion.¹ Inequalities in abortion access followed similar trends as other health inequities faced by the poor. Explanations for these disproportionate health outcomes have centered on class as the main determinant to a safe abortion. While historians have quantitative data to substantiate this claim, there is a lack of data on the role abortion referral networks, both formal and informal, played in preventing abortion deaths. A lack of financial resources was a large barrier for those seeking an abortion, but money alone did not guarantee a safe procedure in the unregulated, criminal abortion market.

The peak of the civil rights movement in the 1960s fueled a generation of young activists who challenged the status quo. College women, many of whom knew of women or had themselves

¹ Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (California: University of California Press, 1997), 210-212.

experienced an illegal abortion, pushed the National Organization for Women (NOW) and others involved in the women's liberation movement to add the repeal of abortion laws to their agendas.² These individuals, along with medical practitioners, writers, and clergy, developed the radical idea of establishing of abortion referral services in response to the high abortion-related death rates that befell women across the United States.

Abortion referral networks began as local organizations that served women in large metropolitan areas in the 1960s. In San Francisco, medical technician Patricia Meginnis organized the Society for Humane Abortions in 1962 as an advocacy organization to support abortion law reform in California. Society for Humane Abortions members believed that abortions should be a private matter between a woman and her doctor, and they strove to de-stigmatize the procedure. When the abortion reform movement proved to be a slow process that did not align with the Society for Humane Abortions's mission, Meginnis began distributing leaflets with the names of safe providers in Mexico. By 1969, the organization had referred over 12,000 women outside the U.S. for their procedure.³ A similar network in Chicago, which became known as "Jane," was unintentionally started by Heather Booth, a student activist at the University of Chicago who repeatedly referred her friends and classmates to safe providers in the city.⁴ As referral requests increased, she organized a group of women to create a referral service to provide judgment-free support and to "give each women a sense that her personal predicament was part of the larger socioeconomic-racial-sexual struggles that were going on at the time."⁵ Jane activists later fired the male abortionist they contracted, and began performing abortions themselves; this shift proved unnerving for some members, who began to view Jane as a "hippie operation" distant from their own racial and class culture.⁶ While Jane and the Society for Humane Abortions served similar functions in their respective cities, neither organization was aware of the other's existence. Members of both organizations were motivated to establish referral services because of their desire to support women who had to navigate an unregulated, illicit market. Referral network volunteers also provided women with mental care to help them cope with the stigma associated with the procedure.

In the mid-1960s New York writer, Lawrence Lader, began using the press conferences for his book *Abortion* as a medium to publicly refer women to abortion providers.⁷ Lader also encouraged area clergy to start their own abortion referral service. On May 22, 1967, the Clergy Consultation Service announced its formation in a cover story in the *New York Times*. The Clergy Consultation Service received legal advice from the New York Civil Liberties Union, which encouraged the clergy to act as if they were obeying the law even when they were not. The Clergy Consultation Service grew to become a highly structured national organization populated by clergy from all over the country who helped regulate the abortion market for the women that sought

² Suzanne Staggenborg, *The Pro-Choice Movement: Organization and Activism in the Abortion Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21.

³ Leslie J. Reagan, "Crossing the Border for Abortions: California Activists, Mexican Clinics, and the Creation of a Feminist Health Agency in the 1960s," *Feminist Studies* 26 (2001), 323-348.

⁴ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 224.

⁵ Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Abortion Service* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 26-27.

⁶ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 226.

⁷ Staggenborg, *The Pro-Choice Movement*, 22.

their help.⁸ The Clergy Consultation Service differed from Jane and the Society for Humane Abortions because men led it, it relied on other established institutions, and while they believed in civil liberties, they did not employ a feminist framework.

In a history they wrote about the Clergy Consultation Service, the organization's founders asked, "But what about those women without means, unmarried, very young, or poor, or black? How did they get abortions? They relied on the 'grapevine.' The 'grapevine' is the interconnected, survival cord in the illicit underground which develops to fulfill any prohibited need."⁹ Prior to the formation of formal abortion referral networks in the late 1960s, women relied on informal networks to access abortion providers. In a Harvard University study carried out between 1965 and 1967, researcher Nancy Lee Howell interviewed 114 women who had obtained abortions, the majority of whom were unmarried and college educated, in an attempt to discover the role of social networks in accessing an abortionist. The study revealed that the majority of the women had acted jointly with their partner in their search, and they consulted between one and thirty persons. The first individuals pregnant women consulted usually contacted a chain of others, who led the women to an abortionist. A median number of two individuals generally separated the woman seeking the procedure from the abortionist. One third of the women interviewed said that they had no choice in the abortionist they went to, while less than a third of respondents said they chose the provider based on trusted recommendations.¹⁰ These informal, patchwork networks that consisted of relatives, friends, and friends-of-friends did not always ensure that women found safe providers. Rather, women were generally relieved to have simply found someone who would provide the procedure at all. In the unregulated, underground network of abortion provision before 1973, pregnant women had few guideposts for judging whether an abortion provider was reputable. The clergy who started the Clergy Consultation Service believed that these informal networks held a major disadvantage in that they created lists of abortionists without verifying their safety, and there was no effective method of verifying this without instituting formal structures to regulate the market.¹¹ Informal networks required women to admit to their close friends and acquaintances that they were seeking an abortion, with no guarantee that the admission would lead to a helpful referral. In other words, the Clergy Consultation Service prioritized safety over mere provision.

Uncovering the Story of June Wall

With no name and only a class year, I found it difficult to confirm whether the rumor of the Newcomb student who died from a botched abortion was indeed true. I turned first to the 1963 and 1964 editions of the joint Tulane University and Newcomb College yearbook, *Jambalaya*, which identified Newcomb students by name and class year. Assuming the student hadn't died before the yearbook was submitted for printing, her name and picture would be featured in the 1963 edition. I compiled a list of all the first year women in the 1963 yearbook, and then compared it with the sophomores listed in the 1964 yearbook. Next, I searched for the names of

⁸ Arlene Carmen and Howard Moody, *Abortion Counseling and Social Change: From Illegal Act to Medical Practice* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), 14-66. For full release story see Edward B. Fiske, "Clergymen Offer Abortion Advice: 21 Ministers and Rabbis Form New Group—Will Propose Alternatives," *New York Times*, May 22 1967.

⁹ Carmen and Moody, *Abortion Counseling and Social Change*, 14.

¹⁰ Nancy Howell Lee, *The Search for an Abortionist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 76-77.

¹¹ Carmen and Moody, *Abortion Counseling and Social Change*, 14.

those women who were missing from the 1964 yearbook on Ancestry.com. It was during this search that I found a death notice from 1963.

Among the smiling faces in the *Jambalaya* of 1963 is June Wall, a freshman from Harvey, Louisiana:



Picture of June Wall (far right). Tulane University, *Jambalaya* 1963 Yearbook (New Orleans, LA), 85.

According to the yearbook, Wall was not affiliated with any campus organizations or sororities. She does not appear in any other edition of the *Jambalaya*.

On May 9, 1963, any New Orleanian reading the death notices in the *Times-Picayune* would have stumbled upon an atypical announcement of a 19-year-old girl's funeral. June Emily Wall, a 19 year-old resident of Harvey, Louisiana, died on May 8, 1963 at one o'clock in the morning. The announcement invited "relatives and friends of the family, also officers and members of the Gretna Assembly No. 58, Order of the Rainbow Girls, West Jefferson High School, Beta Club, Newcomb College and the Marrero Baptist Church."¹² No cause of death is given in the announcement.

Although Wall fit the criteria for the Newcomb student in question, I could not find a source that identified her cause of death. None of the Tulane University or Newcomb College publications, including the student newspaper *Tulane Hullabaloo*, the campus humor magazine *Urchin*, and the alumni magazine *Tulanian*, acknowledged her death. However, an article in *The Times-Picayune* on May 10, 1963, the day after June Wall's death notice, explained that she had died as a result of an abortion she received from "one of the better known abortionists" in New Orleans.

DOWLING, JUDGE HIT BY GARRISON

Says Abortionist Should
Not Have Been Free

District Attorney Jim Garrison said Thursday night that a woman arrested following the death of a 19-year-old girl from an abortion was "one of the better known abortionists in town" and should not have been free.

¹² "Deaths." *Times-Picayune*, May 9 1973, 2.

The DA criticized "the previous district attorney" (Richard A. Dowling) for not pressing "a strong case" against the woman in 1960 and a Criminal District Court judge for signing an order returning medical instruments to the woman.

Asst. Dist. Atty. Alvin V. Oser, who investigated the case with homicide division officers, said earlier Thursday that he will charge the woman Mrs. Ann Corinne Sharp, 81, and her son, Stanley Joseph Sharp, 58, with manslaughter. Both reside at 2221 Esplanade.

Also, [REDACTED] 15, 31 McAlister pl., identified as the girl's boyfriend, will be charged as a material witness. Oser said.

"Dowling, Judge Hit by Garrison: Says Abortionist Should Not Have Been Free,"
Times-Picayune, May 10, 1963.

The article's proximity to June Wall's death, coupled with the fact that the man identified as "the girl's boyfriend" had a Tulane address, makes it very likely that she was indeed the unnamed "19-year-old girl." A subsequent article detailing the outcomes of the abortionist's trial confirms the date of the incident; "the manslaughter charge was accepted in connection with the death of a 19-year-old girl which occurred May 8."¹³

June Wall's death illuminates a little-recognized feature of abortion before *Roe*: the process of obtaining an abortion was frequently confusing, frightening, and potentially dangerous for all women. It is important to acknowledge that poor women of color were more likely than white women to die from illegal abortions during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ June Wall sought an abortion prior to the formation of the known abortion referral networks in the United States, none of which were documented to have existed in Louisiana. Because June Wall's boyfriend was identified in the city's largest newspaper following her death, we can be reasonably certain that authorities believed that Wall and her boyfriend acted jointly in their search for an abortionist. However, their tragic inability to find a safe abortionist brings into question the strength of their social networks.

Wall's short time at Tulane was summarized in a one-page student record, which describes her as a freshman who graduated at the top of her class from West Jefferson High School and finished her first semester of college with a C- grade point average.¹⁵ Wall's lack of affiliation with a campus organization was unusual, as the overwhelming majority of students at Newcomb College were either members of a sorority or involved in other extracurricular activities; most women were members of multiple clubs or athletic teams.¹⁶ Her lack of involvement was probably due to the fact that as a resident of nearby Harvey, Louisiana, she lived with her parents and commuted to

¹³ "Manslaughter, Abortion Seen: Charge Accepted Involving Death of Girl, 19," *Times-Picayune*, May 16, 1963, 7.

¹⁴ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 210-212.

¹⁵ June Emily Wall [Student Record], 1962-1963, University Archives, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

¹⁶ Tulane University, *Jambalaya 1963 Yearbook* (New Orleans, LA, 1963).

school.¹⁷ The decline in her academic performance and her distance from campus life makes it very likely that Wall's ties to her classmates at Newcomb were rather weak. Her social network in Harvey likely consisted of her parents, two sisters, two brothers, and her neighborhood friends.¹⁸ When she learned she was pregnant, Wall likely had to consider carefully who to confide in and entrust with referring her to an abortionist.

June Wall's experience in New Orleans is similar to a case Harvard Researcher Nancy Lee Howard discovered in the mid-1960s. In their search for an abortionist, an eighteen-year-old college student and her boyfriend contacted four different individuals for help. The woman first sought help from her roommate, whose brother gave her the contact information for a girl who had sought an abortion. Her boyfriend sought help from a female friend who directed him to an abortionist who refused to perform the procedure. The pregnant woman also contacted a male friend from her hometown and asked him to obtain pills for her, but the individual who supplied him the pills was out of town. Finally, the pregnant woman, desperate to obtain an abortion, contacted a female friend from home who referred her to an abortionist, but she became uncomfortable with the type of procedure the man provided. The woman finally found an abortionist through her first contact, who referred her to a girl who had received an abortion. In this particular case, the provider was five hundred miles away and charged \$650 for a "competently performed surgical procedure."¹⁹ One might wonder whether Wall and her boyfriend engaged a similar, frenzied search for an abortion provider without the assistance of their families.

With the absence of evidence, we are left to wonder whether Wall, who was raised Baptist, would have confided to her parents about her dilemma, which would have necessitated her admitting to having had premarital sex and to her desire for an abortion. Based upon what we know about other college women of the era from Nancy Lee Howard's research, it is more likely that Wall sought help from a classmate, a friend of her boyfriend, a close friend from West Jefferson High School, or someone she trusted in Harvey. Wall received an abortion from Mrs. Ann Corinne Sharp, an 84-year-old woman who had previously been convicted for performing abortions illegally.²⁰ Her previous convictions indicate Sharp provided unsafe abortions, because prosecutors at the time generally pursued criminal abortion cases only after a woman had died from the procedure.²¹ According to the *Times-Picayune*, Wall's boyfriend paid \$300 for the procedure, and he took Wall multiple times to Sharp's home between May 3 and May 6.²² This suggests that Wall's search for an abortionist did not yield many options. Had she been able to choose among several providers, Wall would probably have visited Sharp on May 3 and decided against the abortionist based on negative cues, such as the abortionist's age. This also reinforces the idea that informal referral networks did not provide checks on the safety of an abortionist, and whoever referred Wall to Sharp failed to inform her, or did not know, of the provider's history.

In the early hours of May 8, Wall was rushed to the Touro Infirmary after hemorrhaging and going into shock.²³ In her book on the abortion before 1973, *When Abortion was a Crime*,

¹⁷ *Tulane University Telephone Directory*, University Archives, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

¹⁸ "The Bankston Family Tree," Ancestry.com. <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/40282810> [Accessed on March 11, 2014]

¹⁹ Lee, *The Search for an Abortionist*, 62-63.

²⁰ "Manslaughter, Abortion Seen," 7.

²¹ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 116.

²² "Manslaughter, Abortion Seen," 7.

²³ "Manslaughter, Abortion Seen," 7.

historian Leslie Reagan argues, “because of their lack of funds, poor women often used inexpensive, and often dangerous, self-induced measures and delayed calling doctors if they had complications. By the time these women sought medical attention, they were likely to have reached a critical stage...”²⁴ Like the poor women Reagan refers to, Wall was in critical condition by the time she reached the infirmary. Wall and her boyfriend’s reluctance to go to the hospital at the first sign of trouble after the abortion was likely not due to their lack of financial resources. Rather, these two young people were likely terrified to seek out the assistance of medical authorities who might have been able to help June if her infection had been treated during the early stages. But with good reason, the couple likely feared the legal and social consequences that they could have encountered had they gone to the hospital as soon as Wall became ill. The needless death of June Wall and thousands of other women, married and single, African American, white, Asian American, immigrant and native-born, wealthy and poor, indicates how ideologies and laws that shamed women for having extramarital sex and for wanting abortions had lethal consequences.

In the four months prior to Wall’s death, the *Times-Picayune* mentioned the term “abortion” eight times. Seven of the eight articles regarded the conviction of an abortionist, and one was an advertisement for a sermon on “Abortion, Planned Parenthood, and Sin.” Conversely, in that same time period, the *Chicago-Tribune* mentioned “abortion” twenty-two times, with sixteen articles concerning convictions, four discussing abortion in a neutral context, and two discussing abortion abroad. The *New York Times* had twelve references to the term, with eight articles expressing neutral views, three discussing negative views, and one discussing abortion abroad, but none of the mentions referred to a conviction.²⁵ Conversely, the discussion of abortion in the *Times-Picayune* nearly always regarded the district attorney’s pursuit of a criminal investigation, giving New Orleanians a more limited and frightening view of abortion. Not surprisingly, activists in Chicago and New York developed formal abortion networks in the latter half of the 1960s, while there is no documentation to support the existence of similar networks in Louisiana. In the case of June Wall, had she and her friends had access to publications with a more diverse view of abortion, beyond the portrayal of the dirty, clandestine criminals convicted for them, she might have been more reluctant to accept care from her unskilled abortionist. Ultimately, the high volume of convicted abortionists in the months leading up to her death indicates that there was not a shortage of providers; however, skilled professionals probably took more precautions in preserving their identity and were thus more difficult to come across.

The publicity surrounding June Wall’s death, although it kept her anonymous, was unusual for a person of her socioeconomic status. Usually wealthier families were able to bribe doctors and officials to keep quiet about an abortion related death.²⁶ The articles following Wall’s death mainly focused on her abortionist, but by revealing the victim’s age and her boyfriend’s name the writer made it possible for a reader who knew the family to make the connection between her death and the story.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, unmarried white women who became pregnant faced enormous pressure to either get married or to go to a home for unwed mothers for the duration of the pregnancy and give up the baby for adoption. Consequently, for the first time in American

²⁴ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 119.

²⁵ Keyword search for “abortion,” *Times Picayune*, *Chicago-Tribune*, and *New York Times*, Jan. 1- May 8, 1963

²⁶ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 119.

history, the age at which men and women married declined. And because it had become more difficult for women to receive hospital abortions, the rate of first births for girls aged fifteen to nineteen conceived out of wedlock rose from 40 percent to 60 percent between 1955 and 1971.²⁷ White women filled maternity homes, which facilitated a booming adoption business. In 1962, the New Orleans Volunteers of America opened a Maternity Home and Adoption Service for unwed mothers that placed 70 babies in adoptive homes in less than two months after their births.²⁸ If Wall had not married her boyfriend, it is likely that she would have entered a maternity home to conceal her pregnancy. College women who chose either option—marriage or maternity homes—nearly always suspended their academic studies. Wall’s decision to engage an illicit and potentially dangerous underground in her pursuit of an abortion must be understood within the context of her era: she stood to lose so much of what she valued no matter what she chose.

Conclusion

The punitive pre-*Roe* legal system, which made safe, hospital abortions unavailable, combined with June Wall’s inadequate social infrastructure, led her to an unskilled abortionist. While she did not fit the usual profile of the poor women who were most likely to die at the hands of unqualified abortionists, it is significant to recognize that her relatively privileged background did not guarantee her access to a safe procedure. Fifty years after Wall’s death, abortion remains a stigmatized procedure in Louisiana. As the state legislature continues to pass legislation that places unnecessary restrictions on women and makes it nearly impossible for clinics to operate legally, they are once again creating conditions that threaten the lives of women seeking a safe and legal medical procedure. The mere fact that women still have to rely on abortion networks, like the New Orleans Abortion Fund, speaks to the lasting influence of the conservative values that remain in our “post-*Roe*” society. Rumors of Tulane women attempting to induce their own abortions still linger today, although unsubstantiated. They leave us with the daunting realization that June Wall’s death is not as distant of a memory as we would like to believe.

²⁷ Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before ‘Roe v. Wade.’* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 29-30.

²⁸ “VOA Program is Geared to Speed Up Adoptions,” *Times-Picayune*, October 18, 1962, 83.

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