Public Presence and Secret Injustice: Women in Genesee County, New York, 1802 to the Present

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Introduction

Until well into the 1950s, a typical historical treatment of the United States generally excluded about half of the population, which was, of course, women. The very "invisibility" of women in such historical works, as the historian Howard Zinn once pointed out, was "a sign of their submerged status." Some scholars have argued that the "invisibility" of women was rooted in their biology. In other words, the simple fact that females are child bearers underscored a primary reason for their general absence from both positions of public power *and* their absence from historical writing. Yet other historians asserted quite the opposite – if this was the primary cause of such "invisibility" then how does one explain an absence that extended to women who were childless. Still others looked at the paucity of documents and other kinds of customary historical evidence to conclude that the absence of females from typical historical accounts was rooted in the lack of evidence that scholars could use to reconstruct the realities faced by women in earlier times. But regardless of the reasons offered for their omission from mainstream histories until the 1950s and beyond, there does remain the discernible reality that at least some women formed a public presence in American life – while, simultaneously, enduring a host of private injustices that even women in positions of authority experienced.

It was not until many of those private injustices were addressed that women were seen as legitimate subjects of historical writing. No small factor here was the entry of growing numbers of women into the historical profession by the late 1950s – be it in academic history departments or into positions in public history, especially that of local history. Female historians began to ask questions about the past relevant to the lives of women. As a result, they discovered evidence – diaries, public documents, letters, and a host of other materials – that male historians for generations overlooked. One example of this is Virginia M. Barons and Marion K. Russell, among other female historians of Genesee County, who were instrumental in the unearthing of primary source materials pertinent to women's history in Genesee County – and then writing about it. Lynne Belluscio, the LeRoy Village historian, is yet another example of the effort to enlarge our historical understanding of the past through a sustained inclusion of women in the historical accounts. For instance, look at Belluscio's incorporation of primary documents in a publication advertising the unveiling of the women's suffrage marker in LeRoy on April 2, 2018:

> Excerpt from a speech given at the LeRoy Women's Suffrage Meeting in 1885:
>
> Ten millions of American citizens are defrauded of their birthright for the crime of being born women. I propose tonight to show our claim to this inheritance and something of its value . . . The government of these United States is founded upon the power of suffrage – being founded upon this right every person born under this government is entitled to the right; in the case of men this is never disputed – black men were freed but to the black women and their white sisters, liberty is a mere negation. They are ignored in the realization of those imperishable truths of the Declaration . . .

In the hands of such local historians as Barrons, Russell, and Belluscio, women emerged from the shadows of the past and into the sunlight of sustained, mainstream historical narrative. This lends credibility to the notion that those who write the history decide what is significant. And what was becoming increasingly important was being decided by growing numbers of female historians, who were by the 1960s both authors of historical works *and* the subject of their focus.

Without necessarily intending to write a history that by its nature challenged the more traditional histories written largely by men and consequently focusing almost exclusively on merchants, political and military leaders, explorers, and landholders, female historians nonetheless shifted the focus of historical inquiry. In other words, female scholars by the late 1950s and early 1960s were rethinking what history really is – and finding the male-centered historical accounts wanting. While this reconceptualization of the past has long been acknowledged about academic history, what has remained less recognized is how this played out among local historians. For example, we return again to the work of Belluscio, who wrote for the pamphlet pertaining to the aforementioned women's suffrage marker ceremony in LeRoy in 2018 that

> On April 2nd, 1918 ninety-one year old Delia Philips became the first woman in LeRoy to vote. Five months earlier, on November 6th, 1917, the men of LeRoy voted against women's suffrage, but the amendment was passed in the State. So, at their first opportunity to vote, 58 women came to the Munincipal Building to cast their ballots for village officers. The *LeRoy Gazette* reported (that)
>
> "The women seemed to enjoy voting thoroughly, many of them coming down from the Red Cross rooms in their caps and aprons to vote . . ."

Utilizing publications such as the *LeRoy Gazette* reminds us that female historians continued to use what can be called "traditional" sources but were using them in untraditional ways. Be they official documents such as government records of various sorts or political tracts or legal instruments, not to mention other kinds of evidence, because the focus had shifted from men to women the manner in which those sources were studied had radically changed. Old evidence therefore was seen in new ways. History becomes revised because not only is there new evidence being examined but, just as importantly, it is being scrutinized in innovative ways as a consequence of new questions being asked.

Hence, in this brief foray into the history of women in Genesee County we are often analyzing old evidence in new ways to recreate, as much as possible, the realities faced by women between 1802 and the present. Tying all of this together is the consistent tension between what became a growing public presence that existed alongside of what I am calling secret injustices. This is complicated by the fact that public presence could sometimes combine with private oppressions – less affluent families by the early twentieth century called upon women to work outside of the home while simultaneously calling upon them to fulfill the domestic duties of a housewife and mother behind closed doors. “Very busy in (the) kitchen,” wrote E.L. Dewey of Byron in her diary entry of July 29, 1867. November 1st of that same year saw no change, for she was still “busy in the kitchen.” Sylvina M. Green wrote sarcastically in her diary entry of June 14, 1880, that is was “a fine day – papered the kitchen.” Along with “papering” the kitchen, she wrote of her effort in upholstering a seat on June 23 and upholstering yet another chair on July 12. The dreary quality of her private life continued to be recorded in a diary entry of September 27, 1901. She described “a lovely day” in which she worked ceaselessly to can plumbs and pickle peaches. For these and other women, the domestic routine of hard work was only broken up by either work outside of the home or by participation in acceptable organizations outside of the home or workplace, such as community or church groups. For some, there was also entry into political activism, e.g. the suffrage movement, or, eventually, into positions of actual political authority. Nevertheless, that last option would generally come later, though there were exceptions in Genesee County even before World War One. These early movements into positions of public authority were noted as far away as New York City. When Minnie Pfeifer moved into the role of acting Genesee County Treasurer on December 7th, 1907, the *New York Tribune* eventually featured an editorial containing the following:

> One by one women are invading the occupations popularly supported to be man’s exclusive property. In Batavia, New York, a woman has held the office of County Treasurer for the last six months.

I n sum, we will explore the ways in which women in Genesee County navigated between a public presence that took numerous forms – be it in the workplace, the farm fields, or the political and social realms – and a private life that in many instances featured equally demanding duties. Throughout all of their activities women faced the tension produced by the imposition of demands both outside the front door and privately, behind closed doors. With all of this in mind, let us turn initially to their presence outside of the home.

The Varieties of Female Public Presence in Genesee County

A less glorious public presence was that faced by slave women and poor white women. This was not the more privileged experience of women whose public presence suggested ample resources of wealth and time to attend such gatherings as the Political Equality Club in Batavia by 1899, which included lectures by the New York State organizer of the Woman Suffrage Association. In that case, on April 11 of that year, tea and a social hour following the address of Harriet May Mills was seen as appropriate. However, for women of more modest means – which would include slave women earlier in the 1800s – such genteel gatherings were simply not feasible. From the start of the nineteenth century and well beyond, slave women, poor white, and African-American women did not occupy a public role suggestive of power. A necessary precondition for women holding public positions capable of influencing others – be it elected office or the movement to gain the vote in order to have a say in who attained elective office – was the time and resources forming the basis for such participation. The different kinds of public presence, then, revealed a class hierarchy among women – a social ordering as visible in Genesee County as in the nation at large.

The class structure that revealed a less lofty public female presence was discernible in Genesee County among slave women. Contrary to what some people may think, the dichotomy between a “free” North and a slave South is one that is not as pronounced as is usually depicted in a standard textbook. The end of slavery in the northern states is far more complex than is typically assumed. For example, the 1860 census counted 451,021 slaves in states and territories constituting the Union throughout the Civil War. New York – and specifically, Genesee County, is part of this complex picture. In 1790, the Federal Census revealed that there were 21,193 slaves. Ten years later the number stood at 20,903. 15,017 slaves were found in New York by 1810, while the number continued to decline, for a total of 10,088 by 1820. 75 slaves were found by 1830, while only four were left by 1840. None was recorded in New York by 1850.

The number of slaves in New York decreased in part due to a gradual emancipation bill passed by the New York State Legislature in 1799. In part, the law set forth that all African-American children born subsequent to July 4 in 1799 would be free. However, just as importantly – in contrast to the South – slavery had never become as entrenched in the North due to the existence of relatively small farms in contrast to large plantations dependent upon greater numbers of laborers.

In any event, the Federal Census of 1820 reveals something about the number of female slaves in Genesee County. While the data does not reveal the names of the female slaves, it does tell us of their location – and the name of the owner. We also discover the ages of the women involved. Issac Bennett, listed as living in Ridgeway, owned a female slave below the age of fourteen. George Bishop of Perry was reported to own a female slave of forty-five or more years. Peter Brown of Caledonia owned a young girl not yet fourteen, and another somewhere between the ages of twenty-six and forty-five.

The census list goes on for Genesee County in 1820. John Crats of Batavia owned a female somewhere between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six. Nathan Follett, also of Batavia, owned a female not yet fourteen. So too did Azel Ensworth, listed as living in Gages. William Keys of Batavia owned a young girl under fourteen years of age and two women aged between twenty-six and forty-five as did Hineman Holden, who owned one female of that age – also in Batavia. David A. Miller, listed as residing in Mt. Morris, owned a woman between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six. Nathan Rochester, whom the census records as living in Gates in 1820, owned two female slaves – one under fourteen years of age, the other at least forty-five years of age. All told, the 1820 census reveals that fourteen female slaves lived in Genesee County. Unfortunately, the Federal Census data does not indicate how those fourteen – and others before and after them – may have been treated. For that, we must turn to other sources.

One of these sources is the 1867 publication of Austin Steward, entitled *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman*. In it we discover that even before the formation of Genesee County, in the area known before 1802 as the “Genesee Country,” William Held, a southern planter, decided to go north in May of 1796 in order to avail himself of the rich soil of Western New York – along with the superior quality of timber. Both a soil that was not exhausted and vast amounts of timber stood in stark contrast to what was available in Virginia and Maryland. Hence leaving his wife and children in the south, he took his slaves, an overseer by the name of Barsly Taylor, and another white man described only as “Davis” on the journey north. Only the white people rode in the party’s wagon along with all of the food and supplies. Male and female slaves simply walked. Making their way along the Northumberland Road to New York, the slaves were obligated to answer to a roll call each morning. Failure to respond resulted in a lashing. After eating breakfast, the journey to Genesee Country continued at an average rate of twenty miles per day. When the party camped at night, the slaves slept in tents.

Upon arrival, the slaves - without the benefit of horses, cleared the land. The slaves were weak from hunger. Provisions at this point were scarce – there was little corn left and, of course, there was none to be purchased. Slaves were prohibited from hunting or fishing.

Consequently, the slaves were close to starvation. There is a description of how the slaves were permitted to gather old bones, grind them, and boil them for food as a broth. Horrific conditions first in evidence on the trek northwards did not necessarily subside once a farm was established, as a January 1810 advertisement regarding a runaway female slave suggests:

> Ran away . . . A likely Negro girl named Linda Moody, 18 years old, about 5 feet 6 inches high. Two of her fingers on the right hand are considerably burnt. She took a variety of clothing with her. Any person who will return said girl shall receive a liberal reward.
>
> D.B. Ferguson, Phelps
> January 16, 1810

While skin color marked a woman as a slave and hence impoverished, such a marker was not needed to separate a woman – in terms of her public presence – from other, more privileged women such as those attending a session of the Political Equality Club in Batavia in 1899. These women, found throughout Genesee County, were seen most visibly in the history of what was once known as the Genesee County Alms House.

While poverty among slave women is self-evident – as an inherent condition of bondage – it appears in many cases to be harder to explain among free women. Nonetheless, an examination of the available evidence for the years 1827 until 1974, the year the Country Home closed, illustrates a number of factors shedding light on the reasons for women found there. Their public presence placed them a world apart from women in the county who occupied a public presence exuding economic resources and lofty status.

One factor that is discernible in the evidence; one that is suggestive of a reason for their poverty, is the intemperance of their husbands. In a set of guidelines promulgated by the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism as early as 1818, one of the causes of poverty among women who were married was

> Intemperance in Drinking. This most prolific source of mischief and misery drags in its train almost every species of suffering which afflicts the poor. This evil, in relation to poverty and vice, may be emphatically styled the *cause of causes . . .*

Another cause of female poverty severe enough to permit entry into the Genesee County Poor House was the condition of mothers in need of assistance due to the absence of a husband and father. An examination of the *Annual Report of the Supervisors of the County of Genesee to the Secretary of State, 1857*, reminds us that the County Home contained ten females and eight males who had not yet reached the age of sixteen. In that same year, three children were born to mothers in the County Home. The records of the County Home illustrate that the admission of children with their mothers was actually common. For instance, look at the situation of Mary Starr of Attica. In cases such as this, the admission of children preceded that of the impoverished mother, who was desperate for help. In Starr's case, her youngest child, a two-year old named Busheba, was brought into the home on 15 September in 1838. Her brother George followed on December 13 at the age of six. In the following month, Angoline was admitted. Their brother, William, aged nine, also entered the County Home on February 1 of 1839. By March 6 of 1839 Mary Starr was, at the age of thirty-two, admitted. The following day she gave birth to a child, who died that same day (March 7, 1839).

So chronic alcoholism and mothers lacking the financial means to take care of children were two factors helping to explain the worst poverty affecting women in Genesee County. There was yet a third variable discernible in the evidence that helps to explain the female poverty at work in the County Home. In the 19th century, the reference to psychological issues at work was described as "lunacy." A century later less severe terms were used, but they are still suggestive of an inability – for a variety of reasons – to adequately cope with one's environment. For example, we see in the records of the State Board of Social Welfare's annual inspection of the County Home in 1931 and 1932 this comment about a female resident:

> There have been no disciplinary cases since the last inspection. (Miss X), blind, age 22, is a mischief-maker. For her own good she should be transferred to an institution where she can be trained. She was dismissed from the School for the Blind at Batavia when she was twelve years old.

The public presence of African-American female slaves, along with that of the poorest women found in the Genesee County Home/Poorhouse; stand in stark contrast to the public presence of more privileged women in the county's history. These were women who early on were generally excluded from such visible public arenas as politics but nevertheless developed associations of all sorts that inherently held political implications. Prominent here was participation in the abolitionist movement before the Civil War; the suffrage movement through 1920; and then the Civil rights movement after World War Two. Eventually, women occupied a growing number of elected offices in Genesee County through our own day, where their public presence was self-evident. But before turning to elected offices, let us first begin with a brief foray into their abolitionist work in Genesee County prior to the Civil War.

The antislavery movement in Genesee County – as in the nation as a whole – had deep historical roots in a society deeply ambivalent about the existence of republican values, such as the liberty of the individual, that rested alongside chattel bondage. This long-standing revulsion regarding slavery made its appearance early on in the form of the county's participation in New York State's Colonization Society. On October 22, 1833, a front-page article appeared in the *Republican Advocate* recommending the movement of free African-Americans to Africa as one way of "mitigating the evils of slavery." However, it was quickly added, this was not "the only measure which promises good to the African race."

The ultimate resolution, then, is not colonization – but instead, the abolition of slavery:

> We look upon slavery as *wrong*, of which our nation is guilty. No circumstance . . . can justify its existence, or continuance. It seems highly desirable, therefore, that measures should be adopted with a view to *abolition*.

The writer of this article then concluded that

> whether colonization advances or recedes, we hope to see the efforts prospered of those who are endeavoring to effect the abolition of *slavery* in this land of *freedom*.

Genesee County abolitionists condemned not only the inherent injustice of one human being owning another but, in addition, argued that slavery produced other crimes as well – such as kidnapping. On July 28, 1835, that same *Republican Advocate* in Batavia published accounts entitled "Kidnapping and Negro Stealing." In one account focusing upon Natchez, Mississippi, the reader was told that

> Clary and Johnson were tried before the circuit court of the charge of negro-stealing, and were convicted. The punishment is death.

The article goes on.

> It appears from the evidence that Clary was caught in the act, by two gentlemen who blackened their faces, and whom he mistook for negroes, and agreed to take to Texas for $125 each . . . Johnson was convicted of stealing a girl from Elijah Bell, Esq.

The following month the *Republican Advocate* offered a front-page story about Reuben Crandall, "a white man," who was arrested "on a charge of circulating incendiary abolition pamphlets among the negroes" of Washington, D.C. His sister, "Miss Crandall," had "undertaken "so philanthropically to teach Negro children in Connecticut . . . " While abolitionism as a goal was celebrated in the pages of the *Republican Advocate* there remained, nonetheless, concern that the distribution of "incendiary publications" could have the effect of producing heightened expectations regarding emancipation that could not be quickly met. From this point of view the irony is that the situation of African-Americans could actually be worsened in the short-run. Accordingly,

> . . . we say to the abolition gentlemen (to) keep your publications at home . . . You are, by your overzealous acts, doing an injury to the black population of the south which you will never be able to atone for. Their situation is miserable enough at best, but you, by your hot headed measures, are rendering it still more so.

Hence, there appeared in the *Republican Advocate* on March 9 of 1836 an announcement regarding an upcoming meeting of the Genesee County Anti-Slavery Society, scheduled for a week later. Concern over the effects of "fanatical" agitation, this announcement expressed the

> Hope (that) they will be allowed to hold their meeting in peace and quiet; indeed, we do not, we cannot think, that anyone will be found so void of respect for the feelings of others, as to raise a hand or a voice to disturb the tranquility of the convention.

Opposition to slavery on the part of women inexorably led to a demand for a more public inclusion for middle class women who had gone through a baptism of fire in the abolitionist movement and the risks involved in the writing and distribution of "incendiary publications." Therefore, on March 15, 1848, a petition signed by "forty-four ladies of Genesee and Wyoming" called for "the repeal of certain laws." These "married women, of the towns of Darien in the County of Genesee, and Covington in the County of Wyoming . . . respectfully represent:

> That your *Declaration of Independence* declares . . . that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. And as women have never consented to, been represented in, or

> recognized by this government, it is evident that in
> justice no allegiance can be claimed from them . . .

For the women signing this petition to the New York State Legislature, a cornerstone of political consent included the power to vote. Yet there were also women who objected to the idea of female suffrage. Women that are more affluent already had access to political leaders and were therefore reluctant to expand that access to less affluent women through an extension of the vote. Others simply saw politics as unethical and felt that women would lower their ethical standards if involved in the political process. An example of these views was found in the New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage.

This sort of sentiment was captured in a March 7, 1903 article in the *Batavia Daily*. Entitled "Anti-Women Suffrage," it told the readers of a public lecture to be given in Batavia by Mrs. A.J. George of Massachusetts, a leader of the Women's Anti-Suffrage Association. Mrs. George was scheduled to speak at the home of Mrs. L.L. Tozier on East Main Street. Though Mrs. Tozier was described as a supporter of women's suffrage, she believed that those opposed to that same suffrage deserved to have their opinions aired.

The debate over female suffrage continued through the opening decades of the twentieth century. In June of 1917, less than two months after the United States entered World War One, the *Batavia Daily* told readers of a suffrage convention scheduled in Ellicott Hall in Batavia. On "Women Suffrage Meeting Day," the June 1 article described, Mrs. James Lees Laidlaw and Mrs. Frank J. Tone "were scheduled to speak in the eighth campaign district of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party." While this suffrage party advocated the right of women to vote, so too did the Bethany Grange as described three months later in the *Batavia Daily*. In an article telling readers of the "Grangers of Bethany (who) Endorsed Suffrage," women suffragists from outside of Bethany also endorsed the resolution of the Grangers in Bethany Center – particularly those from the Stafford Grange.

Nonetheless, that same *Batavia Daily*, on October 29, 1917, published an advertisement in bold lettering: "VOTE NO on Suffrage." Within the context of war fever in the fall of 1917, the advertisement then castigated Jeannette Rankin, the female member of Congress who voted against U.S. entry into the First World War:

> WOMAN SUFFRAGE is responsible for Jeannette Rankin, the woman congressman who votes against patriotic measures and defends the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World).
>
> WOMAN SUFFRAGE is responsible for the picketing at the White House – an insult to good government.
>
> Woman Suffrage Must be Defeated in New York State
>
> Vote NO on suffrage

Regardless of where a woman stood on the question of female suffrage, the fact remains that either side placed female leaders in a very public space. By 1920, with the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the question of voting rights for women had become moot. As the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" the efforts of women in Genesee County to achieve a fuller participation in the political process was rendered obsolete – at least in terms of voting rights. But another manifestation of a female public presence was already manifesting itself, and for some, it grew out of the experiences of the suffrage movement. That movement had roots in both the work of abolitionists and that of the suffragettes. While there were earlier rumblings, this movement's greatest impact was felt after World War Two, when women played a key role in the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

While the role of women in the movement that assumed its modern form after 1945 could be an entire essay in and of itself, maybe its most prominent expression emerged in churches such as the Methodist in Genesee County. Not surprisingly, their efforts in some ways resembled the earlier efforts of the suffragettes. In short, they worked to correct societal abuses while remaining committed to the general framework of American society. Their political identity was similar to the peaceful efforts of a leader such as Dr. Martin Luther King instead of more radical African-American leaders like Malcolm X. This was especially so in a largely conservative Genesee County, so it should not surprise us that a clear manifestation of the Civil Rights Movement in the county was that of the Methodist church. An example of this can be found in the "Official Journal and Yearbook" of the *Western New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church* in 1969.

In a report of the Board entitled "Christian Social Concerns" a priority was the effort to reduce "prejudice and interracial tensions." This was to be accomplished through the development of "Brotherhood Schools" throughout Western New York, which, of course, included Genesee County. The stated objective of these schools was to "help reduce prejudice and inter-racial tensions within individual Christians." The very public presence of women involved in the Brotherhood School movement found themselves in a variety of settings, as described in the *Official Journal and Yearbook* of 1969:

> A group within a local congregation may desire a "Brotherhood School" in a one-evening setting, or a full weekend, a Sunday morning setting with Church School and the regular Sunday service, or a Sunday evening youth program. The local congregation may want to have this Brotherhood School in their own church, on a retreat weekend, or in an inner-city setting away from their local church building.

But the array of Brotherhood School settings could not match the dramatically different elected offices that women held in Genesee County through our own day. This assortment of political offices not only reveals the medley of public roles occupied by women in Genesee County, it also tells us of just how long a time this kind of public presence was in evidence. While we have already seen Minnie Pfeiffer assuming the role of acting Genesee County Treasurer as early as 1907, the *Progressive Batavian* on January 27, 1888, featured an article entitled "A Woman Bank Director." Mrs. Adelaide Kenny, the daughter of Dean Richmond, became the first Bank Director ever elected in Western New York. These two women provide us with early examples of females who had successfully moved into that most visible niche of public presence – politics. This trend continued well beyond 1888 and 1907, and it reminds us of just how different those political offices were.

A short time before U.S. entry into World War Two Mrs. Maud Homelius of Richmond Avenue in Batavia became that city's first female mayor. On November 28, 1941, she took the oath of office. Her husband, Frank H. Homelius, died in the mayor's office of heart disease. Concerned about the immediate need for a mayor's signature on bond interest and payroll checks, the City Council selected her from a list of three candidates. Ironically, Mrs. Homelius herself died from heart disease while still serving as Batavia's mayor three years later.

Over the years women served in numerous capacities as elected officials. June Cotton Vukman became Batavia's first female member of the Town Council in 1985 – and, two years later, won the position of Town Supervisor. The *Daily News* writers told readers of Mary J. Chilson's election to the Oakfield Board on March 21, 1979 – the first woman ever elected to the oakfield Board. Florence Gioia (pronounced JOY-ah) was featured in a long 1991 article in the *Democrat and Chronicle* as her constituents' "tireless advocate" while serving in the Genesee County Legislature. These are only a handful of the women holding elected office in Genesee County through our own day. While enjoying the status of elected office that accompanies such a public presence, the question nonetheless remains – did women still experience secret injustices that groups such as suffragettes had complained of in earlier times? A complete answer to that question would require its own study, but we can, nonetheless, obtain some insights by looking at some of the civil disputes and diaries found in the Genesee County Historical Archives.

Some Secret Injustices Endured by Genesee County Women

The Genesee County Archives is fortunate in possessing a surprisingly large Number of diaries kept by women. These diaries reveal a personal and frank series of reflections offering insights into some of the private feelings of the women writing in them. The advantage of diary usage for the historian is that it tends to hold descriptions and yearnings not always found in "official" documents that are more guarded in nature.

These diaries hold great historical significance precisely because their blunt quality suggests just how women responded to the conditions of their time and place – responses that would inherently be more guarded in a less private setting.

An excellent illustration of how *resistance* took place among middle class women is a diary found in the Genesee County Archives that dates from 1887. While this writer – the unnamed mother of Genie D. Green – accepted many of the social conventions of middle class life in her day – she nonetheless also displayed an effort to smuggle into her middle class world ideas and opinions whose ultimate effect was to undermine that self-satisfied Victorian perspective. Genie's mother longed for a release from a universe that she both embraced and found stifling at the same time.

On January 24, 1887, she wrote that

> There are periods in our lives when some new
> book or acquaintance comes to us like an added
> sun in the heavens, lighting the darkest places
> and chasing every shadow away.

For numerous days after this entry she spoke of drudgery – "doing odd jobs." But then an unexpected and particularly long entry is found – on June 1, 1887, she wrote excitedly of how light will illuminate dark places:

> For (my) eighty ninth birthday I can best honor
> It by consecrating myself to work for every good . . .

What was this "every good?" It was the following:

> . . . for the enfranchisement of women; notion of
> intemperance; for progressive thought and for
> moral and spiritual growth and development . . .
> delivering the ballot in the hands of women will
> prove the key.

From this point on many of her entries focused on feminist books she was reading – or lectures she attended. On September 6, 1887, she spoke of reading a biography of the eighteenth century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of the 1792 work entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Accordingly, her diary entry tells us that she was "reading the *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Three days later she wrote enthusiastically of meeting a Cleveland artist "who has made a bust of Miss Susan B. Anthony," the famous nineteenth and early twentieth century national leader of the women's suffrage movement. Her reading and lecture attendance continued to reveal a dissatisfaction with the world women inhabited in 1887. By September 13 of 1887 she revealed an interest in the writings of Josiah Strong, the Protestant minister who was a leader in the Social Gospel movement, an effort to combat poverty, alcoholism, crime, and other social ills. She thus wrote of her study of Reverend Strong's *Our Country and Its Possible Future*, *and Its Present Crisis*. Much of her remaining diary entries revealed much the same – her deep desire to light the dark places in a woman's private life that is not necessarily seen behind closed doors.

But recording a sense of injustice rooted in one's private life – and then keeping those reflections hidden in a diary – was not always possible, or even desirable. Accordingly, women in some cases could not help but to reveal those secret injustices publicly, and nowhere was this more evident than in the civil cases involving women in Genesee County. One case in particular captures a number of legal – and hence private – realities faced by women in Genesee County in the nineteenth century. In the case of *Francis M. Walsworth and One vs. Sarah A. Walsworth and Others* the issue of marriage and property holding is brought into bold relief. That 1896 case, conducted in the Supreme Court of Genesee County, tells us something about the economic relations that married women found themselves in as America entered the twentieth century.

In this case, a disputed lien produced lengthy interrogatories that disclose the intricacies of marriage and its connection to property and contractual rights. To begin with, the very existence of the marriage was dependent upon its solemnization – an informal union was simply not recognized. Therefore, *Walsworth* offers a detailed examination of the ceremony that constitutes a bona fide marriage. Hence, we find that

> Marriages may be solemnized by any justice of the peace in the county in which he is chosen; and they may be solemnized throughout the state by any minister of the gospel, who has been ordained according to the usages of his denomination, who resides within this state, and continues to preach the gospel.

This section goes on to discuss aspects of the solemnization process, such as an examination of one of the parties to the marriage before the actual marriage. This section also discusses the issuance of the marriage certificate, the names and addresses of at least two witnesses to the marriage, and the requirement of a justice or a minister to keep a record of the marriages performed – along with copies of the certificates issued that were filed with the county clerk.

Having established the existence of a bona fide marriage in *Walsworth* the principles of sexual equality in marriage also shines through. In what begins as an action concerning a lien on real property eventually emerges, in the interrogatories, as an illustration of how both husband and wife shared in the management of property. Nonetheless, a woman who disagreed about *how* that property is managed is one who may have to resort to legal action in order to assert rights that had been established through legislation and prior court decisions. Such management could become very complicated if a partner to the marriage made property decisions pursuant to the wishes of a third party who did not enjoy the rights attendant to a bona fide marriage but who nonetheless influenced the decisions of someone who was in fact part of a bona fide marriage that had been duly solemnized. This is revealed in some of the interrogatories found in *Walsworth*:

> (13th interrogatory): Was there a time when Walter Cheney left his wife, Helen Godfrey, and if so, where were they living at the time, and about what time did he leave her? If you do not know the date, fix it by the ages of his children or by any other fact or circumstance in your mind.

The interrogatories continued:

> (15th interrogatory): Did you keep up your acquaintance with his wife, Helen Godfrey, and did you see her from time to time after the said Walter Cheney left her, and if so, did he ever live with her after he left her . . .

Walsworth reminds us that a woman owning property – while enjoying that right – could nonetheless find it affected by a third party, whose actions disturb both the marital relationship *and* the need to manage the property that is as much a part of that relationship as sexuality. There remained a gap between the public presence of a married woman who owned real property and the private anguish of seeing that right threatened and, hence, having to use the courts to reassert a right that she already possessed. It was irrelevant whether the married adulterer was, or was not, actually cohabiting with a third party. Instead, what mattered more was whether the economic management of a married couple's jointly owned real property was in some way threatened by that third party's influence. The public presence of a woman owning real property was therefore weakened by a private reality of third-party influence – one that could not be ignored.

It is not surprising, then, that some women simply opted out of marriage altogether in some cases, or, if married, pursued a public presence in which marriage was not the most important feature of their life. Such a perspective ushers us into the world of female educators and clergy in Genesee County from the nineteenth century on.

The Public Presence of Female Educators and Clergy in Genesee County

While some female teachers married in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most did not. By the 1840s, women were entering teaching in ever-greater numbers. Through the 1930s – and in some parts of the country in particular – elementary school faculty were predominately female. Female teachers were viewed as surrogate mothers by the wider society, tasked with the duty of rearing children who would grow up with sound character. As one historian of American schoolbooks in the nineteenth century, Ruth M. Elson, put it:

> The purpose of nineteenth-century American public schools was to train citizens in character and proper principles. Most textbook writers had an exalted idea of their function; almost all made statements such as the following: "The mind of the child is like soft wax to receive an impression, but like the rigid marble to retain it."

In other words, Elson reminds us that educators “were much more concerned with the child’s moral development than with the development of his mind.” She then adds this:

> The important problem for nineteenth-century American educators was to mold the wax in virtue rather than in learning.

So despite the low salaries and the moral clauses of teacher contracts in the 1800s and on into the twentieth century, women who became teachers saw their work as offering at least a degree of independence and upward social mobility. Not surprisingly, Genesee County fit into this national trend. In Batavia, Miss Smead of Pavilion eventually assumed control of a private school until later relocating to Toledo, Ohio, where she continued to teach in another school. Between 1875 and 1889 Miss E.G. Thrall operated a school on West Main Street, again in Batavia. Neighboring Bergen saw Deacon Benjamin Wright’s daughter, Chloe Wright, work as a teacher.

By 1848, records reveal the existence of the Byron Young Ladies School. An art school was also in evidence in Byron – and the painting teacher was Julia M. Hall. In LeRoy, Ingham University served as a shining example of female education – both in terms of student enrollment and in the production of female educators. Ingham was the first school to offer a bona fide college curriculum those young women had access to. Madame Staunton led a faculty of seventeen professors and a variety of support staff. Eventually, about 8,000 students graduated from Ingham and taught at colleges ranging from Vassar through Wellesley to the University of Rochester. This was a group of women whose experience of training at Ingham, not to mention their teaching duties, was dramatically different from that of most female teachers. Most female teachers worked in the county’s elementary schools, which meant a very dissimilar work environment.

Women also dominated the faculty in Stafford schools. The first school in the records from Stafford was one administered by Ester Sprout as early as 1806. As the New York State Legislature did not establish free public schools until 1849, this was of course a private school. By 1867, a public school was in operation in Stafford, and in it was Miss Alida Randall. Florence Leanen is recorded as a teacher in this school in 1914, which stood at the corner of Buckley and Britt

Roads. Miss Clara Rudolph then taught there between 1925 and 1938. Miss Lila Page then followed her. This school closed sometime in the 1940s, when Stafford students began to be bussed to schools in LeRoy.

The women who became schoolteachers used the limited opportunities offered by teaching to carve out a niche that afforded a measure of independence while still subscribing to the norms expected of women in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. They bore a striking resemblance to those women venturing into other professions that allowed for a measure of independence while avoiding the charge of “radical” feminism. Those other women, who resisted gender norms in a conservative fashion, were the female clergy of Genesee County.

The female clergy of Genesee County are part of a long line of Protestant ministers that stretch back to Clarissa Danforth, who was the first woman ordained in the Free Will Baptist denomination in New England. In 1893, Miss Frankie Cook began her service as the Pastor for Alexander’s Universalist Church. In Batavia, at the Friends Church, Mary Jane Weaver served as the first evangelist. Anna Leggett then followed her. Grace Shephard served as the church’s third pastor between 1929 and 1934. In 1982, Marie King was named pastor of the East Bethany Presbyterian Church.

Female clergy such as these represent a trend in which women exerted a public presence – and wielded public power – outside of politics. They expressed a power in ways that existed outside of elected office and even the vote. Female clergy, like female educators, understood that activities that were not political per se nonetheless affected the political process. Theirs was an exercise of authority that was separate from political office and the ballot box. It was, instead, a moral authority found in classrooms, lecture halls, and churches where they played a prominent role. They refused to be ignored. They chipped away at their subordinate position in society in a very public way. And yet, while rejecting that subordinate status, they nevertheless perpetuated the characteristics of domesticity – at least until they once again found ways to transcend what some scholars have termed the “cult of domesticity” in ways even more subtle than that of educators and clergy. It is to that creation, and maintenance, of female organizations designed to transcend the ideology of domesticity that we now turn.

Women's Organizations in Genesee County and the Subtle Resistance to the "Cult of Domesticity"

Historians have used the term "cult of domesticity" since the late 1960s to describe a middle class family setting first emerging in the early 1820s. Its legacy persisted after that, and traces of it are still in evidence today. It began with a dramatic shift in the economy that translated into a middle class family not having to produce needed goods in order to survive. Instead, wives and children were able to remain at home while husbands and fathers worked outside of the home producing services and commodities demanded by society.

From this perspective it was the man who supported the family through the earning of income. It was thought that there were two spheres delineated along gender lines – that of the man and his work outside of the front door, and that of the woman who only periodically ventured into the outside world. Her concern was the home and the family. It did not take long for an attendant view to develop – that a woman was delicate and vulnerable and could easily be victimized by forces outside of that front door.

This ideology of the nuclear family was described in a variety of sources that included newspapers, novels, religious publications, magazines, and advice books. An integral part of the description was an idealization of the "good" woman – one that was pious, sexually pure, focused on home and family, and submissive to men. Piety meant that women had an innate religiosity, one that worked to improve the world through compassion and love. Sexual purity meant the avoidance of being labeled a "fallen woman," or one whose virginity was lost before marriage. Ironically, it was in this area that a woman exercised a great deal of power, for it compelled men to remain in control of their own sexual desires – a benefit to society as a whole.

Submissiveness to men was in actuality an acknowledgment of what men were supposed to be – anything but submissive. Men were active. They were doers. Conversely, women were passive beings who accepted subordination to duty; to what life presented; to God; and of course, to men. She should display a consistent spirit of obedience, of pliability, and humility. Finally, the cult of domesticity and the kind of woman found in it featured a focus on home and family. Housework and child rearing were depicted as uplifting tasks. Indeed, any activity that kept a woman in the home – such as needlepoint – was viewed as the natural promotion of a cheerful, peaceful home that men looked forward to returning to. As one scholar once put it, this was "a haven in a heartless world."

However, despite the enormous social pressures in the popular culture to foster these assumptions, women throughout the nation, and of course here, in Genesee County, developed modes of resistance taking them out of the home and giving them a sense of empowerment. Organizations that took women outside of the home include the Batavia Concert Band, the Genesee Symphony Orchestra, and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Alexander Fire Department. The Landmark Society of Genesee County, the LeRoy Historical Society, and the Wednesday Study Club are just some of the organizations that took Genesee County women beyond the confines of domesticity. This last group is a good example of women pushing the boundaries set by the "cult of domesticity" further and further out. Mrs. Francis Pratt Douglas and Miss Emma Comstock founded the Study Club in October of 1904. Its stated purpose was to "promote intellectual development, a broader view of all subjects and to stimulate social intercourse." In *Genesee County, New York: 20th Century-in-Review and Family Histories*, the Study Club is described as

> . . . patterned after other women's organizations formed around the turn of the century. These organizations took shape as a result of a national movement wherein educated women were interested in maintaining intellectual pursuits once their formal education was completed. Early members of the Wednesday Study Club were recruited to form a varied representation of women in the community: married and unmarried working outside and within the home, with differing professions and interests.

As we see in the Wednesday Study Club, the ideal of women throughout the history of Genesee County is the ideal of seriousness. Regardless of the roles played by women in that history, there is an underlying theme of seriousness – regardless of what one is doing – that runs deep. That seriousness translates into a demand for competence regardless of the social pressures endured. Nevertheless, that insistence upon purpose in life was routinely smuggled into the wider society in ways not immediately detectable. The patience that this required sometimes, however, gave rise to expressions of private grievances that took a very public – and surprising – form.

Conclusion

In 1903 Mrs. Flora Caswell Baxter, thirty-four years of age and the wife of LeRoy florist William H. Baxter, murdered both her eight-year old son Gordon and her three-year daughter Gladys. She then committed suicide. The following year Miss Addie Blossom, twenty-three years of age and a Batavia resident, was shot and killed by Clyde Ore. He then shot himself. Miss Blossom had been engaged to Ore but had cancelled the wedding on the morning it was scheduled to take place, saying that she loved Edward Taggert more. Less dramatically, but tellingly, in 1935 male students attending Batavia High School were allowed to listen to World Series baseball games during their free period. However, female students were not permitted to listen. Instead, they were allowed to use the time as a visiting period. Finally, in 1948, a mother abandoned a newborn referred to as "Baby X". The baby boy had been born in a Darien service station washroom, and on December 7 left Genesee Memorial Hospital to begin life in a foster home.

In all of these scenarios, and others not mentioned, women were either discriminated against, resisted what was expected of them, or perpetuators of, or the victims of, a violent act. Hostility of some sort permeated these events, though, of course, they remained unusual. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there was a sense of desperation, or resentment, or even overt aggression in these examples. Like many of the women forming the subject of this essay, they were seeking methods designed to undermine seemingly impregnable bastions of authority that functioned to impede the attainment of a more fulfilling life. These four examples, which in some instances resulted in terrible forms of aggressive behavior, are nonetheless exaggerations of the many ways in which women in Genesee County struggled against a society that did not allow for the full development of their potential.

But these scenarios should not be understood as the final say on womanhood in Genesee County's history. Instead, the story of women in Genesee County is more properly comprehended as a complex unfolding of how women adjusted to social change instead of trying to escape it. Personal adjustments, political and cultural compromises, and the effort to construct new identities all stood as painful reminders that women, be it in their public presence or in their battles with secret injustices, sought to resolve the tension between what was expected of them and what they in fact aspired to. Between 1802 and our own day there has been a consistent effort to work out a compromise between traditional expectations and modern sensibilities. How this dynamic will ultimately be resolved is a story not yet revealed, and it will tell us about the experience of women in the twenty-first century. However, one thing is certain. The experience of women will remind all of us about what is, and is not, acceptable behavior, both within, and beyond, Genesee County.