

A Civil Life in an Uncivil Time: Julia Wilbur's Struggle for Purpose

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Review

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Whitacre, Paula Tarnapol. *A Civil Life in an Uncivil Time: Julia Wilbur's Struggle for Purpose*. University of Nebraska Press, \$32.95 ISBN 978612348551

Wars oftentimes cause individuals to challenge themselves to reach beyond traditional expectations. In Paula Tarnapol Whitacre's biography of Julia Wilbur, Wilbur breaks through the traditional expectation of female dependency for a mid-nineteenth century unmarried, white, middle-class woman like herself. Instead, she becomes an independent, middle-class working woman, and social reformer. Based upon several decades of diaries and various correspondence, Whitacre reconstructs Wilbur's life story dividing it into three sections that outline her life and work before, during, and after the Civil War. Two locations shape Wilbur's life in significant ways: Rochester, New York, where she taught school, learned about social reform, and became an abolitionist; and Alexandria, Virginia, where she was sent by the Rochester Ladies Anti-slavery Sewing Society in 1862 to assist refugee slaves. Unmarried, middle-aged, and far away from family, Julia developed confidence and found new purpose in Alexandria as she devoted herself to providing care and supplies for refugee slaves who were without adequate housing, clothing, and food. During this time, she met and worked with a host of characters who influenced her work including the African-American abolitionist Harriet Jacobs, an escaped slave and well-known author. Following the Civil War, Wilbur continued her work and reform activities serving as a field agent for the Freedman's Bureau and participating in the women's rights movement. In 1869 at the age of fifty-four she joined the U.S. Patent Office in Washington D.C. where she worked as a clerk until her death in 1895.

An important strength of Whitacre's biography of Wilbur is that it provides a window through which readers may view both the everyday struggles of an unmarried, nineteenth-century female reformer from the north during the Civil War, and the complex problems of a captured southern city struggling to accommodate African American refugees. Wilbur's constant relocation from one housing situation to another, her responsibilities for her family, and

especially the disappointment that she could not raise her niece, Freda, expose the special demands and vulnerabilities of a single woman at the time. Wilbur's frequent complaints about the military bureaucracy in Alexandria, Virginia, and about certain male leaders in relief efforts exposes the discriminatory attitude toward female leadership of relief efforts and the racism directed toward black refugees. Wilbur's observations of the "slave pens" and soldiers' use of "shower bath" punishments administered to some refugees in Alexandria ultimately drove her to lodge an official complaint against the military (p.128). Little changed at the end of the war. Whitacre argues that during her work for the Freedman's Bureau in Washington, D.C. Wilbur witnessed the same gender discrimination toward female leaders she had endured in Alexandria and leaders with the Freedman's Bureau continued to articulate racist attitudes toward freedmen.

Whitacre provides considerable context for Julia Wilbur's story. The author lives in Alexandria, Virginia, and conducts archival research into the city's past. Her deep knowledge of the city is apparent in descriptions that bring to life places Wilbur frequented. This book will be of interest to local historians as well as those interested in U.S. women's history and the history of the Civil War. Even though not all of Whitacre's findings are entirely new to Civil War women's history, Whitacre's work brings a fresh, new, female voice to the historical literature about the Civil War.

Dr. Sara Brooks Sundberg is a professor of history at the University of Central Missouri. She is currently working on a monograph titled Voices from a Legal Crossroads: Women and the Law of Property in early Louisiana.