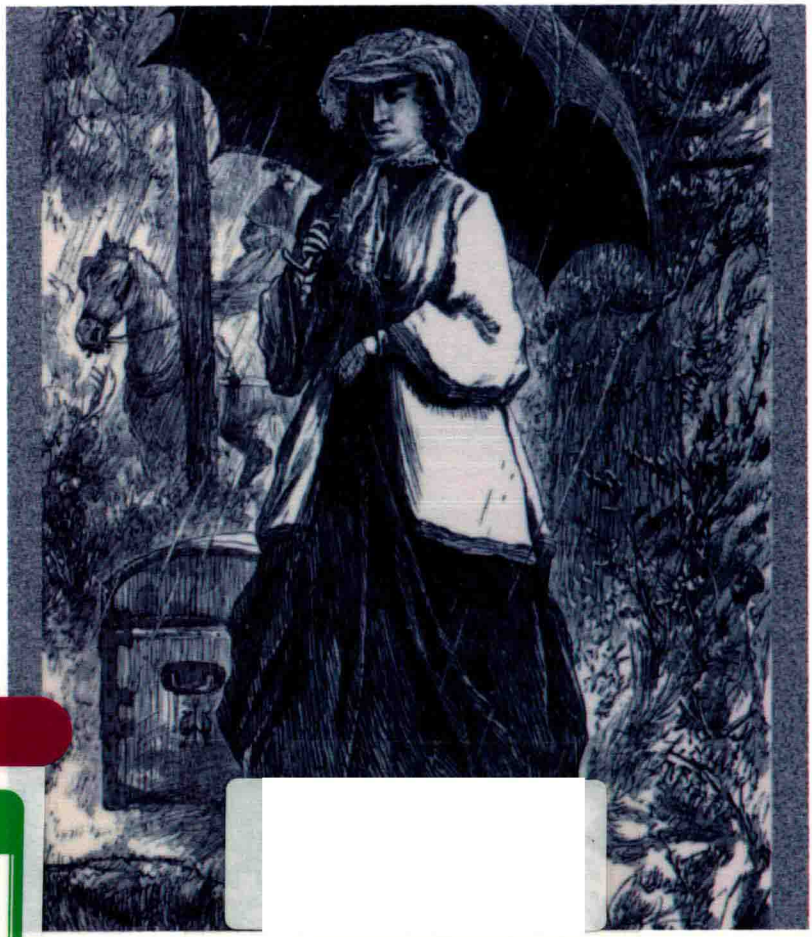
The American History Series

Women in Antebellum Reform

Lori D. Ginzberg



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The American History Series

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FOREWORD

Every generation writes its own history for the reason that it sees the past in the foreshortened perspective of its own experience. This has surely been true of the writing of American history. The practical aim of our historiography is to give us a more informed sense of where we are going by helping us understand the road we took in getting where we are. As the nature and dimensions of American life are changing, so too are the themes of our historical writing. Today's scholars are hard at work reconsidering every major aspect of the nation's past: its politics, diplomacy, economy, society, recreation, mores and values, as well as status, ethnic, race, sexual, and family relations. The lists of series titles that appear on the inside covers of this book will show at once that our historians are ever broadening the range of their studies.

The aim of this series is to offer our readers a survey of what today's historians are saying about the central themes and aspects of the American past. To do this, we have invited to write for the series only scholars who have made notable contributions to the respective fields in which they are working. Drawing on primary and secondary materials, each volume presents a factual and narrative account of its particular subject, one that affords readers a basis for perceiving its larger dimensions and importance. Conscious that readers respond to the closeness and immediacy of a subject, each of our authors seeks to restore the past as an actual

present, to revive it as a living reality. The individuals and groups who figure in the pages of our books appear as real people who once were looking for survival and fulfillment. Aware that historical subjects are often matters of controversy, our authors present their own findings and conclusions. Each volume closes with an extensive critical essay on the writings of the major authorities on its particular theme.

The books in this series are primarily designed for use in both basic and advanced courses in American history, on the undergraduate and graduate levels. Such a series has a particular value these days, when the format of American history courses is being altered to accommodate a greater diversity of reading materials. The series offers a number of distinct advantages. It extends the dimensions of regular course work. It makes clear that the study of our past is, more than the student might otherwise understand, at once complex, profound, and absorbing. It presents that past as a subject of continuing interest and fresh investigation.

For these reasons the series strongly invites an interest that far exceeds the walls of academe. The work of experts in their respective fields, it puts at the disposal of all readers the rich findings of historical inquiry, an invitation to join, in major fields of research, those who are pondering anew the central themes and aspects of our past.

And, going beyond the confines of the classroom, it reminds the general reader no less than the university student that in each successive generation of the ever-changing American adventure, from its very start until our own day, men and women and children were facing their daily problems and attempting, as we are now, to live their lives and to make their way.

John Hope Franklin
A. S. Eisenstadt

PREFACE

"What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world!" observed the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1844. By all accounts, the United States in the years between the War of 1812 and the onset of the Civil War fairly buzzed with plans, projects, and organizations to reform society. During those restless years thousands joined movements to alleviate poverty, educate children, alter Americans' drinking habits, abolish slavery and war, establish socialist communities, and advance working people's, African Americans', and women's equal rights—in sum, to perfect the experiment in human government that many Americans believed was destined to be the most democratic and virtuous in the world.

American women, especially white, middle-class, Protestant women, proved to be at least as committed to social reform as their male counterparts. Whether they offered charity to the poor, distributed religious tracts, or protested the existence of slavery, many women expressed the widely held belief that they had a special mandate *as women* to exert a virtuous influence in the world. In the process, they articulated a range of concerns about social justice, fashioned new conventions for women's public activity, and challenged assumptions about gender, class, race, and reform that transformed their own lives as well.

Historians who have grappled with the mind-boggling array of women's reform activities have engaged in a lively and complex

debate about this passion for social reform. Some have stressed the contradictions between women's belief in their "proper place" and their growing engagement in the problems of the larger society. Others have argued that women's reform activity led to the movement for women's rights and is therefore best understood as an emerging feminist identity. Still others have emphasized the ways that women's reform activism both highlighted the class differences between women and underscored women's close association with the men of their class. This conversation among scholars continues to change how students of American history understand the meanings and goals of reform movements both to women and to the political and social culture of the antebellum United States.

This book offers a view of women and reform through two lenses: one that focuses on the ideas about women, religion, class, and race that shaped nineteenth-century reform movements and another that observes actual women as they participated in the work of social change. For many Americans, participation in movements for social reform expressed both their religious belief in the divinely ordained nature of things and a secular creed of the natural rights of all people. For women, a commitment to reform also offered a broader sense of their place in the world and of their responsibility to set it to rights. For us, this story offers a richer understanding of the antebellum era itself—a period of intense religious passion, when hundreds of thousands of Americans believed that, armed with their convictions, they could transform the world.

Women in Antebellum Reform and its author have benefitted greatly from other people's support and input. Abraham Eisenstadt and, at Harlan Davidson, Inc., Andrew Davidson and Lucy Herz, were enormously helpful at every stage of this project. Archivists and librarians at the American Antiquarian Society, the American Tract Society, the Friends Library at Swarthmore College, the National Archives, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and, especially, the Library Company of Philadelphia, provided assistance in acquiring images for the book. Nancy Hewitt and Elizabeth Varon offered welcome comments and encouragement. Finally, the author is extremely (and probably eternally) grateful to Janet Ginzberg and Joel Steiker for being the careful, considerate, and critical readers that every writer hopes to find.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Roots of Reform

"This is a soul-stirring era," remarked the Reverend William Mitchell in 1835, "and will be so recorded in the annals of time." Countless antebellum reformers agreed: the United States, especially its northern and western regions, was awash with efforts to change itself; a "sisterhood of reforms" characterized the American character and mission; and in all this, women, especially those of the Protestant middle and upper classes, played an important role. Indeed, few would have argued with the Reverend C. Gayton Pickman when he asserted in 1836 that "It is to female influence and exertion that many of our best schemes of charity are due." And women exerted their influence not only in the area of charity: reformers' efforts to provide bibles and tracts, end drunkenness, abolish slavery, build orphan asylums and training schools, improve the moral and physical condition of prostitutes, establish utopian communities, transform Americans' practices of eating, healing, dressing, and educating, and raise women's status were deeply affected both by an emerging ideology about womanhood and by women themselves.

Reform movements do not spring up from nowhere, nor do they emerge simultaneously with a particular social problem; slavery, after all, had existed in North America for two centuries before a small band of reformers grew urgent about abolishing it. Numerous factors come together to make a social ill seem unacceptable and wrong, to make a group of people prepared and willing to commit themselves to change it, and to provide the ideological framework in which they can articulate their goals. In studying reform movements we find ourselves moving back and forth between abstractions about right and wrong and the daily lives of reformers, who had all the complexities, motives, and quirks of ordinary people. Those women who believed that they had a duty to change a world with which nearly everyone else seemed content were neither altruistic saints nor mean-spirited aristocrats, neither leisured ladies nor clandestine feminists; nor were they all the same. In addition to elite white Protestant women, working-class women, free blacks, ex-slaves, and immigrants actively shaped antebellum charity and reform. Only when we avoid simplistic stereotypes about reformers can we begin to ask questions about their backgrounds, how they viewed their world, and what kind of society they envisioned for its future. We can begin to understand why some people believed to the point of moral arrogance that their society could be fixed, and furthermore, that as ordinary citizens they were entitled, even obligated, to undertake its repair.

Economic and intellectual conditions related directly to a person's decision to devote her or his life to social reform, reminding us that reform movements are about more than reformers' stated goals or the changes they achieved; they are also about the reformers themselves, about their social and sexual status, and about how their place in the world informed their sense of duty to others. In the antebellum period, being a reformer was, like having a private parlor, educating one's daughters, becoming a self-made man, or wearing a hoopskirt, one way that an individual exhibited his or her membership in the Protestant middle class.

Where did antebellum Americans get so deep a sense that individuals acting together could fix their society's ills, and that

American women, in particular, were uniquely suited and even divinely ordained to do so? It is worth recalling that the immediate forebears of these early nineteenth-century Americans had believed firmly that a virtuous citizenry could shape a country in its chosen image, and they had fought a revolution to prove it. This Republican thought was influenced by an intellectual Enlightenment that had swept through the educated classes of European cities a century before. Characterized by faith in human reason and in natural, as opposed to divine, law, the Enlightenment drove a wedge into the absolute authority of religious institutions and the divine rule of kings. For many Enlightenment thinkers, it was human rights, and the ideals of liberty and equality, that offered the best hope for human progress. A few, like Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), even expanded their vision of a new society, of a new "man," to include women.

A Changing Society

The Enlightenment's ideals of human progress took on special meaning in the United States, which was seen by many as the testing ground for the idea that a nation built on the rule of its citizens could exist. As Thomas Paine put it in his widely read pamphlet, *Common Sense* (1776), "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind." To freethinker Fanny Wright, each Fourth of July represented the anniversary of "a new era in the history of man." It was here that the grand experiment in human freedom was to succeed or, as many came to fear, to fail.

If Americans' optimism about their magnificent experiment was grand, so were their fears. Enormous changes occurring in the early decades of the nineteenth century signalled to many Americans that their nation's virtue (and thus its survival) were in serious danger. *Bigger, faster,* and *more* were the watchwords of the day. In the northern United States, cities were manifesting unheard-of growth, along with crime and dirt; the production of textiles and shoes was in a state of flux, as were farming and selling practices; and settled communities were breaking up as people

moved west to start new lives. Men's unquestioned control over workers, wives, and children was threatened, as farm daughters took jobs at textile mills throughout New England while their brothers explored the new opportunities offered by city life. In western New York, the Erie Canal (1825) triggered enormous economic and population growth, with the related social turmoil. New groups of immigrants, including thousands of Irish, were entering the country; many believed the influx of these mostly Catholic immigrants threatened the very homogeneity that they considered essential to the nation's moral well-being.

At the same time, those who were presumably in charge, the rulers, fathers, and ministers of the nation, seemed to be losing control. Certainly political life in the 1820s was changing, as state after state gradually revised its laws to allow white men without property to vote (although in many cases restricting free black male suffrage and continuing to limit officeholding to Christians.) To many, what became known as the era of the common man promised nothing less than "political irreligion," as political parties (or "machines") emerged to manage a new kind of political democracy. Of course, to many Americans these changes represented welcome opportunities to loosen the restraining ties of small towns and churches, and to seek individual advancement, mobility, and adventure, a transformation that was symbolized by the election of the hugely popular war hero and Tennessean Andrew Jackson as president in 1828. For every person like Senator Daniel Webster who wrote on Jackson's election that "My *fear* is stronger than my *hope*" and John Randolph, who believed "The country is ruined past redemption," there were those who believed "It was a proud day for the people, [for] General Jackson is *their own* president."

Still, for many Americans, the changes occurring in American society were simply, and literally, too close to home. As literacy and access to print increased, people pored over alarming accounts of New York's murders, gangs, prostitution, and mob violence. Far more frightening was the evidence that no small town or rural hamlet was safe from the incivility and immorality that seemed to have gripped the nation's cities. If to present-day readers the ante-

bellum United States looks rather sleepy (people mostly married, had children, remained on their farms, and had little contact with new immigrants, factories, or cities), nearly every commentary, moral tale, and etiquette book portrayed a world in motion, and many sought to contain the tide. Vast numbers of ordinary Americans were haunted by what one historian calls "the specter of social breakdown."

Yet it would be far too simplistic to attribute the rise of reform movements only to the fears of social elites and conservative impulses in society. Founding reform movements in itself signals people's optimism about the nation's potential for change. For a great number of middle- and upper-class Americans, the anxiety about the nation's moral standing demanded a religious response. Torn between optimism and fear, Americans turned to religion in numbers and intensity that have not been surpassed before or since. It was these people—many of them young, largely middle class and originally from small towns, and most of them women—who filled the churches and the multitude of organizations emerging from them during what would become known as the Second Great Awakening.

If many ordinary Americans found guidance and purpose in religious faith, the second awakening also addressed some of the fears expressed by another branch of traditional authority, the clergy. With the demise of state-funded churches during this era, even the most orthodox ministers had rethink to their assumptions about church membership, recruitment, and funding in light of what historian Perry Miller called a "wild diversity of churches"—not to mention the threats to their authority posed by Catholic immigrants, anticlerical freethinkers, and religious liberals such as Unitarians. They faced what historian Robert Abzug refers to as a crumbling cosmos, a separation of religion from daily life, and the fear that Protestant tenets were no longer universally shared. It would be an exaggeration to see the emergence of voluntarism and reform entirely in terms of ministers' fears of their own cultural decline; indeed, some antebellum reformers, notably Quakers, came from a religious tradition that fostered more egalitarian ideas of the sexes and less hierarchical notions of ministerial authority

than those of evangelicals. Nevertheless, ministers initially encouraged voluntarism as a powerful weapon to, as one of the nation's most prominent evangelicals, Lyman Beecher, put it, "retrieve what we have lost; and perpetuate forever our civil and religious institutions." Hoping to shape Americans' behavior in ways that conformed to their own vision of a Christian society, but using the tools of a new age, Protestant ministers found in benevolent activism a new calling and a new authority.

What emerged was a set of religious views that wove together many contradictions, blending profound fears for the American future with the Revolutionary-era hopefulness that citizens could reshape their society. Orthodox Protestantism had focused on original sin; whether individuals were damned or saved was predetermined and in God's hands. But even the most conservative of the Protestant clergy could hardly remain immune to the teachings of the Enlightenment and the experience of the American Revolution, and their religion became infected with notions of free will, of a benign God, and of a society that could be made better by human endeavor. Faced with the threat that reason would substitute for revelation, and human action for the divine, ministers counterattacked by incorporating those ideas into a new version of American Protestantism.

Thus, however conservative the intentions of ministers may have been, the religious revivals known collectively as the Second Great Awakening reflected a radical change in American religion. Characterized by dramatic individual conversions in a group setting, the revival experience transformed the lives of countless Americans—and, along the way, changed the way Americans thought of themselves, of their national mission, and of God's (and their own) role in leading the world to a golden age. Perhaps, as some historians have suggested, orthodox ministers wanted merely to further people's personal salvation and their own authority; as it happened, they sometimes stood by helplessly as American Protestantism became a vehicle for social change, the means for moral progress and, ultimately, the sign of the millennium itself.

No figure better represents this religious evolution than Charles Finney. Trained as a lawyer, Finney saw his own conver-