

Toward A New Century: Women and The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, 1876

HISTORIANS OF nineteenth-century American culture have become increasingly sensitive to the relationship between women's awareness of themselves as a distinct group identified by common values and experiences, and the transformation of this separateness into a strategy for the collective advancement of their sex. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has shown how intimate female friendships and emotional bonds provided channels for enhancing the self-dignity and energy of women within their private lives.¹ Nancy Cott has suggested that sisterhood, rooted in women's shared domestic destiny and their supposed natural attributes of morality, piety, and self-restraint, may have been a precondition for strengthening the social positions of females. Their strong yearnings for respect, companionship, and security often found expression in associations outside the home where "women's reliance on each other to confirm their values embodied a new kind of group consciousness, one which could develop into a political consciousness."² Other scholars have demonstrated that female friendships and experiences offered powerful support networks for socially active women in the public sphere. Mari Jo Buhle, for example, by focusing on the separate institutions and specialized role of womanhood in society, has provided a valuable understanding of the behavioral patterns and combined demands of women within the context of their own sensibilities. "The woman's movement," Buhle argued, "replicated in philosophy, patterns of organization, and ritual its cultural

¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs*, 1 (Autumn 1975), 1-30.

² Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Conn., 1977), 188, 194. Cott has linked the origins of a female culture to the emergence of industrialism. Despite the nineteenth-century tendency to move production outside the home, women's continued occupation there, defined by responsibilities for home-making and child care, provided the basis for separating the qualities of women from those men.

underpinnings and enlarged the concept of womanhood to its ultimate political limits." Sorority, based upon feminine virtues and values, gave women both the strength and the justification to assert an active role in resisting the male-dominated social order and redefining it in woman's own moral terms.³

The cultural interplay between womanhood and sisterhood is clearly dictated in the consideration of women and their participation in the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876.⁴ Female organizers of the event drew upon deeply rooted traditions of separatism and sorority, as they planned, funded, and managed their own pavilion and devoted it entirely to the artistic and industrial pursuits of their gender. The Woman's Building institutionalized for the first time, at an international exposition, the intimate bonds, shared values, and material achievements of women. Its promoters propounded an ideology which combined commitment to woman's interest with resistance to a male-defined system. Female organizers attempted to translate the individual values and attributes of womanhood into social action, thereby increasing women's influence in the public realm. By expanding rather than rejecting woman's sphere, Centennial women employed a popular means for justifying female autonomy outside the home. Their involvement with the Exhibition, promoters of the Woman's Building believed, could go a long way toward boosting the collective consciousness and advancement of their sisters.⁵ Woven into the vision of organizers were an element of struggle between the sexes and a critique of the socio-cultural order which pushed women into subordinate positions. Centennial women showed disapproval and often challenged

³ Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana, Ill., 1981), xv. See also Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1865-1914* (New York, 1980); Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn., 1981). On the ideology of "womanhood," see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151-74.

⁴ Recent works on the Centennial include Dee Alexander Brown, *The Year of the Century: 1876* (New York, 1966); John Maass, *The Glorious Enterprise: The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and J.H. Schwarzmann, Architect-in-Chief* (Watkins Glen, N.Y., 1973); Robert C. Post, ed., *1876: A Centennial Exhibition* (Washington, D.C. 1976); *Hayes Historical Journal*, 1 (Spring 1977).

⁵ Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, *Address of the Women's Executive Committee to the Chairman of the Several Committees of Women in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1873).

patriarchal power and privilege, while they asserted woman's own creativity and virtue in reshaping society. In legitimizing the expanded role of womanhood, promoters of the pavilion provided women with a clear set of goals. To a considerable extent, these goals were influenced by and, at times, meshed quite favorably with the ideals of contemporary feminists. Through the celebration of woman's culture, organizers of the pavilion aimed to strengthen the bonds of sisterhood, increase female confidence and choices, win woman's social, economic, and legal advancement, abolish unfair restrictions discriminating against their gender, encourage sexual harmony, and gain influence, leverage, and freedom for all women in and outside of the home.⁶

The Woman's Building was the project of the Women's Centennial Executive Committee, a national women's group, appointed in 1873 by the all-male United States Centennial Board of Finance. By engaging women's help, men hoped to generate greater enthusiasm in the celebration. Women, it was believed, would increase subscriptions to Centennial stock and raise the much needed revenue for the Exhibition.

⁶ Historians of women have struggled over the meaning of feminism when applying it retroactively to the nineteenth century. Ellen DuBois, for example, made no clear distinction between feminism and women's equal rights. Gerda Lerner, on the other hand, distinguished between women's emancipation (which she defines as the demand for freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex; self-determination; and autonomy of women), and women's rights (the more limited demands for civil, legal, and property rights of women). Lerner considers both concepts feminist. In another context, Lerner argued that woman's culture is also a feminist activity. She has defined women's culture as "women's redefinition in their own terms." The concept "implies an assertion of equality and an awareness of sisterhood, the communality of women." According to Lerner, women live their existence within the general culture, and "whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of woman's function, even its 'superiority') and redefine it." Woman's culture is the basis for women's resistance to male dominance and their assertion to reorder society in woman's terms. Out of this separate experience rise several levels of feminist consciousness: the recognition of a collective wrong suffered; efforts to remedy these wrongs; the institutionalization of these efforts; and the rise of autonomously defined demands and theory. See Ellen DuBois *et al.*, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies*, 6 (Spring 1980), 50-3. Although more research is needed to test Lerner's thesis, I think it is safe to assume, as Estelle Freedman does, that any female-dominated activity which fosters the advancement of women, places positive value on her contributions, provides helpful support channels, and is not controlled by antifeminist leadership, has feminist potential. Whether this potential is realized depends on larger historical conditions, such as the strength of political, cultural, egalitarian, and economic forces, the status of feminist leadership and ideology, and the

Female involvement might also soften antagonism that remained in the aftermath of the Civil War. Because of their special qualities, women had the ability to “soften man’s more rugged nature” and to encourage him to “abandon local and sectional jealousies.”⁷ Woman’s role as domestic conciliator was enlisted in the task of American reconciliation.

The leading figure of the Women’s Centennial Committee was its president, Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin. Prompt and shrewd in her decisions and unwilling to accept defeat, Gillespie proved herself an efficient manager.⁸ Under her direction, female organizers sold subscriptions to Centennial stock and held receptions to stimulate interest. They canvassed neighborhoods to gain approval and support. Within two days, the Philadelphia committee obtained 82,000 signatures needed to raise an additional one million dollars for the fair from that city. When Congress hesitated to back the Exhibition, Gillespie and fourteen of her aides testified before the Senate where they produced letters from American women, proving

power of antifeminism at a given time. See Estelle Freedman, “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism,” *Ibid.*, 5 (Fall, 1979), 527. Like Lerner and Freedman, I do not subscribe to the idea that nineteenth-century feminism should be defined narrowly as suffragist or as an unyielding ideology for equal rights. Although both concepts may represent demands or strategies of feminism, to concentrate exclusively on these ideas diminishes the importance of the larger, separate, cultural experience of women and their attempts to reshape and influence historical conditions. Feminism should be viewed in its widest sense to describe any struggle to advance the power, status, and autonomy of women in both the public and private spheres. Feminism implies an attack on patriarchy. It demands, among other things, an end to sex-stereotyped restrictions; women’s freedom to make decisions and to transform these decisions into actions; and the right of women to choose their own life-styles, vocations, and destinies. On feminism, see Gerda Lerner, “Women’s Rights and American Feminism,” originally published in 1971 and reprinted in Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York, 1979), 48-9; Linda Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York, 1977), xiv; DuBois *et al.*, “Politics and Culture in Women’s History,” 28-64; Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 290-97.

⁷ “The Centennial: Women’s Meeting at the Academy,” n.d., Women’s Centennial Executive Committee (Hereafter referred to as WCEC), Clippings File, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also WCEC, *First Annual Report* (Philadelphia, 1874), 1, 6-7; WCEC, *Second Annual Report* (Philadelphia, 1875), 19, 25; WCEC, *Final Report* (Philadelphia, 1877), 6-7; *Journal of the Proceedings of the United States Centennial Commission at Philadelphia, May 1873* (Philadelphia, 1873), 6, 25. On the organization of the WCEC, see WCEC, *Officers and Members of the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee and By-Laws* (Philadelphia, 1873).

⁸ National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, Pennsylvania, *In Memoriam. Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, 1821-1901*; *Prairie Farmer*, May 27, 1876; Brown, *The Year of the Century*, 139-40.

a lively enthusiasm of all sections of the country. Congress responded by lending \$1.5 million for the celebration.⁹

The Women's Centennial Committee's main activity was to organize a special exhibit of woman's work, for which ample space had been reserved in the Main Building. In June 1875, however, the men of the Centennial Commission advised female organizers that this display was no longer possible. Requests from foreign exhibitors had multiplied so rapidly that the area allotted to each applicant had to be substantially limited. If women hoped to pay tribute to their work, they would have to erect a separate building for its display and bear the entire cost themselves.¹⁰

Perturbed at the Centennial Commission for advising female organizers of its change in plans at such late notice, but far from being discouraged or resentful, the Women's Centennial Committee set in motion its successful fund-raising machinery for its own pavilion.¹¹ Appeals were made, through local committees, to the women of the various states and territories. The response was so favorable that in less than four months the entire cost of \$31,160 for the Woman's Building had been raised and construction begun. Thousands of additional dollars were obtained to meet related expenses. Promoters, for instance, paid Richard Wagner \$5,000 in gold to compose the "Centennial Inauguration March," and they sponsored a woman's journal, a kindergarten, a *Catalogue of Charities*, a national cookbook, and a series of symphony concerts.¹²

⁹ Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance* (Philadelphia, 1901), 283-87, 296-305; WCEC, *Final Report*, 9-10, 40-57, 79-83; Brown, *The Year of the Century*, 139-40; Maass, *The Glorious Enterprise*, 121.

¹⁰ Letter from Thomas Cochran to Elizabeth Gillespie, June 9, 1875, and letter from Alfred Goshorn to Elizabeth Gillespie, June 11, 1875, WCEC, *Final Report* 84-5; Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance*, 311-14; Maass, *The Glorious Enterprise*, 121.

¹¹ *Woman's Journal*, November 25, 1876; Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance*, 313-15.

¹² The WCEC raised a total of \$138,750. See Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance*, 327; WCEC, *Final Report*, 23-36; *New Century*, May 13, June 3, 1876. On special projects, see WCEC, *Final Report*, 9-11, 14-7; *Women's Centennial Music Hall. Programme of Theodore Thomas' Unrivalled Summer Night Concerts* (Philadelphia, 1876); WCEC, *The National Cookery Book Compiled from Original Receipts, for the Women's Centennial Committees of the International Exhibition of 1876* (Philadelphia, 1876); Mary Rose Smith, comp., *Catalogue of Charities Conducted by Women as Reported to the Women's Centennial Executive Committee of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1876).

In their anxiety to have the Woman's Building completed in time for the Centennial's opening, May 10, 1876, female organizers overlooked one important feature. Either by ignorance or oversight, the contract for the pavilion was awarded to a male architect, Hermann J. Schwarzmann, chief engineer and designer of many buildings at the Exhibition. Soon afterwards, promoters, hearing high praise of Emma Kimball, an architect from Lowell, Massachusetts, realized that their committee had made its "first great mistake" by failing to engage a woman for this charge. In her memoirs, Gillespie confided: "I feel pained because I fear we hindered this legitimate branch of women's work instead of helping it."¹³

Although plans for the Woman's Building were designed by a male architect, its other activities were the products of women's efforts and thought. At the doorways of the pavilion, visitors were greeted by the words of Proverbs 31: LET HER WORKS PRAISE HER IN THE GATES.¹⁴ Spectators had little difficulty grasping the message of this inscription. What they found in the department rendered obsolete the notion of woman as submissive, nurturing, and completely non-productive. Instead, visitors found exhibits that demonstrated her positive achievements and influence: industrial and fine arts; wood-carvings, furniture-making, and ceramics; fancy articles, clothing, and woven goods; philanthropy; philosophy, science, and medicine; education; literature; and inventions.¹⁵ The displays illustrated the power, skill, and organizational talents of women and suggested the various, yet limited, opportunities opened to them. Contemporary feminists accepted the pavilion as a viable sign that women had the potential to do more to help themselves if they were determined and courageous.¹⁶ The

¹³ Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance*, 315-16; WCEC, *Final Report*, 12. For a description of the Woman's Building, see United States Centennial Commission, *Specifications for the Construction, Erection and Finishing of a Building to Exhibit Woman's Work, to be Erected in Fairmount Park* (Philadelphia, 1875); *The Centennial Eagle*, August 8, 1876; Dorsey Gardner, *International Exhibition. 1876. Grounds and Buildings of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia, 1878), 117-18.

¹⁴ *New Century*, May 13, 1876.

¹⁵ *United States Centennial Exhibition. 1876. Official Catalogue*, III (Philadelphia, 1876), 85-97.

¹⁶ *New Century*, May 13, 20, July 1, 1876; *The Independent*, December 7, 1876; *Woman's Journal*, May 27, July 1, 1876.

Woman's Building demonstrated all that "woman has been able to do" despite "the limitations that social prejudices, and the Laws of Medes and Persians have set to her working at all."¹⁷

Implied in the gender orientation of the Woman's Building was a self-conscious bid for collective strength and sorority. Its promoters brought together, under one roof, the work of women of different social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and levels of productive activities. Exhibitors planned displays to illustrate the interlocking interests experienced and understood by all women, regardless of status or heritage. "A dainty damask, whose flaxen threads were spun by Queen Victoria" received no greater or less distinction than the "fairy fabrics which grew into matchless beauty beneath the fingers of the Belgium peasantry."¹⁸ The unifying theme was gender. Each exhibit represented the product and shared experience of a woman's labor.

To demonstrate their interest in sorority in another way, organizers arranged a special opening ceremony for the Woman's Building. Unlike most pavilions of the Exhibition, which were formally dedicated by dignitaries like President Grant and Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil, the doors of the woman's department "refused to fly open at the magic touch" of a man.¹⁹ Instead, Centennial women invited Empress Theresa, the wife of Dom Pedro, to preside at a very simple ceremony which took place at the conclusion of the Exhibition's grand opening. Although both men and women were free to inspect the pavilion after its opening, the official dedication was reserved for females only. The idea of a separate ceremony, headed by a foreign celebrity and attended by women, reminded women of the emotional bonds of sisterhood shared by all women of the world.²⁰

From the start, Centennial women expressed their greatest concern over the question of woman's advancement. To make their sisters fully aware of the commitment of organizers to this goal, the latter published the *New Century*, an eight-page weekly paper, printed on premises at

¹⁷ *New Century*, May 13, 1876.

¹⁸ *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, July 1876.

¹⁹ *Woman's Journal*, June 10, 1876.

²⁰ *Public Ledger*, May 11, 1876; *New Century*, May 13, November 11, 1876; *The Independent*, May 18, 1876; Gillespie, *A Book of Remembrance*, 327-30; Brown, *The Year of the Century*, 141-42; William D. Andrews, "Women and the Fairs of 1876 and 1893," *Hayes Historical Journal*, 1 (Spring 1977), 178.

the Woman's Building and financed entirely by the Women's Centennial Committee. This pro-feminist journal, edited by Sarah Hallowell of Philadelphia, attacked the cultural and institutional barriers which prevented women from obtaining equality and justice.²¹ Its editorials argued for dress reform, married women's property and inheritance rights, changes in the divorce law, and an end to other discriminatory, sex-stereotyped legislation. The journal demanded abolishment of "femme couverte," and it challenged a father's absolute authority, within the family, over decisions concerning his children.²² The paper called for women's financial autonomy and insisted upon equitable compensation and opportunity for all female endeavors.²³ Equally noteworthy, the *New Century* served in effect as the organ for the Third Woman's Congress, held in Philadelphia in 1876; and it accepted articles and correspondence from feminist reformers like Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Eliza Sproat Turner, Elizabeth Churchill, Kate Doggert, Julia Ward Howe, and Anna Garlin.²⁴ In welcoming the *New Century*, the *Woman's Journal*, published by the American Woman Suffrage Association, hailed the new woman's weekly as a "coadjutor in the field of woman's rights."²⁵

In propounding its ideology of woman's advancement, the Women's Centennial Committee showed a particular interest in female labor. Like other feminist-inspired groups, its members considered woman's industry the surest and most important means to increase women's influence, respect, and power in society.²⁶ In struggling for this goal, organizers confronted two related dilemmas, both of which had profound impact on their reform impulse.

In the first place, promoters sympathized with the emotional and material difficulties experienced by their less fortunate sisters who had

²¹ On Hallowell, see *Woman's Journal*, December 2, 1871.

²² On dress reform, see *New Century*, June 3, July 8, 22, August 19, September 16, 1876. On discriminatory laws, see *Ibid.*, July 1, 8, August 12, September 23, October 7, 14, 1876.

²³ *Ibid.*, May 13, June 3, 10, 24, July 1, August 5, October 7, 1876.

²⁴ The Woman's Congress was sponsored annually by the Association for the Advancement of Women. On the AAW, see William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York, 1980), 185-89; Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, 39-56. The *New Century* published the activities and several of the texts of papers delivered at the Congress. See *New Century*, September 30, October 7, 14, 1876.

²⁵ *Woman's Journal*, May 13, 1876. See also *Ibid.*, May 27, December 23, 1876.

²⁶ WCEC, *Final Report*, 19.

become victims of the male-controlled economic system. By the post-Civil War period, historical conditions had alerted most reformers to the dangers created by mechanization and industrial capitalism. The collapse of woman's traditional domestic industries, coupled with the rapid expansion of the factory system and the unpredictable necessity of female self-support, had combined to endanger the destinies of thousands of destitute women.²⁷ Centennial women criticized unjust practices of industry, such as its hazardous, unhealthy, and immoral working conditions, its long, tedious hours of toil, and its meager monetary compensation for female wage-earners. Organizers also defended women's right to command equal pay and status in the work force as masculine counterparts received for comparable labor.²⁸

At the same time, female organizers resented the plight of many bourgeois homemakers who had become victims of a masculine-defined culture characterized by dependency and leisure. Centennial women chastised those who called work degrading and improper "for the delicate or refined" woman.²⁹ They criticized the sexual stereotype which labelled women as idolent and wasteful. "The wife who cooks, mends, makes clothing, washes, irons, and does an untold amount of labor that would cost every year hundreds of dollars if paid for by the husband," promoters argued, "should receive a better and nobler reward than being told she is extravagant."³⁰

Female organizers were aware that all women, regardless of social position, shared a common economic injustice, whether it be defined by hardships in the male-controlled marketplace or by the humiliating condition of financial dependence on husbands and fathers. Mari Jo Buhle has called this dilemma "woman's dual inheritance." Nineteenth-century women were plagued by either "the physical injury of poverty and exploitation or the spiritual poisoning of idleness and dissipation."³¹ Centennial women recognized both factors as sources of woman's inequality and lack of autonomy. Their critique of work took on a

²⁷ Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 53-5; Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, 163-67.

²⁸ WCEC, *Final Report*, 7; *New Century*, May 13, 27, July 1, August 5, September 2, October 28, 1876.

²⁹ *New Century*, August 5, 1876.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, June 17, 1876.

³¹ Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 54.

character influenced not only by issues of class but, more significant, by problems unique to their gender. Promoters aimed “to give woman a definite place as a worker, to help her to understand her power, see her opportunities, and to aid her in the terrible fight she has to make for equal wages, equal position.”³²

Centennial women proceeded to promote their ideology by demonstrating to visitors of their pavilion by what means some women were making a profitable living. Organizers did not “shrink from competition with the works of men;” rather, they planned a separate exhibit to make female labor a more distinctive feature of the Exhibition.³³ It was an opportunity to display what would have been overlooked as potential careers for women in another building. Exhibitors intended to show to their “more timid sisters that some women have outstripped them in the race for useful and remunerative employment, and to encourage these to the perseverance sure to be followed by a larger measure of success.”³⁴ There was nothing unusual about a dental exhibit, for example, but when one compared its generous income to that of “a drudging teacher, dragging out her life on her few hundred a year,” the symbolic and real value of the display for women became apparent.³⁵

Similarly, the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania might have challenged its male competitors by placing its exhibit of “Materia Medica” in the Main Building alongside other pharmacies. “As the intention was to offer to women a new industry and a richly paying field,” the College chose instead to display its “highly commendable work” in the Woman’s Building.³⁶ Not only did “Materia Medica” prove that the apothecary’s trade was opened to women, but it also criticized, in a subtle way, female dependency on a growing consumer drug market controlled by men. The exhibit proved that women could “be more profitably employed in putting up medicine than in swallowing it.”³⁷

³² *New Century*, May 20, 1876. See also *Ibid.*, June 3, 24, August 5, October 28, 1876.

³³ WCEC, *Final Report*, 7-8; *New Century*, September 8, 1876. Female organizers were, in fact, very supportive of women who chose to display their work alongside that of men. Every issue of the *New Century* praises the activities and achievements of women throughout the other pavilions of the Exhibition.

³⁴ WCEC, *Final Report*, 8.

³⁵ *New Century*, July 1, 1876.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, September 8, 1876. See also *Ibid.*, October 14, 1876; WCEC, *Final Report*, 14.

Promoters of the Woman's Building expressed a special interest in placing women into the mainstream of nineteenth-century American progress. They were aware that the modern economic system had created new, highly paid positions which both sexes could perform with equal success. To illustrate this point, organizers employed a lady engineer, Emma Allison of Grimsly, Ontario, whose small six horse-power engine generated enough energy to run a printing press, spinning frames, and power looms. Allison, who managed her engine entirely herself "from starting the fire in the morning, to blowing off steam at night," found her work enjoyable, relaxing, and profitable.³⁸ When asked whether females could run such machines on a regular basis, Allison "expressed her confidence" in their ability, stating "that there were thousands of small engines in various parts of the country, and no reason existed why women should not be employed to manage them." Tending an engine required "far less attention" and was less fatiguing than minding a small child or taking charge of an ordinary stove.³⁹

Female organizers never intended to desex women. Instead, they hoped to mix feminine virtue with professional achievement. Allison was most admired for the domestic attributes she brought to the otherwise male trade of engineering. "She is no low, vulgar woman," wrote one spectator, "but an educated and accomplished lady."⁴⁰ She does her work "in such a neat, womanly way," insisted another admirer, "as to make one recall with disgust many other engine-rooms, where the inevitable heat, dust, and smoke are increased a thousand-fold by masculine disorder."⁴¹ Allison symbolized, for promoters of the Woman's Building, the promise of significant change. She represented an acceptance of the American woman into a growing economic system, while she remained faithful to the female attributes of respectability,

³⁷ *New Century*, July 1, 1876.

³⁸ Harriet S. Blatch and Theodore Stanton, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary, and Reminiscences*, I (New York, 1922), 267-68; *New Century*, June 3, September 8, 1876; *Woman's Journal*, July 1, 1876.

³⁹ Blatch and Stanton, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, I, 268; *New Century*, September 8, 1876; *Harper's Bazaar*, July 8, 1876; Brown, *The Year of the Century*, 142.

⁴⁰ David Bailey, 'Eastward Ho' or *Leaves from the Diary of a Centennial Pilgrim* (Highland, Ohio, 1877), 80.

⁴¹ *Woman's Journal*, July 15, 1876.

cleanliness, and order. Allison demonstrated that women were fully capable of taking command of the nation's industrial activity and progress, without sacrificing woman's virtue.⁴²

The rhetoric of Centennial women, however, did not endorse industrial capitalism. The exhibits of the Woman's Building reflected an unwillingness or inability to integrate completely the ideology of womanhood with a rapidly expanding economy. Organizers, primarily representatives of older, established families or the wives of wealthy men, demonstrated their dislike and distrust for socio-cultural changes caused by industrialization. In their displays, promoters celebrated the more traditional, old-order values associated with stability, individual skills, and woman's domestic and moral nature. Because they could not successfully reconcile the differences existing between these virtues and the evils of the new economic system, Centennial women excluded wage labor and mass-produced factory goods entirely from their department and exhibited only that type of work which did "not come under any vulgar category."⁴³ Organizers envisioned an ideal society where women would not have to toil at tedious, low-paid work, or to sacrifice originality and independence. The woman's pavilion suggested to females new vocational options in the "higher branches of industry."⁴⁴ Promoters accepted its displays as sufficient testimony that all women could blend the utilitarian with the artistic and sentimental, while they also commanded just compensation and respect for their work.⁴⁵

Although professional activities overshadowed exhibits of the Woman's Building in notoriety and in curiosity, promoters did not ignore the more traditional branches of female work. A sizable portion of the pavilion was devoted to what might be classified as woman's domestic production. This significant category of labor showed woman in her "most familiar character," as well as demonstrating her genius and inventiveness.⁴⁶

⁴² *New Century*, June 3, September 8, 1876; *Woman's Journal*, July 1, 15, 1876; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 29, 1876; Andrews, "Women and the Fairs," 178.

⁴³ *Demorest's Monthly Magazine*, June, July 1876; *Cincinnati Commercial*, May 22, June 1, 1876.

⁴⁴ WCEC, *Final Report*, 7; *New Century*, June 3, 10, July 1, 1876.

⁴⁵ See praise for Cincinnati School of Design, *New Century*, June 10, 17, 1876.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, July 15, 1876.

Critics of the pavilion frequently found fault with displays of domestic production for their apparent high praise of woman's role as homemaker. The woman's department, wrote Jane Croly, "stands as a very poor representation of woman's work."⁴⁷ Because of its emphasis on traditional handicrafts, reasoned another columnist, the displays of the Woman's Building "rose no higher than the standard of a common county fair."⁴⁸ Its exhibits did not represent woman's "labor in the great world of work, but rather the result of her leisure."⁴⁹ Take, for instance, a case of natural flowers handsomely preserved under glass, or the "Dreaming Iolanthe," a bust skillfully molded in the novel media of butter, or a specimen of needlework wrought in silk and so finely executed that it gave the appearance of a steel engraving or etching. Examples like these afforded "sad evidence of the genius wasted in a monotonous round of drudgery, by many women of whom the world never hears."⁵⁰

Female organizers, however, never intended that exhibits of domestic production should rival professional achievement. Their reason for including the former represented more a critique of woman's private sphere than praise for it. If the pavilion, insisted the *New Century*,

has permitted the entrance of many petty prettiness, it is for the good of the senders thereof—that they may measure these trifles with the dignified and substantial exhibits of others. And as even the wax-fruit and embroidery stand for the living of these women, their means of honest support, we fail to see the objection to it as an exhibit of industry, save as it sets forth, in unmistakable speech, by how few methods hitherto has a woman been permitted to make a living at all.⁵¹

Woman's domestic production included more than "prettiness." The pavilion also exhibited over eighty patented inventions: a reliance stove, a hand attachment for a sewing machine, a dish-washer, a fountain griddle-greaser, a self-heating gas iron, a frame for stretching and drying lace curtains, and a stocking and glove darning. Clearly these

⁴⁷ *Cincinnati Commercial*, June 1, 1876.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1876.

⁴⁹ *The Centennial Eagle*, August 8, 1876.

⁵⁰ *Demorest's Monthly Magazine*, November 1876.

⁵¹ *New Century*, July 1, 1876.

devices demonstrated woman's mechanical ingenuity. The display also illustrated the sympathy that organizers of the pavilion held for domestic reform. By making household labor easier and more efficient, woman's inventions created new, more professional home environments necessary to facilitate women's transition from private to social roles. The introduction of labor-saving devices limited women's overall hours of work, and provided the average wife and mother with leisure time to develop new interests, such as participating in community work or developing new friendships and relationships. Organizers praised technological innovation for its promise of greater freedom to all women, thus allowing them the time to pursue activities outside the domestic realm.⁵²

The ideology of Centennial women was rooted in an insistence upon vocational choice. Organizers challenged the belief that a woman must marry. There were other useful and worthwhile options available to her, wrote the *New Century*. "Marriage need not be entered upon rashly to escape the reproach of the world."⁵³

Female involvement in the public sphere was not meant to replace family and family values, however. Centennial women praised reform of woman's position for the positive effect it brought to the home. Work extended the scope of women's experience, making them more intelligent and responsible wives and mothers.⁵⁴ It provided women with a sense of respect. Given the opportunity to pursue careers equal in status and compensation to those of male counterparts, both sexes learned that, except for natural distinctions, they were not totally unlike. Work allowed women, like men, the chance to become wise, creative, and capable of decision-making. It gave them the feeling of maturity, independence, and self-reliance.⁵⁵ Such training, organizers believed, led ultimately to a companionate relationship and understanding be-

⁵² *Ibid.*, May 20, 27, July 8, 15, 29, August 19, 26, September 16, 1876; *The Independent*, May 11, 1876; *Woman's Journal*, July 15, 1876; Deborah J. Warner, "Women Inventors at the Centennial," Martha Moore Trescott, ed., *Dynamos and Virgins Revisited: Women and Technological Change in History* (Metuchen, N.J., 1979), 102-19; Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, 188.

⁵³ *New Century*, November 11, 1876.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, July 1, 1876.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, June 24, September 16, 1876; Emma C. Bascom, "Centennial Thoughts of Woman," Anna B. Butler et al, eds., *Centennial Records of the Women of Wisconsin* (Madison, Wis., 1876), 216-17.

tween men and women. Thus, when marriage took place, both husbands and wives together could "study its limitations, its duties, and its work."⁵⁶

Female organizers insisted that their vision of a companionate relationship between the sexes should spread beyond the home and into the community. "Woman's kingdom," wrote the *New Century*, must not be confined "within four walls," but must move outward "whithersoever her own purpose or the needs of others call her to go."⁵⁷ The moment a woman "allows her energies and interests to be absorbed in the family, and becomes indifferent to public measures, and to the welfare of other homes and of the no-homes," one promoter warned, "that moment deterioration commences in herself and in her household."⁵⁸ Such selfishness was morally unacceptable in a context where the complexities of industrialization and the competitive and uncongenial atmosphere of social Darwinism had created new tensions and unrest. Centennial women criticized the extravagance, corruption, and disorder of the male-controlled system; and they urged women to soften, with their virtues of honesty, charity, and love, the harshness created by modernization.⁵⁹ Reformers, like Eliza Sproat Turner and Sarah Hallowell, urged women to continue their active involvement after the demise of the Exhibition.⁶⁰ The *New Century*, praising the thorough investigations by the Women's Centennial Committee into Philadelphia's twenty-six wards, proposed that the group be converted into a permanent sanitary board with full advisory power. "It would be for the interest of the municipal government to remember this well-drilled

⁵⁶ *New Century*, June 24, 1876.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1876.

⁵⁸ Bascom, "Centennial Thoughts of Woman," Butler *et al*, *Centennial Records of the Women of Wisconsin*, 217.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 215-19; *New Century*, May 13, June 8, 17, October 7, November 11, 1876.

⁶⁰ *New Century*, October 28, November 4, 11, 1876. Both Hallowell and Turner were instrumental in forming the New Century Club in 1877. From its start, this organization expressed concern for practical and benevolent matters in the community. In 1882 an offshoot of the Club, the New Century Guild, was started with Turner as its first president. Under Turner's influence, the Guild provided evening vocational classes and served as a recreational and learning center for working-class women. See Jane Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (New York, 1898), 1021-28, 1033-35; Lenore M. Lybrand, "In Memoriam of Eliza Sproat Turner," Eliza Sproat Turner, *Out-of-Door Rhymes* (Philadelphia, 1903), 21-4.

force when the suggestions of social science associations come up for consideration and action.”⁶¹ Promoters of the woman’s department expressed great faith in the wisdom and cooperation of both sexes to assure proper order and stability in a rapidly changing society. They understood the future success of America as closely tied to this interdependence, and they looked forward to the time when:

Not man alone, but man and woman both
 Shall mingle skill and grace in our new growth;
 And the new century shall fling its glow
 In ampler freedom, nobler power to do,
 For man and woman in unnumbered spheres
 Broadening and brightening through the pregnant years.⁶²

To demonstrate their concern for a harmonious society, based upon the companionate relationship of both sexes, Centennial women included in their department a model kindergarten, initiated by the educational reformer, Elizabeth Peabody. Organizers praised this exhibit for its ideological and social value: “As the kindergarten is the ground from which the schools of the future will grow, and as its comprehensive methods underlie not only the intellectual but the physical and moral training of children, it will receive much attention in the *New Century*.”⁶³ The kindergarten represented, for its proponents, “the seed of all reforms, especially touching women’s duties and correlative rights.”⁶⁴

Based upon the teaching methods of the German pedagogue, Friedrich Froebel, the kindergarten, presented by the woman’s department, embodied the goals of organizers to socialize young pre-school children of all classes to attributes of “habitual order, attention, cheerful industry, accurate knowledge, gentleness, courtesy, and manual skill,” without resort to arbitrary or repressive punishment.⁶⁵ Its object was to

⁶¹ *New Century*, October 7, 1876.

⁶² S.P. Putnam, “The Woman’s Pavilion,” *Woman’s Journal*, November 25, 1876.

⁶³ *New Century*, May 13, 1876.

⁶⁴ *Woman’s Journal*, September 9, 1876.

⁶⁵ *Public Ledger*, September 29, 1876; *Woman’s Journal*, September 9, 23, 1876. The kindergarten met in a separate school house behind the Woman’s Building.

prevent, at an early age, natural inclinations toward selfishness, crime, and other inner-directed traits detrimental to the community. Through organized play and experiences based upon childish consciousness, young boys and girls learned obedience, patriotism, and respect for work, as well as the virtues of sharing and companionship. Organizers considered the Froebel system a means to accomplish all of the social, civil, and political reforms on which they were so intent. The kindergarten was a training ground where young children of both sexes could put into practice the concepts of interdependence and harmony, two ideals necessary for an orderly, well-balanced community. This experience would ultimately lead to a higher and more progressive civilization. Equally important, by adapting individual virtues to the common needs of society, a proper blend of private and public spheres would at last be fulfilled. Female organizers believed that such training would transform society into a fully cooperative and companionate social organism in which every person, every class, and every concern would profit.⁶⁶

In their critique of the existing order, organizers of the Woman's Building did not identify with the contemporary women's rights movement. Although the *New Century* criticized the patriarchal system which legally, socially, and economically discriminated against females, Centennial women vacillated on their acceptance of outright political protest. When the American Woman Suffrage Association sent to the pavilion an exhibit case displaying the "Protests of Women Against Taxation Without Representation," promoters of the department placed it in an inconspicuous location, off-limits to the public view.⁶⁷ The action alienated suffragists, who insisted that woman's most fitting contributions to the Exposition were the protests, laws, and decisions which proved her political and legal slavery in historical context. This presentation, critics argued, would have taught "the great

⁶⁶ *New Century*, May 13, 1876; *Woman's Journal*, September 9, 23, 1876; *Public Ledger*, September 29, 1876; Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, 331-34.

⁶⁷ *Woman's Journal*, November 18, December 16, 23, 1876. The case contained a copy of Bowditch's pamphlet on "The Taxation of Women in Massachusetts," a collection of the laws discriminating against women, and the protests of women who lost their property because they refused to pay taxes. These women argued their cases on the basis of taxation without representation.

multitude" of citizens that the violation of a principle in 1876 was "as much a sin and as truly unworthy when committed against women as committed by George III against the Colonies."⁶⁸

For the feminists, the legal and political slavery of one-half of the American people brought into serious question whether female organizers were justified in celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of the nation's independence. Disfranchisement and deprivation of other privileges and rights of citizenship classed females with lunatics, idiots, and criminals.⁶⁹ Suffragists criticized Centennial women for their loyalty to what the former considered a male celebration: When women "voluntarily give to work for aggrandizement of the very power which degrades them, they are only objects of contempt."⁷⁰

To protest the Centennial, the National Woman Suffrage Association, headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, set up public parlors in Philadelphia where all women could join together and learn more about their common plight as inferiors. Its headquarters, located at 1431 Chestnut Street, were leased by Anthony, who, as the only "femme sole" of the group's leadership, was alone held capable of entering into contract according to Pennsylvania law. In contrast to the Woman's Building, the activities of the National Woman Suffrage Association represented a propaganda appeal for equal rights. Parlors were filled with books, papers, speeches, and photographs of contemporary female activists. There were also tracts, laws, reports, and decisions, testifying to woman's slavery. In addition, women's meetings and protests were scheduled during the season in various halls and churches throughout the city. Suffragists hoped to show the world "that the women of 1876 know and feel their political degradation no less than did the men of 1776."⁷¹

The most dramatic activity of the National Woman Suffrage Association was its protest at the Centennial's July 4th day celebration, held at Independence Hall. For several months prior to the date, suffragists had attempted to secure a place on the formal program but were re-

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, January 8, 1876.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, II (New York, 1882), 56.

⁷⁰ *Woman's Journal*, May 1, 1875.

⁷¹ Stanton *et al.*, *History of Woman Suffrage*, II, 20-2.

peatedly snubbed by male organizers of the event. Determined to have the final word, Anthony and four cohorts managed to obtain, at the last moment, passes for admission to the ceremony. At the conclusion of the reading of the Declaration of Independence, Anthony rose from her seat, made her way down a crowded aisle, climbed unto the stage, and presented to a bewildered presiding officer, acting United States Vice President, Thomas Ferry, an updated copy of the Woman's Declaration of Rights. The document was prepared and signed especially for the occasion by the most prominent advocates of woman's enfranchisement. After scattering hundreds of printed copies of the address throughout a curious crowd of onlookers, the women retreated from the hall. Outside, they mounted a musician's platform, and Anthony, before an enthusiastic crowd of listeners, read the famous Woman's Declaration. The women then proceeded to the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia, where a day-long session, dealing with women's rights, was being sponsored by the National Woman Suffrage Association.⁷²

The source of conflict between suffrage groups and Centennial women represented more a difference in defining strategies than an acceptance by the latter of patriarchal power and authority. Female organizers undoubtedly supported many of the feminist demands of the women's rights movement. Both camps advocated woman's social, economic, and legal justice. They favored woman's autonomy and advancement outside the home; and they assigned her a positive role in reshaping the social order. The point of departure, however, was enfranchisement. Although promoters of the department often demonstrated leanings toward the suffrage movement, neither the Women's Centennial Committee nor the *New Century* took an official stand on the issue.⁷³ Centennial women, it appeared, deliberately avoided direct

⁷² *Ibid.*, II, 27-44; Blatch and Stanton, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, I, 261-66; *Woman's Journal*, July 15, August 12, 1876; Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York, 1980), 218-20; Brown, *The Year of the Century*, 165-66.

⁷³ In subtle ways, the *New Century* showed signs of acceptance of the women's rights movement. Many of its contributors were suffragists. Eliza Sproat Turner and Sarah Hallowell, for example, were active members of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association. The journal ran advertisements for the National Woman Suffrage Association, and it encouraged women to visit NWSA's public parlors. The *New Century*, as mentioned earlier, served as an organ for the Woman's Congress, a group of women including many suffragists. Finally, when Thomas Higginson, an officer of the American Woman Suffrage Association, came under attack by one critic, the *New Century* defended him as a "true and steadfast friend to women." *New Century*, August 12, 1876.

alliance with women's rights associations because these groups were seen as potentially dangerous and controversial. Unlike other roles women pursued outside the home, the goal of the ballot was not easily accommodated to the ideal of womanhood. Symbolically, woman suffrage was the extreme of feminism in that it asserted the individuality, self-interest, and full equality of women. At its core was the notion of selfhood. Enfranchisement was intended "to establish some kind of independent position in the world" apart from woman's traditional realm and threatened to destroy completely the differences between the sexes.⁷⁴ Like many reformers, Centennial women did not wish to confront this dilemma. They chose instead to make their aims attractive to the broadest possible audience. The most popular way to justify the expansion of woman's autonomy and power, organizers believed, was to celebrate feminine virtue. Promoters of the pavilion emphasized the higher values and moral standards women contributed to society, rather than to demand outright the goal of total sexual equality. In this way, organizers were able to appeal to the thousands of females who supported increased influence and justice for women, but were not yet prepared for the more advanced vision of suffrage groups.

* * * *

In assessing the commitment of Centennial women to the cause of woman's advancement, one must ask whether female organizers were successful in achieving feminist goals. Awareness of woman's potential influence outside the home was not sufficient to check the larger forces which shaped American life. Promoters of the pavilion ideally demanded the right of their sisters to enter the public sphere, where they might benefit, like men, from experience and success. In a real sense, however, woman remained greatly inhibited in her advancement. By the 1880s and 1890s, a significant change in professions and occupations had come to only a small and privileged number of women. The majority of females who entered the labor force continued to encounter the same discriminatory restrictions and had the same limited, sex-stereotyped positions opened to them as existed several years earlier.

⁷⁴ Ellen DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), 136; Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980), 341-42.

Most employers hired women when men were either unwilling or unable to accept certain work, or when women made up the cheapest available and suitable labor supply, particularly during boom periods and wartime.⁷⁵ Business interests, moreover, profited by keeping married women home to purchase mass-produced goods and to reproduce another generation of males and females for producer and consumer roles respectively. The marketplace thus had strong economic reasons to subordinate women. Female organizers never proposed radical changes in business structure. Instead, they aimed to liberate women to participate in the highest branches of industry, within the existing economic order.

The same failure occurs when one considers the reluctance of female organizers to reconcile the concept of womanhood with industrialism. Although promoters of the pavilion wished to open new opportunities to their sisters, their vision was narrow. The ideology of Centennial women suggested an acceptance of social distinctions and a failure to understand the positions of the working class. Organizers encouraged females to pursue careers of the highest and most individual type, yet they could not grasp that, for various reasons, not all women had the same potential or opportunity to choose these fields. By ignoring the work of wage-earners in the woman's department, its promoters denied laboring women a serious place in the ranks of American workers. The pavilion was thus "partial, incomplete, and above all, lacking in that broad, human interest which grows out of the equal recognition of equal claims to consideration and fair judgment."⁷⁶ Because Centennial women clung so strongly to higher, sentimental values, they were forced to sacrifice the welfare of the majority of female workers who continued to toil under exploitive conditions.

There still remains the issue of whether female organizers achieved their goal of working toward a companionate social order. Faced with religious, ethnic, regional, and other socio-cultural mores and practices, reformers lacked the strength to reshape sexual relations in either

⁷⁵ Sheila Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York, 1978), 42-60; Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, 348; Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). 301.

⁷⁶ *Demorest's Monthly Magazine*, June 1876.

the family or the community. Influenced, moreover, by the fear that total equality would desex women, as well as by the insecure existence of worthy alternatives to wifehood and motherhood, promoters could not conceive of attacking all aspects of woman's private realm. They did not, for instance, criticize the assumption that it was woman's moral responsibility to provide man with domestic services; nor did they demand that men participate in child-raising, cooking, and homemaking. Yet activities, such as these, prevented women from facilitating passage out of private and into public roles. The large percentage of American females continued to live within a framework of male dominance. As one historian has argued, only those few women, who were able to renounce marriage, or "who had the luck or privilege to construct extraordinary family arrangements," were able to challenge successfully the sexual hierarchy.⁷⁷ In clinging to domestic values, Centennial women strengthened, rather than weakened, woman's subordination, thus preventing organizers from transforming their goals into a full-force attack on female inequality.

That the promoters of the Woman's Building could not reform woman's sphere and achieve harmony and equality does not diminish the significance of their struggle. Organizers had the courage and the will to offer women alternative vocations, an enlarged vision of experience and training, and a companionate social order shaped by feminine values. They alerted females to a sense of responsibility and usefulness in the community by showing that women, like men, were needed in the administration of public affairs. Centennial women also provided a sound basis for the union and mutual self-helpfulness of universal sisterhood. The creation of a separate pavilion helped mobilize the collective consciousness of all women, by offering them the opportunity to realize woman's potential power, to gain confidence and pride in their individual achievements, to recognize the injustices discriminating against their sex, and to learn the possibilities and the means for eliminating these inequities. By basing their ideology on the shared cultural ideals of womanhood, female organizers developed and institutionalized an important strategy for demanding the feminist goals of legal, social, and economic justice and advancement for all women. That promoters of the Woman's Building expressed so much

⁷⁷ Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity*, 149.

confidence in the virtues of woman's culture and its potential power for reordering society, greatly reduced their response to the contemporary women's rights movement and its call for total equality between the sexes. The experience of Centennial women, however, successfully refuted the nineteenth-century notion that women were passive, submissive, and divorced from the mode of production. By so doing, promoters made an important contribution to the feminist quest for female autonomy and status.

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