

Katharine McCormick (1876-1967) ^[1]

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Katharine Dexter McCormick, who contributed the majority of funding for the development of the [oral contraceptive pill](#) ^[6], was born to Josephine and Wirt Dexter on 27 August 1875 in Dexter, Michigan. After growing up in Chicago, Illinois, she attended the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) ^[7] (MIT), where she graduated in 1904 with a BS in biology. That same year, she married Stanley McCormick, the son of Cyrus McCormick, inventor and manufacturer of the mechanized reaper. Katharine's father was a prominent Chicago lawyer, so this marriage created the accumulation of great wealth and power. Her primary contribution to society was her commitment to reproductive reform.

McCormick became involved with the development of the [oral contraceptive pill](#) ^[6] and the [birth control movement](#) ^[8] more generally through her relationship with Margaret Sanger. After Sanger had met with [Gregory Goodwin Pincus](#) ^[9] to discuss the development of a [birth control](#) ^[10] pill, she brought McCormick to meet with him at his laboratory, the [Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology](#) ^[11], on 8 June 1953. McCormick then pledged to fund the project to completion, contributing \$100,000 annually at the beginning and later \$150,000-\$180,000 annually until her death in 1967. She initially distributed the funds through [Planned Parenthood Federation of America](#) ^[12], but later, due to a lack of enthusiasm from the [organization](#) ^[13] about the pill, McCormick donated directly to the Worcester Foundation.

McCormick had always been involved with women's rights issues. Her mother was involved with the suffragist movement, and McCormick was a member of the Massachusetts Women's Alliance, one of the many women's suffrage organizations. She was one of the few women to graduate from MIT during this time period and had taken additional preparatory classes before starting at the institution. A strong supporter of [reproductive rights](#) ^[14], she smuggled illegal diaphragms from Europe into the US for Sanger and her [birth control](#) ^[10] clinic.

McCormick's funding of the [birth control](#) ^[10] project can be partially explained by her faith in science and her experience with her husband's illness. Within two years of their marriage, Stanley was placed in a mental institution for schizophrenia. Because of her training as a scientist and her strong belief in science to provide solutions, she funded the Neuroendocrine Research Foundation at Harvard from 1927 to 1947 in the hope that they could find a cure for her husband. It was this same belief that drove her to fund the [birth control](#) ^[10] project, seeing a technological development as the solution to a social problem.

On 28 December 1967 [Katharine McCormick](#) ^[5] died from a stroke in her sleep. In her will, she gave five million dollars to the Planned Parenthood Federation and one million dollars to the Worcester Laboratories. Her contributions were essential to the development of the [oral contraceptive pill](#) ^[6], which revolutionized [birth control](#) ^[10] and underscored concerns about [reproductive rights](#) ^[14].