THE FIRST WOMEN
WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENTS

Maurine Hoffman Beasley
Mary Abigail Dodge 1833-1896
Emily Edson Briggs 1830-1910
Kate Field 1838-1896
Columbia Historical Society
Mary Clemmer Ames 1831-1884
Jane G. Swisshelm 1815-1884
Minnesota Historical Society
Sara Clarke Lippincott 1823-1904
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

THE question of the proper sphere for women represented a paradoxical problem in pre-Civil War America. Although millions of women led lives of menial drudgery, the eyes of society were fixed on a different image: The lady, a woman of wan beauty and modest manner who basked in the reflected glory of husband, home and family. Work outside the home lay beyond the lady’s realm, to be resorted to only in cases of dire financial adversity.

A few resolute women who refused to conform to this enervating role risked ridicule and obloquy to move into masculine occupations. This monograph deals with one particular group of women who moved into the male arena of Washington correspondence. However, a brief survey of women’s roles in nineteenth-century society is necessary to provide the framework for understanding their achievements.

Women always have participated in the labor force in the United States although the extent of their activities has fluctuated in response to social, economic and political conditions and has depended on the social status and economic need of the individual. In colonial America with its chronic labor shortage, widows and sometimes daughters commonly ran their dead husbands’ or fathers’ businesses. In literature and journalism, women made an early impression. Anne Bradstreet won recognition as the first truly gifted poet in the colonies. Other women ran printing presses and published newspapers before the Revolution.

Opportunities dwindled for middle-class women to develop careers outside the home in the nineteenth century. Rising standards of living in the settled portion of the republic freed women from the need both to earn money outside the home and to toil laboriously inside it. Gradually the ideal of the lady emerged which called upon women to constrict their bodies in tightly-laced corsets and their minds in a stifling sentimentality.

The myth of the lady and its attendant cult of domesticity, heartily endorsed by clerical opinion, set the tone in the decades before the Civil War. It remained unchallenged even by women like Emma Willard, Mary Lyon and Catherine Beecher who founded institutions of higher education to lift their sex beyond the superficial accomplishments of finishing schools. They simply exploited the conservative argument that broader education would make women better wives and mothers.

It was not sexual bondage as such that turned a few women into the first outspoken feminists in the United States. When women abolitionists found their crusade against slavery impeded by prejudices against public activity for women, they were ready to revolt. The result was the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 which endorsed eleven resolutions, including one that advocated equal participation with men in trades, professions and commerce.

Numerous women gained prominence in literature and journalism during the nineteenth century, but women writers generally reinforced the conventional mythology of the lady and publicized her virtues. Literary activity centered around tearful novels aimed at a female audience or syrupy magazines that fostered piety and ladylike conduct. In comparison with other occupations, literature and journalism were attractive to women. Writing could be done at home and consequently did not violate as many taboos for middle-class women as did other occupations. Moreover, the colonial tradition of women journalists had not died out entirely even in the repressive atmosphere of the early nineteenth century.
More than twenty-five publications aimed at women were founded between 1806 and 1849 with women as editors or associate editors. The most famous, Godey's Lady's Book, founded in Philadelphia in 1830 by Louis A. Godey, was edited by Sarah Josepha Hale, the foremost woman journalist of her day.

With newspapers concentrating on the rough-and-tumble politics of the new nation, women, who had no political rights, usually stayed within the silken confines of their own segregated literature. Nonetheless, an occasional woman did take to newspapering to promote causes including temperance, "moral purity" (elimination of prostitution), dress reform, suffrage, higher education for women, and abolition.

In 1841 Lydia Maria Child, founder of the first monthly magazine for children, moved into the newspaper field, taking charge of the weekly American Anti-Slavery Standard. When her husband's recovery from illness enabled him to succeed her a year later, she began a series of "Letters from New York" to the Boston Courier, which made her the first well-known woman newspaper correspondent.

It was not until 1850 that the first women ventured into the masculine preserve of Washington correspondence. Women Washington correspondents numbered in the dozens during the nineteenth century, but frequently they chronicled only social news of limited impact. In many cases, no record exists of their work. Consequently it would be impossible and unRewarding to consider all women Washington correspondents of the last century. This study concentrates on seven women who attained national recognition as Washington journalists writing on significant topics of the day.

Since these women were once prominent figures, considerable manuscript material and clipping files pertaining to their work exist in various libraries. Use of this primary source material has made it possible to explore the women's motivations and their individual reactions to the cultural strains that ensued. This case study approach pictures each woman as responding differently to the stresses of engaging in what was considered an unwomanly occupation. In the final chapter, the argument is presented that these pioneers enlarged the opportunities open to them in Victorian society and, thereby, encouraged other women to explore alternatives to accepted roles.

This analysis is based on the assumption that it is important to study Washington correspondents, male or female, because of the influence they wield. Curiously, almost no scholarly attention has been paid to the character and personality of individual correspondents and comparatively little to the development of Washington correspondence as a journalistic specialty. The work that has been done concentrates on men and barely mentions the presence of women in the ranks of correspondents.

Notes

3Ibid., p. 25.

The most complete treatment of early women Washington correspondents to date appeared in a single chapter of Ladies of the Press (1936) by Ishbel Ross, but no attribution was given. An article by Bertha Monica Stearns, "Reform Periodicals and Female Reformers: 1830-1860," in the American Historical Review (July, 1932), dealt with Jane G. Swisshelm as a reform editor but did not mention her role as the first woman Washington correspondent. An article by Mrs. Elden E. Billings titled "Early Women Journalists of Washington" in the Columbia Historical Society Records (1969) listed nineteenth-century women journalists but contained no bibliography or sources.

The present monograph is an abridged version of the author's dissertation which can be consulted in the George Washington University library. That original study treats of minor figures passed over for reasons of space in the present publication. It also contains a more comprehensive discussion of sociological material regarding historical roles for women, as well as a fifteen-page bibliographic essay.
CHAPTER TWO

Anne Royall—Iconoclast

THE first woman Washington correspondent, a determined reformer named Jane Grey Swisshelm, marched into the Senate press gallery on April 17, 1850. Mrs. Swisshelm had come to Washington as a correspondent for the New York Tribune, edited by Horace Greeley, who had agreed to pay her five dollars for every column sent up from the capital. She had secured this arrangement on the basis of her national reputation as editor of an antislavery newspaper in Pittsburgh.¹

Intent on claiming equal privileges with male journalists, Mrs. Swisshelm appealed to Vice-President Millard Fillmore to let her sit in the Senate press gallery. Recalling the incident in her autobiography, she said Fillmore was disturbed by her request:

He was much surprised and tried to dissuade me. The place would be very unpleasant for a lady, and would attract attention. I would not like it; but he gave me the seat. I occupied it one day, greatly to the surprise of the Senators, the reporters, and others on the floor and in the galleries; but felt that the novelty would soon wear off, and that women would work there and win bread without annoyance.²

Shortly after spending her historic day in the press gallery, Mrs. Swisshelm left the capital. She feared to stay and face the hubbub that arose over a column in which she accused Daniel Webster of fathering a mulatto family. It was not until thirteen years later that she came back to Washington as a correspondent.

Although, strictly speaking, Mrs. Swisshelm was the first woman Washington correspondent, the capital had seen its share of women writers. Margaret Bayard Smith contributed to Godey’s Lady’s Book and other magazines, wrote two novels and left a legacy of chatty letters giving intimate glimpses of famous politicians from Jefferson to William Henry Harrison who dined in her home.³ But writing was only a pleasing avocation for Mrs. Smith, not a career.

The first known newspaperwoman in Washington, Mrs. A.S. Colvin, published the Weekly Messenger, believed to have been issued first in 1817.⁴ Publication is known to have begun definitely in 1822 but to have been suspended until 1826 when it reappeared until 1828. Little information is available on Mrs. Colvin although she probably was related to a J.B. Colvin who founded a triweekly Washington newspaper, the Monitor, in 1806, followed two years later by the Weekly Register.⁵

Mrs. Colvin’s career was eclipsed by that of Anne Royall, the first important Washington woman journalist, who struggled to publish newspapers in the capital from 1831 until 1854. Anne Royall has gone down in history as a bizarre character who interviewed President John Quincy Adams by sitting on his clothes while he was swimming in the Potomac and refusing to get up until he answered her questions. As a recent biographer noted, the trouble with this delightful tale is that it probably never happened since Adams befriended Mrs. Royall and willingly spoke with her on many occasions.⁶

Anne Royall was no ordinary woman. Born in 1769, near Baltimore, she was the oldest daughter of a farmer named William Newport. When she was three, the family moved to the western Pennsylvania frontier, where Newport is thought to have died and his widow to have remarried, only to lose her second husband. Unable to carry on the farm, Anne and her mother trekked back to Virginia. In 1785 the widow sought relief from blood poisoning at Old Sweet Springs where William Royall, a Revolutionary War hero, took pity on the pair. He hired the mother as a washerwoman, and,
eleven years later, married the daughter, when she was twenty-eight and he forty-seven.7

During the sixteen years of their marriage, the alcoholic Royall taught his wife the ideals of the rationalists whose philosophy shaped the Revolution. He also was an ardent Mason and stimulated her lifelong enthusiasm for the fraternal order. When he died in 1813, she was left heiress to his comfortable estate. Royall's relatives succeeded in breaking the will ten years later, leaving her penniless at the age of fifty-five. The litigation charged that the will had been "forged" and that the couple had "cohabited" before their marriage.

Contemporary society offered the penniless widow few respectable choices. She could have sought shelter in the home of a sympathetic family, attempted to remarry or begged a pittance from the Royall relatives.8 Instead she boldly sought a pension from Congress as the widow of a Revolutionary War veteran and embarked on a literary career. Roaming over the new nation, she churned out ten travel books (and a novel) between 1826 and 1831. Traveling presented hardships and inconveniences but she kept on, living on the charity of Masons, her husband's fraternal brothers, when her money ran out. Reflecting an era in which anti-Masonic fervor was stimulated by evangelical churches, she attacked Presbyterians and other Protestants in her narratives.9

Arriving in Washington in 1824 to push her pension claim, Mrs. Royall decided to make the capital her home base. It was here, in 1829, that she suffered the indignity of being tried and convicted on the obsolete charge of acting as a "common scold" stemming from her repeated confrontation with a Presbyterian congregation located near her Capitol Hill home. Her ten dollar fine was paid by two newspapermen, acting for the "honor" of the press.10 The undaunted Mrs. Royall set off on a new round of travels to track down buyers for her current books and collect notes for three more volumes.

When Mrs. Royall reached the age of 61, she decided to end her peripatetic existence and publish a newspaper in Washington. The unfortunate title of her four-page sheet, Paul Pry, bestowed by a neighborhood boy, failed to convey her commitment to her country and her profession.11

Although she lived in an age of the partisan press, Mrs. Royall remained a staunch independent. She exposed graft and wrongdoing in office, fought against the Bank of the United States, stood for internal improvements, sound money and states' rights. She advocated separation of church and state, free public education, free thought, free speech, and justice to immigrants and Indians.12

She barely kept food on the table, appealing repeatedly to subscribers to pay up: "May we ask our friends to forward the needful. Can they suppose we can print and live on air?"13 In 1836 she decided to scrap the bankrupt Paul Pry and to start a new paper, The Huntress. Like its predecessor, The Huntress flopped.14 Mrs. Royall resorted to inferior type (cast-off gifts from other newspapers), the cheapest paper, and child labor (using orphans given a home in exchange for their work in printing). She operated the press in her home, which was sometimes so cold that the pages froze.

Both newspapers exemplified the bygone age of personal journalism. Haunting the halls of Congress to ferret out misconduct and malfeasance, she railed against petty corruption such as use of a "public wagon and horses" to take a sergeant-at-arms to the theater.15 She apologized if her paper came out late and confided why: Once a printer was inebriated and another time she had to mend her clothes.16 Often she traded insults with other editors, but she stayed within the acceptable limits of her era.17

At the same time Mrs. Royall remained conscious of her feminine role, as when she wrote, most untruthfully, "as to politics, I have never made it my study .... I think no woman has any business with politics; there is something so masculine and opposed to female delicacy in meddling with the affairs of state that I view it with sovereign abhorrence."18 A foe of woman suffrage, she joined male editors in poking fun at the bloomer costume promoted by another woman editor.19

Still she remained a friend of her own sex, known for her charity toward wayward women who desired to reform.20 Perhaps these kindnesses were rooted in remem-
brance of her own alleged premarital indiscretions, but they showed true generosity since Anne Royall was miserably poor. True, her pension finally came through in 1848, but it proved so insufficient that she wrote in the last issue of *The Huntress*, printed less than three months before her death, that she had “but thirty-one cents in the world.”21 She died in 1854, foreseeing the shadow of the Civil War. In the final issue she prayed that “the union of these states may be eternal.”22

Anne Royall has been mistreated by history. Her first biographer, Sarah H. Porter, writing in 1909, blamed male journalists for ridiculing Mrs. Royall by picturing her as a “funny little old woman, trotting through the corridors of the Capitol.”23 In a more psychological analysis, George Stuyvesant Jackson quoted from an interview with Phineas T. Barnum, the famous showman, and suggested that Mrs. Royall had some symptoms of mental disease. As the interview, if accurate, indicated, Mrs. Royall felt threatened by conspiracies and held a messianic sense of her own importance.24

If Anne Royall was paranoid, her abnormality might have accounted for her amazing career. It took a woman spurred by some powerful inner force to defy convention and endure the ordeal of a “common scold” trial. Plunged from wealth to poverty by a broken will, she may have blamed her “enemies,” possibly pious Presbyterians who testified on behalf of the Royall relatives during the will contest, for her plight. Perhaps she transferred this personal animosity into apprehension that their religious zeal might destroy the nation. She chose journalism, a male occupation, both to sustain herself and to expose her “enemies.” Even her friend, John Quincy Adams, appraised Anne Royall as unwomanly when he wrote in his diary that “stripped of all her sex’s delicacy, but unable to forfeit its privilege of gentle treatment from the other, she goes about like a *virago errant* in enchanted armor.”25 It was her misfortune to be judged as an unconventional woman, not as a legitimate journalist.

Notes

5 File of Mrs. A.S. Colvin’s *Weekly Messenger*. Library of Congress.
8 Ibid., p. 50.
9 James, *Anne Royall’s U.S.A.*, pp. 162-163.
11 *Paul Pry*, Dec. 3, 1831.
13 James, *Anne Royall’s U.S.A.*, p. 322.
16 Ibid., p. 125.
17 *Paul Pry*, June 9, 1832, and *The Huntress*, Oct. 9, 1852.
20 *The Huntress*, July 24, 1854.
21 *The Huntress*, July 24, 1854.
22 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE

Jane G. Swisshelm—Reformer

WHEN Jane G. Swisshelm barged into the Senate press gallery in 1850 as the first woman Washington correspondent, she was long accustomed to overcoming obstacles. Born in 1815, she struggled against adversity from childhood. After the death of her father, a real estate speculator in frontier Pittsburgh, her mother made straw hats to support the family and put Jane to work teaching lacemaking to adult women. Her marriage at twenty to James Swisshelm, a strong-willed individual less intellectually able than his wife, brought her years of misery. Swisshelm, who chained a panther outside their farm home, partly to frighten her, demanded more submission than his talented wife was willing to give.

Accompanying Swisshelm to Louisville, Kentucky, where he failed in business, Mrs. Swisshelm witnessed slavery and deplored it. After returning to Pennsylvania to nurse her mother through a fatal illness, Mrs. Swisshelm stumbled into journalism accidentally, contributing anonymous articles to a local newspaper opposing capital punishment. Although critical of her activities, even suing her mother’s estate for the value of his wife’s nursing services, Swisshelm urged her to write to make money. Initially hiding behind a pen name, she started to use her real name in 1844, beginning with a rhyme published in the Spirit of Liberty, a Pittsburgh abolitionist newspaper. Subsequently, she signed all of her articles, even though it was considered improbable that a woman wrote them, and a rumor circulated that the real author was a member of the state legislature.

After Pittsburgh lost this newspaper, Mrs. Swisshelm started the Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter in 1848 as an organ for the Liberty party. When a male editor accused her of being a “man all but the pantaloons,” she replied, as she put it in her autobiography, “in rhyme to suit his case,” accusing him of “horsewhipping Sal or Lizzie” and retorting “Nature must change her plan / Ere you can be a man.” The Visiter established her as one of the best-known abolitionist journalists in the country, notorious to some and revered by others. Yet she was said to be small and slender, to speak softly and to possess an enchanting smile.

When she decided to go to Washington in the spring of 1850, Horace Greeley eagerly added her name to the list of luminaries who wrote for the New York Tribune. Her trip stemmed from a desire to observe how Congress would act on the question of allowing slavery to spread to land annexed in the Mexican War. As she described it, “I longed to be in Washington, so I wrote to Horace Greeley, who answered he would pay me five dollars a column for letters. It was said that this was the first time a woman had been engaged in that capacity.” She also may have seized on the trip as a way of separating, even though temporarily, from her husband. Swisshelm voiced no objections to his wife’s newspaper career, particularly since she used her own money (a legacy from her mother) for her paper.

Her first column, inconspicuously featured on pages three and four of Greeley’s paper for April 12, 1850, called attention to the novelty of a woman writing from the capital. Apologetically she told her readers that she wondered “how the crude ideas of a western woman would look in the columns of the far-famed New York Tribune, beside the finished productions of the master minds of the age.” The second letter, published three days later, exemplified her pungent prose as she covered a Senate debate. “They keep such a dingdong about ‘supporting the Constitution.’ One might imagine it was
some miserable, decrepit old creature that was no longer able to totter on crutches but must be held on every side, and dragged along like a drunken loafer, on his road to the lock-up.”

In the third letter she detailed the excitement in the Senate chamber two days earlier when Senator Foote drew a pistol on Thomas Hart Benton, commenting, “I sat in the reporters gallery, directly opposite the gentlemen, and saw it all.” The description of her invasion into the reporters’ gallery came in the next letter. She explained that she had become disgusted with crowded conditions in the public gallery and had decided to demand equal privileges with men journalists. “So much for a fit of ill-temper! It has established woman’s right to sit as a reporter in our legislative halls.”

Her appearance in the reporters’ gallery was fleeting. The letter in which she described it was the last one to Greeley from Washington. The reason lay in her effort to expose Daniel Webster for alleged immorality. After Webster supported the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Mrs. Swisshelm vigorously fought his attempts to win the Whig presidential nomination. She felt it her duty to publicize a story circulating in the capital gossip mill that he had a “family of eight mulattoes.” Not wanting to embarrass Greeley, Mrs. Swisshelm sent a column on Webster’s alleged misconduct to her own paper, the Visiter, but not to the Tribune, and immediately left the capital. But due to Mrs. Swisshelm’s connection with the Tribune, Greeley’s rival editors accused him of defaming Webster and he was forced to denounce the charge anyway. Greeley and Mrs. Swisshelm remained on good terms, however, and Mrs. Swisshelm continued to correspond occasionally for the Tribune from Pennsylvania.

In later years Mrs. Swisshelm liked to exaggerate her own importance and to claim that the charge, gleefully circulated by newspapers under the pretense of castigating her, had prevented Webster from winning the Whig presidential nomination in 1852. There is no evidence that this was the case since by 1852 Webster was an old man who had been passed over in many presidential contests. Her specific accusation has been ignored by Webster’s biographers although they have noted that various charges of immorality were circulated against Webster by his abolitionist enemies. At any rate Mrs. Swisshelm proved that a woman could be a Washington correspondent and wield a powerful pen.

* * * *

When Mrs. Swisshelm took her abrupt departure from the capital, she evidently expected to return within a year since she promised to act as a Washington correspondent in 1851 for a St. Louis newspaper. The birth of a daughter, Mrs. Swisshelm’s only child, prevented her return. She continued to publish the Visiter until 1852, however, when it was combined with another newspaper after failing to show a profit. Mrs. Swisshelm kept on writing for the new Family Journal and Visiter for five more years until her marriage became intolerable. She finally left her husband in 1857 and took her daughter by steamboat to Minnesota to seek a new life there. Three years later Swisshelm obtained a divorce and remarried.

In Minnesota Mrs. Swisshelm again plunged into journalism and political controversy. Reviving an almost defunct newspaper as an abolitionist organ, she attacked Gen. Sylvanus B. Lowry, proslavery boss of the Democratic party in central Minnesota. When he inveigled a gang of cohorts into destroying her press and brought a libel suit against her, Mrs. Swisshelm was forced to close the paper. Yet she refused to capitulate. She started another abolitionist newspaper, the St. Cloud Democrat, and took to the lecture platform to denounce both Lowry and slavery.

On a national lecture tour to oppose leniency for Sioux Indians accused of massacring hundreds of Minnesota settlers, Mrs. Swisshelm arrived again in Washington in 1863. An old friend, Secretary of War Edwin A. Stanton, offered her a clerkship in the Quartermaster General’s office since the government was beginning an experiment to replace men clerks with women. Anxious to aid the war effort, she eagerly accepted and transferred her St. Cloud newspaper to her nephew, but sent back long columns as its Washington correspondent. She became the most prominent woman journalist in Washington during the Civil War, although not the only one.
While waiting to begin her new job, Mrs. Swisshelm discovered that there was a shortage of nurses in Army hospitals. She started nursing herself and launched a journalistic crusade to improve conditions. In a dispatch to the New York Tribune, she begged for pickles and lemons, believed useful in fighting gangrene. The appeal succeeded as readers sent money and lemons to her home.

In her correspondence to the St. Cloud Democrat, Mrs. Swisshelm blasted Dorothea Dix, superintendent of women nurses in Union hospitals, and the Sanitary Commission, the Union relief agency. She wrote that both had turned her down when she first volunteered as a nurse, assuring her that the wounded had “everything deemed proper” but that her firsthand experiences had shown the falsity of these words. Eventually her attacks on hospital administration prompted authorities to bar her from further nursing. Physically exhausted from months of tending the wounded, Mrs. Swisshelm settled down to work as one of the first women hired for a federal clerical post. (In her autobiography, she dwelt on nursing far more than on her journalistic career although the latter occupied most of her life. In nursing she had found a socially approved woman’s role for practically the only time in her life, and apparently it meant much to her.)

After she started her clerical job, Mrs. Swisshelm continued her absorbing concern with politics. Far from muting her voice because she was a government employee, Mrs. Swisshelm criticized President Lincoln on grounds of being too soft-hearted and conciliatory toward the Democratic party. A sympathizer with black people, she pressed for the use of Negro troops long before Lincoln decided to employ them. Yet she defended Mrs. Lincoln from her numerous detractors, after the President’s wife welcomed her warmly at a White House reception.

Contentious and prejudiced, Mrs. Swisshelm, in the name-calling tradition of Anne Royall, censured numerous targets of her disapproval, particularly Indians and those she considered lukewarm patriots. “The popular sympathy of Washington is in favor of Red men and Rebels, and individuals of either class are apt to be feted and get good places,” she observed sourly. “Who now doubts that McClellan is and always was a traitor?”

As a “lady copyist” herself, Mrs. Swisshelm wrote frequently on the employment of women in government offices. Far from wholeheartedly endorsing the experiment, she faulted the character and abilities of some of her co-workers. Although she observed that some did the same work as men who received $1,600 per year but were paid only $820, Mrs. Swisshelm did not push for equal pay for equal work. Instead she favored the employment of women because it enabled the government to economize.

Mrs. Swisshelm soon found that copying documents six hours a day failed to stimulate her active mind. A fervent Radical Republican, she decided to start a newspaper to give her views more circulation than her correspondence for the St. Cloud newspaper allowed. Angry at President Johnson for his opposition to radical programs, she launched a Washington newspaper for the radical cause. The first issue of her Reconstructionist appeared on Dec. 21, 1865. Mrs. Swisshelm intended to finance it with her salary, but President Johnson thought otherwise. Furious at his bitter attacks on his policies, the President issued a special order dismissing her. Lacking funds, Mrs. Swisshelm suspended publication of her newspaper in March 1866.

Worn out from a lifetime of agitation, Mrs. Swisshelm faced an impoverished old age. Acting on a suggestion of Secretary Stanton, she instituted a successful suit for a part of her dead husband’s estate at Swissvale, Pennsylvania (now a section of Pittsburgh). Retiring there, she lived quietly, although in 1872 she made a lecture tour for woman suffrage, a cause that she had long supported even though she was too independent to work in the women’s organizations committed to it. She occupied her last years writing her autobiography, Half a Century, which appeared in 1880. She died in 1884 at the age of sixty-eight.

It is difficult to assess precisely the impact of Mrs. Swisshelm’s second stay in the capital upon the opening of the field of Washington correspondence to women. No
doubt her national reputation made women aware that opportunities existed in Washington journalism. Her crusading zeal, on behalf of blacks and wounded soldiers, probably served to persuade other women that they, too, could advance causes and “do good” with their pens.

Notes

1Swisshelm. *Half a Century*, p. 20.
9The (N.Y.) *Tribune*, April 12, 1850.
15Letter, Jane G. Swisshelem to Joseph M. Field, May 21, 1850, Boston Public Library. Kate Field collection.
16Swisshelm, *Crusader and Feminist*, p. 27.
17Mrs. John A. Kasson, wife of a Congressman from Iowa, corresponded as “Miriam” for the *Iowa State Register* in Des Moines. Laura C. Redden, who used the male pseudonym, “Howard Glyndon,” was a deaf poet who contributed a few articles from Washington to the *St. Louis Republican*.
18The (N.Y.) *Tribune*, May 22, 1863.
19St. Cloud (Minn.,) *Democrat*, Sept. 17, 1863.
20Thorp, *Female Persuasion*, p. 98.
25Swisshelm, *Crusader and Feminist*, p. 28.
CHAPTER FOUR

Mary Clemmer Ames & Emily Edson Briggs
Literary Ladies

FOLLOWING the war, Mary Clemmer Ames became one of the foremost women Washington correspondent. A popular and versatile writer, she always claimed financial necessity forced her into a career. According to Edmund Hudson, her second husband, she truly believed that “the best thing that can happen to any woman is to be satisfactorily loved, to be taken care of, to be made much of, and to make much of the life and the love utterly her own in her own home.”¹ This conception of Victorian womanhood was not borne out by her own life. She divorced one husband, experimented with fiction and poetry, and developed contacts with leading politicians to gain material for commentary on the key issues of her times. Her life shows the conflicts in a woman who maintained, on the one hand, that all she wanted was to be cherished and protected, while, on the other hand, she worked doggedly to climb to the top of a competitive occupation.

Born in Utica, New York, in 1839, she took pride in her Anglo-Saxon background. As a child she made up rhymes almost before she could write. A teacher sent one poem to Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield (Mass.) Republican, who published it and later became her close friend.

Her father’s failure as a merchant precipitated her marriage at the age of twenty to Daniel Ames, a Methodist minister, who held a federal post in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, during the Civil War. Mrs. Ames, taken prisoner briefly by the Confederates, observed the surrender of the tiny town to Union forces. She described her experiences in a novel, Eirene; or a Woman’s Right, published in 1871, which was praised for its graphic war scenes. The marriage, which proved a mistake from the beginning, ended with a final separation in 1865 and a divorce in 1874. Even while it continued, Mrs. Ames, pressed for funds, attempted to earn her living by writing.

Her newspaper career began in 1859 when she sent letters from New York City to the Utica (N.Y.) Morning Herald and the Springfield (Mass.) Republican. In New York she lived with the acclaimed poets, Alice and Phoebe Cary, who sponsored a literary salon. They presented her to Greeley and other editors and encouraged her literary aspirations. Discontinuing her efforts to write during the war, she lived in Washington, as well as Harpers Ferry, and nursed in army hospitals. She also made long-lasting friendships with notable figures, including Rep. Partus Baxter and Sen. Justin S. Morrill of Vermont, and with their wives.²

On March 4, 1866, her first “Woman’s Letter from Washington,” appeared in the Independent, an influential New York weekly. Her column continued for nearly two decades, drawing increasing acclaim. Yet only a few weeks after it began, she carefully pointed out that fame does not appeal to the “true woman.” Indeed, she insisted that success in a profession extracted a higher price than a “womanly” woman wanted to pay:

If she offends as an artist, it is her misfortune to be assailed as a woman, because, as a woman, nothing can be so sacred to her as her womanhood. That fame is a curse which soils the loveliness of the womanly name by thrusting it into the grimy highway, where it is wondered at, sneered at, lied about, by the vulgar, the worldly, and the wicked.¹

But Mrs. Ames championed the right of women, presumably those like herself who
lacked a man to support them, to enter gainful occupations. She urged "unmarried and unoccupied women" to enter medicine, arguing that the art of healing would develop their true womanly sensibilities. Although she favored suffrage for women, she considered it less important than economic gains: "Women can live nobly without voting; but they cannot live without bread." Unlike Mrs. Swisshelm, Mrs. Ames was disturbed by inequalities in pay between the sexes, arguing that it was unjust and unrealistic to pay men as if they had families dependent on them for support but to ignore the fact that many women also supported households.

Not confined to women's issues, Mrs. Ames' column ranged broadly over the capital political scene, although the Independent also had men Washington correspondents. She spent a considerable amount of time observing Congress and pinpointed lawmakers she thought guilty of ineptitude or undue pomp. Crusading to improve the moral caliber of Congressmen, she branded Senator Salsbury of Delaware as a drunk and lamented, "To see such a man reeking with tobacco and rum is one of the saddest comments on human frailty." She also criticized Senator James G. Blaine of Maine as a "beneficiary of railroad corporations for his own personal enrichment."

Convinced that the Northern victory struck a blow for human betterment, Mrs. Ames praised strides made by the newly emancipated black population. Her belief in social justice prompted hatred for President Johnson whom she accused of plotting to betray the hard-won advances. Pressed to produce weekly columns, she ranged from the profound to the trivial, writing one week on the future of democratic institutions and the next on the Washington weather.

When the Grant administration came in, Mrs. Ames harped on the "excesses" of society, giving her readers the vicarious thrill of learning what was going on in fashionable circles if only to shake their heads in dismay. As women correspondents began to cover social events, Mrs. Ames ridiculed her colleagues whom she referred to by the derogatory nickname of "Jenkins." She scorned the "Jenkins" who sought admission into the press galleries, assuring her readers that she would not venture there:

"Because a woman is a public correspondent it does not make it at all necessary that she as an individual should be conspicuously public — that she should run about with pencils in her mouth and pens in her ears; that she should invade the Reporters' Galleries, crowded with men: that she should go anywhere as a mere reporter where she would not be received as a lady. It is a class of women who like to do these things, who wish to make themselves personally conspicuous, who choose to do all that they do in a loud, intrusive manner, who provoke antagonism and bring reproach upon an entire class."

Like other nineteenth-century advocates of women's rights, Mrs. Ames never foresaw an era when women would adopt the same moral standards as men. Instead she pictured a future Utopia wherein men would be raised to the allegedly "pure" level of women. During the campaign of 1872 she urged women to back Grant, but she exhorted them to avoid "practical" politics and to operate from behind the scenes, claiming that "only in this higher realm of politics can woman reign without detriment to herself or without reflex injury to man."

As the scandals of Grant's second term multiplied, she attacked Grant's "cronyism," which led the President to put unsavory personal friends in office, and defended the press against attacks from those exposed as corrupt. Reporters, she held, had an obligation to disclose the true state of government. Clearly she saw her duty both as a woman and as a journalist to elevate the moral tone of Gilded Age politics. Considering herself far above the average woman journalist, she delineated the high standards that she felt a woman correspondent should attain. "Because she is a woman, hers is a higher work. It is her work to help exalt the standards of journalism, and in the midst of an arduous profession to preserve intact the dignity and sweetness of individual womanhood."

Following her divorce in 1874, Mrs. Ames resumed her maiden name, Clemmer, purchased a townhouse on Capitol Hill and brought her aged parents to live with her. She used money earned from her work for the Brooklyn Daily Union published by Henry C. Bowen, who also published the Independent. For three years, from 1869 to
1872, she wrote for both publications. Her Brooklyn assignments, which included book reviews, comments on public men and even preparation of advertising copy, so impressed Bowen that in her final year she received a salary of $5,000, the largest ever paid to an American newspaperwoman up to that time.\(^{17}\) Later she corresponded for the *Cincinnati Commercial* as well as the *Independent*.

In 1878 Mrs. Ames panicked and jumped from a carriage when the horses bolted; she suffered a skull fracture. While she continued her column, her literary output diminished after the accident, although she wrote one book of poems. (Prior to her accident she had published a *Memorial of Alice and Phoebe Cary*, two volumes based on her columns, as well as her novel.)

A year before her death in 1884, she was married to Edmund Hudson, a well-known Washington journalist. According to her obituary, she was a slender, graceful and dignified woman with blue eyes, light brown hair and high coloring. The obituary stressed that her letters “commanded a position in the selectest society of Washington,” and that “she took her rank as a recognized leader in the literary circles of the day.”\(^{18}\) It pointed out that she began writing newspaper columns for $2 each and was earning $40 or more per story when she died. But it praised her most of all for being a “remarkably womanly woman,” who “loved home cares, to attend to the house, to go to market, to dress with a woman’s elegance, to identify herself with a woman’s life and woman’s duties and hopes.”\(^{19}\)

* * * * *

Another woman, Emily P. Edson Briggs, who wrote as “Olivia,” won equal distinction with Mrs. Ames as a Washington correspondent after the Civil War. Unlike Mrs. Ames, “Olivia” dabbled in “social gossip” for its own sake. A more important figure than most of the women society reporters, “Olivia” touched also on political issues affecting women. A Washington correspondent for twenty years, she always used her pseudonym yet did not try to disguise her true identity.

One of four daughters of a blacksmith, she was born in 1830 in Burton, Ohio, where her mother’s family had been pioneers. In 1854 her father moved the family to Chicago where he prospered in real estate. Young Emily, after teaching school briefly, was married to John R. Briggs Jr., a former member of the Wisconsin legislature. They had two children, one of whom died in infancy. The other, John Edson, became a Washington real estate dealer.

Mrs. Briggs’ introduction to journalism came with her marriage. The couple moved to Keokuk, Iowa, where Briggs purchased a part ownership in a newspaper. An early Republican, he gained the friendship of Abraham Lincoln after reporting on the Lincoln-Douglas debates. The Briggeses came to Washington in 1861 when Briggs got a job as financial clerk of the House of Representatives under Col. John W. Forney, owner of both the *Washington Chronicle* and *Philadelphia Press*.

Dismayed over newspaper attacks on women, like Mrs. Swishelm, who had been hired as government clerks, Mrs. Briggs wrote an anonymous letter to the *Chronicle* refuting charges that women clerks were inefficient. Late in her life she explained to an interviewer:

... there was something in its style that caught the fancy of Col. Forney, the editor, and caused him to ask who wrote it. “Why the wife of one of your clerks.” Then he sent for John and said that he would like to meet me. I was scared to death.\(^{20}\)

Fortunately Forney proved affable and asked her to write for his Philadelphia paper. Mrs. Briggs told him that she was uncertain of her ability but would try. She started with book reviews but later furnished from six to eight columns a week of Washington news, receiving a salary of $3,500 annually.\(^{21}\) Her pseudonym was bestowed by a Philadelphia editor. Between the years of 1866 and 1882 she wrote hundreds of columns under the name, “Olivia.” She became one of the first women correspondents to send news over telegraph wires in contrast to others who continued to use the mails.\(^{22}\)

Living in a hotel, Mrs. Briggs was free of domestic responsibility which allowed her to concentrate on her columns. Although she was granted admission into the Capitol
press gallery, she did not avail herself of this privilege, feeling that, as a woman, she was not really welcome there. In addition, since her husband had an office in the Capitol, she told an interviewer that she got along very well without the gallery.23

In many respects, Mrs. Briggs' Washington coverage paralleled that of other women writers. Like those from Anne Royall on, she described political figures. She reported on woman suffrage activities; made up lists of "matrimonial" eligibles among the capital bachelors; covered inaugurations and White House receptions; and depicted dramatic scenes on the floor of Congress. A male admirer of Mrs. Briggs found none of the Washington journalists "more industrious, more painstaking, than she, not one who gets hold of better news, and not one who equals her in independence and originality."24

In her early columns she conveyed a sense of the changes wrought by the war on the capital's political atmosphere. Like Mrs. Ames, she sided with the Radical forces against President Johnson and befriended the freed Negroes. After watching black gardeners at work, she pointed out that their main handicap lay in their color, asking rhetorically, "What business have they to be born? Isn't it a crime of the darkest dye?"25 Although she did not view herself as a political analyst, she believed that she did not step outside the bounds of acceptable subjects for women writers by favoring civil rights.

The Johnson impeachment proceeding occupied her for months, although she left the narration of the actual events to male reporters. She explained that her aim was to "depict the delicate life-currents and details."26 When the National Woman Suffrage Convention met in Washington in 1870, Mrs. Briggs covered it in minute detail, although she was equivocal on the cause. Her lack of enthusiasm for suffrage led to news being withheld from her and given to a rival reporter, Nellie Hutchinson, of the New York Tribune.27 Perhaps this taught "Olivia" a lesson since the next year she presented a more favorable account of the annual convention.28

After the death of her husband in 1872, Mrs. Briggs continued her journalistic career. Her large acquaintance with leading men made it easy for her to interview them, although she stressed that her role as a woman journalist differed from that of a man. As she explained in one interview:

This article is not written with the attempt to portray that which makes Charles Sumner the central figure of the American Senate. No woman possesses the gift to explore his mind. Yet there may be those who read The Press who feel an interest in the material part of his nature, and who would like to know something about his every-day life — how he looks, how he appears, and the impression he makes upon the womanhood of the day . . . .27

Over the years "Olivia" pictured innumerable receptions and social affairs, treating them with more respect than Mrs. Ames, although Mrs. Briggs also moralized. A successful hostess herself after purchasing "Maple Square," a Capitol Hill mansion, with money inherited from her father, "Olivia" nevertheless warned against the evils of social life, declaring, "All is glare, glitter and pomp, and nothing home-like and substantial."28 Probably her comments pleased readers who lacked access to society, allowing them the rationalization that they would not want to participate even if they could do so.

At her zenith during the Grant years, Mrs. Briggs's career declined after 1876. She stopped corresponding regularly for the Philadelphia Press and tried sending letters to other newspapers. By 1880 she was writing less and less, devoting increasing attention to entertaining. She lived until 1910, enjoying her mansion, which now houses Friendship House, a social service agency. When in her seventies she spent her time preparing a book called The Olivia Letters, a collection of her favorite columns.

Both Mrs. Ames and Mrs. Briggs made a major impact on the development of women Washington journalists. As two widely-known correspondents, they stimulated other women to follow in their paths. Both women capitalized on their own positions in society to gain access to news sources, and each claimed that she confined her scope to narrower limits than would confront a male journalist. Mrs. Ames also used the mantle of womanhood to call for moral reform, assuming that a woman,
because her sensibilities were believed to be finer than a man's, exemplified a purity that could not be expected of a male journalist.

Encouraged by the examples of Mrs. Ames and Mrs. Briggs, an influx of other "literary ladies," who tried to earn, or to improve, their livings via their pens, swarmed into the capital in the 1870's. This influx was recorded in the Congressional Directory which listed 20 women correspondents entitled to Capitol press gallery privileges in 1879 compared to only four in 1870.

Less aloof than Mrs. Ames from other women journalists, Mrs. Briggs worked for the professional advancement of her sex. She was the first president of the Woman's National Press Association, established in 1882, an outgrowth of a group called the Ladies' Press Club.29 The press association soon passed out of existence, leaving behind no records, but marking the first feeble attempt of Washington women correspondents to organize in their own interests.

Notes

3 The (N.Y.) Independent, May 24, 1866.
4 Ibid., March 29, 1866.
5 Ibid., Dec. 27, 1866.
6 Ibid., April 23, 1868.
7 Ibid., Jan. 14, 1869.
8 Ibid., June 15, 1876.
9 Ibid., July 9, 1868.
10 Ibid., March 29, 1866.
11 Ibid., April 8, 1872.
12 Ibid., Jan. 28, 1869.
13 Ibid., March 24, 1870.
14 Ibid., Oct. 10, 1872.
15 Ibid., March 12, 1874.
16 Ibid., March 24, 1870.
18 The Independent, Aug. 28, 1884.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
26 Ibid., March 16, 1868.
27 Ibid., Jan. 19, 1870.
28 Ibid., Feb. 2, 1871.
CHAPTER FIVE

Sara Clarke Lippincott & Mary Abigail Dodge
Victorian Career Women

AMONG the “literary ladies” who flocked to Washington in the 1870’s were two who wrote for great New York papers. Sara Jane Clarke Lippincott used the pseudonym “Grace Greenwood” for the Times; Mary Abigail Dodge wrote as “Gail Hamilton” for the Tribune. Neither was a stranger to Washington; each had been in the capital as a correspondent before the Civil War.

Shortly after Mrs. Swisshelm left Washington in 1850, a dark-eyed, raven-haired young woman, Sara Jane Clarke, accepted an invitation from Dr. Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the National Era, the capital’s abolitionist newspaper, to live in the Bailey home and assist him with editorial duties. Only twenty-seven at the time, Miss Clarke already had won a reputation as “Grace Greenwood” for sentimental poetry and letters on subjects considered suitable for women (scenery, books, art work, interesting people) that ran in the Home Journal, a New York magazine. She was among a number of women writers who gained success under floral pseudonyms in the 1850’s; the phenomenon led one literary historian to characterize the era as the “feminine fifties.”1

Miss Clarke’s appearance in Washington, however, stemmed directly from her refusal to stay entirely within the narrow boundaries of genteel magazines. The youngest of eleven children of a smalltown doctor, Miss Clarke had grown up in a New York village where she roamed freely with her brothers. The great-granddaughter of Jonathan Edwards, she had been taught to voice her views on moral issues. She had not hesitated to write for the National Era, at the request of John G. Whittier. Although her contributions dealt mainly with the joys of nature, she lost her position as a junior editor of Godey’s Lady’s Book because her appearance in the abolitionist National Era offended Godey’s Southern readers.

The sympathetic Bailey offered Miss Clarke a job to replace the one with Godey’s. She also arranged with the Saturday Evening Post of Philadelphia to act as its Washington correspondent. Her columns, which also appeared in the National Era, were reprinted later in the first and second volumes of books titled Greenwood Leaves. The letters to the Saturday Evening Post concentrated on the style, not the substance, of political activities, conveying the impression of a clever woman making dinner-table conversation. Referring to what she regarded as the limitations of a woman correspondent, she commented on President Millard Fillmore:

I will not, of course, presume to pronounce upon the political principles or executive abilities of the new President, but if I may be allowed a purely womanly observation, I would say that, in some respects, he is certainly peculiarly fitted to his new position. He will wear gracefully the honors and dignities of that high station.2

Miss Clarke paid homage continuously to the “cult of true womanhood,” which preached four cardinal virtues for the gentle sex — piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.3 Although she supported herself in a long and successful career, she defined “true feminine genius as ever timid, doubtful and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood.”4

By 1852 Miss Clarke tired of Washington and went to Europe. She had become enamored of a handsome, clever young man from Philadelphia named Leander K. Lippincott.5 Their romance ended in an unhappy marriage with Lippincott displaying an
eye for other women and failing abjectly as a provider. Of necessity, Mrs. Lippincott
continued to write to support both herself and her only child, a daughter. She pub-
lished a shelf of children’s books based on her European trip, ran a children’s magazine
and lectured on patriotic themes during the Civil War, leading President Lincoln to
tnick her “Grace Greenwood, the Patriot.”
In 1871 “Grace Greenwood” began writing columns for the New York Times, which
she continued for most of the decade. Her descriptions of a train trip to the Territory of
Colorado, which she pictured as a new Utopia, were collected in a book, New Life in
New Lands, which catapulted her into the role of unofficial propagandist for the West.
After returning to Washington in 1873 Mrs. Lippincott continued her weekly
columns to the Times. At first she sat in the public galleries, although she told her
readers she “hovered” near the press galleries.7 Apparently, however, as the number of
women correspondents increased in the 1870s, Mrs. Lippincott felt that she could sit in
the press galleries without compromising her respectability. She watched the inaugura-
tion of Rutherford B. Hayes from the Senate press gallery.8
“Grace Greenwood” rarely gave factual accounts of news developments but rather
explored her own views, sometimes with strong asides against men. During the Credit
Mobiler scandal she referred to men as the “irresponsible lords of creation.”9

If these men are really so ignorant and innocent of the ways that are dark and the tricks that are
vain, of railroad corporations and stock gamblers, they should employ their leisure evenings in
Washington by taking a course of instruction in Spencer’s Business College, and perhaps they
had better begin in the ladies’ department. If . . . the women of the North had been . . . accorded
their political rights . . . and if they had been . . . involved in this compromising affair . . . what
a savage and universal demand there would have been for their immediate disfranchisement.10

In lectures she pleaded politely for more opportunities for women but assured
audiences that “American home life is not declining,” ruling out any discussion of
divorce or other legal remedies for unhappy marriages.11 To keep her personal faith in
conjugal affection, sentiment had to triumph over reality. Her husband, who had
gained a federal job due to her influence, was accused of conspiring with a ring of
thieves to file false Indian land claims. Lippincott was indicted in 1878 but fled abroad
before arrest and thereafter disappeared. The scandal caused embarrassment for his
wife, even though she was traveling in Europe at the time. She never commented
publicly on the charges but wrote friends that she thought them untrue.12

In her columns in the Times, she supported the cause of women government work-
ers, urging the Republican party to allow them to stay in office.13 She stood up for
Radical Reconstruction, accusing the Republicans of using civil service reform as a
phony issue to mask the loss of concern for civil rights. She was disturbed by the end of
the last Republican government in the South as part of the compromise responsible for
Hayes’ election in 1876.14 She was appalled by the willingness of the Hayes administra-
tion to overlook the return of white supremacy in the South.15

The fervent patriotism of her Civil War career prompted her repeatedly to “wave the
bloody shirt” in an era when most people preferred to bury it. She defended Hayes’
choice of Frederick Douglass to be the District of Columbia marshall, acidly proclai-
mimg, “It is idle to say that the real objection is more than skin-deep. The chief element of
fitness he lacks is the Caucasian element.”16 She complimented Hayes, in contrast to
her customary criticism of his performance, on a visit to Howard University, a black
college, when it was under attack.

When her stand on political issues led to criticism that a woman had no right to
speak out in spheres apart from the domestic, she retorted, “I can ‘rattle’ with cooking
and sewing as well as any of my gentler sisters, but just at present I confess I prefer . . .
pricking with my pen ‘the bubble reputation’ of political charlatans to puncturing inno-
cent muslin with my needle.”17 Not surprisingly she backed woman suffrage.

In the summer of 1878 Mrs. Lippincott announced her intention of leaving Wash-
ington to seek a musical education for her daughter in Europe. Noting that she had
been dubbed the “Cassandra of the Republican Party,” she told her readers, “I, for one,
fear more from the idle, discontented laborer than from the busy and plotting
politician." Even "Grace Greenwood," by the end of the Reconstruction period, was shifting her concern from the liberties of the freedman to apprehension over labor's threat to private property, exemplifying the way in which the idealism of the Civil War period gave way to the materialism of the Gilded Age.

Back in the United States in the 1880's, Mrs. Lippincott lived in New York before returning to Washington where she wrote a series of reminiscenses of the capital during the Civil War. She continued to write almost to the day of her death in New Rochelle, New York, in 1904.

* * * * *

Like "Grace Greenwood," Mary Abigail Dodge first arrived in Washington before the Civil War under the auspices of Dr. Bailey. Miss Dodge came to the capital in 1858 as a governess in the Bailey home. Painfully shy, she insisted on masking her identity behind the pen name, "Gail Hamilton," with which she already had launched her writing career.

The youngest of seven children, she was born in 1833 to a well-to-do farm family in the village of Hamilton, Massachusetts. A precocious child, she was haunted by thoughts of her own unloveliness stemming from an accident that damaged one of her eyes. After graduating from the Ipswich (Mass.) Female Seminary, she taught there for four years before moving to Hartford, Connecticut, where she began to write while teaching in a high school. Clinging to her pseudonym, based both on her first name and the name of her home, she consistently held to the fiction that "Gail Hamilton," was a different person from Mary Abigail Dodge.

"I can write far more freely if I think no one knows the author," she stated. Writing to Dr. Bailey in 1856 to seek publication of an article in the National Era, she referred to herself as a post office box number. She divulged her name only after Bailey praised her work as "worthy a place" in the National Era. When she agreed to live with the Baileys as their governess, she suffered pangs of apprehension over mingling in Washington society. But she accepted the job to further her writing career.

Before moving to the capital, she contacted C.A. Richardson, editor of the Congregationalist, a widely-circulated Boston religious newspaper that included general news, and made arrangements to act as the publication's anonymous Washington correspondent. During the winters of 1858 and 1859, she sent dozens of columns to the Congregationalist and produced numerous articles for the National Era. She signed her Congregationalist pieces "Cunctare," a Latin epithet commending hesitation or reserve, but continued to use "Gail Hamilton" for the Era. Richardson pleaded vainly that she sign her Congregationalist dispatches, "Gail Hamilton," since the name was gaining attention in the literary world, but she refused. Evidently she felt it even more important to conceal her identity as a Washington correspondent than to disguise her work in other areas, probably because she considered correspondence a masculine occupation.

Demonstrating great zest for politics, Miss Dodge concerned herself with anti-slavery issues, economy in government and Congressional proceedings in her Congregationalist correspondence. Her material was gained either from conversations in the Bailey drawing room, a meeting place for abolitionists, or by watching Congressional sessions from the ladies' gallery. Certainly the shy governess did not set foot in the press gallery or demand the same privileges as a male correspondent.

Miss Dodge left Washington just before the Civil War to care for her ailing mother. She remained in Hamilton for a decade, but this did not cripple her literary career. She sold numerous essays, based on her sharp-witted Yankee philosophy and belief in the Civil War as a moral crusade, to The Atlantic and other magazines. Collected into five books, they established her as one of the popular stars of Ticknor and Fields, the Boston firm that also published Whittier, Longfellow, Hawthorne and Mrs. Stowe.

Yet she was not a feminist. In a book titled Woman's Wrongs, published in 1868, she suggested an alternative to woman suffrage: Restricting the present suffrage only to literate, male property holders who could be expected to exercise it fairly under the influence of their wives. Still she was always able to hold her own with men. When she
discovered that Ticknor and Fields had been paying her less than the customary ten per cent royalties on her books, she roasted the publishers in a book giving a sarcastic account of the controversy.

When Miss Dodge returned to Washington in 1870, she easily established herself as a personage of importance, due both to her prominence as an author and her close ties with one of the capital's leading political figures, Sen. James G. Blaine of Maine, whose wife was Miss Dodge's cousin. Dressed in resplendent gowns of silk, brocade and satin, she occupied a place in society, her youthful shyness apparently overcome. But within herself, Miss Dodge did not feel the assurance that she projected. Writing years later, a friend remembered that she "never in all her life could bear to be looked at."26

Miss Dodge did not return as a newspaper correspondent. A recognized author, she stood aloof from the women who eked out a living by collecting tidbits of social news for capital letters. "I do hate that whole style of writing — newspaper correspondents. It is meddlesome and mischievous. It does small harms and great harms. It does its little all to make people petty, and it is arrogant and pretentious."27

Rather than newspaper correspondence, Miss Dodge wrote book reviews, magazine articles and essays reconciling conventional Congregationalism, her lifelong religious affiliation, with scientific interpretations of the Bible. Yet her zest for politics and current affairs remained.

In 1877 she sent the New York Tribune a long series of article which established her as a leading woman Washington correspondent during the Hayes administration. Unlike the letters of other women correspondents, Miss Dodge's articles all revolved loosely around the same subject, civil service reform. Taking a position in line with Blaine's, "Gail Hamilton," expressed her opposition by picturing civil service reformers as pretentious hypocrites.

The Tribune, which backed the conservative Blaine as a prospective Presidential candidate, served as a logical vehicle for the articles. It was rumored that Blaine either had written or instigated the pieces, an accusation which both Miss Dodge and the Tribune indignantly denied.28 In one editorial the Tribune lavished praise on the articles as the "most brilliant and the most widely read series of criticism ever contributed by a woman's pen to the literature of American politics."29

From today's standpoint, these much-lauded articles make little sense. The logic seems cockeyed; reformers and reform journals may be correct, even if inconsistent, and "Gail Hamilton's" refusal to argue the main issue — whether it is preferable to have government employees selected by merit or politics — stands out as infuriating. But the series enhanced her already enviable reputation. By the 1880's her magazine articles, usually on religious themes, drew so great a following that she could dictate to editors: "Two hundred dollars an article, without limit as to length. Free range as to themes over this world and the next."30

It was believed that she wrote Blaine's speeches, but there is no firm evidence that she did so. Clearly she emerged as an apologist for the questionable political morality of the Gilded Age which Blaine exemplified. Unlike other women Washington correspondents, she did not deplore the Credit Mobilier scandal.31 In a magazine article, she played down the capital's sparkling social life to repel attacks on the wastefulness of the circles in which she and the Blaines moved.32

It was unfortunate for Mary A. Dodge's development that she fell so completely under Blaine's sway. The perceptiveness and originality of her early work for the Congregationalist did not flower in later years when her opinions echoed those of Blaine, a spokesman for business interests who had acquired a fortune by unexplained means.

Her last literary work, appropriately, consisted of The Biography of James G. Blaine (1895), a labor of love assigned by Mrs. Blaine. As a work of scholarship, the book was a disaster. Reviewing it in the American Historical Review, Professor Hart appraised it dimly: "It was not in the mind of the author . . . to use critical tints; the book is all in black and white; so far as we learn from it, Mr. Blaine appears to have had no other fault than that of interrupting other senators."33 Mary A. Dodge, child of strict Puritan
morality, closed her eyes to Blaine's methods of operation, perhaps because the Blaine home provided a substitute for a home and children of her own.

Miss Dodge died in 1896 after suffering a paralytic stroke in Washington while working on the last portion of the Blaine biography. Taken home to Hamilton, she recovered enough to dictate an account of visions during her attack that convinced her of immortality. Her early promise as a journalist remained unfulfilled; her role as a popular essayist and humorist of the Civil War era remains to be studied.

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In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the number of women correspondents dropped markedly from the high of twenty listed in the 1879 Congressional Directory. The decrease coincided with a change in rules that barred persons not considered their newspapers' main representatives from the Capitol press galleries. Since most of the women correspondents supplemented the work of men, this change effectively excluded them. In addition, by 1880 public interest in the moral questions of Reconstruction which had occupied the leading women correspondents had waned. Those women correspondents who continued to write from Washington were left almost exclusively to handle social news.

Notes

5Thorpe, Female Persuasion, p. 156.
8Ibid., March 17, 1877.
9Ibid., Feb. 1, 1873.
10Ibid., Feb. 22, 1873.
11Ibid., April 13, 1873.
14Ibid., May 5, 1877.
15Ibid., June 9, 1877.
16Ibid., March 24, 1877.
17Ibid., July 9, 1877.
18Ibid., June 1, 1878.
19Mary Abigail Dodge, "A Chapter on Bashfulness and Ugliness," Commonplace Book, Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts.
20Gail Hamilton [Mary Abigail Dodge], Gail Hamilton's Life in Letters (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1901), I, p. 188.
21Ibid., p. 108.
22Ibid., p. 203.
23Congregationalist, Dec. 30, 1859.
28The (N.Y.) Tribune, Aug. 25, 1877.
29Ibid.
31Ibid., p. 698.
KATE Field did not fit the mold of the other important nineteenth-century women Washington journalists. An editor and publisher, not a correspondent, her interests were different from those of the earlier women correspondents. Although she had been a strong Union sympathizer during the Civil War, she was not particularly concerned with civil rights by the time she started *Kate Field’s Washington* in 1890. Consequently, her interests were different from those of the earlier women correspondents. Her importance lies in the fact that she gave one woman’s highly personal views on the news including reform efforts, politics and local issues in a period when it was most unusual for a woman to found and run a newspaper.

Miss Field personified the achievements of a clever and intelligent American woman during the late nineteenth century.¹ Now forgotten, she stood before the American eye for decades, exhibiting talents as an actress, playwright, literary critic, lecturer, writer and journalist with flair and style — if with only indifferent success. Although somewhat eccentric, she demonstrated unusual gifts and attainments, among them the establishment of her national newspaper.²

Born in 1838, she was the daughter of Joseph M. Field, an actor, journalist and theater manager, and his actress wife, who managed to give their daughter a sheltered upbringing in St. Louis, Missouri, in spite of financial trouble. After her father’s death in 1856, the girl became the ward of a millionaire uncle, Milton L. Sanford of Boston, husband of Mrs. Field’s younger sister, Cordelia. In 1859 the Sanfords took her with them to Italy where she became the darling of the Florence writers’ colony. Before she left this country, she tried to prepare for a career, persuading the *Boston Courier* to pay her five dollars a column for travel letters on her European experiences. Once in Europe, she also sent travel letters to the New Orleans *Picayune*.

In Florence she dallied with the elderly writer, Walter Savage Landor, took tea at the Brownings and flirted with Robert, charmed Anthony Trollope and met George Eliot. When she learned that her literary friends thought American slavery a curse, she agreed, even though Sanford, who had interests in the cotton industry, thought otherwise. After she defended John Brown, Sanford threatened to cut off her allowance, but she was not dismayed and vowed to become self-supporting.³

Returning to the United States on the eve of the Civil War, she continued to antagonize Sanford by her espousal of the Union cause, leading him to change his mind about making her his principal heir.⁴ But she did not let this development defeat her. She traveled throughout the United States, writing letters on her experience for Samuel Bowles’ *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*. Later she trod the boards on the lyceum circuit, wrote humorous accounts of several return journeys to Europe and embarked on a mildly successful theatrical career. In return for publicizing an amazing new invention, the telephone, she received Bell Telephone Company stock that quickly grew in value to $200,000. Sinking the money into a dressmaking business to reform the fashion industry by promoting simpler styles, she promptly lost everything.

Described as “an egocentric individual,” she was said to be “short and slight of build, pert and attractive, though not beautiful.”⁵ Although she had opportunities to marry, she declined them, apparently due to hesitancy to play a woman’s usual role in the Victorian world. As she wrote in her journal at the age of seventeen:
Oh, if I were a man! I pity myself, indeed. I do. There is not an ambition, a desire, a feeling, a thought, an impulse, an instinct that I am not obligated to crush. And why? because I am a woman, and a woman must content herself with indoor life, with sewing and babies. Well, they pretend to say that God intended women to be just what they are. I say that He did not, that men have made women what they are, and if they attribute their doings to the Almighty, they lie. The time will come, but my grave will be many centuries old....

Later as a lecturer she publicly took the opposite stand: That woman’s happiest place was in the home. Yet ambivalence on the issue remained. When she was 30 she wrote in her diary:

Mrs. ______ called, and in the course of conversation I said that I held the post of honor to be a private station; that a home, a loving husband and children, were the real satisfactions of a woman’s life.

“Strange that you should say this,” replied Mrs. ______.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you strive for just the opposite.”

“I am trying to make a living, certainly.”

“The world says you care for nothing but fame.”

“The world tells many lies.”

“Ah, but there is never fire without smoke,” she replied.

Polite, to say the least. I scorn to vindicate myself to such people. I am misunderstood.

According to her biographer, Miss Field distrusted marriage instinctively, although she exploited her own femininity. Her intense individualism led her away from customary women’s activities and prompted her search for a place in a man’s world, culminating in her last ambitious undertaking, Kate Field’s Washington.

Eager to express her views on social, political and economic conditions, Miss Field chose Washington as a logical spot to launch her weekly newspaper. She was not a strong supporter of woman suffrage, failing to endorse the movement until 1893, only three years before her death. Politics in general attracted her, although she pictured marginal issues as great causes, for example, a national marriage law, cremation, annexation of Hawaii and Alaska, international copyright, removal of taxes from imported art objects, and a national conservatory of music.

Ensnared in a suite at the Shoreham Hotel, then the most fashionable in Washington, Miss Field set herself up as editor and publisher. She got her venture off to a fairly sound start with help from friendly financiers. The publication did not give a summary of national news but rather focused on topics of special interest to Miss Field and featured book reviews, theatrical news, novelettes and drawing-room comedies, often written by the editor herself. Her kaleidoscopic opinions opposed arbitrary power but championed tariff and civil service reform, temperance (not abstinence), high society and the arts.

Fascinated by fairs and expositions, Miss Field campaigned unsuccessfully for Washington to be the site of the World’s Fair of 1892 and later publicized the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. She backed the right of the rich to conspicuous consumption, noting, “When people have money I like to see them spend it generously instead of piling it up for unborn generations.” In the political arena, she supported higher salaries for public officials and civil service reform but presented her views in the self-deprecatory style often used by women correspondents: “I have no vote and it matters little what a woman thinks on any subject; but, worm as I am, I pray for the day when the sovereign people will rise to the sublime height of common sense and ask that it rule the nation.”

Her sharpest criticism was aimed at her own sex. Commenting on the outlandish conduct of some Congressmen, she blamed their mothers. Women, she claimed, not only failed to discipline their children but to aid unfortunate members of their own sex. She charged that women failed to “appreciate the greatness” of their roles. On civil rights she expressed mild sympathy for the Negro but embraced racial stereotypes of the day, referring to a black delegate to the Mississippi Constitutional Convention as “this Sambo.”

Although repeatedly boasting that she was the only woman editor of a national
review, Miss Field made only two attempts, both unsuccessful, to sit in the Capitol press galleries. The alleged reason was that the galleries were limited to telegraphic correspondents for newspapers, but she believed that she was excluded solely because of her sex.18

A handsomely-printed, sixteen-page publication which aimed at an upper-class audience, Kate Field's Washington finally expired with the issue of April 20, 1895, a fatality attributed to its miscellaneous character.19 Reflecting little but the views of its founder, it suffered as Miss Field's interest and health began to wane. After its failure, she left Washington for Hawaii where she hoped to regain her health while working as a correspondent. She died in Honolulu of pneumonia at the age of Fifty-seven.

Notes

4Baldwin, "Kate Field," p. 613.
5Ibid., p. 614.
6Lilian Whiting, Kate Field: A Record (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1899) p. 69.
7Ibid., p. 204.
8Baldwin, "Kate Field," p. 614.
9Ibid.
10Whiting, Kate Field: A Record, p. 470.
11Baldwin, "Kate Field," p. 613.
12Kate Field's Washington, Jan. 15, 1890.
13Ibid.
14Ibid., March 5, 1890.
15Ibid.
16Ibid., June 11, 1890.
17Ibid., Oct. 8, 1890.
18Ibid., Feb. 14, 1894.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

WASHINGTON women correspondents evolved from a long tradition of American women active both in journalism and literature. Anne Royall's bravery, and the fortitude of dozens of widows before her who carried on their husbands' newspapers in colonial America, had established the groundwork for Jane Swisshelm, the first and probably most influential woman correspondent in the nineteenth century.

It is doubtful that either Mrs. Swisshelm or Sarah Jane Clarke Lippincott ("Grace Greenwood") would have appeared in Washington if they had not been spurred by the powerful cause of abolition. Both women believed so fervently in its righteousness that they turned aside from the prevailing cult of "true womanhood" which confined a woman's sphere to the home. In doing so, they still operated within the cultural mold which called upon women to display a higher morality than men and thus gave tacit permission for them to criticize society's ills.

The Civil War, with its victory over bondage, opened opportunities for women in many occupations, including journalism. Mary Clemmer Ames, who traded heavily on the mystique that women possessed a higher moral sense, showed that a facile woman writer could do well for herself as a Washington correspondent. In the seamy world of post-Civil War politics, a woman correspondent could stand apart from the robber barons and their hireling politicians, pointing a finger of righteous scorn and indignation, since the culture expected women to display values superior to those of men.

A long-forgotten figure, Mrs. Ames' career merits examination today. Her vigorous stand on freedom of the press deserves as much recognition now as when she held, in the midst of attacks on reporters for exposing corruption, that "without a proclaiming and protesting press...the government itself, too low in its standard of integrity already, would be thrice as corrupt as it is." Mrs. Ames saw clearly that the decline in political morality following the Civil War reflected a social upheaval which produced a new aristocracy of wealth, power and ruthlessness.

With the exception of Mrs. Swisshelm, most nineteenth-century women correspondents cannot be considered active feminists. Often lukewarm on suffrage, they showed greater enthusiasm for economic issues, particularly the right of women to hold federal jobs. Most were not reformers apart from their interest in abolition. The society reporters, headed by Emily Edson Briggs ("Olivia"), were enthralled by lavish entertainments even though they lamented their impact on morality, as required by convention.

The composite picture of these outstanding women journalists shows that most came from the West, where women enjoyed greater freedom than in the East. Excepting Mrs. Briggs, all were divorcees, widows or single women who had to earn their own livings. Several had suffered in unhappy marriages: Mrs. Swisshelm, Mrs. Lippincott and Mrs. Ames. Unlike many women of their day, as a group these early journalists were not burdened by a large number of children. Most had no children and those who did, Mrs. Swisshelm, Mrs. Lippincott and Mrs. Briggs, had only one. In short, the nineteenth-century woman Washington correspondent emerges as an independent individual of above average intelligence with a flair for words who turned to newspaper work from financial necessity. None entered the field to prove an abstract point — such as the right of a woman to engage in the same profession as a man. It is not surprising that they exhibited more interest in economic than in political issues affecting women.
Most of the group (excepting Mrs. Swisshelm) took care to select topics that seemed appropriate for women and to give repeated assurances of their own respectability within the confines of accepted feminine roles. Women were expected to be sentimental, so they sentimentalized. Women were expected to love the home, therefore they praised it to high heaven. Women were not expected to comprehend or be concerned with politics except for an overriding passion for spiritual or moral crusades, like abolition, so they disregarded day-by-day political analysis although Mrs. Lippincott, Mrs. Ames and Miss Dodge (in her early years) all demonstrated the ability to be astute political writers. Women were thought to be deeply interested in personalities and appearances, so women correspondents churned out thousands of “pen-portraits,” and “pensketches” and “pen-pictures” of everyone of importance. The women correspondents tried to prove that they remained “true women” in spite of their careers.

Nevertheless, they enlarged horizons for women beyond the previously accepted ones. No matter how much they praised the home, they were not in it. No matter how much they attempted to carve out a province separate from that of men correspondents, they still found themselves competing with men.

From only two in 1850 the number of women correspondents rose to twenty accredited to the Capitol press galleries in 1879; in that year the rules were changed and women effectively were barred from the galleries. More study is needed of the events surrounding the exclusion of women, although it is clear that by 1880 women had lost their novel position as voices of political morality. The topics of the foremost women correspondents, Radical Republican politics, concern for civil rights and criticism of corruption, had lost their appeal for a nation enraptured by big business.

Yet the increasing number of women correspondents indicated that women journalists were beginning to make inroads in a male domain. The obituary of Mary Clemmer Ames pointed out that she was not one of the women correspondents who had “to hang about lobbies and galleries and buttonhole Congressmen to pick up material.” It is likely that those women correspondents, who lacked the social access to influential figures enjoyed by Mrs. Ames, may have been taking clients away from men, and the male establishment retaliated by barring them from the galleries.

At least one woman correspondent, Austine Sneed, who wrote social news for the New York Graphic and other newspapers, complained repeatedly in the 1880’s that men correspondents envied her success and made it increasingly difficult for her to make a living. In a series of letters to former President Hayes, a close personal friend, she cited growing masculine competition and commented bitterly, “editors always help the man who is trying to get a woman’s work on their paper away from her.”

Even though women correspondents were relegated to social trivia in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the pioneer women correspondents planted the seeds of opportunity for women in Washington journalism. When women Washington correspondents emerged again in the first World War period, they may have represented the harvest of ambition sown in the female subconscious by their nineteenth century predecessors.

Notes

1The (N.Y.) Independent, March 12, 1874.
2Ibid., Aug. 28, 1884.
3File of letters, Austine Snead to Rutherford B. Hayes, Rutherford B. Hayes Library, Fremont, Ohio. See letter, Austine Snead to Rutherford B. Hayes, Jan. 10, 1887.
APPENDIX

WOMEN CORRESPONDENTS ENTITLED TO PRESS GALLERY PRIVILEGES ACCORDING TO CONGRESSIONAL DIRECTORY 1870-1885

1870
Mrs. Briggs
Philadelphia Press
Mrs. Lippincott
New York Tribune
Miss Snead
New York World
Maria A. Stetson
Topeka State Record

1871
Mrs. M. C. Ames
New York Independent
Mrs. Briggs
Philadelphia Press
Mrs. Lippincott
New York Tribune
Mrs. McCaine
New York Herald
Miss Snead
New York World
Marie A. Stetson
Topeka State Record

1872
Mrs. M. C. Ames
New York Independent
Mrs. H. M. Barnard
New York Herald
Mrs. Briggs
Philadelphia Press
Mrs. Mary E. Nealy
New York Home Journal
Miss M. A. Snead
New York World
Maria A. Stetson
Topeka State Record

1873
Mrs. M. C. Ames
New York Independent
Mrs. H. M. Barnard
New York Herald
Mrs. Briggs
Philadelphia Press
Mrs. F. D. Cogswell
New Carolina New Era
Mrs. Mary Fuller
St. Louis Times
Miss Eunice E. Gibbs
Chicago Inner-Ocean
Mrs. Lippincott
New York Times
Mrs. Mary E. Nealy
New York Home Journal
Miss M. A. Snead
New York World

1874
Mrs. M. C. Ames
New York Independent
Mrs. H. M. Barnard
New York Herald
Mrs. Briggs
Philadelphia Press
Mrs. E. S. Cogswell
North Carolina New Era
Mrs. Mary Fuller
St. Louis Times

1875
Mrs. Lippincott
New York Times
Mrs. Mary E. Nealy
New York Home Journal
Mrs. F. C. Sneed
Louisville Courier-Journal
Miss Austine Sneed
New York Graphic
Mrs. E. O. Wallace
Philadelphia Evening Telegraph

1876
Mrs. Briggs
Philadelphia Press
Mrs. M. Clemmer
New York Independent
Mrs. Mary Fuller
St. Louis Times
Mrs. Anna S. D. Husted
Boston Globe
Miss Emma Janes
Cleveland Herald
Mrs. Lippincott
New York Times
Mary E. Mann
Daily Saratogian
Ballston Democrat
Mrs. Mary E. Nealy
New York Home Journal
Mrs. F. C. Sneed
Louisville Courier-Journal
Miss Austine Sneed
New York Graphic
Mrs. E. O. Wallace
Philadelphia Evening Telegraph

1877
Mrs. Briggs
no paper listed
Miss Louise F. Hopkins
Green Bay (Wis.) State Gazette
Mrs. Anna S. D. Husted
Boston Transcript
Miss Emma Janes
Cleveland Herald
Saratoga Record Union
Miss Mary E. Mann
Daily Saratogian
Harriet N. Nute
Kansas Daily Champion
Mary Gay Robinson
New York Daily Times
Mrs. F. C. Sneed
Louisville Courier-Journal
Miss Austine Sneed
New York Graphic
Mrs. Mary C. Stewart
Iowa Printing Co.
Mrs. G. W. Thompson
Chicago Advance

1878
Mrs. Briggs
no paper listed
Mrs. S. F. Crocker
Mary Fields
Chicago Journal
Miss Emma Janes
Saratoga Record Union
Mrs. A. D. Johnston
Rochester (N.Y.), Democrat
Mrs. M. D. Lincoln
Cleveland Plain Dealer
Mrs. J. V. McCann
Philadelphia Evening Herald

1879
Mrs. Briggs
Washington Union
Mary Fields
Chicago Journal
Mrs. J. W. Haydarre
Chicago Times
Emma Janes
Sacramento Record Union
Mrs. M. D. Lincoln
Cleveland Plain Dealer
Mrs. J. V. McCann
Philadelphia Evening Herald
Miss Austine Sneed
New York Graphic
Mrs. F. C. Sneed
Louisville Courier-Journal
Fanny B. Ward
National Republican

1880
Mrs. A. D. Johnston
Rochester New York Democrat
Mrs. M. D. Lincoln
Cleveland Plain Dealer
Mrs. J. V. McCann
Norristown Daily Herald
Mary Gay Robinson
New York World
Miss Mary Shannon
New Orleans Daily City Item
Maude St. Pierre
Washington National View

1881
No women listed

1882
Helena McCarthy
San Francisco Chronicle
Mary Shannon
New Orleans Daily City Item

1883
Mrs. G. W. Thompson
Syracuse Journal

1884
Helena McCarthy
San Francisco Chronicle

1885
Helena McCarthy
San Francisco Chronicle
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*Articles by Early Women Washington Journalists*

