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So Pleasant to be a School Ma'am: The Civil War as an Educational Force for Women

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Abstract

This paper draws from a collection of over one hundred and fifty letters Northern women wrote during the American Civil War to consider aspects of women's education during this devastating national conflict that spanned four bloody years and involved millions of Americans. Women's historians have explored the Civil War's varied reverberations for women's social roles, gendered consciousness, and political organizing, yet its educational implications remain an under-theorized aspect of the war's complicated legacy worth exploring further. Scrutiny of the documentary traces of women's lives reminds us of the significant variability in what constitutes women's "leadership" and "advancement" historically. During war time, even the act of writing a letter offered women opportunities to advance their learning. The letters under study reveal four compelling aspects of women's education during the American Civil War: (a) women's varied attitudes toward new "opportunities" to teach and attend school, (b) the function of wartime correspondence as an informal educational tool, (c) home front demands as an obstacle to women's pursuit of formal education; and, conversely, (d) war events as an educational force in women's lives.

Key words: Women, education, school, civil war

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Introduction

This paper draws from a study of over one hundred and fifty letters Northern women wrote during the American Civil War to consider four aspects of women's education during this devastating national conflict that spanned four bloody years and involved millions of Americans. Women's historians (Silber, 2005; Attie, 1998; Faust, 1996; Clinton & Silber, 1992) have explored the varied reverberations of the Civil War for women's social roles, gendered consciousness, and political organizing, yet its educational implications for women remain an under-theorized aspect of the war's complicated legacy. Thus aspect is worth exploring further. In a century in which women's intellectual capacities were still deemed inferior to men's and their formal education considered of lesser importance than their other roles and responsibilities, the collection of letters from which this study draws suggests that some Northern women pursued educational opportunities in the midst of war even as national upheaval, gendered demands of war work, and concern for the men they loved consumed women's emotional and physical energies. Northern middle-class white women slipped into classrooms that soldiers left vacant, engaged with such informal educational mediums as letters, newspapers and literary societies, and pursued educational opportunities with varying degrees of reluctance and enthusiasm. For other women, demands on the home front forced them to defer their educational dreams.

Although the costs of the Civil War differed for men and women—over 620,000 men lost their lives in the war's hospitals, camps, and battlefields—and women's roles in the war have historically received little attention, contemporary social historians have worked to document the varied social, economic, and political effects of the war for women's lives nearly one hundred and fifty years after Confederate forces surrendered at Appomattox. The scholarship of Drew Gilpin Faust, Jeannie Attie, Catherine Clinton, Nina Silber, Patricia Richard and the Society for Women and the Civil War has contributed to this notable effort. Yet, much is left to mine in the diaries, letters, and other documents women left behind. In this paper, I draw from a unique collection of letters women wrote between the years 1862 to 1867 to focus on four aspects of women's education during the Civil War, a period in which American print culture flourished and citizens exchanged letters with a degree of vigor and fanfare previously unknown in American history: (a) women's varying attitudes toward formal "opportunities" to attend school or pursue teaching as a profession, (b) the function of wartime correspondence as an informal educational tool, (c) home front demands as an obstacle to women's education, and conversely, (d) war events as an educational force in women's lives.

The aspects of education legible in this collection of primary sources not only highlight rural and middle-class women's increasing engagement with formal education as opportunities continued to expand throughout the 19th century but they also underscore the significance of women's "informal" educational pursuits historically. Feminist scholars have argued that women's exclusion from formal education historically necessitates that educational historians document and analyze the "informal" tools of education women have utilized to nourish their development. Letter-writing, print culture, study groups, and bible readings are among the key vehicles women have seized to serve their intellectual development and social advancement (Martin, 1989).

This study is based on a unique collection of 158 letters that women sent to one Union soldier during the Civil War years. These primary sources, discovered in recent years at the bottom of a Lieutenant's dispatch box, bear characteristics that are unusual in collections of war correspondence (Author & Author, 2009).ⁱ Most notably, collections of women's letters that survived the weathering of soldier's marches and battles are rare. War collections typically contain soldiers' letters that wives and mothers preserved or the writing of military figures whose heroic acts or leadership historians deem worthy of scrutiny and preservation. In contrast, this collection is comprised of letters from young, single women—including female chums, love interests, one admiring cousin, and strangers who responded to the soldier's newspaper advertisement for correspondents. The letters thus provide insights into the preoccupations, activities, and "kinship work" (DiLeonardo, 1987) of dozens of unknown, rural, middle-class school-aged girls and women who lived during the Civil War. Also unusual is that the soldier, in a sense, edited the collection himself. He selected the letters from a larger number of originals, carried them throughout three years of military service, preserved them secretly throughout his life, and by happenstance or intent, left them for his granddaughter to discover more than a century after the Civil War ended. He did not retain any letters from his mother in the collection and left few other material possessions behind (Author & Author, 2009).

In addition, the letters reveal literate, optimistic, energetic writers who wielded their pens as patriotic, romantic, and educational tools and worked to "cheer" soldiers rather than lament hardships at home. As historian James McPherson notes, such encouraging missives from the home front are too often "lost to history."ⁱⁱ Epistolary art and labor are important aspects of studying women's educational development, for as literary scholar Sally L. Kitch argues, the letter historically has been a form "all but synonymous with *woman*, not because men wrote no letters, but because literate women were permitted to write little else" (1993, p.21). Epistles thus constitute a key genre women have utilized as an educational tool. Investigating women's letters can also help expand our thinking of what women's "leadership" and "advancement" have looked like at different historical moments. Such analysis is significant because the historical record, particularly in matters of war, often renders invisible women's efforts to advance their own skills. Weaving literary lines into a letter, learning new geography, or stealing a moment to read a newspaper might seem inconsequential in comparison to a soldier's sacrifices or a general's military maneuvers. Yet, such contextually-specific acts of women's educational agency reflect women's minute efforts to seize opportunities available to them. They remain enduring lessons for contemporary women seeking spaces to advance themselves.

Emancipatory Narratives of Educational "Opportunity"

In 1863, Sophronia Rogers, a nineteen-year-old teacher in Ohio, wrote to the Union Lieutenant, "I intend commencing my school next Monday. O! horror, how I hate it. I would just as soon go to my grave the first week." The "horror" Phrone expresses at the idea of entering a school room points to American women's complex relationship with the teaching enterprise since the profession first cracked, then threw open, its doors to admit them. Indeed, educational historian Marjorie Theobald (1999) argues that feminists have embraced far too eagerly as an emancipatory narrative of women's educational progress the remarkable demographic shift from male to female teachers that occurred during the 19th century. Although historians have rightly heralded the far-reaching changes in women's educational opportunities

that occurred during this era as symbols of women's political and social advancement, Phrone's comments suggest, and Theobald echoed, that individual women felt far more ambivalent about their educational opportunities than feminist historians' glowing reports sometimes indicate.

Phrone was among thousands of women whose presence in American classrooms contributed to changing formal education and the teaching profession during the 19th century. As scholars such as Jackie Blount (1998), Nancy Hoffman (1993), and Katharine Kish Sklar (1973) have explored, the steady increase in the numbers of women teachers across the 19th century is perhaps the most striking demographic change in American educational history. In the early 1800s, men constituted the majority of the nation's teachers, but by 1870, women became the majority (Fraser, 2007). By century's end, women held 70% of teaching positions and as much as 90% in cities. The development of the common schools, increased literacy, the need for teachers—as well as women's percolating discontent with gendered social restrictions—spurred women to pursue educational participation and equity with, in Blount's words, “a thirst and drive characteristic of persons long deprived” (1998, p.7). As Hoffman (1993) phrased it, during the 19th century, *teachers* became *women*. Given the almost total exclusion of women from formal education before 1800, the breadth and longevity of this demographic shift is a remarkable aspect of American women's advancement historically (Blount, 1998).

Yet, Theobald (1999) argued that however significant “feminist demands for the *right* to education” were to advancing women's status in the 19th century, “what happened to [individual] women as teachers—as subjectivities shaped by institutionalization, the ‘everydayness’ of waged labour, and the lifetime of self-censure demanded of them—may well be the antithesis” of women's broader emancipatory gains (p. 20-21). Phrone, for instance, seemed to begrudge many days she spent in Ohio's rural classrooms, perhaps because her pupils often felt restless, the work kept her away from her beloved sister, or she preferred to spend time among friends sledding in the fresh Ohio snow. Indeed, her presence in a fatherless household may have rendered her teaching labor a financial imperative and an onerous undertaking. She was 18 years old when the war broke out and her favored beau hurried to join the Union ranks. Her concern for his fate and the sheer effort required to contain wiggling bodies in school desks may have tempered the zeal this young woman felt for the “opportunity” to teach.

The specific circumstances of women's lives shaped their attitudes toward education. For example, feisty Lou Riggen, who was 22 years old when she began writing to the Lieutenant, taught in a rural area of Montgomery County, Kentucky for years. Lou likely had few other opportunities to earn a living in her small community. Her father, Reuben, died when she was four years of age, and her mother, Mary, died when she was twenty-one. Although Lou was a witty, educated woman who enjoyed poetry and music, wielded logic with ease, and sculpted sophisticated letters for the soldier's enjoyment, she described feeling “closely confined” as a teacher. As the eldest of three with a brother serving in the Union, Lou did not experience teaching as a liberating phenomenon but as a financial necessity. Answering the soldier's advertisement for correspondents in 1863 may have provided welcome relief from her daily labor.

For other young women, the mere idea of attending school during wartime evokes a lackluster response. In 1862, fourteen-year-old Fannie Meredith wrote, “Mae Lydick is going to

Danville to school...I intended to go but geve it up [sic]. There was so much excitement about war that I could not think of going.” Although formal education expanded women’s social and economic opportunities, and Fannie, like Phrone, later claimed a school ‘room of her own,’ the significance of lessons, quills, and schoolbooks seems to pale in comparison to the excitement of war. Such contextual forces are important aspects of analyzing women’s educational experiences.

In contrast to Phrone and Fannie’s feelings of reluctance, the Lieutenant’s young cousin, Rosa Crum, dreams wistfully of teaching. Yet, in the wake of the war and her mother’s death, she must grapple with domestic burdens that keep her dreams out of reach. Rosa, who lives in a small community in Southern Ohio, writes to the soldier from ages fourteen to eighteen. During these years, she feeds her young brothers, maintains her father’s household, contributes to farming and harvesting, and abides by her father’s wishes to defer her teaching goals until she is older. Indeed, at her father’s request, she adds to her household duties late in the war when she begins teaching her brothers at home. She describes her circumstances as “confining” but must await her father’s blessing before pursuing a teaching position—and she waits in vain for his approval throughout the war and beyond. Once the Lieutenant has returned safely from war and acquired a teaching position, Rosa expresses,

I almost envy you to think you are teaching school. I wish I was there to help you. I would then be in the occupation I have so long desired. It seems to me nothing would be so pleasant as to be a school maam.

Although Rosa’s domestic duties and patriarchal forces continue to thwart her personal hopes, she continues to direct her energy to a teaching future. Aware of the broader connections between women’s education and their professional opportunities, she writes,

I think the winter will close my schooling at Bainbridge and I must improve my time to every advantage...I think of teaching when I go out west...I will study hard and learn all I can that I may be the better prepared.

In Rosa’s experience, schooling is a fleeting gift for women and a key vehicle to expand her choices. Her earnest comments foreshadow broader changes for women on the horizon as communities establish training institutes and school boards develop certification mechanisms to professionalize the field (Fraser, 2007).

Theobald’s critique of the “grand narrative of emancipation” in which historians have sometimes cast women’s teaching is particularly useful in considering the pay discrepancies between men and women that were commonplace, and indeed, championed as a method for school boards to conserve money. An Ohio woman might earn \$16.25 a month teaching in the common schools in comparison to a man’s paycheck of \$27.81.ⁱⁱⁱ Such disparate tallies do not negate the cumulative force teaching held as a vehicle for women’s advancement—in fact, Catharine Beecher advocated for women to teach on this very basis (Sklar, 1978). However, in considering various factors that enabled women’s advancement as a group, it is important to clarify that individual women often felt ambivalent about these “opportunities.” Some women felt empowered in seizing the reigns of the classroom and others found trudging to the lectern

little cause for celebration. As Theobald (1999) reminds us and contemporary teachers are sure to echo, the “institutionalization” and “‘everydayness’ of waged labour” that shaped women’s teaching lives did not necessarily feel like “advancement.”

War Correspondence as an Informal Educational Tool

An aspect of women’s education during the Civil War invisible in our contemporary era of electronic communication is the significance of letter-writing. During the Civil War, letter-writing was serious business on both ends of the postal route. President Lincoln perceived the mail system of such importance to the war effort that in 1862 he appointed a special agent to oversee operations. The increasing efficiency of the postal service coupled with high levels of literacy in the North allowed writers to produce a steady stream of letters to sustain kinship bonds and romantic relationships across the miles. This correspondence was awaited eagerly. As one soldier expressed, “the ‘sojer’ boys answer no call with a greater zest than [letter call]!” (Bard, 1996). Another soldier captured the sentiment more concisely: “FOR GOD-SAKE RITE” [sic] (Wiley, 1952). In his classic studies of Union and Confederate soldiers, historian Bell Irvin Wiley estimated that 1,000 men, early in their service, could send out an average of 600 letters a day. One soldier’s tally of his 1863 mail revealed that he received eighty-five letters and wrote 164 others, thirty-seven of which were on behalf of other men (Wiley, 1952, p. 183).^{iv} Writing was distraction and duty, relief and ritual, comfort and craft.

Young women turned to pen and ink as a form of “war work,” a tangible way to contribute to the war effort. In the process, their writing also advanced their literacy and allowed them to practice “interchange of thought” with their correspondents. Northern writers called women to this war labor repeatedly during the day. In an article the *Atlantic Monthly* published in 1863, Gail Hamilton (Abigail Dodge) wrote, “Follow the soldier to the battlefield with your spirit. The great army of letters that marches southward with every morning sun is a powerful engine of war...” In what may have been daunting terms for her readers, Hamilton argued that women’s writing could determine the very outcome of the war. She insisted that although women cannot take up arms, “this issue of war depends quite as much upon American women as upon American men—and depends, too, not upon the few who write but upon the many who do not” (1863, p. 348). Hamilton’s call to epistolary arms emerged in response to a critique of Northern women’s lackluster support of the war effort as the war dragged on (Silber, 2005) and some women thus undertook “soldier letters” as their patriotic duty. Other women wrote to “while away the hours,” to forge romantic connections once the war disrupted traditional courtship rituals, and to improve their communication skills.

A less recognized but significant function of letters was their use as educational tools. Instructors in the common schools often incorporated letter-writing into writing instruction as a vehicle to teach composition skills (Halloran, 1990). Some young writers asked their correspondents to model penmanship and epistolary etiquette and elders, in turn, offered constructive criticism and guidance. Indeed, some women represented in this collection explicitly identified “self-improvement” as a goal in corresponding with soldiers. For example, in responding to the soldier’s advertisement for correspondents in 1863, one young writer asserts,

I am a school girl, and the greatest desire of my heart is a good education. I come to the conclusion that by interchange of thought I should be enabled to obtain usfull [sic] knowledge, and also, sometimes to drop a word or two to cheer the dull monotony of camp life.

Letter writing seemed a promising avenue for this young woman to both “cheer” the soldiers and to practice “interchange of thought” to advance her own learning.

Their efforts were often successful. In the case of soldiers, both Wiley (1952) and Brenner (Bard, 1996) note that the soldier’s letters they studied showed marked improvements during the war. Soldiers who “maintained a considerable flow of correspondence, despite their handicaps,” Wiley observed, “showed decided improvements in style during the course of their service” (1952, p.186). Women’s letters in the collection speak to similar improvement. For example, a letter Rosa Crum wrote at the beginning of their three year correspondence reads, “Papa received a letter from you daybeforeyesterday [sic] stating that you was well and getting along well. As pappu [sic] has not time to write I will have to write in behalf of him.” In contrast, a letter Rosa sent the soldier four years later reflects mastery of the epistolary form and the flowery prose of period literature. She writes,

I have just come from the concert and while all the rest of the family are wraped [sic] in sweet repose and perchance having pleasant dreams, I am here this cold still night all alone writing to my cousin with naught to disturb me save the ticking of the old clock.

Although Rosa’s maturation, formal education, and intellectual development likely propelled her shift from awkward grammar to smooth prose, the letters she wrote to soldiers undoubtedly advanced her skills as well.

Women’s approach to letter writing as a synthesizing educational activity highlights the significance of women’s informal educational practices during wartime. Writers often sculpt their letters using lines from canonical texts, poetry, and battle hymns and refer to classic and popular authors on the 19th century literary landscape. For example, Lou Riggen writes,

I have been reading some of Tennyson’s poems. As I thought it my duty to like so celebrated a poet, read and read, and do like some of them. What common people would call smoke he calls “the warm-blue breathings of a hidden hearth.” Isn’t that pretty?

In other letters, one writer refers to sleep as “nature’s sweet restorer,” another describes a photograph as a “thing of beauty that is a joy forever,” and another suggests soldiers’ deaths make “countless thousands mourn.” Such smooth mobilization of lines from classic American literature and patriotic anthems with few explicit references to their original sources reflects the increasing importance of the written word in 19th century culture and women’s awareness they were participating in a community of literate readers. It also reflects women’s approach to letter writing as a creative educational act through which they performed their learning, practiced interchange of thought, and used literature to articulate their ideas, emotions, and experiences. In

this manner, war time correspondence functioned as an important gendered educational tool for women with varying access to and engagement with formal education.

Variable Access to Formal Education

Civil War scholars have detailed the extensive labor both Northern and Southern women performed to support the war effort (Silber, 2005; Attie, 1998; Faust, 1996; Clinton & Silber, 1992). Understandably, women's domestic and kinship duties sometimes claimed their attention at the expense of their formal schooling. Both Northern and Southern women procured goods for soldiers, raised money, participated in local civic events, wrote letters, provided essential "kinship work" (Di Leonardo, 1987) to sustain families, farms and businesses, and grappled with additional duties that disrupted traditional gender roles. Given the geographic reality that battles primarily took place on Southern soil, by the end of the war, many Southern women faced near constant Union invasion and displacement. Northern women forged their understanding of the war through newspapers, letters from the front lines, changing demands in their daily lives as the war continued, and young men's dwindling numbers as they joined the Union ranks. As one writer reflected, "men are scarce around here these days," and fewer men meant more for women to do.

Some differences in women's prose and mechanics in the letters suggest the disruption domestic responsibilities posed for school-aged girls' and women's formal education. Although the letters reveal a group of literate women who clearly benefited from the spread of literacy, Ohioans did not seem to enroll their girls to the same extent as their boys in any year from 1837 to 1875 and girls and women's educational opportunities remained circumscribed throughout the century. By the start of the Civil War, Ohio boasted 13,192 common schools that served 364,000 boys and 322,000 girls. Yet, whereas 346,147 girls enrolled in Ohio schools in 1862, the daily attendance figure for that year was 189,972 (Ohio State Teacher's Association, 1862, p.447). War events undoubtedly shifted priorities, as Fannie Meredith's earlier comments indicate: "There was so much excitement about war that I could not think of going [to school]."

Other letters also shed light on these erratic attendance figures. In 1862, Ohioan Mollie Ward writes, "[mother] has been sick over three weeks and the principal part of the care of the household rested upon my shoulders...I have been so busy I have scarcely found time for reading the news." War events preoccupy some women, while laundry, cooking, and caring for ill family members preoccupy others. For Ell Hawn, a member of a farming family with ten children, writing skills seem the least of her worries. Her brother John's service throughout the war and her enlisted brother Marion's death in 1862 left her family with fewer hands to carry out the agricultural labor that dominated the economy of Knox County, Ohio where they lived. It is thus understandable that Ell's writing is circuitous in style and peppered with misspellings. For example, on September 27, 1862, after President Lincoln had circulated the Emancipation Proclamation, Ell writes, "And Allas the President has ishued a proclamation that all the negroes shall be set free by the first of January if the Southernns do not go Back as they once were & obey the laws of thire Country." Ell may have lacked the luxury of time to improve her skills and produce polished prose.

Lou Riggen's colorful description of her domestic responsibilities crystallizes the enormous labor involved in maintaining a 19th century household that undoubtedly consumed schooling hours for many young women. Responding to the soldier's query concerning her domestic skills, Lou clarifies that she once managed her household for six months to the "edification of all but Lou Riggen." "My! What an endless task of intricate labor," she writes with a dramatic flourish:

Brooms, carpets, beds, cobwebs, dinners, suppers, breakfasts, with all their attendant auxiliaries of good butter, sweet milk, done bread & not burnt either.... 'to be or not to be' good was always the question until dinner stood in all its dread array on the table. Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't. Don't I know how to boil & bake & fry & stew & roast beef & biscuit & pork & light bread & "season to taste [!]"

Although Lou describes this "dread array" of activities with a lively, humorous tone, she likely performed these duties in the wake of her mother's death in the early 1860s, and did so in addition to teaching school. Lou's remarks remind us that women's domestic responsibilities continued during war—as they do today—regardless of the number of men seated at the table.

The Civil War as an Educational Force

Although domestic demands challenged Lou and interfered with Rosa's dreams to teach, the Civil War was influential in spurring many women to become students and teachers. As the battlefields drained schoolrooms of its men, administrators turned to women to fill vacant desks (Blount, 1998). Statistics from Ohio, the home state of many women in this collection, capture this phenomenon. For example, Ohio men outnumbered women in teaching by more than 2,000 in the 1850s and 740 in 1861. In contrast, during the war years, an estimated five thousand Ohio teachers joined the service and Ohio women surpassed men in teaching for the first time in history. By 1863, women outnumbered men by 3,890 (Ohio State Teacher's Association, 1876, p. 448) and they constituted the majority of Ohio teachers thereafter.

Examples in the collection also indicate the opportunities that print culture, men's travel reports, and letters provided rural, Northern women for learning about distant locales and events that were, until this point, perhaps unimaginable and irrelevant to the contours of their daily lives. Letter writers sometimes mention Southern geography, battle particulars and political events. Others inquire about the details of marches and engagements. The railroads, the telegraph, and newspapers increased efficiency in transferring information and family members' access to war news. In addition, the war personalized distant geography to women who felt anxious for their loved ones states away.

A striking comment Edith Welker offers in an 1862 letter hints to this subtle aspect of correspondence for women distanced from the frontlines. She writes, "the Rebels have possession of Frederickburg [sic]. I suppose you knew where that is. It is in Virginia." Although Edith's treatment of this key battle is limited to this cursory line, and she assumes the soldier knows the location of Fredericksburg, her reference reveals how war reports opened a geographic world in print for Northern young women as soldiers encountered that world

firsthand. Edith learns the location of this place called “Frederickburg” in “Virginia” because a battle took place there, newspapers reported it, and community members discussed it.

Women are sometimes painfully aware that gendered restrictions may limit their geographic education to the realm of print. Indeed, at times women convey a degree of gendered envy for soldiers’ mobility and agency, if not for the circumstances that necessitate men’s travel. In one letter, a writer comments on the soldier’s travels with a degree of regret. She writes, “I should like much to visit the hallowed spot [of President Washington’s grave], but as I cant be a soldier suppose I will never have that pleasure.” She underlines the word “can’t” to emphasize her point that gender shapes her choices and opportunities. Women’s access to information, like their travel, could also be constrained as a result of gender. Despite the proliferation of news sources and the significance of the war for men and women alike, one writer’s passing remark indicates that women sometimes relied on their fathers and brothers to provide political news. Ell Hawn writes, “Pa did not stay [at the political meeting] so I cannot tell you how it went off.”

Other women describe float decorations, fund raisers, and political tensions with a local flavor that seems disconnected from the fundamental divisions driving the war. For example, as if national conflicts were a mere contest of ribbons and bows, Rosa Crum insists in a fierce, patriotic tone that the Republican float in the next community parade will beat that of the “Butternuts.” Newspapers’ separation of “ladies sections” from “war news” reinforced the gendered understanding of war and politics as men’s business, presenting challenges to women who wished to learn more about political events. Thus, even as Edith Welker collected tidbits of geographic information and Rosa learned about community tensions, women’s ability to access information and develop their political knowledge remained inextricably linked to gender.

Gendered Legacies from the Civil War

Women’s writing from more than a century ago remains compelling for the insights it offers into white, rural, middle-class women’s experiences during a war that remains the bloodiest, and the most analyzed, in American history (McPherson, 1988). Preserving and exploring primary source documents expands our knowledge concerning women’s daily lives and contributions. Yet, perhaps of greater import for women’s educational history, these writings underscore the linkages between formal and informal education and the significance informal educational tools had for women’s intellectual development. Even as common schools expanded, and women trickled into classrooms at all educational levels, women’s access to formal education varied significantly on the basis of race, socio-economic class, citizenship, and region. Literate women’s engagement with the informal educational tools of letter-writing, newspapers, literary societies, and Bible study groups provided key opportunities to develop their skills, supplement their formal education, and provide “interchange of thought.” Rosa Crum and Ell Hawn’s experiences are sobering reminders that women’s educational advancement remained of secondary importance to their domestic responsibilities.

In addition, these letters remind us that we must remain vigilant to the intricacies of what women’s “advancement” and “leadership” have looked like at different historical moments. As Phrone and Lou trudged to their classrooms, they may not have experienced their labor as liberating or recognized their role in the significant historical shift in which women became

bearers of knowledge. As Rosa dreamed of teaching and dashed off yet another letter to the Lieutenant, she may not have recognized her quill and ink were educational tools that helped synthesize her learning and advance her skills. As Eliza avoided school in the flurry of war events and Phrone approached her classroom with “horror,” they could not have realized how their lived experiences complicate the “grand narrative of emancipation” in which historians have often cast women’s educational opportunities. Exploring such complexities enriches our understanding of women’s educational history.

Contemporary educators can gain insight into women’s educational advancement through close scrutiny of the ways crises both unlock and reinforce gendered norms, and family and context both interrupt and facilitate women’s education. Indeed, at first glance one woman’s letter to the front lines may seem inconsequential to advancing women educationally. However, a closer look reveals that women pursued what acts of educational agency were available to them during this devastating national conflict. Rural school girls and teachers, who could not serve in traditional leadership roles, who were primarily confined to the home front, and who had few educational or professional choices in their small communities, nevertheless seized minute opportunities to advance their learning. They grappled with their responsibilities, dreaded or dreamed of schoolrooms, and learned of far away places while they watched, waited—and wrote—from the home front.

ⁱ The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions for this essay. All quotes from women’s letters are excerpted from (Author & Author, 2009). This collection would not have been possible without the work of (name). Also see the introductory remarks for more information on the letters, the growth of scholarship on women’s Civil War history, and the significant role print culture played in creating a climate in which war letters and photographic images were welcomed. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of AERA and Research on Women and Education (RWE).

ⁱⁱ See James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 133, 139.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on Ohio teaching, see Ohio State Teachers Association (1876). *A history of education in the state of Ohio: A centennial volume*. Columbus, OH: Gazette Printing House.

^{iv} See Bard, D.B. (1996). *Friend Alice: The civil war letters of captain David D. Bard, 7th and 104th Regiments, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, 1862-1864*. (J.T. Brenner, Ed.). Kent, OH: Scholar of Fortune Publications.

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Biography

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