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‘So Pleasant to be a School Maam’: The Civil War as an Educational Force for Women

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Abstract

Scrutinizing the documentary traces of women’s lives reveals the significant variability in what constitutes women’s leadership and advancement historically. During war time, even the act of writing a letter offered women opportunities to advance their learning. This paper draws from a collection of over 150 letters Northern women wrote during the American Civil War to consider aspects of women’s educational experiences during this devastating national conflict that spanned four bloody years and involved millions of Americans (Bailey, 2008; Rhoades & Bailey, 2009). Women’s historians have explored how the war shaped women’s social roles, gendered consciousness, and political organizing, yet its educational implications remain an under-theorized aspect of the war’s complicated legacy worth exploring further. The letters under study highlight four aspects of women’s education during the American Civil War: (a) women’s varied attitudes toward new *opportunities* to teach and attend school, (b) wartime correspondence as an educational tool, (c) home front demands as obstacles to women’s pursuit of formal education; and, conversely, (d) war events as educational forces in women’s lives. Each has implications for reconsidering women’s leadership and advancement historically.

Keywords: Women, education, school, civil war

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Introduction

This paper draws from a collection of over 150 letters Northern women wrote during the American Civil War (1861-1865) to consider aspects of women's educational experiences during this devastating national conflict that spanned four bloody years and involved millions of Americans, which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Bailey, 2008; Rhoades & Bailey, 2009).ⁱ Women's historians (Attie, 1998; Clinton & Silber, 1992; Faust, 1996; Richard, 2003; Silber, 2005) have detailed varied ways the Civil War shaped women's social roles, gendered consciousness, and political organizing, yet its educational implications for women's lives and leadership remain an under-theorized aspect of the war's complicated legacy. Given the significant role education has played in advancing women's status historically, and women's activism throughout the 19th century to increase educational access, these aspects of women's experience merit further consideration.

In a century in which many deemed women's intellectual capacities inferior to men's and their education of lesser importance than their other roles and responsibilities, the collection of letters under study offers insight into young Northern women's attitudes toward education and teaching and their methods for pursuing educational opportunities in the midst of war. Although national upheaval, gendered demands of war work, and women's concern for the men they loved often consumed their emotional and physical energies, print culture also flourished during the Civil War and citizens exchanged letters with a degree of fervor and fanfare previously unknown in American history (Wiley, 1952). Some white, middle-class women slipped into classrooms that soldiers left vacant, utilized such informal educational tools as letters, newspapers, and literary societies, or taught school with varying degrees of reluctance and enthusiasm. Others found that home front demands forced them to defer their educational dreams (Bailey, 2008).

As historians have detailed, the Civil War was a profoundly gendered phenomenon. Gendered beliefs saturated cultural discourse about patriotism and war, gendered prescriptions shaped men and women's war experiences and roles, and sex/gender status influenced who lived and died: over 620,000 men lost their lives in the war's hospitals, camps, and battlefields (Attie, 1998; Clinton & Silber, 1992; Faust, 1996; Richard, 2003; Silber, 2005). Gender also shaped patterns of documentation during the war and scholarship produced in its aftermath (Faust, 1996; Nelson, 1997). Nearly 150 years after Confederate forces surrendered, social historians continue to explore the varied social, economic, and political effects of the war for women's lives. The scholarship of Jeannie Attie, Catherine Clinton, Drew Gilpin Faust, Patricia Richard, Nina Silber, and the Society for Women and the Civil War has contributed to this notable effort. Yet, much is left to mine in the Civil War era diaries, letters, and other documents women left behind. In this paper, I draw from letters some Northern women wrote between the years 1862 and 1867 to discuss four aspects of education legible in the texts (Rhoades & Bailey, 2009): (a) women's varying attitudes toward formal educational *opportunities*, (b) the function of wartime correspondence as an informal educational tool, (c) home front demands as obstacles to women's education, and conversely, (d) war events as educational forces in women's lives.

The four educational themes I highlight in these historical documents not only suggest ways that rural and middle-class women participated in formal schooling as their opportunities expanded throughout the 19th century but also underscore the significance of women's *informal*

educational pursuits. Women's limited access to formal education historically has prompted educational historians to explore the informal tools women have used to advance their learning to create a more comprehensive portrait of women's educational experiences. Letter-writing, print culture, study groups, and bible readings are among the key vehicles women seized to nourish their intellectual development (Davidson, 1986; Martin, 1989). Exploring such complexities can enrich our understanding of women's educational history.ⁱⁱ

In what follows, I first describe the letters on which this study is based. I then utilize Marjorie Theobald's (1999) critique of the "grand narrative of emancipation" (p. 20) in which historians have sometimes cast women's teaching progress historically to highlight letter writers' varied attitudes toward teaching and learning. I suggest such variability offers insight into the historically-specific nature of women's *advancement* and *leadership*. Next, I describe the educational function of letter writing during the war and letters' value as informal educational tools. In the remaining sections of the paper, I describe how war events both interrupted and facilitated women's educational and teaching opportunities. I conclude with possible lessons these historical documents have for contemporary women.

Women's Letters

This study is based on a collection of 158 letters women wrote to one Union soldier during the Civil War years.ⁱⁱⁱ These primary sources, discovered at the bottom of a Lieutenant's dispatch box, bear features that are unusual in war correspondence. Most notably, few collections of women's letters survived soldier's marches and battles across the war years. War collections typically contain soldiers' letters from the frontlines that wives and mothers worked to preserve or the writing of political figures whose heroic acts or leadership has inspired scrutiny and acclaim. In contrast, this collection is primarily comprised of letters from young, white, rural and single women—including chums, love interests, one admiring cousin, and strangers who responded to the soldier's newspaper advertisement for correspondents.^{iv} The letters thus provide glimpses of the activities and preoccupations of dozens of unknown middle-class school-aged girls and women who lived during the war. Also unusual is that the soldier, in a sense, edited the collection himself. He carried select letters throughout his service, preserved them throughout his life, and by happenstance or intent, left them for his granddaughter to discover more than a century after the Civil War ended.^v The soldier left few other material possessions behind.

In addition, the letters reveal literate, optimistic, energetic writers who wielded their pens as patriotic, romantic, and educational tools, working to "cheer" soldiers rather than lament hardships at home.^{vi} Although often anxious for the war to end, and sometimes bored with their daily lives, the young women discussed a variety of entertaining topics: local gossip, family health, picnics and singing schools, and the exploits of local war dissenters. Significantly, they also championed the bravery of Union men. These cheerful epistles expand our understanding of women's communicative patterns during the war; as historian James McPherson notes, such encouraging missives from the home front are too often "lost to history" because married women's letters more often detail their struggles in men's absence (1997, p. 133). Epistolary art and labor are important aspects of studying women's educational development, for as literary scholar Sally L. Kitch argued, the letter historically has been a form "all but synonymous with *woman*, not because men wrote no letters, but because literate women were permitted to write

little else” (1993, p. 21). Epistles thus constitute a key genre women have utilized as political, relational, creative, and educational tools.

Investigating the educational aspects of women’s letters can heighten awareness of the varied forms women’s *leadership* and *advancement* take at different historical moments. Such analysis is significant because the historical record, particularly in matters of war, has too often rendered women’s contributions invisible, indeed inconsequential, in comparison to soldiers’ sacrifices or leaders’ military maneuvers. Yet, women sought and seized varied opportunities within historical circumstances that limited their development. Weaving literary lines into a letter, learning new geography, or stealing moments from household duties to read a newspaper are contextually-specific acts of women’s educational agency. These glimpses of agency remain enduring lessons for historians working to trace and reconceptualize leadership in the historical record and for contemporary women seeking creative spaces for their own advancement.

Emancipatory Narratives of Educational “Opportunity”

In 1863, Sophronia Rogers, a nineteen-year-old teacher in Ohio, wrote to the Union Lieutenant, “I intend commencing my school next Monday. O! horror, how I hate it. I would just as soon go to my grave the first week” (November 27). The “horror” Phrone expressed at the idea of entering a school room underscores American women’s complex relationship with the teaching enterprise since the profession first cracked, then threw open, its doors to admit them. Indeed, Theobald (1999) argues that feminists have embraced far too eagerly as an emancipatory narrative of women’s educational progress the remarkable demographic shift from male to female teachers that occurred during the 19th century. Although historians have rightly heralded these far-reaching increases in women’s educational opportunities as markers of women’s social advancement, Phrone’s comments suggested, and Theobald echoed a century later, that individual women felt far more ambivalent about their educational *opportunities* than feminist historians’ glowing reports sometimes indicate.

Phrone and other letter writers were among thousands of women whose presence in American classrooms reflects women’s changing educational fortunes during the 19th century. As scholars such as Jackie Blount (1998), Nancy Hoffman (1993), and Katharine Kish Sklar (1973) have explored, the steady increase in the number of female teachers across the 19th century is perhaps the most striking demographic change in American educational history. In the early 1800s, men constituted the majority of the nation’s teachers, but by 1870, women became the majority (Fraser, 2007). By century’s end, women held 70% of teaching positions and as much as 90% in cities. The development of the common schools, increased literacy, the need for teachers—as well as women’s percolating discontent with gendered social restrictions—spurred women to pursue educational participation and equity with, in Blount’s words, “a thirst and drive characteristic of persons long deprived” (1998, p. 7). As Hoffman (1993) phrased it, during the 19th century, *teachers* became *women*. As Blount (1998) notes, given women’s almost total exclusion from schools before 1800, the breadth of this demographic shift is a remarkable aspect of American women’s advancement historically. Indeed, in the letters, teaching is the only public occupation that women mention performing.

Yet, Theobald (1999) argued that however significant “feminist demands for the *right* to education” were to advancing women’s status, “what happened to [individual] women as teachers—as subjectivities shaped by institutionalization, the ‘everydayness’ of waged labour, and the lifetime of self-censure demanded of them—may well be the antithesis” of women’s broader emancipatory gains (p. 20-21). For example, in the quote above, Phrone seemed to begrudge the days she spent in Ohio’s rural classrooms, perhaps because her young charges were restless, her labor kept her away from her beloved sister, or she preferred to spend time among friends sledding in the fresh Ohio snow. Indeed, her father’s death may have rendered her teaching labor a financial imperative, and thus a burdensome, rather than pleasurable, undertaking. In addition, Phrone was 18 years old when the war began and her favored beau rushed to join the Union ranks. Her concern for his fate and the sheer effort required to contain wiggling bodies in school desks may have tempered the zeal this young woman felt for the *opportunity* to teach. Significantly, she never links teaching with women’s social advancement.

In addition to the broader context of war that shaped writers’ experiences, the specific circumstances women navigated in their daily lives inevitably shaped their attitudes toward teaching. For example, feisty Lou Rigger, who was 22 years old when answered the Lieutenant’s advertisement for correspondence, lived and taught in a rural area of Montgomery County, Kentucky. Her father, Reuben, died when she was four years of age, and her mother, Mary, died when she was 21. She was the eldest of three, and her brother served in the Union army throughout the war. A single woman who needed to work, Lou likely had few occupational choices in her small community and thus did not necessarily experience teaching as a liberating phenomenon. Indeed, she maintained steadfast silence on the details of her schooldays in all 26 letters she wrote to the soldier. Teaching, she mentioned once in passing, kept her “closely confined” (March 3, 1864). Lou’s letters reflect a witty, intelligent writer who enjoyed poetry and music, wielded logic with ease, and reveled in her ability to entertain the soldier. Responding to his advertisement might have provided welcome relief from her daily labor.^{vii}

For other young women, the mere idea of attending school during the war evokes a lackluster response. In 1862, fourteen-year-old Fannie Meredith wrote, “Mae Lydick is going to Danville to school...I intended to go but gave it up [sic]. There was so much excitement about war that I could not think of going” (September 14). Although schools expanded women’s social and economic opportunities, and Fannie, like Phrone, later claimed a school ‘room of her own,’ the appeal of lessons, quills, and schoolbooks seems to pale in comparison to the excitement surrounding the war. Such contextual forces are key to analyzing the diversity and complexity of women’s educational experiences, for considering their varied attitudes toward educational opportunities, and for complicating the “grand narrative of emancipation.”

In contrast to Phrone’s dread and Fannie’s disinterest, the Lieutenant’s young cousin, Rosa Crum, enjoyed schooling and longed to become a teacher. Yet, in the wake of the war and her mother’s death, she must grapple with domestic burdens that keep her dreams out of reach. Rosa, who lives in a small community in Southern Ohio, writes to the soldier from ages 14 to 18. During these years, she fed her young brothers, maintained her father’s household, contributed to farming and harvesting, and abode by her father’s wishes to defer her teaching goals until she was older. Yet ironically, after the war, her father asked her to teach her active young brothers at home. In response to his request, she wrote, “will try to learn them all I can and will be delighted

in doing so, but it is quite an undertaking I assure you; they would rather play than be kept in the house at their books” (April 15, 1866).

With poignant reserve, Rosa described her circumstances as “confining” (April 15, 1866) but gendered social prescriptions dictate that she must await her father’s blessing before pursuing a teaching position—and she waited in vain for his approval throughout the war and beyond. After the Lieutenant returned safely from war and acquired his own teaching position, Rosa expressed,

I almost envy you to think you are teaching school. I wish I was there to help you. I would then be in the occupation I have so long desired. It seems to me nothing would be so pleasant as to be a school maam (December 11, 1865).

Although domestic duties and patriarchal forces thwarted Rosa’s goals, she continued to work toward a teaching future. Aware that education could expand her opportunities, she wrote,

I think the winter will close my schooling at Bainbridge and I must improve my time to every advantage...I think of teaching when I go out west...I will study hard and learn all I can that I may be the better prepared (September 11, 1865).

In Rosa’s experience, schooling is a fleeting gift for women and a key vehicle to expand her choices—indeed, for her, a “grand narrative of emancipation” (Theobald, 1999, p. 20). Whether Rosa was able to advance her learning to achieve her professional goals is unknown.

Theobald’s critique of the emancipation narrative is useful in considering the gendered pay discrepancies that were commonplace, and in fact, championed as a method for school boards to conserve money. Rosa, Phrone, or Lou might have earned \$16.25 a month teaching in the common schools while a man might earn \$27.81.^{viii} Such disparate sums do not negate the pleasure some women felt in teaching or the cumulative power teaching as a profession wielded in advancing women’s interests—in fact, Catharine Beecher advocated for women to become teachers on this very basis (Sklar, 1978). However, in considering factors that enabled women’s advancement as a group, it is important to clarify that individual women felt ambivalent about these *opportunities*. Some women felt empowered in leading classrooms while others found the prospect little cause for celebration. As Theobald (1999) reminded us and contemporary teachers are sure to echo as they reflect on their own professional experiences, the “institutionalization” and “‘everydayness’ of waged labour” (p. 20-21) that shape women’s teaching lives do not always equate to, or feel like, *advancement*.

War Correspondence as an Informal Educational Tool

A common technique women used to advance their learning during the Civil War that is invisible in our contemporary era of electronic communication is letter-writing. During the war years, letter-writing was serious business. President Lincoln perceived the mail system of such importance to war morale that he appointed a special agent in 1862 to oversee aspects of the army’s mail service. The increasing efficiency of the postal service coupled with high levels of literacy in the North allowed writers to produce a steady stream of letters to sustain bonds across

the miles. This correspondence comforted many soldiers during the war. As the Lieutenant expressed in 1864, “received a mail...oh lord how glad we are!” (December 18). In his classic studies of Union and Confederate soldiers, historian Bell Irvin Wiley estimated that 1,000 men, early in their service, could send out an average of 600 letters a day. One soldier’s tally of his 1863 mail revealed that he received 85 letters and wrote 164 others, some on behalf of other men (Wiley, 1952, p. 183). Writing became distraction and duty, relief and ritual, comfort and craft.

Some young women turned to pen and ink to perform a patriotic service to the war effort (Hamilton, 1863). In the process, their writing also advanced their literacy and allowed them to practice what one letter writer called “interchange of thought” (August 23, 1863). Northern writers called women to the patriotic labor of letter writing throughout the war. In an article the *Atlantic Monthly* published in 1863, Gail Hamilton (Abigail Dodge) wrote, “Follow the soldier to the battlefield with your spirit. The great army of letters that marches southward with every morning sun is a powerful engine of war...” (p. 347). Responding to public criticism of Northern women’s lackluster support of the war effort (Silber, 2005), Hamilton argued that women’s writing was imperative for a successful outcome: “this issue of war depends quite as much upon American women as upon American men—and depends, too, not upon the few who write but upon the many who do not” (1863, p. 348). Some women thus penned “soldier letters” (June 26, 1865) as their patriotic duty, crafted them according to gendered epistolary conventions, and refined their communication skills in the process.^{ix}

The function of letters as educational tools is a less recognized but compelling aspect of their role for women during the war. Instructors in the common schools often incorporated letter-writing into writing instruction as a vehicle to teach composition skills (Halloran, 1990). Some young writers asked their elders to model penmanship and epistolary etiquette and elders, in turn, offered constructive criticism and guidance. In this collection, one young writer claimed “self improvement” was her goal in corresponding with soldiers. For example, in responding to the soldier’s advertisement for correspondents in 1863, she asserted,

I am a school girl, and the greatest desire of my heart is a good education. I come to the conclusion that by interchange of thought I should be enabled to obtain usfull [sic] knowledge, and also, sometimes to drop a word or two to cheer the dull monotony of camp life (August 23).

Letter writing seemed a promising avenue for this young woman to both “cheer” the soldiers in Hamilton’s patriotic vision and to practice “interchange of thought” to advance her own learning.

A notable aspect of Civil War correspondence is that writer’s improvement efforts met with some success. In the case of soldiers, both Wiley (1952) and Brenner (Bard, 1996) note that the soldier’s letters they studied showed marked improvements in skill and style during the war. Soldiers who “maintained a considerable flow of correspondence, despite their handicaps,” Wiley observed, “showed decided improvements in style during the course of their service” (1952, p.186). Women’s letters in the collection evidence similar improvement. For example, a letter Rosa Crum wrote at the beginning of their three year correspondence reads, “Papa received a letter from you daybeforeyesterday [sic] stating that you was well and getting along well. As pappa [sic] has not time to write I will have to write in behalf of him” (May 24, 1863). In

contrast, after four years of writing to the soldier, relatives, and presumably, other Union men from her hometown, Rosa's writing reflects mastery of the epistolary form and the flowery prose of period literature. She wrote,

I have just come from the concert and while all the rest of the family are wraped [sic] in sweet repose and perchance having pleasant dreams, I am here this cold still night all alone writing to my cousin with naught to disturb me save the ticking of the old clock (December 23, 1866).

Although Rosa's maturation, schooling, and intellectual development likely facilitated this shift from awkward grammar to smooth prose, the letters she wrote to soldiers did not simply *reflect* her learning but undoubtedly *advanced* her learning and her skills as well.

In addition to the value of epistolary practice for advancing literacy, women's approach to letter writing as a synthesizing educational activity highlights the additional creative benefits women's informal educational practices offered during wartime. Writers often craft their letters using excerpts from literature and poetry in the 19th century literary landscape. Such integration of print culture, letter-writing and reflection speaks to the creative value of letter writing and the prominent literary norms shaping women's reading choices. For example, Lou Riggen wrote,

I have been reading some of Tennyson's poems. As I thought it my duty to like so celebrated a poet, read and read, and do like some of them. What common people would call smoke he calls "the warm-blue breathings of a hidden hearth." Isn't that pretty? (December 4, 1866).

Lou dutifully reads, cites, and evaluates canonical literature, and shares her reading preferences with the soldier. Other letters refer to sleep as "nature's sweet restorer" (July 12, 1864), described a photograph as a "thing of beauty that is a joy forever" (April 26, 1864), and suggested soldiers' deaths make "countless thousands mourn" (September 30, 1863). Such smooth mobilization of lines from classic American literature and patriotic anthems with few explicit references to their original sources reflects the increasing value of the written word in 19th century culture and women's assumption they were participating in a community of literate readers with a common knowledge base and common frames of reference that needed little to no explanation. It also reflected women's approach to letter writing as a creative educational act through which they cited appropriate texts, practiced interchange of thought, and used literature to articulate their ideas, emotions, and experiences. In this manner, war time correspondence functioned as a gendered educational tool that supplemented women's private reading and formal schooling.

Variable Access to Formal Education

Domestic, community, and patriotic leadership on the home front during war sometimes claimed women's attention at the expense of their formal education. Civil War scholars have detailed the extensive labor Northern and Southern women performed to support the war effort (Attie, 1998; Clinton & Silber, 1992; Faust, 1996; Richard, 2003; Silber, 2005). Women procured goods for soldiers, raised money, participated in local civic events, wrote letters,

provided essential “kinship work” (Di Leonardo, 1987) to sustain families, farms and businesses, and performed duties that disrupted traditional gender roles and, significantly, led to leadership opportunities after the war. Northern women forged their understanding of the war through newspapers, letters from the front lines, changing demands in their daily lives as the war continued, and young men’s dwindling numbers as they joined the Union ranks. As one writer surveying empty church pews reflected, men are “pretty scarce here these war times” (November 11, 1862). Fewer men meant more for women to do.

Some differences in women’s prose and mechanics in the letters suggest that wartime responsibilities, family illness, and war anxieties disrupted their formal schooling. Indeed, Nelson (1997) suggested that war-time literacy practices were governed by gender-specific tropes; in women’s case, the “interruptibility” topos that suggested women “never have time to write” contributed to normalizing gender and literacy roles and dictating the type of writing with which women could engage (p. 48). Although these letter-writers were literate, Ohioans did not seem to enroll their girls to the same extent as their boys in any year from 1837 to 1875 and girls and women’s educational opportunities remained circumscribed throughout the century. Whereas 346,147 girls enrolled in Ohio schools in 1862, the daily attendance figure for that year was 189,972 (Ohio State Teacher’s Association, 1862, p.447). War events shifted priorities, as Fannie Meredith’s earlier comments indicate: “There was so much excitement about war that I could not think of going [to school].”

Other letters shed additional light on these erratic attendance figures. In 1862, Ohioan Mollie Ward writes, “[mother] has been sick over three weeks and the principal part of the care of the household rested upon my shoulders...I have been so busy I have scarcely found time for reading the news” (November 28, 1863). War events preoccupy some women, while laundry, cooking, and caring for ill family members preoccupy others. For Ell Hawn, a member of a farming family with ten children, polishing her epistolary prose seems the least of her concerns. Her brother John’s service and her enlisted brother Marion’s death in 1862 left her family with fewer hands for the agricultural labor on their farm in Knox County, Ohio, a region in which agriculture was the dominant industry. It is thus understandable that Ell’s writing is circuitous in style and peppered with misspellings. For example, on September 27, 1862, after President Lincoln had circulated the Emancipation Proclamation, Ell wrote,

And Allas the President has ishued a proclamation that all the negroes shall be set free by the first of January if the Southernns do not go Back as they once were & obey the laws of thire Country.

Although Ell’s skill base was established long before the war, she might have lacked the luxury of time or family support during her adolescent years to refine her skills.

Lou Riggen’s colorful description of domestic responsibilities illustrates the enormous labor women performed to maintain their 19th century households that undoubtedly consumed schooling hours for many. It also provides a clear example of the gendered “interruptibility” topos governing war time literature that suggests women “never have time to write” (Nelson, 1997, p. 48). Responding to the soldier’s query concerning the range and quality of her domestic

skills, Lou asserted that she once managed her household for six months to the “edification of all but Lou Rigger.” “My! What an endless task of intricate labor,” she wrote with a flourish:

Brooms, carpets, beds, cobwebs, dinners, suppers, breakfasts, with all their attendant auxiliaries of good butter, sweet milk, done bread & not burnt either.... ‘to be or not to be’ good was always the question until dinner stood in all its dread array on the table. Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn’t. Don’t I know how to boil & bake & fry & stew & roast beef & biscuit & pork & light bread & “season to taste [!]” (September 29, 1864)

Although Lou volleyed this “dread array” of activities with a lively tone and a creative nod to Shakespeare, she likely performed this very labor throughout her childhood in the wake of her father’s death. Later, after her mother died in 1860, she likely performed this labor in addition to teaching school. Lou’s remarks remind us that women’s domestic responsibilities continued during war, as they do today, regardless of the number of men seated at the table. From a historical perspective, women’s *leadership* thus might often look much like domesticity.

The Civil War as an Educational Force

Although domestic demands challenged Lou and interfered with Rosa’s dreams to teach, war events created spaces for some women to become students and teachers, avenues for women’s advancement that were unavailable to many in previous centuries. As the battlefields drained schoolrooms of its men, administrators turned to women to fill vacant desks (Blount, 1998). Statistics from Ohio, the home state of many women whose letters appear in this collection, capture this phenomenon. For example, Ohio men outnumbered women in teaching positions by more than 2,000 in the 1850s and by 740 in 1861. In contrast, during the war years, Ohio women surpassed the number of men in teaching for the first time in history. By 1863, women outnumbered men by 3,890 (Ohio State Teacher’s Association, 1876, p. 448) and they constituted the majority of Ohio teachers thereafter.

The letters also indicated the opportunities that print culture, men’s travel reports, and letters provided rural, Northern women for learning about distant locales and events that were, until this point, perhaps unimaginable and irrelevant to the contours of their daily lives. Railroads, newspapers, and the telegraph increased efficiency in transferring information and facilitated families’ access to war news. Writers sometimes mentioned Southern geography, battle particulars and political events. Others inquired about the details of marches and engagements. The war personalized distant events to women who felt anxious for their loved ones states away.

A comment Edith Welker offers in 1862 hints to this subtle aspect of correspondence for women distanced from the frontlines. She wrote, “the Rebels have possession of Frederickburg [sic]. I suppose you knew where that is. It is in Virginia” (December 19). Although Edith’s treatment of this key battle is limited to this cursory line, and she assumed the soldier is aware of Fredericksburg’s location, her passing reference reveals how war reports opened a geographic world in print for Northern young women as soldiers encountered that world firsthand. Edith

learns the location of this place called “Frederickburg” in “Virginia” because a battle took place there, newspapers reported it, and community members discussed it.

Writers sometimes seemed painfully aware that gendered restrictions will limit their geographical education to the realm of print and undermine their authority to “write the war” (Nelson, 1997). At times women seemed envious of soldiers’ mobility and agency, if not for the circumstances that necessitate their travel. In one letter, a writer’s comments about the soldier’s travels are tinged with gendered yearning. She wrote, “I should like much to visit the hallowed spot [of President Washington’s grave], but as I can’t be a soldier suppose I will never have that pleasure...[and] all soldiers that might, do not avail themselves of the privilege” (June 6, 1865). She underlined the word “can’t” as if to emphasize how gendered conventions constrain her choices and opportunities and subtly criticize soldiers who choose not to advance their learning and enrich their life experiences through the “privilege” of travel.

Women’s access to information, like their travel, could also be constrained as a result of gender. Newspapers’ separation of “ladies sections” from “war news” reinforced the gendered understanding of war and politics as men’s business. A passing remark of Emma Peterman’s indicates that despite the proliferation of news sources and the significance of the war for men and women alike, women’s exclusion from political arenas could limit their access to information. Emma wrote, “Pa did not stay [at the political meeting] so I cannot tell you how it went off” (July 6, 1863). Other women described float decorations, fund raisers, and political tensions with a local flavor that seems disconnected from the fundamental tensions driving the war. Thus, even as Edith collected tidbits of geographic information, women’s political knowledge and leadership opportunities remained inextricably linked to gendered conventions.

Gendered Legacies from the Civil War

Women’s writing from more than a century ago remains compelling for the insights it offers into white, rural, middle-class women’s experiences during a war that remains the deadliest, and the most analyzed, in American history (McPherson, 1988). Exploring primary source documents expands our knowledge of women’s lives historically. Yet, perhaps of greater import for women’s educational history, these writings underscore the linkages between formal and informal education and women’s use of informal educational tools to advance their learning. Literate women used letters, newspapers, literary societies, and Bible study groups to develop their skills, supplement their schooling, and seek interchange of thought. Even as common schools expanded, and women trickled into classrooms at all educational levels, women’s access to formal education varied significantly on the basis of race, socio-economic class, citizenship, and region. Rosa’s confinement to her father’s household and Ell’s struggle with writing are sobering reminders that women’s education remained secondary to their other responsibilities.

These letters also remind us that we must remain vigilant to the intricacies of what women’s *advancement* and *leadership* look like at different historical moments. Indeed, how contemporary scholars define these profoundly gendered concepts differs from how women in the past conceptualized and experienced them. As Phrone and Lou trudged to their classrooms, they may not have experienced their labor as liberating or recognized they were part of a momentous shift in women’s social roles. As Rosa dreamed of teaching and dashed off letters to

soldiers, she may not have perceived her quill and ink to be educational tools that synthesized her learning and advanced her skills. As Eliza avoided school in the flurry of war events and Phrone approached her classroom with “horror,” they could not have realized how their lived experiences would complicate the “grand narrative of emancipation” (Theobald, 1999, p. 20) in which feminist historians have sometimes cast women’s teaching opportunities. Exploring such complexities enriches our understanding of women’s educational history.

Contemporary educators can gain insight into women’s educational advancement through close scrutiny of how historical events both unlock and reinforce gendered norms and how contextual forces both interrupt and facilitate women’s educational pursuits. Indeed, at first glance one woman’s letter to the front lines may seem inconsequential to spurring or theorizing women’s advancement. However, reconsidering this small act in light of women’s social constraints and responsibilities suggests its educational value for that individual, as well as its cumulative value for advancing women’s literacy during war time. These rural school girls and teachers, who could not serve in traditional leadership roles, who were primarily confined to their local environments, and who had few educational choices in their small communities, nevertheless seized minute opportunities to advance their learning. They grappled with the dictates of their historical and contextual circumstances, dreaded or dreamed of schoolrooms, and learned of far away places while they worked, worried, and wrote from the home front.

Endnotes

ⁱ Author note: The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on this essay as well as audience members at annual meetings of the Research on Women and Education (RWE) where earlier versions of this paper were presented (see, for example, Bailey, 2008).

This paper reflects ongoing analytic work on this collection of letters. It draws from letters and text that appear in Rhoades & Bailey (2009) and are used with the permission of Ohio University Press. See this source for full text of the letters, information on the growth of scholarship on women's Civil War history, and the significant role print culture played in citizens' investments in war letters and photographs.

ⁱⁱ Exploring informal educational practices historically is critical in part because of their potential insights into diverse women's lives, who, because of kinship demands, geography, racism, sexism, or socio-economic class restrictions, had limited access to formal education.

ⁱⁱⁱ The collection contains 168 letters; of these, 158 are written by women.

^{iv} For more on the phenomenon of soldier advertisements, see Richard (2003) and Rhoades & Bailey (2009).

^v Nancy L. Rhoades discovery of her grandfather's letters is discussed in Rhoades & Bailey, (2009). This work would not be possible without her efforts.

^{vi} Many writers mentioned their goal to "cheer the soldier" in his duties (Hamilton, 1863).

^{vii} Teaching might have become Lou's lifelong occupation. The 1870 Census of Vermillion County, Illinois, lists Lou, age 28, living with her brother, John, and sister, Sarah, and working as a school teacher.

^{viii} For more on Ohio teaching, see Ohio State Teachers Association (1876). *A history of education in the state of Ohio: A centennial volume*. Columbus, OH: Gazette Printing House.

^{ix} The genre of "soldier letters" was a new epistolary genre that emerged during the Civil War. Women wrote to pass the time, to forge romantic connections, to maintain links with loved ones, and/or to comply with idealized gendered prescriptions of patriotic womanhood.

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Biography

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