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Margaret Sanger

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Margaret Sanger

American social reformer

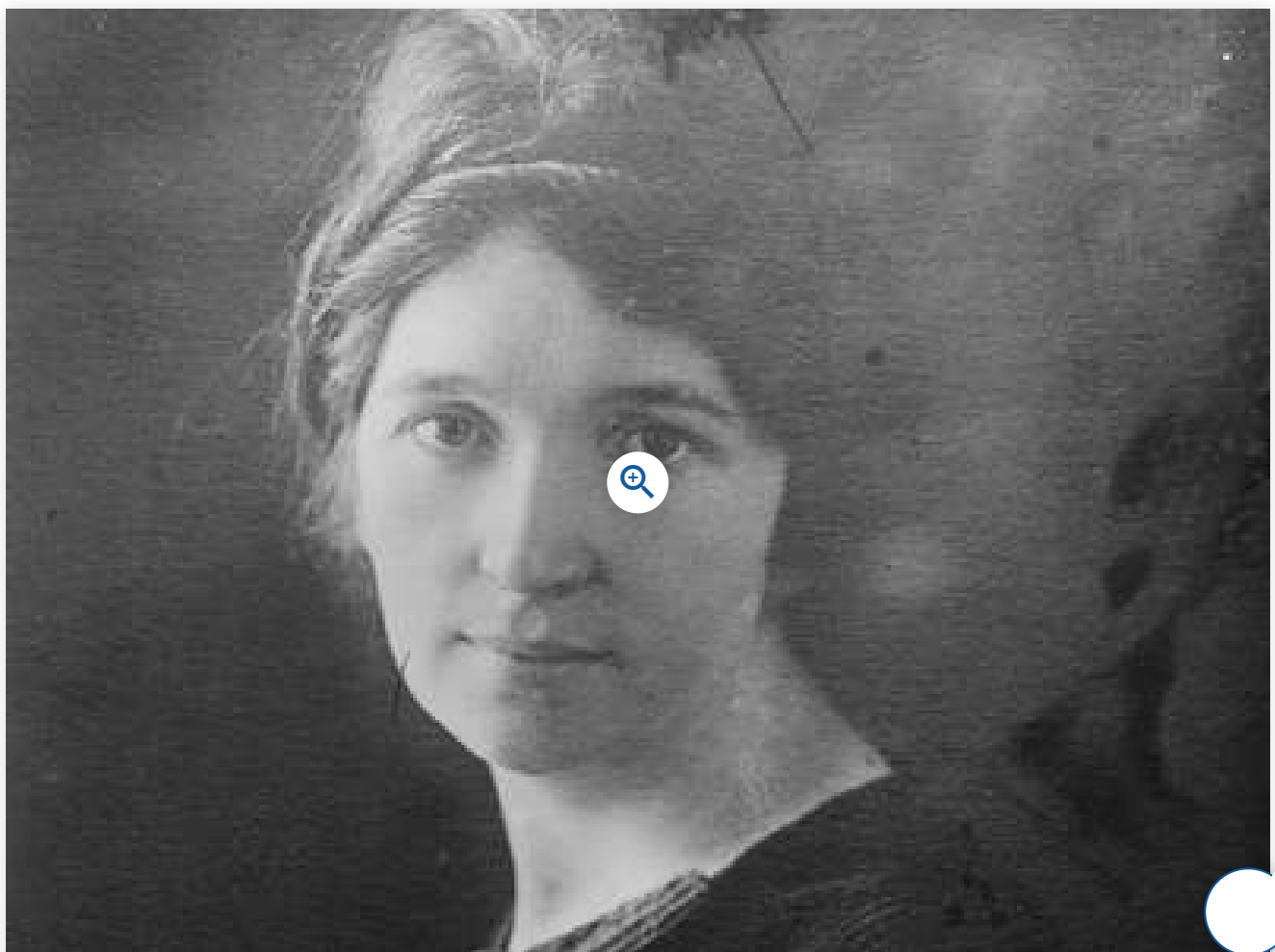
Alternate titles: Margaret Louisa Higgins

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Margaret Sanger

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Born: September 14, 1879 • [Corning](#) • [New York](#)

Died: September 6, 1966 (aged 86) • [Tucson](#) • [Arizona](#)

Founder: [American Birth Control League](#)

Notable Works: ["What Every Girl Should Know"](#)

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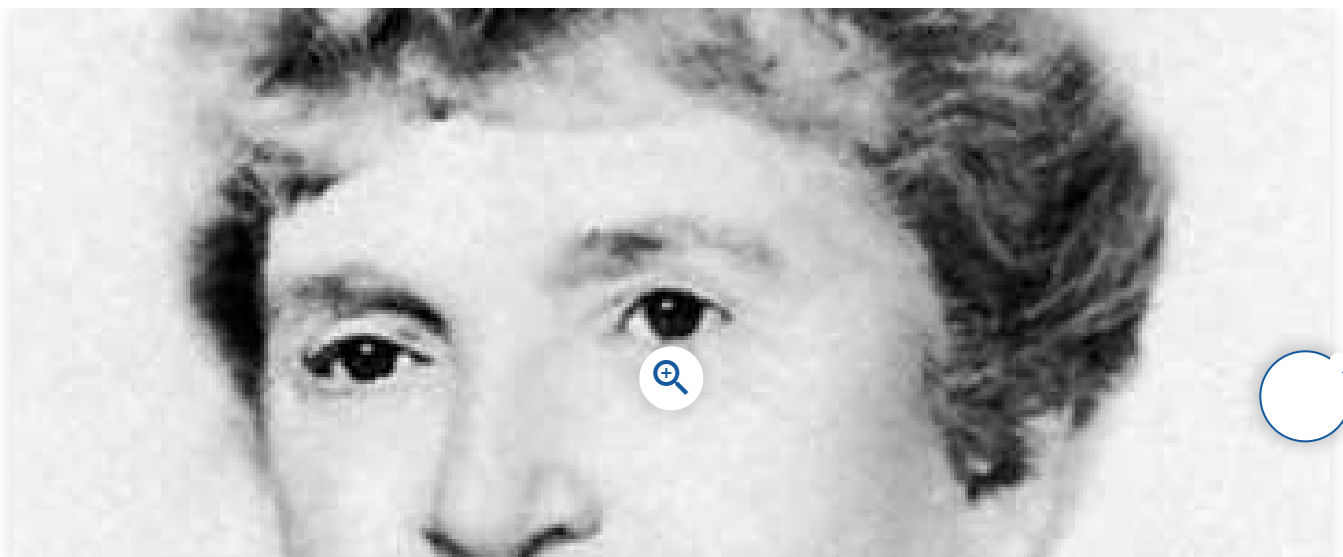
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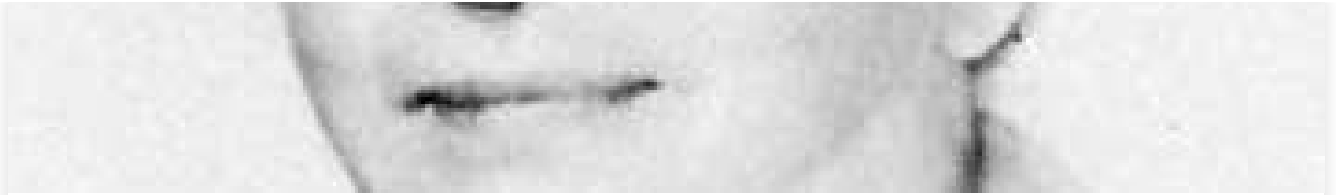
Why was Margaret Sanger important? ▾

What did Margaret Sanger do for a living? ▾

What did Margaret Sanger accomplish? ▾

Margaret Sanger, original name **Margaret Louisa Higgins**, (born September 14, 1879, [Corning, New York](#), U.S.—died September 6, 1966, [Tucson](#), Arizona), founder of the [birth control](#) movement in the United States and an international leader in the field. She is credited with originating the term *birth control*.



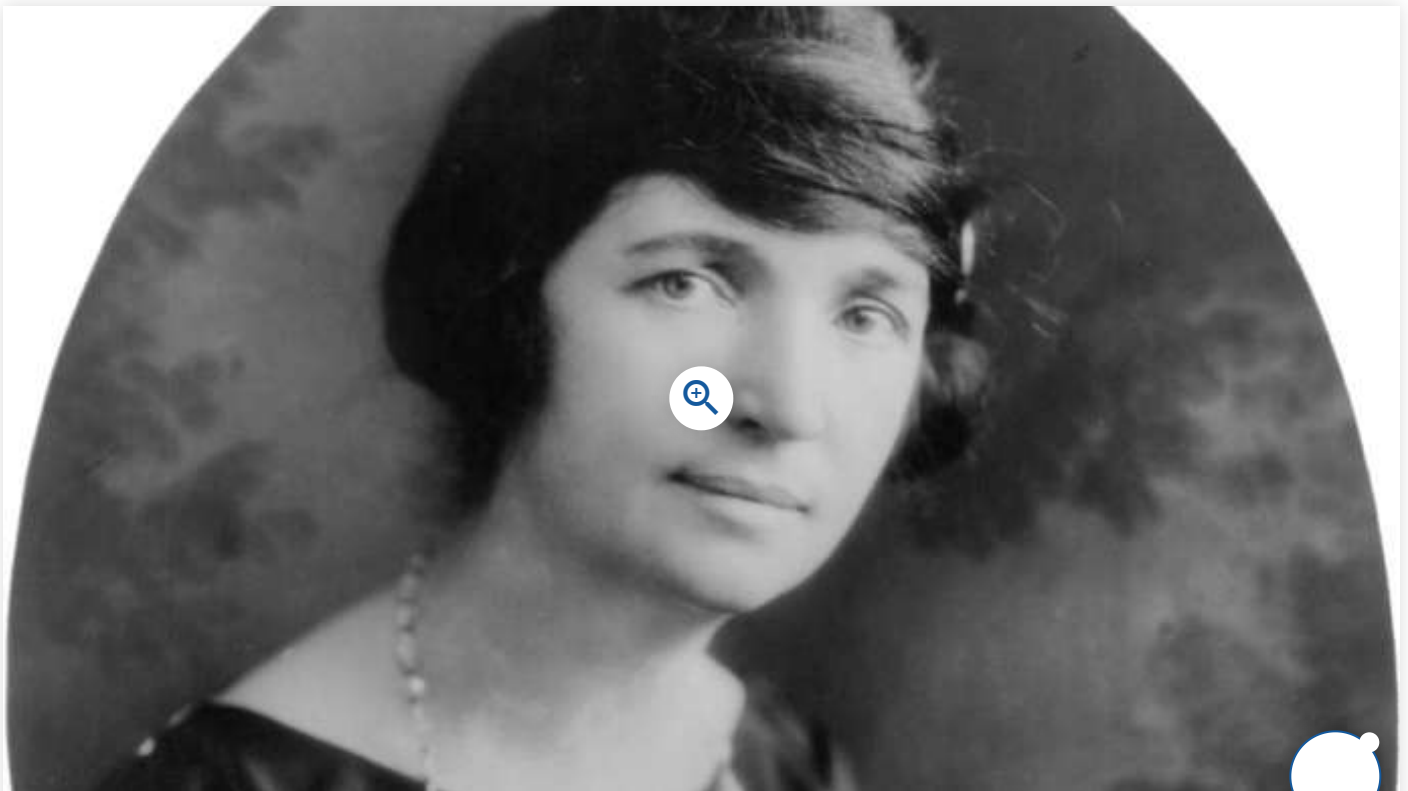


Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger.

Image: Courtesy of Planned Parenthood ® Federation of America, Inc.

Sanger was the sixth of 11 children. She attended Claverack College and then took nurse's training in New York at the White Plains Hospital and the Manhattan Eye and Ear Clinic. She was married twice, to William Sanger in 1900 and, after a divorce, to J. Noah H. Slee in 1922. After a brief teaching career, she practiced obstetrical nursing on the Lower East Side of New York City, where she witnessed the relationships between **poverty**, uncontrolled **fertility**, high rates of infant and maternal mortality, and deaths from botched illegal **abortions**. These observations made Sanger a feminist who believed in every woman's right to avoid unwanted **pregnancies**, and she devoted herself to removing the legal barriers to publicizing the facts about **contraception**.



Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger, 1922.

Image: Underwood & Underwood/Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USZ62-29808)

In 1912 Sanger gave up nursing to devote herself to the cause of birth control and sex education, publishing a series of articles on the topics, including “[What Every Girl Should Know](#)” for the *New York Call*. In 1914 she issued a short-lived magazine, *The Woman Rebel*, and distributed a pamphlet, *Family Limitation*, advocating her views. She was indicted for mailing materials advocating birth control, but the charges were dropped in 1916. Later that year she opened in [Brooklyn](#) the first birth control clinic in the United States. She was arrested and charged with maintaining a “public nuisance,” and in 1917 she served 30 days in the Queens penitentiary. While she was serving time, the first issue of her periodical *The Birth Control Review* was published. Her sentencing and subsequent episodes of legal harassment helped to crystallize [public opinion](#) in favour of the birth control movement. Sanger’s legal appeals prompted the federal courts first to grant physicians the right to give advice about birth control methods and then, in 1936, to reinterpret the [Comstock Act](#) of 1873 (which had classified contraceptive literature and devices as obscene materials) in such a way as to permit physicians to import and prescribe contraceptives.



[What Every Girl Should Know \(1922/23\)](#)

Front and back covers of Margaret Sanger's pamphlet *What Every Girl Should Know* (1922/23), a compilation of Sanger's writings from 1910–19 on sex education and birth control.

compilation of Sanger's writings from 1912–13 on sex education and birth control.

Image: The Newberry Library, Case HQ57 .S28 (A Britannica Publishing Partner [↗](#))

In 1921 Sanger founded the [American Birth Control League](#), and she served as its president until 1928. The league was one of the parent organizations of the Birth Control Federation of America, which in 1942 became the [Planned Parenthood Federation of America](#), with Sanger as honorary chairman. Sanger, who had traveled to Europe to study the issue of birth control there, also organized the first World Population Conference in Geneva in 1927, and she was the first president of the [International Planned Parenthood Federation](#) (founded 1953). Subsequently she took her campaign for birth control to Asian countries, especially India and Japan.



Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger.

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Sanger's legacy has been complicated by her support of [eugenics](#), the idea that selective

breeding for desired heritable characteristics could improve future generations of humans—an idea that was popular in the early 20th century (though it was later debunked). At the time Sanger began her work with birth control, eugenics was championed by well-known and respected scientists. It is unclear how extensively Sanger was involved in the eugenics movement, though she did believe that birth control could be used to prevent the breeding of unfit individuals. In addition, through the “Negro Project,” working closely with NAACP leader [W.E.B. Du Bois](#), Sanger brought birth control to [African American communities](#). As a consequence of these actions, critics have described Sanger as racist. However, as with her work in white communities, Sanger emphasized the importance of giving African Americans choices about parenthood and the number of children they wished to have. It is generally accepted that Sanger’s notions were no more racist than those found in society in general at the time.

Among her numerous books are *What Every Mother Should Know* (1917), *My Fight for Birth Control* (1931), and *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography* (1938).

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 This article was most recently revised and updated by [Kara Rogers](#).

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American reformer **Margaret Sanger** coined the phrase in 1914–15 and, like the social movement she founded, the term has been caught up in a quest for acceptance, generating many synonyms: family planning, planned parenthood, responsible parenthood, voluntary parenthood, contraception, fertility regulation, and...

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