

**Dick Whitney, R&D, Carl Zeiss Vision**

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**Sent:** Thursday, July 12, 2007 2:10 PM  
**To:** Whitney, Dick  
**Subject:** BioRC: Frank Parsons1854-1908

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**Biography Resource Center**

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**Frank Parsons**

1854-1908

**Birth:** November 14, 1854 in New Jersey, United States

**Death:** September 26, 1908

**Occupation:** Political Scientist

**Source:** *Dictionary of American Biography* Base Set. American Council of Learned Societies, 1928-1936.

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**BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY**

Parsons, Frank (Nov. 14, 1854 - Sept. 26, 1908), political scientist, was born at Mount Holly, N. J., the son of Edward and Alice (Rhees) Parsons. His ancestry on his father's side was English and on his mother's, Scotch and Welsh. After graduating with the degree of B.C.E. from Cornell University in 1873, he went to work on a railroad. From 1874 to 1881 he lived in Southbridge, Mass., where, after the railroad became bankrupt, he taught a variety of subjects in the district schools and in the high school. Meanwhile he studied law and in 1881 was admitted to the Massachusetts bar. In 1885 he became chief clerk in a Boston law firm. These were critical years in his career. He discovered a talent for writing that was not satisfied with the humdrum task of editing legal textbooks and a talent for public speaking that needed a larger audience than the classes he taught in the law school of Boston University. The social and economic unrest then agitating the whole country stirred him profoundly. In 1895 he was nominated for mayor of Boston on a platform of municipal reform by the Prohibition, Populist, and Socialist parties. Two years later he resigned his position in the law firm and took leave of absence from Boston University to accept the professorship of history and political science at the State College of Agriculture and Applied Science at Manhattan, Kan. While in Kansas he formulated a plan for a college to be devoted entirely to economic and social studies. At a convention in Buffalo in June 1899 the plan was launched and funds were obtained to found the Ruskin College of Social

Science at Trenton, Mo. He was made dean of the lecture extension department and professor of history and economics. The venture seems not to have been successful, for shortly afterward he returned east and resumed his teaching at Boston University.

His western experience focused his attention on two problems, currency and the railroads. In October and November 1896 he published articles on currency in the *Arena*. These were followed in 1898 by a book, *Rational Money*, in which he advocated abandoning both gold and silver as standard money and establishing a managed currency with a commodity dollar of constant purchasing power. The arguments were set forth with remarkable clearness and thorough acquaintance with the scientific literature of the subject. The publisher was Charles Fremont Taylor, a Philadelphia physician and editor of *The Medical World* who had become deeply interested in economic and social reform. With Taylor's backing, Parsons now plunged into study of municipal ownership of public utilities, both in the United States and abroad, and published the results in a substantial volume, *The City for the People* (1900). A part of the book was devoted to the advocacy of direct legislation, since it was his theory that municipal ownership must be accompanied by reform in city government. *The Story of New Zealand* (1904) treated comprehensively the history and economic origins of the country as a background for the description of its experiments in state socialism. In 1901 he was sent by the National Civic Federation to England as a member of a commission to study municipal trading. His observations are recorded in part in his chapter, "British Tramway History," in *Municipal and Private Operation of Public Utilities: Report of the National Civic Federation Commission on Public Ownership and Operation* (1907, vol. II). In 1905 he resigned his position at Boston University to devote himself entirely to the study of American railroads. After much traveling and interviewing of railway officials and other interested persons, he published *The Heart of the Railroad Problem* (1906), which was criticized as lacking discrimination and constructive suggestions.

He was now suffering from Bright's disease and, although he had undergone a serious operation, refused to modify his habits of strenuous work. He became associated with Meyer Bloomfield in settlement work in Boston, and with his intimate friend, Ralph Albertson, he founded the Breadwinners' College. With the financial aid of Mrs. Quincy A. Shaw, he established the Vocation Bureau, and as its director he did valuable pioneer work in the field of vocational guidance. His posthumous book, *Choosing a Vocation* (1909), summarizes his methods. Another posthumous publication was *Legal Doctrine and Social Progress* (1911). He died in the solitary bachelor quarters in Saint James Street, where most of his work had been done. A friend, Edwin D. Mead, described his career as an "attempt to make the world over . . . into some sort of reflection . . . of the Kingdom of God" (Letter to the *Public*, Oct. 16, 1908, p. 683). He brought to bear on certain political and social problems to which most of his countrymen were indifferent a logical mind and a passion for justice, truth, and fairness. Simple and unassuming in manner he was an inspiring teacher and an effective public speaker. Although in general lacking in humor, he proved on occasion a spirited and entertaining companion. Scholars respected him, and the poor loved him.  
-- Percy W. Bidwell

## FURTHER READINGS

[*Arena*, Nov. 1908; *Public* (Chicago), Oct. 2, 16, 1908; *Who's Who in America*, 1908-09; *Boston Herald*, Sept. 27, 1908.]

## SOURCE CITATION

"Frank Parsons." *Dictionary of American Biography* Base Set. American Council of Learned Societies, 1928-1936.

Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2007.  
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**Document Number:**

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