

### Stepping Lively In Place: The Not-married, Free Women Of Civil-war-era Natchez, Mississippi

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## Review

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**Broussard, Joyce** *Stepping Lively in Place: The Not-Married, Free Women of Civil-War-Era Natchez, Mississippi*. University of Georgia Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780820349725

### Spirited Single Women in Mid-Century Natchez

Good monographs are like specialty stores: their “goods” are deeply-researched specialized historical evidence that amplifies a subject and offers new information on a particular topic, the corollary of a unique piece of clothing that highlights an outfit. Such is the case with Joyce Linda Broussard’s excellent *Stepping Lively in Place*. As the title indicates, this is a study of unmarried women in Natchez, the port city along the Mississippi mostly during the antebellum period. After a background chapter on the setting in Natchez, Broussard focuses in individual chapters on not-married, divorced, and widowed white women, dissecting the ways in which these single women survived in a traditional system that privileged white males and expected adult women to be dutiful wives.

In subsequent chapters Broussard turns her attention to free black women and what she calls the disorderly, not-married white and black women of antebellum Natchez, that is those who had some contact with the criminal justice system. Two final chapters move from the ante-bellum period to cover single women during the Civil War and post-war period. Enslaved women who held no legal status before the war are not included until after their emancipation; some married women whose male relatives were killed in the war or die soon after are included in these last two chapters as women living without male authority in their households.

Broussard does not—in fact could not—offer Natchez as typical of southern cities and hence she does not extend her conclusions to other southern communities, though she does argue that they fit a pattern of single women, as neither typical nor aberrant due to their marital circumstances. Broussard’s

sustaining motif of stepping lively suggests how these single women—divorced, never-married, widowed and abandoned--operated in a white, male-dominated world, maneuvering in times of war and peace “with amazing dexterity.” (P. 239) But as Broussard makes clear they were never activists in the sense of envisioning political changes for all women, much less organizing, as their sisters in the North increasingly did. But they did *step out*, living in the shadows, moving on their own, stepping on the edge and during Reconstruction, stepping into the breach.

This book began as a dissertation but in its present form it has none of the characteristic deficiencies the academy associates with dissertations. The writing is lively and informative despite the staggering but useful number of statistics. A case in point: while we assume that most adult women are married, 40% of the 1200 women living in Natchez in 1860 were single. In one of Broussard’s central themes, they are not aberrations as we have been led to believe because of their absence from the historical literature. Broussard acknowledges a recent body of scholarship that focuses on spinsterhood, although she is correct that most of these studies concentrate on elite women. Her study does not, as we learn about single women who were prostitutes, criminals, and in one case simply “foul-mouthed.” Broussard is careful to note comparative material but she might have spent more time developing the reasons for the differences in her findings from other similar studies.

Broussard’s conceptualization is discreet, persuasive and only occasionally redundant. The research on which Broussard bases her conclusions is exhaustive and should stand as a model for anyone doing women’s history where the sources are often illusive. Indeed one of the contributions of this book is its use of every available source—from court records to manuscript collections, from census records to the freedman’s bureau materials, from statistics to mini-biographies.

At stake in *Stepping Lively* is the operative common law distinction separating feme soles with limited legal rights and married femmes couvertes, the latter without legal identity after their marriage. Broussard describes the prevailing southern ideology of white male mastery that established cultural values glorifying marriage and the subordination of married women as helpmates. She writes on page 6 that this system based on the “servant ideal” offered women “a protected albeit second-class citizenship covered by the authority of paternalistic husbands who often viewed women as wards deserving

of a white man's protection and care in return for faithful service and obedience." The question Broussard seeks to answer in its most simplistic terms is how did single women in Natchez navigate such a system in the ante-bellum period and later during the Civil War's disruptions? As she writes in her introduction "By looking at the entirety of single free women in midcentury Natchez,...this book explores how the city's single women ...from all walks of life coped, survived, and endured over time in a wealthy, slave-driven community ripped apart by war and its tumultuous aftermath." (p. 9)

Throughout Broussard has humanized her statistical material by including profiles—biographical mini-narratives of individual women. For example in the chapter on never-married white women Lydia Dowell, viewed as foul-mouthed by some of her neighbors, operated two successful shops in the city. The memorable widow Madame Gireaudeau lived comfortably in a well-appointed home with a retinue of enslaved, many of whom she emancipated. Only after her death did the community learn that she was the child of a mixed-race mother and in the racial calculus of the times, a free black, subject to various restrictions. Margaret Dent, a free black, earned her living as a washerwoman while she enjoyed a sexual relationship with a wealthy white planter and slaveholder who remembered her in his will.

War and its aftermath upended the cultural norms of this antebellum society, though they did not entirely displace male, white authority. Still women had new opportunities during the war and Reconstruction. Broussard's chapter on these women during the Civil War is a stand-alone classic of a community at war.

Overall this is an excellent example of how a look at a singular community adds to our historical "store" of knowledge.

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