

“Labouring for the Freedom of This Territory”

Free-State Kansas Women in the 1850s

by Nicole Etcheson

In 1855 Harriet Goodnow refused her husband William’s pleas to join him in Kansas. The Goodnow brothers, Isaac and William, had arrived in March and settled along Wild Cat Creek, having chosen a site on the outskirts of what is now Manhattan, Kansas. Isaac, who had been an educator in Rhode Island, became one of the founders of Manhattan and later of what would become Kansas State University. In the manner common in settling the frontier, Isaac and William came on ahead of their wives to establish a claim, build a cabin, and put in the first year’s crop. Within four months, Isaac’s wife, Ellen, followed him to Kansas. William’s wife, Harriet, refused to come to Kansas, and instead remained in New England.

The tale of the Goodnow women, and that of other eastern women who moved to Kansas, relates the unusual interplay of politics, domesticity, and western settlement in the lives of nineteenth-century women. As did many of the New Englanders who migrated to Kansas in the 1850s, the Goodnows responded to the call to save Kansas for freedom. The Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854 had repealed the prohibition against slavery in the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase out of which Kansas Territory was formed. Kansas thus had its origins in the national struggle over slavery extension. The New England settlements there experienced first threats and then civil war with Missourians resentful of free-state intrusion onto their borders.





This scene of an immigrant wagon train on the streets of territorial Manhattan, Kansas, clearly illustrates the rigors of travel and primitive living conditions that deprived eastern women of the advantages of nineteenth-century domesticity.

The Kansas frontier caused many of the hardships experienced on other frontiers, including the rigors of travel and primitive living conditions that deprived eastern women of the advantages of nineteenth-century domesticity. These pioneer women found it difficult to replicate the gentility of the middle-class life of the East. Although the inconveniences presented by dirt floors and cooking over open fires might seem privation enough, it was most keenly felt because it struck at the heart of what nineteenth-century middle-class society held to be woman's sphere—the home. Frontier life made woman's role as domestic caretaker not only more difficult but deprived her of the middle-class possessions and comfort with which she was to enjoy and carry



In 1855 Harriet Goodnow refused her husband William's pleas to join him in Kansas. She repeatedly consigned her husband to God's care, disbelieving that William could seriously expect her to leave her beautiful home in the East to begin anew on the wild and dangerous frontier.



out that role. One daughter of pioneers suffused her memoir of the early days with descriptions of the accouterments of genteel living: sofas and chairs, carpets, and an organ.¹

Historians have long debated women's reaction to the frontier experience. Dismissing the stereotype of western women who pined nostalgically for the East, John Mack Faragher, Joan Cashin, Annette Kolodny, and others have examined the differing and sometimes complementary motivations with which women and men viewed the westward migration. Whether women agreed or disagreed with their husbands' decisions to move, the rationale for relocation was primarily economic.² For a small group of wo-

men, however, the decision to move to Kansas, if not a political decision itself, quickly involved them in politics as the crisis on the Kansas–Missouri border intensified.

One must emphasize that only a small group of women became involved in the political struggle in Kansas. The February 1855 territorial census records a population of 8,601 people, 2,905 of them voters (adult white men). Discounting the children, blacks, Indians, and men under the voting age, hundreds of women would still have been in the territory. By 1860 the total population of Kansas territory had grown to more than one hundred thousand with a rough parity between women and men. Thus, over the course of

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1. Eliza Johnston Wiggin, *Impressions of Early Kansas* (Wichita: Grit Printery, 1915), 30–31. On woman's sphere and domesticity, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151–75; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1778–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9–39.

2. On women's attitudes to western migration, see John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the*

Southern Frontier (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Susan Lee Johnson, "'A memory sweet to soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the 'American West,'" *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (November 1993): 495–517; Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994). See also Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); Susan Armitage, "Women and Men in Western History: A Stereoptical Vision," *Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (October 1985): 381–95; Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women, The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 173–213; Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

territorial Kansas's history, thousands of women were in the territory, many of whom did not participate in the area's civil war. Nonetheless the struggle was such that some women felt emboldened to speak and act outside the norms for their sex.³

Nineteenth-century women, historians now recognize, were not completely isolated from the political, and male, sphere. An increasingly complex literature has examined women's participation in and impact on politics.⁴ Kansas, however, presented a unique instance in which those women settlers who felt conflicted about the personal sacrifices made in the westward movement could justify those sacrifices to themselves and to others by celebrating their political participation. Rather than threatening the men's control of the political realm, or women's belief that men only should be political actors, their activism supported the male decision to move west. Free-state Kansas women embraced politics to reconcile themselves to the hardship of re-creating their domestic ideals on an embattled frontier.

A few of Harriet Goodnow's letters appear in the Isaac T. Goodnow Collection at the Kansas State His-

3. Samuel A. Johnson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The New England Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Crusade* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), 99; Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self, eds., *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 28.

4. On women's political influence, see Elizabeth R. Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History* 82 (September 1995): 494–521; Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620–47; Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986); Michael McGerr, "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830–1930," *Journal of American History* 77 (December 1990): 864–85; Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

On abolitionist women, see Keith Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1800–1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977); Blanche Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist Abolitionists in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 112–28; Ellen DuBois, "Women's Rights and Abolition: The Nature of the Connection," in *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists*, ed. Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 238–51; Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

torical Society, and these reflect her adamant refusal to come to Kansas. Harriet, who was deeply religious, repeatedly consigned William to God's care as she could do nothing for him. Harriet clearly expected William to fail in Kansas, inveighed repeatedly that the New England Emigrant Aid Society "should so dupe and deceive the public!" and passed on all negative information rumored in the East about Kansas. She could not believe William would seriously expect her to leave her beautiful home in the East to begin anew in Kansas. Letters from other family members also give an indication of her motives. William's letters speak occasionally of a daughter the couple lost, and as there seem to have been no other children it is possible that an estrangement had been created in the marriage by the tragic loss of their only child. Harriet's repeated assumptions of William's probable failure, and a telling paragraph in which she chided him on his mismanagement of the life insurance funds that provided some of her financial support, indicate other rifts in the marriage. But it is clear from the letters written to Harriet, as well as her own few letters to William, that the political situation in Kansas was of great concern to the women of the Goodnow family. A letter from Isaac and William's mother acknowledges that William had written of his desire to go to Kansas and his wish for the rest of the family to join him there. "[I] think i shall wait and see how many the Masorians kill before i go," Harriet's mother-in-law suggested. Another female relative finished the letter, noting that Harriet's dislike of the venture was known to the rest of the family and continuing with the hope that William and Isaac be preserved from "the many evils that surround the Antislavery Men in that section." Having read about the doings of the Missourians, she too was reluctant to go to Kansas.⁵

William tried to reassure Harriet that Kansas would become a free state without bloodshed, writ-

5. Harriet W. Goodnow to William Goodnow, May 13, 1855, box 1, Isaac Tichenor Goodnow Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Harriet W. Goodnow to William Goodnow, May 27, 1855, *ibid.*; Harriet Goodnow to William Goodnow, June 24, 1855, *ibid.*; [Mother] to Harriet Goodnow, May 13, 1855, *ibid.*; E. Co. Whitney to Harriet Goodnow, July 16, 1855, *ibid.*



Unlike Harriet, Ellen Goodnow was not only willing but eager to join her husband, Isaac, in Kansas. In a letter to her sister-in-law she wrote, "One thing I do believe I should not stand acquitted in the great day [of judgment], had I not been willing to join my husband in labouring for the freedom of this territory."



ing optimistically to his wife in that vein just two months before the infamous 1856 sack of Lawrence in which Missourians attacked the free-state town of Lawrence, threw its antislavery presses into the river, and destroyed the town's hotel. Again and again William cautioned Harriet not to believe the exaggerated reports of violence heard in the East and cajoled her with images of a peaceful, free-state Kansas.⁶

Harriet's reluctance to move west was not unusual given the physical hardships and discomfort all women endured in the migration. Miriam Colt told the story of a fellow immigrant to Kansas in the 1850s who gave birth on the trail. Her company paused only two days for the delivery. The difficulty of travel had made the woman so ill that she could hold neither her infant nor the flowers Miriam picked to cheer her. After reaching Kansas, the new mother and her family lived in a cabin with a bark-covered roof, no door, and a dirt floor. "She cannot bear to hear a word about staying in the country," Colt noted. Eventually the family did leave Kansas.⁷ Even John Brown's family possessed discontented women. Jason Brown wrote that, although he was much pleased with the beauty and fertility of Kansas land, his wife was "so

lonely and discontented here" that, if she did not overcome these feelings, he would bring the family back to Ohio. Julia Lovejoy's attempts to convince others of the necessity of moving to Kansas were often undermined by her wrenching accounts of her own emigration in 1855. Pregnant and accompanied only by two sick daughters, she was cheated by a drunken teamster and had to take refuge in an Indian wigwam, where one of her daughters died. Looking back on the tragic journey, she commented, "We never expect to feel at home in Kansas, though, if we can enjoy health when warm weather returns, we may live and die here. . . . Kansas must be redeemed and saved, and we want a hand in helping on the good work."⁸ Clarina Nichols reported the death of her husband and the illness of her sons but claimed the death rate of the territory did not differ from that of her native New England. Earlier she had felt compelled to deny rumors that she was unhappy in Kansas, attributing their source to the minor irritation of finding her house unready for occupation. In 1857 Ellen Goodnow wrote her traveling husband that she

6. William E. Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, March 16, 1856, *ibid.*

7. Miriam Davis Colt, *Went to Kansas; Being a Thrilling Account of an Ill-Fated Expedition to that Fairy Land, and Its Sad Results* (Watertown, N.Y.: L. Ingalls, 1862), 56–57, 71.

8. Julia Louisa Lovejoy to Bro. Haven, January 1858, "Letters of Julia Louisa Lovejoy, 1856–1864," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (November 1947): 368–73; see also Lovejoy to Messrs. Editors, February 9, 1857, *ibid.* (August 1947): 290, for another description of their trip; J.L. Brown to Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters, June 23, 1855, in F.B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (1885; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 197.

had read a religious tract on “cross-bearing women.” She concluded that the author did not know any such women and should come to Kansas to meet some, but left unclear whether the burden Kansas women bore was the general hardship of frontier life or the particular hardship caused by the political situation.⁹ Her sister-in-law Harriet may indeed have suffered from physical ailments that made her reluctant to endure the migration. In her letters to William she complained of her health: a lame arm, an aching head, sore eyes. And Harriet certainly was aware of the hardships involved in going to Kansas, reporting to William of an acquaintance who had buried his wife and child there.¹⁰

As a matter of course, life on the frontier involved discomfort, and many recognized that that discomfort fell particularly harshly on the women. One settler advised, “If your wife and daughter could consent to live for a time in a cabin *sixteen feet square*, and do without a thousand luxuries and many necessities which you enjoy in New-York, you could live very well.”¹¹ Cyrus Holliday wrote from Lawrence describing his sod cabin and dirt floor. Although he joked that his wife would dislike such accommodations, he added, “and yet I have seen beautiful and refined and educated women occupy just such mansions.” One Kansas woman comforted herself by reflecting that a female friend endured worse privation on the Minnesota frontier.¹²

Even women who did not suffer severe deprivation felt keenly the difference between their own hard lives and the lives enjoyed by sisters, cousins, and old friends in their native East. In a letter to a female rel-

ative, Sarah Everett wrote defensively of her success in making cheese:

I presume you think me very childish to feel so much elated simply because folks like my cheese, but *you* cant realize the reasons that make me feel so—Supposing you had been living on the plainest possible food for only a *few* years say jonny-cake & skimmed milk for weeks together. Supposing you had turned your clothes inside out and bottom side up and then been obliged to wear tatters at that—Suppose your *toes had touched the floor* until the 27. of Dec. and your crops had been shortened by drought and cut off by frost, and you had even with all the economy you could muster kept not only continually sinking in debt but taxing also the charity of your friends. Supposing all this and a great deal more too tedious to enumerate I say—dont you think you would grow a little childish over the first faint gleamings of a better time coming?¹³

Everett’s defensiveness arose from the difficulty of maintaining gentility and refinement under the conditions she described. Her hard-won pleasures and accomplishments no doubt seemed trivial to female relatives in the East. A traveler to Kansas in 1859 remarked that Mrs. Tyler of Canton had “been accustomed to live like a Christian in her native (New York) state” and was trying “to keep up to the mark in Kansas” despite suffering from the illnesses common to the Kansas frontier. “[S]he sighs for her Northern home!” he remarked.¹⁴ A Kansas girl wrote an eastern cousin, “The things for which I like Newark are entirely wanting here. The comfort, the elegance, the refinement and educational advantages are things we hope and work for.” Yet she went on to say, “But what I love Kansas for is her great beauty and fertility, and for her sufferings. The very hardships I have borne here, and the political strife, and the great wrongs inflicted upon us, and the unjust and savage wars which we have passed through,

9. Ellen D. Goodnow to Isaac T. Goodnow, June 14, 1857, box 1, Goodnow Collection; Joseph G. Gambone, ed., “The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas: The Papers of Clarina I.H. Nichols, 1854–1855,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 39 (Summer 1973): 220–61, esp. 230–32, 228–29.

10. Harriet Goodnow to William Goodnow, June 24, May 27, 1855, box 1, Goodnow Collection.

11. Robert W. Richmond, “A Free-Stater’s ‘Letters to the Editor’: Samuel N. Wood’s Letters to Eastern Newspapers, 1854,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 23 (Summer 1957): 185.

12. Lela Barnes, ed., “Letters of Cyrus Kurtz Holliday, 1854–1859,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 6 (August 1937): 245; Mary T. Wait to [Mrs. Benjamin], March 4, 1859, box 2, John Benjamin and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul.

13. Sarah M.C. Everett to Jennie Everett, June 20, 1859, “Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854–1864: Miami County Pioneers,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 8 (August 1939): 307.

14. Isaac Moffatt, “The Kansas Prairie, Or, Eight Days on the Plains,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 6 (May 1937): 158–59.



Harriet Goodnow's reluctance to leave the East was not unusual given the physical hardships and discomfort all women endured in the migration. Illness and death were common occurrences on the trail, and women's accounts often describe tragic journeys west.

have all made me love Kansas as I love no other place on earth."¹⁵ Kansas, feminized as "she," had much in common with "her" women settlers: loveliness, fecundity, and "sufferings."

Much of the advice to migrants recommended leaving women behind. One guidebook urged:

Where the wife is feeble, has an infant, or several young children, or from any cause cannot lend a helping hand, *she had better remain behind, until the new home is provided for her. . . .* If, on the other hand, the woman is the man, or is in truth a *help-mate, and can cheerfully submit to roughing it for a while, if the children be of an age and character suited to prove serviceable, let them be taken along.* If families remain back, it will be unnecessary to return for them, as there will be some one going out under whose charge they can be placed.¹⁶

While acknowledging the difficulties of frontier life, this writer stigmatized women who wished to avoid it as feeble and sickly. He encouraged men to leave families by ignoring the troubles encountered by women traveling alone or with young children and by excusing the father from responsibility for the children.

One woman who made the transition to the frontier attributed success to the women. "[M]en who have wives and children with them, keep up good

spirits." But she scolded "Those who shrink from toil and privation" and urged them to observe the "lesson of the mothers who have gathered up their treasures, and patiently cheerfully meet all the privations of the long journey to crowded cars and boats, by night and by day, beset by the demands of their little irresponsible 'responsibilities.'"¹⁷

Even when the men acknowledged women's contribution, they stressed the need to leave behind women who might be an impediment. At an Old Settlers' Meeting in 1879, James Rogers complimented the "ladies of the highest type of womanhood; ladies in virtue, refinement, and culture" who endured hardships and danger to save free institutions in Kansas. Rogers's account included an ill wife who nonetheless urged her husband to migrate and whose supportive letters kept him in Kansas.¹⁸

Sara Robinson's account of the guerrilla warfare of 1856 depicted New England women who managed to wield guns, protecting husband and hearth, without losing the "native refinement, sensibility, and modest dignity of a true woman."¹⁹ The early chap-

15. *Herald of Freedom* (Lawrence), November 1, 1856.

16. Thomas H. Webb, *Information for Kansas Immigrants* (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Son, 1855), 15.

17. Gambone, "The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas" (Spring 1973): 33, 30.

18. Charles S. Gleed, ed., *The Kansas Memorial, a Report of the Old Settlers' Meeting held at Bismarck Grove, Kansas, September 15th and 16th, 1879* (Kansas City, Mo.: Press of Ramsey, Millett, and Hudson, 1880), 157–59.

19. Sara T.L. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 7th ed. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Co., 1857), 183.

ters of her book, which describe the time before the outbreak of general violence, found her chiefly occupied in picking wildflowers and visiting neighbors. The wife of a professional man in Lawrence, Sara was perhaps not called upon to perform the domestic and household chores of the average farm wife or chose not to relate her own experiences. She once described with some amusement a friend's ineptitude at making butter. But she recounted how other women took up those chores in the face of necessity:

In some regions, where husbands and brothers were in arms to protect some other settlement, or to drive out marauders, delicately reared and intelligent New England women were busy in the fields. . . . Two beautiful and accomplished girls, thus at work, said to a friend of mine, "Those who would think less of us for working in the field, may say what they please; we do not value their opinions."²⁰

Sara not only defended Kansas women's allegiance to domesticity, she sought to convince her readers that the hardships of frontier life were beneficial for maintaining those ideals. Women who in the East would have been lured by the "false show of society" found that "life is real, life is earnest." In Kansas, "the useless ornament of a city drawing-room becomes the strong, the active, earnest woman."²¹ Julia Lovejoy also asserted that "delicate ladies" could "ford (wade) creeks, rivers, sleep in the open air, on the prairies, in the ox-wagons, or wherever night overtakes them, and suffer no inconvenience."²² Although Sara Robinson and others may have exaggerated the ease and ability of women to re-create eastern gentility, they correctly assessed the expectation that women *should* re-create that gentility. A young wife complained of her home above a store in Lawrence. The quarters were hot and lacked privacy as she and her husband shared a stairway with a lawyer's office. The post office, billiard hall, and sa-

loon all had views of that stair. She reported her embarrassment at doing laundry in the public eye, trekking up and down stairs all day, in an "old dirty dress" with lawyers and others in full view. Her discomfort arose in part because women were expected to dress as neatly as in the East, although men were not.²³ Kansas presented a dilemma for free-state women who attempted to make a home on the frontier where delicate "true women" might lack the necessary stamina to overcome western hardships but who were loathe to forego the title of ladies. As did Ellen Goodnow and the other women settlers, Julia Lovejoy reconciled herself to the difficulties of life in Kansas by asserting the nobility of sacrifice for the cause of freedom.

This commitment to saving Kansas proved to be the crucial difference between Ellen and Harriet Goodnow. On at least one occasion, when William Goodnow's exasperation with his wife overcame him, he wrote:

the tone of your letter is quite different from those of other men's wives which I have read—they seem cheerfully to acquiesce in the course determined to be the best to come here or not—but you without any regard to my prospects of health improved or pecuniary success in business, will not give any encouragement of removal, although it would place you in a condition to be above want & care which is now the chief burden of your life.²⁴

Curiously absent from William's lecture is any mention of sacrifice for the free-state cause. Instead, he spoke of economic success, personal health, and, most important, wifely duty. By contrast, Isaac, in a short note addressed to his sister-in-law, made the argument for her coming to Kansas on the basis of ensuring that Kansas became a "free & a Christian state."²⁵ Harriet, emotionally estranged from her husband or the possessor of a remarkably firm tempera-

20. *Ibid.*, 288.

21. *Ibid.*, 178–79.

22. Julia Louisa Lovejoy to Editor, August 1, 1855, Julia Louisa Lovejoy, "Letters from Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 11 (February 1942): 42.

23. Harriett Carr to Sister, July 11, 1858, folder 3, box 1, Benjamin and Harriett Carr Papers, Colorado Historical Society, Denver.

24. William E. Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, June 10, 1855, box 1, Goodnow Collection.

25. Isaac T. Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, part of a letter from William Goodnow, July 15, 1855, *ibid.*



Pioneer women found it difficult to replicate the gentility of the middle-class life of the East. Although the inconveniences presented by dirt floors and cooking over open fires might seem privation enough, it was most keenly felt because it struck at the heart of what nineteenth-century middle-class society held to be woman's sphere — the home.

ment, refused their entreaties. Other wives suppressed their reluctance and followed; Harriet stayed home, even calmly writing William, “if you can do well there, I have no objection. I can do well here and feel perfectly contented, why should I not?”²⁶

Ellen Goodnow was not only willing but eager to go to Kansas. Her letters in the months between her husband's and her own arrival in Kansas are filled with plans and requests for advice on the trip to Wild Cat Creek. Ellen's letters home, written mostly to Harriet, rarely mention Kansas's agricultural bounty, the richness of the land, or the rigors of settlement. Ellen spoke almost solely of the political situation. Joining in the effort to persuade Harriet to come to Kansas, Ellen tried reassurance; she advised her sister-in-law that the Goodnows' claims were too far from Missouri for trouble to occur and that Kansas would be settled by freestaters with little bloodshed. When reassurance failed, Ellen appealed to Harriet's wifely conscience, telling her in firm tones, “One

thing I do believe I should not stand acquitted in the great day [of judgment], had I not been willing to join my husband in labouring for the freedom of this territory.”²⁷

The only story thus far uncovered approximating Harriet and William's stubbornness was told of one of James Montgomery's free-state guerrilla followers and his bride-to-be. After the passage of the proslavery Lecompton Constitution in 1857, this New Englander asked to postpone his wedding to go to the aid of free Kansas. His fiancée threatened to end their engagement if he did. He chose duty over love. But in this case, the young woman relented and wrote to him. He, feeling peace in Kansas secure by 1858, left for the East.²⁸ Unlike Harriet, the woman acknowledged the worth of the cause. And unlike the Goodnows, the couple was reunited in the genteel East, not on the “bloody” Kansas frontier.

26. Harriet Goodnow to William Goodnow, June 24, 1855, *ibid.*

27. Ellen Goodnow to Isaac Goodnow, May 23, 1855, *ibid.*; Ellen Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, May 13, 1856, *ibid.*; Ellen Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, July 21, 1855, *ibid.*

28. William P. Tomlinson, *Kansas in Eighteen Fifty-Eight* (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 271–80.



Perhaps the woman best known for joining her husband in “labouring for the freedom” of Kansas Territory was Sara Robinson. Her husband, Dr. Charles Robinson, was a leader of the free-state forces, governor of Kansas under the illegal Topeka government of the 1850s, and the first governor in 1861 of the newly admitted state of Kansas. Sara acted as propagandist for the free-state cause, her *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* serving as both travel guide and free-state polemic. Charles jokingly referred to Sara’s fame in the East by remarking that he was known there as “the husband of Mrs. Robinson.” After Charles was arrested trying to leave Kansas in the summer of 1856, Sara continued east bearing the papers of the congressional committee investigation. She toured New England and appeared at the Republican state convention in Illinois.²⁹

Sara Robinson may have been the most notable politically minded Kansas woman, but she was not the only one. One finds mention of women attending public speeches as when they crowded a Leaven-

worth building’s steps and windows to hear James Lane speak. In her letters, Sarah Everett discussed John C. Frémont’s candidacy for the presidency, the importance to the republic of the upcoming presidential election, the problems with slave labor, a wish for President Franklin Pierce’s assassination, John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry, and Abraham Lincoln’s election.³⁰ Mrs. S.N. Wood recalled her ready acceptance of her husband’s pledge to go to Kansas. Despite the difficulties of travel with an infant and a toddler, and the threats the family endured en route, “We never lost our faith in the triumph of freedom, in the ultimate triumph of right.”³¹ When a free-state settler near Fort Scott expressed fear that Missourians would revenge themselves on his family for his political activities, his wife resolutely avowed that she would rather die than be the cause of his failure “to do your duty as a man.”³² Julia Lovejoy, in an effort to en-

29. Charles Robinson to Sara Robinson, September 29, 1856, Charles and Sara T. D. Robinson Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; Leverett W. Spring, *Kansas: The Prelude to the War for the Union* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), 116.

30. *New York Times*, May 5, 1858; Sarah M.C. Everett to Cynthia Everett, August 1, 1856, “Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854–1864,” (May 1939): 146–47; Sarah M.C. Everett to Jennie Everett, December 31, 1859, January 18, 1860, *ibid.* (November 1939): 354–56; Sarah M.C. Everett to Jennie Everett, March 4, 1861, *ibid.*, 366.

31. Gleed, *The Kansas Memorial*, 154–55.

32. Tomlinson, *Kansas in Eighteen Fifty-Eight*, 154.

tice her relatives to move to Lawrence, informed them of upcoming land sales and asked, "Who of you will come, and by helping freedom, help yourselves?" Her eighteen-year-old son wrote a similar letter that concentrated on economics. "If you have any desire like the rest of mankind to get a pleasant home cheap and a chance to make money, I advise you by all means to come to Kansas," he wrote his uncle's family. In an appended note, his mother added that "you may make your fortune! We have no object but your temporal good and the cause of freedom in thought."³³

Political involvement led free-state women beyond woman's sphere. Women who were criticized for taking up land claims found excuses in their free-state activities. One woman had acted as scout and guard for free-state bands so her brother, later killed at Osawatimie, could rest. On her lay the care of an orphan child and of aged parents impoverished by border ruffian raids. Another had established a claim to help recoup her father's funds, exhausted from helping the victims of Missouri attacks. Other women were given shares in a town company in recognition of their services to the local military company.³⁴

Tales of the Kansas civil war are replete with instances of women's heroism. One early settler recalled that during the civil war in 1856, Lawrence women practiced their marksmanship to help drive away the Missourians. Other accounts describe how Lawrence women smuggled ammunition under their skirts through the Missouri lines, or made cartridges and loaded guns during the Wakarusa War, a stand-off between the citizens of Lawrence and the Missourians in December 1855.³⁵ Missourians stopped two Lawrence women whose buggy was too

weighed down with hundreds of pounds of ammunition—the Sharps rifle caps in their stockings, the cartridges sewn into petticoats and underclothes—to outrun the border ruffians. The Missourians merely doffed their hats, apologized for disturbing the ladies' outing, and sent them on their way. The men of Lawrence were reduced to joking about the return of bustles to fashion for the women were "swelled out *awful!*"³⁶ Referring obliquely to women spies, one Lawrence settler commented that she had learned to ride during the guerrilla warfare of 1856 "when it was necessary to know the latest tidings and when 'twas safer for a woman to be seen out than a man.'" By the time fighting began in the spring of 1856, one newcomer reported, "It is nothing uncommon to see [the women of Lawrence] running bullets and making cartridges."³⁷

Indeed, free-state women were most famous for their refusal to back down in the face of proslavery pressure. A Mrs. Speer threw hot water on a Missourian who attempted to enter her house to search for her husband in 1856 and told the soldiers accompanying the obnoxious "border ruffian," "I have respect for the United States troops. You can search the house, but, as for this puke of a Missourian he shall not come in." Living in an as yet unfinished cabin, another wife whose husband had been forced into hiding by the soldiers vowed to shoot this same Missourian on sight, although she was normally a "timid, sensitive" woman who found frontier hardships difficult to bear.³⁸ A judge's wife in Atchison freed her husband from a drunken mob by convincing its leader she would use the gun she brandished. A Lawrence wife threatened to shoot the infamous Sheriff Samuel Jones, who led the proslavery attack on that town in May 1856, if he tried to arrest her husband. The good sheriff backed away from the gun-toting woman, say-

33. Julia Louisa Lovejoy to Honored and Beloved Parents Brothers and Sisters, December 9, 1856, "Letters of Julia Louisa Lovejoy, 1856–1864," (May 1947): 41–42; Charlie J. Lovejoy to Uncle and Family, December 7, 1856, *ibid.*, 140.

34. Tomlinson, *Kansas in Eighteen Fifty-Eight*, 289–91; *New York Times*, May 27, 1857.

35. Isaac T. Goodnow letter [1856], box 1, Goodnow Collection; Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 141–59; [Hannah Anderson Ropes], *Six Months in Kansas* (Boston: J.P. Jewett and Co., 1856), 117; Gleed, *The Kansas Memorial*, 66–67.

36. G. Douglas Brewerton, *The War in Kansas: A Rough Trip to the Border* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), 268–75.

37. "Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854–1864," (August 1939): 295; Edward Bridgman to S.E. Bridgman, May 25, 1856, Edward Bridgman Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

38. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 205–7; James Shaw, *Early Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in Kansas* (Atchison, Kans.: Haskell Printing Co., 1886), 44–45.

ing he “had rather face an army of men than one furious woman.” Yet this same pistol-toting woman was allegedly tongue-tied in front of a New York City audience and had to have her account presented by her husband.³⁹ The very fact that genteel women felt compelled to take up arms was used to condemn the proslavery cause. One observer described a “delicate young lady” of “modest sensitiveness” who had braved the danger of a threatened Missouri raid to stay by her husband. “What wrongs must a people have suffered when a creature so fragile in peace becomes almost a second JOAN OF ARC!”⁴⁰ There was no dearth of proper eastern women prepared to expand the boundaries of woman’s sphere on behalf of the free-state cause. Ironically, Sheriff Jones was the toast of the ball ending the Wakarusa War, even receiving the offer of an escort home from one free-state demoiselle, “a very masculine undertaking,” an overt recognition by the writer of the way in which the Kansas civil war had disordered gender roles.⁴¹

Some of that disorder was unintended by men or even women. Historians’ work on the national Civil War has shown that women did not embrace a change in gender roles but quickly discovered men’s inability to carry out their traditional obligations to protect women.⁴² So it was that Kansas free-state women discovered they were safer against Missouri attacks than were their men.

When women stepped outside their roles, however, they opened themselves to violent retaliation. Sara Robinson believed the threat to free-state women in Kansas to be almost as great as that to free-state men. At the time of the Wakarusa War, she alleged that “the Missourians threaten to kill all our

men, and save the women for a more bitter fate.” But she recorded far fewer instances of violence against women than her almost constant litany about murders of male settlers. A woman teacher at the Wyandot Indian school believed she narrowly avoided death at the hands of a Missourian. After H. Miles Moore’s arrest, his sister-in-law had her sleep and her composure disturbed by Missourians who banged on her door, threatening the “d-ning Abolitionist woman” with murder.⁴³ Margaret C. Hendrick experienced a frightening encounter at Kickapoo City in February 1856. Because she window-shopped in this proslavery town without making purchases, the locals suspected her of spying. Two men stopped her outside of town. Thrusting a revolver at her, they threatened to shoot out her brains. Hendrick proved she was not a boy in disguise by pulling off her bonnet and showing her hair. When they were joined by two other men, the ritual of showing her hair had to be repeated. Hendrick’s bravery was extraordinary—she briefly escaped from her captors and even at one point threatened them with her own gun. Her greatest fear was of the indignity of a bodily search to prove her sex. She was escorted home with only the injury of a thorough scare and the asking of improper and vulgar questions.⁴⁴

Still the threat to the women was a staple of the free-state argument for retaliatory violence: free-state settlers rationalized John Brown’s murder of proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek by alleging the proslavery men had threatened free-state women—threats that seem never to have occurred.⁴⁵ Similarly, David Atchison’s famous charge to the Missourians waiting to attack Lawrence in

39. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 183; Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 162–63; *New York Times*, January 29, February 2, June 10, 1856.

40. *New York Times*, May 7, 1858.

41. Brewerton, *The War in Kansas*, 125–26.

42. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); George Rable, “‘Missing in Action’: Women of the Confederacy,” in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 134–46; Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

43. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 138; Gleed, *The Kansas Memorial*, 88; *New York Times*, October 17, 1856.

44. *Herald of Freedom*, April 5, 1856.

45. D.G. Watt, “Reminiscences of Pottawatomie Creek and Vicinity, 1856,” Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 118; William Elsey Connelley, *John Brown* (Topeka: Crane and Co., 1900), 163; see also Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 126–37.



In the politically active town of Lawrence, pictured here in 1858, women took on heroic endeavors: practicing marksmanship to drive away proslavery Missourians, smuggling ammunition under their skirts, loading guns, and wielding their own weapons in the face of danger.

May 1856 that excused violence against a woman who “takes on herself the garb of a soldier” appears to be an invention of free-state newspapers.⁴⁶

In fact, the Missourians seem to have scrupulously avoided bringing the war home to women. The ability of women to spy and smuggle attests to Missouri chivalry. When male relatives wanted to escort the widow of a free-state settler into besieged Lawrence, they chose the “safest expedient,” dressing as women themselves, “women being allowed to pass without much question.”⁴⁷ Lawrence women were able to smuggle ammunition under their skirts because the Missourians who stopped their carriage refrained from searching ladies. A Mrs. McDaniel and a six-year-old girl were sent from Fort Scott to Lawrence in search of arms because “it was not believed any man would get through without losing the arms.”⁴⁸ A fellow Yankee traveler advised Clarina Nichols at Independence to relabel her baggage to conceal her Vermont origins. One member of the party, a Missouri slaveholder and participant in the

Wakarusa War, indignantly pointed out that “Missourians did not insult women.” At Nichols’s request, he agreed to act as her “champion.”⁴⁹

Robinson herself recorded only one instance of violence against a woman. In late August 1856, at the height of the territorial conflict, four proslavery men carried a free-state woman a mile and a half from her home. Her arms were tied and her tongue was drawn out of her mouth, according to Robinson’s account, and tied to keep it so. She was so “wantonly abused” that she came close to dying. Her crime was to make remarks about the murder of a local man, which offended the proslavery party.⁵⁰

Despite their challenge to the conventions of nineteenth-century spheres, free-state women in Kansas refused to take their political consciousness and unorthodox activities beyond playing a supporting role to male lead actors. Harriet Goodnow’s defiance of her husband’s wishes was the exception rather than the rule. Miriam Colt’s father-in-law and sister-in-law died in Kansas, and her husband and son on the return trip. Although the family endured sickness and drought during the summer of 1856,

46. T.H. Gladstone, *The Englishman in Kansas or Squatter Life and Border Warfare* (1857; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 34; William E. Parrish, *David Rice Atchison of Missouri: Border Politician* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1961), 200–1.

47. Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 136

48. *New York Times*, June 8, 1858; Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 141–59.

49. Gambone, “The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas,” 233–36.

50. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 328; John H. Gihon, *Geary and Kansas: Governor Geary’s Administration in Kansas: with a Complete History of the Territory until July 1857* (Philadelphia: J.H.C. Whiting, 1857), 98; *New York Times*, September 3, 1856.

Colt's father-in-law prevented them from leaving. "His indomitable will is not thus to be turned," Colt commented. Colt herself longed to leave Kansas even before the hardships began. In late spring she was so depressed that her husband feared for her sanity. She told her young son, when he caught her crying, "Mama wants to go back to her old home." The boy did not understand why she would want to leave a place with such pretty flowers.⁵¹ Distressed and unhappy, she was kept in Kansas by the will of the family patriarch, if not by the desires of the family's youngest male.

Even the much remarked-on martial qualities of Kansas women had limits. In the spring of 1856 Lawrence women looked "with fear and trembling" at the absence of their men at the free-state government in Topeka.⁵² The children of an abolitionist family recalled a fearful night in 1856, after the family had moved to proslavery Atchison. A friend warned the wife of a threat against her husband's life. She armed herself and searched for the potential assailant. Although she did not find the man, and no blood was shed, the children found their parents reluctant to discuss the incident in later years. One suggested that their father "felt a bit sensitive at the suggestion that he might be unable to protect himself."⁵³ Their mother may have also felt constrained at describing herself in so unwomanly a role.

Lawrence women were themselves uncomfortable with some of the Amazonian excesses of their fellow easterners. A Lawrence woman, famous for her "freaks" during the Wakarusa War, was described by Hannah Ropes as having a "face not only determined but somewhat brazen." This woman had passed herself off as a Missourian when border ruffians came to her home and had even persuaded them to leave guns for her own defense. On another occasion she was pursued by a drunken Missourian. She refused to give up her horse, outran him, and even collected his dropped weapon. Despite the woman's

evident bravery and quick thinking, Ropes's choice of words such as "freaks" and "brazen" indicate her disapproval.⁵⁴

As politically aware and involved as Kansas free-state women were, most did not challenge nineteenth-century norms that dictated men were the political actors in society. In appealing to Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner for help, Hannah Ropes demurred that "My poor woman's head does not pretend to sift, or unravel this state of things."⁵⁵ A newspaper correspondent inquired of the young wife of free-state leader William Phillips whether her husband's long absences and notoriety worried her: "she made the heroic reply *that he was but doing his duty, and whatever his fate might be, it would be better than remaining ignobly at home when his country needed his services.*" The visitor concluded "that little danger existed of enslaving Kansas, while even the refined and delicate of her women exhibited such Spartan courage."⁵⁶

One occasionally finds hints of women's traditional activities, as when Lawrence women spent all day cooking for the peace celebration that ended the Wakarusa War, or when they organized a fundraiser to feed the free-state prisoners held at LeCompton. As a token of support, "a lady" presented a flag to the militia unit organized to defend Lawrence.⁵⁷ Making and presenting flags seems to have been a specialty of Lawrence women. When the editor of the *Herald of Freedom* was released from prison, a committee of ladies commemorated the event with a flag presentation and orations by the editor, the territorial governor, and a Miss Hall. The ladies of Little Osage presented free-state guerrilla James Montgomery with a new suit of clothes, saying "that as he had worn out his clothes in their defense, it was their duty as well

51. Colt, *Went to Kansas*, 90–91, 70–71, 77–78.

52. Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 202.

53. Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 236–37.

54. Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 163–64.

55. *Ibid.*, 208.

56. Tomlinson, *Kansas in Eighteen Fifty-Eight*, 42.

57. Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 144; Edward P. Fitch to Brother, [November 21, 1856], John M. Peterson, "Letters of Edward and Sarah Fitch, Lawrence, Kansas, 1855–1863, Part I," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 48–70, esp. 66; Isaac T. Goodnow diary, July 4, 1855, box 7, Goodnow Collection.



Free-state women were most famous for their refusal to back down in the face of proslavery pressure. During the 1856 raid on Lawrence, depicted here, a Lawrence woman threatened to shoot Sheriff Samuel Jones, who led the attack, if he tried to arrest her husband. The good sheriff backed away.

as pleasure to present him with a new apparel." At the end of 1856 the famous Stubbs rifle company adopted the additional title of the "Oread Guards" after the women of the Oread Female Institute of Worcester, Massachusetts, who had made each member of the company a waterproof overcoat.⁵⁸ By these activities, as recent historians have suggested, women validated and gave moral legitimacy to men's political actions.

In fact, Julia Lovejoy, wife of a New England minister, advocated that women exert their political views through their husbands. She defended Kansas women's political concerns but urged them not to take up the methods of the wife who, trapping her husband in the cellar, sat on the door until he agreed to vote for her favored candidate. Rather, Lovejoy urged women to sew Free Soil presidential candidate John C. Frémont's name onto sofa cushions and make Frémont cheese. She noted:

We never turned politician, until the wrongs of Kansas, heaped mountain-high, compelled us to

58. "The Life of Frank Allen Faxon," Frank A. Faxon Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; *Herald of Freedom*, November 1, 1856; quote regarding Montgomery in Tomlinson, *Kansas in Eighteen Fifty-Eight*, 267–68; Martha B. Caldwell, "The Stubbs," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 6 (May 1937): 124–31, esp. 125.

it, and as much as we hate these gadders abroad—these women-lecturers who are continually at the old theme, "woman's rights," while the poor man at home is in a sad plight, and perchance the crown of his hat goes, "flip flap flip," and his pants are all out at the knee, yet, did not the state of my sick and suffering family require my constant attention, I would love to go "home" and try to help bleeding Kansas . . . by telling my sisters in the East, . . . to exert their individual and associate influence, over their husbands and brothers in favor of freedom and Fremont.⁵⁹

Lovejoy combined a defense of the political role women were playing in Kansas with condemnation of women who turned politics into a challenge to domesticity.

In the example of Sara Robinson, one clearly sees that woman's courage, whether free-state or proslavery, was intended to bolster man's. In a melodramatic proslavery account of Charles Robinson's arrest, Sara Robinson advised her husband to resist, pulled a dagger and a gun from her bosom, and fell on her knees imploring him to defend himself or die but not to surrender. Charles apparently was less moved by

59. Julia Louisa Lovejoy to Editor, September 22, 1856, "Letters of Julia Louisa Lovejoy, 1856–1864," 138.

her appeals than were the Southern auditors who described her as a Spartan woman. He gave himself up. The free-state women supported a cause that was led and carried out by men. Even Sara cautioned against giving excessive credit to the women.⁶⁰ And few in Kansas suggested, as some women did in the East, that the struggle for liberty ought to be extended to them.

The closest approximation to a women's rights proponent on the Kansas frontier was Clarina I. H. Nichols, the newspaperwoman and activist. Later historians credited Nichols with obtaining property rights, guardianship rights, and school suffrage for women by her lobbying at the 1859 Wyandotte Constitutional Convention. She wrote editorials on women for the *Herald of Freedom*, one of which was lost when Missourians threw the press into the river in the 1856 raid on Lawrence. She found Charles Robinson the most sympathetic male leader in Kansas. He invited her to speak on women's rights at the Topeka convention and offered her a clerkship that her husband's final illness prevented her from accepting. But even Nichols faced limitations. In addition to the opposition of male politicians—the territorial governor grew flustered at the idea of women “muddying” in politics—Nichols herself subordinated the issue of women's rights to that of freedom in Kansas. Through 1856 and 1857 she gave fifty lectures on Kansas and only a few on women.⁶¹ She used her lecture fees to support two sons in the free-state army, one of whom was wounded in battle by proslavery forces. In an appeal to New York women, Nichols passed over the political issues to address them as mothers, wives, and sisters on behalf of “outraged” daughters and murdered husbands in Kansas. Kansas's “‘strong-minded’ women,” Nichols wrote,

60. O.N. Merrill, *A True History of the Kansas Wars* (1856; reprint, Tarrytown, N.Y.: W. Abbatt, 1932), 56; Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, 182.

61. Clarina I. Howard Nichols, “Reminiscences,” in *History of Woman Suffrage*, ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage (1881; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 1:171–200, esp. 171, 186–93; see also Gambone, “The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas” (Autumn 1973): 413–22. See *Herald of Freedom*, February 7, March 30, April 14, 1856, for Nichols's editorials.

will be content to run bullets, transfer ammunition, and inspire their husbands and sons with hope, faith and courage, until public offices of honor and trust are redolent of domestic peace and quiet before they ask a share in their responsibilities. Yes, woman, self-denying now as in the past, is forgetting herself and her wrongs in the great national wrong that threatens to deprive the manhood of the nation of the right and the power to protect the altars and the hearths consecrated to God and humanity.

Nichols remarked in one letter, “Sharp's rifles are in all our cabins, and Kansas' freedom sworn upon all our domestic altars.” She signed another letter, “Yours for Freedom.”⁶²

The guerrilla war also mobilized women outside of Kansas. The records of free-state fundraisers indicate that Northern women contributed generously to the political cause of Kansas with money and shipments of clothing.⁶³ Antislavery author Lydia Maria Child was deeply moved by the struggle in Kansas. She organized women to sew clothes for Kansas emigrants, wrote of politics and lamented that women lacked the vote, and offered to nurse John Brown after he was wounded in the raid on Harpers Ferry. Her most powerful contribution was the fictional story “The Kansas Emigrants,” serialized in a New York City newspaper.⁶⁴

“The Kansas Emigrants” tells of two couples who migrated to Kansas. Both wives, Alice Bruce and Kate

62. Gambone, “The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas,” 254, 258–60, 238–42, 230–32, 224–25.

63. Accounts of the New York State Kansas Committee, October 31, 1856, box 22, Williams Family Papers, Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, N.Y.; Calvin Cutler to W.C. Crosby, November 1, 1856, William Chase Crosby Collection, University of Maine Library, Orono; S. Cabot to W.C. Crosby, November 14, 1856, *ibid.*; P.T. Jackson to W.C. Crosby, January 12, 1857, *ibid.*

64. Lydia Maria Child to David Lee Child, October 27, 1856, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 82–84; Lydia Maria Child to Mrs. S.B. Shaw, 1856, *ibid.*, 78–80; L.M. Child to Lucy and Mary Osgood, July 20, 1856, *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880*, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 288–89. L. Maria Child to Henry A. Wise, October 26, 1859, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, 103–5; Henry A. Wise to Lydia Maria Child, October 29, 1859, *ibid.*, 105–7; see also Margaret M.R. Kellow, “‘For the Sake of Suffering Kansas’: Lydia Maria Child, Gender, and the Politics of the 1850s,” *Journal of Women's History* 5 (Fall 1993): 32–49; L. Maria Child, “The Kansas Emigrants,” *New York Tribune*, October 23–25, 28, November 4, 1856.



Resilient pioneer women who emigrated to territorial Kansas, enduring illness, family deaths, and the dangers of political unrest, included (left to right) Miriam Colt, Julia Lovejoy, and Clarina Nichols.

Bradford, are reluctant to migrate and are shocked by the rough conditions in Kansas, but “there was need that the women of Kansas should overlook their own inconveniences, and be silent about their own sufferings; for a thunder-cloud was gathering over the heads of the migrants.” Among the inconveniences Kate overlooks are the vulgarity and insults to her by Missourians when she ventures into public on errands for her family and an attack on the family in which Kate defends her husband from Missouri violence. Kate smuggles ammunition into the besieged Lawrence and defends her house from a Missouri mob. Through all these incidents she earns the respect of the Missourians as “a hell of a woman” and of her husband who calls her “True as steel.” But she determinedly resists an inversion of gender roles. When her husband remarks on how “manfully” she “stood by” him before the Missourians, she corrects him, “How womanfully, you mean.” If Kate represents the strength of free-state women who supported the cause without endangering gender roles, Alice, obviously modeled on the widow of free-state martyr Thomas Barber, embodies the outrages of Missourians on free-state women. Alice prays that her husband’s “courage to dare might be equaled by

her fortitude to endure,” but she quickly finds her strength broken by Missourian persecution and fear for her family. When her husband is killed, she becomes insane and dies dreaming that a local landmark has been renamed “Free Mont,” a reference to Frémont’s candidacy for president.⁶⁵

The triumph of political and sectional loyalties was evident in the failure of free-state women to develop close relationships with white Missouri women. Of the death of a proslavery neighbor lady with whom she had argued politics, Sarah Everett reported, “When she left I remarked to John that I felt as if I never wanted to see her face again and I never did.” Sarah and her husband seemed to get along better with the woman’s son, although he “threatened to shoot the first abolitionist that steps into the house.” Sarah commented that the son “knows we are abolitionists and he is as obliging and good a neighbor as we want.”⁶⁶ Sarah expressed no regret at her uncivil last parting from their elderly neighbor.

65. Child, “The Kansas Emigrants.”

66. Sarah M. C. Everett to Cynthia Everett, August 1, 1856, “Letters of John and Sarah Everett,” (May 1939): 146–47.

In contrast, John Sherman, the Ohio congressman on the congressional committee sent to investigate conditions in the territory, and his wife remembered the “kindness,” “civility,” and charm of the Missouri committee member’s wife. He noted, however, “most of her sex were unfriendly,” indicating Missouri women possessed their own political sensibilities. Similarly, a proslavery woman in Kansas “declined giving her hand to a gentleman Free-Soiler in the dance, alleging as a reason, that she was a Border Ruffian.”⁶⁷ As befitted the image Kansans had of bloodthirsty Missourians, a seventeen-year-old girl in Leavenworth, originally from South Carolina, said she “would like to wade ancle [*sic*] deep in Abolition blood.” One territorial settler recorded his wife’s reaction to the news that the free-state military commander Jim Lane was at a neighboring house: “So Betsie and some of the other ‘Border Ruffian!’ women here talked about killing him.”⁶⁸

Proslavery women, in fact, shared much the same experience as Northern women. One woman recalled matrons of Kentucky and Virginia descent who endured the privation of living in Kansas cabins no better than the ones their slaves had possessed in the East. Proslavery women also sought to protect their men and accused the free-state men of atrocities. Free-state papers reported that the wife of a Franklin postman “clung to him with true devotion” when he was taken by their forces “and wildly implored them to save his life.” Although the paper recognized the woman’s courage, it scoffed at her fears. The free-state side, the newspaper avowed, did not commit outrages.⁶⁹ Mary Mason Williams, wife of the Democratic judge of Fort Scott, described a free-state raid on that town in 1858. An elderly and respectable citizen was dragged from his home with his wife clinging to his arm. When another man was shot, it was

the women who had the courage to go to his aid as “it was considered men would not be allowed to go.” Like Sara Robinson, Mary Williams was a politically astute woman who petitioned government officials for political favors for her husband, yet deferred to his authority. After providing the attorney general with an extremely detailed account of the attack on Fort Scott, she demurred that her husband would write with a fuller account, even though he had been very ill for some time and uninvolved in the events she related.⁷⁰ Free-state forces captured a flag in a proslavery camp with the names of the two ladies who had sewn it inscribed on it. Like the free-state opposition, proslavery commentators struggled for atrocities against women. Judge Williams reported to the administration that free-state guerrillas had made prisoners of two young sisters, forcing them to work for the band. He related this in the tones of horror reserved for more serious crimes against womanhood.⁷¹

Missouri women symbolized the loss of gentility and refinement that eastern women settlers feared. Traveling to Kansas, Miriam Colt noted a barefooted Missouri woman who carried her cornmeal over her shoulder in a bag. Colt asked herself, “Is that what I have got to come to?” A month later Colt observed that she too was carrying her flour home in a bag over her shoulder.⁷² Julia Lovejoy, writing from Sumner, Kansas, described a scene from her window, outside of which a group of young men and women had stopped. Their “uncultivated appearance,” “senseless laughter,” rude staring, and the girls’ “peculiar . . . costume” indicated they were Missourians. Clarina Nichols pronounced, “there is more comfort, neatness, order, and consequently thrift, in the cabins of the six months free state residents in Kansas, than those of four to ten years residents in Missouri.”⁷³ Historian Peggy Pascoe has noted the absence of fe-

67. Brewerton, *The War in Kansas*, 78; John Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate and Cabinet* (Chicago: Werner, 1896), 86.

68. *New York Times*, November 6, 1856; William Stanley Hoole, ed., “A Southerner’s Viewpoint of the Kansas Situation, 1856–1857: The Letters of Lieut. Col. A. J. Hoole, C.S.A.,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 3 (May 1934): 161.

69. *New York Times*, August 23, 1856; Wiggin, *Impressions of Early Kansas*, 20–21.

70. Mary Mason Williams to J.S. Black, December 20, 1858, Jeremiah S. Black Papers, Library of Congress; Mary Mason Williams to Jeremiah Black, November 13, 1859, *ibid.*

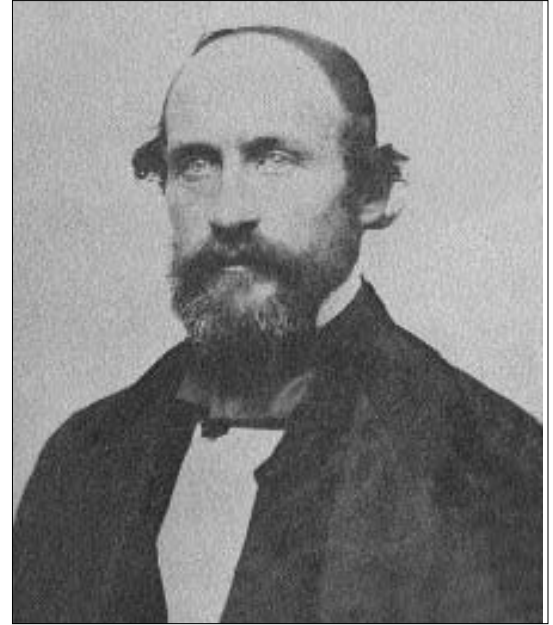
71. *New York Times*, August 29, 1856; Judge Williams to Judge Black, December 24, 1857, Black Papers.

72. Colt, *Went to Kansas*, 41–42, 73.

73. Julia Louisa Lovejoy to Bro. Haven, July 30, 1858, “Letters of Julia Louisa Lovejoy,” 389; Gambone, “The Forgotten Feminist of Kansas,” 233–36.



Sara Robinson was perhaps the woman best known for joining her husband in securing freedom for Kansas Territory. Her husband, Charles Robinson, was a leader of the free-state forces, and Sara acted as propagandist for the free-state cause.



male solidarity in the willingness of Victorian-era women to condemn those who did not embrace their middle-class morality.⁷⁴

Only black women earned the empathy that free-state women did not feel for white Missouri women. And that sympathy for black women helped further to condemn Missourians, including Missouri women, and their institutions. Lovejoy, traveling through Missouri, shuddered at the sight of a slave woman emptying a cart of manure under the supervision of an overseer. “[H]e moved not a finger to assist the poor creature in her masculine task! O slavery, thou unsexing demon, how art thou cursed of God and humanity.”⁷⁵ A Vermont woman settler presented the logic of women’s political activism. After dismissing the women’s rights activists in the East by proclaiming, “Our old Revolutionary mothers . . . had pretty much sich [*sic*] rights as we wimin [*sic*] of Kansas have—the right to bake johnny-cakes and help the men folks build log cabins, and fight for ‘em,” she explained

why women were justified in crossing the boundaries of women’s sphere in the antislavery cause:

the women of Kansas feels that slavery threatens *their* rights when it would parade a degraded, beastly womanhood, to be trampled beneath the contempt of their husbands, sons and brothers. *Our* rights will never be won and secured while slavery tramples upon our black sisters.⁷⁶

Her thinking echoed that of free-labor men who felt slavery endangered the existence of freedom.⁷⁷

Western historians have noted that isolation did not lead respectable women on the frontier into sisterhood with the less respectable.⁷⁸ The middle-class eastern women who migrated to Kansas felt estranged from Missouri women because of class differences, sectional prejudices, and political ideology. Similar differences between themselves and black women could, however, be blamed on the “unsexing

74. Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 212.

75. Julia Louisa Lovejoy to Editor, April 13, 1855, Lovejoy, “Letters from Kansas,” 34.

76. Deborah Van Winkle, Ottawa Creek, to Mr. Editor, *Herald of Freedom*, August 11, 1855.

77. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

78. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*.

demon," slavery. While their antislavery ideology allowed them to see a commonality among all women, black and white, it excluded white Missouri women who were, however, experiencing a similar pattern of politicization because of the border war.

The Goodnows' story reveals something of the experience of free-state Kansas women. Ellen justified her sufferings by the lament that she was "labouring for the freedom of this territory," a political purpose to which she clung far more tenaciously and single-mindedly than did the Goodnow men. While Ellen's letters home focused on politics, freedom for Kansas appeared only sporadically in William's and Isaac's letters or in Isaac's diary. The Goodnow men wrote about the weather, the beauty of the country, and their farming, topics Ellen eschewed. Indeed, when Isaac did mention the Missouri threat, it was in the context of Missourians who "will be on in swarms to lock up the land"—a threat to the free-state settlers' abilities to obtain good land. Ironically, Isaac, who participated in the free-state government, wrote extensively about the beauty of the land and his hopes for economic success. Ellen, who often was left alone to maintain the farm while Isaac politicked, wrote extensively about Kansas politics. Yet Ellen's labors never caused her to question woman's role or her subordination to Isaac. After all, she was in Kansas not by her own choice but by her husband's. Yet she condemned Harriet for refusing to join in that labor. Political ideals did not cause Ellen to rebel against the subordinate role assigned to women. The true rebel was Harriet, who refused "cheerfully to acquiesce in the course determined" by the men. Harriet's and William's letters make clear their emotional distance from one another. Perhaps Harriet considered William to have failed to provide for her as a husband should and thus justified her failure to cleave to him as a wife should. In any case, Harriet's sense of a wife's duty clearly differed from

William's and that of all the other Goodnows. Harriet may not have worked for such causes as a free Kansas or women's rights, but in her own way she struck a small blow against woman's subordination to male authority.⁷⁹

Like other white women settling other nineteenth-century frontiers, Ellen Goodnow and the women migrants to Kansas faced the hardships, physical and emotional, of life in regions newly settled by whites. They coped with sickness, separation from family and friends, natural dangers, and primitive conditions whether they located in growing towns such as Lawrence or settled on claims in the countryside. And they struggled to maintain ideals of nineteenth-century womanhood and domestic life despite these difficulties. Yet their frontier differed from those other frontiers because the very act of settlement in Kansas was a political one. Politics shaped the lives of these women in ways different from those on other frontiers, and indeed from the norms of nineteenth-century womanhood. Kansas women possessed a strong political consciousness that enabled them to reconcile themselves to life on the frontier and to contribute to the free-state cause in ways that often challenged nineteenth-century norms of women's behavior. But their actions ultimately remained within the bounds of domesticity. Political consciousness and action on behalf of freedom in Kansas never led them to assert the need for their own freedom, but it did allow them to accept the difficult conditions under which they attempted to attain the ideals of domesticity. K11

79. Goodnow diary, March 30, June 12, 1855; Isaac T. Goodnow to William Goodnow, April 9, 1855, box 1, Goodnow Collection; Isaac T. Goodnow to Ellen Goodnow, May 6, 1855, *ibid.*; William Goodnow to Harriet Goodnow, June 17, 1855, *ibid.*; Isaac T. Goodnow to Ellen Goodnow, March 25, 1855, *ibid.*