My name is Dorothy Kenyon. I live at No. 433 West 21st Street, New York City. I am a practicing lawyer with offices located at No. 50 Broadway, New York City.

When I was informed of the accusations that were made against me before this subcommittee last week, I did explode. Doubtless my indignation led me to make some impulsive remarks in unparliamentary language. Reflection, and a recollection refreshed by such investigation as I could make in the interim, now permits a much more dispassionate approach. However, nothing can diminish the deep resentment I feel that such outrageous charges should be publicized before this subcommittee and broadcast over the entire nation without any notice or warning to me.

My answer to these charges is short, simple and direct. I am not, and never have been, a Communist. I am not, and never have been, a fellow traveller. I am not, and never have been, a supporter of, a member of, or a sympathizer with any organization known to me to be, or suspected by me of being, controlled or dominated by Communists. As emphatically and unreservedly as possible, I deny any connection of any kind or character with Communism or its adherents. If this leaves anything unsaid to indicate my total and complete detestation of that political philosophy, it is only because it is impossible for me to express my sentiments. I mean my denial to be all-inclusive.

So absolute a negation of the charges should be supplemented with an equally positive, but brief, affirmation of what I am and have been.
Dorothy Kenyon was born in New York City on February 17, 1888. She was the oldest of three children and the only daughter of prominent patent attorney William H. Kenyon, and Cincinnati, Ohio native Maria Wellington (Stanwood) Kenyon. Raised in the privileged environments of Manhattan’s Upper West Side and her family’s summer home in Lakeville, Connecticut, Kenyon excelled at the progressive Horace Mann High School from which she graduated in 1904. At Smith College she majored in economics and history and participated in numerous activities ranging from music to championship tennis and hockey. Kenyon was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year and graduated with an A.B. from Smith in 1908.

During a year-long stay in Mexico, where she observed poverty and injustice at close range, Kenyon acquired her “slant to the left,” decided upon her vocation, and transformed herself into a social activist. Kenyon entered New York University Law School at the age of 26 in 1914 and obtained her J.D. degree and admission to the New York Bar in 1917. The first series in the collection, Biographical Material, contains interesting documents on Kenyon’s childhood including a baby book kept by her father and information collected by Kenyon’s sister-in-law for a planned, but never published, biography of Kenyon.

One of the unique features of the Kenyon Papers is that it includes documentation from her earliest years to her last years. Kenyon wrote this poem about her father when she was a young teenager.

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**My father is a patent lawyer, He is like a great employer There are many clerks in his office. He very seldom a case will miss. He is the best lawyer in New York. He once had a case about a fork, A csgn, about an engine bumber Also about a baby jumper. He has a wife, that no pencil or pen Could fully describe, also two chldr A boy and a girl who loves his wife is sweet and very sedately. He is fond of golf no wonder for he seldom makes a blunder. He plays in winter and summer and seldom calls for the plumber. He is very kind and good And supplies us well with food. He is six feet, some inches. In work he never flinches. He gives us all kinds of good things, And tries not to let us get stings. He gives us all good things of ?? And would like Theodore plant ?? In the country he gives Theodore ?? And when in the lake he often dives We one and all of us raise a scream Till he appears in a large sunbeam. But now I must close, for I can't write any more besides I sha'n't I've no paper on which to write So, good-bye, dear, till to-night. Dorothy Kenyon
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The baby book kept by Dorothy Kenyon’s father is included in the collection. This page is from that book as is the photo of a 5 month old Dorothy on the first page of this fact sheet.
York City Comptroller’s Advisory Council on Taxes for the Relief of the Unemployed, and in 1936 she chaired a committee to study procedure in women’s courts where she called for more sympathetic treatment of prostitutes and stronger prosecution of the men who patronized them. In 1937 she served as Vice Chair of the New York Commission of the National Public Housing Conference. Kenyon was a charismatic speaker and she regularly traveled around the U.S. lecturing about civil liberties, the law, women’s equality, and numerous other subjects. Many of her speeches are available in the “Speeches and Writings” series of the collection. At the beginning of 1939 Fiorello LaGuardia appointed Kenyon to fill a vacancy on the Municipal Court bench, a position in which she served until November of 1940. Despite her short tenure on the bench, Kenyon was known to many as “Judge Kenyon” for the rest of her life.

Throughout her career Kenyon devoted special attention to the issues of jury service for women, equality in marriage, the legalization of birth control, and improved educational and economic opportunities for women. Kenyon gained national prominence as a feminist activist in 1938 when she was named the U.S. representative to the League of Nations Committee for the Study of the Status of Women, a group of seven lawyers charged with studying women’s legal status internationally. World War II interrupted the committee’s work and it was never completed. Kenyon resumed her commitment to improving women’s status through her work as the U.S. delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women from 1946–1950. The Activities and Organizations section of the collection documents the wide range of organizations that Kenyon was involved in from the 1920s through 1971, with particular focus on Kenyon’s involvement with the League of Nations and United Nations.

Already well-known in academic, legal, and political circles, in 1950 Dorothy Kenyon made national news when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy charged her with membership in numerous Communist-front organizations. Kenyon responded aggressively to McCarthy’s accusations by declaring: “He’s a lowdown worm and although it ought to be beneath my dignity to answer him, I’m mad enough to say that he’s a liar and he can go to hell.” As the first person to appear before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that investigated McCarthy’s charges she admitted that she had lent her name to various liberal and anti-fascist organizations, but forcefully denied that she had ever been a member or supporter of the Communist Party. The Activities and Organizations series includes a file on Kenyon’s confrontation with McCarthy and the first page of this fact sheet shows the first page of Kenyon’s statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In the wake of her confrontation with McCarthy, Kenyon received widespread support from the liberal press and from respected public figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt. Her fearless defiance and unabashed condemnation of the Senator and his tactics undoubtedly contributed to his eventual downfall. Despite such vindication, the experience tarnished Kenyon’s reputation to the degree that she never received another political appointment. Nevertheless, she sustained her busy law practice and, as progressive social movements
In the 1970s, Dorothy Kenyon became a supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment. Previously, as seen in this 1943 speech, she opposed such an amendment because she feared it would hurt working women.

resurfaced in the 1960s, escalated her already intense involvement in both national and local politics.

As a longtime supporter of civil rights, Kenyon prepared briefs for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the ACLU, fought segregation in the New York City schools, and participated in numerous civil rights marches. She participated in various aspects of President Johnson’s War on Poverty and at age 80 she worked tirelessly and almost single-handedly to establish legal services for the poor on the Lower West Side. She continued her feminist activism throughout the 1950s and 1960s by pushing the ACLU to take a stand against sexist policies and institutions and, once they had done so, working with African-American activist and attorney Pauli Murray on preparing briefs for cases that challenged sex discrimination. In the last few years of her life Kenyon, along with many women of her generation who had opposed the ERA because of the negative implications they believed it held for working-class women, joined the pro-ERA forces. She also joined with much younger feminists in the emerging women's liberation movement where she participated in the 1971 Women's Strike for Equality and in the burgeoning movement to legalize abortion.

In addition to her numerous professional and political commitments, Dorothy Kenyon also maintained a busy social life. She had friends of all ages in New York and around the world, but her closest personal relationships centered around “Barn House,” a rustic estate jointly owned by a small group of East coast liberal intellectuals in Chilmark on Martha’s Vineyard. Kenyon joined Gertrude

Dorothy Kenyon developed a strong friendship in the 1960s with fellow attorney Pauli Murray. In this letter, Kenyon describes a visit to Beaufort, South Carolina, and her desire to see Murray during the trip.

and Stanley King, Natalie and Adam Haskell, and Wolcott Pitkin in founding Barn House in 1919. Over the years Barn House members and guests included such notables as Crystal and Max Eastman, Roger and Evelyn Baldwin, Walter Lippman, Felix Frankfurter, and Sylvia Plath, among many others. In order to take advantage of its relaxing yet intellectually stimulating environment, Kenyon participated actively in administering Barn House and spent time there every summer from 1919 until 1971. Kenyon’s work for Barn House work is reflected in the Activities and Organizations series.

When Kenyon was diagnosed with cancer in 1969 she concealed the severity of her illness from most people and refused to suspend or even curtail her legal or political work. Active and articulate as an advocate for social justice until the very end, Dorothy Kenyon died one week before her 84th birthday on February 11, 1972.

The Dorothy Kenyon Papers illuminate the continuity of social activism around such issues as race, class, poverty, and gender from the 1930s through the 1960s, and also offer valuable documentation on the life of a pioneering woman lawyer, judge, and political figure.


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Source Note: Dorothy Kenyon Papers, 1850–1998, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

Fact sheet text adapted from the Dorothy Kenyon Papers Finding Aid written by staff of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. All photographs and document images are from the Dorothy Kenyon Papers.