I am not a little surprised that you loved me. I cannot think what it was for, as for my talents I have just enough to perform the duties of a family and that is all. I am not well read. I have not a knowledge of many subjects that many other females have. You singled me from the world to love me and me only to place all your hopes of domestic happiness in me and to make me a partner in all your joys and sorrows.

So wrote Hannah Huntington (1770-1818) of Norwich, Connecticut in 1797 to Samuel (1765-1817) her husband of six years.¹

Historically, women’s place in American society has been one of dual status: affiliated status acquired through a father and husband and personal or sex status as a female. This is a key factor in a study of the historical experience of American women. The emerging American republic produced a division of labor between the sexes that gave men roles as guardians of political order and family providers and women the administration of the domestic establishment and education of the children.

This nineteenth century definition of the female role applied to women of the Western Reserve. By their own accounts, through letters, diaries and journals, they reveal how, in the exercise of their personal or sex role responsibilities as females, they experienced both a sense of accomplishment and achievement.

The Western Reserve, also called the "Connecticut Reserve" was chartered with the parent state in 1662 by England’s Charles II. The state maintained its sovereignty over the western lands until 1786 when in the creation of the Confederation it ceded its claim to the three million acre territory but reserved rights for future development. Part of the Northwest Territory established under the Ordinance of 1787, the Western Reserve would become northeastern Ohio.

The Western Reserve extended one hundred twenty miles west from the Pennsylvania border and north from Akron to the shores of Lake Erie. With the exception of the westernmost portion, the lands were sold to the Connecticut Land Company. In 1796 the first survey occurred under Moses Cleaveland whose name was given to his destination at the mouth of the Cuyahoga. The surveyed land was proportioned among the land company members according to their investments and then as proprietors, they sold these lands to individuals and groups. The settlements were widely scattered. They did not begin at the Pennsylvania border and move west or commence along the lake and move south. Instead, each family or party fought its way through the wilderness along township lines until it came to its assigned spot. There, in the vast loneliness, a hole was chopped out of the forest, a cabin was erected, a few acres of corn or wheat were planted, and the struggle for survival began.

The migration that began after 1796 with settlers from the east gave the area its popular name, "New Connecticut." To a wilderness etched by short rivers running to the lake, crossed by Indian trails, these transplanted New Englanders brought their way of life in political, religious and community ideas. Braced by a faith in their newly liberated country, their own physical strength, courage and ambition, these Yankees were powerfully attracted by the thought of security on the land across the mountains into the wilderness.
My mind is now in the situation you wish whenever you think a removal will be for our mutual happiness. I am ready to go -- to say I should not feel a regret in leaving the friends I enjoy in Norwich would be ridiculous -- but my husband and children are the dearest objects I can ever know and with them I would go wherever fortune would direct.\(^2\)

In 1798 Yale educated, European travelled, Connecticut lawyer, Samuel Huntington whose distinguished New England lineage he shared with his wife Hannah, received her letter. Beckoned by the economic opportunity of the west, Samuel Huntington in 1800 travelled on horseback to Cleveland, a settlement of just three families. Here he purchased 300 acres, selected the site and arranged for the construction of a log house to which he would bring his wife Hannah and their six children. In the spring of 1801 the family, accompanied by two servants and Hannah's friend Margaret Cobb, made the overland journey in wagons across the Pennsylvania wilderness to Youngstown and in May reached Cleveland.

Quickly, Samuel Huntington was tapped to begin what became an exemplary career as a guardian of political order in the national expansion of the west. Arthur St. Clair, territorial governor of the Northwest Territory appointed Huntington Lieutenant Colonel of the militia in Trumbull County of which all the Western Reserve was then part. The next year, 1802, Samuel Huntington was a delegate to the Ohio Constitutional convention in Chillicothe. The following year he was elected to the State Senate from Trumbull County and immediately chosen its Speaker at the first General Assembly in 1803. That same year, the General Assembly selected him as judge on the State Supreme Court and in 1804, he became Chief Justice. Clearly, young Samuel Huntington was reaping the rewards of the land to which he helped bring statehood.

And what of Hannah and her life's experience as a frontier wife over this same period of time? In a letter to her already absent husband dated May 10, 1801, she said:

> Your wishes that I would be contented short of a great town give me some uneasiness because it implies an idea that company and dissipation are my object. Very far from it I assure you. I could be as happy in this country as anywhere if I can have your company but the prospect of your absence, ill health of our family and the state of the society in this place are my objections to it.\(^3\)

On October 1, 1801, their first autumn in the Western Reserve, Hannah wrote:

> We have all been in good health since you left us but we are now suffering the want of fire. I had not been able to get a stone laid on the chimney and weather has been uncommonly cold.\(^4\)

One week later, she added:

> You think I cannot know how much I love the children because I am not at a distance from them -- but surely I have an opportunity to know how lonely my days are without you -- it is paying for happiness at a dear rate to live without you half the time.\(^5\)

In 1803, Ohio became a state; Samuel Huntington's important role in that effort has been documented. Hannah's letters to him lend unmistakable punctuation:

> August 13, 1803
> The children have the ague and Patty (a servant) has the hooping cough. I got up this morning with a violent headache and have had smart agues and fever ever since.\(^6\)
August 30, 1803
I have one very serious request to make and that is that you will not go to the assembly in their next sessions. I do not know whether your office of a judge will render you ineligible or not but I cannot support the idea of your absence all winter.7

October 1, 1803
Mr. Rogers has sown the wheat and they are now gathering corn. The major has been rather contrary about turning cattle through his territory but you know I have a small faculty at scolding and I have taken the liberty to use it.

Mr. Young, Mr. Gorham and Mr. Pease paid us a visit 3 weeks since and we really enjoyed it -- for we live as much by ourselves almost as we should six miles the other side of the river -- their coming was the only way that we have heard from Warren [county seat for Trumbull] since you left us.

The ague hangs upon Margaret [her friend] pretty severe. She has had it more than half the time since you left us. Patty [servant] has the 3 day ague -- Frank has been quite sick with a fever but is now able to work -- Martha was taken last week with a fever which lasted 3 days steady but ever since that she makes great complaint of pain in her back side and stomach. She sits up very little -- Julian has been very well ever since you went away. Colbert has had a few fits -- Sammy has been sick a few days but is now very well -- Robert has had a touch of ague. George had the ague two weeks.8

In 1801 Hannah Huntington was brought to the banks of the Cuyahoga and to the doorstep of a log house that by frontier standards was considered luxurious; it had a wooden floor and a door that locked! Accompanied by two servants and a female companion, Hannah had six children under the age of seven. She was 31 years old with a home and farm to manage in a wilderness outpost, without close neighbors where illness was ever present. Hannah's pleas to her husband to remain more often and longer at home, however do not derive from her inability or unwillingness to meet her responsibilities, but from her desire for her husband's presence, his companionship, his support especially at grievous times. Hannah's letters take on a new authority as witnessed by this letter in the spring of 1804 to Samuel who now sits as chief justice of the Ohio State Supreme Court.

April 24, 1804
I kept the fever and ague till I was put to bed. Our child was supposed to be the victim of it -- for 4 hours there was every exertion to preserve it without effect -- it was buried the 27th of March.

I would not my Dear husband spend another such winter as this for what I know not. Is honour a compensation for your absence and the many troubles and vexations that I have experienced in the two journeys that you have been. I love my children. I love my family -- but what is that? Children, family and the whole world without you is barren and joyless -- they may say I am weak, foolish, even a worshipper of flesh and blood. What care I, it is my glory and happiness that I feel as I do -- let your station in life be ever so exalted, little will it gratify me it must be purchased at so high a price as our separation.9

In 1806 the Samuel Huntington family moved six miles east on the Cuyahoga to the improved climes of Newburgh and Hannah wrote favorably:
August 29, 1806
Cleveland has been as healthy this fall as it ever has been.10

November 9 and 17, 1806
I hope you have made up your mind to stay in Cleaveland for accounts from grand
river are not more favorable than of Cleaveland.11

For Hannah the family circle that embraced her Connecticut home friend Margaret Cobb
sustained her. She had buried a child in Cleveland. Now from Newburgh she informed Samuel:

August 10, 1807
Margaret has received the account of her sister Mary's death with a request from
her remaining sister to return. I cannot express to you my feelings on the occasion
with her for my friend. I have borne your repeated absence with fortitude, in
sickness, and health. I have leaned upon her and found her still the same. But in
your's and her absence I shall have no one attached to me but for motives of
interest. But I cannot be so selfish as to oppose her going. I must promote it. Her
own comfort depends upon it and I must be resigned however hard it may be.12

Although Hannah was comfortably situated in Newburgh, her husband elected to proceed with
the exchange of 300 acres of Cleveland property for a large tract of land in Painesville on the
Grand River that belonged to John Walworth. The two families switched locations and in the
summer of 1808 the Huntington occupied a substantial frame home on the river bank north of
Fairport. During the fall Samuel Huntington began his campaign for governor of the state of
Ohio. He would be elected but meanwhile Hannah wrote him:

September 26, 1808
Mr. Meigs told me that if you got the election of which he did not entertain a
doubt, it was not probable that you would be home until March. I don't know how
I shall bear that but I must submit if necessary.13

October 16, 1808
I am glad to hear that you still continue in good health -- but you do not write
half often enough for your letters are my greatest comfort in your absence. You
cannot guess how lonely I am -- but -- be still self. I am happy to inform you that
the wheat is in and in very good order. The first part of the month of September
was very cold and remarkably wet so that we could not get in the corn as soon as
calculated.14

At last the letter confirming Samuel's election as governor reached Hannah. She acknowledged
it, suggested an early matter of business for the new governor and then in a remarkable parallel
to his accomplishment issued a profound personal statement of her own:

December 28, 1808
Your letter of Nov. 27th came to hand this week. I had felt impatient for a letter
and to hear some certain account as to the result of the election. I get no papers
because they are all directed to Cleveland and they cannot be stopped in this town
without your orders.

I have take 100 lbs. of pork and this day have cut and salted it. I have also bought
of Capt. Parker 3 lean hogs at 4 dollars and half a piece. He must wait for his pay
till you return when they shall weigh 200 pounds. The ox is thriving very well. I
want to keep him until you return.
You must suppose that I am not a little vain to be thought by my neighbors an excellent manager. I hope you will not think differently when you know how everything is.  

A part of her domestic managerial plan was to take in boarders. While in Painesville Dr. John Henry Mathews found acceptance by the scrutinizing Hannah who noted that, while he insisted on paying, his more notable virtue was that he "is a great help in the way of sociability." This virtue resulted in the betrothal of the Huntington's only daughter Martha Devotion when in 1813 she returned from school and at the age of 18 became the bride of Dr. John Mathews. In 1829, Jonathan Goldsmith built what was one of the finest houses in the Western Reserve for Dr. John Henry and Martha Devotion Huntington Mathews. Dr. Mathews had delivered a Goldsmith baby in 1812 and the master builder of the Western Reserve in turn created for him an architectural gem in Painesville on North State Street. In 1951 Lake Erie College took title to the house and moved it to its campus at 309 West Washington Street where it stands today open to visitors.  

Samuel Huntington did not seek a second term as governor. He ran for the United States Senate but was defeated. He returned to his Painesville estate to engage in business enterprises and in 1812 laid out the town of Fairport on the east bank of Grand River. He died in 1817 and was followed by Hannah the next year. Both were originally buried near their home when erosion of the property caused their removal to Painesville's Evergreen Cemetery.  

Among the land-seeking souls who streamed westward in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were certain New Yorkers who saw the promise of the untamed West in its potential as a thoroughly Christianized society. From their rocky hills, across New York and on to Connecticut's Western Reserve, the ministers and teachers came to establish schools and churches. Both religious and patriotic, they believed that by Christianizing the West, they would prevent anarchy and secure the future of the republic. John Jay Shipherd and Philo Penfield Stewart, founder of the Oberlin Colony, were a part of this movement.  

John Jay Shipherd (1802-1844) 17, born in West Granville, New York experienced conversion as an adolescent and was carefully and religiously educated at Pawlet Academy in Vermont where he earnestly prepared for college as a minister. Impaired eyesight prevented his college matriculation and he studied in an alternative manner. For one and a half years, he apprenticed with the Reverend Josiah Hopkins in whose home he lived and pursued theological studies. Married prior to this in 1824, Esther and John Jay Shipherd first went to Shelburne, Vermont where he held a pastorate for one year. Then for two years Shipherd served as General Agent for the Vermont Sabbath Union, headquartered in Middlebury, writing textbooks and starting religious schools and libraries. His salary was $500 a year and when only less than half of that was forthcoming, Esther Shipherd helped support the family by taking over the boarding department of a female seminary.  

It was after reading The Home Missionary and Pastor's Journal of The Home Missionary Society that Shipherd heard the call and took his commission to go forth into the "unplowed spiritual fields" of the West. Esther Shipherd wrote:  

His desires were like fire shut up in his bones. He must carry the gospel to the Mississippi Valley.  

Early in their marriage, when Shipherd answered the call to train for the ministry and resided in the home of his mentor Reverend Josiah Hopkins, Esther was convinced that "he was moved in the right direction." Nevertheless, she found it "humiliating" to have to return to live in the home of her parents. Now her husband's "call to the West" cast her in the role of a frontier wife and her conflicted feelings surfaced:
I must dispose of all my furniture that my parents had lavished upon us at a great sacrifice, which at first seemed unbearable, on account of my parents, whom I felt I could not grieve. But the "dye was cast." He had fasted and prayed until he had a "thus saith the Lord" and my mouth was shut.19

On Tuesday, September 28, 1830 Esther and John Jay Shipherd, their two sons and a woman teacher friend started west by canalboat from Schenectady, New York. Four days later, a Saturday, they were in Rochester, where in order not to profane the Sabbath, their travel halted. Shipherd preached that Sunday. By Monday evening, the travelers had reached Buffalo, viewed Niagara Falls and on Wednesday took a steamboat across Lake Erie to Cleveland, a city of 1000 inhabitants. On Friday, Shipherd learned of a vacancy at the frontier settlement of Elyria in Lorain County twenty miles west. He arrived there on Saturday and Sunday, October 10 supplied the pulpit for 30 members of the First Presbyterian Church of Elyria. Their two week, seven hundred mile journey had concluded.

Upon their arrival in Elyria, a stark contrast to the "flourishing village with all the civilization of New England towns," disappointment crowded in on every side. Esther Shipherd wrote:

I was prepared for a log house, and if need be, to ride in an ox-cart to church. I had always felt my inefficiency as a minister's wife and now it was doubly increased. But as I had two children to look after, I could do but little outside my family.20

The virgin forest in the area west of Cleveland had been broken by a few New England farmers who drove their ox-carts west in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The threat of Indians impeded settlement of Lorain County until after the War of 1812 when log houses began to appear in Elyria. John Jay Shipherd, installed for two years as a missionary pastor, took three resident interns to prepare for ministerial labor. Philo Penfield Stewart (1798-1868)21 was one. Stewart born in Sherman, Connecticut was raised in Pittsford, Vermont where he apprenticed as a saddle and harness maker for seven years with one three month term each year to study at Pawlet Academy. There, under the influence of a Christian teacher, Stewart chose his life's work in Christian labor. In 1821, commissioned by The American Board, he travelled 2000 miles by horseback to work among the Choctaw Indians at Mayhew, Mississippi. There he administered the secular affairs of the mission, taught the boys' school, and helped by an interpreter, held Sabbath services at the Indian settlements. In 1827, he returned to Vermont to recruit one man and three women. The next year he married Eliza Capen, one of the enleisees, and together they worked in Mississippi for three years until her health broke. Determined to carry the gospel, Stewart wrote to his former Pawlet Academy classmate, John Jay Shipherd, now of Elyria, about being useful in the West.

Shipherd found his duties as pastor of a frontier missionary church strenuous. His physical being suffered, his soul was more troubled. He felt he was a failure; he was unable to get people to repent. He had thrown himself into the temperance cause. Frontier life was hard and whiskey cheap. Aggressive temperance advocacy was viewed as an extreme fanaticism in the West. Public opinion was against him. Shipherd's resignation and the vote for his dismissal coincided.

For several months, in the wake of his despair, Shipherd shifted his thinking to new ways of being useful to the Christian cause. With Philo Penfield Stewart, he talked, read, and prayed to reach a plan for the Oberlin colony and school. He conceived of a new colony of selected, consecrated souls founded in the virgin forest far from the taint of established and sin-infected towns. The whole enterprise would be devoted not to worldly ends but to the salvation of men's souls. When the settlement was firmly established, a school would be founded to educate the
hopefully pious and serve by means of missionaries and teachers as an evangelical agency to create new colonies, churches, and schools.

When the time arrived to "build a college in the woods," Esther Shipherd noted that much attention was given to the possibility of her husband's "lunacy" and the thought that his visions would disgrace him and his family. She wrote:

Perhaps I might have come to the same conclusion, if I had not watched the leadings of his mind in this, as in former changes. I did not dare to lay a straw in his way. I felt that time would show the Lord's hand was in it, nor did I feel bitter toward those who ridiculed the idea. I did feel the loss of the sympathy that had cheered us in our western home, though this was not the greatest trial that I felt I was called to. My parents had been cheered with the flattering hope that we were fixtures for some years at least, as we were occupying our own house, and the thought came, how can I again agonize them; surely they say my husband has no stability, and how can I bring my strong arguments to bear in his favor? I can only say, the Lord calls and he must obey.22

Esther Shipherd returned to her parents' home in New York to bear her fourth son and with her husband journeyed back in September 1833 in an open buggy with a "willow cradle at our feet." Near their destination, the rutted road, a tangle of tree roots and underbrush, compelled Esther to walk and carry her child.

We came to Plumb Brook, and the bank was about 30 feet deep, and we were much puzzled to know how to get down. But Yankee-like, we loosened the horse, and then turned the vehicle backwards and let it go. Then by help I got safely down and got into the wagon to ride over the brook which was somewhat shallow, and taking up again my march on foot. I now began to realize my former anticipations of missionary life.23

At Oberlin, fifteen acres were cleared and five or six log houses erected along with the Preparatory Hall where Esther Shipherd and her family occupied a basement room. She "felt in haste to find my niche, more particularly to share my sympathy with the lone women in the woods." One, in particular Eliza Capen Stewart, wife of Oberlin's co-founder, had tended the Shipherds' three young sons in their absence.

Eliza Capen met her husband when both were missionaries serving the Choctaw Indians of Mississippi. In his biography, which she authored, her self-restraint ran to self-abnegation in a work that makes only one reference to their relationship and that in the third person:

On the 23rd day of June, 1828, Mr. Stewart believing that "it was not good for man to be alone," became the husband of one of the young women he had taken out with him from Pittsford, Vermont. She very materially aided him in the domestic department of the mission, and lightened his heavy burdens for years.24

Eliza and Philo Stewart were the superintendents of the boarding house and manual labor departments at Oberlin. They were among the first to greet Dr. and Mrs. James Dascomb25 who arrived in May 1834. The Colony physician, Dr. Dascomb also came to a professorship in Chemistry, Botany, and Physiology. His wife, Marianne Parker Dascomb, seminary educated in the east became the first Principal of the Female Department. Soon after their arrival Marianne Dascomb wrote to home friends at Dunbarton, New Hampshire:
May 24, 1834

[From Cleveland] we took a stage for Elyria which is ten miles from Oberlin -- road very bad from ruts and mud. We were in constant danger of overturning. Once when we came to a ditch in the road the gentlemen got out and took down a fence, so that we could turn aside into the adjoining field and ride around the obstacle. At Elyria we dined, and obtained a two-horse wagon to transport us, and two gentlemen from New England going to the Institute as students, to our journey's end. We found the wagon a very comfortable conveyance, and I was in no fear of being turned out into the mud, for the driver assured us it could not turn over. You cannot conceive of a more miserable road than we had, the last two miles especially, but still I enjoyed the ride, and our party were all very cheerful. When passing through the woods I was so delighted with the black squirrels, the big trees and above all the beautiful wild flowers, that at times I quite forget to look out for the scraggy limbs that every now and then gave us a rude brush. Glad were we when an opening in the forest dawned upon us, and Oberlin was seen. "That," said our driver "is the city." We rode through its principal street, now and then coming in contact with a stump, till we were set down, at the boarding house. I have been very happy from that day to this.26

After one year at Oberlin, James Dascomb wrote his wife's parents:

April 7, 1835

I can never be sufficiently grateful that I was so kindly received into your family, and allowed to become a son. In every trial, in sorrows and in joys, Marianne is just the companion I need, and everything I could wish.

Mrs. Dascomb in the same letter told of her work as an administrator, teacher, and student:

I find my school engagements occupy most of my time, yet it is time pleasantly spent. I do not come home at night so fatigued as I used to when I had a whole school to manage alone. The government of the school, and its general plans, devolve now upon a president, and I have nothing to do but discharge faithfully my office as teacher of a few classes. I devote most of my time out of school preparing for recitations.

In an affectionate and respectful tribute to her husband Marianne Dascomb wrote:

I recite daily with Dr. Dascomb's class in botany, being desirous of extending my knowledge of that science. You will say I am partial to the professor of chemistry and botany, and I confine my studies to his department. I shall not refuse to have other teachers when I take other studies, though I may express as much regret as some of the other ladies at changing teachers.27

Hannah Huntington and Oberlin women Esther Shephard, Eliza Stewart, and Marianne Dascomb, through an affiliative status with their husbands, became frontier wives. There were, however, personal or sex role responsibilities held by each as a female. Hannah Huntington despaired over her husband's absences as he pursued a political career that crafted the new state of Ohio. Left with the responsibilities of creating and maintaining life to sustain her large family, she became in her own words, "an excellent manager." At Oberlin, a minister's wife, Esther Shephard was supportive of her husband's calling but uneasy about her place; her chosen role was as a mother. Eliza Stewart worked as her husband's help-mate in activities that went from missionary to boarding-house steward. Marianne Dascomb was educated and to the delight of her husband a perfect companion who managed a career in teaching and continued her own education. All
these Western Reserve women diminished the traditional subordination suggested by the affilative status. Through their achievements and accomplishments they demonstrated that American women took their opportunities to gain personal and sex status within the confines of their historic position.

NOTES

1 The biographical information on Hannah and Samuel Huntington is based upon these sources: The Huntington Family in America: A Genealogical Memoir (Hartford: Huntington Family Association, 1915); Harriet Taylor Upton, The History of the Western Reserve (New York: Lewis, 1910); Gertrude Van Rensselaer Wickham, The Pioneer Families of Cleveland (Cleveland: Evangelical Publishing House, 1914); The Hannah Huntington Letters, 1791-1811, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio. Hannah Huntington to Samuel Huntington letters hereafter designated HH to SH, 7 October 1797.

2 HH to SH, 30 October 1798

3 HH to SH, 10 May 1801

4 HH to SH, 1 October 1801

5 HH to SH, 9 October 1801

6 HH to SH, 13 August 1803

7 HH to SH, 30 August 1803

8 HH to SH, 1 October 1803

9 HH to SH, 25 April 1804

10 HH to SH, 29 August 1804

11 HH to SH, 9 November 1806; 17 November 1806

12 HH to SH, 10 August 1807

13 HH to SH, 26 September 1808

14 HH to SH, 16 October 1808

15 HH to SH, 28 October 1808


17 The biographical information on Esther and John Jay Shipherd is based upon these sources: James H. Fairchild, Oberlin: The Colony and the College 1833-1883 (Oberlin: E. J. Goodrich, 1883); Robert Samuel Fletcher, A History of Oberlin College: From Its Foundation Through The Civil Way (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1843); Frances Juliette Hosford, Father Shiphehrs's Magna Charta:


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 The biographical information on Eliza and Philo Penfield Stewart is based upon these sources: Fairchild, Fletcher, Hosford, Leonard, Shipherd and Eliza Capen Stewart, P. P. Stewart: A Life Sketch (New York: Printed for the author, 1873).

22 Shipherd, "A Sketch of the Life and Labours of John J. Shipherd".

23 Ibid.

24 Steward, P. P. Stewart: A Life Sketch, p. 41.

25 The biographical information on Marianne and James Dascomb is based upon these sources: Fletcher, Fairchild and the letters of the couple printed in Fairchild.


27 Dr. and Mrs. Dascomb to Home Friends, 7 April 1835 in Fairchild, pp. 349-350.