

[Anthony Comstock \(1844–1915\)](#) ^[1]

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[Anthony Comstock](#) ^[3] was a US postal inspector and politician who advocated for the suppression of obscenity and vice throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Comstock considered any sexually explicit material like pornography and literature related to [birth control](#) ^[4] and [abortion](#) ^[5] as obscene. In 1873, Comstock lobbied US Congress to pass an anti-obscenity law titled “An Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use,” also called the Comstock Act. The law penalized individuals for sending material classified as obscene through the US postal services, which Comstock, as a special agent of the United States Post Office, could enforce. Comstock’s role in passing and enforcing the Comstock Act influenced the social and political restriction of [birth control](#) ^[4], hindering women’s access to contraceptives.

Comstock was born on 7 March 1844 to Polly Ann Lockwood and Thomas [Anthony Comstock](#) ^[3] in New Canaan, Connecticut. He was one of ten children, of which seven survived to adulthood. Comstock’s mother and father owned a farm. Comstock’s father expanded his farm to 160-acres, employed farm hands, and owned two sawmills. According to Comstock’s biographer, Anna Bates, Comstock’s father focused on his business, which led to Comstock’s mother to have a stronger influence on raising him and his siblings.

Comstock had a religious upbringing. Comstock’s parents attended the New Canaan Congregational Church in New Canaan, Connecticut. His father led a daily prayer service, his mother attended all-day services, and his family attended church every Sunday. Comstock’s mother read bible stories to her children, and biographers noted that she emphasized the importance of maintaining purity, resisting temptation, and following God’s words. Comstock’s teachers at the New Canaan district school instructed the students to recite bible verses during class. In 1854, Comstock’s mother and Theophilus Smith, the reverend of the New Canaan Congregational Church, died. According to Bates, those deaths traumatized Comstock and strengthened his resolve to follow his religious education.

After the New Canaan district school, Comstock attended the New Academy run by the New Canaan Congregational School where he learned to write. Comstock then attended the New Britain high school in New Britain, Connecticut. Comstock attended high school intermittently until 1862, at which point he became a clerk in a general store in Winnipauk, Connecticut. While working at the general store, Comstock tried to convince the town sheriff to close down the local saloon for opening on Sundays and illicitly selling alcohol to women and children. When the sheriff ignored his complaints, Comstock drained all the saloon’s alcohol barrels and threatened to destroy the saloon. Following Comstock’s actions, the owner of the saloon closed and left town.

In 1863, Comstock voluntarily enlisted in the Union Army during the US Civil War after his older brother died in battle. According to Bates, Comstock viewed the war as a moral battle against slavery, which he believed was cruel. She stated that Comstock’s near-death experiences in the army increased his resolve to complete God’s work. Furthermore, Comstock’s enlistment provided him with money that he used to support his younger siblings, as his father had gone into debt after the death of his wife and creditors had taken the farm. During his time in the army, Comstock opposed the drinking, gambling, and smoking of his fellow comrades. Comstock poured his cup of whisky, which soldiers received as part of their daily meal, onto the ground instead of giving it to another soldier because he claimed that the consumption of alcohol was immoral.

After being discharged from the army in the summer of 1865, Comstock moved to New York City, New York, to become a dry goods merchant. He worked first as a porter for a company called Ammidon, Lane, and Company, and later as a shipping clerk for the same company. While working in New York, Comstock lived with other young men in a crowded lodging house. Those men visited saloons, attended theaters, and hired prostitutes. According to Bates, Comstock viewed their actions as sinful.

Comstock’s arrival in New York mirrored the migration of many people from small towns to cities. After the end of the Civil War, many young men and women moved to cities where they were exposed to environments that often clashed with popular Christian beliefs. The availability of alcohol and sexual literature led to new habits that concerned the moral leaders of the time period. Two federal laws, one passed in 1842 and one passed in 1865, attempted to halt the distribution of obscene materials. The 1842 law criminalized the importation of French postcards deemed pornographic, and the 1865 law attempted to stop individuals from sending allegedly obscene books and photos through the mail. However, neither law stopped the distribution of such materials. According to Bates, the Young Men’s Christian Association, in New York City, New York, tried to promote Christian behavior and warn young men away from the temptations of vices in New York City.

In 1866, Comstock joined the Young Men's Christian Association, or YMCA. The [organization](#) ^[6] shared Comstock's views, opposing gambling, consumption of alcohol, and purchase of sexual literature. Comstock attended a lecture in 1868 hosted by the YMCA. The lecture discussed obscenity in printed material, such as pornographic fiction. According to Bates, that lecture inspired Comstock to voice his own views about the vices of New York City in a letter to the director of the YMCA. Shortly after sending the letter, Comstock began to arrange for the arrest of various booksellers for selling literature he deemed obscene. He arranged for those arrests by buying copies of the books from the sellers and turning them into the police as evidence.

After Comstock quit his job at Ammidon, Lane, and Company in 1869, he pursued jobs as a dry goods clerk. At one of his jobs, Comstock met Margaret Hamilton. They married in January 1871. Comstock was ten years younger than his wife. On 4 December 1871, Comstock's wife gave birth to a girl, Lillie. However, the infant died on 28 June 1872, after becoming ill. Comstock and his wife adopted a daughter, named Adele, that year.

Although Comstock achieved his earlier goal of becoming a dry goods merchant, his interest in suppressing what he considered to be vice persisted and he continued supporting the actions of the YMCA. In June 1872, the YMCA helped pass federal anti-obscenity legislation strengthening previous laws that had been ineffective at stopping the circulation of sexually explicit literature such as half-dime novels and photos. However, according to Bates, the law did not halt the distribution of obscene literature, and after its passage, Comstock decided to lobby a more effective anti-obscenity law to US Congress in Washington, D.C.

To garner support for a stronger anti-obscenity bill, Comstock began to travel to Washington, D.C., in 1873. Members of the YMCA referred him to Republican US Representative from New York, Clinton L. Merriam, who had supported their 1872 bill. Comstock lobbied various representatives to support his bill, which unlike previous laws, emphasized punishing offenders for sending obscene material through the postal services. Additionally, the bill criminalized the importation and distribution of obscene material through the mail. Comstock's proposed bill applied to a broader category of items, including those related to [contraception](#) ^[7] and [abortion](#) ^[5], which previous laws had not mentioned. Comstock created a presentation that included various pieces of obscene literature and visuals to shock representatives into supporting his bill.

Comstock arrived in Washington on 6 February 1872 to monitor the progress of his bill after representative Merriam presented it to the US House of Representatives. According to Bates, Comstock's bill was presented to the House in lieu of other pending anti-obscenity bills because it was more specific and encompassed many of the restrictions proposed by other bills. While Comstock's original draft of his bill specified that physicians could prescribe [contraception](#) ^[7], the clause was deleted during one of the revisions completed by William Buckingham, a Republican US Senator from Connecticut. According to Bates, Buckingham's revision prevented physicians from prescribing contraceptives to patients, a right that Comstock never intended to restrict. On 3 March 1873, after several delays caused by legislators wanting to amend the wording of the bill, Comstock's bill passed as "An Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use." The bill specified a \$5,000 fine and possible jail sentence for those who violated the law. The bill, also called the Comstock Act, led to the creation of anti-obscenity laws at the state levels. Three days after the passage of the Comstock Act, Congress appointed Comstock a special agent of the United States Post Office. In that position, Comstock had the authority to enforce the bill that he had helped pass.

On 16 May 1873, Comstock's supporters in the YMCA formed the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in New York City, New York, after receiving a charter from the New York State legislature. The formation of the society enabled the YMCA to separate its image from Comstock. According to historian Charles Trumbull, some members of the YMCA feared being blamed by opponents of the Comstock Act for Comstock's actions and voted to distance themselves from his actions. Comstock became secretary and special agent of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The organization's charter granted Comstock the power to act as a police officer and make arrests. In addition, the charter specified that whenever Comstock arranged for arrests, a portion of the money the violator of the law paid went to the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The Society used those funds to pay Comstock a salary, as his US Post Office appointment provided none.

With his newly salaried appointment, Comstock quit his job as a dry good seller and focused on his position as special agent of the United States Post Office. Comstock worked from an office in New York City, with the help of hired staff, to identify and arrange the arrests of individuals violating the Comstock Act. On 31 October 1874, Comstock traveled to Newark, New Jersey, to arrest printer Charles Conroy for distributing obscene advertisements. Conroy assaulted Comstock by stabbing him in the face with a pocketknife. Comstock survived, despite physicians' prediction that he would die. Many of Comstock's enemies, most of them people he had arranged to be arrested, sent him threatening letters. According to Bates, one opponent sent Comstock a letter containing a homemade bomb that failed to detonate.

Following the passage of the Comstock Act, Comstock suppressed other activities he considered sinful. In 1875, Comstock began arresting gambling hall owners with the help of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. In 1880, Comstock published a book titled *Frauds Exposed* that detailed many of the vices he discovered and suppressed during his career as

special agent. In 1883, he published *Traps for the Young*. In that book, he emphasized the importance of saving youth from moral corruption by dangerous vices such as gambling, obscene novels, and sexually explicit artwork. He also began to oppose lotteries in 1877. Comstock's career provided him with the income to move his family to a larger house in Summit, New Jersey, in 1886. Several years later, Comstock proposed a law to ban advertising lotteries and US Congress passed the Anti-Lottery Act of 1890.

Throughout the early 1900s Comstock continued to arrest individuals who he said violated the Comstock Act. During that time, women began advocating for the right to vote and for access to contraceptives to control their own reproduction. That movement caused concern for many individuals who argued that if women had access to [birth control](#)^[4] they would start having sex outside of marriage. In 1912, Comstock read articles about birth control written by Margaret Sanger, a [birth control](#)^[4] and women's rights activist. He believed her articles written for a newspaper titled *The New York Call* and for a journal called *The Women Rebel* violated the Comstock Act. Comstock helped prevent three of Sanger's articles about [birth control](#)^[4] from being distributed in the mail.

In 1914, Comstock arranged to arrest Sanger for violation of the Comstock Act after Sanger wrote a pamphlet titled "Family Limitation," about controlling family size through the use of [birth control](#)^[4]. However, Sanger had fled from the US to England a month earlier to avoid being placed on trial after Comstock's initial condemnation of her articles in *The New York Call* and *The Women Rebel* as obscene. Unable to arrest Sanger, Comstock arranged for his assistant to visit Sanger's husband and trick him into giving him a copy of her article on 19 January 1915. That tactic enabled Comstock to arrest Sanger's husband, who later went on trial and subsequently spent time in jail after being charged for distributing obscene literature.

In August 1915, Comstock traveled to San Francisco, California, as a US delegate at the International Purity Conference at the San Francisco Exposition. There, he caught a cold that progressed to pneumonia. On 21 September 1915, Comstock died at the age of 71 in Summit, New Jersey.

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