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EXHIBITING WOMEN:  
SECTIONAL CONFRONTATION AND RECONCILIATION  
IN THE WOMAN'S DEPARTMENT  
AT THE WORLD'S EXPOSITION, NEW ORLEANS, 1884-85

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

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B. A. University of New Orleans 1969  
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## Abstract

At the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, the Woman's Department offered women of all regions of the country an opportunity to exhibit what they considered "woman's work." As women came together and attempted sectional reconciliation, controversy persisted, especially over the selection of northern suffragist Julia Ward Howe, author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," as the Department's president. However, during the course of the event, which lasted from December 16, 1884 to May 31, 1885, New Orleanians and other southern women learned skills and strategies from participants and famous women visitors, and these southerners insinuated their voices into the national debate on late-nineteenth-century women's issues.

## Setting the Stage

Following the success of the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, expositions in America proliferated as a way to tout the country's commercial power and vast resources and to boost the material wealth of the hosting community. The decade of the 1880s was filled with regional expositions and replete with talk of rejuvenation and industrial expansion. These ideas were especially pertinent for a southern market like New Orleans that was still depressed as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Despite lingering sectional divisions among areas of the country, promoters of the "New South" concept created the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans in 1884-85 as a strategy to attract northern investors to develop the region's natural resources into thriving manufactures, to reclaim dominance for the Crescent City's port partly by attracting Mexican and Latin American commerce, and to improve the area's dismal economy by attracting visitors and capital to a grand show.

This celebration of a hundred years of exporting cotton had been the brainchild of Colonel F. C. Morehead, president of the influential National Cotton Growers Association, but Major E. A. Burke was the event's ideological architect and was responsible for its mammoth growth and excessive claims, as well as its reconstitution into international theater. With Burke as Director-General, the Exposition's organizers sought to broadcast the New South as peaceful but vigorous, with racial accommodation and sectional reconciliation already accomplished, and with men at the controls who could skillfully produce the largest, most inclusive extravaganza the world had ever known. As Burke claimed to an applauding "multitude" in front of his *Times-Democrat* office, the Exposition was "an opportunity for the people of the South to prove to the people of the North and of the world that the victory won by the Democracy has been worthily

won and will be worthily worn” (“A Great Outpouring,” *Times-Democrat* 8 Nov. 1884). The Cotton Centennial would test grandiloquent statements such as these.

Diversity of products, races, and nations were to confirm the region’s inclusiveness, and “two great and distinct departments” (Fairall 12) would support the scheme. A first-ever Colored Department could validate the New South’s declaration of racial accommodation as African-Americans displayed the progress they had made in twenty years of freedom, an option that was denied them at the Philadelphia Centennial and later events like the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. These men and women could also demonstrate to investors their readiness as a body of capable workers. Calling Burke a liberal man, the chief of this department, Senator Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi, assured African-Americans, “what a showing my race will make.” The separate space was not “some discrimination being made against the colored race” and not “prescribing us.” Rather, “colored people can individually go anywhere in the Exhibition Building that they desire,” but the opportunity was to “once and forever . . . deny the assertion so often made that freedom has not developed in them the higher aims and better accomplishment all citizens should have” (“World’s Exposition,” *Times-Democrat* 20 Nov 1884). The Colored Department was therefore a vehicle for African-Americans to proclaim their participation in the New South and validate the claims of the event’s white organizers to the North.

In a similar show of inclusiveness, women were invited to set up a distinct Woman’s Department that could shore up sectional reconciliation as women from all regions exhibited their contributions to American society and the marketplace. Securing the right women for the Department, the organizers believed, might also draw more women visitors to the Exposition grounds. It was a splendid and ambitious plan, but declaring reconciliation did not make it so,

and the brittle confrontations between locals and northern participants in the Woman's Department mirrored the fragility of the sectional reunion that the event as a whole was designed to project.

The fracturing of national unity in the Department settled on the figure of its president, Julia Ward Howe of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" fame, and exposed sectional biases recently mended but still tenuous. Colonel Morehead, traveling as scout and ambassador for the Exposition, had met Howe when she was chief of the Woman's Department at the 1883 Merchants and Mechanics Exposition in Boston. Perhaps he recommended a Woman's Department to mimic those in successful regional expositions in the North and assumed that such a department headed by a famous woman would boost the national prestige of his Cotton Centennial. According to Howe's daughter Maud, Morehead was the "main factor" in her mother's appointment (Elliott 204). Howe's tireless performance of her duties and her intrepid support of the Woman's Department and the Exposition, however, did not assuage the anger that fomented over her selection. Clashes persisted as a result of sectional differences partly stemming from conflicting notions of appropriate female behavior, or they grew out of personality conflicts. Howe's assertive leadership style created rancor among some coworkers and outraged the New Orleans press, especially the *Daily Picayune's* columnist Catharine Cole. As an outspoken advocate for the rights of working women, Cole's voice was definitive in the female community into which Howe was cast.

According to cultural historians Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, in *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, current scholarship on expositions is "moving toward a view that stresses the complex and often contradictory nature of fairs. That view sees expositions as arenas for debate about what they contribute to the cultural milieu of

societies that have hosted them” (7). In accordance with this view, the focus of my inquiry is the interaction of women from various regions and the volatility of debate in the Woman’s Department that garnered so much attention from the press during the six months of the Exposition. Scenes that played out in the Woman’s Department did not always coincide with the propaganda of the Exposition’s promoters, but as Rydell, Findling, and Pelle assert, visitors and participants “were not necessarily taken in by the ideological messages of the fairs’ sponsors” (6). Although leaders in the Department participated in many special occasions of the larger Exposition, the women somewhat ignored the stated and unstated goals of organizers and pursued their own agenda: having visitors note and appreciate “woman’s work” and celebrating the expanse of their contribution to industry. Although the exhibiting women’s tactics varied depending upon their region and culture, most of them shared goals of improved education, better work and equal pay, access to voting rights, and increased power and acknowledgement for their achievements. Because the Woman’s Department was on the balcony of the Government and States Building and not in a separate Woman’s Pavilion as at Philadelphia and Chicago, the women were not as completely segregated by gender, but the partial isolation provided them with a separate place to discuss advances in education, literature, science, politics, reforms and the institutional management of them, and the number of professions opening to women. Or something as simple as silk culture as a new field of work for women at home.

When the Cotton Centennial opened on December 16, 1884, it was the first time southerners fully participated in a national exposition, and although the event propelled the city and its women into the national spotlight, few historians or literary scholars have examined the Exposition as the watershed moment it was for southern women in politics, social reform, and the arts. Certainly, the women’s roles were complicated by southern images of womanhood, and



as Anne Firor Scott claims in *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, their “efforts to free themselves were more complex than those of women elsewhere” (x). However, women of the South, and of New Orleans in particular, had anything but a monolithic attitude toward women’s changing roles in the late nineteenth century. Many women were no doubt content in the submissive role in which conservatives had typecast them. Others appear to have only simulated a modest and conservative façade to accommodate the expectations of their society but were really what Scott calls “secret suffragists” (170). Yet, even some of these women harbored scarcely-dormant remnants of sectional bias that prevented their public allegiance to northern-driven organized movements begun by abolitionists. On the other hand, a few, like New Orleans activist Caroline Merrick, openly supported national organizations for the advancement of women and for suffrage. The Cotton Centennial was the first national exposition to bring together southern women, western women (some of whom had already gained the right to vote), and northern women (many of whom were well-known reformers), and the mixture exposed the tensions among them as well as the growing progressiveness of their ideas about women’s roles.

Julia Ward Howe hinted at the Department’s skirmishes in the official *Report and Catalogue of the Woman’s Department of the World’s Exposition, held at New Orleans, 1884-1885*. She wrote, “When we remember that the ladies who united in the work of the Woman’s Department came together as strangers, from all parts of the Union, the agreement which prevailed among them will seem more surprising than the fact that it did not prevail without exception.” She insisted that Lady Commissioners who had gathered their states’ exhibits could “sufficiently attest the unanimity of feeling which existed,” but they nevertheless had been subjected to “abusive statements in the public prints, accusing them of engaging in unseemly

squabbles and contentions” (38). She noted that she was personally “subjected to some animadversion from the newspapers of the day, whose proprietors, giving free room to such attacks, were unwilling to publish the counterstatements which would have established their injustice” and that there had been “disagreement among the workers in the department,” but she expected that women thousands of miles apart would “ever remain united in a common zeal for promoting the industrial interests of women” (39). However, the positive image Howe attempted to project in her *Report* has too many flaws not to be noticed and questioned.

Why was Howe insistent that women had been unified, despite their disagreements? What were journalists writing, and were their criticisms unfair or perhaps motivated by lingering sectional tensions? If the women were squabbling, what was the controversy about? What did it signify that the women’s conflicts were made known in a public forum? And, to begin with, how did Howe’s southern hosts react to the selection of this icon of northern righteousness from the recent war to lead the Woman’s Department?

When investigating these questions, I relied mainly on newspaper articles and columns in competing New Orleans dailies: the *Daily Picayune*, owned by Eliza Jane Nicholson, and the *Times-Democrat*, owned by the Director-General of the Exposition, Major E. A. Burke. I also turned to the memoirs and letters of some leading figures from the event to see how southern women, and especially New Orleans women, engaged in the debates on issues important to late-nineteenth-century American women. What I learned was that although southern women resented the dominance of northern women in the leadership of the Woman’s Department, they were influenced by what appeared to be “northern” progressive views. They absorbed the substance offered by the influx of exhibiting women and famous visitors, altering the style to suit themselves and their southern culture.

## Opening Scene

The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition began with a belief that the postbellum New South was a sleeping industrial giant waiting to be awakened by northern capital, but it grew into an international extravaganza, the size and complexities of which far outstripped the abilities of its management, especially its Director-General, Major E. A. Burke, who was a blatant New South agent, booster extraordinaire, and suspect impresario. As the "genius of the Exposition" (Maud Howe, qtd. in "World's Exposition: Ladies' Day—Interesting Exercises in the Woman's Department," *Daily Picayune* 31 May 1885; King 49), he directed the massive work that transformed 247 acres of undeveloped land called Upper City Park (now Audubon Park) into a dazzling multi-stage theater. But the event got underway only after a damagingly protracted start.

The newspapers and the Board of Managers for the Exposition touted the event as the "world's university" for the "instruction of all peoples; to teach them how to improve their industries" ("World's Exposition: A Great Iron Metropolis," *Daily Picayune* 10 Feb. 1885), and in the end, the exhibits were splendid, but the Cotton Centennial's financial problems almost immediately eroded its impact. In 1883, the United States Congress had approved a million-dollar loan to mount the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition by the end of 1884, and management was to match the loan with \$500,000 in regional pledges. However, this latter figure never became a reality; it was simply a sleight of Director-General Burke's hand in creative financing (Watson 240-9), and the shortfall contributed to the Exposition's inability to sell the event to the rest of the country's travelers or even to Louisiana residents ("Ungrateful Curiosity," *Mascot* 10 Jan. 1885; "The Great Failure," *Mascot* 24 Jan. 1885). Nonetheless, the world's companies displayed enthralling engines and wares of great variety, anticipating sales

and orders, in the gigantic 33-acre wooden Main Building, a structure larger than three New Orleans Superdomes. Tropical South American countries expected to dazzle visitors with exotic plants amid hundreds of native fruits and greenery in the predominately-glass Horticultural Hall that the city of New Orleans funded. The park's only indigenous contribution to the scenery was its magnificent and much-admired giant oaks draped with Spanish moss that were left from the land's former use as a sugar plantation. Artists and patrons of the arts loaned paintings and sculptures for display in the Art Gallery that was structured of iron. In addition, Mexico and some American industries added their own smaller buildings to the grounds, and stockyards enclosed animals competing for ribbons and awards. Miles of curved walkways and profuse landscaping eventually connected the buildings, including the second largest structure on Exposition grounds, the huge wooden Government and States Building. There, the federal government presented its services, and each state and territory showed its products and unique natural resources in order to lure investors and population. The building's balcony housed three departments meant to proclaim the New South's progress and inclusiveness: the Educational Department, the Colored Department, and the Woman's Department.

To many of its participants and to a number of journalists in 1884-85, the Exposition was a colossal failure. Everything that could go wrong did. Historians D. Clive Hardy, Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Thomas D. Watson, and the newspapers of the day document the problems: delayed construction, horrific weather, chronic underfunding, striking streetcar drivers, low attendance, internal squabbling, poor management, and incomplete exhibits. No matter how grand was the design for the Exposition, it remained largely unfinished on Opening Day, December 16, 1884, and the Woman's Department was completely empty. The balcony where the Department was to be housed had a leaky roof, no floor, no partitions, no showcases, and no

funds to arrange the waiting displays. But for a time, the extraordinary fanfare of opening ceremonies in the Main Building distracted visitors from the Exposition's shortcomings in other areas.

Only a few exhibits were in place in the vast structure when tens of thousands of people assembled for the day's exercises in its huge central Music Hall, but thirty female participants had joined other dignitaries for the morning trip to the grounds amid the "flags and streamers" on the steamboat *Fred A. Blanks* and accompanying ships (Richards and Elliott 2.100). In the Music Hall, on the platform that could hold eleven hundred participants and six hundred musicians, "[s]everal hundred chairs were devoted to the representatives of woman's work, and all were occupied" by women, not as wives of dignitaries, but as participants in their own right. Howe and her personal staff of northern women had "seats of honor" ("World's Exposition: The Lady Guests," *Daily Picayune* 17 Dec. 1884). The all-male Exposition management saw to it that women were included in opening celebrations, although these men's endorsement of the women's presence was sometimes tempered by their own overriding patriarchal perspectives.

The tension between southern women's inclusion on this national stage and more conservative notions of womanhood was apparent on Opening Day. Management invited local poet Mary Ashley Townsend to create the Centennial Poem, a distinction more commonly offered to a man, yet Townsend embraced traditional womanhood in a way that was contrary to her strong verse. Her lengthy commemorative ode included the obligatory complement of exclamatory phrases such as "Oh, Freedom! Gentle Mother of us all . . . Sweet Liberty! Thy blazing torch afar . . . ," but her sixth stanza made a plea for women's "rightful place" in the Exposition:

Among thy lustrous triumphs be it scrolled,  
Thy hand from woman's clouded destiny rolled  
The stone that held her from her rightful place,  
And led her brave feet to thy foremost fold,  
Among advancing heroes of her race!

(“World’s Exposition: Centennial Poem,” *Daily Picayune* 17 Dec. 1884)

Personifying the Exposition in her poem, Townsend appears to have been petitioning the advocates of the ideals of the New South to remove the “stone” of obstruction and unleash the power of women from a repressive society and the constrictions of men. However, in contrast to the poet’s vigorous lines, which *Picayune* publisher Eliza Nicholson claimed “glow[ed] with ardor” and “delicious rhythms,” Townsend was either herself too reticent to speak in public or was encouraged to hand her words over to male presenters. Page M. Baker, the managing editor of the *Times-Democrat*, read the “noble and stirring” words of “the woman-poet of the South” (“Society Bee,” *Daily Picayune* 21 Dec. 1884) and “laureate of the opening exposition” (Howe 399). The “Society Bee” further reported that Townsend took her seat in the audience at the Exposition’s opening rather than on the platform. The contradiction between Townsend’s words and her presentation suggests the diffidence that some southern women maintained about adopting a public role, even as they understood the advantages. The reception of Townsend’s poem suggests how its content was overlooked in favor of her seeming womanliness. Northern women had already begun to dismantle this barrier before the war, especially in the cause of abolition.

In keeping with a more conservative approach to womanhood, forty-one-year-old Townsend reaped as much admiration in her milieu for her domesticity and charitable works as

for her poetry. As an active society matron, she was one of the founders of the Southern Art Union, and a supporter of its circulating library. Her verses frequently appeared in local newspapers, sometimes over her pen name, Xariffa, and she was counted upon frequently to create “something entirely worthy . . . of the occasion she has been chosen to commemorate” (“All Sorts,” *Times-Democrat* 30 Nov. 1884). Townsend was praised by the local papers for being “keenly sensitive of [her] shortcomings,” for her “personality ever gracious, gentle, comprehending and appreciative,” and for her “devotion to her husband and children” (“Mary Ashley Townsend,” *Times-Democrat* 8 June 1901, sec. 2:3+). Another considered her “shy, reserved, modest and very timid, and utterly self-conscious” (“The Voice of the Singer Is Silent,” *Daily Picayune* 8 June 1901, sec. 1:3+), adjectives intended as praise.

Despite her timidity, Townsend later penned another celebratory poem for the official opening of the Woman’s Department on March 3, 1885, in which she expanded some of the expectations and declarations of her Centennial Poem:

From North and South, from East and West,

This little band is gathered here . . .

And far beyond this day, behold!

The prophet sees its influence spread—

Sees woman’s fame with heroes scrolled,

Her name with loftiest names enrolled,

Across the world new luster shed—

While down the ages, lo! He sees

Expand her widening destinies!

(“World’s Exposition: A Poem,” *Daily Picayune* 4 Mar. 1885)

Although there is some forcing of rhyme and meter and Townsend breaks no new poetic ground, she echoes her earlier theme of the possibility of reconciliation among women from all regions, but, more importantly, she restates her claim that the Exposition might advance women's fame and equality not just among ordinary men but also in step with heroic, public ones. However, she again absented herself from the stage, even though this was an event specifically for women. And rather than have another woman read her lines, this time Townsend's husband took her place at the podium. Her self-effacing style overshadowed the public role Townsend was called upon to play.

Self-effacement had little place in Julia Ward Howe's public style. Rather, she seemed to confidently tread where most southern women from farms and plantations had yet to imagine venturing themselves. For example, one of the Texas women "had never gone farther north than South Carolina, and had never heard a woman lecturer" ("Society Bee," *Daily Picayune* 7 Dec. 1884) before hearing Howe speak in New Orleans. Another young woman, Mississippian Belle Kearney, perhaps described the experience of many women in her memoir, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, when she wrote that, although her eyes already had "grown accustomed to larger visions" of "developed power of bread-winning" for women (107), she was awe-struck upon hearing Howe speak at the Exposition: "For many years an earnest desire had possessed me to behold a genuinely strong-minded woman,—one of the truly advanced type. Beautiful to realize, she stood before me! And in a position the very acme of independence—upon a platform delivering a speech!" (108). Hearing Howe speak on "Woman's Work" helped propel twenty-one-year-old Kearney into active Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) work, through which she later gained "national fame as a first-class platform speaker and progressive reformer" with young people of the temperance movement (Merrick 183). Her story suggests the extent to



which public women such as Howe inspired some of the southern women who were present at the Cotton Centennial to seek beyond the limited roles assigned them.

### Casting the Lead

Julia Ward Howe's leadership role at the Exposition gave the Woman's Department national cachet and some women like Kearney a role model, but local women fumed over Exposition management's selection of Howe to head the Woman's Department. They considered themselves as skilled as Howe in organization and leadership. Caroline Merrick, the best-known New Orleans suffragist, wrote in her 1901 memoir *Old Times in Dixie Land*, "it seemed unnecessary to seek so far for a head of the Exhibit. If southern women could create it, some one of them was surely able to direct it" (176). The heated reaction from New Orleans women to Howe's appointment revealed their bruised local pride and sense of betrayal by Exposition management. It also suggested that many of them were not willing merely to sit in the audience as Townsend had done, but wanted prominent positions on the stage for themselves.

Southerners knew well the patriarchal pressures of domesticity, purity, piety, and submission to the domination of men, but the women were determined to take command in an area they knew well—woman's work—and to contradict an image of themselves as protected, helpless females of the South. However, through their rhetoric, men who claimed to be the women's supporters sometimes thwarted the women's efforts to rise to public recognition. Even in an unconventional city like New Orleans, which in many ways contradicted the more conservative tendencies of the Deep South, some traditional men echoed antebellum commentators like George Fitzhugh, who wrote that a true lady "naturally shrinks from the public gaze, and from the struggle and competition of life" (214). On February 19, 1885,

Honorable F. P. Poché, one of the Justices of the Louisiana Supreme Court, publicly repeated this conservative stance in his remarks at the opening of the Louisiana Historical Collection:

The true woman of Louisiana is essentially modest in character and retiring in disposition. Hence in harsh criticism she has been unjustly considered as inert and indolent. She does not crave for power: she has never clamored for the right of suffrage or other prerogatives of man, the parasitic ambition of certain strong-minded women of the day. Her power is in the reign of her heart. Her strength is in the weakness of her sex, for she is the queen of the household, as she is the angel of kindness and sweetness to suffering man. (“World’s Exposition: Opening of the Louisiana Historical Collection under the Auspices of the Ladies,” *Daily Picayune* 20 Feb. 1885)

Poché’s words abound with classic masculine constrictions that complicated southern women’s desire to pursue meaningful advancement. For women to contradict such defined obstacles and expand their own range of possibility required determination and encouragement from other women like Cole. Was Poché also making a distinction between the women of Louisiana and women like Howe, and did he consider her one of the strong-minded women with “parasitic ambition”? It is tempting to speculate what Howe thought about the speech, since she shared the platform that day. Perhaps sentiments such as these about Louisiana’s women also influenced Exposition management to disregard a southern woman to head the Woman’s Department. As progressive as these men purported to be, Poché no doubt expressed a dominant attitude in their social order.

Furthermore, men like Poché preached a kind of “protection” that many scholars like Drew Gilpin Faust and Anne Firor Scott admit never fully existed for many southern women.

Demureness had probably never served working class women well, women who labored hard to eke out a scant living. Although Poché seems to describe the Townsends of the milieu, outmoded ideas like his lingered beyond the time when they were practical for the many women who had managed farms, plantations, and town dwellings remarkably well. Or for the many genteel women who had had to find a way to earn a living. One correspondent recognized the difference and wrote it into an article for the Chicago *InterOcean*:

I have been pleased and surprised by the management and executive ability of the Southern women whom I have met. The loss of heads of families and of fortunes during and after the war has developed a power that lay latent in these women and brought out some admirable characters. . . . In social qualifications they excel Northern women on account of the ready warmth and heartiness of the southern temperament. (“A Tribute to Southern Women,” reprinted in *Times-Democrat* 16 Jan. 1885)

Even in this compliment, the competency of southern women seems to come as a surprise to this midwestern journalist who emphasizes what most southern women knew and later historians like Faust further investigated, that leadership skills latent in southern women emerged in the necessity of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Caroline Merrick’s memoir, *Old Times in Dixie Land*, documents that journey, and women like her clearly bristled over an image of themselves as pampered and inept. And they expressed a strong preference for being led by one of their own.

Several local women were certainly qualified for the role of chief of the Woman’s Department. A good choice might have been sixty-year-old Merrick who presided over the Louisiana Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and made it a success in a city replete with “concert saloons, ‘gambling hells’ [sic], barrooms, and prize fight arenas,” brothels, and a “let

the good times roll' attitude" even in the Royal Street district near Howe's hotel (Long 87, 99, 118, 145). Merrick was a prominent and dedicated reformer, a benefactor of charities, and a woman whose presence was never ignored. She was "the first woman to speak publicly in Louisiana in behalf of equal suffrage for women" at the Constitutional Convention of 1879 ("Mrs. C. E. Merrick, Dies, Aged Eighty-Two," *Daily Picayune* March 30, 1908), an event that "can be considered the start of the women's movement in Louisiana" (Louisiana State University Library's "Timeline of Louisiana Women's History"). Earlier, she had repudiated the New Orleans Educational Society because its men invited her to chair a committee and then denied her a vote (Merrick 23). She and other New Orleans women had also petitioned for the right to be legal witnesses after her special charity, St. Anna's Asylum for Destitute Women, lost a bequest of \$1000 because only women had signed the benefactor's will ("Woman's World and Work," hereafter "WWW," *Daily Picayune* 29 Mar. 1885; Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 3.789).

In addition to Merrick, a number of other women could have been candidates for the lead role in the Department, as their accomplishments demonstrated. President Mrs. R. M. Walmsley and leaders of the Christian Women's Exchange (CWE) had already created a gathering place for working women where every day they sold 1500 fifteen-cent lunches to help women stretch their wages ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 5 Apr. 1885). In 1884-85 alone, the organization sold and paid needy women profits of \$40,000 from the sale of their handmade items, pies, cakes, and preserves ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 19 Apr. 1885; Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 3.799), and women of the CWE transformed the top floor of their building into inexpensive rental rooms for women visiting the Exposition. Townsend and the other leading women of the Southern Art Union had amassed a circulating library of 4000 volumes and offered art instruction and low-cost stenographic and telegraphic classes to over a thousand women, thus preparing workers for more

lucrative employment as clerks or “typewriters” (“Southern Art Union,” *Daily Picayune* 17 Dec. 1884). Elizabeth “Bessie” Bisland of the *Times-Democrat* presided over the first Woman’s Club in the South that began earlier in 1884 with thirty-plus working women (Merrick 216). Journalist Catharine Cole named six likely southern candidates for the chief position of the Woman’s Department, including Townsend, Walmsley, and writer Augusta Evans Wilson (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 2 Nov. 1884). Neither Exposition management nor Howe—nor many later historians—gave New Orleans women the credit they insisted was due them. Instead, the selection of Howe as president “opened old wounds of lost southern honor” (Tardo 10) that erupted periodically during the course of the Exposition.

The two New Orleans daily newspapers treated tensions and expectations in the Woman’s Department differently, given their position on women’s issues. Director-General Burke’s editorial staff at the *Times-Democrat* congratulated the Exposition for including a Woman’s Department, and in an article citing increases in work and education for women, declared the Department “a splendid opportunity of showing exactly what the women of this country have done in the past ten years—the period of their greatest improvement” (“Work for Woman,” *Times-Democrat* 24 Nov. 1884). However, the newspaper also seemed to trivialize women’s roles when it chided New Orleans women for their lackluster response to the opportunity provided by the Woman’s Department to “assist their husbands, brothers and fathers in bringing fame, reputation and glory to the Exposition” (“A Woman’s Meeting,” *Times-Democrat* 10 Jan. 1885). This editorial, appearing in Burke’s paper, assigns supporting roles for local women more than leading roles, suggesting why the men thought the women were not considered competent to lead the Woman’s Department. In stark contrast, publisher Eliza Nicholson and her star reporter Catharine Cole of the competing *Daily Picayune* intended that

“fame, reputation, and glory” be made available directly to women and not as adjuncts to the men in their families or in society. Rarely did Burke include criticism of the Exposition in the *Times-Democrat*, and he allowed little of the disagreements among women or complaints from irate male exhibitors to mar the boosterism in his newspaper, but the *Picayune* had no such compunction and reported controversy freely, especially when the reputation of southern women was at stake. The opening salvo came over the selection of Julia Ward Howe.

When Cole questioned Secretary Richard Nixon of the Board of Managers about “why the Exposition failed to appoint a Southern woman to the head of the Woman’s Department” and “why Mrs. Howe was selected,” he replied:

First, was wanted a woman of national reputation; second, a woman unencumbered by care, and with plenty of time to devote to the work; third, a woman of physical ability for the duties; fourth, a woman of wealth; fifth, a woman of executive ability; and sixth, a woman who would unite all the women of the country and be accepted by them all. In the South there was no Southern woman possessing all of these attributes. The appointment of this woman or that, no matter how capable, would have certainly given offense to some. (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 19 Oct. 1884)

Whether or not these criteria were set by management or stated offhandedly by Nixon in the intensity of the interview, his answer to Cole’s inquiry was nevertheless packed with biases against local women. He implied that southern women were provincial and possessed responsibilities at home that weighed more heavily on them than duties did on northern public women. Southern women were apparently too weak, too fragile to undertake such a demanding role. His criteria imply that it was tolerable for a northern woman to be “strong-minded” and

have executive ability but that these qualities were neither expected nor desirable in a southern woman.

Other criteria might have perplexed or irritated local women. Did Nixon assume that money afforded a measure of freedom that most southern women lacked? Or perhaps from a wealthy woman, the Exposition would acquire an expert in organization at no pay, which it did. However, according to Cole, the greatest insult lay “in the statement that the South had no woman equal to the emergency and as competent for the work as Mrs. Julia Howe” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 2 Nov. 1884). In Cole’s opinion, management could have helped to create a national reputation for a local woman rather than using the lack of fame as an excuse not to choose a southern woman. The criteria suggest an indifference to the developing power of southern women, a note of detachment in the phrase “this woman or that,” and a belief that women were unwilling to give allegiance to one of their own. Regardless, Howe apparently embodied northern women’s progress, and as such she would have been a lesser threat to those southern men who appear to have desired to restrict and contain the women around them.

The “ladies of New Orleans” responded to Nixon’s criteria with a rather sectional “disappointment and disapproval” that grew louder during the weeks before Howe’s arrival:

Not that our New Orleans women have any fault to find with Mrs. Howe. They say she is all that has been claimed for her, but they say also, and justly, that the honor should have been bestowed upon some representative Southern woman; that there are women in the South who embody all the qualifications assigned as the reason for selecting Mrs. Howe, and that the Exposition managers have put a slight on the women of the South by not giving the preference to one of our own countrywomen—by sending to Massachusetts for what could have been found in

Louisiana or some other Southern State. (“What the Ladies Are Saying,” *Daily Picayune* 2 Nov. 1884)

Regional reconciliation was off to a rocky start. Howe was “representative” of a culture that appeared not to follow the same standards of acceptable female behavior as that of southerners. Many southern women were caught in the contradiction of wanting public recognition while also needing or desiring to maintain an outward appearance of modesty.

The crux of the affront seems to have been that Howe was placed in a dominant position over southern women in an exposition that proclaimed a New South. The women had already written letters encouraging women around the country to participate in the Woman’s Department. They had gathered exhibits and housed them. Their pride seems to have been hurt, as they were deemed inferior to a northern woman. Exposition management’s choice of Howe embarrassed and belittled local women, since a grand exhibition was their opportunity to show visitors from across the country how welcoming and capable they were. On that point, producers of the Exposition seem to have thwarted one of their own goals. By casting the women in secondary roles, management demonstrated one of the paradoxes of attempting a New South while still being mired in an old one. The complaints about Howe exposed the ways southern men continued to harbor “Old South” expectations for their women, but it also revealed some southern women’s eagerness to take advantage of potentially reconstructed gender roles in a promised New South.

The local controversy was also noticed elsewhere and signified to outsiders an unnecessary sectional pride. One Wisconsin woman was quoted in the *Times-Democrat* as having said:



Some of the ladies of the South have issued a protest against Mrs. Julia Ward Howe being the president of the Woman's Department, and they feel it an insult that a Yankee should be placed in such an honorable position. They, perhaps, do not understand that the Exposition is not entirely Southern because it is to be held in Louisiana; and more interest is being taken in it here in Wisconsin than in many of the Southern States. ("World's Exposition," *Times-Democrat* 20 Nov 1884)

This statement rendered the southern women as parochial, and printing it served Burke's purposes to rouse people from their lackluster response to the Exposition. Also, the Wisconsin woman dared to use the term "Yankee" that emphasized the sectionalism she seems to have expected from southern women. Her statement also echoes Cotton Centennial management's desire to give the Exposition and the Woman's Department broader appeal, despite their contradictory promotion of the event as a showcase for the New South.

Although Howe's presence, perceived as interloping, created the dramatic tension in the Woman's Department, her experience and fame wholly fit Nixon's criteria to head it. As Cole stated when she acknowledged that Howe possessed intellectual power, social position, and years of leadership skills ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 2 Nov. 1884), the Bostonian was "President of more societies and clubs than any other woman on the Continent" ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 25 May 1884). Oliver Wendell Holmes had labeled her "eminently *clubable*" (Howe 400). As a result, Howe knew virtually every female of note in the country. Her celebrity rested firmly on the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," that iconic anthem that put God squarely on the side of the North in the Civil War. The verse had first appeared in *The Atlantic* in February, 1862, was quickly set to the music of the popular tune, "John Brown's Body," and immediately became

famous, as did Howe. Thereafter, wherever she went in the North, bands played and choirs sang the hymn, and she was often obliged to sing it. In the South it was her primary claim to fame. As Merrick wrote in her memoir ironically, “this world-renowned Bostonian was not a stranger to our people—they fully appreciated the power of her “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (176), implying that the song was a reminder of defeat and that it rankled southern hearers. However, the only time “Battle Hymn” was mentioned in connection with the Exposition was when Howe spoke in the Colored Department one afternoon and included the experience in her journal. Newspapers reported only that the Leland University choir sang, but Howe wrote, “They gave me a fine basket of flowers and sang my ‘Battle Hymn’” (qtd. in Richards and Elliott 2.108). Otherwise, “Dixie” was ubiquitous.

Apart from her hymn, Howe was a minor literary light but a popular speaker and an innovative leader. Her lectures helped raise early funds for the impoverished Woman’s Department and later for the Southern Art Union (“Society Bee,” *Daily Picayune* 22 Mar. 1885), and her platform skills helped boost attendance at special openings and festivities: Massachusetts Day, Indiana Day, Illinois Day, and others (*Report* 10). Howe gave considerable energy to a variety of additional projects on Exposition grounds, for example, arranging twenty-four popular “Twelve O’Clock Talks” (Richards and Elliott 2.107)—short noontime lectures on a variety of topics held in various departments—to bolster the Exposition’s educational claims. At one of these “Talks,” former Wyoming Governor J. M. Hoyt’s stunning pro-suffrage “testimony” drew wildly enthusiastic applause and some masculine challenges from the audience when he stated that his state had experienced sixteen “favorable years” of full suffrage that had “proved of practical value,” had strengthened woman’s “self-respect” and “influence as mother and wife,” and thus had constituted a power for good in Wyoming. Further, teachers in the state received

“equal pay for equal work.” He declared, “Men are more respectful toward women in Wyoming than in other sections,” suggesting that the chivalrous posture of southern men sometimes disguised their resistance to women’s equality. When challenged by one man about what was the scriptural basis for women’s suffrage, Hoyt answered, “The golden rule,” and a woman retorted with the same question about the scriptural basis for men’s suffrage. Ironically, men of the time erroneously predicted that women would have the vote in the next twenty years by assent or “social convulsion” (“World’s Exposition: Lecture on Woman Suffrage,” *Daily Picayune* 6 May 1885). Woman’s suffrage would take another thirty-five years, but Howe forged ahead with another lecture on the subject a few days after Hoyt’s talk.

Howe’s remarkable physical stamina for her sixty-five years suited management’s criteria, and her widowhood left her unencumbered except for duties to her many clubs and organizations. Despite Howe’s advanced age, her unflagging energy gave Maud reason to accompany her mother: “to keep her from killing herself with work” (Elliott 209) and to take the Literary Department off her hands. Howe did not, however, fit Secretary Nixon’s criterion of being a wealthy woman, since her husband had long since squandered her inheritance on poor investments before his death in 1876, as biographer Valarie Ziegler documents in *Diva Julia* (125), but Howe was socially connected in Boston and in her hometown of New York. Her early personal struggles to free herself from her husband’s domination and to set her own path was probably closer to the experience of many southern women than they realized. But her progress toward an independent public life had taken considerable ambition, determination, outright defiance, and support from those who had gone before, like Margaret Fuller, as Gary Williams traces in *Hungry Heart* (69-80). Women in the South generally lacked the kind of role models that had helped Howe develop her ambitions.

About Exposition management's final criterion—"a woman who would unite all the women of the country and be accepted by them all"—there was some question. As Maud wrote in one of several biographies of her mother, there were "endless vexations" at the Exposition. Maud noted that the "best people of the place were hospitable beyond belief," but some "resented the appointment of a Northern woman" (Elliott 213), causing her mother to claim, "Satan has a fresh flower for me every morning when I come to my desk" (Elliott 214). Maud wrote, "Most of the women commissioners appointed by the different States proved loyal comrades to their chief in her great and distressful labor; but there were others who gave her endless trouble." For the Howes, "the cup of life was brimming over, even if it was not all filled with honey" (Richards and Elliott 2.102-3). As Merrick wrote in her memoir, "Mrs. Howe came and performed this duty with marked ability, and displayed a force of character which commanded respect though it did not always win her acquiescence in her decisions or affectionate regard from all her colleagues." This controlled assessment only slightly masks the furor over Howe's presidency, and Merrick found "naught special to excite [her] gratitude" even if she did maintain pleasant relations with Howe during and after the Exposition (176).

Julia Ward Howe's management style repeatedly stirred controversy, and local women's private outrage periodically burst into the public venue of newspapers, but Exposition managers were generally distracted by larger problems with negative national press about incompleteness of exhibits, financial shortfalls, and their own incompetence. However, when Howe appointed a solely northern personal staff—Lizzie Cloudman, Isabel Greeley, and journalist Marion McBride—she caused another round of resentments and further insult to local women. The *Picayune* fanned the controversy by reprinting clips from other newspapers. For example, the *New York World* was quoted as reporting that Howe was "heating more hot water for her

Crescent City tea-kettle” by appointing all New England women (“Mrs. Howe’s Appointments Again,” *Daily Picayune* 12 Dec. 1884). The *Picayune*’s editorial staff found Howe “Lacking in Courtesy” for being ungraceful and ungracious to New Orleans women, but the affront was rightly laid on the men who snubbed them:

We suppose that Mrs. Howe has taken it for granted that since the Exposition managers have declared that no Southern woman is competent to fill the position that was tendered to herself, so there are none who are capable of being put at the head of the various departments under her charge. Ah, well, we live in the hope that our Southern women will not be looked upon as such “ninnies” at the next Centennial celebration. (9 Dec. 1884)

This last sarcasm barely masked their fury and determination to be heard and acknowledged in *this* celebration. If Howe read the *Daily Picayune* on December 11, 1884, the day she arrived in her rooms at the elegant new Hotel Royal, she discovered that the women of New Orleans felt “left out in the cold” and “second fiddle” to a northern woman who seemed to have considered them “a set of incapables” (“Mrs. Howe’s Appointments”).

Cole had assessed Howe with more balance before the selection of president for the Woman’s Department. Howe’s name appeared often in Cole’s column, “Woman’s World and Work” wherein Cole provided news of women’s progress from around the country. As the city’s devoted advocate of working women’s causes, Cole used her Sunday columns to inform local women of new occupations and encourage them to demand respect and fair treatment. She had reported an October, 1883, meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Women (AAW), over which Howe presided and called it “not a howling suffragist’s affair—far from it,” perhaps an assurance that there were alternatives to the National Woman’s Suffrage Association

(NWSA), considered the more radical wing of the suffrage movement and led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Cole labeled Howe then a “brilliant and essentially womanly woman” who projected a motherly, quiet persona. Cole was apparently not a militant suffragist, and Howe was a leader in the conservative wing of suffrage, the American Woman’s Suffrage Association (AWSA), led by Lucy Stone, with an emphasis on accomplishing suffrage for their daughters’ sake as much as for themselves. Cole, Merrick, and three other New Orleanians became members of the AAW because its goals matched theirs: greater access to higher education, “first-class pay for first-class work,” and an objective to “dignify labor, to honor the working woman.” From that meeting in Chicago, thirty-two-year-old Cole described Howe as

a woman of medium size, with a strong, fine face, rather florid, very brown, or may be black eyes, white hair; she is of that age that one cannot now say to her au revoir, without the fear it may be adieu. Her manner is gentle and dignified, with much, I suspect, of the Bostoness in it. (“Catharine Cole in Chicago,” *Daily Picayune* 21 Oct. 1883)

Cole saw the Bostonian in a much harsher light when Howe led the Woman’s Department in New Orleans. The “redoubtable Julia Ward Howe” (Brady 108) was obviously charming in brief encounters, but many women judged six months of her leadership as problematic, and Cole used blunt language to skewer Howe every time she considered the chief to be high-handed, authoritarian, inequitable, or “sectional.”

### The Opposing Force

Had there been no Howe to stir controversy and no Catharine Cole to cover it, what is known of the Woman’s Department might be confined to drier catalogues of “woman’s work,”

as in Burke's *Times-Democrat*. The women were formidable opposing forces and Cole as critic played the role of antagonist to Howe's protagonist. As chronicler of the Woman's Department, Cole reported on the Department daily and kept women aware and informed of every occurrence there, working from her base in the *Picayune's* Exposition office in the Main Building. For many women, no doubt, she wrote what they were feeling about Howe but were too polite to say. Cole was self-possessed and highly informed, her prose powerful and eloquent. She had little patience for "the dead lumber" of occasional female contributors like many of the hundred or more newspaper women who were in New Orleans "wandering over the vast building with their notebooks and pencils in hand," reviewing the women's activity ("World's Exposition: Women's Work," *Daily Picayune* 23 Dec. 1884). Those "story writers, the Spring poets and those ubiquitous ladies who volunteer to work" on insignificant gazettes did not gain Cole's approval even if she wanted them treated with respect. Her standards and journalistic mission were higher:

the newspaper woman must say something in every short sentence, and that must be the truth . . . she must plod on and prod on to get people to do their best, and she must not forget that she has the opportunity of helping women to help themselves . . . [with] the encouragement of her pen. (qtd. in "First New Orleans Newspaper Woman Was Avid Crusader for Women's Jobs," *Times-Picayune* 16 May 1976, sec. 3: 3)

These few sentences reveal the motivation behind Cole's work. She exhibited clarity and candor in her columns day after day, and her mission of prodding people to do their best may in part explain her treatment of Howe. Apparently, she thought that Howe's personality got in the way of her advocacy of women's advancement. As Cole wrote, "The president should be their

servant, protector and helper . . . The office of President has never been confounded with the office of Dictator” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 5 Apr. 1885).

Through her columns, Cole covered a multitude of women’s advances in voting rights and new avenues of employment, urging her readers to be more, to do better. As a widow with a mother and daughter to support and who began her journalistic career at fifteen, her bluntness and straightforward reporting were legendary. She was a crusader, “a major champion of women,” and “one of the most forceful and beloved writers” on the *Picayune* staff (“First New Orleans Newspaper Woman Was Avid Crusader for Women’s Jobs,” *Times-Picayune* 16 May 1976, sec. 3: 3). She joined the *Picayune* with her editor-father in 1881 when Burke bought the New Orleans *Democrat* and added it to his recently-purchased *Times* to create the *Times-Democrat*. Cole had arrived at the *Picayune* with strong credentials and a polished style, but the spotlight on this Exposition assured her a national audience. Her first column, “Tea Table Talk,” began in December of 1881, but by November of 1883, the harder-hitting Sunday column had become “Woman’s World and Work,” containing bits of gossip, lessons in finance, catalogues of social and political activity, and a proliferation of new occupations available to women.

Cole most often championed the common woman over the privilege of position. In her lifetime, readers and colleagues respected her toughness, as Elizabeth Bisland revealed when Cole joined the Woman’s Club: “She assails evil with unflinching courage, and is intrepid in the cause of right.” But Bisland modified the statement with, “Her wit, though trenchant, is qualified by a tender heart” (“The Woman’s Club,” *Times-Democrat* 30 Nov. 1884). Cole could also achieve “exquisite word-painting” (Mount 153), and in *Louisiana Voyages*, a book of Cole’s travel writings, Joan and Jack McLaughlin claim that Cole possessed “a poet’s eye with a reporter’s spade” (xvi) which she practiced daily. Readers labeled her the “prose-poet of the



South” for the “excellence of her descriptive writings” (“First New Orleans Newspaper Woman Was Avid Crusader for Women’s Jobs,” *Times-Picayune* 16 May 1976, sec. 3:3). Cole’s coverage at the Cotton Centennial was agile, factual, and even intermittently complementary of Howe’s skill and accomplishments, except when she was judging through a sectional lens.

At the *Picayune*, Cole had a prominent platform for her views partly because she was “inspired and guided by the leadership of another memorable New Orleans woman” (Cole Papers), Eliza Jane Pointevent Nicholson, who dramatically influenced the paper’s coverage of literary, social, and political matters, and who gave Cole a free hand to express stark opinions. Nicholson’s ownership also gave the city’s women strong coverage and unique access. Cole was a star reporter, but the *Picayune*’s later famous advice-giver, Dorothy Dix, overshadowed the reputation Cole might have enjoyed. Even in articles praising her later coverage of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair—where she delivered her speech “Come South, Young Woman”—she received little credit for her exceptional prowess at the New Orleans event. In her careful watch on the Woman’s Department of the Exposition, she wrote that it should reflect a “practical illustration of divers [sic] methods by which a woman may earn money,” and that it should display what other women had done and provide women the opportunity to learn what they might do themselves (“Personal and General Notes,” *Daily Picayune* 16 Jan. 1885).

Cole was fearless when she wielded her pen, but her candor also cast a shadow on the Woman’s Department, revealing as it did all the “miserable wrangles and ill-feelings [that] marred the harmony” there (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 5 Apr. 1885). Although her daily coverage of “woman’s work” was mainly straightforward reportage, her criticisms of Howe in “Woman’s World and Work” were curt, crisp, passionate, and to the point. According to Cole, Howe held secret meetings from which women left in tears, did not allow the women who

worked for the Exposition to rest in the Department, set the prices on goods too high, and appeared at times “sectional.” The writer of a later laudatory column on Cole tempered appreciation of her sharpness with some restraint about her fearlessness: “Indeed, we fear she has too little reverence for authority. She takes the step from the sublime to the ridiculous with absolute indifference” (Mrs. M. R. Field: Our ‘Catharine Cole,’” *Daily Picayune* 24 Apr. 1887).

Nevertheless, Cole was a relentless campaigner for women in the public domain and, as an assertive woman with a coherent agenda, embodied what Aleta Feinsod Cane and Susan Alves call a “clear desire to bring about substantial social change” (15), which also could describe Howe. On the other hand, Nicholson shared this desire but exhibited what Anne Goodwyn Jones refers to as the “oxymoronic ideal of the woman made of steel yet masked in fragility” (13). A delicate woman who ruled her reporters with “an iron hand in a velvet glove” (“Dorothy Dix Recalls,” *Times-Picayune* 25 Jan. 1937), Nicholson kept her public involvement to a minimum and let her paper speak for her (Bridges 62). Cole had no such contradiction and disdained the paradoxical role many southern women found comfortable. Cole had the “dash, the verve, the piquancy and brilliancy and . . . [the] painstaking care of a professional woman of letters.” In person, she exhibited “fluency, animation, and humor” (“Mrs. M. R. Field: Our ‘Catharine Cole,’” *Daily Picayune* 24 Apr. 1887), yet her role in print was ruthless analyst, advocate, and gadfly.

#### A Brief Interlude

Howe ignored the early criticism and met every challenge from the time of her arrival, thus establishing her value as a leader. Not easily deterred when she found the Department incomplete, she called a “fireside talk” in her hotel rooms with Lady Commissioners and local

women to plan how to raise needed funds (“The World’s Exposition: Mrs. Howe and the Woman’s Department,” *Times-Democrat* 13 Dec. 1884). The \$50,000 management promised the Woman’s Department for expenses did not materialize, and Director-General Burke denied the amount was ever offered (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 5 Feb. 1885). Yet, his own *Times-Democrat* had announced the amount on December 17, 1884, along with \$50,000 for the Colored Department, which also evaporated (“The Exposition: Women at the Exposition”). Howe’s rousing words about the shortfall were: “Ladies, we must remember that women have sometimes built churches with no better instruments than thimbles and a teapot!” (Richards and Elliott 2.102). It was one of many instances when her determination kept the Department on track.

Putting aside initial ill feelings, the newly-formed community of women planned successful evenings of entertainment to raise the needed \$3000 to buy showcases and partitions, to hire custodians, and to pay for policing the department. The women even considered raising money to provide “the necessary toilette rooms so badly needed for the ladies” (“World’s Exposition: Meeting of Ladies,” *Daily Picayune* 11 Jan. 1885) that were a glaring omission in a building where the Woman’s Department was housed. Participants and visitors complained for months of the “untold embarrassment and inconvenience” (“World’s Exposition: Women’s Work,” *Daily Picayune* 30 Dec. 1884; 21 Dec. 1884; 25 Dec. 1884; 3 Jan. 1885; 5 Jan. 1885; 11 Jan. 1885; 20 Jan. 1885), but the lack of comfort rooms, like the absence of promised funds, was more an example of management’s pervasive ineptitude and a general deficit of funds than it was a deliberate negligence of the women. On the contrary, the Woman’s Department was important to the success of the Exposition and was not an exercise in the ghettoization of women. But, as Cole wrote, “When the Exposition got into financial straights the usual thing happened. The men went to begging and the women went to work” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 25 Jan. 1885). Her

witty declaration of role-reversal cast women as superior managers even in financial matters—normally thought of as men’s domain—but probably reflected the reality of many desperate southern families. The statement also pitted women against men in this instance instead of against each other.

With the same zeal that southern women had exhibited raising money through bazaars during the Civil War (Faust 24), experienced women of New Orleans used that skill when forming the temporary Woman’s Exposition Aid Society that functioned until early February (“World’s Exposition: Woman’s Aid Society,” *Daily Picayune* 8 Feb. 1885) and executed three successful fund-raising entertainments. At the first of these soirées, hundreds of local men and women—“our best people,” according to an editorial in the *Times-Democrat* (“The Woman’s Department of the Exposition,” 15 Jan. 1885)—crowded to hear Howe deliver her lecture, “Is Polite Society Polite?” in a “somewhat monotonous” small voice to a “breathless audience” in a room where “one could have heard a pin drop” (“Mrs. Howe’s Lecture,” *Daily Picayune* 14 Jan. 1885). The “best people” allusion hints at a lingering or growing class-consciousness that Exposition managers soft-pedaled in favor of unanimity. In Laura E. Richards and Maud Howe Elliott’s biography of their mother, they quote Howe’s anxiety that evening: “the lecture appeared to me very homely for a Southern audience accustomed to rhetorical productions” (Richards and Elliott 2.203), but her audience was attentive to the message of Howe’s often-presented lecture: if one is “tolerant, generous, respectful, modest, reverent, one is polite” (“Mrs. Howe’s Lecture,” *Daily Picayune* 14 Jan. 1885).

Ironically, politeness became a quality over which Howe and her southern hosts later differed, but this new form of entertainment fascinated the public, and people turned out in great numbers to hear Howe speak. The city’s French newspaper *L’Abeille* assessed Howe’s discourse

as an “*élévation d’idées et tout plein d’un charm émouvant*” (“L’Exposition Universelle de la Nouvelle-Orleans,” 4 Mar. 1885), but Cole found it merely “admirable, as an eloquent padding of the golden rule” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 1 Feb. 1885). Nicholson’s “Society Bee” declared that people had come “not because their souls yearned for lectures” but “to do Mrs. Howe honor” (*Daily Picayune* 1 Feb. 1885) and as a demonstration of their hospitality. However, by attending, the women and men of New Orleans did announce that they were willing to hear erudite women speak publicly on issues of interest. This kind of evening with a woman on the platform probably strengthened the possibility for southern women to speak more readily to mixed audiences, as Merrick did on several occasions during the Exposition.

Howe’s tireless efforts on behalf of the Exposition and her accommodations to local needs in the Woman’s Department demonstrated her resolve to make a success of both. In a city off of the regular lecture circuit, her first event raised \$600 and was the beginning of many lectures presented on Exposition grounds and in other venues. She spoke wherever invited and vigorously presented women’s issues at clubs and churches and delivered congratulations at African-American graduation exercises. She strengthened the Department and smoothed ruffled feelings a bit by appointing six regional vice-presidents (Fairall 361): for New England States, Middle States, Pacific Slope, Northwest, Southwest, and the Southern States, which were put under the auspices of Caroline Merrick (“The World’s Exposition: Mrs. Howe and the Woman’s Department,” *Times-Democrat* 13 Dec. 1884). These categories identify the regions from which women came and attempted reunification in the Woman’s Department, but most remnants of divisiveness were clearly between the South and the North.

For a time in the Department it appeared that harmony was established, and Howe could begin her real work and relax into the cultural season of New Orleans. She oversaw the arranging

of exhibits, and she assessed needs and progress at meetings with Lady Commissioners. Her fame drew scores of visitors to the Woman's Department, as management expected. Although she announced Thursday as "reception day," Howe was "daily besieged by visitors" wanting to meet her ("World's Exposition: Woman's Department," *Daily Picayune* 8 Jan. 1885). Despite "animadversion" from the press, Howe projected a united and positive face for the Woman's Department and the Exposition. In addition, her "perfectly conversant" French facilitated "her intercourse very much with that large and influential half of [the] population" that was Creole, an essential consideration in New Orleans and one that endeared her to this important group ("The World's Exposition: Mrs. Howe and the Woman's Department," *Times-Democrat* 13 Dec. 1884). Howe's sociability also brought her invitations to elite gatherings around the city and to the homes of Jennie Nixon, the Merricks, the Townsends, and to Mrs. William W. King's Creole dinners, no doubt also attended by her daughter, Grace ("Society Bee," *Daily Picayune* 21 Dec. 1884; Elliott 205). Howe was complimented as a "belle" at the Twelfth Night Revelers carnival ball (Cole's "Sunday Talk," *Daily Picayune* 11 Jan. 1885; "Society Notes," *Times-Democrat* 11 Jan. 1885), and Grace King wrote, with perhaps a tinge of envy, that Maud Howe "became a belle in society, and was a cynosure at the carnival balls" (55). In spite of the women's disappointment over the appointment of Howe and the contentiousness in the Department, the community welcomed these guests and other prominent visitors to the Exposition with the "noblesse oblige" their milieu mandated (King 54). And they gathered with enthusiasm to hear messages delivered by famous visiting women.

## Celebrity Appearances

Lectures became de rigueur in New Orleans during the Cotton Centennial, and the “lectresses” spread news of the accomplishments of women from across the country. Local newspapers reported on these events and broadcast the progressive views of many northern women. For example, Frances E. Willard, national president of the WCTU, spoke to audiences in the Music Hall, churches, the Temperance Pavilion in the Woman’s Department, and at the Woman’s Club on strategies to advance the temperance movement. Susan B. Anthony, whose name was synonymous with the fight for suffrage, reminded men and women of the Press Association of “the power of the press to disseminate new ideas” (“World’s Exposition: Miss Anthony’s Lecture,” *Daily Picayune* 18 Mar. 1885). At the Girls’ Central High School, she spoke on the “Advantages of the Present over the Past,” encouraging the girls to “learn something that they could depend upon and not be dependent upon the support of some man,” surely a shocking statement for southern girls of the time to hear (“Miss Susan B. Anthony: She Visits One of Our High Schools Yesterday,” *Times-Democrat* 7 Mar. 1885). To school teachers of New Orleans, she lectured about the necessity of trade unions to “right wrongs of working women to receive their equal pay for equal work” (“Susan B. Anthony: Lectures to a Large and Appreciative Audience at Tulane Hall,” *Daily Picayune* 20 Mar. 1885), and to working women of the Woman’s Club, about her thirty years in the cause of woman’s suffrage. While Anthony was in New Orleans, she engaged Merrick to write a section on Louisiana for the third volume of the *History of Woman Suffrage* that she and Stanton were editing with Matilda Joslyn Gage. Merrick was more sympathetic to their original, radical, and controversial wing of suffrage that demanded of Congress that laws be changed. Howe’s conservative wing approached state legislatures to achieve suffrage state-by-state.

The lectures of famous women visiting New Orleans during the Exposition filled rooms “from pit to dome” (“Mrs. Howe’s Lecture: Generous Reception of the Eminent Bostonienne at Werlein Hall—Mr. Miller as a ‘Reader of Poetry,’” *Daily Picayune* 14 Jan. 1885) and demonstrated the developing interest in women’s issues in the city. When Anthony and May Wright Sewell, “Principal of a Classical College in Indianapolis” (“Visitors at the Girls’ High School,” *Daily Picayune* 7 Mar. 1885), spoke to the Woman’s Club, two to four hundred men and women were seated, a hundred men and a hundred women stood, and hundreds were turned away for lack of room. These two women “attracted the largest audience ever seen in New Orleans at an entertainment of this character.” The audience held “prominent judges, lawyers, physicians, editors, as well as preachers” (“Wisdom of Women: Mrs. Sewell and Miss Anthony at Continental Guards’ Armory,” *Daily Picayune* 10 Mar. 1885) and a “great number of intelligent and agreeable persons [the Exposition] brought to the city” (Elliott 206). Apparently Nicholson was wrong when she wrote in her “Society Bee” column: “we are not a lecture-loving people” (*Daily Picayune* 1 Feb. 1885). The Crescent City seems to have been gaining an appetite for enlightenment on topics significant to women, even if some people attended primarily to show honor to their special guests.

Whatever the reasons for locals’ attendance, the influx of intelligent women speakers helped transform New Orleans into a “cosmopolitan nerve center” (Elliott 206) and created a “public appetite for this refined and profitable form of entertainment” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 11 Jan. 1885), even among working women. An editorial in the *Times-Democrat* had declared that Howe’s appointment “gave to the army of workers a leader of national reputation,” (“The Department of Woman’s Work,” 4 Mar. 1885). About three hundred working women heard Howe’s informal talk on the extensive activity of her New England Woman’s Club when she



spoke at the recently-formed Woman's Club of New Orleans. Howe spoke on "the infinite variety of employments now common to women" and the "professions being cracked by women and other trades open to women." She "believed work to be the new gospel of womanhood, and that the women were now finding out their latent value." As she usually did, Howe mentioned the responsibility of motherhood and issued a challenge that mothers should lead the "great uplifting of morality" ("The Women's [sic] Club: Lecture by Julia Ward Howe at Tulane Hall," *Daily Picayune* 29 Jan. 1885). She brought scores of women into the suffrage movement with this kind of conservative appeal to motherhood.

The topics of other women's lectures demonstrate the range of issues that women heard that spring. May Wright Sewell spoke on "Woman's Work in the New Way," May Rogers on "M'me Roland," and Dr. Julia Holmes Smith of New Orleans and Chicago on women in medicine and the "whole world of working women." Although the creation of the Woman's Club dates to the months prior to the opening of the Exposition, the lectures were a great "boon" and "privilege" to a club "in its infancy" ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 8 Mar. 1885; "WWW," *Daily Picayune* 1 Feb. 1885), which helped increase its membership and authority during the Exposition. Its existence was also an indication that the women of New Orleans were already interested in American economic and political issues, and that they were poised to act on the new ideas brought to them from the North and West.

Of all the famous women who mounted a platform during the Exposition, few had the impact Howe had in her leading role. She was the foremost advocate for women's issues, aside from Cole, and it was Howe's penchant for forming clubs and organizations that also led her to revive a latent parlor literary club where women and men exchanged ideas and gained confidence as they delivered essays in a limited and supportive forum with the intent to publish.

Howe and the Pan Gnostics, which launched Grace King's career and enhanced those of *Times-Democrat* reporters Elizabeth Bisland and Jennie Nixon, focused six of the meetings on the subject of women (Taylor 38). Cole wrote that the appearance of leaders in the city for the Exposition could "do more for the suffrage cause in the South than [reams] of suffrage literature could do" ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 11 Jan. 1885).

### Staging the Exhibits

The formal opening of the Woman's Department on March 3, 1885, was an occasion to celebrate accomplishments. Howe declared her purpose for the Woman's Department: "The world remains very imperfectly educated concerning its women," and her hope was that the Department would correct that lack of knowledge. This goal shared the aim of the Exposition to educate, but it was only peripherally aligned with the New South's plan to bring northern capital southward or to open world trade, although the Woman's Department did include displays from Mexico, Central America, and Japan. The women had worked together to raise money and arrange exhibits, and in her opening speech, Howe declared "harmony" among Lady Commissioners. She pushed for fuller reconciliation as she reminded American women, "We are all under one flag now." She also pointed to the vast array of "woman's work" surrounding the gathering. Colonel Morehead claimed that he had seen marvelous evidence of women's progress in the Department and declared himself "a woman's rights man" ("World's Exposition: Opening of the Woman's Department," *Daily Picayune* 4 Mar. 1885 and "The World's Exposition: Woman's Day," *Times-Democrat* 4 Mar. 1885).

Iowa Commissioner Herbert Fairall's description of the Woman's Department's celebrations and his tour of the exhibits provides a contemporary male view of woman's role in

the Exposition. He recorded that at the formal opening of the Department, “far away in every direction stretched the crowd, in which persons of the female persuasion predominated” and the “air was heavy with the perfume of flowers” as women added the “crowning glory to this great Exposition” (375). He claimed that “all the avenues of trade and invention open to man, are being closely contested by the advancing genius and intelligent research of woman . . . save helping to make the laws that govern her, woman is doing her full share to make this age a progressive and prosperous one” (361). He also noted that Caroline Merrick presented Howe with flowers from the Lady Commissioners “as a testimonial of the respect and affection of her colleagues in this work so happily completed,” and Merrick also declared that Howe had taught New Orleans to love Boston, and that she had united South, North, East, and West (376). At this public event at least, the women celebrated Howe, reconciliation, and woman’s contribution to industry.

What was the “woman’s work” they were celebrating? Most exhibits were predominately domestic, amateurish, and created by leisured women’s hands, perhaps sent more to be admired for the items’ own sake than as they related to commercial industry. Nestled among an abundance of doilies, crazy quilts and banners, amateur paintings and screens, wax flowers, bookmarks, and hair wreaths, were finely-painted china, Ohio pottery, Kate Greenaway illustrations, photographs by “lady photographers,” and a set of professionally-made false teeth from the first lady dentist in Iowa. Northern institutes showed examples of design from the Academy of Design in New Jersey, the Institute of Technical Design 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and the School of Industrial Arts in Philadelphia, but middle states also made a showing from the St. Louis School of Design and the Ladies School of Pharmacy in Louisville. The exhibits were an odd mix of amateur and professional products and of private and public spheres of work. Reporters

who covered the Department on a daily basis described the uneven quality of the displays. On the other hand, even that which appeared amateurish or simply domestic was exactly the kind of work that supported the needy women who made items to be sold in the shop at the Christian Woman's Exchange.

In part, the inconsistency in quality resulted from the fact that each Lady Commissioner gathered her states' display based partly upon how she interpreted the concept of "woman's work." The women's personal narratives in the *Report and Catalogue of the Woman's Department of the World's Exposition* reveal the variety of approaches they took when collecting exhibits, yet most emphasized their understanding of women's contribution to American industry. The narratives also complain of the limited time to collect items and the broken promises made by management. The women hint at problems in the Department and offer some support for Howe, but mainly they extol their states' advancements for women and the new fields and professions open to them. Cole urged women to emphasize organizations, reforms, wage-earning opportunities, and statistics in their states, and Howe had called for a full range of women's industry that would "render the Woman's Department a credit to women from Manitoba to Mexico." Fairall wrote, "though the women were somewhat overshadowed by that mighty creature man, [Howe] pointed with pride to this triumphant answer to that stupid and oft-repeated inquiry, 'What has woman done? What has she ever created or invented?'" (376). Howe highlighted the inventions of women that might move them into the world of commerce ("World's Exposition: Woman's Work," *Daily Picayune* 19 Dec. 1884). She was particularly fond of showing "a heavy iron chain, forged by a woman blacksmith" (Howe 397).

Most of the patented inventions that claimed attention at the formal opening of the Woman's Department were time- and labor-saving devices for the home: a washing machine, a

combination table and ironing-board, a portable nursery chair, a skirt supporter, the hook and eye. But others were of general use: a snowplow, a portable summer cottage, a carriage tip and wagon tongue, a color game designed as a “cure for color blindness.” One inventor had already “made a fortune” with her machine to sew straw braid (“World’s Exposition: New York Women’s Work,” *Daily Picayune* 24 Mar. 1885). Such displays projected the image that women were thinking creatively and taking the next step of pursuing legal patents for their inventions. Western women appeared particularly inventive, but the South was less so, and New Orleans women contributed no inventions at all.

However, Louisiana did exhibit in several areas of the Exposition. A notable display appeared as an “annex” to the state display on the ground floor, containing mainly the work of Anglo-Saxon, or “American,” women. French Creoles of New Orleans exhibited in the Woman’s Department, showing their unique and popular “Collection Historique de la Louisiane.” Their determination to show with the Woman’s Department suggests that an old rivalry continued to divide the Crescent City into French and American sectors. This group of descendants of French and Spanish settlers had begun in the autumn of 1884 to amass an exhibit that mined their ancestry (“World’s Exposition: Louisiana’s Historical Exhibit,” *Daily Picayune* 4 May 1885; “The World’s Exposition: Woman’s Work in the Louisiana Department,” *Times-Democrat* 16 Jan. 1885). Grace King wrote that the Creole exhibit “was the opening of the past history of the city, not only to strangers, but to the citizens themselves in whose minds the hard chances of the Civil War and its consequences had effaced the historical traditions of the past” (King 55). Historian D. Clive Hardy later agreed that what local citizens “had taken for granted was in fact their own unique and rich culture. Ultimately, this awareness would be the most important legacy of the exposition” (*The World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition* n. pag.). A New

Orleans presence was also noted in the booth of the Christian Woman's Exchange where unlike most other sections, the women attempted to sell from their exhibit. Also, the New Orleans Colored Ladies' Exposition Association exhibited with men in the Colored Department rather than in the Woman's Department. These women's sizeable display was remarkably similar to the domestic pieces and amateur paintings of white women, but the two groups had little formal contact.

Although the separation of woman's work on the balcony at the Cotton Centennial might seem intentionally isolating, the exhibits were just a staircase away from the states' main product displays downstairs, and there is no indication that this arrangement was problematic for the women of the Department. They were free to show with their states if they chose to, as did Wisconsin, Missouri, Ohio, Texas, and part of Louisiana. Some expositions like those in Philadelphia in 1876 and later in Chicago in 1893 excluded African-Americans from true participation and institutionalized gender segregation by creating separate Woman's Pavilions. In fact, to separate woman's work or to include it continued to be a knotty issue into the twentieth century. As late as the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, women chose to create a detached Woman's Pavilion to show their progress in the world of work.

At the Cotton Centennial, woman's work was highlighted, but Howe noted that women in manufacturing were "dimly recognized" because their work was usually "shown merely in conjunction with that of men" and that most of the products downstairs and in the Main Building would not be there but for women's contributions ("World's Exposition: Opening of the Woman's Department," *Daily Picayune* 4 Mar. 1885; "The World's Exposition: Woman's Day," *Times-Democrat* 4 Mar. 1885). As Virginia Grant Darney declares in her unpublished dissertation on women at four World's Fairs, by the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis

in 1904 when woman's work was no longer shown independently, the impact of their contribution was diluted into the general exhibits and thought of mainly as man's work (199). The Cotton Centennial's Woman's Department did show some products that women helped to produce in factories, such as tiles, socks, braids, and buttons, but Cole complained, "the work of factory women is scarcely represented at all in the department" ("WWW," *Daily Picayune* 11 Feb. 1885). On the other hand, the Conant Thread Company boasted that it employed "eleven hundred women and girls in the manufacture of Coats Thread" (*Report* 52), a statistic that hinted at economic need that had forced children into factories, as might happen if more manufacturing came south.

Paradoxically, the displays of woman's work remained mainly amateurish partly because if professionals showed their wares, the exhibits might be considered too commercial ("World's Exposition: Pennsylvania Women," *Daily Picayune* 11 Feb. 1885). Cole was disappointed that "not a single dressmaker or milliner" showed her professional wares ("World's Exposition: The Woman's Department," *Daily Picayune* 10 Feb 1885), but the Woman's Department was a place of ideological consequence rather than commercial assembly. The women were selling an image of woman's expanding role in the marketplace more than they were concerned to push the limited number of items they marked for sale. As Walmsley of the Christian Woman's Exchange (CWE) confirmed, the Woman's Department was "the opportunity to show how much broader are the fields of her influence since the exhibit of '76, and how varied are her opportunities" ("World's Exposition: The Woman's Exposition Aid Society," *Daily Picayune* 1 Feb. 1885). As exhibiting women worked on their balcony to applaud their accomplishments, they turned to each other for inspiration and support rather than to the larger Exposition that, for the most part, had a decidedly commercial flavor. *The Century Magazine* reporter Eugene V. Smalley wrote of

“temples of soap and cathedrals of cracker-boxes,” towers of spools of thread, and exhibitors in the Main Building vying to catch the eye of passers-by in order to sell their wares. States promoted their “natural resources and farm and mine products” and, in the South, cheap land that was available for investment (Smalley, *Century* 30.1: 9, 13), but the women promoted education, suffrage, and their accomplishments.

Within the Woman’s Department, its Science and Literary Departments garnered considerable interest, but less tactile progress was harder to display. In the Science Department, superintendent Evelyn Ordway exhibited women’s botanical, chemical, geological, and astronomical specimens, and tests of the veracity of products, a kind of forerunner of *Good Housekeeping’s* investigation and seal. Maud Howe filled the shelves of the Literary Department with books written by women for self-expression or for money, literature being an acceptable occupation for nineteenth-century women, and teaching another. Maud arranged the books by states. Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island contributed the largest number. Texas showed only two books, Louisiana only four at first (“World’s Exposition: In the Woman’s Library,” *Daily Picayune* 12 Feb. 1885), but in the end, Louisiana listed about twenty entries, most written by Sister of Mercy, “Frank” Leslie, or Pearl Rivers (Eliza Nicholson). Many states found a way to include other evidence of women’s labor: examples of stenographic arts, lists of reform institutes that women administered, reports on jobs and colleges available to women, and records of women’s farm ownership where they raised everything from cattle to the popular new industry of silk culture. As visitors browsed these departments and talked to Lady Commissioners, they were exposed to new roles and issues affecting women: access to higher learning, the professions, unexpected new fields of work, suffrage, and equal pay for equal work.



Some journalists criticized the “woman’s work” as too domestic and leisured, but Smalley’s articles for *The Century Magazine* captured the essence of the Exposition and the Woman’s Department for a national audience. As pleasing as Smalley found the “retreat to one of these nooks from the masculine spaces of the fair . . . to find one’s self surrounded with only feminine influences,” he claimed that “no great intellectual effort or physical exertion [was] needed” to view the women’s exhibits. On the other hand, he wrote that the displays were “of necessity inadequate to present a view of the attainments of women in the industries and arts.” This northern writer tapped into the tranquility men could experience in private feminine spaces as opposed to the aggressiveness of the public male commercialism dominating the rest of the Exposition, thus perpetuating the idea that men and women inhabit separate spheres. But he did grasp the women’s mission to show a cross-section of “woman’s work” and a wide variety of new occupations, admitting, “An enormous amount of the labor, skill, and taste employed to carry on the processes of our modern life comes from women’s hands and brains” (30.2, 188-9).

Cole believed such displays would be inspirational to women who were accustomed to domestic seclusion or limited avenues to work outside the home:

To thousands of women the display of woman’s work will be a revelation, and to many of them an inspiration to attempt greater works themselves. . . . literary and scientific works of women will be a wholesome surprise. [Women] will find there are a thousand other congenial employments in the world available for them beside teaching, or drudgery. . . . If greater things and of more permanent value than pincushions are possible to her, the inspiration will surely come to her some day as she stands in the Woman’s Department. (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 4 Jan. 1885)

For Cole, the exhibits must have affirmed what she had been advocating in her second Sunday column: for women to seek employment (“Those Who Have Been,” *Daily Picayune* 17 May 1885), to give up the foolish notion that wage work was humiliating (“The Professional Society Girl,” *Daily Picayune* 10 May 1885), and to see that all woman’s work deserved appreciation (“The Young and Struggling,” *Daily Picayune* 3 May 1885). She made it clear that potential wage-earners should take heed of the exhibits. Those “brave and desolate women” who needed “honorable employment” to lift them “from privation” or “dependence on the cold world” in the “new order of things” (“Work for Women,” *Daily Picayune* 8 Dec. 1884) would “find new ideas, new plans, new hopes, new energies. They will see what other women have done and will learn what they may do themselves” (“Personal and General Notes,” *Daily Picayune* 16 Jan. 1885).

Cole, in her advocacy for wage-earners, was as ambitious for them as was Howe in her drive for woman suffrage. Cole expressed satisfaction when the Board of Managers employed about fifty local women as clerks, bookkeepers, and assistants at the Exposition, but she berated management for seeking outside New Orleans for a stenographer when there was an experienced one in the city (“Exposition Work for Women,” *Daily Picayune* 19 Oct. 1884). However, this seemed more an example of management’s lapse of judgment than a sectional issue. In her column, Cole sought to publicize common jobs for women of the time: “bookkeepers, cashiers, artists, writers, cooks, seamstresses, factory hands, teachers, clerks, musicians” (“Sunday Talk,” *Daily Picayune* 11 Jan. 1885). She also reported often on unusual occupations as possible inspiration for other women: a steamboat captain, a press agent, a piano tuner (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 29 Mar. 1885).

The long months of the Exposition gave ample time for southern women to “change the trajectory” of their lives (Cane and Alves 8), and journalists like Cole and Nicholson forwarded

that end, seizing the opportunity of the Exposition to encourage greater social and political participation. Most of the female correspondents from other regions were not nearly so critical as were local ones, and they helped broadcast the attractions of the Exposition, the city, and its women. The newswomen came en masse to the Exposition and sent reports back home on “woman’s work” and the graciousness and competence of southern women. The hundred names of correspondents that Howe submitted to management indicated how prevalent newspaperwomen were in the period (Howe Papers), but when Howe had no funds to bring to New Orleans the respected Boston journalist Marion McBride to head the Press Department, she must have rescinded her appointment. This was an unfortunate occurrence because McBride might have prevented some of the Department’s negative press. She arrived only in the final three weeks of the Exposition, her expenses paid by Boston activists.

Under McBride, women journalists at the Exposition cemented their new-found connections by forming a National Women’s Press Association, but the local satirical weekly *Mascot* derided the organization complaining that “petticoat progress” was going to “invade the editorial sanctum,” and clobber “the citadel of that ‘safeguard of Liberty’ The Press.” It snidely advised men to “establish an association for mutual benefit and relief, and call it the ‘Men’s National Home Duties Association,’” and it claimed that “the Exposition [was] directly responsible for the impetuosity of the onslaught” of these strong-minded and influential women (“The Woman’s National Press Association,” 30 May 1885). The *Mascot*’s shrillness over this new “onslaught” on a male domain suggests that organized women posed a threat to men, and it identifies the Exposition as a powerful force for women, demonstrating that they were gaining ascendancy in journalism as female readership increased. Furthermore, Nicholson’s election as

president of the organization in 1885 and for subsequent terms was a manifestation that women acknowledged New Orleans as an important journalistic center.

Even as New Orleans women operated in what must have seemed the eye of a storm, they recognized the significance of what happened in their city during the Cotton Centennial. As writer Grace King declared, “It was not that which was built with hands that gave this exposition its historical importance. It was not the exhibits. It was the people who came to it. It was the visitors from a distance, and foremost among them the newspaper correspondents sent out to report upon the land and its people” (51). Whether or not historians have recognized the significance of the event, it left a legacy of progress and opportunity for the women of the city, none more so than for King herself, whose career came as a result of the northern visitors she met during the Exposition, especially Julia Ward Howe. Thirty-three-year-old King embraced the Old South rather than the New in her local color stories of a Creole way of life that was passing, but the glory of the Exposition and the people it brought together were the perfect match for her own ambitions for a literary career and national recognition.

#### Crises and Climaxes

However grateful individual women were to Howe, the apparent harmony in the Woman’s Department in February and March broke down by April and May. By turns, sociability and irritability took center stage in the Department. In early February, Cole wrote: “Something very like complete harmony prevails at present in the Woman’s Department. Tempers have improved along with the weather” (“World’s Exposition: Woman’s Department,” *Daily Picayune* 3 Feb. 1885), but by Easter Sunday, April 5, she complained that Howe was ignoring the hard work of the Lady Commissioners, and accused her of a dictatorial manner.

Cole implied, however, that had Lady Commissioners “substituted moral courage and absolute Christian sincerity for an artificial politeness,” troubles could have been averted (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune*). Cole complained also that Howe was preventing journalist McBride from coming to head the Press Department, and claimed that McBride possessed “the real Boston culture, not a spurious article whose other name is caddyism [sic]” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 9 Apr. 1885), thus she rejected Howe as a true representative of northern women and suggested that perhaps personalities more than regions thwarted reunification.

Participants from various regions who worked on a daily basis with Howe as their chief vacillated between appreciation of her efforts and exasperation over her authoritarian stance. No matter how many declarations were made by Howe and the promoters of the Exposition that the breach between sections had been mended, rips in the fabric of unity persisted. In the *Mascot*, a letter to the editor complained that Howe’s “rude and arbitrary” decision to exclude Lady Commissioners from meetings “repeatedly insulted the ladies of Kansas” (“Echos [sic] from the Expos,” 30 May 1885), and it was echoed in “Answers to Correspondents” on the same day: “Her coarse ways and rude demeanor have been the cause of numerous complaints.” Howe created a tempest with women of other regions over her seating of one Kansas Lady Commissioner when two had been appointed by each of the outgoing and incoming Kansas governors. She also struggled for power with Marion McBride and attempted to block the journalist from holding press meetings in the Woman’s Department. And she attempted to exclude exhibiting women who chose to show with their states instead of in the Woman’s Department from any portion of the \$15,000 windfall lately approved by Congress and earmarked specifically for the Department’s expenses (*Report* 33). In each case, the loud

complaints brought Exposition management into the fray as the final authority and *deus ex machina*.

The speeches of Merrick and Howe in the Colored Department further highlight a typical difference in approach by a northern and a southern woman offered the same opportunity. When Merrick accepted Howe's invitation to join her in addressing the Colored Department, the *Picayune* recorded Merrick's speech but summarized Howe's, perhaps because Merrick's sentiments were more acceptable to the newspaper's audience. In her memoir, Merrick writes that someone said to her: "Well, you are probably the only Southern woman here who would risk public censure by speaking to a negro assembly" (Merrick 176). The statement affirms the lack of interaction between the two groups and suggests that Merrick's society might have seen her as a maverick.

Both women's remarks were patronizing and racist, but probably for their day, somewhat advanced. Howe's topic was "The Friends of the Colored People" in which she "recounted incidents in the life [sic] of prominent anti-slavery advocates" including her husband, and she urged the audience to "show themselves worthy of their distinguished friends and all they had done for their race" ("World's Exposition: Interesting Exercises in the Department of the Colored People's Exhibit," *Daily Picayune* 17 May 1885). Merrick reminded the group that they had friends in the South, too, and expressed gratitude for the kindnesses of slaves, but with her customary sarcasm, she also lashed out at northern slave traders in a decidedly sectional tone:

Be as grateful as you can to the descendants of the people who first brought you from Africa—and then sold you 'down South' when your labor was no longer profitable to themselves. But remember, now you are free, whenever you count up your friends never to count out the women of the South. They too rejoice in your

emancipation and have no grudges about it; and would help you to march with the world in education and true progress. As we have together mourned our dead on earth let us rejoice together in all the great resurrections now and hereafter.

(“World’s Exposition: Interesting Exercises in the Department of the Colored People’s Exhibit,” *Daily Picayune* 17 May 1885)

Characteristic differences between northern abolitionists and conservative southerners are encoded here, and each seeks to gain from the audience allegiance for their region’s position. Howe speaks for abolitionists who she claims earned rights for African-Americans, implying they had no agency in the matter. On the other hand, Merrick attempts to neutralize Howe’s position by drawing the audience back to former masters with her plantation rhetoric. Her appeal, however, might have distanced her audience, since these “best people” might not have been freed slaves but free persons of color, a population that complicated the racial mix of New Orleans. Merrick and Howe might have shared goals for women, but they spoke from their own sectional experiences in this exchange: Howe as wife of a supporter of John Brown, Merrick as plantation mistress during the Civil War who claimed she said about emancipation, “Thank heaven! I too shall be free at last!” (Merrick 18).

During the second round of storms, when Cole sought to correct “certain people [who] are saying that the ladies of New Orleans entertain a *sectional* feeling against Mrs. Julia Ward Howe,” she called on Howe to correct the “grave mistake”:

She should speak out brightly and graciously, as she knows how to speak, and tell the women of the far Northern and Western States how warmly the women of New Orleans welcomed her on her arrival here. . . . how bravely and heart-warmly they helped her . . . make a big show with a little money. . . . in fact how

courteous, how unselfish, how hospitable, how warm-hearted, how liberal-minded and truly *unsectional* she has found the women of New Orleans. (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 3 May 1885)

Cole implied that sectionalism had come from Howe and that the women of New Orleans proved their willingness for reconciliation in the warmth and enthusiasm of their welcome. She listed qualities important to southern women for whom strong-mindedness and manners were not mutually exclusive. The women apparently expected more camaraderie, more support, and more equal treatment from their own sex. The tinge of betrayal reappears in Cole’s statement, as does the determination not to have southern women’s role in the Department diminished.

In public, the southern women of the Woman’s Department welcomed Howe and “spoke of her with enthusiasm” (“WWW,” *Daily Picayune* 14 Dec. 1884). Cole’s outspokenness may have been an anomaly in the outwardly polite society of the Crescent City, but there is no indication that the women shunned her opinions. Rather, the private correspondence of some New Orleans women made similar judgments about Howe’s apparent bossiness. Although Grace King presented a balanced if slightly wry view of Howe in *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters*, a letter to her sister May takes an exasperated tone:

Mrs. Howe presided, as a matter of course. She presided at everything & has done it so long that her air, manner, smile & language are actually threadbare, from constant use. It is a pleasure to know that if she presides in the next world—which she will do, if she has a chance, that she will be regenerated and renewed.

(qtd. in Bush 379-80)

King’s pronouncement of Howe’s officiousness is a clever use of language, and its wit is razor sharp. The two faces she shows concerning Howe demonstrate that, in many cases, southern



women's politeness was mainly a façade masking harsher opinions. Like King, Caroline Merrick continued to be supportive of Howe in public and saved most sarcasm for correspondence. She must have vented her private frustration to Susan B. Anthony, because on May 15, 1885, Anthony replied to Merrick:

You rightly read JWH—it is amazing to me that any woman should not be anxious to bring out and to the front every woman who can speak or act— She seems to feel that she herself is the only woman possessed of brain and culture to open her lips—whereas the fact is there are hundreds of young women of to-day who possess both of those necessary qualities to a much . . . greater degree than her ladyship! (Merrick papers)

This surprising candor has little to do with direct sectionalism and more to do with Howe's personality and leadership style, which Anthony also judged as flawed. However, for many local women, Howe's challenging personality and "Battle Hymn" fame were probably indivisible from the fact that she was a strong-minded northerner.

Nonetheless, Merrick and Lady Commissioners had signed two formal proclamations endorsing their chief. The first in February claimed a "shaky condition of affairs in the woman's department," but expressed confidence in Howe's ability to bring about reconciliation among them ("World's Exposition: Women State Commissioners," *Daily Picayune* 5 Feb. 1885). After later criticisms, Lady Commissioners signed a second "Resolution of Union, Confidence and Harmony" and issued it to the national press to counter "anonymous articles" of a "contemptuous and sneering manner," accusing "the President and members of the department of extravagance, bickerings and general unladylike and puerile conduct." The women claimed that they noticed the "untruthful and garbled reports" with "astonishment and indignation" since the women had

“worked together harmoniously, economically and successfully, having confidence in each other and in [their] honored President.” The Lady Commissioners considered the complaints a “lack of courtesy and journalistic honor.” Instead, they complimented their chief’s “strict adherence to duty, her high sense of honor, and her devotion to the work . . . in a manner gentle, winning and impressive” (“Woman’s Department of the Exposition,” *Daily Picayune* 11 Apr. 1885; “The World’s Exposition: Meeting of the Lady Commissioners,” *Times-Democrat* 12 Apr. 1885). Their public support returned some of the focus to accomplishments and to Howe’s advocacy on behalf of women. Cole intimated that she saw Howe’s hand in the Resolutions.

In an unanticipated way, controversies in the Woman’s Department brought a brighter spotlight that also captured the support for Howe and positive accomplishments of the exhibiting women. On “Woman’s Day” May 30, 1885, the penultimate day of the Exposition and the day the front page cartoon of the *Mascot* showed women squabbling over pots of money, Howe had another chance to redeem her reputation publicly during the Department’s closing ceremony, but she seems to have turned the honors over to others. Surrounded by flags and flowers, diminutive Julia Ward Howe sat alone on a small platform in the Woman’s Department. It was noon. She rose from the theatrical “great arm chair made of the enormous horns of Texas oxen” and introduced Maud Howe, chief of the Literary Department, who was to donate 1400 books written by women to the Southern Art Union’s circulating library. Maud had intended from the beginning that the books stay together as a collection to benefit the community. She spoke to the large crowd of local men and women, visitors, reporters, Lady Commissioners, and officers of the Department, and presented the books to the Art Union in “loving remembrance of the long winter of labor and of pleasure” (“World’s Exposition: Ladies’ Day—Interesting Exercises in the Women’s [sic] Department,” *Daily Picayune* 31 May 1885).

After Maud finished, “Mrs. Howe made some happy remarks, and the exercises were closed with a short address from Major Burke,” who had resigned his position effective May 20, 1885 to take up his “public duties” but returned for the ceremonies in the Woman’s Department. He lifted the Art Union’s basket of roses sent for Julia Ward Howe and gallantly wished that “her memories of New Orleans should be all roseate, and her future strewn with flowers.” Then honored guests, staff, and the Lady Commissioners retired to the President’s office for light refreshments (“World’s Exposition: Ladies’ Day—Interesting Exercises in the Women’s [sic] Department,” *Daily Picayune* 31 May 1885). It had, indeed, been a “long winter,” and all had not been “roseate,” but there were accomplishments for which the women could be proud and considerable success for which Howe could claim credit.

The city and its people gained much as a result of the Exposition and Howe’s appointment as Chief of the Woman’s Department, despite the controversies that swirled around them. Howe had dedicated her total energies to leading the Woman’s Department, and she and the Department were magnets for drawing famous women to the city and ordinary ones to women’s causes. Despite shaky beginnings and negative press, women displayed a wide range of useful domestic arts and inventions. Other exhibits revealed the extent to which women were venturing beyond the private sphere and into the labor market, how they were advancing literary and educational pursuits while strengthening organizations for urban reform and women’s rights. Local organizations had gained new members, exposure, and influence in the community. Women who participated in the Woman’s Department improved their managerial skills and understanding of power and expanded their network of reformers as a result of Exposition endeavors. Although the dream of a “New South” of industrial expansion and national solidarity was elusive, reconciliation requires interaction, and the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial

Exposition provided an arena in which to test the announced goals of its producers and the promise of the future.

### Epilogue

The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition was exhilarating theater in a city striving to regain its economic balance and its lost dominance as a port, and the Woman's Department was a microcosm of some of the event's aspirations and failures. The Exposition's most extravagant promises evaporated, and its assertions of racial accommodation and sectional reconciliation were premature and unattainable. Yet, its New South objectives underscored the region's resources and innovative products of great variety. The women of various sections of the country strove to define women's combined contributions to America, and they staged a grand display of woman's work from private and public spheres. Exhibiting women shared an agenda of lifting women up in education, occupations, and power. And perhaps their squabbling, which was portrayed as conflict in the press, was primarily a public negotiation of roles and methods. Although Burke wanted to squelch negative press, even criticism worked favorably to draw attention to the Woman's Department. Although the threat to Howe's reputation as a leader might have prompted her to insist that the women were unified, she seems to have been able to see beyond day-to-day controversies to declare a truth of the event: that women of all regions did muster their "common zeal for promoting the industrial interests of women" (*Report* 39).

Had the men of the Exposition appointed a southern woman as chief, they would have given more credit to the South's women and soothed their feelings, but it is unlikely that the Woman's Department would have received as much journalistic attention as with the formidable and charismatic, if obstructive, Mrs. Howe at its helm. Her managerial style, by its contrast to the

more “polite” demeanor of southern women, also catalyzed greater defiance among the Crescent City’s women to prove themselves confident, informed, organized, and more “public” than women from other regions expected them to be. The “diva” personality attributed to Howe became symbolic for northern domination, especially in criticisms from Cole, who might have been a bit of a diva herself. At times, the roles of protagonist and antagonist seemed interchangeable between these two women.

Women journalists proved signally valuable to the controversies and debates that Julia Ward Howe and the Lady Commissioners stirred in the Woman’s Department, and they merit further study as participants as well as observers. Even if newspapers bared the women’s inability to get along, in many parts of the country, women could read about the southern hosts, the Woman’s Department, and the Crescent City in the meticulous accounts and impressions of newspaperwomen. Furthermore, the columns of Catharine Cole forced readers to consider what was worth arguing about in 1884-85. Unlike other major cities, New Orleans had daily access to women’s news because Eliza Nicholson was the controlling editor of the *Daily Picayune*, and because of the Exposition, she became a national force as president of the newly-formed National Women’s Press Association.

The city’s journalists had never been handed such a continuous subject of local and national interest, and their reportage is a boon to researchers studying the activities and accomplishments of nineteenth-century New Orleans women. The proliferation of female correspondents in the period and their writings is an underexamined field that warrants additional study. Women who owned or operated newspapers, especially in the South, also bear further examination, and finding letters, journals, and memoirs of Lady Commissioners at the Cotton Centennial could deepen the understanding of the Woman’s Department. In addition, following

the careers of some of the New Orleans women—Townsend, Merrick, or Bisland—might prove fertile study. Another worthwhile pursuit might be of southern and New Orleans women’s extant letters and journals to discover what they wrote about the Exposition and whether it influenced their otherwise-ordinary lives. And the Colored Department demands further study.

Of course, no one event can be credited as a sole means of change. Had New Orleans women not made advances before the Exposition, they could not have taken advantage of what was available there. On the other hand, for many women, no doubt little was altered in their lives, and they proceeded at their own pace refusing to be swept along by ideology of the New South that proved to be more myth than reality, more ephemeral than lasting. Although its goals remained elusive, the New South’s promises have seduced almost every New Orleans generation to date. The Cotton Centennial and the Woman’s Department cultivated glimpses of sectional reconciliation, but the healed breach was still fragile (Taylor xii), so cultural reunification continued to slip away during the Exposition. Although a body of men seemed supportive of women’s efforts, convenience and traditional roles, especially in the South, were surely difficult for them to abandon, and women’s equality with men was not part of the New South ideology. Nevertheless, exhibiting women did negotiate local, regional, and national roles. Historians who examine women’s progress in politics, economics, and in literature should no longer “tend to see New Englandly” (Jones 5), for these southern women in 1884-85 were, indeed, in the mainstream of history.

In the few years after the Cotton Centennial, a new literary club formed, the Quarante Club, as did new political clubs: Portia and the Equal Rights for All Club (ERA). Merrick declared that the Exposition had an “enlarging influence” for the political battles ahead, such as that against the Louisiana Lottery (Merrick 176). Because some clubs were in existence before

the event and could take advantage of famous women's advice, they grew into powerful forces in New Orleans in following years. On the other hand, the Southern Art Union expired, and its books likely became one of the foundations for the New Orleans Public Library. The Christian Woman's Exchange continues today, and in 2006, Pelican Publishing Company revived its 1885 cookbook. In 1886, Josephine Louise Newcomb funded the first women's institute of higher learning in New Orleans. According to Newcomb's website, H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College emerged by an indirect route through Howe and the Woman's Department and the intense interest of late-nineteenth-century women in improved education for women.

Women who worked together to realize the potential of the Woman's Department continued their personal goals. Julia Ward Howe served many more years as an advocate for suffrage: addressing legislatures, making speeches, heading organizations. She lived until 1910, within a decade of realizing her goal. Maud Howe's most important writings were the biographies of her famous parents, but she claimed that she "put some of [her] impressions of Louisiana in a story called 'Atalanta in the South'" (Elliott 216). Caroline Merrick compiled Louisiana information for Stanton, Anthony, and Gage's third volume of *History of Woman Suffrage* and continued her suffragist and charitable works in local groups until her death in 1908. Her eminently-quotable *Old Times in Dixie Land* is referenced in southern histories almost as often as are Mary Chesnut's diaries.

Other local women garnered national attention, achieving early recognition as a result of their work at the Exposition. Poet Mary Ashley Townsend gained some prominence in national magazines and continued to write commemorative poetry until her death in 1901. Grace King won national acclaim for her local color stories and local praise for her historical works on the city and state and, most importantly for her, regained her lost place in New Orleans society.

However, her fame has faded, and her Creole stories, intended to be antithetical to those of George Washington Cable, are infrequently anthologized save one, “The Little Convent Girl,” not necessarily her best. Nevertheless, King’s biographer labeled the Exposition “the great divide in Grace King’s life” (Bush 5). Her fellow Pan in Howe’s literary club, Elizabeth Bisland, was the only woman writer of the time who left New Orleans seeking recognition in New York. She wrote for numerous national publications, including a period as an editor at *Cosmopolitan*, a magazine that sent her, like Phineas Fogg, on an Around-the-World-in-80-Days adventure in the opposite direction from stunt reporter Nellie Bly. Bly won the race and the fame, but Bisland had several books published and edited two volumes of writer Lafcadio Hearn’s letters. Eliza Nicholson led the *Daily Picayune* through tough political times for another decade until her death in 1896, and Catharine Cole continued to cover national and foreign events and places as the *Daily Picayune*’s special correspondent, receiving high praise for her coverage of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Cole resigned from the *Picayune* in a fury over a younger writer and rejoined the staff of the *Times-Democrat* in 1894 (Kane 51), writing until 1898 when she died at 43. In contrast to the women’s later successes, Major E. A. Burke was accused in 1889 of embezzling nearly two million dollars from the Louisiana State Treasury, but instead of facing the charges, he sailed to Honduras and lived out his life near his gold mines, acting as foreign correspondent for the *Times-Democrat*. He died in 1928 (Burke Papers).

The Exposition lived to die another day when it reopened on the same grounds and with a new Board of Managers in the fall of 1885-86 as the North, Central, and South American Exposition to even dimmer reviews and slimmer gate receipts. Jennie Nixon, local reporter and later professor at Newcomb College, supervised the reconstituted Woman’s Department. In late May 1886, the two largest buildings were sold for salvage for \$13,750 (Watson 364).



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## Vita

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