

# This Grand Experiment: When Women Entered the Federal Workforce in Civil War-Era Washington, D.C.

Jane E. Dabel

California State University, Long Beach, [jane.dabel@csulb.edu](mailto:jane.dabel@csulb.edu)

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## Review

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**Ziparo, Jessica.** *This Grand Experiment: When Women Entered the Federal Workforce in Civil War-Era Washington, D.C.* University of North Carolina Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9781469635972

*This Grand Experiment* is an eye-opening study which reveals the complicated relationship between female civil servants and women engaged in the suffrage movement during the American Civil War. Ziparo reveals how female federal employees worked in critical jobs during the war but had to do so under "a veil of subordination" (3). In other words, female employees had to emphasize their dependence on men and downplay the value of their contributions to keeping the government running to secure and maintain these federal clerkships. As a result, very few of these female employees were engaged in the women's rights movement or considered themselves suffragists. But Ziparo suggests that the efforts of these women to secure these positions in the first place and then lobby for equal pay once they were employed reveals how they did attempt to expand the traditional social and economic roles that women were expected to adhere to in the 19th century.

The book is very clearly structured with seven chapters, beginning with an examination of how women managed to gain employment in the federal government in the first place. By exploring application letters and employee files, Ziparo reveals that many women sought work in the federal government because they were looking for intellectually stimulating jobs that paid higher wages than those traditionally held by women during this period (i.e., teaching). In Chapter 2, she explores how women were forced to present themselves as dependent to secure employment. Ziparo carefully examines how women lobbied for letters of recommendation from critical male contacts to get hired. Chapter 3 discusses the types of work that women did in these clerical positions, while Chapter 4 provides a look at their lives outside of work in a city set on

the front lines of the Civil War. In Chapter 5, Ziparo provides a fascinating analysis of a sex scandal that erupted in the Treasury Department in 1864. In particular, the event revealed stereotypes of the sexuality of female federal employees. Chapter 6 examines struggles that women faced in trying to keep their positions during a time of tremendous economic and political volatility and, the final chapter explores women's efforts to secure pay which precipitated the congressional debate that nearly secured equal pay for female clerks.

The strengths of Ziparo's book are many. In particular, she provides a very nuanced view of these female federal workers. For example, while Ziparo illustrates that these women did not view themselves as part of the larger women's rights movement, nevertheless they did challenge traditional gendered expectations about women's abilities by merely engaging in this work in the nation's capital. Ziparo refers to these women as "early, often unconscious, labor feminists" (5).

The significance of Ziparo's argument (building on the work of Dorothy Sue Cobble) is that it illustrates that efforts to gain women's rights went far beyond the organized suffrage movement of the 19th century. This demonstrates that there were a wide variety of ways that women sought economic and political equality in the nineteenth century.

The significance of women's work in the federal government cannot be understated. In particular, federal female employees demonstrated that women were highly capable of performing clerical work, thereby marking a shift to the administrative labor sector which would come to be dominated by women. Moreover, the sheer presence of so many female workers in Washington D.C. helped to normalize this work of females. In stark contrast to the experiences of Rosie the Riveters who were forced out of factories at the end of World War II, female federal employees did not face massive layoffs at the end of the war. Instead, increasing numbers of women went into clerical work in both the government and private sector in the decades following the end of the Civil War.

Ziparo's use of sources is impressive. She created profiles of more than 3,000 women employed in government positions during the Civil War era, relying heavily on information available in the Federal Register, which listed the name of employees, the

departments in which they worked, and their salaries. Ziparo fleshed out these profiles with information from the census, personal diaries, newspapers, legal documents, and congressional reports. In spite of this vast array of sources that she uncovered, Ziparo is upfront about their limitations. In particular, she explains that it is difficult to quantify exactly how many female employees worked in federal jobs during the war. Moreover, the majority of the documents referred to the experiences of white, middle-class clerks. Ziparo did find some of evidence, however, of African-American female workers during this era.

Ziparo is also careful to point out that, in spite of the gains made by female workers during the Civil War era, they also faced a severe backlash as they challenged gender norms. In particular, she examines the failure of female employees to obtain equal pay even when they performed the same duties as men. Moreover, women were forced to construct a "narrative of dependence" to get hired and to remain in their jobs. As a result, women emerged from this era frustrated with limitations that they faced based on their gender. Ziparo argues that it is precisely this frustration that led many of these women to begin to advocate for women's rights and ultimately the right to vote.

Ziparo's study builds on the work of Cindy Sondik Aron who examines the emergence of white-collar workers – both men and women – during this era. By contrast, Ziparo focuses her study exclusively on female federal employees and also considers their experiences in public spaces. Ziparo is careful to point out that female federal workers were never a homogeneous group, working in different departments, interacting with different supervisors, and being compensated at different levels.

In this excellent book, Ziparo illustrates how women's work during the Civil War made them a regular part of the nation's bureaucracy while also highlighting the inequality that they faced. In turn, many of these women did eventually embrace a women's right agenda after experiencing the full brunt of labor inequality in their work as federal clerks. While Ziparo's story is not one of triumph for these women, it does illustrate how the first wave of female employees in government jobs - and the frustration that they experienced in being confined to such limited roles - ultimately convinced them that collective action to fight for gender equality was necessary.

*Jane E. Dabel is a professor of history at California State University, Long Beach. She is the author of A Respectable Woman: The Public Roles of African American Women in 19th-Century New York (2008). Her current research explores the saving patterns of depositors of New York City's Freedman's Savings Bank and the socio-economic lives of African Americans following the Civil War.*