

Cleveland Women in Antebellum Ohio

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Goals and Objectives

The main objective of this project is to analyze the daily life and activities of a Cleveland woman from around 1830, until the Civil War broke out in 1861. I chose this time frame because it encompasses the rise of domesticity, the separation of spheres, the gendering of society, and the rise of the middle class. In order to gain this intimate understanding of women, I will use the diary collection that the Western Reserve Historical Society has in their archives. After a preliminary digital search, I found that there are many diaries available that fit this general description from their collection.

I hope to achieve two main goals whilst conducting this research project. First, to further my understanding of what women's lives were like during the rise of domesticity in the United States. Many roles that we today believe are "inherently" female were defined in the mid-1800s. First hand accounts of women's experiences, specifically in their diaries, reveal a unique perspective on how aware women were of these changes, and what their thoughts and feelings were towards them. Additionally, I am interested in exploring the types of jobs these women held (if any), whether they married, had children, had a formal education, and how they perceived their own place in nineteenth-century society.

My second goal is to hone skills required to locate, review and analyze primary sources with a variety of voices and content. Such research will require me to interact with professionals in the museum, archive, and history fields who will be crucial resources for me to ask questions of and learn from.

Importance of this Project

Diary analyses have produced deeply important historical works not only because they reveal the human impetus behind crucial historical events, but because they also reveal the personal thoughts and emotions that reveal so much about the zeitgeist of an era. Among other things, these women's diaries reveal educational levels, describe mundane tasks and occupations, and provide a picture of social interactions otherwise unknown and unknowable through more formal source material. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* is one of the most well known diary analyses of a woman living in the American colonies. Ulrich was able to piece together the

family history of midwife Martha Ballard (the midwife) and reveal the physical and psychological stresses of being a midwife, wife, and mother, forming an engrossing and thoroughly human picture of a woman's life in this period of history (Ulrich). This type of insight gained from such primary documents is invaluable to historical research, and is something I hope to emulate with this research project.

From the 1830s to the Civil War, the U.S. was industrializing at a furious pace, and with this massive change came many concomitant changes for women. These changes were not always especially beneficial and, in fact, often came to separate women further from the public sphere (Cowan). Innovations such as washing and sewing machines, and white flour created both more jobs and more housework for women. Instead of washing clothes once every few weeks and making quick bread out of coarse flour, women were now expected to launder and iron weekly and make increasingly intricate dishes like angel food cake (Leavitt). This additional work helped to reinforce the sphere of domesticity that had risen out of the Revolutionary period's Republican Motherhood and Enlightenment ideals. The requirement of family members of all genders and ages to work around the farm, typical of rural life, was quickly being replaced by the expectation of men working outside the home in paid jobs and women remaining back, in charge of the house and children. This excising of men from home led to a disconnect between the public and the private sectors of life, and impacted the types of work women were able to conduct (Morantz). This disconnect is important to research and understand, if not to just see the reality of a life where there is no choice except for the one society dictates.

Methodology

In order to complete this project, I would first research the many ways that successful diary analyses have been done. In so doing, I will seek to find the most effective ways to glean knowledge from people's personal accounts of their daily lives. This analysis would be done as a literature review using the resources we have available at CWRU. These resources include, but are not limited to, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, America & English Literature Collection, History Collective, and Humanities International Complete. Following this step, I would go to the Western Reserve Historical Society's archives to look at the possible diaries that

I have identified as matching my criteria. After a brief review of each account, I would pick one diary to analyze in further detail. To aid in this analysis, I must understand more of what living in Cleveland entailed from the 1830s until the Civil War. In order to obtain this information, I would use the Kelvin Smith Library Databases, specifically the Encyclopedia of Cleveland History. Once I have gained more knowledge about the general lifestyle, major events, and climate that Cleveland had during this time period, I will be able to begin analyzing the diary and form a better idea of how this particular woman, and most likely other women similar to her, experienced Cleveland life. Throughout this process, if I had concerns or questions about how to best approach these topics, I would contact Dr. Sentilles. If I had questions about the archives or how to correctly use historical documents, I would contact the archivists at the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Connection with Education and Career

As a student who hopes to be able to work in a museum someday, I also think that being able to work so closely with the Western Reserve Historical Society and their collections would be a unique opportunity, and a chance for great intellectual growth. Learning how to conduct sound historical analysis is something that I will continue to use throughout my career and the rest of my academic journey at CWRU. Not only would this project educate me on the specific history of Cleveland, but it would give me a better understanding of what life as a woman in the pre-Civil War United States looked like in the American Midwest. For my degree, I have focused primarily upon women's history, so having the ability to dedicate more substantial time to a biographical analysis of a woman's life is exciting. I believe that it is only fitting that my first contribution to the field of history is about women's lives in Cleveland, especially in a time period in which what it meant to be a woman was defined, a definition that many contemporary women are challenging today.

Budget Summary & Time Commitment

The proposed timeline for this project would be from May 27, 2019 to August 2, 2019. The stipend granted of \$3,500 would be used for living expenses, a flight to Cleveland for the

summer, and for my full time work on this project. In order to be held accountable in this research, I will work with Dr. Sentilles to set up a timeline of goals that need to be done throughout the summer in the most timely and efficient manner.

Works Referred To:

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. *More Work for Mother*. United States: Basic Books, 1941.

Leavitt, Sarah A. *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*. North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Morantz, Regina Markell. "Making Women Modern: Middle Class Women and Health Reform in 19th Century America." *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 4 (1977): 490-507.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: the Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Knopf, Distributed by Random House, 1990.