

The Weston Sisters: An American Abolitionist Family

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Recommended Citation

Coryell, Janet L. (2015) "The Weston Sisters: An American Abolitionist Family," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.3.19

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss3/18>

Review

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Summer 2015

Chambers, Lee V. *The Weston Sisters: An American Abolitionist Family*.
University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781469618173

Sisters Driving and Defining an Antebellum Abolitionist Family

In the days of Bush III and Clinton II, it is not surprising to view political life in America as a bit of a family affair. After all, this is a country where a father-son combination became president--twice--and a grandson followed his grandfather president into office. Families regularly supply related candidates for state and local offices as well. This long-standing tradition of practicing politics in the family inhabits the foreground in Lee V. Chambers' new work, *The Weston Sisters: An American Abolitionist Family*.

The title is a bit of a misnomer, since there was more to the family than just the sisters. Papa Warren and Mama Anne Weston had eight children, two boys and six girls, all of whom lived to adulthood. The girls--Maria, Caroline, Anne, Debora, Lucia, and Emma--were all involved in the antebellum abolition movement to a profound degree; the parents and boys, not so much. Maria, the eldest daughter and the only one who married, became the best known of the lot, possessed of a happy facility with language that resulted in a most memorable phrase oft-repeated in histories of the movement. When confronted with a threatening mob outside a meeting of the Boston Female Antislavery Society in 1835 and asked by the mayor to leave the premises, Maria Weston Chapman resisted. "If this is the last bulwark of freedom," she said, "we may as well die here as anywhere." Her sisters, particularly the three eldest, joined forces with Chapman to wage war on slavery in such uncompromising fashion. Staunch Garrisonians, the women refused to engage politically with more conservative women in the antislavery organization or, indeed, with government at all as long as slavery was the law of the land. These women fought against slavery, not for woman's rights or the other reform movements of that period.

Chambers details well the ins-and-outs of supporting the abolitionist movement, including the unvarnished opinions Chapman and her sisters held of the men in the organizations. They thought little of men's ability to do what was needed for the cause, in part, argues Chambers, because of the weak men who inhabited the household in which they were raised—an intemperate (for most of his life) father, two selfish and lazy brothers. Such a weak and failed patriarchy provided these women with an unparalleled opportunity to shed any deference to men not only in the home, but at large in the world. As a result, they took action without waiting for male approval and worked together as a unit to accomplish their goals of ending slavery in America.

Therein lies the crux of the matter and what sets this book apart from others on the antislavery movement and even from other works on filial devotion to the cause. Writing what is ultimately a five-person biography would give any historian pause. But Chambers' organization is brilliant. She interprets these women's work within a framework of their sisterhood, rather than approaching them as somewhat disconnected individuals. All the tasks that they had to accomplish as members of a family, as members of a household (or two or three, depending on where they were living), as single women, as women who had to care for others and themselves, both in terms of making a living but also in terms of cooking dinner, providing childcare, caring for clothing, shopping for supplies (both household and for the cause)—the myriad activities that went into simply living life in an urban area in the antebellum era, combined with the interest in and dedication to and activities undertaken for a political cause did not happen in isolation. The sisters' economy, political, social and religious lives interweave as each chapter traces the group's actions within those larger divisions, then goes back over the same time period, looking at it from the next angle. This is a thoughtful and enlightening approach to the topic and to this most interesting group of unusual women that serves as a model to practitioners of biography as well as history of the antebellum period. There are no monoliths here; the patriarchy is so weak that the underlying world of women can be not only perceived but studied in its own right; the movement's cost to women supporters is laid out, not only in its political terms, but in the social and familial bonds affected by taking such unpopular actions. Well done.

Janet L. Coryell is Professor of History at Western Michigan University and is author of Neither Heroine nor Fool: Anna Ella Carroll of Maryland, as well as co-editor of numerous works on women's political lives, and screenwriter of the documentary film "A Team of Their Own: Stories from the All-American Girls

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