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Interview

SISTER SOCIETIES: WOMEN'S ANTISLAVERY ORGANIZATIONS IN ANTEBELLUM

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Spring 2006

Beth Salerno is Associate Professor of History at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, NH. She is currently working on a scholarly biography of Mary Clark, Corresponding Secretary for the Concord (NH) Female Antislavery Society. Interview with Beth A. Salerno

Interviewed by Christopher S. Freeman

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): In the first chapter of your book you contend that "The history of these "sister societies" makes clear the power of association." Could you explain briefly what the "power of association" is and how these societies demonstrated it?

Beth A. Salerno (BAS): The "power of association" is the multiplier effect that occurs when dedicated men and women join forces to work together toward a common cause. While many women and men supported antislavery societies with occasional donations or their signature on a petition, I wanted to see what happened when people agreed to join an organization and pool their efforts. Female antislavery society constitutions recognized the power of association. Many required that members come to weekly or monthly meetings where they would sew goods for fundraising fairs, learn more by listening to antislavery readings, and sign petitions or plan events. Members who could not make the meetings had to pay a fine, showing that membership required a contribution of time, skill or money on a regular, continuing basis. When local societies organized into regional, or in the case of Illinois a state-level association, they took this multiplier effect to a new level. As the women themselves noted, coordinated networks of women could leverage greater support through large antislavery fundraising fairs and could speak with a national voice. .

CWBR: In your work you seem to have identified several different periods of the organizational history of female anti-slavery societies. What were and how would you categorize these different period?

BAS: The late 1820s and early 1830s were a formative period for antislavery activism as women wrote antislavery poetry in black women's literary societies, boycotted slave made goods through free cotton associations, and explored gradual emancipation through the American Colonization Society. By 1833 when William Lloyd Garrison and others met to form a national antislavery organization, there were already women's organizations dedicated to immediate emancipation. The women's organizations grew and expanded through 1837 when the explosive growth culminated in an Antislavery Convention of American Women in New York City. Here the chronology separates by region. From 1838 through 1840 in the east, women negotiated differences that erupted in male and female societies related to tactics, strategies and understandings of woman's appropriate role. From 1840 to 1860, eastern women were in transition with many societies losing members, and most holding fewer public activities. Antislavery fairs replaced conventions as the major organizational node for women. During the 1840s and early 1850s in the midwest, however, the number of women's societies grew dramatically and they focused on assistance to fugitive slaves. Debates similar to those in the east disrupted their growth by 1855. It is only with the outbreak of the Civil War that public female antislavery activism burst forth again with the National Women's Loyal League and their massive petition campaign for the 13th Amendment. .

CWBR: How and why did the tactics used by female anti-slavery organizations change over the course of their history?

BAS: In the late 1830s, debates broke out both within and outside abolitionist circles over woman's appropriate role in society. Strategies such as petitions and conventions which had seemed unusual but just inside woman's appropriate role seemed to fall outside it by 1840. Once women's rights advocates met in Seneca Falls in 1848 and Worcester in 1850, conventions became the purview of this new cause. Many antislavery women tried to avoid controversy by focusing their petitions at the state level, sewing for fugitive slaves, or running antislavery fairs. Economic and political challenges caused changes as well. The 1837 recession took a heavy toll on antislavery donations. The American Antislavery Society began to stress fundraising more than society formation. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act politicized women's aid for fugitive

slaves, causing a previously benign activity like sewing to seem more radical, pushing conventions and petitioning even further from woman's appropriate sphere. .

CWBR: Throughout your book you describe how the women involved in these organizations had to justify their actions and activities on the issue of slavery. Why did women have to offer such justifications and what were some of them?

BAS: One should remember that antislavery was a wildly unpopular cause throughout its history. Both women and men had to justify their involvement in a movement that challenged the fundamental economic and political underpinnings of the nation. Women had an additional responsibility to justify their actions since gender ideologies of the period assigned the political and economic realm to men, rendering women intruders on this controversial subject. Women had to redefine slavery as a moral issue, one which affected women, children and the virtue of the nation, in order to have a right to speak on the subject. From that perspective, petitions to Congressmen were moral prayers, while aid to fugitives was assistance to the poor and needy. .

CWBR: One point that I found particularly enlightening was the affect that foreign and particularly British anti-slavery efforts had upon American anti-slavery organizations. How and why did this relationship begin and how did it evolve over time?

BAS: British antislavery efforts were a model for both male and female abolitionists in America. Members of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, in both England and America shared arguments against slavery and strategies such as boycotts of slave-made goods. Both Benjamin Lundy and William Lloyd Garrison regularly printed British female arguments against slavery in their newspapers and included copies of female antislavery society constitutions as models for American women. When women began to form American societies, they immediately corresponded with their British counterparts, asking for antislavery strategies, justifications for female action, encouragement and support. The abolition of British West Indian slavery in 1838 was a powerful motivation for American abolitionists, particularly for women. Many in Britain described a massive women's antislavery petition as critical to the success of that effort. By the 1850s, female antislavery societies were actively competing to secure British women's donations for their antislavery

fairs, since having the latest, most stylish British goods proved a profitable draw as abolitionists combined doing good with holiday shopping. .

CWBR: When reading about the activities of these associations I was often struck and found myself comparing the Anti-Slavery movement to the subsequent Temperance and Women's suffrage movements. Is it possible that the relationships, lessons, and skills gained through participation in the anti-slavery movement carried over into those subsequent social movements?

BAS: There clearly was overlap in membership among these three major movements, as well as with missionary efforts. Some female societies chided their members about attending temperance meetings or church sewing groups at the expense of antislavery gatherings. The relationships between antislavery and women's rights have been well-studied; some abolitionist women and men saw a direct relationship between their calls for human rights for African-Americans and a claim for human rights for women. The most famous examples are Frederick Douglass, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, all of whom were abolitionists who signed the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls, NY, or Angelina and Sarah Grimke, who wrote on the horrors of slavery and the rights of women. All three of these movements also engaged in debates over the proper role for women and the grounds on which women could claim a right to participate in the political system. Were women equivalent to men, with similar rights and skills, or were they different from men, with values and skills that society could not do without? Both arguments were used to justify women's involvement in each of these movements. .

CWBR: Where there any interesting or unique challenges to researching female anti-slavery societies?

BAS: Luckily many women recognized the importance of their antislavery work and made sure to preserve the records of their organizations. Some like the Salem (MA) Female Antislavery Society formally donated their materials to an archive. William Lloyd Garrison and the American Antislavery Society also noted the formation and activities of women's organizations in the Liberator and in annual publications. However, smaller societies, black women's societies, societies in which the recording secretary changed regularly, and sewing societies were all more difficult to track. In addition, after 1840, most antislavery newspapers and associations focused on issues rather than societies per se, meaning that fewer societies and activities were listed. Finally, many female

societies which formed after 1840 were listed only in western newspapers or in Christian missionary publications rather than the national antislavery press. This means that I have probably continued the trend of underestimating western and church-based organizations. The major challenge in this research is true for much research in women's history - women change their name when they marry and often go by their husband's first and last name (Mrs. Charles Crocker). This makes it hard to identify continuity from single status to married status and can make women's papers hard to find - one has to look in the husband's family collection..