

### Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity

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## Review

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**Zaeske, Susan** *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity*. University of North Carolina Press, \$19.95 ISBN 807854263

### Exercising their Rights

Study reveals women's roles in reform

In her study of women's petitioning in the antebellum period, Susan Zske quotes Samuel Johnson: "This petitioning is a new mode of distressing government, and a mighty easy one." Indeed, Zske effectively portrays the distress petitioning created for the U.S. government, and the ease with which women adopted this means of asserting themselves. **Signatures of Citizenship** provides a useful history of the right of petition, the kinds of petitions women employed during the antebellum years, and its evolving strategy.

Zske divides women's antislavery petitioning into four stages: the first, 1831-36 when women employed supplicating, often defensive, language in long statements; the second, 1837-40, after enactment of the gag rules, when men and women jointly signed shorter, more direct documents; the third, after 1840, when the requests became more aggressive even as the number of women petitioning declined; and the fourth, 1861-65, when approximately one in every twenty-four Northern Americans (both women and men) signed petitions supporting the constitutional amendment to emancipate slaves. Zske devotes considerable and helpful space to Congress's opposition to the petitions via the gag rules, a legislative device by which members voted to ignore these requests. Undeterred by this opposition, however, from 1837 to 1865 the petitioners continued to send to Washington thousands of requests to free the slaves, first in the District of Columbia, later the territories, and finally in all the states. Zske analyzes the different kinds of petitions, the changes in tactics for recruiting signers, and the increasingly effective organizational tactics of the abolitionists, beginning in the late 1830s.

Zske quite rightly stresses the marginal status of abolitionists in this period, writing on page 38, "to publicly declare oneself an abolitionist in the 1830s was to align with a small and despised minority." And within that small group, women played an even more marginal role. They were aided, however, by congressman and former U.S. President John Quincy Adams who emerges here as a heroic defender of women's right to petition. Zske also tells us how the visionary Adams argued that women's rights extended from citizenship to suffrage.

Like many historians, Zske sees a direct link between women's antislavery efforts in becoming more organized and assertive and the women's rights movement. What is new in her study is her concentration on the act of petitioning alone. She states on page 159, "The right of petition, then, provided the sole means through which women could enact their national citizenship." Women became more conscious of their identity, she argues, and by signing a petition took a step toward involvement in politics. On page 99 she writes of women petitioners in 1837, "No longer did they describe their petitioning as motivated by some outside force. No longer did they identify themselves as adjuncts of male citizens." She appropriately calls attention to the groundbreaking 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia, a meeting that should not remain in the shadow of the well-known 1848 Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention.

This study is a substantial contribution to the history of women's rights and the antislavery movement. Zske, associate professor of rhetoric at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes in clear, jargon-free prose. Her research into primary and secondary sources is extensive and her analysis of the petitions incisive. Some repetition, however, could have been avoided. For example, several times in this brief work we are told how women's language became bolder. On the other hand, Zske's narration of her fourth stage on pages 167-72 seems rushed, providing only a brief narrative of the Woman's National Loyal League which helped bring about the 13th Amendment. Although this 1861-65 period is not strictly "antebellum," it is crucial, as one of her four stages, to her study. I found myself wanting the author to slow down, and provide the same kind of detailed analysis of the strategies and kinds of petition as in the earlier chapters.

These relatively minor flaws do not, however, detract from an admirable study of a significant activity in the history of 19th century reform movements.

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