

## The fiftieth anniversary of Helen Parkhurst's death

René Berends, 2023

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*In the spring of 1973, Parkhurst falls down a flight of stairs in her home and breaks her hip. She is admitted to the local hospital. There she is nursed for six weeks before she dies on June 1, 1973. She was interred on June 4, 1973, in the Parkhurst family grave. On June 1, 2023, it was therefore fifty years ago that Parkhurst died. A moment to pause.*

*Leading up to this date, I have made an effort to locate the site of her grave and obtain photographs of it. That worked, but also led to the resurfacing of an old question.*

### Starbridge

Helen was born in Durand, Pepin County, Wisconsin. But when she chooses a career in education at the age of eighteen, she lives where her work takes her. That is from 1919 the metropolis of New York.

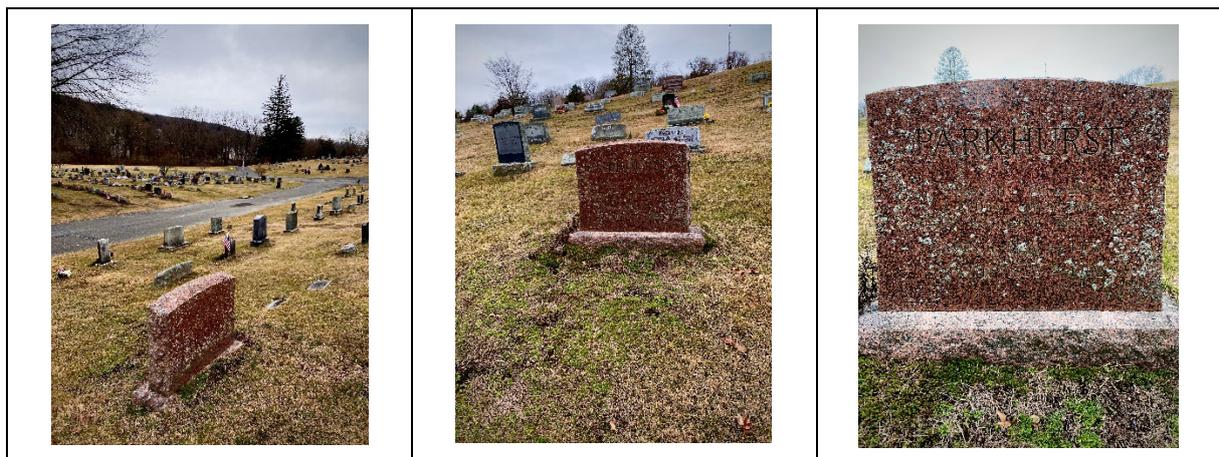
However, the busy life in 'The Big Apple' takes its toll on aging. When work no longer required her to live in New York, in 1956 she and her friend Dorothy Rawls Luke moved into a newly built house on Hopkins Road in New Preston on Lake Waramaug, Connecticut (CT), about 90 miles from New York.

Parkhurst is familiar with the area. Her parents had a cottage in New Milford in Berkshire Hill County for years, where Parkhurst regularly spent holidays in her youth. And in 1941, Parkhurst set up an evacuation village near New Milford. It is wartime and German U-boats threaten to attack the cities of the eastern United States. Parkhurst considers existing evacuation camps unsuitable for the needs of school children and is building its own evacuation village with a space that can also be used as a school in times of need.

### The search for her grave

A report in Connecticut's largest newspaper, The Hartford Courant, about Parkhurst's death finally led me in my search to the place where she is buried.

In the newspaper of June 3, 1973, there is a memorial of Parkhurst. It says that she will be interred in the family grave of the Parkhurst's the next day - so on Monday, June 4, 1973. The pre-ceremony will take place at Lillis Funeral Home, 58 Bridge Street in New Milford and will be presided over by Reverend Richard E. Crews, rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church.



Unfortunately, a number of e-mails with requests for information in the message box of the cemetery website yielded no response. But when I called in a good friend, Terry Mesch, the president of the historical society in Durand (Parkhurst's hometown), things started to move.

Terry contacted the cemetery by phone and through him I eventually came into possession of a number of photos of the Parkhurst family grave.

**For those in the area...**

*Helen Parkhurst's grave can be found in section 2, rank 3 at the Central Cemetery in New Milford, Connecticut, 6 Poplar Street, New Milford, CT 06776, located between U.S. Route 202 and the Great Brook stream.*

**The Parkhurst family grave**

The cemetery in New Milford has existed for about 300 years. It is a typical American cemetery, spaciouly set in a gently sloping landscape. In the message that Terry Mesch received from the cemetery employee, it is almost apologetically stated that the headstone needs cleaning and is difficult to read.

When we study the photos, it is easy to conclude that the grave of Helen Parkhurst is not exactly a pilgrimage, as the grave of Maria Montessori in Noordwijk in the Netherlands is.

It is difficult to see that five names are engraved on the stone. The two bottom names are Helen's mother (Ida L. 1858-1942) and her father (James H. 1852-1938). The two names above are those of Helen Parkhurst's youngest brother (A. Alden 1897-1989) and presumably his wife (Vivian H 1911-1998).

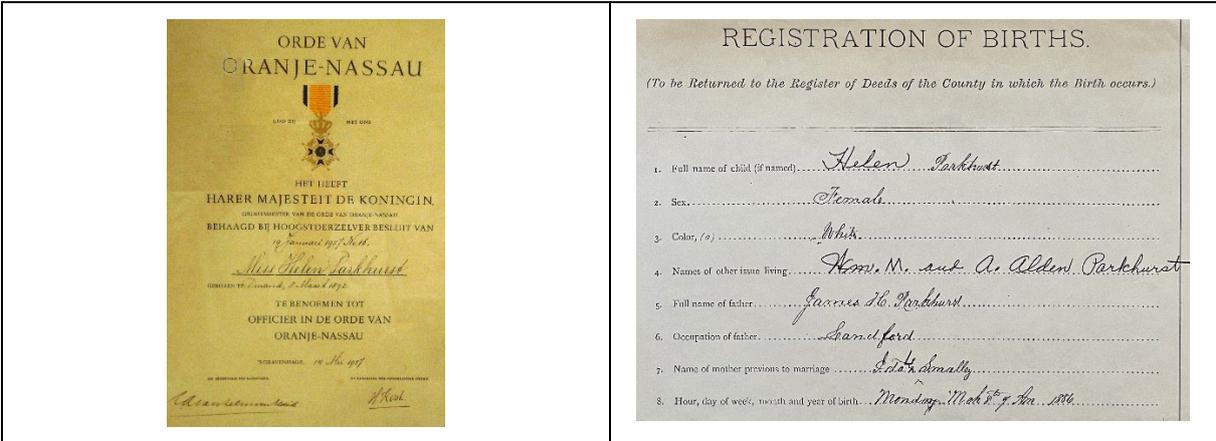
**Helen Educator**

The middle name on the headstone is of Helen Parkhurst. It literally says: Helen Educator 1887-1973. A modest text, but that's all it really needs. It's an honorary title: Helen, educator! That is the woman written about in a Washington Post obituary in June 1973: "She is recognized as one of the hundred greatest educators of all time."

**The renewal of the discussion about her year of birth**

But despite the modesty of the inscription on the tombstone and the simplicity of the text, the dates that accompany it immediately trigger: It says she was born in 1887! And that's not what I'm assuming about her in my biography.

I finally concluded that she was born on March 8, 1886. Would that be wrong? Or would her relatives be wrong?



Of course, the sense of time and the knowledge of when someone was born has, over time, become more important and perhaps now, a hundred years later, we focus even more on such a difference in dates than we did then.

We now know that Parkhurst herself also 'cheated' with her age. For example, she pretends to be older when she applies for a job in Tacoma in 1909. Perhaps, with the lengthening of the years, she also pretended to be younger than she really was. She herself writes in a curriculum vitae that is in the archives of the Dalton School in New York, 3/7/1887, the same date also mentioned by Diana Lager, Dorothy Luke and Susan Semel. However, Vern Pinkowski, from her hometown, mentions the year 1886 and the date March 8 in a short biography. He indicates that he has consulted authentic, genealogical sources in Wisconsin. But he doesn't say exactly what they are. Susanne Popp (1993) points to the possibility of a mix-up in the literature with her namesake and relative Helen Huss Parkhurst, who is certain to have been born in 1887.

In any case, confusion has arisen. A good example of this is the text on the diploma that Parkhurst received in 1957 from the Dutch embassy upon her appointment as an officer in the Order of Orange-Nassau. The included diploma even states the date of birth as March 8, 1892!

All in all, I stick to the date of birth of March 8, 1886. That is the date on the copy of the birth certificate that comes from the Durand archive, although the original birth certificate has probably been lost. In Durand there is only an 'uncertified copy' of this proof. But it was drawn up in 1886 with the midwife Mrs. H. Weifer who "brought" Parkhurst, as a witness.

On January 22, 1963, an affidavit is made to amend the birth certificate. The notary on duty in Washington (CT) writes: "Subscribed and sworn to before me this 16th day of January A.D. 1963." The notary and Helen Parkhurst then sign the statement. So, Parkhurst swears it's true and signs the statement: March 8, 1886.

That year also matches Parkhurst's recently discovered enrolment at Teacher College in Riverfalls. She is registered there on August 30, 1905, at the age of 19 years. And when you calculate back, you come to 1886!

So, it is special that it says 1887 on her tombstone.