

Women's Domesticity and the Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair

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Readings in US History

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In the early afternoon of Tuesday, March 15th 1864, the doors to Sanitary Hall opened in Poughkeepsie NY and the Dutchess County and Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair was officially begun. Without any protest, the support of the Fair seems to have been unanimous and much praise was given to the women who initiated, planned, and ran the Poughkeepsie Sanitary. In fact, the *Poughkeepsie Telegraph* called the participation in the Fair a “holy duty” because of its support of the Sanitary Commission, which gave the Fair its name, and the “relieving of sickness and suffering of our soldiers in the field.”¹ While the Fair was very much a patriotic and community based event, The Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair did not go without its controversy and ridicule. A long and protracted argument over “gambling” in the Fair was the main controversy, but some of the language in reporting of the Fair also shows mistrust and even disdain of some of the money making attractions present; ultimately ending in subtly questioning the women who ran the Fair. And even while it was women who planned and ran the whole affair, they were still held back in certain respects: an advisory committee of men was necessary for the proper running of the Fair especially concerning money. While the Fair was offered as a patriotic event that should draw the interest of everyone, and was ultimately a great success, the small controversies and prejudices against the event showed a society straining to understand the direction it was headed in, especially in terms of the ideal of the domestic woman.

Long before the Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair, the proper role of women had been brought to the front of society by the onset of the Civil War. Women, left at home as sons and husbands left to fight for their country, often turned to other women in their locality to find means of supporting their men. In Bridgeport Connecticut, on the very day that Abraham Lincoln called for the first soldiers to fight, the women formed the very first Relief Association in the United

¹*The Poughkeepsie Telegraph* (Poughkeepsie: E.B. Killey & A. Low, 1864) March 5, 1864

States.² They would not be the last. In New York Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell began a plan that would have the newly formed Woman's Central Association of Relief (WCAR) providing the military with highly trained professional women nurses along with managing relief efforts of already formed relief associations.³ To facilitate an official connection with the United States government, Blackwell enlisted the help of Rev. Henry Whitman Bellows to go to Washington to find that recognition. It is from this that the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC) formed.

In the scope of this paper, it is impossible to go into detail about what happened between Blackwell and Bellows in the formation of the WCAR-USSC, however, I will try to explain in short. Where the WCAR was meant to be a mainly women driven effort, supported by men connected to Washington, the USSC became an almost entirely man driven effort. The men doctors who become the board members of the USSC did not fully endorse Blackwell's model for training nurses, likely because she believed that women nurses should be equals to doctors,⁴ and instead adopted a model advocated by Dorothea Dix which stated "nursing was merely an extension of the domestic ideal and nurses were proudly subordinate to male doctors."⁵ The men of the USSC betrayed Blackwell and her ideals, leaving her without much of anything to do within the organization. The USSC became the only government endorsed relief association and the WCAR became an independent auxiliary branch.⁶ While Blackwell may have lost her battle for women in society to the men of the USSC, the women in the North-Western Branch of the Sanitary Commission were to eventually win another battle.

² Benson John Lossing, *Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States of America* (Hartford: T. Belknap, Publisher, 1868), 607.

³ Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ While it was endorsed by the government, it was not funded by it. The USSC was still a civilian organization and funded only by donations. In this way the USSC had the powers to remain independent of the government and military, while still have the power to offer aid and advice to government hospitals and the military for the maintaining of clean sanitary conditions, the goal that gave the commission its name.

In the last week of October in 1863, The North-Western Soldier's Fair was to be held in October. The Fair was proposed by Mary Livermore and Jane C. Hoge as a means to "replenish the treasure of the [North-Western] Commission" and to "develop a grateful demonstration of the loyalty of the Northwest to our beloved but struggling country."⁷ However, while it quickly gained the support of the local women, it met with a lukewarm reaction by the USSC men as Livermore noted: "[they] languidly approved our plan, but laughed incredulously at our proposition to raise twenty-five thousand dollars for its treasury."⁸ Part of the reason for the Commission's "barely tolerated"⁹ stance towards the concept was that the Fair's very nature made it a local venture which was in direct conflict with the "commission's commitment to the federal principal."¹⁰ Livermore and Hoge pushed forward though, without men's help, and support of the Chicago Fair became national as women from as far away as Connecticut and Boston donated to the cause. Eventually, men too would get caught up in the "Fair Mania," the official term employed by Livermore for what followed,¹¹ and "atoned for their early lack of interest...by a continued avalanche of gifts."¹² The Chicago Fair would raise about seventy-nine thousand dollars, over triple what they first predicted. Livermore and Hoge had, against odds and negative male pressure won the event, however, it was to be reeled in a little.

Fair mania had a double meaning though. In the way that Livermore presented it, it meant only that there was a great stir about the Fair that encompassed both men and women. In the hands of some men though, fair mania likely held a different meaning. In a very gracious letter written by USSC president to Hoge and Livermore, Bellows talks of women in the nation.

⁷ Mary A. Livermore, *My story of the war: a woman's narrative of four years personal experience* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington and Company, 1889), 410-411.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 412.

¹⁰ Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood*, 107.

¹¹ Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 412.

¹² *Ibid.*, 416.

He writes “I trust the women of this country, because of all its people they are most controlled by their instincts; which are purer, holier, and better than those of men.”¹³ In this way, the fair mania becomes something born out of uncontrolled women’s instincts rather than something born of just simple needs to exercise duty and wants. The opinion of Bellows was likely the opinion of many a male spectator to the many fairs that followed in the mania.

The Dutchess County and Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair was, in some ways, just another Sanitary Fair born from the fair mania. At least nine others had preceded the Poughkeepsie Fair and at least another twelve followed.¹⁴ However, the Poughkeepsie Fair is also just as important as all the others and while smaller, was nothing less than the greater fairs. Like the Chicago Fair that started it all, the Poughkeepsie Fair had a mechanical hall, an art gallery, lecturers, musical performances, local craft goods, military sections, and even more similarities. While the Poughkeepsie Fair was smaller in scale and profits, it offered just as much as any other fair for the paying spectators.

The first meeting “for the purpose of organizing the Dutchess County and Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair, for the relief of the sick and wounded soldiers” was on February 5th of 1864.¹⁵ On this day the officers were voted for and managers were appointed. All of these positions were filled by women, mostly prominent women from Poughkeepsie and almost all married. While no men were present for this meeting, it would not have been long afterwards that some men were appointed in the advisory, receiving, merchandise, and decoration committees. This is one way that the Poughkeepsie Fair differed from the Chicago Fair.

¹³ Henry W. Bellows to the Women of the Northwest, 1863, in *Documents of the U.S. Sanitary Commission*, (Washington: M'Gill & Witherow, Printers), 3.

¹⁴ Beverly Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Laides: the history of the American fundraising fair* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1998), 66-71.

¹⁵ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle* (Poughkeepsie: Platt & Schram, 1864) February 6 1864.

The Chicago Fair “was pre-eminently an enterprise of women, receiving no assistance from men in its early beginnings” and while “The great fairs that followed this were the work of men as well as of women, from their very incipiency — but this fair was the work of women.”¹⁶ However, Livermore and Hoge ran into problems because of this. When talking to an “illiterate builder” to build the Manufacturer’s Hall, he informed them that under the state law they could not lawfully pay the man without written consent by their husbands because they did not own their own money.¹⁷ This came as quite a shock to them, and Livermore swore to change the laws one day. In Poughkeepsie, and other Fairs, though, it was well understood that women could not fill certain roles. This is where the advisory and other male filled committees came in. They had the power to contact local governments, spend money, and other jobs which women could not, by law or custom, occupy. Even in the home circle, where “young ladies plied their fingers in crochet work and other delicate fabrications” for the Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair, the “gentlemen contributed towards the expense of the materials, and gave their countenance to the project.” The women may have planned and run the Fair, but in no way was it completely a female project, as the Report of the Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair makes clear with its repeated use of the phrase “ladies and gentlemen,” and in no way was their efforts seen as anything beyond an extension of domestic life and the female “instinct.”

One way in which the Fair exemplified and reinforced the domestic nature of women was in the most popular room at the Fair, the Old Dutchess County Room. It was a room meant to represent all parts of life from one hundred years prior and included people in period garb and many artifacts including a “sofa imported from Holland in 1696, and an old dining table” which

¹⁶ Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 411-412.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 435-436

George Washington was said to have sat at, and a Bible “which was printed in 1741.”¹⁸ The main attraction though was the women attired in period clothing who sat in domestic tranquility; “One was seen merrily spinning on the great wool-wheel; another making thread with an ancient flax-wheel; and another, as the mistress of the house, presided at the tea table...others of the family were engaged in proper duties.”¹⁹ For an admission of ten cents, or fifty if one wished to be served tea, a person could see and enjoy all of this and “witness the indolent habits, the free and easy manners, the absence of witchcraft and other degeneracies[sic].”²⁰ Many did partake in this scene of domestic tranquility making it the most profitable room in the entire Fair.

While the women who inhabited the Old Room were an example of perfect domesticity, some of the women who ran the other booths were anything but. The two perfect examples of this are the post office and gypsy tent. The women of the post office used their imagination to trap men with promises of love letters, while the gypsy tent lured them with exotic mystery and beauty. Both are examples of women using their unique position to control men, something very much against domestic ideals. The post office, headed by the postmistress, was to “provide lovers and love-letters for those who have none, furnish good news whenever it is called for, and labor with hand and brain when others rest.”²¹ The Daily Eagle called these letters “ludicrous,” which is actually quite fair; one letter given to a reverend was written by an old flame who has married a man who could be her grandfather, but promises the reader will one day find a suitable woman.²² The Eagle reported that young men flocked to the post office for those love-letters. The position of the woman who ran the Gypsy tent was especially interesting. Open only at night, the Gypsy tent was “a portentous looking affair, crowned with a staring owl, and adorned

¹⁸ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 16, 1864.

¹⁹ *Report of the Dutchess County & Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair* (Platt & Schram, 1864), 22-23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 17, 1864.

with cabalistic characters” where fortunes were told.^{23,24} The work of magic was far beyond the ideals of domestic life, but yet its exotic nature drew people. The Eagle reported one incident where one man “remarked [of another] that he ‘wished that the old codger was out of the way, he wanted to talk to the gypsies.’”²⁵ Both of these booths represent that, while the Fair might have been seen as an extension of domestic duty, the individual booths in the Fair sometimes pushed that definition.

The local papers, especially the *Daily Eagle* which reported daily and in some detail the proceedings of the fairs, lauded the Fair as a great success and patriotic endeavor. However, they also looked at the Fair and the women in it with an eye of paternal amusement, and even mistrust, rather than with a Fair and positive countenance. For example, a pair of reporters was “accosted by a young lady who wished to usher us in a suspicious looking place.”²⁶ They declined her invitation. There was no reason to treat her with suspicion though, nothing in the Fair could lead to ill harm or something such. Another example of reporter bias against women was on the second day when the Fair had reached maximum occupancy. The Eagle reported that “some of the floor managers became demoralized and tearing their badges off, rushed from a shower of questions into an obscure corner...”²⁷ This illustrates an example where the report could easily have been read as women were not strong enough to properly manage the Fair. While it wasn’t the intentions of the reporters, both of these examples exemplify some bias against the women who ran the Fair.

The Fair was accepted with a patriotic applause, but there was one way in which it brought upon itself much controversy. This was the Raffle at the Fair. Interestingly enough, the

²³ *Report of the Dutchess County & Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair*, 13.

²⁴ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 16, 1864.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 18, 1864.

²⁷ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 17, 1864.

debate about the raffle seems to have been cut across gender lines, the men found it immoral and the women found it a perfectly suitable method of making money. The argument happened in the Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle, where, from the first day, the paper complained of the raffling at the Fair because “is it contrary to law, wrong in principle, and abominable in practice.”²⁸ Two days later, after another day of more furious remarks against the raffle, Mrs. B. J. Lossing, Vice President of the Fair committee, defended what was now being called “selling items by lot.”²⁹ She argues that the lot has always been accepted, and is mentioned “no less than forty-nine times in the scripture.”³⁰ She then goes on to explain that if the lot is immoral, then the system of conscription must also be immoral and illegal since it is also a lot system. She bases her remarks on the Bible and her moral views. The Eagle wrote a reply that same day that argues the opposite; using the effects of gambling and a theory of business to argue against her.³¹ A truly moralistic argument against the raffle would not be made until after the Fair when the Reverend Lull, in his Sunday sermon talked of the “abuse of the lot.”³² Mrs. B. J. Lossing tried one last futile attempt at getting her point across, but the paper would hear nothing of it. Even so, with the men so opposed to the practice, the women at the Fair did continue it, though it is impossible to tell what profit was made from the raffle based on the treasurer’s report.

When all was said and done, the Poughkeepsie Fair had raised a net value of \$16,283.73, nearly a dollar for every citizen of Poughkeepsie at the time. By all standards, the Dutchess County and Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair was a great success. In terms of the role of women in society though, it was a meager effort to expand their boundaries. While maintaining their image of domesticity, the women at Poughkeepsie pushed at the boundaries of what was expected of

²⁸ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 16, 1864.

²⁹ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 17, 1864.

³⁰ *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 18, 1864.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, March 21, 1864.

them, and met it with the almost unanimous applause of men. However, even with prominent women playing the role of gypsies and their fight against the protest of men in regards to the raffle, their relationship with men and society did not really change. Men were still needed to run the Fair, even if their role was more in the background³³, and men still saw the women of the Fair as only an extension of their domestic life. That doesn't mean that the Fair didn't help spark the next wave of women's suffragists. In the years following, prominent women of the USSC and WCAR would become leaders in the women's rights movements of the nineteenth century. Mary Livermore is one such example. She took her experiences of running the first, and arguably only, women's fair, and from those experiences decided that she would become a leader in the suffragist movement. Without further research on the subject, it is impossible to say if some of the women of the Poughkeepsie Sanitary Fair didn't feel the same way as Livermore, however, it is not hard to imagine that they did indeed find the Fair a liberating and rewarding experience that was, without a doubt, beyond the realm of women's domesticity.

³³ Even though the treasurer was a woman, her report was not certified until a group of men had confirmed her numbers and receipts.

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