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ADVERSARIES AND ALLIES
RIVAL NATIONAL SUFFRAGE GROUPS AND
THE 1882 NEBRASKA WOMAN SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN

CARMEN HEIDER

In September 1882, Nebraska was the setting for a significant moment in the history of the United States women’s rights movement: the two rival suffrage organizations, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), both held their annual conventions in Omaha, an event Sally Roesch Wagner describes as “an unprecedented move.” Furthermore, the AWSA and NWSA “act[ed] in conjunction with the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association” to schedule speakers during the 1882 campaign. Susan B. Anthony even participated in the AWSA thirteenth annual meeting held in Omaha in 1882. “I feel at home,” she said, “on every woman suffrage platform, and am most glad to speak to you to-day. This is the third campaign in which my friend Lucy Stone and myself have shared.” National activists focused their attention on Nebraska in 1882 because the state’s suffrage amendment was about to go before the male electorate.

The alliance of the AWSA and NWSA during the September 1882 conventions was a notable point in the gradual reunification of the two suffrage organizations. “During the decade of 1880-1890,” Eleanor Flexner writes, “it was becoming increasingly evident that the factors which had brought about the existence of two separate suffrage associations were steadily diminishing in importance.” Because suffragists in Thayer County, Nebraska, associated with both organizations and incorporated the ideas of both groups into their suffrage rationale, it is possible that they represented the early stages of the two groups beginning to merge back together. It is also possible that the suffragists’ location on the Great Plains

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provided a context in which both groups realized they could, when they needed to, cooperate despite their larger disagreements.

The *Western Woman’s Journal*, a Nebraska suffrage periodical, wrote encouragingly about the upcoming Nebraska conventions: “Much good is expected to result from the meetings of the American and National Associations, in this state in September.” Prominent Thayer County suffragist Erasmus Correll noted that “Local workers, noble ones, too numerous to mention, are doing much local work to advance the cause. The cause is everywhere progressing.” Anthony, the “suffrage war veteran,” was scheduled to arrive in mid-September “to aid in carrying the amendment.” Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, according to Leslie Wheeler, “extended their stay [in Nebraska] from ten days, as originally planned, to more than a month, and spoke in twenty-five counties.”

This essay analyzes the AWSA and NWSA in the context of the 1882 Nebraska woman suffrage campaign. In particular, the study focuses on Thayer County from 1879 to 1882 because it was the center of Nebraska state suffrage activity and, as Roesch Wagner notes, “received national attention.” Thayer County reformers produced a variety of materials, including speeches, fifteen issues of the *Western Woman’s Journal*, and the “Woman’s Column,” which appeared weekly on the front page of the *Hebron [Nebraska] Journal*. By focusing on the Nebraska case study, I hope to demonstrate that first, in spite of organizational differences over goals and methods, Thayer County suffragists affiliated with both rival groups, as both national organizations worked publicly with each other during the 1882 Nebraska campaign; and second, Nebraska suffragists, by affiliating with both groups, reconceptualized womanhood by challenging conventional constructions of the “True Woman,” who was pure, pious, submissive, and best suited to the “private” sphere of the home. Furthermore, their reconstruction of womanhood not only challenged ideals of True Womanhood, it also blurred the distinctions between the seemingly dichotomous “public” and “private” spheres. Debates about the proper role of women are still with us and often remain rooted in historical gender assumptions.

This analysis of the Thayer County reformers’ suffrage rationale and their reconstruction of womanhood builds on existing scholarship that focuses on women and their role in the development of the Great Plains. As June Underwood explains, “Western women, like their eastern sisters, organized their lives around domesticity and piety, and then used those concepts to expand their spheres.” Underwood explains how nineteenth-century women expanded their “domestic roles” from the private to the public sphere, where they became abolitionists, temperance activists, and club members. She urges scholars to focus on how women physically and socially adapted to their new environments and she identifies woman suffrage as one form of the “idea of adaptation.” This essay, then, contributes to literature that explores how symbols have been used and appropriated by particular groups in the Plains; furthermore, this study builds upon scholarship that explores how such symbol use complicates dichotomies between private and public. I also address Glenda Riley’s concern that scholars refrain from ignoring “old” issues, such as domesticity. Riley emphasizes that “domestic roles and contributions were the central concerns of most plainswomen’s lives.” The 1882 census bears this out for the Thayer County suffragists, as nearly all are defined by occupation as “housekeepers.” At the same time, Thayer County activists clearly had civic interests, most notably their suffrage work, and this study seeks to contribute to scholarship that examines the nuances within the ideology of domesticity in its material and symbolic forms.
The Nebraska case study is significant for two reasons: First, it enriches and nuances what we know about the two national suffrage organizations and how they functioned materially and symbolically with state activists. Second, it contributes to our understanding of “national” suffrage activism by integrating, into the dominant woman suffrage narrative, state and regional interpretations of arguments, appeals, and activism. Specific case studies complicate our understanding of dominant interpretations of woman suffrage activism by addressing the symbolic and material interplay between local and national groups. This essay is divided into four sections: the first provides a brief overview of the AWSA and NWSA; the second explores the AWSA in Nebraska; the third analyzes the NWSA in Nebraska; and the fourth section concludes the essay.

Overview of the Split Between the AWSA and NWSA

The 1869 split that resulted in two national suffrage organizations, the AWSA and the NWSA, marked a major turning point in the United States’ woman suffrage movement. Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, led the AWSA; Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the NWSA.

Disagreements over the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments played a crucial role in the split between the two suffrage organizations. One of the central differences stemmed from the implications surrounding the end of slavery and the approval of the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibited states from denying male citizens the right to vote. Anthony and Cady Stanton argued that women must be included with African American men in the amendment; they claimed that suffrage must be universal rather than based on sex. As Louise Newman indicates, the NWSA opposed the amendments because they “provided no constitutional protections for women, white or black.” On the other hand, Stone and Blackwell supported the Fifteenth Amendment without the inclusion of women, believing that some blacks should vote even if women could not. Ellen DuBois asserts that these differences “inflamed already severe conflicts among reformers.” As Suzanne Marilley explains, Stone and Blackwell “dissented from the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments for their failure to enfranchise women but avoided outright opposition to ensure the consolidation of some reform. Anthony and Stanton, however, ultimately decided that they had to oppose Stone and Blackwell in order to defend woman’s rights as a critical rights issue.”

DuBois posits that the position held by Anthony and Cady Stanton regarding the Fifteenth Amendment led to attacks that they were “feminist and racist” even though both groups appealed to racist ideas. Such accusations stemmed from their claim that suffrage should be granted to those who met specific qualifications. As Anthony and Cady Stanton contended, “a government of the most virtuous, educated men and women would better represent the whole humanitarian idea, and more perfectly protect the interests of all, than could a representation of either sex alone.” White, middle-class women were ostensibly better suited for suffrage than free black men. DuBois explains that Anthony and Cady Stanton “submitted a series of resolutions [during their 1868 midwestern tour], against the Fifteenth Amendment, which charged the Republican party with ‘the establishment of an aristocracy of sex,’ and condemned the amendment as ‘retrogressive’ legislation.” Furthermore, she notes that “by the end of 1869, two national suffrage organizations existed, competing for adherents and for the right to direct the way to victory.” As Beverly Beeton explains, the 1869 split that resulted in the formation of the AWSA and NWSA was a “schism on goals and methods” that “would persist until 1890.” A primary point of contention was over state versus federal ratification of female suffrage: the AWSA
supported the former; the NWSA supported the latter. Sarah Evans notes that “the deep, bitter split between woman suffrage advocates in the 1860s fragmented the women’s rights movement for more than two decades. . . . These two organizations with their very different styles but shared agenda kept the issue of woman suffrage alive for two decades before old animosities could be set aside and a new, joint organization formed.”29

Both the AWSA and NWSA materially and symbolically influenced Thayer County suffragists and their constructions of womanhood.30 Prominent Thayer County suffragists such as Erasmus Correll, Lucy Correll, Barbara J. Thompson, and Susan Ferguson interacted with members of each organization and incorporated the ideas of both groups into their suffrage rationale. While this paper focuses primarily on Thayer County suffrage activists, suffragist Clara Bewick Colby from the nearby town of Beatrice also deserves note as an active Nebraska campaigner who worked with both rival groups. Bewick Colby helped organize a suffrage association with forty-two members, worked “successfully in York and Hamilton and in the Republican Valley, organizing large societies” and had “spoken with much success at London, in Nemaha County.”31 After she presented addresses in Aurora, the Western Woman’s Journal reported that her “lecture was good, and she advanced many new ideas.”32 In general, the journal commended Bewick Colby’s work.33 E. Claire Jerry suggests that Bewick Colby aligned herself with the NWSA through her emphasis on NWSA movement history in the Woman’s Tribune, which she edited from 1883 to 1910.34 Jerry also notes that the “early conventions [Bewick Colby] commemorated, while technically belonging to the movement as a whole, were closely associated with Anthony and Cady Stanton.”35 The Western Woman’s Journal, however, indicates that Bewick Colby also held AWSA offices and participated in the 1882 AWSA convention in Omaha.36 Nebraska suffragist Ada Bittenbender also associated with both organizations.

NEBRASKA WOMAN SUFFRAGE ACTIVISM AND THE AWSA

Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, as leaders of the AWSA, published the Woman’s Journal, the most prominent national suffrage periodical during this time. The AWSA focused specifically on suffrage and distinguished itself from other less conventional issues such as labor and divorce reform. The Western Woman’s Journal, for example, quoted the Woman’s Journal to highlight Blackwell’s argument that the vote would provide women with increased protections and penalties against abuse.37 Blackwell, according to the Western Woman’s Journal, held the positions that “Political Progress, historically viewed, consists in the successive extension of suffrage to classes hitherto disenfranchised,” and “the enlargement of woman’s sphere of activity and the recognition of her equal rights mark and measure the progress of civilization.”38 The AWSA also encouraged state ratification of the suffrage amendment and municipal reform. AWSA members believed that obtaining the vote could be accomplished effectively one step at a time at local and state levels. The AWSA also included men and women as members, officers, and leaders.

Thayer County suffragists materially affiliated with the AWSA through financial support, supplies, and speaking engagements. As the Western Woman’s Journal noted, “Had it not been for the kind assistance of Lucy Stone, and other eastern friends, in sending in occasional donations to aid the publication of the Journal, our financial burdens would have been almost overwhelming.”39 While Nebraska suffragist Clara Bewick Colby donated the “largest sum” of $106 to the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association, Stone donated $65, the second largest amount.40 Stone also encouraged Philadelphia suffrage supporter J. K. Wildman to send tracts entitled, “Four quite new reasons why you should wish your wife to vote.”41 In addition, AWSA officers and delegates from a range of states, including Missouri, Indiana, Colorado, and Pennsylvania,
were scheduled to attend and speak at the 1882 Omaha convention. The Western Woman’s Journal also noted that “The two lady delegates from England to the American Woman Suffrage meeting in Omaha, the Misses Muller, are highly recommended as workers and speakers for women’s enfranchisement.”

Thayer County suffragists Erasmus and Lucy Correll affiliated with the AWSA in several ways. Erasmus Correll, the most prominent Nebraska suffragist from 1879 to 1882, corresponded with Stone, and Lucy Correll, his spouse, reportedly wrote for the Woman’s Journal. The Corrells undoubtedly drew support and inspiration from Henry Blackwell and Lucy Stone during their month-long stay in Nebraska in September 1882. As a Columbus [Nebraska] resident wrote, “We are having many valuable accessions to our ranks. Lucy Stone and Dr. H. B. Blackwell spoke here very acceptably to the people.” Furthermore, Correll’s Republican loyalties probably tied him more closely to the AWSA, which DuBois indicates “relied on strong support from Republican and abolitionist men.”

The AWSA elected Erasmus Correll as its president in 1881, which best represents Thayer County suffragists’ material affiliation with this organization. Upon being “unanimously elected,” Stone wrote to Correll that “They did this in consideration of the great service you have rendered, and are now rendering to the cause of Woman Suffrage. It is an honor that has been bestowed on some of the best men and women in this country.” Correll, in his response to Stone, wrote, “It affords me much pleasure to thankfully accept the position and its duties and divide the honor among the earnest men and women who are not only seeking the highest political welfare of humanity, but the honor of placing upon this young commonwealth the first coronal of
a pure and advanced government—the realization of the loftiest principles of a true republic." Correll noted that "Having devoted my life to the cause of Equal Rights, no labor will be avoided, and I desire to be considered an active member of the Association."49

The inclusion of men and women in Nebraska suffrage activities also demonstrates the AWSA influence. Suffrage texts reveal that Thayer County's suffrage activism was indeed integrated on the basis of gender. According to the 1880 "Petition for Woman Suffrage" in Nebraska, forty-six women and sixty-one men from Hebron supported the Nebraska woman suffrage amendment.50 Lucy Correll stated that "many of the leading businessmen became members [of the Thayer County Suffrage Association]," which indicates that men were welcome at meetings and were participants in suffrage activism in Thayer County.51 The involvement of both men and women correlates with Blackwell's note in Lucy Correll's autograph book: "Woman's cause is man's; they rise or sink together."52

Prominent Thayer County suffragist Barbara J. Thompson primarily participated in the NWSA, but her two children demonstrate the AWSA practice of integrating men and women into suffrage organizations. In 1882 Walter (W. J.) Thompson presented a short speech at the Thayer County Woman Suffrage Association meeting and remained active in the suffrage movement after he moved to Washington. In 1888 Alice Stone Blackwell thanked him for his "efforts on behalf of women."53 He also corresponded with Henry Blackwell, Harriet Brooks, and Zerelda McCoy, vice president of the Washington Territory NWSA. Sixteen-year-old Jessie Thompson also gained recognition for her suffrage activism in Thayer County. The Western Woman's Journal highlighted her accomplishments: "One of the most energetic young ladies of the West is Miss Jessie Thompson... She has been successful in obtaining for us a club of sixteen names, and is now at work on a second club. With youth, energy and perseverance, elements which are necessary for the success of any cause—woman suffrage finds in her a warm supporter and advocate."54

The Woman's Journal reports on Nebraska suffrage also highlight gender integration. Mrs. H. S. Wilcox, in her Woman's Journal report, reflected on her meeting with the "wide awake people of Hebron": "I was met by one of the ladies with a carriage and taken to the home of the president of the society, Mrs. Susan E. Ferguson... and was most agreeably surprised to find a party of ladies to welcome me."55 Wilcox also mentioned that "Mr. Ferguson, the husband of our hostess with characteristic Yankee proclivities for story-telling, afforded much amusement, and the JOURNAL and Woman's Kingdom with their extended influence and power came in for a share of our 'gossip,' and each expressed a hopeful outlook for our cause."56 Wilcox wrote that "addresses made by Mrs. Ferguson and Mrs. E. M. Correll at the last anniversary of their society, evince talents and ability that are needed in our legislatures to help make laws and reform politics."57 Through such newspaper accounts, we know that men and women participated together at suffrage meetings, which paralleled the AWSA practice of including men and women.

Correll and other men who supported women's rights earned the respect of their female counterparts. According to Belle Bigelow, "Hon. E. M. Correll has devoted his entire time to the [suffrage] work excepting that demanded by his official duties. He has also expended large sums of money to his great loss financially; and to him more than to all others belong the praise for the present fair outlook in Nebraska."58 In addition to the respect female suffragists accorded Correll, they also recruited other men to support their cause. The Western Woman's Journal requested "names of earnest, energetic men in the various counties, for appointment as county superintendents of campaign work, but "only such men as can be relied on for persistent, careful and effective work until the battle is over."59 A Nebraska suffragist named Holly, from nearby Nelson, interestingly noted that "there is
much more earnest thought among the men than among the women. It is the topic of conversation, and has many bitter opponents, but I am quite satisfied that a majority of the men desire to be fair and candid."60 Holly hoped that "the more it is talked about the greater the number of friends to the amendment."61

Like the AWSA, the Thayer County suffrage association welcomed men at their meetings. Furthermore, the Western Woman's Journal often highlighted the work of activist men, such as Correll, Mr. A. T. Hobbs, and the Rev. W. D. Vermillion, who "made addresses at a woman suffrage picnic in Jefferson County [Nebraska]."62 The journal also reported that Gov. Hoyt, Gen. Connor, and Mr. Hamer made addresses to suffrage audiences in Kearney, Nebraska.63 Michigan suffragist Wilder Wooster, a Nebraska delegate to the AWSA convention, indicated that he had "organized an association with 47 members." He also mentioned in his report to the Western Woman's Journal that Mr. E. A. Fletcher "took an active part in forming the organization, and offered his assistance in future precinct work."64

Finally, Thayer County suffragists fought for state ratification, a primary AWSA strategy. Stone and Blackwell publicized Nebraska suffrage activity in the Woman's Journal, including various news items on state and local progress, and specific references to the Western Woman's Journal. For example, Stone wrote that the Western Woman's Journal is "full of the sounds of work. It reports ninety out of a hundred papers in that State in favor of Suffrage. It is with special pleasure that we see help to those who so nobly help themselves."65 The Western Woman's Journal also highlighted Stone's editorial work. "Under the editorial management of Lucy Stone . . . [the journal] is unexcelled for the thoroughness and depth with which it handles questions relating to woman's suffrage and advancement."66

Even Blackwell, however, noted his concern regarding the Nebraska woman suffrage amendment in a letter to his daughter Alice, who edited the Woman's Journal while Stone and Blackwell campaigned in Nebraska. On September 24, 1882, Blackwell wrote from Wisner, Nebraska:

Between ourselves—there is no more hope for carrying woman suffrage in Nebraska than of the millennium coming next year. Both parties have avoided it. The republicans refused to endorse it day before yesterday in their state convention. I had not been in Omaha 48 hours before I saw how the matter stood, but as we dont [sic] want to discourage the workers, we keep our opinions to ourselves & talk and work as if we expected to win. But the prospect is not nearly so good as in Kansas in 1869. I am confirmed in my opinion that we will have to get what we can from the State legislatures by statute without going down to the masses—to be beat . . . Don't publish my predictions as to Nebraska.67

The defeated amendment, according to Leslie Wheeler, generated a shift in AWSA strategies for state ratification: "From then on Lucy and Henry decided that the [AWSA] should concentrate on lobbying state legislatures rather than conducting mass campaigns among the general populace, who were usually less enlightened than their legislators."68

In short, suffrage documents demonstrate the material and symbolic interaction between Thayer County suffragists and AWSA leaders, which then informed the local reformers' ideas, arguments, and constructions of gender. Stone and Blackwell complicated the idea of separate spheres by demonstrating that women's and men's interests were materially and rhetorically intertwined. Stone and Blackwell undoubtedly provided an exemplary role model for Thayer County suffrage couples while state and local activism also influenced national strategies.

The prevalence of joint activities is significant in relation to self-determination, the central tenet of the Thayer County woman suffrage rationale.69 To them, suffrage activism
represented an integrated “sphere” of public activism comprised of men and women who demonstrated that rigid gender roles, along with “separate spheres,” were not so clear-cut in the Plains. This lack of rigidity and the prevalence of overlapping activities correlate with the emphasis on self-determination, as Thayer County suffragists’ interpretation of womanhood challenged gender-dichotomous beliefs and institutions. To be self-determined warranted the breakdown of confining gender assumptions. If one was self-determined, one could pursue whatever one wanted, and it seems logical that men and women would participate in some of the same activities. This liberal interpretation of feminism grounded the Thayer County woman suffrage rationale and, as will be explained in the following sections, reflected tenets of the National Woman Suffrage Association.

NEBRASKA WOMAN SUFFRAGE ACTIVISM AND THE NWSA

In addition to (or in spite of) their AWSA connections, Thayer County suffragists also interacted with the two leaders of the less conventional National Woman Suffrage Association, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The NWSA fought for federal amendment ratification and advocated reform beyond the ballot, including changes in marriage and divorce laws, and equal pay for equal work. NWSA members and officers, unlike the AWSA, were exclusively women. Thayer County suffragists materially reflected the NWSA influence through their selection of women as leaders and officers in their local organization. They also argued for self-determined womanhood in the context of broad women’s rights reforms that reflected NWSA perspectives on two pressing issues: divorce and equal pay.

Self-Determination and Property, Dower, and Divorce. Thayer County suffragists prioritized legal protections as a key component of their marriage reform arguments. Mutuality in marriage resulted in part, they claimed, from the self-determination that legal protections could potentially provide. To most fully understand Thayer County arguments and appeals on this subject, we must briefly turn to the 1860 National Women’s Rights Convention debate on the issue of divorce. This debate provides the rhetorical framework that helped shape the Thayer County rationale nearly twenty years later. Cady Stanton, in this debate, defined marriage as an institution that women often entered into on the basis of “custom, policy, interest, [and] necessity,” only to be “held there by the iron chain of the law.” She claimed that women should have the right to divorce if “violence, debauchery, and excess” characterized their marriages. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell’s daughter, approached the topic of marriage from a different perspective: She claimed that women “choose” to be married and therefore “the cure for the evils that now exist is not in dissolving marriage, but it is in giving to the married woman her own natural independence and sovereignty, by which she can maintain herself.”

Ernestine Potowski Rose, however, contended that Brown Blackwell’s ideal of equality between husband and wife often did not in reality exist. Hence, she claimed, the need for divorce: “I ask, in the name of individual happiness and social morality and well being, why such a marriage should be binding for life?—why one human being should be chained for life to the dead body of another?” Potowski Rose concluded by stressing that women needed to be educated so that they would not marry out of necessity. While William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips argued that divorce should not even be part of the women’s rights platform, Brown Blackwell and Anthony responded by claiming that the marriage question was indeed an integral component of women’s emancipation. Thayer County suffragists aligned themselves with national suffragists such as Cady Stanton and Potowski Rose, who argued for specific legal protections that would benefit a woman’s position in
marriage and upon divorce. The 1880 census indicates that one Hebron resident who signed the 1880 suffrage petition, Maria Correll, was divorced. 77

By the early 1880s Nebraska had abolished many standard discriminations against women. 78 Nebraska, however, had not yet abolished sex discrimination in “probate settlement of estates; between the right of curtesy and the right of dower; in the law relating to divorce, in the guardianship of children, and in the law allowing the father to dispose of the children by will.” 79 Erasmus Correll, reflecting the positions of Cady Stanton and Potowski Rose, portrayed such discriminatory acts as violations of the individual rights necessary to a self-determined life. “The laws,” according to Correll, “are made by men and for men, and consequently, when that almost legal non-entity, a woman[,]
dies, all things progress very smoothly the man!” 80 Such sentiments were also similar to those of suffragists such as Anthony, who in 1860 had claimed that “Marriage has ever and always been a one-sided matter, resting most unequally upon the sexes. By it, man gains all—woman loses all.” 81 The Western Woman’s Journal reported at least one neighboring state that offered women laws under which they could become more fully self-determined: “In Kansas there is much to emulate by other states. Husband and wife have the same property rights. Fathers and mothers the same right in their children.” 82 Property rights would have hit close to home for at least four Thayer County women. Lucy Correll, Susan Ferguson, Sarah Church, and Hannah Huse filed petitions on January 14, 1880. They claimed that they paid “heavy taxes” but had no “power to suppress vice or regulate taxation.” 83 Accordingly, each asked “for the removal of her political disabilities [and] that she may exercise her right to vote.” 84 While there is no petition on record filed by Ann Martha Vermillion, her will and estate inventory indicate that at the time of her death in 1886, she owned real estate valued at $3,200, which her husband and stepson later inherited. 85

Marriage could be one of the most devastating obstacles to women's self-determination and autonomy. “The status of a wife as civilly dead, as the property of her husband,” according to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “was symbolic of woman’s status in society.” 86 Erasmus Correll claimed that “the holiest institution ever ordained—marriage—is taken as a pretext for a degrading discrimination. The law makes no distinction between married and unmarried men—then why between women? And why should marriage be a cause for disbarred franchise?” 87 In addition to these gender inequities, Alabama suffragist Virginia Betts pointed out that “A man is privileged to defraud his wife,” which certainly hindered a woman’s right to a self-determined life. 88 When marriage invalidated the franchise, Correll stressed that such laws affect “men and women unequally, and women unjustly.” 89

The death of a spouse also had important legal implications that potentially impeded a woman’s right to a self-determined life. If a woman died a civil death when she married, what happened when she or her spouse physically died? According to the rights of dower and curtesy, “At his death she is entitled to only one-third. At her death, he is entitled to her entire real estate during her natural life.” 90 Correll responded to such legal inequities with a question: “Now I ask you, is that distinction fair? Is there any justice in such a law? Why should not she have, on the death of her husband, precisely the same rights that he has on her death? Certainly, fair-minded men will at once concede that she should.” 91 Thayer County suffragists, through their emphasis on legal customs and legal change, symbolically paralleled Cady Stanton, Potowski Rose, and Anthony in their constructions of women as individuals who had a right to their own life, liberty, and happiness.

Self-Determination and Equal Pay. Equal pay was another issue upon which Thayer County suffragists focused their attention and through which they argued for self-determination. It was one thing to argue for and gain access to a
wider range of professional opportunities. It was yet another to argue for and gain equality within the professions themselves. One manifestation of inequity within the professions was the debate over equal pay for equal work. Through this debate, Thayer County suffragists critiqued conventional constructions of womanhood, including women's financial dependence on men. The Hebron Journal highlighted the tensions that arose from the issue of work for wages: “There should be no antagonism to women’s working for wages. Men's unwillingness that women should enter into competition in work and wages is founded on chivalry—on noble and generous principles; but the conditions of women's dependence on man's support cannot be secured against contingencies.” Furthermore, Thayer County suffragists argued that while women had been socialized to view financial self-support as inconsequential to their lives, it was actually crucial to women’s freedom and independence. As the Western Woman’s Journal emphasized, “Every daughter ought to be taught to earn her own living. . . . No reform is as imperative as this.” The Hebron Journal also noted that all girls “should be taught to be self-supporting.” As the newspaper stated, “Every girl, whatever her social or pecuniary condition, is liable at some time in life to be thrown upon her own resources and the cold charities of the world, and this emergency should be provided for.” The focus on self-reliance reflected Cady Stanton’s perspective on women’s rights. As she concluded in “Solitude of Self,” “Who, I ask you, can take, dare take on himself, the rights, duties, the responsibilities of another human soul?” Through such arguments, Thayer County suffragists dissociated themselves from constructions of womanhood that were grounded in dependence, helplessness, and confinement.

Thayer County suffragists addressed wage inequity by highlighting various occupations, one of which was teaching, a profession familiar to Thayer County suffragists. Lucy and Erasmus Correll taught school after moving to Thayer County. Erasmus taught algebra, arithmetic, United States history, readers, geography, and spelling in Hebron in 1874, earning forty dollars for a three-month session. Lucy taught in Meridian, Nebraska, where the couple briefly settled upon their arrival in the county. A. Martha Vermillion, her husband W. D. Vermillion, and Ivy Green also taught school. As both men and women taught school and earned unequal pay, wage inequity was undoubtedly an issue that hit close to home for Thayer County suffragists. In 1886 Josie Keith was paid $450 per year as a teacher, making her one of the highest paid educators in the district. At the same time, her salary was substantially less than her male colleague, A. J. Mercer. Of the seven teachers listed in school records, Mercer earned ninety-five dollars per month, followed by Nellie Pletcher and Keith, who both earned fifty dollars per month. The Hebron Journal editors also highlighted what they perceived as “items of interest” concerning Thayer County teachers:

We are pleased to notice that the same number of women are employed as teachers as men. . . . But when it comes to the wages paid, the women are quite in the minority. Look at the figures: “The whole number of days of school taught by the male teachers were 4,027, while the lady teachers taught 4,240. In spite of the above facts the total wages of male teachers was $7,198.22, while the ladies received $6,835.97.” Thus you see while the women taught 573 days more than the men they received $362.25 less than the men teachers. The question arises: Is it sex or brains which grades the salary?

Through the Western Woman's Journal, suffragists also offered proof of unequal pay in neighboring Iowa: “Iowa has 21,598 teachers, only 7,255 of whom are men. Their average salary is $31.16; that of the female teachers is $26.28.”

There were, however, models of pay equity that suffragists held up as ideal. “The teachers in the city schools of Lawrence, Kansas,” noted the Western Woman’s Journal, “are paid
according to the length of service from $35 to $55 per month, women receiving the same as men for equal service. The point was to actively pursue equal pay rather than passively wait for it to be voluntarily granted. As the Hebron Journal urged, "Girls qualify yourselves, then demand the same pay for the same work performed that the men get." By qualifying themselves and then making demands, women participated in the reconceptualization of what it meant to be a self-determined woman who acted on her own behalf.

Thayer County suffragists also highlighted the principle of self-determination through a "work and wages" debate reported in the Sutton [Nebraska] Register. In this debate, University of Nebraska chancellor Edmund B. Fairfield argued that wage inequity should be left to the discretion of individual employers. According to Fairfield, "Work is what one does. Wages is what one gets for it." He further claimed that wage inequity was not a legislative issue, but rather a conflict best resolved between the employer and employed, thus implying that solutions should be individual rather than societal. "The law of wages," Fairfield claimed, "is ordinarily independent of prejudice or whims." He then listed three reasons: First, "women, as a class, by physical constitution or the customs of society, are shut out from a large number of employments in which men are allowed to enter." Women, according to Fairfield, did not have "adequate strength and endurance" for such positions. Second, Fairfield stated that "Nine tenths of women marry in the course of time, quit their jobs, and do not develop their skills," which are "only acquired by long practice." And third, to pay men and women equally, men would have to be paid less, which, Fairfield argued, would ultimately hurt women, as husbands would earn less money to support their families. In the end, Fairfield justified his position on the basis of patriarchal conceptions of family as the basic unit of society. He claimed that because 90 percent of women married, equal wages "would reform out of existence the entire home life of the nation. The divine plan was that the human race should live in families, and all laws are conformed to this one idea. Woman was to be confined to home duties, but was to receive her wages through her husband."

Thayer County suffragists responded to Fairfield’s justifications by situating the individual as the basic unit of society and by emphasizing the right to a self-determined life, in which women could claim rather than receive wages and live in freedom rather than confinement. As the Sutton Register noted, it would be "absurd to say that one individual should receive less wages than another for the same work equally well done, under similar surroundings." For all citizens to realize the inherent, individual right to a fair wage, suffragists argued that the government must pass legislation. In other words, social problems warranted social, not individual, solutions. In so doing, suffragists situated legal rights, including the vote, as a means through which equality might be realized and through which society would progress. Omaha suffragist Orpha Dinsmore encapsulated this perspective: "I think that legislation should interfere in the matter of work and wages only insofar as it removes restrictions and thus prevents discrimination. . . . Fitness and ability, demand and supply alone should govern wages. Race, color, sex, ought not to be the test—or measure of compensation." Dinsmore thus emphasized the need for protective legislation as long as race, color, and/or sex were instrumental in determining one’s earning potential (or lack thereof). These arguments and appeals paralleled those invoked by Cady Stanton and Anthony.

NWSA Activists in Nebraska. In addition to Thayer County suffragists’ broad emphasis on women’s rights, the Western Woman’s Journal reported NWSA news and activism in Nebraska, just as it did with the AWSA. According to NWSA Executive Committee chair May Wright Sewall, "The spread of the equal suffrage belief, is shown by the existence of two great public organizations, the ‘National’ and
the ‘American’ Societies, each including local organizations in all parts of the country. That Nebraska women want the ballot, is proved by the one hundred local societies that they have organized to secure it; by the money and the time which they have already invested in this agitation.”

Anthony, according to the Western Woman’s Journal, “addressed audiences on woman suffrage at the following recently held fairs: Otoe County, Franklin County, and Fillmore County.” The journal also advertised the NWSA convention, scheduled for September 26, 27, and 28 at the Omaha Opera House and September 29 and 30 at the Lincoln Opera House. It also reported that NWSA affiliate Sewall would work in Nebraska one week prior to the convention and Rachel Foster, NWSA corresponding secretary, had spoken at North Platte and Plumb Creek “while en route from Colorado to attend the National Convention in Omaha.”

NWSA officer Helen Gougar spent the month of September in Nebraska and while there “made a stirring speech on the street and made many converts.” Moreover, the journal advertised and provided continuous updates on the progress of the History of Woman Suffrage, written and edited by Cady Stanton, Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. The journal praised the volume and noted that “it supplies a place in the world’s literature not filled by any other.”

Thompson and Erasmus Correll were delegates to the Nebraska State Convention and Thompson was also a member of the NWSA Executive Committee in 1881 and served as vice president of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association in 1881. Thompson’s obituary refers to her as a “pioneer in the movement for woman suffrage” in Nebraska and also states that she remained on the executive council of the NWSA after moving to the state of Washington in the 1880s.

Just as AWSA leaders Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell campaigned in Nebraska, so did Anthony and Cady Stanton, the NWSA’s most prominent activists. They lectured in Hebron, home of the Thayer County Suffrage Association, on several occasions. On October 30, 1877, Anthony presented her lecture, “Woman Wants Bread, Not the Ballot.” In spite of his association with the rival suffrage organization, Correll wrote that Anthony presented a “clear, logical, and masterly exposition of the theory known as ‘woman’s rights.’” She asserted that “there is no field of thought—no realm of science,—no pathway of art, that has not been trodden by women.”

Cady Stanton presented her lecture, “Our Girls,” in Hebron on April 14, 1879, when she helped organize the Thayer County Suffrage Association. In this speech, which was popular “all over our broad land,” she argued that educational opportunities should be the same for boys and girls. Just as he did with Anthony, Correll wrote a complimentary review: “[Stanton] brought masterly, logical, and irrefutable arguments in favor of equal rights for woman, and clearly answered the usual objections advanced against equal woman suffrage.”

The NWSA’s emphasis on a broad range of rights hinged on a woman’s right to a self-determined life. Hence, visits
by prominent national suffragists to enlighten and awaken the masses and to help organize and energize the Thayer County Suffrage Association were particularly important and demonstrate the material and symbolic impact of national suffragists and their ideas.

CONCLUSION

Thayer County suffrage texts reveal the local activists' interactions with national leaders and the influence of AWSA and NWSA rhetorical strategies and tactics on this group of reformers. The AWSA influenced Thayer County suffragists more organizationally, as they emphasized the integration of men and women, while the NWSA influenced Thayer County suffragists more discursively through arguments for self-determination and their emphasis on a broad range of women's rights issues. We can also see, in the context of the 1882 Nebraska woman suffrage campaign, the rival AWSA and NWSA organizations beginning to merge back together. Individuals from both groups interacted with one another and contributed to the cause.

The interplay between the AWSA, NWSA, and Thayer County suffrage activism is similar to and distinct from suffrage activism in nearby states such as Illinois and Wisconsin. Historian Steven Buechler notes that "the standard image of a suffrage movement divided between two competing camps had little relevance in Illinois." While Buechler points out that "Traces of the national rivalry between the NWSA and AWSA filtered down to the state level at various times during these two decades, particularly when the national organizations held conventions in Chicago," he explains that "the impact of this rivalry on the local suffrage movement was minor, partly because [Elizabeth Boynton] Harbert had aligned the [Illinois]WSA with the NWSA and partly because the AWSA had little power in the Midwest." Buechler also notes that the "more radical women in Midwestern cities and small Western towns rallied behind Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton." Cady Stanton and Anthony, however, were not so popular in Wisconsin. Historian Genevieve McBride indicates that Wisconsin suffragist Olympia Brown "refused to affiliate with either Stanton and Anthony or Stone and Blackwell but became a charter member of each group," which also suggests that national divisions played out less significantly in the Midwest. While they toured the state in 1880, Wisconsin suffragists did not invite them back in 1882. McBride suggests that their "militant tactics" might "have been too scandalous to midwesterners, women or men."

Yet, ten years earlier, as Glenda Riley notes, the "fledging Dubuque [Iowa] organization was given a major shot in the arm by a lyceum appearance by Stanton in 1869." While divisions between the AWSA and NWSA appear less significant in the Plains and Midwest, the Thayer County case study reveals distinctions from these neighboring midwestern states. Thayer County suffragists actively aligned themselves with both suffrage groups and their activist work indicates that the AWSA was, at minimum, a powerful presence during the 1882 campaign.

Finally, Thayer County suffragists, through the influences of the AWSA and NWSA, challenged the notion of separate spheres. The reconceptualization of "separate spheres" resulted in a self-determined construction of womanhood. While Thayer County suffrage arguments were neither new nor original, their campaign was atypical because they prioritized natural rights arguments and emphasized self-determination at a time when arguments based on "True Womanhood" were more common. Scholars vary in their interpretations of how and whether "True Womanhood" and "separate spheres" manifested in the West, and the extent to which frontier ideology shaped woman suffrage arguments and appeals. Julie Roy Jeffrey suggests that the frontier did not offer women new possibilities; rather, it maintained existing gender assumptions. While Jeffrey claims that the "frontier" was structured to maintain existing gender norms and the ideology of separate spheres, Elizabeth
Jameson urges scholars to complicate the separate spheres framework through which much of western women’s histories have been understood and to question the prevalence of “True Womanhood” in the West. Jameson calls for a more complicated assessment of women’s activism and specifically stresses the necessity of exploring gender roles. “Rather than assuming that all settlers arriving in the West internalized the idealized gender roles,” Jameson contends, “we need to document what previous understandings of manhood and womanhood each brought with them.”

While the majority of Nebraska voters did not support woman suffrage and subsequently defeated the 1882 suffrage amendment, the campaign provides us with a rich case study from which we can more fully understand the interrelationships between national organizations and local activists. Furthermore, Thayer County suffrage texts demonstrate that their construction of womanhood was shaped in part by the ideas of both suffrage organizations, resulting in a distinct conception of gender in the Plains.

NOTES

2. Western Woman’s Journal, September 1882, 279.
3. Ibid., 285.
10. These primary materials are the focus of the analysis. Most are located in the Erasmus Correll Manuscript Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Thayer County Museum in Belvidere, NE.
11. The cover story “Babies vs. Career: Which Should Come First for Women Who Want Both?,” Time Magazine, April 15, 2002, is an example that reflects current constructions of middle class womanhood rooted in traditional ideas.
13. Ibid., 95.
17. Ibid., 88.
18. U.S. Census, 1880. The census is available on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE. The one exception is Maria Correll, who is listed as milliner.
20. The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1868, states in part, “No state shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” The amendment also provided disincentives to states not granting the franchise to blacks. The Fourteenth Amendment, according to Ellen Carol DuBois, “introduced the issue of political rights of the freedmen into the Constitution, but it did so indirectly and did not commit the federal government to protect them. . . . [T]he major thrust of the amendment was for civil, not political rights.” See Ellen Carol DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in the United States, 1848-1869 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 58.
22. DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, 173. For additional discussion on woman suffrage and the Fifteenth Amendment, see Lori D. Ginzberg, Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183-89; Carol Lasser and Marlene Deahl Merrill, eds., Friends and Sisters:


24. DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, 174. See also Marilley, Woman Suffrage, 79, who stresses that the split was not a "division" between "racists and nonracists," as both groups at various times appealed to racist tactics. She notes that "Stanton and Anthony had collaborated openly with vituperative racist George Francis Train. But Stone and Blackwell also exhibited a willingness to tolerate racism before the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified."


27. Ibid., 199.


33. Ibid., 268.


36. "The American Woman Suffrage Association," Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 287. Bewick Colby held the office of vice president at large, and Bittenbender was vice president ex officio.

37. "Are Women Protected?" Western Woman's Journal, August 1882, 270.

38. Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 274.


40. "Correspondence," Western Woman's Journal, August 1882, 268.


44. According to Lucy Correll's obituary in the Hebron Journal, October 16, 1924, she "wrote for the Woman's Journal and was secretary during the campaign of 1880, when such national celebrities as Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, Mrs. Blackwell and others were brought to this city. She was a forceful writer and author of beautiful poems." Although the obituary states that she wrote for the Woman's Journal, her name is not included in the indexes from 1879 to 1883.

45. Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 274.

46. DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, 196.

47. Reprinted in Western Woman's Journal, October/November 1881, 100.


49. Ibid.


52. Lucy Correll's autograph book, Erasmus Correll Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE (hereafter cited as Correll MSS).

53. Letter from Alice Stone Blackwell, January 16, 1881, Woman Suffrage Collection, Box 1/#5, Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma, WA.


56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 286.

59. Western Woman's Journal, August 1882, 261.

60. Ibid., 268.

61. Ibid.

62. Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 274.

64. “Correspondence,” Western Woman’s Journal, August 1882, 269.
65. Woman’s Journal, December 31, 1881, 420.
66. “Editor’s Table,” Western Woman’s Journal, 1881, 85.
68. Ibid., 280.
70. See Newman, White Women’s Rights, 56-85.
71. See, for example, “Woman Suffrage Societies,” Western Woman’s Journal, June 1881, 47.
73. Cady Stanton, ibid., 194.
76. Ibid., 220-29.
77. Though it seems logical, it is not clear from the census or other primary materials whether Maria Correll and Erasmus Correll were related, and if so, how.
78. Erasmus Correll, “Nebraska Legislation for Women.” (Correll Manuscripts). Such discriminations included women’s property rights, the right to sue and be sued, the right to carry on business or trade on her own account and use and invest by her own name, and property bequeathment rights.
79. Ibid.
82. Western Woman’s Journal, May 1881, 21.
83. “Petition of Susan Ferguson,” “Petition of Lucy Correll,” and “Petition of Sarah Church and Hannah Huse,” HR46A-H12.2, National Archives, Washington, DC.
84. Ibid.
85. Thayer County Judge’s Office, Thayer County Courthouse, Hebron, NE. Ferguson at the time of her death also owned real estate and two certificates of deposit worth $400.
86. Campbell, Man Cannot Speak for Her, 1:74.
88. Western Woman’s Journal, August 1882, 270.
90. Erasmus Correll, “Speech.” According to Correll’s speech, “Section 1 Chapter 17 of the Revised Statutes of this State, provides that ‘The widow of a deceased person shall be entitled to dower, or the use, during her natural life, of one-third part of all the lands whereof her husband was seized, and of all estates of inheritance at any time during the marriage, unless she be lawfully barred thereof.’ The law of curtesy is defined in Section 29 Chapter 17, and is as follows: ‘When any man and his wife shall be seized in her right of any estate or inheritance in lands, the husband shall on the death of his wife, hold the lands for life, as tenant thereof by curtesy’” (Correll’s italics).
96. “Teacher’s Contract,” MS 572, Box 1, S2.F4, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.
98. “Records of School Visitation and Formation of School Districts”, County Superintendent’s Office, Hebron, NE. The census lists A. Martha Vermillion’s occupation as “keeping house.” School records, however, indicate that she taught school from 1876 to 1878, earning $60 for a three-month period.
100. Hebron Journal, June 1, 1882.
101. Western Woman’s Journal, January 1882, 152.
103. Hebron Journal, June 1, 1882.
107. As DuBois notes, “Stanton was interested in the sexual exploitation of women, the nature of marriage, and the need for divorce reform. Anthony’s concerns were with the economic realm—the low wages, lack of mobility, and general powerlessness of working women. They extended their natural rights principles to these areas, and tried to link the demand for political equality with changes in women’s economic and sexual conditions.” See Elizabeth Cady Stanton–Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 94. For a discussion on Anthony and Cady Stanton’s involvement in labor reform, see DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, 105-61.
112. Western Woman's Journal, August 1882, 263; Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 274.
113. See, for example, "Work!," Western Woman's Journal, September 1882, 280.
114. Ibid.
116. Western Woman's Journal, April 1881, 10. The same information is printed in the Woman's Journal, April 30, 1881.
117. Western Woman's Journal, June 1881, 38.
120. Hebron Journal, November 1, 1877, 1.
121. Ibid.
122. Hebron Journal, April 17, 1879, 4.
123. Ibid.
124. Buechler, Transformation of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 144.
125. Ibid.
126. Ibid., 218.
130. "Far from providing a setting in which women liberated themselves from conventional views of sex relations," Jeffrey claims that "the frontier was an environment calling for a reaffirmation of woman's nature. Even suffrage and coeducation, supposedly two badges of frontier freedom, suggest how the new society failed to reinterpret woman's place in society." Julie Roy Jeffrey notes that there was nothing in particular about the frontier that "encourag[ed] women to break with prevailing concepts of the sexual order." As she concludes, "Just as women's participation in reform suggests that Western women were no more emancipated from social norms than their Eastern sisters, the evidence used to support the case for the West as a liberating environment, upon closer examination, proves weak." See Jeffrey, Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 181-90.