

Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics

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Review

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Gender roles

The ideal woman and antebellum politics

In the acknowledgements section of **Free Hearts and Free Homes**, Michael Pierson writes that as an undergraduate student at Gettysburg College, he changed "from a reader of Civil War military history into a historian interested in the interactions between society and politics." Civil War historians should be grateful for the conversion. Pierson's book is a major contribution to our understanding of how the antebellum political parties wooed voters, developed their distinct platforms, and ultimately divided the nation into warring camps. Drawing on a rich array of newspapers, letters and literary publications, as well as Pierson's three previously published articles, this book links party rhetoric about Free Men and Free Soil to the less well-studied rhetoric on Free Hearts and Free Homes. By exploring themes rarely seen as central to politics, including courtship, romance and the structure of the family, Pierson provides new answers to the question of what enabled the North and South to see each other as foreigners and enemies.

Free Hearts and Free Homes moves chronologically from the formation of the Liberty Party in 1840 through Lincoln's election in 1860. Yet the introduction makes clear the essential contribution of the market revolution, already more than two decades old by 1840. As Americans attempted to cope with the rapid but uneven spread of a cash economy, commercial farming, and urban wage labor, political parties laid claim to different economic constituencies. Pierson argues that these economic changes raised six contentious issues which divided political parties: the role of women in the wage

economy, the role of women in public, the language of courtship, the ideal relationships between husbands and wives, proper roles for masculine men, and the emancipation of slaves. One of Pierson's most interesting arguments is that voters were drawn to political parties which articulated and portrayed a vision of the family that matched the voters' own beliefs. Liberty Party men, Free Soilers, Republicans and Democrats developed party loyalties and a sense of shared identity based in part on the gender culture of the party.

In the first chapter Pierson explores the evolution of Liberty Party ideas on gender and how these helped to bind and then divide the party. At first, the Liberty Party was quite conservative on gender issues. However, as the party base changed to include more members whose own families had been reshaped by female participation in the market and voluntary associations, the party's positions on gender changed. The strong belief in male dominance in the home gave way to a "kindler, gentler patriarchy" in which men held power, but women could use their moral influence to shape society. By including discussions of courtship, romance and gender relations in party newspapers, the Liberty Party garnered wider support than its antislavery agenda might otherwise have drawn. However, these issues also opened arenas for conflict as different constituencies vied for supremacy within the party. The Liberty Party's successors would be more successful in using gender to help manage and mask divisions and to expand to new constituencies across the North.

The Free Soil Party, founded in 1848, welcomed women far more than Liberty had, and women repaid the party by serving as some of its most able and vocal writers. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jane Gray Swisshelm, Clarina Nichols and others rejected the women's rights demands of Garrisonian abolitionists, but brought an "underappreciated note of radicalism in the otherwise rather tepid anti-slavery chorus of male politicians" as Pierson writes on page 48. Bound by a belief that the Constitution protected slavery where it currently existed, male Free Soilers failed to condemn slavery's moral outrages, preferring to focus on its economic and political effects. Free Soil women filled in that gap, stressing the impact of slavery on both black and white families and urging a higher law argument that placed moral beliefs over constitutional interpretation. These two competing strains of Free Soil thought could have led to major divisions within the party. However, by portraying the division as the result of gender roles, the Party could place both interpretations before the public, impressing moderate voters with their restraint and enjoying radical support based on their moral arguments.

Pierson also examines the Democratic and Republican parties, making a convincing case that their increasingly divergent beliefs about gender helped bind their constituencies ever more tightly to the parties. The slow expansion of the market revolution in the South ensured that many southerners retained a far more hierarchical, patriarchal family than urban northerners, but had a family structure in common with more rural northerners. Pierson argues that while slaveholding divided southerners amongst themselves and from the North, a strong belief in male rights and a rejection of increasing economic and political access for women united them across geographic and class lines. Republicans also used gender to unite their party, rewriting the story of John and Jessie Fremont's elopement to stress the masculine self-made man, the egalitarian relationship, and the power of Republican Party affiliation to win young partisans sexy, virtuous wives! The unprecedented public presence of Republican women at 1856 campaign events, parades, rallies and performances underscored the Republican commitment to a new understanding of gender roles.

By 1860, the Republicans stood alone against the Democrats, and began to move closer to the center on northern gender norms in order to garner the widest possible constituency. At the same time, more radical Republicans, including Charles Sumner and Owen Lovejoy, adopted Republican women's emphasis on the evil impacts of slavery on both black and white southern families. The contrast between the gender roles of north and south had never been more clearly drawn, a fact which Pierson believes helped contribute to the onset of war. On page 187, Pierson writes that portrayals of the South "as a land of aristocratic marriage practices and deviant sexuality" had already succeeded in convincing many northerners that the South was a foreign society that threatened their values. Having gone that far, war seemed more like a battle against a hostile and different culture than a civil war against people whose values they shared."

Free Hearts and Free Homes is crisply written, with a delightfully clear argument and engaging and persuasive use of supporting examples throughout the text. A major strength of the book is Pierson's extensive use of both newspaper and literary sources. The bibliography lists eighty partisan newspapers in seventeen states, and these are liberally quoted throughout the text. In addition, Pierson carefully examines the short stories, serialized novels and advice columns printed in party newspapers. Whether analyzing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or the less famous fare that filled newspaper pages, Pierson argues that literature was not filler to entertain in between election results, but a

fundamental way to express the party's political platform on gender. Pierson also addresses a remarkable array of historical debates in his work, challenging previous interpretations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's writings, the reasons for political affiliation, and the role of anti-slavery women. However, he does not clutter the text with references to other historians. When appropriate, Pierson makes clear how his arguments differ from others, and how he has built upon, challenged, or chosen to ignore other works in his field. However if you want the details, you will have to read the footnotes. In the end, Pierson makes his point not by debating others but by redefining the argument. At the end of the book you cannot help but agree with him that gender played a central role in creating a shared identity among antebellum voters and in shaping the political debates which ultimately divided the nation.

Reviewed by Beth A. Salerno, Assistant Professor of History at Saint Anselm College, Manchester, NH. Dr. Salerno has a book on female anti-slavery societies forthcoming from Northern Illinois University Press and is working on a biography of New Hampshire abolitionist Mary Clark. She can be reached at bsalerno@anselm.edu.