

Doing Women's History at the American Antiquarian Society

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I HAVE WORKED for extended periods at the American Antiquarian Society twice. My first visit was on a short-term fellowship the final summer that I was finishing my dissertation, and I had to discipline myself severely to stay on task and finish the final chapter I had come to research and write here. The second extended stay came ten years later, in 1987-88, when I had an AAS-National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship for the year. I was at that point a decade past graduate school, but the year I spent here felt like five years of renewed graduate training rolled into eleven months, in terms of what I learned and what I accomplished.

There are two reasons for this speeded-up learning environment. One is the unparalleled resources physically present in this building. If somebody in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century America had a thought and committed it to print, chances are very good that it exists somewhere in this building; the strong prospect of quick payoff motivates novel research strategies. The second factor contributing to the learning environment is the gathering of scholars and staff who congregate here daily. The Antiquarian Society is to historians what Woods Hole is to biologists, or the Institute for Theoretical Physics is to scholars in that field. It is a think tank, a collection of early American specialists who share

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ideas, leads, resources, and lunch on a daily basis. An ethos of generosity and sharing characterizes the Antiquarian Society, a cooperative spirit that does not always obtain at other archives, given the reality of professional competition in a scholarly world built on hierarchy, where the reward structure favors those who publish first and where the reality is that jobs are scarce. The opposite end of the spectrum was illustrated to me once when I visited an archive in a European city where a historian friend was working. When he showed me into the reading room, all of the scholars quickly covered their manuscripts and notes; my friend explained that some people worked side by side for months, deliberately concealing helpful leads from other researchers. Happily, that competitive model of scholarship in no way afflicts the AAS. There is a lot of interaction here, and it is extremely conducive to the rapid advancement of knowledge in early American history.

I teach women's history at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In my year-long stay here, I came to work on a project on gender and travel in the early nineteenth century. My larger interest is gender relations and particularly the history of sexuality in early America. The early nineteenth-century world was organized around the assumption of universal heterosexuality, and support mechanisms and social rules perpetuated this assumption. The marriage system was predicated on the fact that women could not easily support themselves without a male provider; on their side of the marriage bargain, men relied on wives for domestic labor and sexual services. Starting in the 1830s, some of the conditions of this bargain began to change as economic opportunities for women enlarged. My interest lies in both uncovering the unstated assumptions that undergirded the old marriage bargain and in studying those moments when the assumptions came unglued, when social rules were tested and found to be flexible, when boundaries governing behavior suddenly got punctured. Human beings, after all, do have free will, an ability to act as they choose at any given moment, but we are generally constrained by the consequences of our actions. Breaking the unstated rules of the gender

system usually carries heavy consequences. For a variety of reasons some people began to test the boundaries of the gender system in interesting ways in the 1830s. My research design was to seek out those moments or social situations where the rules that hitherto had served to maintain the subordination of women in a heterosexual universe got stretched or broken; I then looked to see what consequences flowed from that interesting moment.

My research at the AAS initially focused on gender and travel, because commercial travel was an essentially new activity in the early nineteenth century that threw men and women together without a lot of preexisting rules to govern conduct. I suspected it might be a good arena for seeking innovations in gendered behavior. Historians speak of a transportation revolution in the years 1790–1850, and a revolution it certainly was. First, regular stagecoach lines connected Eastern seaboard cities in the late eighteenth century. Next came turnpikes and canals, and then railroads in the 1830s. Travel became a much more common experience; large numbers of people could now traverse space without having to have map reading or equestrian skills. The task I set for myself was to study hundreds of trip accounts in diaries, letters, and published sources, to discover the emerging rules of gendered deportment in public as well as the breaches of those rules. Travel is an attractive research topic for getting at challenges to normative behavior because travel was and remains a kind of liminal experience, where travellers can possibly consider themselves untied from their usual moorings in life and take on different identities. Perhaps many here have experienced the temptation to try out a new identity on that nearby stranger in the next seat on a cross-country airplane ride; there is indeed a kind of possible adventure built into travel.

At the AAS I first tackled the vast genre of travel literature. Embarking on a trip was a common spur to starting to keep a diary, as was writing letters home to inform of your safe arrival. Hence travel accounts form a major part of manuscript archives. But there is far more here, buried in this library in printed volumes, and it

is a real trick to figure out how to access it, especially since the stacks are closed to all but the staff. (I have heard that in the old days Mark McCorison actually let ordinary researchers go into the stacks. My dissertation supervisor, Winthrop Jordan, told me several years ago that when he was writing his dissertation in the early 1960s McCorison gave him a key to the library and the stacks so he could come in on the weekends and roam the bookshelves!) Now we have to rely on the help of fellow scholars and the marvelous staff here to suggest research leads. One important source for me was the periodical literature of the 1820s and 1830s. Travel was still a novel enough experience that journal editors welcomed and printed travel narratives. I did not restrict myself to women's accounts alone, for male travellers as well commented richly on the gendered rules of deportment, and male accounts are what tended to get published, disproportionately to those of women.

I soon learned that the AAS had records of stagecoach lines in the manuscript holdings. These contain not merely financial records but sometimes manifests, that is, lists of passengers carried over weeks and months at a time; from this I could construct a quantitative sense of what proportion of the travelling public was female, and, of even more interest to me, of those women, which ones were travelling alone. Passenger lists always identified women as Miss or Mrs., which I take to be a crude proxy for age. I also discovered the AAS had hotel registers, mostly from Worcester establishments, from which I could calculate numbers of women travelling without male escorts. Another useful and unusual source proved to be the school catalogue collection. These are pamphlets that private academies issued year after year, listing the curriculum and teachers but also very often the student body along with hometowns, and from this I could get a sense of the geographical distance young girls attending academies found a reasonable trek from home.

At some point in my research year here, I found that I was not quite getting at a critical aspect of my project: did women travellers have a sense of sexual danger or peril? The published travel ac-

counts, the letters of safe arrival sent home, the stagecoach manifests, none of these yielded any insights on what in the twentieth century is a major concern for women in public. The realistic concern for danger restrains and controls women's behavior, causing them to think carefully about where they can go and at what hour. I could get some sense of this from reading women's diaries and letters, for some of the writers would describe the kinds of strategies they would adopt to avoid unnecessary or too familiar conversations, like wearing veils and speaking only when spoken to. But these records yielded nothing on actual instances of peril — for the obvious reason that letters of reassurance written at the conclusion of a trip don't get written when something goes seriously wrong.

In talks with other AAS fellows I learned of the large and impressive collection of crime pamphlets housed here. Pamphlets about crime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries usually took the form of execution sermons by ministers or last confessions by penitent criminals. But in the early nineteenth century, in just the period I was studying, a new sort of crime pamphlet became popular, one that revelled in the gory details of the crime itself. I didn't know how to access the pamphlets — again, that new but justifiable rule about no researchers pawing through the stacks. Finally I just looked up subjects like rape and murder in the subject card catalogue, and filled out call slips for all the crimes that had a woman's name somewhere in the title, either as perpetrator or (much more often) as victim.

In the process of looking through these crime pamphlets, I found nothing about travel-related crimes. It was indeed a long shot, but happily the kind of long shot one can afford to explore at a library like this. All the murders were very stationary; and one in particular grabbed my attention and became an all-consuming new research project that will without doubt make it into print as my next book long before the gender and travel project materializes. Such is the serendipity of working in the AAS.

This murder was different from the others in the pamphlet

literature for several reasons. For most murders, there was one or at most two pamphlets, but this one had seven or eight here at the AAS, and another distinct four have turned up in other libraries. As I read the pamphlets I became immediately fascinated with the case, just because of the sheer contradictions the pamphlets evinced. There were wildly differing accounts of who the victim was—her very name and parentage were up for grabs—and there were key differences in the accounts of the circumstances leading up to her death. And of course, they disagreed about the guilt of the alleged perpetrator. Since the pamphlets had nothing to do with travel, I set them aside, but I continued to think about them. Soon I found I was working on my real history project from 9 to 3:30 every day, and then treating myself for the remaining hour or so to being a detective on this murder case. Who was the victim, and why was there such disagreement in print about her?

Before long, I was totally hooked on the story of the murder of Helen Jewett, a prostitute who lived and died in New York City in 1836. I soon found I was not alone in being hooked on the case. The editor of the New York *Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, saw a chance to sell a lot of newspapers in his newly emerging penny-press newspaper; he hooked a countryful of readers on the case as it unfolded, and found his circulation went from 5,000 to 20,000 newspapers in the space of about two weeks. The rest of the cheap press of New York City quickly cashed in on the sensational story, vying with each other for true versions of the dead girl's past, thus partially explaining why there were several differing accounts of her life before the public. The accused murderer was a young man who had been Helen Jewett's special lover, a graduated step up from being one of her clients. He was acquitted in a trial widely regarded as a spectacular miscarriage of justice, and that again prolonged the public interest in the case, since it never then could seem to be a settled thing. For fifty years after the murder, newspapers could casually mention Jewett's name as though it were still a household word. The victim and the alleged murderer were

memorialized in waxwork exhibits that toured the country and enchanted audiences at natural history museums and showrooms.

The interesting thing to me initially was simply the mystery of the victim. The murder itself did not strike me as a worthy subject for academic inquiry; in fact it seemed a little unseemly to get entranced by a murder. (Only much later, when I had adopted the project as a worthy academic endeavor, did I realize that the very idea that we get entranced by murders, and especially murders with a sex-crime angle as this one had, is itself an historically specific cultural phenomenon that calls out for interpretation and explanation.) But at first I considered my interest in the case a private vice, and so I would do solid academic work most of the day and then give myself permission to have fun trying to run down the details of the girl's life.

The AAS collection offers unparalleled opportunities to answer questions about this murder case that no one in 1836 could have answered. The genealogical resources alone are remarkable. Since my victim had gone by four or five different pseudonyms, I had a hard task ahead of me. I spent more time than I care to admit skimming through the vital records reports from various Maine towns (since there was convergence on her Maine roots in the otherwise contradictory stories). It was a tedious process. I spent a lot of time with the various county history books, and I also started cruising through newspapers from all over the country for April, May, and June of 1836. The AAS has a spectacular collection of early nineteenth-century newspapers, and not on microfilm, but the real thing, so that a researcher does not need to go blind spinning away on machines. I could read the papers as did readers in 1836, and the bits and pieces of stories I collected not only advanced my knowledge about the particulars in the case but later on unexpectedly proved to be crucial for understanding the construction of the mythologies surrounding it, once I started paying attention to who the editors of the newspapers were and considering where they got their information. Some of them later turned

out to be men who had inside information on the case, something they would never have acknowledged in print at the time.

At some point, all the research began to pay off and the true story of Helen Jewett began to fall into place. I have been able to determine who she was and how she came to be a prostitute in New York. In essence, what I am doing is writing a biography of a person who didn't leave much in the way of written records herself but who left enough of an imprint on lots of other records for me to be able to reconstruct a great deal about her.

She was raised as a servant in an elite Maine family; she was remarkably bright, and the family allowed her extraordinary opportunities to be educated and to read. Jewett read the leading fiction of her day, and my suspicion is that it was her reading that allowed her to imagine herself out of the servant's role and into something much more exalted—and unobtainable. Here is an echo of the concern manifested in my travel project: how do people learn to break rules, especially gender rules? In this girl's case, she read sentimental, gushy fiction of the 1820s that inspired her to leave the life of a servant behind her. Some of the pamphlet literature about her death portrayed her as a seduced and abandoned woman who was done ill by some wicked man and who then had no choice but to become a prostitute. But I think I can make a pretty persuasive case that she made a determination that her best and perhaps only path upward and outward from her servant life was to strike out for the excitement of the big city and whatever it might bring. She was a talented and beautiful girl caught in a town where she was marked as a servant; since she could never legitimately join the elite of the town, even though she had learned all their manners, education, and ways, she did the next best thing and joined them illegitimately, as a high-class prostitute.

Near the start of my fascination with this case, I shared my hobby one day with Georgia Barnhill, the graphic arts curator here, who helpfully remarked that the AAS had four lithographs related to the case. I was surprised at the time—but no longer am—that not only did the library have them but also Gigi knew it

off the top of her head. At another critical moment when I was delving into the penny press of New York—the *Herald*, the *Transcript*, and the *Sun*—Joyce Tracy and Dennis Laurie informed me about a set of uncatalogued racy newspapers from the early 1840s in New York City they had tucked away somewhere, still wrapped in the tissues they were acquired in. Soon Dennis was bringing me runs of issues of journals with titles like *The Libertine*, *The Rake*, and *The Whip*, risqué papers put out by young male devotees of the sporting culture in New York. (The masthead of *The Rake* showed a group of farmers leaning on rakes—evidence of the sense of humor of the usually pseudonymous editors.) The papers postdated my murder case, but they did report on a lot of the brothel activity (columns of tours of the local brothels with ratings on who was hot this week) of the Fifth Ward and mentioned some of the girls who had lived with Jewett and who were witnesses at the trial; I could thus see what they were doing five years later.

A final example of the kind of synergy this library vibrates with is the story of my lunch one day with another visiting fellow, over at the Goddard-Daniels House. I had finally decided to go public with my enthusiasm for the murder—it was taking on the aspects of a real academic subject and not just an idle vice. So I told the bare outlines of the story to one of the fellows, who declared she had already read this story, in a cheap fiction purchased in an airport a few years before. At first my heart sank, to think that this murder that I was coming to think of as mine was already a popular-culture product out there in the market. I spent months trying to find the fiction—a tricky business if you don't know either the author or the title; finding aids to ephemeral fiction are pretty nonexistent. But I finally did locate it, as well as four other fictionalized versions of the story. I no longer worry about the case having passed over into popular culture through these fictionalizations. The way I figure it, the popularizations will only add to my audience for the Real Story behind the fictions, and in many ways the real story is every bit as interesting and bizarre as the fictions.

The murder case was not the only spin-off project that came my

way during my year at the Antiquarian Society. Projects kept coming to me, landing on my desk, which added to my sense that a year here was like five years anywhere else, in terms of my productivity and mental growth. This third project was something that was relatively easy to research here, yet it would have been much more arduous in other libraries. Along my way of reading about sexual peril in the early nineteenth century and reading about criminal activity, I became aware of the fact that a new form of crime was defined in the mid-nineteenth century that very directly related to my concerns: the crime of seduction. Up to the 1830s and 1840s, the legal system handled seduction as a wrongful action committed by one party against the father or master of the seduced woman. In other words, a daughter or servant who was seduced was not party to the action, but the man who owned her services could sue for the loss of those services in the woman—under trespass law. The wrongful action consisted in the loss of labor, not sexual sin. My reading in the newspapers of the 1830s led me to a larger story of an effort to criminalize seduction in this country, state by state, to make sexual trespass into a moral crime that the state should prosecute. A key provision of these proposed laws was that women were now seen as the victims of seduction, which was a truly extraordinary thing. Recall, these were not laws covering rape but instead covered sexual activity that the woman consented to. But if she consented, how could she be the victim?—that was the tricky part of the proposed law. The campaigns to criminalize seduction tell us much about how Americans in the 1830s and 1840s thought about sexuality and power. The laws were campaigned for by legions of middle-class white women who petitioned their state legislatures year after year, for about fifteen years. Ultimately they were successful.

I was able to research these campaigns in several ways in this library. One was to look at the printed state judicial supreme court reports, to track all the cases sent up on appeal to the highest state court. Another fruitful way was to look for seduction cases in the crime pamphlet literature. I found a few, not many, but they were

wonderfully rich and interesting trial reports, full of detailed, first-person testimony taken under oath about courtships gone wrong. A third avenue for studying seduction laws was presented by the large newspaper collection here, where the debates in the state legislatures were often reported verbatim. There, amidst the tedious reports of bank charters and railroad schemes, were humorous accounts of all-male state legislators responding to the petition campaigns of concerned women. In the early years, when the men did not take the petitions seriously at all, the debates were conducted with great glee, but eventually the women prevailed, and by the late 1840s nearly every northeastern state had passed some sort of law criminalizing seduction of unwitting and chaste young women.

As you can see from the tales of my year at the Antiquarian Society, this library is a gold mine for studying gender in early American history. The principles of organization and cataloguing that early librarians instituted here did not include an attention to women's history, so it takes more than the usual amount of cleverness and inventiveness to sleuth out materials here. The wonderful staff and the other scholars present make that job both much easier and wonderfully exciting. There is a sense of discovery, the excitement of finding something new and unusual, that overcomes me every time I come here, and that sense is fed both by the scope of the collections and the people (both staff and scholars) who can be found here on any day, every day. The American Antiquarian Society is a delightful place to do women's history; it is truly a national treasure.

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