Southern Ladies and Suffragists

Julia Ward Howe and Women's Rights at the 1884 New Orleans World's Fair

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For my late parents, who would have been proud,
and my daughter Gretchen, who is a strong-minded woman

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Preface

March 3, 1885. "What have women ever invented?" tiny Julia Ward Howe "osked" in her broad "*a*" Boston accent. Then she answered the impertinent question by gesturing to scores of objects that proved women could indeed contribute to industry. Howe also pointed to scientific specimens, silk-culture processes, published works, and other evidence. Truth be told, these exalted examples of women's productivity had to vie for attention with rather amateurish needlework and curiosities. Surrounding the gathered audience were display cases and boudoir-curtained booths that fairly teemed with incompatible items. A dainty pincushion sat near a sturdy iron chain from a female blacksmith; a glut of crazy quilts hung near a collapsible summer house from a Chicago woman's design. Despite the incongruous mix, these were the best examples of "woman's work" that representatives from all participating states could collect on short notice.

At three o'clock that Tuesday afternoon in New Orleans, Julia Ward Howe was formally opening the Woman's Department at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. As the department's president, Howe stood behind a flower-bedecked podium on a small platform, her manner dignified and full of grit. With sparkling dark eyes, a strong but rather florid face, and a lace cap perched on her silken white hair, she was very like old Queen Victoria. In fact, she was of an age that one feared when saying *au revoir* to her, it might well be *adieu*. Or so a local journalist had written. For now, however, in a voice small but sweet, Howe pronounced: "The world remains very imperfectly educated concerning its women." Although woman's "hand and brain" was everywhere in the great industrial exhibits at this World's Fair, those efforts were "lost" when incorporated with the work of men. This separate department, if it achieved its aims, might correct misconceptions about woman's role in the marketplace. So Julia Ward Howe, the little lady from the North, ignored women's recent nattering and optimistically named that March day a "smile" in the "crown" of many weeks of "harmonious labor." It was true that harmony had been elusive, but at least the opening of the Woman's Department commenced with the glow of a society *fête*.[1]

Exhibitors brought what they thought was validation of women's achievements in the public sphere as well as in the home. And already, as designated Lady Commissioners worked on displays, the department had become a place to exchange convictions, tactics, and dreams. For the first time in the South, the broadest spectrum of the nation's women were coming together to have a big say. In a country still divided after war and reconstruction, this was a fragile opportunity for reconciliation, and women in the know realized that they were experiencing a defining moment. Ambitious women surely glimpsed the possibility of a different future. This Woman's Department at a world's fair in late-nineteenth-century New Orleans should have been one for the history books; it was not. To miss it entirely, however, is to lose a significant marker in women's striving toward recognition, independence, and influence.

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"Loyal and beautiful, the Southern queen / Bids the wide world welcome to her door . . ." World's International Cotton Centennial Exposition. Centerfold from *Puck*, a popular weekly humor magazine, suggests that New Orleans and its people are about to capture worldwide attention during the six-month extravaganza. Puck as Uncle Sam helps Miss New Orleans greet all nations, symbolically represented as women. Examples of exhibits can be seen at the right, and the icon of the Exposition—Horticultural Hall—is in the background. The American flag flies as evidence of a united country. Courtesy of the Collections of the Louisiana State Museum, acc. #1996.001.17.11.

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, exhibitions like the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition billed themselves as utopian spectacles of current glories and future prospects. In actuality, they revealed more about the ideology and identity of the people who created them than about external reality. Male organizers framed the events, in part, to help assuage fears in a troubled world of booms, busts, and unsettling changes. They painted rosy forecasts wherein political consensus, emerging science, and daring industry would solve the era's problems; they imposed a kind of order on chaos by arranging row upon row of precisely categorized objects. White men decided the overall goals and messages. At best, they considered women and people of color as beneficiaries of these enterprises, when considered at all.[1]

In New Orleans in 1884, a party of determined businessmen and politicians fashioned the Cotton Centennial Exposition in their own image. The event was to be a harbinger of a New South. After the Civil War and Congressional Reconstruction, this new version of the South sought reunion and earnestly solicited northern-led industrialization to develop its natural resources. The label "New South" was the brainchild of a small group of publishers and merchants who combined wishful thinking with calculating opportunism. Enthusiasts of the emerging ideology touted reconciliation and racial harmony as if these had already been accomplished, but such notions were more conceptual than tangible in a culture still largely devoted to an Old South. Henry W. Grady, owner of the *Atlanta Constitution*, was the New South movement's chief zealot; Edward Austin Burke, owner of the *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans) and now the director-general of the World's Fair, was the local mythmaker-in-chief. If the Exposition's propaganda succeeded, it could lure men, money, and machines to the entire southern region. In a city badly in need of financial rejuvenation and a revived status, the event might also resuscitate the flagging economy and rescue the floundering Port of New Orleans.[2]

On the face of it, the Cotton Centennial was mounted to commemorate a hundred years of exporting southern cotton. But one of its major

missions was to sooth the qualms of northern businessmen who might otherwise be skittish about investing in a problematic South. Thus, it marketed sectional goodwill and tranquil race relations. As a further balm, the fair's Board of Management decided to include a Woman's Department and a Colored Department, and it plucked two celebrated national figures to preside over them: activist Julia Ward Howe and former United States senator Blanche Kelso Bruce, respectively. Once the two departments were designated, however, women and people of color assumed agency over their exhibits and activities. They shaped their own meanings, and occasionally they deviated from the official script.

In the Woman's Department, matters sometimes bordered on the dramatic as homemakers, clubwomen, and professionals from across the country competed, collaborated, and frequently disagreed. While the exhibits were fairly impressive, the department was more important as a space of intersecting opinions, as participants and visitors sought to persuade each other and form new alliances. Individuals spoke for themselves, of course, but some common themes emerged. Spirited women sought to redefine "woman's work" and remove barriers to their accomplishments, employment, and higher education.

As southerners interacted with women from other regions, including sturdy pioneers from western territories, the boldest among them considered progressive ideas that, without the Woman's Department, might have taken decades to drift southward. The winds of national movements wafted into traditional social and doctrinal patterns. And because of the potent conference that the Woman's Department provided, more than a few self-identified ladies of the South were obliged to question their presumptions about "strong-minded women" from the North and West.

The Woman's Department provided New Orleans ladies with their first collective exchange with national activists, whom they had heretofore dreaded, snubbed, rejected, or simply not known. Between mid-December 1884 and the end of May 1885, attentive women gained new opportunities to insinuate their voices into debates on women's issues, even if they eschewed organized movements. During the six months of the World's Fair, some individuals began to understand that newfound strategies and collaborative efforts could serve their own agendas long after the exhibits were dismantled. Caroline Merrick, perhaps the city's lone declared suffragist, called the experience an "enlarging influence" on future endeavors.[3] Despite the persistence of certain sectional rivalries and personality clashes, women created a tenuous sisterhood of "common cause" in the

Woman's Department in the somewhat tattered Queen City of the South. This book chronicles that journey.

Although local and visiting women affected the course of the Woman's Department, Julia Ward Howe was its linchpin. She was also its irritant. As a venerable luminary in the Northeast, Howe basked in sunny deference wherever she went in that distant region; as a stranger in a southern land, she often received as little reverence as a bone-chilling winter day. Controversy that swirled around her exposed local biases. The stuff of drama lurks in Howe's postmortem *Report and Catalogue of the Woman's Department*, where this research began. She complains there of "animadversion" from local women of the press while in New Orleans. She carps that the Exposition's director-general, Edward A. Burke, denied her rebuttal space in his *Times-Democrat* for fear of a "newspaper war" with the rival *Daily Picayune*. She employs the *Report and Catalogue* as a refutation of certain criticisms about her leadership.[4]

Howe's defiant comments piqued my curiosity. What were the details of this onslaught, I wondered, and what prompted such intense reaction to this famous figure? What mission had she assumed, and how well had she performed it? And why, in the first place, had promoters of a "New South" exposition chosen a northern abolitionist and suffragist to lead a Woman's Department in the old Deep South? From the evidence available, I argue that in spite of the adverse reactions that Julia Ward Howe aroused, her skills and unflagging resolve made her a smart choice. She was generally a successful leader, but the harmony she professed among women was as slippery as a silken bonnet string; it invariably came undone. Yet, the Woman's Department at the Cotton Centennial Exposition, more than any other occasion in late-nineteenth-century New Orleans, provoked an awakening in women who dared to be open to it.

World's fairs were invariably local affairs, despite how strongly their developers boasted of international participation. In New Orleans, social and political matters intruded on promoters' best-laid plans. Conventions of race, gender, class, and region sometimes contradicted otherwise coherent commercial and scientific aims. The ambitions and personalities of newspaper owners and journalists influenced how the news was presented.

Especially relevant to women's issues at the Cotton Centennial was that a woman owned and published the popular *Daily Picayune*. Eliza Holbrook Nicholson had assumed control of the major daily in 1876 as a youngish widow, and by 1884 she had increased its circulation considerably. Innovative pages for women and children and her own society column made the *Picayune* a family paper with an ardent female readership.

Like Director-General Burke in his *Times-Democrat*, Eliza Nicholson fully supported the Cotton Centennial Exposition as the "World's University" and as a boon to the region. Yet, the *Picayune* paid special attention to how the event affected women as well as men. Vast displays of engines and machines in the main halls might appeal mainly to male viewers, but marvelous new technology for the home also promised better lives for the entire family. Journalists foretold how electric lights, sewing machines, typewriters, telephones, elevators, and elevated railways would benefit women; how mass entertainment and new taste treats would delight them; how new drudgery-reducing products would entice them. About the Woman's Department, especially, newswomen highlighted displays of many new fields of employment, so sorely needed. Most important, the *Picayune* raised pertinent questions of the Woman's Department while it detailed every triumph and woe. Women had much to say about the culture of this World's Fair, and, consciously or inadvertently, they muddled the reconciliation messages that developers had so carefully crafted. In other instances, some women took the promises of a "New South" further than male creators of the notion probably intended.

Questions tumbled out of my early investigation of the Woman's Department. If "progress" was a major goal of this Cotton Centennial Exposition, did the all-male Board of Management realize how that initiative might alter traditional covenants between southern white ladies and the men in their lives? What was it about the milieu of New Orleans that made it a likely setting for visiting women to present their advanced ideas? On the other hand, how did racial attitudes constrict progress? Did women knowingly contradict themselves in this transitional period between civil war and a new century? Moreover, in an age obsessed with machines and merchandise, would women be able to prove their competence beyond domesticity? Could disparate women reconcile their differences enough to make a harmonious show? These queries drove my research.

This book attempts to show how the event became a watershed moment in persuading a coterie of late-nineteenth-century white ladies

to trade illusory pedestals for broader vistas, to enlarge notions of acceptable womanhood, and even to contemplate organized suffrage. Perhaps the Board of Management inadvertently created the impetus. They granted authority to militant causes when they chose Julia Ward Howe to lead the Woman's Department. Then, bold newspaperwomen amplified the political nature of the department by publicizing every nuance and provoking repeated debates. Meanwhile, famous national leaders of women's organizations saw the Exposition's public platform as an opportunity previously unavailable. During a six-month period in a southernmost city, a nationwide network of women—both famous and unexceptional—devised alternative strategies and celebrated common victories.

The backdrop for celebration and change at the Cotton Centennial was the purposely gendered space of the Woman's Department, a strategy of separateness that these white women used to meet their goals. Women of color, who originally wished to show with their gender, instead exhibited with their "race" in the Colored Department, the first such space offered to people of color at a world's fair. Each of the two departments offered exhibitors and leaders a place to prove they were capable of contributing to industry. Of course, as both groups readily admitted, they first had to *disprove* the commonly held view that they were *incapable* of full partnership in a marketplace so highly prized. Toward that end, each group seized a measure of agency and controlled its own messages during the Exposition.[5]

The two distinct departments served the participants' political end of public acknowledgment. Yet, the separate arrangement also created a quandary for women and people of color. Much of their best work—from textiles and tobacco to factories, farms, and inventions—was shown elsewhere, depriving their own spaces of important categories of achievement. Critics and supporters alike noted the paradox. When reviewing the Woman's Department for *Century Magazine*, for example, journalist Eugene V. Smalley conceded that woman's finest work was too "entangled with that of man" in general exhibits to be recognized for its own merit. He further granted that even the student work that was shown in the nearby Educational Department was "in reality woman's work." About the Woman's Department generally, Smalley judged its pretty alcoves as admirable and peaceful places but its displays of needlework and ornamentals as "elaborate trifles" from genteel hands, examples of "woman's play rather than woman's work." It was a criticism often debated during those six months.[6]

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