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Southern Ladies' Rebellion: The Failure of Women's Suffrage in Mississippi

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“There was born in me a sense of injustice that had always been heaped upon my sex, and this consciousness created and sustained in me a constant and ever increasing rebellion.” -Belle Kearney, A Slaveholder’s Daughter¹

In the United States, the movement for women’s suffrage formally began with the Seneca Falls conference of 1848. There were no notable southern suffragists present at this pivotal conference, with the exception of the Grimké sisters who avidly disavowed their southern heritage. When thinking of women in the Antebellum and post-Civil War South, rather than picturing ardent feminists, most think of proper genteel women more interested in racism than their own advancement. Yet in 1920 several Southern states would play a pivotal role in the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; what led to the success of suffrage in some Southern states and not in others?

The woman’s suffrage movement in the American South was motivated by extremely different factors than the Northern movement. Southern suffragists were bound by a much stricter social system than their Northern counterparts and thus were met with stronger resistance than in other states. In Mississippi, a state where slaves made up a majority of the population and almost the entire population lived in rural areas, it is unsurprising that these repressive social systems were particularly powerful.² The Mississippi government denied women the right to vote until forced to do so by the federal government in 1920. Perhaps most interesting because of their failure to spawn a state amendment or ratify the federal amendment, indeed only ratifying the 19th Amendment in 1984,³ women’s suffragists in Mississippi were nonetheless active.

¹ Belle Kearney, *A Slaveholder’s Daughter*, 11th ed. (Boston: The Abbey Press, 1900) HathiTrust Digital Library, accessed February 27, 2015, 107-108.

² Both of these factors influenced the development of the woman’s suffrage movement in Mississippi and will be discussed in depth later in this paper.

³ Richard Adams, “The 19th amendment that gave the women the right to vote, 90 years on,” *The Guardian Online*, August 18, 2010, accessed April 4, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/richard-adams-blog/2010/aug/18/19th-amendment-women-right-to-vote-90-years>.

In a society entrenched in the traditionalism accompanying slavery, Mississippian women attempted to counteract the social conservatism which limited women to the domestic sphere. These activists were spurred by social and economic changes after the Civil War, though social and economic opportunity was limited to upper class white women. Mississippians were affected by the Civil War differently than other Southerners. Though they would become effective activists, the opportunities brought by the Civil War largely failed to reach the general populace and therefore Mississippi suffragists could not hope for large-scale public support. Belle Kearney, the daughter of a plantation owner, and Nellie Nugent Somerville, the daughter of one of the most respected lawyers in Mississippi, were seminal in the creation of the Mississippi Woman's Suffrage Association (MWSA) in 1897 and headed the movement for women's rights in the state. To its great detriment, the MWSA was almost exclusively led by a few upper-class women including Kearney and Somerville⁴ and lacked significant popular support. While Mississippi suffragists were informally trained for activism through work in voluntary organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and church-affiliated missionary groups, their efforts were dampened by the relatively late advent of voluntary organizations in Mississippi. Once motivated to work for suffrage through the previously noted changes, Mississippians relied on several general ideologies to support their cause. Belle Kearney and Lily Thompson Wilkinson, two future presidents of the MWSA, argued that the enfranchisement of white women could serve to negate the votes of African American; Nellie

⁴ There were few, if any, other prominent activists in the first decade or so of suffrage activism in Mississippi. This is evident in the hierarchy of the MWSA—Somerville was elected as the first president of the organization in 1897 with Kearney as her vice president. Somerville served for two years before she retired of poor health and Kearney took over her position for a few months. After Kearney retired from this position, “the MWSA was dormant until...Kearney's efforts resulted in its revival in late 1906 with Kearney as president and Somerville as vice President.” In 1908, Somerville succeeded Kearney and served as President until 1912. After this, Lily Wilkinson Thompson, who had long been Somerville's correspondence secretary, took over the presidency of the MWSA. Marjorie Julian Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville: Mississippi Reformer, Suffragist, and Politician” in *Mississippi Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, Elizabeth Anne Payne, Marjorie Julian Spruill and Martha H. Swain, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 45.

Nugent Somerville, in stark contrast to Kearney and Thompson did not believe white supremacy to be an effective political strategy, though she certainly still espoused racist ideas. Divisions between MWSA leaders on this question weakened the power of the organization. Perhaps more unifying for Mississippian suffragists was their invocation of religion and the image of the traditional “Southern Woman” in convincing their fellow citizens that women deserved the vote. Despite a strong ideological base, however, the lack of strong leadership in Mississippi suffrage organizations and the dissociation between the educated, wealthy women leading the movement and their fellow Mississippians prevented these arguments from resonating with a society married to notions of “True Womanhood”, female traditionalism and religious propriety.

Mirroring the events in Mississippi, the women’s suffrage movement across the Southern United States did not gain momentum until after the Civil War. Several decades behind Northern states, at the end of the 19th century, activists in Southern states began to create women’s suffrage associations which advocated not only for the right to vote but also for the advancement of “the industrial, educational and legal rights of women.”⁵ Despite this reality, historians studying the advancement of women’s suffrage in the United States initially focused on the complexities of the movement in the Northern states, assuming that women in the American South had little individual agency and simply benefitted from the Northern women’s movement.⁶ Over the last several decades, however, interest in women’s history and women’s suffrage in the United States has uncovered in the American South a unique and clearly distinct movement for suffrage from that which took place in the North.

⁵ *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association* Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association (Meridian, Mississippi: 1897) University of Mississippi Libraries, accessed March 20, 2015. <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/6/rec/19>.

⁶ Elna C. Green *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 2.

While the assumption that the Southern movement took advantage of the gains made by the Northern suffragists was temporarily popular among scholars, recent research by southern historians such as Marjorie Spruill Wheeler and Elizabeth Hayes Turner has demonstrated this assumption to be false. The Southern women's suffrage movement had its own leaders, its own causes, and its own characteristics which evolved in a particular context and was shaped by particular circumstances. The suffrage movement in the South differed from that of the North in its association with other social justice movements and its racial ideologies. Southern suffragists were more closely affiliated to temperance than to abolitionism and are often linked to white supremacy, though the latter point has been contested.⁷ Due to major social, experiential, and economic differences, the women's suffrage movement did not truly gain momentum in the South until the first decade of the 20th century. Once the movement gained traction, however, Southern women "set out with grim determination to win their enfranchisement and to do it in the shortest time possible."⁸ The suffragists' determination was more effective in some Southern states than in others.

The enormous disparity between Northern and Southern societies and cultures in Antebellum America led to the development of distinct suffrage movements in either region. Through research on women's lives in the South prior to the Civil War and during Reconstruction, historians came to understand the stark differences between Southern and Northern female experiences. Pivotal among this research is Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household*⁹ which addresses the unique nature of Southern plantation white

⁷ As will be discussed in depth later, while most historians addressing major southern suffragists note their emphasis on white supremacy as a means of supporting their cause, Elna Green contests this idea. She argues that while major suffragists may have advocated this viewpoint, most women did not embrace this ideology.

⁸ Green, *Southern Strategies*, 26.

⁹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

women and African American slave women's lives before the Civil War. Elizabeth Hayes Turner, a prominent scholar on women and the South, has furthered Fox-Genovese's original research by analyzing the role of gender, class, and race in the post-Civil War South in her work *Women and Gender in the New South: 1865-1945*.¹⁰ Both of these works address the nature of gender and women's lives in the South and were seminal in sparking interest in Southern women's issues and fostering an understanding of what mattered to Southern women.

From this research focusing on the lives of Southern women, came scholarship on the Southern women's suffrage movement. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler,¹¹ Jeanne Perrault,¹² and Evelyn Kirkley¹³ all suggest that Southern suffragists were closely affiliated with racism, in stark contrast with their co-suffragists in the North. The Southern suffrage movement's connection to white supremacist ideology has been described and defended by scholars in the latter decades of the 20th century. In Wheeler's work *New Women of the New South*, she argues that among the relatively wealthy, Southern white women who dominated the women's suffrage scene in the South, "many supported and none challenged the movement to restore white political supremacy that occurred simultaneously with the Southern woman suffrage movement."¹⁴ The aforementioned historians, among others, agree that Southern suffragists perceived there to be a strong link between white supremacy and white women's right to vote. Certainly this is the image communicated by Wheeler's research on suffrage leaders in the New South. However, Elna Green, in her work *Southern Strategies*, challenges this portrayal. Green argues that

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women and Gender in the New South: 1865-1945* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2009).

¹¹ Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹² Jeanne Perrault "Southern White Women's Autobiographies: Social Equality and Social Change" *The Southern Literary Journal* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2008).

¹³ Evelyn A. Kirkley "'This Work is God's Cause': Religion in the Southern Woman Suffrage Movement, 1880-1920. *Church History* 59, no. 4 (December 1990)

¹⁴ Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, xv.

“southern white women did not band together and work...to obtain the ballot in order to outvote their black neighbors.”¹⁵ Green’s assertion is particularly relevant to the case of Mississippi. Of the two most important leaders of the MWSA, Kearney supported white supremacist language while Somerville perceived it to be a politically unviable tactic. While the power of the white supremacist narrative itself can be debated, there is little doubt that this ideological division among the MWSA leadership diluted the organization’s power.

Modern research has also demonstrated that affiliations between the women’s suffrage movement and other social movements differed greatly between Northern and Southern states. While in the North the women’s suffrage movement was closely affiliated with abolitionism, this link was understandably disavowed by Southern white women who were often the daughters or wives of ex-plantation owners and had little sympathy for African Americans.¹⁶ Instead the Southern women’s suffrage movement was closely affiliated with missionary groups and temperance organizations such as the WCTU. A variety of the aforementioned authors including Kirkley, Smith, Wheeler, and Green noted this association. Green argues that many women who became leaders in the suffrage movement found “opportunities for personal growth and social enrichment” in the WCTU.¹⁷ While few deny the importance of the WCTU for individual women, the role of the organization in relation to the suffrage movement remains up for debate. Some, Green among them, claim that the WCTU contributed to the women’s suffrage primarily in terms of public experience,¹⁸ while others, such as Kirkely, argue that the religious nature of the WCTU provided an example to suffragists of how to reconcile religious ideology with social

¹⁵ Green, *Southern Strategies*, xii.

¹⁶ In fact, southern suffragists in many cases had to disavow themselves from abolitionism and the Northern movements if they were to maintain influence. “As a movement native to the North, with abolitionist roots, the woman suffrage movement was anathema to most Southerners.” Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, xiii.

¹⁷ Green, *Southern Suffrage*, 21.

¹⁸ Green asserts that women’s experience in the WCTU “were preparing southern women for leadership roles...years of critical experiences had been preparing them for new roles as activists and reformers, and, later, as suffragists.” Green, *Southern Suffrage*, 15.

progressivism.¹⁹ The temperance movement in the South held an undeniably important role for Southern women and the women's suffrage movement.

As the history of Southern women's suffrage has become more fully developed, scholars turned to the histories of particular Southern states. Taken as a geographic whole, the suffrage movements in various Southern states certainly had similarities. Yet much as an analysis of the Northern women's suffrage movement cannot be directly translated to the Southern suffrage movement, each Southern state's movement—its players, problems, and ideologies—must be understood individually as unique to its place and time. Significant research has been done on women's suffrage in North Carolina,²⁰ Virginia,²¹ and Louisiana,²² all of which were powerful locales of American Southern society during and after the Civil War. Perhaps the most notable scholar on states' histories of women's suffrage is Alexandra Elizabeth Taylor, who has written on the women's suffrage movements in Tennessee, South Carolina, and Texas.²³ Scholarship has largely focused on states wherein suffragists were relatively successful in garnering support for their cause; as such, many states whose movements failed to cause change have not yet been examined.

Paradigmatic amongst these cases is Mississippi: the Mississippi women's suffrage movement remains relatively unexplored, perhaps due to its ultimate failure. Due to the social

¹⁹ In these groups, Kirkely argues, the women's "'intense soul searching which had characterized southern religion before the war' was 'transformed into a demand for social reform' and inspired 'a sort of unself-conscious radicalism...'" Kirkley, "This Work is God's Cause", 518.

²⁰ A. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in North Carolina" *The North Carolina Historical Review* 38, no. 2 (April 1961).

²¹ Sara Hunter Graham, "Woman Suffrage in Virginia: The Equal Suffrage League and Pressure Group Politics, 1909-1920", *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 101, no. 2 (April 1993): 227-250.

²² Armantine M. Smith, "The History of the Women's suffrage Movement in Louisiana" *Louisiana Law Review* 62, no. 2 (Winter 2002).

²³ A. Elizabeth Taylor, *The woman suffrage movement in Tennessee* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957). It should be noted, however, that this particular work by Taylor is quite dated. The movement in Tennessee has more recently been examined by Anastasia Sims. Sims, "'Powers that Pray' and 'Powers that Prey': Tennessee and the Fight for Woman Suffrage" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991).

A. Elizabeth Taylor, *Citizens at last: the women suffrage movement in Texas* (Austin: Ellen C. Temple, 1987).

changes caused by the Civil War, a limited number of Mississippi women were exposed to higher education which instilled in many women progressive values and often led them to the MWSA. Such women were the exception in Mississippi, not the rule. Yet those women who did become suffragists did so in large part because of experience gained through voluntary organizations such as the WCTU and religious, usually Methodist, missionary groups. However, these organizations came to Mississippi significantly later than in other Southern States, lessening their ability to garner significant public support for women's suffrage. In attempting to create sympathy for their movement, Mississippi women's suffragists relied on religious and chivalrous notions of women's proper role in society. Moreover, while it divided the leaders of the MWSA and may in fact have been spurred by white males in the state, many Mississippi suffrage advocates based their ideology on racial arguments, suggesting that granting the vote to white women would negate the influence of African American men in politics.

Until the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920 by the U.S. federal government, Kearney, Somerville, and other activists worked to advance the condition of women in Mississippi and grant them the right to vote. Due to the diluted power of Mississippian women's education and experience in comparison to that of other Southern women, deeply entrenched Southern ideologies, and the inability of Mississippi leaders to garner significant support for their movement, Mississippians never succeeded in passing their own suffrage amendment. In fact, the Mississippi House of Representatives expressly rejected ratification in 1920. While neither a state amendment nor the 19th Amendment was ever passed during the 20th century in Mississippi, it was not for lack of effort on the part of activists.

From Civil War to Social Activism

In contrast to Northern states which had previously struggled with the forces of industrialization and modernization, Antebellum Mississippi retained the marks of a quasi-capitalist economic system which presupposed inequality for significantly longer.²⁴ As the plantation home was the center of the traditionalist Mississippian economy before the Civil War, the household served as the primary space for both public and private activity. Fox-Genovese, in her analysis of Southern women, notes: “The persistence in the South of the household as the dominant unit of production and reproduction guaranteed the power of men in society.”²⁵ Moreover the fact that the Antebellum South, in clear contrast with the industrialized North, remained overwhelmingly rural “excluded women from many of the opportunities that were opening up for their Northern sisters, notably to live and work independently by their own labor, to develop female networks beyond the household, and to form associations of various kinds.”²⁶ As almost 92 percent of Mississippi’s population lived in rural areas and Mississippi remained an overwhelmingly agricultural society, these social divisions were particularly strong.²⁷ Women’s geographic and social isolation, along with their active participation in a society in which they dominated African Americans, meant that while white women were certainly not in control of Southern society, they lacked many of the connections and impetuses which drove Northern women to change their position in society.²⁸ The very nature of Southern society and its relevant

²⁴ Despite this typical traditionalism, Harris argues that many Mississippi entrepreneurs had long desired the development of non-agricultural opportunities, the “economic success of slavery and cotton had dampened organized enthusiasm for” the fulfillment of these ideas. It must be understood that these are broad generalities for Mississippi society and were not true for every case. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 515.

²⁵ Fox-Genovese furthers this distinction in the formation of feminist movements, saying: “In the South, in contrast to the North, the household retained a vigor that permitted Southerners to ascribe many matters—notably labor relations, but also important aspects of gender relations—to the private sphere, whereas northerners would increasingly ascribe them to the public spheres of market and state.” Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 38.

²⁶ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 70.

²⁷ Westley F. Busebee, Jr., *Mississippi: A History* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2005), 185.

²⁸ Fox-Genovese notes that the frustration inflicted upon Southern women “did not tempt them into feminism” and that Southern women “complained about their lives, but their complaints rarely amounted to opposition to the

institutions worked to subjugate women and thus delayed even the formation of women's advocacy groups, much less the fostering of suffragist spirit.

The turmoil of the Civil War spurred important social change in the American South. The loss of nearly one quarter of the white male labor force²⁹ and the sudden emancipation of nearly more than 3 million previously enslaved African American men and women catapulted white Southern society out of the traditional slave-holding system and into a more industrialized, modern nation as ordained by Northern states. In Mississippi, as in most other Southern states, this modernization altered not only the economy but also traditional social systems and conventions. Adding to the desolation wrought by the war, the abolishment of slavery destroyed an economic institution which had long served as source of social cohesion and identity for white Southerners. While these changes affected all Southern states, Mississippi "in which blacks constituted a majority of the population" and which was under military control from 1867 to 1876, was particularly destabilized.³⁰ The changes produced by the Civil War at times permitted and at times forced women to undertake new endeavors and offered a much looser social system in which these women could form new identities as activists.

The Civil War blurred the long-standing line between Northern and Southern women. After the war, modernization and industrialization flooded into the South; in Mississippi this meant the creation of a railroad system and sawmills.³¹ These changes forced Mississippi society to cope with not only with drastic economic changes, but also to manage the human and

system that guaranteed their privileged position as ladies." This added to the sense of isolation which Southern women experienced. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 30.

²⁹ Green, *Southern Suffrage*, 203.

³⁰ William C. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), xii.

³¹ Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 516-517.

environmental tolls the war had wrought. Despite these negative repercussions,³² however, the Civil War was ultimately beneficial for the women's suffrage movement in Mississippi. Indeed, Kearney notes that the sudden changes caused by the Civil War in terms of the dearth of white men meant that "the daughters were sent to college...until, after fifteen years [after the Civil War] the superiority of culture of the young woman over the average young man was very noticeable...the tide had set toward the advancement of women in the educational and industrial field."³³ Due to the depopulation and turmoil left in the Mississippi in the wake of the Civil War, it is unsurprising that gendered expectations changed to fit the new society.

Many women who would become suffragists viewed the destruction of the Civil War as all the more reason to claim the right to vote. In Somerville's pamphlet discussing why Mississippi women sought the right to vote, she argued that during the Civil War:

Southern women saw homes burned, estates pass to strangers, fathers and husbands dead...and many a Southern grand-dame learned the true meaning of politics at the cook stove...Was not the war caused by politics? Was not the horror of reconstruction a game of politics? So Southern women pondered as they were forced to take the places of their own slaves.³⁴

In post-Civil War Mississippi the economic and social gap left by white men was filled by white women, particularly members of the middle and upper classes. Drastic social change left many women under less stringent supervision than they had been in the past and endowed them with both freedom and opportunity they had not possessed before the strict Antebellum social system collapsed. From this opportunity sprung a variety of voluntary organizations led by women—most

³² Middle and upper class white Southerners were particularly hard-hit by the Civil War not only in economic terms, but also in terms of personal and collective identity. In her autobiography, Kearney describes the time when the U. S. Federal Government ordered her state to be given over to the Union armies. "It was done, and Mississippi stood dismantled and dishonored. Every vestige of civil rule was thrust from sight." Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 11.

³³ Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 113.

³⁴ Nellie Nugent Somerville, "How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote", Lily Thompson Collection, University of Mississippi, accessed April 21, 2015.
<http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/117/rec/10>.

notably missionary organizations and the WCTU, both of which provided important experience for Mississippi women. Despite their best intentions, however, women's suffragists in Mississippi couldn't overcome the destruction of the Civil War in order to garner support for their cause.

Voluntary organizations as Training Grounds

Voluntary organizations had established themselves in most Southern states by the 1880s,³⁵ yet it was only by the turn of the 19th century that voluntary associations became active in Mississippi. These organizations, once entrenched in Mississippi society, gave women organizational experience, provided them with opportunities to increase their courage and sense of self-confidence, and offered the opportunity to travel and connect with other like-minded women. In 1897, Ella Harrison, spokeswoman for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, could still write of Mississippi: "...the truth is they are not ready for [suffrage organizations]—in many places they have no literacy clubs, never have had."³⁶ Harrison's statement reinforces the idea that at this time Mississippi had no tradition of women's voluntary associations as there had been in many other Southern states. Due to the influence of these organizations in other suffrage movements, the lack of voluntary organizations can be seen to as a significant detriment to the creation of suffrage associations in Mississippi. Significantly, as interest in voluntary associations increased through the beginning of the 20th century in Mississippi, so did interest in women's suffrage. Evidencing the importance of these organizations in creating suffragists, Nellie Somerville, the first president of the MWSA, was heavily involved in religious missionary work with the Southern Methodist church; Belle Kearney was a long-time orator for the WCTU. Both cited these voluntary associations as

³⁵ Mary Smith, "Constructing Womanhood in Public: Progressive white women in a New South", *Ph.D. Dissertation*, Louisiana State University, 2002, 1.

³⁶ Harrison quoted in *Green Southern Suffrage*: 23.

significant in stoking their interest in women's suffrage. Years later, the MWSA would emphasize the same notions of voluntarism and service as had been emphasized in these organizations, reinforcing their association: "The keyword of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association is Service."³⁷

Although Kearney suffered a period of doubt in her early adulthood,³⁸ both she and Somerville were dedicated Methodists by their adulthood. However, Somerville was always more active in religious missionary work. In fact, "Somerville's social activism began through her work in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South" in which she "served as the district secretary for Women's Foreign Mission work, as a member of the Board of Missions, and as the first president of the North Mississippi Conference Parsonage and Home Mission Society."³⁹ Having had close contact with influential Methodist church leaders throughout her childhood, Kearney also worked with the church as an activist.⁴⁰ The influence of these voluntary organizations upon the future leaders of the women's suffrage movement is clear, yet most Mississippi women were less involved in these voluntary organizations than Kearney and Somerville were and thus might not have been as strongly influenced.

For many women in Mississippi, the church was not only the locus of voluntary organizations, but was also one of the first places where they noticed and became dissatisfied with gendered hierarchies. Somerville noted her bitterness related to women's missionary work, writing in a church magazine: "What long-suffering creatures women are...they consent to hold office in a sort of *sub-rosa* way, doing all the hard work; but as soon as some immature stripling

³⁷ Nellie Nugent Somerville, "How Mississippi Women Work for the Vote", Lily Thompson Collection, University of Mississippi, accessed April 21, 2015.

<http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/117/rec/10>.

³⁸ She details her loss of faith and religious awakening fully in her autobiography. What is important is that, regardless of this period of doubt, Kearney was a dedicated Methodist by the time she reached adulthood and understood her activism and suffragism through this lens. Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 128.

³⁹ Spruill, "Nellie Nugent Somerville" in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 42.

⁴⁰ Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 115.

or reformed drunkard joins the Church he gets the office, while women keep on doing the work.”⁴¹ Having expanded their spheres of influence into the next accessible locale, educated and motivated Mississippi women expressed discontent with the church before their conception of justice shifted to include the right to vote. Kearney wrote: “Young Southern women are beginning to ask for deaconesses’ orders and...are...filling almost every office known to the church except that of pastor.”⁴² Women’s frustration with their churches, however, led some to adapt their religious views in order to make room for their new, more activist identities while other women simply acquiesced to what they believed to be the proper, religiously-ordained gender relations and church hierarchy. While religious organizations provided some opportunity for women to partake in activism and empowerment, this was not true for all Mississippian women. Depending on a woman’s reaction to the challenging of deeply entrenched religious and social traditions—epitomized by the church hierarchy—church activism could drive a wedge between would-be activists.

The temperance movement provided further impetus for some Mississippi women to seek independence. Due perhaps to the turmoil of post-Civil War Reconstruction, alcohol consumption was particularly rampant in Mississippi. In fact, State Attorney General Morris “estimated that in 1871 alone 600,000 gallons of liquor...were sold in the state through licensed establishments.”⁴³ The negative effects of such copious liquor consumption led many women to join the already popular temperance movement. Kearney, while involved with missionary work in general, was more closely associated with temperance, in particular with the WCTU, as were many other Mississippi women. “The [WCTU] was the golden key that unlocked the prison

⁴¹ Interview with Lucy Somerville Howorth in Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 43.

⁴² Kearney, *A Slaveholder’s Daughter*, 115-116.

⁴³ Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 580.

doors of pent-up possibilities. It was the generous liberator, the joyous iconoclast, the discoverer, the developer of Southern women. It, above all other forces, made it possible for women to occupy the advanced and continually advancing position they now hold...⁴⁴ In noting the position of women, Kearny was not arguing that women's political equality had been achieved, but rather that the WCTU had provided the opportunity to reach new highs as lecturers and social and political organizers which had never before been feasible.⁴⁵ In 1874, before Kearney and Somerville were involved with the WCTU, the governor of Mississippi stated that "'one of the finest features of the [temperance] law is its recognition of the voice of the women of the state.'⁴⁶ While women had long been involved in the movement for temperance in Mississippi, involvement with the WCTU in particular gave Mississippi women valuable experience and social credibility which they used to their advantage in the fight for suffrage.

Both Kearney and Somerville were brought to the WCTU by its president, Frances Willard, on her tour through Mississippi in 1889.⁴⁷ Less involved than Kearney, Somerville would nonetheless become president of the Greenville chapter of the WCTU in 1894 and corresponding secretary for the state chapter in 1896.⁴⁸ Upon hearing Willard speak in Jackson in 1889, Kearney stated that "a vision arose before me of the glad day when... women of all lands shall have entered into the human heritage—as man's equal in society, church, and state."⁴⁹ Soon after this initial meeting, Kearney became the state superintendent and organizer for two youth

⁴⁴ Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 118.

⁴⁵ "Southern women have developed marvelously as lecturers and organizers in philanthropic movements. Nearly every state in the South can boast of women orators who have addressed hundreds of enthusiastic audiences and unflinchingly pushed their way through overwhelming difficulties to positions of influence and power" within these organizations. Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 117-118.

⁴⁶ Governor Ames in Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 581.

⁴⁷ In an interview, Somerville's daughter Lucy Somerville Howorth stated that "...although there were many factors that converted her mother to woman suffrage, Willard convinced [her] that 'the women couldn't get anything done until they had the right to vote' and 'that is really what pinned my mother's mind to that point.'" Spruill, "Nellie Nugent Somerville" in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 43-44.

⁴⁸ Spruill, "Nellie Nugent Somerville" in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 44.

⁴⁹ Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 136.

divisions of the WCTU and, within her first year there organized more than 100 unions around the state. Through her work with the WCTU, Kearney traveled across the South, around the United States and even to Europe.⁵⁰ For both Kearney and Somerville, and many others besides, the WCTU provided not only a valuable locale in which to learn how to mobilize the public, but also created a valuable social and political network of women who would be invaluable for the suffrage movement.

The WCTU was particularly important as it provided suffragists credibility in their societies. By portraying the temperance movement as pertinent to traditional woman's spheres despite being largely political, activists were not seen as radical, but rather maintained the image of the "Southern Lady" innate to Southern white womanhood. By being politically active in a movement which could easily be framed as important for women's traditional household sphere, the WCTU gave these activists political credibility as well as personal training. In establishing their political place with the WCTU, "...leaders attempted to confirm that while they appeared to be stepping outside their traditional gender roles, they were still upholding their regional and racial responsibilities as southern white women by affirming their southern identity within the national women's temperance movement."⁵¹ Mississippi suffragists would similarly utilize the image of the "Southern Lady" in their fight for women's suffrage, proving their regional loyalty by petitioning for a state amendment rather than a federal one. The WCTU not only "provided many southern white women with their first lessons in political organization and reform...its leadership stressed the nineteenth century ideology of woman's domesticity and superior moral

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵¹ Smith, "Constructing Womanhood in Public", 5.

virtue”⁵² and thus helped suffragists understand how the traditionalism of their society could be manipulated for progressive goals.

However Mississippi lagged behind even other Southern states in public participation in voluntary associations. Along with North Carolina, Mississippi was the last Southern state to establish a chapter of the WCTU, only officially forming a chapter in 1883.⁵³ Through its vocal support of their cause, WCTU was an invaluable tool for women attempting to spur suffrage sentiment.⁵⁴ Once established, voluntary organizations such as the WCTU gave many women their first taste of political activism and are thus “given...much credit for producing experienced platform speakers and for creating a network of women that suffragists would use to their advantage later on.”⁵⁵ In places where such missionary organizations were not as highly prized among the general population, therefore, suffragist sentiment was hard to spur.⁵⁶ While such organizations were established in the state by the turn of the century, Mississippi women’s inability to create a network of organized political and social groups for so long certainly contributed to their inability to garner support for suffrage in the state.

The Privilege of Education

The discord between MWSA leaders and their admittedly small constituency and membership further harmed the women’s suffrage movement in Mississippi. As previously noted, Kearney and Somerville were the only influential suffragists in Mississippi until the

⁵² Smith, “Constructing Womanhood in Public”, 40.

⁵³ Green, *Southern Suffrage*, 20.

⁵⁴ In a report on the work of the WCTU by its then-president Lillian Stevens in 1908, she wrote that the WCTU “strives to redeem outcast women from a slavery worse than that of chains, and by better laws to secure the protection of women and girls from the outrages of brutal and designing men.” Lillian M. N. Stevens, “The Work of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 32 (November 1908), 40.

⁵⁵ Green, *Southern Suffrage*, 21.

⁵⁶ As missionary groups “provided a school for women leaders of considerable significance in the shaping of Southern society”, in places where they were not present, communities lack the leadership necessary to begin and maintain suffrage movements and organizations. Kirkley, “This Work is God’s Cause”, 518.

1910s. Indeed, Kearney and Somerville were the only individuals to serve as president or vice president of the MWSA from its establishment in 1897 until Lily Wilkinson Thompson took over from Somerville in 1913. In addition to its lack of more than two qualified leaders, public participation in the MWSA was sparse. The initial report of the creation of the MWSA listed only 31 official members from the state⁵⁷—so what prevented this movement from attracting members of the Mississippi public? Green notes that while there were certainly some passionate, educated women who advocated for the right to vote in the late 1890s in Mississippi, they lacked support from “a critical mass of middle-class women ready to fill the ranks of the movement.”⁵⁸ Five years after the establishment of the MWSA, the lack of public support for the suffrage movement was a concern for both state and national activists. In their analysis of woman’s suffrage, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony noted that at a 1903 conference on women’s suffrage in Jackson, only Hala Hammond Butt—an eventual leader of the MWSA—and three other women were present.⁵⁹ The advocacy of women’s suffrage by a population of non-elite women which spurred the movement in other Southern and Northern states was largely absent in Mississippi.

In terms of education, which often imbued young women with pro-suffrage sentiment, the leadership of the MWSA was further divided from its constituents. The “privileged socioeconomic positions” of the MWSA’s leadership “enabled them to have educational

⁵⁷ Nine of these 31 members were, in fact, men. Certainly this does not negate their support, but it is interesting to note such a high percentage of men in the organization. Of the rest of the listed members, a few would go on to play roles in the MWSA including Fannie Clark and Lilly Wilkinson Thompson, but none have been written about or documented extensively, if at all. Both Clark and Thompson would go on to become presidents or vice presidents of the MWSA, but only after 1912 when both Somerville and Kearney had retired from active engagement in the organization. *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*. Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association. Meridian, Miss., 5 May 1897. University of Mississippi Libraries, accessed March 25, 2015. <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/6/rec/19>

⁵⁸ Green, *Southern Strategies*, 12.

⁵⁹ Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Ida Harper, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton *The History of Woman Suffrage: 1900-1920* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1922), 326.

opportunities... that contributed to the undermining of provincial attitudes concerning woman's role."⁶⁰ While the leadership of the MWSA received education and prized it highly—indeed, in her autobiography Kearney wrote at length about her desire to further her education—most Mississippi women “seem[ed] to think that the little educated they rec'd in school [was] sufficient.”⁶¹ Harrison, the lecturer for the NWSA, cynically wrote: “I tell you...education has much to do to redeem this south-land.”⁶² The fact that both Kearney and Somerville were highly educated relative to their fellow Mississippian women put them at odds with many of the would-be supporters of the movement. Somerville came from a highly respected and well-educated family in Mississippi and was sent to Whitworth College, a Methodist school for women, when she was 12. She then attended Martha Washington College “from which she graduated as valedictorian in 1880.”⁶³ Somerville's father, one of the most highly respected lawyers in Mississippi,⁶⁴ even invited her to read law in his office.⁶⁵ Similarly, Kearney was sent to a woman's institution for several years before her father sacrificed her education in favor of her brothers' for monetary reasons. Both women read voraciously⁶⁶ and Somerville, being the wealthier of the two, amassed a significant personal library by the time of her death.⁶⁷

These experiences, however, were the exception, not the rule. “Never more than 52% of the school-age population [of both genders] attended the public schools” established by the

⁶⁰ Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 39.

⁶¹ Harrison in Green, *Southern Strategies*, 12

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Both of Somerville's grandmothers had studied at women's academies, rather unusual for wealthy Southern families. Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 41.

⁶⁴ In fact, William L. Nugent, Somerville's father, argued a case before the Supreme Court in 1873 advocating for the right of property owners to enforce segregation. While his educational experience was passed on to his daughter, to her great benefit, Nugent's racial opinions were largely and unfortunately passed on as well. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 448.

⁶⁵ Spruill, *New Women of the New South*, 61.

⁶⁶ Kearney says that, after many of the plantation families had moved out of her area: “I read, read, read—English and American poets, standard fictions, travels, histories, biographies, and philosophies.” Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter*, 33.

⁶⁷ Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 41.

Mississippi government during the 1870s.⁶⁸ Of those few women who were not wealthy enough to be sent to a private institution, but were lucky enough to have received a public education, fewer still were able to receive higher education. In 1888 only 8,000 women in the *entire South* were enrolled in some form of higher education. Even that number should be qualified: as of 1903, only two of the 140 so-called colleges for women in the South offered four year programs—all of which were well below the standards of those for Northern women.⁶⁹ Due to the lack of education among most Mississippi women, the leaders of the MWSA were largely alienated from the very people to whom they were trying to appeal.

Suffrage activists recognized the importance of an education in bringing women to their cause. An article in *The Biloxi Herald* supporting women's suffrage stated that: "The larger intellectual powers of women and the greater financial independence of women have tended to elevate the home."⁷⁰ Mississippi suffragists continually emphasized the value of education not only for the advancement of woman's status in general, but for its value in the creation of future suffragists. Upon its inception, the MWSA created a department specifically for the advancement of Educational Opportunities for women.⁷¹ Furthermore, in its constitution the MWSA described as their object "to advance the industrial, education, and legal rights of woman."⁷² Yet at the turn of the 20th century, a formal education remained a luxury for most in Mississippi. Therefore through the beginning of the 20th century, education, which commonly inspired both Northern and Southern women's activism was not a viable source of support for Mississippi suffragists.

⁶⁸ Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger*, 330.

⁶⁹ Green, *Southern Strategies*, 16-17.

⁷⁰ Reverend Anna H. Shaw, "Strong Plea for Equal Suffrage: Champions of the Cause of Both Sexes Give Their Views", *The Biloxi Daily Herald*, June 29, 1900.

⁷¹ *Constitution and By-laws of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*. Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association. Clarksdale, Miss.: The Challenge Print, 1898. University of Mississippi Libraries Digital Collections: Lily Thompson Collection, accessed February 28, 2015.

<http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/148/rec/7>

⁷² *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*. Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association. 1897.

While neither voluntary organizations nor educations were as productive for suffragism in Mississippi as they were in other places, “based on the numbers of women involved, voluntary associations appear to have had more impact on the consciousness of southern women than did higher education...”⁷³ Regardless, neither were able to create large-scale pro-suffrage sentiment in Mississippi.

The Ideologies of Suffragists and the MWSA

The 1890 Mississippi Constitutional Convention “seriously considered giving the vote to women”⁷⁴ in an effort to remove the power of African American voters, as they assumed Southern white women would vote the same way as their male counterparts; however, the proposal lost by a single vote in committee.⁷⁵ Despite important post-Civil War advancements in Mississippi women’s lives, the women’s suffrage movement did not garner any significant support until the end of the 19th century. When Harrison, spokeswoman for the NAWSA, undertook a tour of Mississippi in the state in 1897, she purportedly found little support for the women’s suffrage movement. Indeed, at a speaking engagement in Grenada, MS, Harrison had almost no audience. She later wrote that her landlady attributed the dearth of listeners to the fact that, “as for suffrage...she did not believe that women knew a thing about it or would even listen to a speaker—there was absolutely no sentiment here in favor of it.”⁷⁶ Yet while support for suffrage arrived later than in other places, the movement for women’s suffrage *did* in fact

⁷³ Green, *Southern Strategies*, 19.

⁷⁴ Marjorie Julian Spruill and Jesse Spruill Wheeler, “Mississippi Women and the Woman Suffrage Amendment” on Mississippi History Now, published by the Mississippi Historical Society, Dec. 2001, accessed March 31, 2015. <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/245/mississippi-women-and-the-woman-suffrage-amendment>

⁷⁵ Considering the significant power of “carpetbaggers” and Radical Republicans in the first, later overridden, Constitutional Convention in Mississippi in 1868, many Mississippians reacted with extreme conservatism when they eventually re-convened to establish a new Constitution in 1890. This may have influenced the lack of receptivity most delegates demonstrated in 1890 when it came to women’s suffrage. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 160.

⁷⁶ Ella Harrison quoted in Green, *Southern Strategies*, 9.

arrive in Mississippi accompanied by particular forms of advocacy unique both to the South and to the state itself.

In stark contrast to the women's suffrage movement's association with abolitionism in the North, the Southern women's suffrage movement was passive at best when it came to the inclusion of newly freed African Americans. Many Mississippi suffragists advocated what they believed to be the most politically viable strategy: women's suffrage as a means of maintaining the political supremacy of Southern whites. At least for the some time, this tactic was not central to the formation of the MWSA: race was not mentioned at all in the minutes of the first five MWSA annual reports.⁷⁷ In the 1910's, after Somerville left the organization, race became a central tenant of Mississippian suffrage rhetoric. True to the Southern trend, several influential Mississippi suffragists vocally associated women's suffrage with white supremacy. Somerville's contestation of this particular point, however, meant that the leadership of the MWSA for the first decade of its existence was divided. Despite Somerville's political opinions, however, many Mississippians saw that Southern legislatures, including their own, considered the possibility of granting the vote to white women a feasible solution to "dilute the voting power of black men."⁷⁸ Due to this reality, many suffragists chose to support their cause with what they saw as this politically viable ideology.

In an analysis of the biographies of Southern white women, Perrault states "perhaps because of her generation, [Kearney] embraced the story of white supremacy with no

⁷⁷ In the minutes for the Fifth Annual Convention of the MWSA held in 1909, the authors wrote that the MWSA "insists that [the Declaration of Independence's] principles be applied to women who are citizens of the United States". While this did not overtly include African American women, neither did it overtly exclude them as African American women would have been considered "citizens" by this time. *Fifth Annual Report of the Mississippi Woman Association 1909* Lily Thompson Wilkinson Collection, University of Mississippi Libraries, 10. Accessed April 22, 2015. <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/63/rec/8>,

⁷⁸ Green, *Southern Strategies*, 10.

hesitation.”⁷⁹ Green, while denying that most non-elite women supported the idea of white supremacy as Perrault, Wheeler, and Kirkely have claimed, poses Kearney to be paradigmatic of the racism of Southern suffrage leaders, saying “outsspoken women like Belle Kearney...were the exceptions” among the general public, but the rule among Southern suffragist leaders. Green argues that Kearney tried to “create a suffrage organization explicitly advocating the ballot ‘as a solution to the race problem’...”⁸⁰ While this was not true of all Mississippi suffragists, Kearney’s racism may indeed have influenced her political ideology. Certainly, Kearney asserted in several speeches that women’s suffrage was a potential “solution” to the race “problem”. At a 1903 convention of the NAWSA in New Orleans, Kearney gave a speech in which she said that “the white South would...be forced to look Anglo-Saxon women as ‘the medium through which to retain the supremacy of the white race over the African’”⁸¹ Kearney even asserted that the idea of using white women to negate the African American vote should be self-evident: “The South is slow to grasp the fact that enfranchisement of women would settle the race question in politics.”⁸² Similarly, the 1912 President of the MWSA Lily Wilkinson Thompson, espoused white supremacy as one of the desirable results of women’s suffrage in the state. In her 1913 Presidential address, Thompson continually spoke of “white women” specifically,⁸³ language which had never been utilized before in the MWSA’s annual conventions. Both of these

⁷⁹ Jeanne Perreault, “Southern White Women’s Autobiographies: Social Equality and Social Change” *The Southern Literary Journal* 41, no. 1 (Fall 2008), 49.

⁸⁰ Green, *Southern Suffrage*, 11.

⁸¹ Kearney in Smith, “Constructing Womanhood in Public”, 101-102.

⁸² Joanne Varner Hawks, “Belle Kearney: Mississippi Gentlewoman and Slaveholder’s Daughter” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 65.

⁸³ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, 1913. University of Mississippi Libraries, accessed April 22, 2015. <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/109/rec/12>.

important suffragists saw the narrative of white supremacy as a viable support for their cause politically, even if their personal stances on race may have differed.⁸⁴

Somerville, however, was not as committed to using race as a political tactic. An astute politician, Somerville argued that in Mississippi, “where African Americans had been virtually removed from the electorate since 1890, white rule was not in jeopardy.”⁸⁵ Somerville’s opinion was not inspired by “any feeling of what is now called ‘civil rights’” but rather because Somerville “didn’t think it was a good, sound argument,”⁸⁶ according to her daughter.⁸⁷ Throughout the period she was active in the MWSA, no overt mention of race appears in the organizations’ minutes. Furthermore, through inclusive language Somerville nods to the African American population in her state. Lack of exclusion, certainly, does not presume inclusion, but Somerville’s refusal to use racial language in her speeches for the MWSA put her at odds with Kearney and other suffragists.

Kearney’s preference for racism as a means of supporting women’s suffrage added to the tensions already present between the two women⁸⁸ and further divided the leadership of the MWSA. This division is apparent when looking at the advent of racialized language in the

⁸⁴ Kearney notes that she first heard the idea of women’s suffrage as a means of supporting white supremacy from Henry Blackwell, a man from Massachusetts who edited *Woman’s Journal*. While no model of racial equality, Kearney appears to be relatively progressive in her autobiography, even asserting at one point that she believes there to be no such thing as in-born racism, but instead that all notions of superiority are learned through society. Kearney, *A Slaveholder’s Daughter*, 100.

⁸⁵ Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 49.

⁸⁶ Interview with Howorth in Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 49.

⁸⁷ Due to the demographics of Mississippi, the voting power of African Americans in the state had long been in question. As early as 1868 in the first constitutional convention in the state, many delegates expressed concern that under a system which permitted unrestricted suffrage to African Americans, these freedmen who “constituted a clear majority of the voting population of Mississippi, would dominate the legislature...” Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbaggers*, 127.

⁸⁸ The relationship between these two women were historically tense. Coming from a family of modest means, Kearney supported herself primarily from her speaking tours with the WCTU. However, this meant that she was in the state significantly less than Somerville or other less important suffragists who were not forced to make their own wages. Somerville once “complained that Kearney would come home long enough to stir things up and then would be gone again.” As most of the other Mississippi suffragists were affluent women, they “may not have sufficiently taken into account her more precarious financial situation and need to support herself through her work.” Hawks, “Belle Kearney” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 65.

minutes of the MWSA. As previously noted, the first five annual conventions made no overt mention of race. As late as 1912, in her address to the Eighth Annual convention of the MWSA, Somerville made no mention of race at all. However, once Somerville had effectively left the MWSA due to poor health and Lily Thompson Wilkinson had taken the presidency, racialized language was inserted into the ideology of the association. In the report of the 1913 convention, Thompson argued that the suffragists could make “woman suffrage...one more bulwark of the maintenance of white supremacy in the state.”⁸⁹ After Somerville left the active leadership of the MWSA, therefore, race began to be used in earnest as a means of supporting the suffrage movement.

What Kearney and Somerville did agree upon as leaders of the MWSA, however, was the use of religion and the image of the gentlewoman to further their cause. As many women were brought to the movement through the inequalities they saw at church and in missionary organizations, religion was a natural point of association between Mississippi suffragists. In fact, the MWSA even built into their institution a department for Bible Study in order to “set forth the true position of woman”⁹⁰ and set a verse from the Bible as the motto for their organization: “If ye abide by my work, ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”⁹¹ Every meeting of the MWSA opened with a prayer.

In an analysis of religious arguments made by both Southern suffragists and anti-suffragists, Kirkley argues that Southern suffragists used the Bible to legitimize their efforts. Suffragists, as described by Kirkley, argued that God created all of humanity equally and,

⁸⁹ *Minutes of the Ninth Annual Convention: Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, 1913. University of Mississippi Libraries, accessed April 22, 2015. <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/suffrage/id/109/rec/12>.

⁹⁰ *Constitution and By-laws of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association*, Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, 6.

⁹¹ *Report of the Organization of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association* Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association, 7.

therefore, that female subordination was a negative human invention not ordained by God which should be rectified.⁹² The relationship between missionary groups, the WCTU, and the suffrage movement further emphasizes the religious undertones of the Mississippi suffrage movement. Both Kearney and Somerville were emphatic Methodists and the both they and the MWSA as a whole used religion as a source of legitimacy. Over and over again, “suffragists used religion in their meetings, speeches, and articles. The Mississippi convention of 1906 invited a Methodist minister to open its meeting with a prayer.”⁹³ Indeed, Kearney began “a suffrage group with a Methodist minister as president.”⁹⁴ While in some ways, this tactic lent the MWSA legitimacy, it also caused significant divisions between Mississippi women who took the opposing view: that women were subordinate to men because of women’s position in the Bible and that women should “‘stay where God Almighty placed her—the queen of the home, the moulder of character...’.”⁹⁵ Kearney and Somerville used their religion in an attempt to lend their movement credibility, but this effort often backfired, pushing uneducated, religious women away from suffrage instead of towards it.

Similarly divisive was the image of the typical Southern Lady and suffragists’ views on the nature of propriety. Suffragists in Mississippi understood that as educated, generally wealthy, white women they were imagined to be “epitomes of the Southern Lady.”⁹⁶ Utilizing this image lent suffragists credibility individually, helped them operate in a society which necessarily respected upper class white women, and permitted them to use men’s chivalrous ideas in their favor. Yet from this same vantage point, the deep-rooted ideology of the Southern Lady repelled

⁹² Kirkley, “This Work is God’s Cause”, 510.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 518.

⁹⁵ This was part of a sermon preached by a lawyer in Mississippi. It demonstrates an attempt undertaken by both Northern and Southern anti-suffragists to elevate the position of women in the household in order to prevent women from seeking opportunities outside the household. Kirkley, “This Work is God’s Cause”, 512.

⁹⁶ Kirkley “This Work is God’s Cause”: 508.

many women from joining the movement as women often saw themselves as typical of this stereotype and could not imagine how suffrage could be synonymous with the Southern Lady. After the turmoil of the Civil War, “the image may have become even more tenacious as white women were constructed to be the repository of southern white culture and the personification of domestic purity, virtue, and morality for white southerners.”⁹⁷ Supporting the struggling image of the South, the “Southern Lady” was left “to represent the ideal of the southern white patriarchal order”⁹⁸ which had been diminished by the destruction of the Civil War. Many Southern white women and arguably more Southern white men clung desperately to the stereotype of the Southern Lady as a source of stability in a tumultuous time. For Mississippians in the post-Civil War period still the Southern Lady was an image wherein “the lady was expected to manifest in her character...all that was best in her society”⁹⁹ and was expected to accept “the dominance of men” while cultivating “her own sense of honor.”¹⁰⁰ Many women felt that this was incompatible with progressive activism or that their position of subservience was required by their position as Southern Ladies. An anecdotal anti-suffrage article published in *The Biloxi Herald* told of a Mr. Jobson saying of the Southern Lady “[men] slave for her and we fight and die for her. She is at once the incentive of our best efforts and the recipient of all the results thereof. We love, admire, and honor her.”¹⁰¹ Many Mississippi women were brought up with this stereotype and, lacking education and experience, took such imagery to heart. Yet having been inspired by the WCTU’s ability to manipulate the Southern Lady to incorporate political goals, both Somerville and Kearney understood the image of the Southern Lady to be necessary and attempted to use it to their benefit in the MWSA.

⁹⁷ Smith, “Constructing Womanhood in Public”, 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁹⁹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 196.

¹⁰⁰ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 203.

¹⁰¹ “Mr. Jobson on Suffrage”, *The Biloxi Daily Herald*, May 22, 1900.

In an appeal to “Members and Friends of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association,” Somerville warned that “the public, and especially the editorial public will be quick to see and use against us any mistakes that may be made. An unpleasant aggressiveness will doubtless be expected from us.”¹⁰² Somerville understood that any deviation from the traditional role of women in Mississippi society would bring suffragists criticism. Therefore Somerville emphasized that MWSA members should strive to limit the perceived threat to traditional ideas of Southern womanhood. Emphasizing the idea that propriety was important for most Southerners, Kearney wrote that “Southerners, though tenacious of social traditions...are chivalrous toward a woman who wishes their cooperation provided that she comes to them as a lady.”¹⁰³ Acting on her own advice, Kearney always appeared at events in dresses “with trains that swept the floor in an era when most women had long since given them up.”¹⁰⁴ Regardless of how careful these Mississippi women were, however, they could not help but polarize the public with a movement which forced men and women alike to radically alter perceptions of Southern womanhood. While not unique to Mississippi, the challenge of co-opting an age-old ideology did not add to the popularity of the MWSA.

Conclusion

The Mississippi women’s suffrage movement, like the Southern movement in general, began only after the Civil War had propelled drastic social changes for women who had previously been constrained by an isolating and necessarily unequal society. After the death and destruction of the Civil War, Southern women had access to a broader range of opportunities and experiences which permitted them to engage in voluntary associations and gave them educational

¹⁰² Nellie Nugent Somerville pamphlet entitled “Appeal to Members and Friends of the Mississippi Woman Suffrage Association” in Spruill, “Nellie Nugent Somerville” in *Mississippi Women*, Swain, Payne, and Spruill, eds., 45.

¹⁰³ Kearney quoted in Spruill, *New Women of the New South*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Spruill, *New Women of the New South*, 76.

opportunities they had previously been denied. In Mississippi, Methodist missionary work and the WCTU played perhaps the largest role in granting suffragists experience and a social network upon which to build their organization. Once established, the MWSA utilized particular ideologies suited to their society in order to promote women's right to vote. Mississippian women's suffragists manipulated religious narratives and the image of the Southern Lady to fit their progressive needs and, though not all did, many Mississippi suffragists espoused white women's vote as a means of disenfranchising African Americans.

Despite their best efforts, Mississippi suffragists failed to pass a state or the federal amendment in favor of women's suffrage. The lack of significant leadership in the state and the ideological divisions between leaders was a tremendous detriment to the women's suffrage movement. Moreover, Somerville and Kearney's antagonistic relationship lessened the organizations influence and prevented a unified message from developing, as evidenced by their conflicting opinion on white supremacist ideology.

While Mississippi women saw a significant increase in the number of voluntary associations and educational and work opportunities after the Civil War, the lack of opportunity for many lower-middle-class women in the state meant that despite the best efforts of Somerville and Kearney, Mississippi suffragists failed to rally a strong female base to support their cause. Many middle and upper class white women in Mississippi used their social positions as gentlewomen and their religious beliefs to help push other Mississippians towards women's suffrage, yet they could not overcome the power of such deeply-rooted narratives. Ultimately suffragists in Mississippi failed to sway most women or political men and therefore failed to force the passage of a suffrage amendment in their home state.

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