

[Ann Trow \(Madame Restell\) \(1812–1878\)](#) ^[1]

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Self-proclaimed female physician Ann Trow was a women's reproductive health specialist as well as an [abortion](#) ^[3] provider in New York City, New York during the mid 1800s. Although she had no formal medical training or background, Trow provided women with healthcare and abortions under the alias Madame Restell. Restell gained attention across the United States for her career as a professional abortionist during a time when abortions were highly regulated and punishable with imprisonment. Restell was tried numerous times for carrying out abortions. She never confessed to any crimes, but she was convicted on several occasions. Her services as a business woman, medicine producer, [abortion](#) ^[3] provider, boarding house maintainer, and adoption facilitator provided women with solutions to unwanted pregnancies throughout her forty years of healthcare service and made her a subject of widespread controversy in the United States.

Ann Trow Sommers was born on May 1812 in Painswick, England. At age sixteen, she married Henry Summers, who fathered her daughter Caroline. In 1831 Trow, her husband, and her daughter moved to the United States where they settled in Lower Manhattan, New York. Shortly after arriving in the United States, Trow's husband died of bilious fever, leaving Trow to support herself working as a seamstress. In 1836, Trow met Charles Lohman, a printer for the *New York Herald* who was a member of New York City's community of radical thinkers and philosophers. Lohman published pamphlets concerning [contraception](#) ^[4] and [birth control](#) ^[5] and, according to Restell scholar Clifford Browder, he encouraged Trow's transition into work with patent medicines. Patent medicines, which were especially popular in the 1800's, are marketed products advertised as over-the-counter medicines, and they usually include natural ingredients and may or may not have actual medically beneficial properties.

Trow re-married to Lohman in 1863. Together, Trow and Lohman created a fictional story that Trow had traveled to Europe and received formal medical training as a midwife with her grandmother, whom they claimed was a noteworthy French physician with the surname Restell. Trow adopted the name Madame Restell after allegedly returning from Europe and entering the medical profession. During the early 1800s, it was possible to practice as a doctor after carrying out an apprenticeship even without a medical degree or medical license. That meant that Restell could legally practice medicine given her claims of apprenticeship in Europe.

Restell first advertised her services as a physician in the *New York Sun* on 18 March 1839. In her first advertisement addressed to married women, Restell offered women the opportunity to visit her office and obtain information on alternatives to bearing children. The alternatives were not detailed in the advertisement. With the help of her husband, Restell published advertisements in the *New York Herald* and the *New York Times* offering those same services. Restell met with clients at her office on Greenwich Street in New York City, New York between the hours of 9 am and 10 pm.

However, if a client was unable to receive abortions or other treatment in person, Restell offered solutions by selling birth control and substances that ended pregnancies, called abortifacients. Some abortifacients included preventative powder for five dollars and female monthly pills for one dollar a piece. Restell sent such treatments to her patients via mail. Restell utilized ingredients including pennyroyal, savin, black draught, tansy tea, cedar oil, ergot of rye, mallow, and motherwort to create concoctions to alleviate what she referred to in newspapers and other forms of media as private difficulties and obstructions, euphemisms for treating menstrual discomfort as well as preventing [conception](#) ^[6]. Her pills and powders were traditional folk remedies that had been used for centuries and exhibited occasional effectiveness as abortifacients.

If the folk remedies failed and a woman became pregnant, Restell offered and frequently performed surgical abortions at her office. Restell charged twenty dollars to women with less financial means and one hundred dollars to wealthy women to perform an [abortion](#) ^[3]. What was worth twenty dollars in the early 1800s would be worth nearly five hundred and thirty dollars in 2017.

When Restell began performing abortions in the late 1830s, New York state law permitted abortions up until the point of quickening. The term quickening referred to the moment a pregnant woman feels the developing [fetus](#) ^[7] move inside her body. According to historian Karen Abbott, prior to that point, usually around the fourth month of [pregnancy](#) ^[8], the [fetus](#) ^[7] was not considered technically alive and [abortion](#) ^[3] was legal. After the point of quickening however, the termination of a [pregnancy](#) ^[8] was considered second-degree manslaughter in the state of New York. Under the New York laws, only the individual who performed the [abortion](#) ^[3] faced consequences for breaking the law, not the pregnant woman requesting the procedure. Restell attempted to determine the timeline of a woman's [pregnancy](#) ^[8] before offering her [abortion](#) ^[3] services to avoid the \$1,000 fine and one year prison sentence for intervening in a [pregnancy](#) ^[8] after quickening. Regardless of medical implications, according to historian Adina Cheree Carlson, [abortion](#) ^[3] was considered the ultimate crime against womanhood in the United States.

Despite the negative public view of [abortion](#) ^[3], Restell continued advertising and grew her business. Using newspaper advertising, Restell warned clients to beware of imitators and, to remain competitive, she expanded the range of services at her

office. Restell recruited other women's health professionals willing to perform abortions. While continuing to sell the powders and pills she made, Restell also opened a boardinghouse where women with unwanted pregnancies could give birth in private. Following those deliveries, she facilitated the adoption of unwanted infants for a fee.

After one such adoption, the pregnant woman Mary Applegate filed a lawsuit for the return of her child. Applegate's child's adoption had been arranged by Applegate's former love interest after she became pregnant by another man. Applegate's former love interest privately instructed Restell, who was unaware of the circumstances, to facilitate the adoption and did not inform Applegate. After the child was adopted, Restell denied knowing where the infant was, preventing Applegate from claiming the infant and leading to the lawsuit. The incident led to protests and demonstrations outside Restell's home. Applegate gained public support as a victim of Restell's crimes.

In 1840, Restell again attracted the attention of the media when a former patient dying of tuberculosis confessed to her husband that she had sought treatment from Restell. The patient, twenty-one year old Maria Purdy, claimed that Restell had given her a small vial of yellow medicine in exchange for one dollar. After taking part of her prescription, Purdy had a physician analyze the concoction and the doctor ordered her to never take the medicine again after finding it contained oil of tansy and spirits of turpentine. Purdy returned to Restell seeking an [abortion](#)^[3], but because Purdy could not pay the twenty dollars Restell charged, Purdy instead paid with various items of gold jewelry. According to Purdy, Restell led her to a darkened room where a man assessed her abdomen and determined that she was three months along in her [pregnancy](#)^[8]. Purdy underwent the [abortion](#)^[3] and claimed that she had contracted tuberculosis as a result. Purdy's husband involved the police, and because Restell herself only arranged for the [abortion](#)^[3] and did not administer it herself, she was not charged for performing the [abortion](#)^[3] but was arrested and charged with administering noxious medicine and procuring a [miscarriage](#)^[9] by use of instruments. Though Restell was found guilty at trial, she appealed her case on the grounds that the deathbed deposition given by Purdy was not admissible. Restell was retried and found not guilty.

Following the controversy, Restell expanded her business, opening offices in Boston and Philadelphia. She also increased her advertising, placing an ad in the *New York Herald* in which she offered to award anyone who could prove her methods harmful one hundred dollars. Restell continued to arrange abortions for her clients and admit women to her boarding house to give birth in anonymity.

Restell's business became widely renowned and anti-[abortion](#)^[3] advocates sought to end her medical career. According to historian Carson, Restell received the nickname the Wickedest Woman in New York. According to historian Abbott, many believed that Restell threatened the institution of marriage by giving women the means to commit adultery without detection and encouraged prostitution by alleviating the consequences. Likewise, according to Abbott, some declared Restell a hag who preyed on the fragility of pregnant women by providing women with abortions when they could seek consolation from the Church instead. The term Restellism became equivalent to pro-[abortion](#)^[3]. Restell's critics wrote anonymous letters accusing her of performing a fatal [abortion](#)^[3] on celebrity Mary Rogers, who was the inspiration for Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Mystery of Marie Roget." Restell's business maintained success thanks to those women who supported her and sought her out as a last resort.

In 1845, Restell's business was affected when the New York legislature passed a bill that prohibited the provision of abortions of any form, surgical, pill, or powder, regardless of what stage of [pregnancy](#)^[8] the woman was in. According to the bill, providing abortions was punishable by a year in prison and those seeking abortions or attempting self-[abortion](#)^[3] were subject to a \$1,000 mandatory fine and/or a prison sentence of up to a year.

The new laws affected Restell when she was found guilty of a misdemeanor in 1847 after performing an [abortion](#)^[3] on Maria Bodine. Bodine visited one of Restell's clinics in the fall of 1847. After determining that Bodine was too far along in her [pregnancy](#)^[8], Restell advised the woman to stay and give birth at her boarding house. However, the father of the [unborn child](#)^[10] insisted on the [abortion](#)^[3]. Restell eventually agreed to perform the [abortion](#)^[3], and after the procedure, Bodine consulted a different physician when she began experiencing abdominal pain. The physician reported Bodine and Restell to the police and Restell was arrested and found guilty of second-degree manslaughter. Restell was sentenced to and served a year in prison on Blackwell's Island off of New York City, New York. After her release, Restell alleged she would not perform surgical abortions, but that she would still provide abortifacient pills and maintain her boarding house.

Despite several altercations with the law, Restell was able to realize significant profits through her business. New Yorkers often saw Restell wearing her collection of diamonds, furs, and expensive clothes, as well as traveling in her extravagant carriage, which included four horses and a coachman. She and her husband lived in a brownstone mansion on the corner of 52nd Street and 5th Avenue in New York City, New York. According to Abbott, the mansion was built in that location partially to aggravate the first Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, who had purchased the neighboring block to build St. Patrick's Cathedral. The Archbishop had denounced Restell from his pulpit for what he called crimes against God.

In 1873, Restell's business was further impacted by the passage of the Comstock Act, which made reaching pregnant women through writing more difficult. The federal law was created by [Anthony Comstock](#)^[11], founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and made it a misdemeanor to publish, sell, or advertise information designed or intended for preventing [conception](#)^[6] or procuring an [abortion](#)^[3]. In 1878, Comstock himself visited Madame Restell's office on East 52nd Street posing as a married man whose wife was pregnant and did not want any more children. Restell, unaware of Comstock's true identity,

sold the man pills intended to induce an [abortion](#)^[3]. Comstock returned to Restell's office the following day and arrested Restell with the help of a police officer. According to Abbott, upon searching her office, Comstock found [birth control](#)^[5] pamphlets and instruments which he assumed were intended for [abortion](#)^[3] purposes. Restell was therefore in violation of the Comstock Act.

Before Restell's trial, on 1 April 1878, her chambermaid found her nude body semi-submerged in her bathtub, where Restell had slit her throat from ear to ear. Following her death, Restell's house servants admitted to reporters that Restell had been anxious and disturbed by the recent arrest and had been declaring through the house "Why do they persecute me so? I have done nothing to harm anyone."

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