

### Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction

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## Review

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**Lamphier, Peg A.** *Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage*. University of Nebraska Press, \$55.00 ISBN 080322947X

In search of alimony

The end of a political marriage

Peg Lamphier's book focuses on the marriage of Kate Chase and William Sprague and she has produced a work that is a combination of biography and political science. Lamphier examines the extant personal and political writings of both of her subjects as well as other contemporary sources such as legal documents, newspaper accounts, letters to and from friends and relatives, and the papers of Samuel P. Chase to reveal that Kate Chase was very much a political woman and that a number of men consulted her before making political decisions and valued her opinions and expertise.

Kate Chase was the daughter of Samuel P. Chase, a prominent 19th-century politician from Ohio. Chase's mother died when she was very young and her father sent her away to boarding schools so that she could get the best education possible for a female. She had tired of school and longed to return home, but her father continually insisted that she pursue her studies. She got the chance to return to Ohio when he was elected Governor and quickly made herself indispensable to him so that he would not send her away again. The plan worked as Samuel P. Chase's second wife died and he relied on his eldest daughter to serve as his host. Kate Chase continued to serve her father when he became a U.S. Senator and later when President Lincoln appointed him Secretary of the Treasury and eventually Chief Justice of the United States. As her father's host, confidant, and advisor, Kate Chase became intimate with the Washington, D.C., social scene. She was young, charming, highly intelligent, and apparently as politically astute as most of the men in the nation's capital. Kate Chase was very much involved in national politics as well, albeit in a backdoor kind of way. Many politically ambitious young men vied for her hand in marriage, but it was

a flamboyant, young leader of the Rhode Island militia who caught her eye.

William Sprague was born into a wealthy Rhode Island family that had made its fortune in textiles. Sprague inherited the family business at a young age after his father was murdered and his uncle died. He took the already successful company and quickly built it into a cotton-milling empire and a multi-million dollar corporation, making himself an extraordinarily wealthy man in the process. Lamphier asserts that despite his wealth and status the fact that Sprague grew up without a male role model and was subject to the ravages of the market economy, made him acutely insecure and unsure of himself and his manhood. In 1859 at the tender age of 29, William Sprague became the Boy Governor of Rhode Island. When war broke out between the United States and the Confederate States, Sprague quickly offered the United States the services of the Rhode Island militia, and even led the unit into battle at the first battle of Bull Run. Sprague used his military record as a springboard into national politics and got himself elected to the Senate. But he also had an untoward side, one that resulted in his having to go to Europe for an extended period to avoid marrying a woman he impregnated and thus also to avoid taking responsibility for the welfare of his putative eldest daughter. He had a fiery and violent temper that was most conspicuous when he was inebriated, a condition that he, his friends, and family members found Sprague in often.

Chase and Sprague first met in Cleveland, Ohio in September 1860 at a dedication of a monument to Oliver Hazard Perry. They met again in Washington, D.C., during the summer and early fall of 1861 and that is when the relationship started. The initial courtship began with an exchange of letters, but stopped for a time when Sprague used his relationship with Kate Chase to try to lure her father, Salmon P. Chase, who was Secretary of the Treasury at the outbreak of war, into a business venture that would have amounted to treason had it actually come to fruition. Salmon P. Chase wisely declined the offer. After a time, the couple began exchanging letters again and though they had disagreements, Kate Chase and William Sprague married in November of 1863. Kate Chase could not have made a worse choice of a life mate. William Sprague was a seemingly able businessman, but as a politician he was mediocre at best and as a husband and father he was an abysmal failure. It is clear why Sprague would select Kate Chase to be his bride, but it is mystifying why she settled for him. Kate Chase certainly wanted a spouse whose political star was on the rise and Sprague's did seem to be that at the time of the marriage. She also wanted to live a comfortable life and Sprague was by far the wealthiest of all of her suitors.

But during the courtship, Sprague revealed himself to be a corrupt businessman and politician, an alcoholic, and generally a cad, and Chase knew these things before she married him.

The marriage of Kate Chase and William Sprague began with a separation, a circumstance that became the norm over the course of the couple's contentious nuptials. Sprague spent a lot of time in Rhode Island tending to his business affairs, and having numerous extramarital affairs as well. Kate remained in Washington, D.C., serving as hostess for her father. Despite much separation, Chase became pregnant and in January 1865, delivered a son, the first of four children. By 1868, evidence indicates that Sprague was abusing his wife. Chase spent even more time away from him, trying to help her father become president and, after Samuel P. Chase's death in 1872, living abroad with her children. When the Panic of 1873 struck, William Sprague's industrial empire began to crumble. Though Sprague had frequently accused his wife of having affairs, no proof existed before 1874, when Chase began a relationship with Roscoe Conkling, a prominent New York politician. The combination of his worsening business, his faltering political career, and his failing marriage made William Sprague a volatile man. He increasingly became more abusive, more openly adulterous, and more discernibly drunk.

In an effort to appear manly and honorable, William Sprague publicly threatened to kill Roscoe Conkling. One day in 1879, Sprague actually chased Conkling from Sprague's Rhode Island home at the barrel of a shotgun. Sprague was highly intoxicated and rather than let the matter end at the house, he chased Conkling into town and threatened him again in a very public manner. After that incident, which Lamphier terms the Narragansett Affair, Sprague locked Chase away in their home and refused to let her out or to allow people in to see her. She escaped from him after he tried to throw her out of a second story window and filed for divorce on grounds of cruelty, adultery, and habitual drunkenness. In the suit, Chase petitioned for alimony, custody of her four children, and the restoration of her maiden name. The court granted Chase her divorce and the use of her maiden name, but refused to award alimony, most likely because of her well-known extramarital relationship with Conkling. She also got custody of her daughters, but not of her son who was old enough to choose his own residence and opted to remain with his father. The boy was nearly as dissipated as his father and eventually committed suicide.

Chase never remarried although she could have had she so chosen. She ended her days in poverty, dying in July 1899 of kidney failure. Sprague remarried a mere ten months after the divorce to a woman he had been having a relationship with for quite some time. Despite the failure of his industrial empire, he was very wealthy and lived the remainder of his days in luxury. He died in Paris in 1915 of spinal meningitis.

Lamphier raises some important issues in her book. She makes a case that some women were rather directly involved in politics and political decision making. Kate Chase frequently sat in the gallery with other women spectators and listened to speeches and observed the legislative process as it unfolded. Men actively sought out Chase's advice and counsel. They trusted her opinions and were not afraid of her intelligence. Lamphier asks the worthwhile question of whether other women in the gallery had comparable political influence. Lastly, Lamphier highlights the fact that the so-called lower orders did not have a monopoly on domestic abuse. Studies have shown this to be the case in contemporary times, and now we have evidence that abuse occurred in wealthy 19th-century homes as well. Alas, there was no happy ending for this 19th-century power couple.

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