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Experiencing Women's History as a Documentary Editor

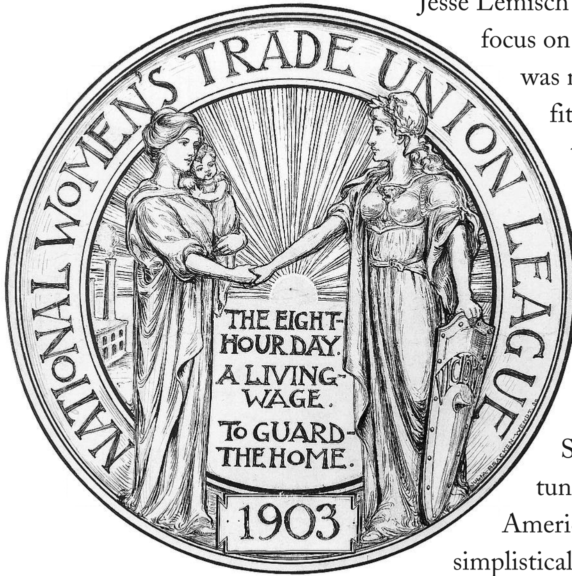
Ann D. Gordon

Historical editions that we recognize as women's history take the form, primarily, of the papers of individual women. We are Jane Addams, Frances Willard, M. Carey Thomas, Susan B. Anthony, or Jessie Frémont.[1] Such a state of affairs was not the inevitable outcome of the decision to include women's history in the National Historical Publications and Records Commission's publications program. If memory serves me well, one of the first completed editions in women's history supported by the NHPRC was the *Papers of the Women's Trade Union League.*[2] The Trade Union League, based in New York City and Chicago in the early twentieth century, built alliances between working-class, often immigrant, women in factory jobs and upper-class progressive women for the purposes of resisting exploitation, organizing unions, and fighting for safety in the workplace. Two aspects of that early edition are important to the history of editing women's history: first and obviously, the Commission assigned importance to the activities of women by funding it, and second, it ventured away from publishing the papers of individual leaders into the papers of a group of social activists. These were both markers of a public debate about the Commission's work during the 1970s. In anticipation of the American Revolution Bicentennial, historian

[1] This is a modest revision of a paper written for a panel on the past and future of historical editing at the annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in 2008. I thank Esther Katz for reading it in my stead. Richard Leffler edited the original and made valuable recommendations. This list of the women whose papers have received editorial treatment is not an exhaustive one. For Addams, see *The Jane Addams Papers* [microfilm] , ed. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1984), and *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams,* eds. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, Barbara Bair, and Maree de Angury (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003–). For Willard, see note 12 below, and for Thomas, see note 6. For Anthony, see *The Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* [microfilm], eds. Patricia G. Holland and Ann D. Gordon (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1991), and *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, ed. Ann D. Gordon (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997–). See also *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, eds. Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1993).

[2] *Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and Its Principal Leaders* [microfilm], eds. Edward T. James, Robin Miller Jacoby, and Nancy Schrom Dye (Woodbridge, Conn.: Research Publications, 1981).

Jesse Lemisch had criticized the NHPRC for a narrow focus on "the Papers of Great White Men." His was not simply a call for new characters to be fit into existing molds; "we need more than the papers of leaders," he wrote in 1971.[3] Four years later, in the year that I became an editor on Lemisch's recommendation, he amplified his critique in an article entitled, "The Papers of a Few Great Black Men and a Few Great White Women."[4] The women's editions were, he noted, "coming attractions." Still hopeful that editions might be attuned to social history, he wrote, "History in America is no longer defined so archaically, so simplistically, so exclusively, and so unselfconsciously as the history of 'notable,' 'outstanding' people."[5] The *Papers of the Women's Trade Union League* seemed to be an approximation of the social history edition that he championed. The League's papers, however, are a model with few imitators. Right from the start of the Commission's funding for women's editions, the more popular model for women's projects was to publish the papers of a "Few Great White Women," as Lemisch anticipated.



Emblem of the National Women's Trade Union League, drawn by Julia Bracken Wendt, c. 1908. (LC-USZ62-43017, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.)

It would be useful to learn what problem people thought they were solving by adding women's history to the NHPRC's program. Even without an oral history of the commissioners, it is possible to identify overlapping definitions of the problem. By one definition, the Commission needed to come to terms with discrimination. At the time of the birth of modern editing in the 1950s, the history of women was invisible: untaught in the academy, unwritten by the professionally trained, absent in textbooks, and undetected in most manuscript collections. Even their most obvious agitation—seventy years of demands for voting rights—was ignored in professional histories. Blindness about women was the contemporary norm.

[3] Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Papers of Great White Men: A Preliminary Critique of Current Documentary Publication Programs and Some Alternative Proposals," *American Historical Association Newsletter* 9 (November 1971): 7–21. Portions of this essay were republished as "The Papers of Great White Men," *Maryland Historian* 6 (Spring 1975): 43–50.

[4] *Maryland Historian* 6 (Spring 1975): 60–66.

[5] Ibid., 65.

Fixing discrimination matured into the mantra of "race, class, and gender." Scholars would apply their craft to new kinds of people. But that was more complicated than it first appeared. In ways Lemisch did not articulate, even the greats among women did not meet the standards of achievement and excellence associated with the white men whose editions were underway. In order to incorporate women, the standards shifted, but the new standards were then reserved for women. Imagine weighing the papers of M. Carey Thomas against those of Woodrow Wilson. Carey Thomas, from her perch at Bryn Mawr College, was a pioneer and national figure in the fields of higher education and training women for leadership.[6] To edit her papers would be a step toward correcting the ignorance about women in history. But why do it? What was her significance in American history? Many of Woodrow Wilson's papers have a similar focus on education, even on education at Bryn Mawr, but his story went on from there. The man became a president of the United States. The woman did not.

To justify an edition of her papers, the value of an *educator*'s papers was elevated in order to accommodate the social reality that she had gone about as far as a woman could go. The new standards of significance condescended to women's disabilities. In the wake of the microfilm edition of the Carey Thomas Papers, we have not seen a rush to edit the papers of *male* college presidents. That was not the plan.[7]

By another definition of the problem, it was time for funding to be informed by a new historiography. The ideas were the same as those debated among American historians at the time—the contest between social and political history, critiques of how the Cold War had reshaped the American memory, challenges by New Left historians to history written from the top down, and, of course, the voices rising from liberation movements for African Americans and women. The field of women's history was new. Writing in 1988 about the 1970s, historian Peter Novick described the early interests of its practitioners: he listed "overcoming historical neglect; stressing the contributions of the group; an emphasis on oppression . . . ; a search for foreparents in protest and resistance; finally, a celebration of . . . a separate cultural realm." And, he added, a refusal to accept "male-centered definitions of importance and excellence."[8] (I was so much a part of that, that I published an article in 1970 insisting that the history of

[6] *The Papers of M. Carey Thomas in the Bryn Mawr College Archives* [microfilm], comp. Lucy Fisher West (Woodbridge, Conn.: Research Publications, 1981).

[7] To be fair, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, 14 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972–1989), are an educator's papers, but that role of his is not the first one to come to mind.

[8] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 497.

woman suffrage should *not* be the focus of women's history.)[9] But in the 1970s the collective voice of woman's history was *not* what influenced the decisions about who and what to edit.

The famous list of people deemed meritorious enough to warrant an edition of their papers had a prerequisite: knowledge that there were papers to edit.[10] It is not as obvious as it sounds, and this knowledge, or the lack of it, built a bias in favor of manuscript collections, predominantly organized as collections of famous individuals, and housed in powerful repositories. There was little of modern historiography about it, nor was there much rethinking what editing might be or do.

The money flowed into editions for exceptional women whose achievements were easily recognized. While the Women's Trade Union League project began its speedy and efficient path to a microfilm edition, I went to work at another early project, the Jane Addams Papers.

Of necessity, the editors of women's papers developed skills different from their predecessors. Often the searching was more difficult because of the women's lower profiles and marginal positions. None of us has had the luxury of publishing comprehensive, annotated editions. We learned to make the most of facsimile editions. We invented styles of indexing for comprehensive microfilm editions. Later, we designed highly selective book editions that could be distinguished from documentary histories, point readers into the unwieldy facsimile edition, and meet the needs of readers as well as researchers. We were not alone in this; one of the first places I looked for tips was the *Black Abolitionist Papers*, a few years ahead of me in the new school of editing.[11]

Editors of women's papers invented models of editing while navigating the tension between biography and social history that swirled around our birth. The tension arose in part because as historians of women, we brought conflicting values to the editing project. But in many ways, the tension was built into the subject matter. The contradiction that Jesse Lemisch spotted between a publishing program aimed at the greats and a historical profession engaged with social history was not an abstraction for the editors working in African American and women's history. Our values and interests were shaped by the confusion.

[9] Mari Jo Buhle, Nancy Schrom Dye, and Ann D. Gordon, "Women in American Society: An Historical Introduction," *Radical America* 5 (July–August 1971); reprinted in Radical America Pamphlet Series, 1971. Revised for *Liberating Women's History*, ed. Berenice Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

[10] See *Report of the National Historical Publications Commission Advisory Committee on Women's Papers*, c. 1974. The Commission recommended the committee's list of seventy women whose papers should be published.

[11] *Black Abolitionists Papers, 1830-1865* [microfilm], eds. George E. Carter and C. Peter Ripley (New York: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1981), and *The Black Abolitionists Papers*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985–1992).

Susan B. Anthony chases former President Cleveland in May 1905, after he described women's clubs as a menace to domestic and marital happiness. Anthony kept the cartoon in one of her scrapbooks. (Unidentified and undated clipping Susan B. Anthony scrapbook 1905-1906, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.)

For two years, I traveled in search of the Jane Addams Papers. Addams was one of the few American women to avoid the erasure of women's history during the 1950s and 1960s: college students, myself included, read her *Twenty Years at Hull-House* at a time when a history major was unlikely to hear the name Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The breadth of her influence was staggering: the social sciences, social work, progressive education, international peace work, folklore studies, autobiography, urban reform, juvenile justice, social welfare, and women in politics—*all* claimed her as a founding mother. Although she wrote many books, considered solely as an author she had little significance. Her ideas had great impact but not because she functioned in the ways of an intellectual. She worked in a social rather than a political environment, and the institutions through which she worked were ones created on the fly, by herself or her friends, to solve specific problems.

Addams's life left a complex trail for the people tracking down and piecing together her papers. I read smart and funny lesbian love letters at Columbia and the New York Public Library. In Boulder, I was the first historian to read through boxes of office files recently retrieved from Switzerland documenting the work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, that contained, among many other things, accounts of women's conditions in Europe at the close of World War I. In Minneapolis at the Social Welfare History Archives, I waded

through countless files created by reformers concerned with old-age pensions and better housing and full of enthusiasm for dreams that would be realized in the New Deal.

I picked out the documents that met our criteria for the papers of Jane Addams. That was my job. But I was ignoring precisely those records that met a standard for a new vision of historical editing. I cherry picked the papers of groups to focus on an individual. Some of those groups were middle-class troublemakers, like the Woman's Peace Party that resisted World War I. Other groups were made up of trade unionists. From their residence on Halsted Street, Addams and her friends knew as much about the lives of families in an urban, immigrant community as anyone in America. Papers illustrative of what the residents of Hull House learned about their neighborhood are arguably more valuable than the record of a personal life among those residents.

These practices of selection were not unique to the Addams papers. Frances Willard's accomplishment was her skill as a leader, and the measure of her success lay in the records of her followers.[12] The same could be said of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, with the additional tension created by their politics of confrontation. Stanton's and Anthony's contributions to American history needed to be measured not only in their personal lives, but in the response of their followers, *and* in the reactions of politicians in state and federal governments. In other words, the personal papers of the people in these editions were not always the most revealing of their actions and values in American history.

The women's editors work hard to resolve the tension. In the *Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger*,[13] for example, there is abundant evidence about participants in the birth control movement. It cannot be systematic: the editors respond to the references that occur in Sanger's papers. It is not the same as an edition of the papers of each brave person who took the initiative to open a clinic or an edition of the records of those clinics or of the testimony of women who sought help. Nonetheless, the editors provide valuable help in understanding both the circumstances that moved Sanger to action and the experiences that attracted people to her cause. The same could be said for Sanger's opponents. The reader comes away with at least an introduction to, and probably a more thorough en-

[12] Willard's papers make up one series in the massive *Temperance and Prohibition Papers* [microfilm], eds. Randall C. Jimerson, Francis X. Blouin, and Charles A. Isetts (Columbus : Ohio Historical Society, 1977), and see also *Writing Out My Heart: Selections from the Journal of Frances E. Willard, 1855-96*, ed. Carolyn De Swarte Gifford (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

[13] *Margaret Sanger Papers* [microfilm], eds. Esther Katz , Cathy Moran Hajo, and Peter C. Engelman (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1996, 1997), and *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger*, eds. Esther Katz , Cathy Moran Hajo, and Peter C. Engelman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003-).

counter with, the fierce conflict over women's right to control reproduction that occurred in Sanger's lifetime.

If Peter Novick were to try again to make a quick list of essential elements in women's history thirty years later, he would, I think, be stumped. Historians of women still profess a conviction that "incorporating the history of women would enrich the study of history," to quote Alice Kessler-Harris in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and that historians would write better history if they considered all of the nation's inhabitants.[14] But during the last thirty years, women's history has become more complex and diverse as historians turned their attention to women of color and to immigrants, for example, and heeded the ways in which women *disagreed* as well as differed. Even the notion that women shared historical experiences on the basis of their sex is suspect nowadays.

Along the way, women's history became separated from the liberation movement that shaped its founding. Today's post-feminist graduate students reject histories that assume a model of oppression and resistance, and they detect that model in places my generation would never see it. Their circumstances tell them that no one needs or wants celebratory histories. The field is pressed on the one hand to mainstream the story—"get over it"—and on the other hand to yield to gender history—"men too are victims." The defense of women's history in this new environment is not obvious. But to quote Kessler-Harris again, without women's history, we risk overlooking "the particular ways in which women . . . engaged their worlds." This is especially true, she went on, "in areas where the history of women is still being excavated."

Beyond the university, the history of women bears a closer resemblance to its 1970s form. It is still "cool" in towns and states to celebrate women's accomplishments. The Stanton and Anthony Papers often benefits from the excitement when librarians and local historians volunteer to solve a problem for us. The history of oppressive disfranchisement and a hard-fought victory still resonates with and inspires the League of Women Voters. Even the right-wing gets into the spirit, reinventing Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton as leaders seeking to criminalize abortions—albeit without a source or document to stand on.[15] Some editors of the papers of women deal regularly with the fact that their subjects' aims are still *aspirational*. The English common law is back in vogue: individualism as a model for ridding society of social inequities is on the defensive

[14] Alice Kessler-Harris, "Do We Still Need Women's History?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 December 2007.

[15] The main source on this phenomenon is Mary Krane Derr, Linda Naranjo-Huebl, and Rachel MacNair, eds., *Prolife Feminism Yesterday & Today* (New York: Sulzburger & Graham Publishing, 1995). Any search on the worldwide web for the names of Stanton or Anthony will turn up many instances of this appropriation to a political cause they knew not of.

in some quarters.[16] State power as a substitute for old-fashioned patriarchy is an idea with a lot of political power. The notion of self-sovereignty is still under siege, especially in reproductive rights.[17] The "field" of women's history cannot at this moment tell us what to edit.

If I had to choose a new topic for an edition today, I would steer clear of biography. I would avoid heavy reliance on papers already collected and described. I would not worry too much about market research or evidence of an immediate audience for the finished product. I would want to be surprised by my own results; the investment would have an element of risk because I would not know the size or complexity of the "deliverable" when I first applied for a grant. I am not sure I would know all the ways to deliver the product at the start until I had found the papers I hoped to edit. I would think nationally rather than locally, though I will admit to some local or regional ideas that I think would be both fun and valuable. And of course I would consider the transformative powers of the worldwide web as a medium for publication.

As an historian, I have all kinds of odd knowledge about people, places, and papers that could be drawn upon to design an edition. As an editor, I have a few skills. I am quite good at finding historical sources. I am good at drafting a line of demarcation between papers that do and those that do not meet the objectives set for an edition and, equally important, at redrawing that line as knowledge increases. I know something about making the sources useful in multiple ways. I have the skill to be a transcriber, but like other former residents of the microfilm ghetto, I know how to add value to sources without investing such time in the texts.

So here is one of the editing projects I let my idle brain design. It entails creating a virtual edition of the documents created by a group of northern women about whom no one seems to care—the Woman's Relief Corps.[18] The Corps was associated with the Grand Army of the Republic, though it apparently decided along the way that its members need not demonstrate a direct connection to military service for the Union. Membership in the Corps seems to have exceeded membership in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union several times over, despite the claims by historians that the Temperance Union was the largest organized force in the Woman's Movement. In frontier communities like those in the

[16] See for example, Kathleen S. Sullivan, *Constitutional Context: Women and Rights Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[17] For one exploration of this problem, see Reva B. Siegel, "The New Politics of Abortion: An Equality Analysis of Woman-Protective Abortion Restrictions," 2007 *University of Illinois Law Review*: 991–1053.

[18] The Library of Congress maintains a bibliography on the Corps on its website at http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/gar/womans/womans.html.

Dakota Territory, the Corps preceded the Temperance Union. You assembled your Woman's Relief Corps and later added a local temperance union. One duty of women in the Corps was to be responsible for the states' homes for soldiers.

At first glance, the Corps might appear to be a classic women's auxiliary: dinners for the Grand Army of the Republic, beds for ailing veterans. But the group brought itself to my attention because its members stepped onto the stage of women's politics. Woman's Day at the South Dakota State Fair, September 1890: a parade of carriages, bands, and lines of marchers escorted nationally known suffragists through the fair grounds to a platform. There, fair-goers listened to speeches in favor of amending the state constitution at the upcoming election to give women the right to vote. The largest group in the parade carried the banners of the Woman's Relief Corps.[19] Early summer 1893, at the annual encampment of the Colorado and Wyoming Department of the Woman's Relief Corps: the president, Mrs. Gen. Carr, welcomed the women with a speech urging them to help pass Colorado's constitutional amendment for woman suffrage on the ballot that fall.[20] A few months later in Kansas: suffragists rallied in unprecedented numbers to launch their campaign for the amendment that would appear on the ballot in November 1894 and found their numbers swelled by the presence of members of the Woman's Relief Corps.[21]

I do not want to suggest that I have identified an underappreciated progressive force in the American heartland. I have no clue what these women wanted to do with the ballot when they got it. But it strikes me that historians should know the answer. Local and state histories of women in the Midwest and Great Plains cannot be told without encountering this large organization. It may be smaller in New England, but the local leaders published their minutes in Lucy Stone's *Woman's Journal* aimed at woman suffragists. I think I could find the papers.

I call it a virtual edition because I am not sure the subject needs even a digital, facsimile edition. I think it needs a spider's web—a carefully constructed map of where sources on this subject can be found. I make no prior claim to the significance historians should (or should have) paid to the story that I might make visible. But if a million women thought this organization worth their time, a way to become acquainted with each other, useful in training themselves as leaders, and nominally useful to their society, should we not know something about it?

[19] For a description, see *Papers of Stanton and Anthony* [microfilm], reel 28, frames 589–90.

[20] See *Selected Papers of Stanton and Anthony*, 5:523.

[21] For an unusual example of tracking the historical connections between the Woman's Relief Corps and other groups, see June O. Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas: Women's Organizations, 1880–1920," *Kansas History* 7 (Winter-Spring 1985): 291–306.