

Woman's Place on Exhibit:
Women at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, 1897

by

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ABSTRACT

My thesis examines the Woman's Building at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897. It analyzes the creation of the building, the exhibits, and the meetings held there to determine what the planners believed of womanhood and woman's work in the nineteenth century. These women spoke of one united womanhood, but the reality seen in their exhibits and speeches was much more complicated. These women were part of a growing movement of women who worked beyond the doors of the home, still convincing those around them they were the highest examples of grace and refinement.

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INTRODUCTION

When I began the process of writing my thesis, it was initially focused on a completely different topic. My original plan was to look at families that were displaced due to the battle of Chickamauga and the later creation of the first national military park in the U.S. Unfortunately, the sources were not there, and it did not work out. So, I looked around for something else. I made a list of places or people that I was interested by. The Parthenon in Nashville made the list.

The Parthenon was my starting point for the Tennessee Centennial. I knew of the building, but little about the exposition. Some time spent with Google and history books showed the scale of the event. But one building continued to stand out: the Woman's Building. As I researched more I found myself falling down the rabbit hole, like Alice to Wonderland, into the world of women, womanhood, and fairs in the late nineteenth century.

The Woman's Building gave upper-class women in Tennessee a platform in a changing time. The late nineteenth century was full of shifts in society. The beginnings of suffrage and prohibition were here, along with the growth of industry, and a South that was embracing of all. The centennial event provides historians the opportunity to look at what these women were trying to say and show about their lives, roles, and beliefs during this time of change.

So what did they talk about? What mattered to them? These elite women were inserting themselves in a debate that still continues-defining the nature of womanhood. Then, as now, "womanhood" was hard to nail down. It was and is understood in a

plethora of ways. For those women who planned and built the Woman's Building at the Tennessee Centennial, their structure created a snapshot of upper-class womanhood. After all, these women had the freedom and the power to present their perception of womanhood and woman's work.

I wanted to understand who these women were and what they were trying to say about womanhood and woman's work. What did they believe about themselves and their fit in society? I wanted to know if these women were rich ladies of the house; who organized clubs and dinners to fill time. Did any of them push the boundaries of what women should do? Did anything they do address other groups of women?

What I found was a much more complicated understanding of woman's work and womanhood. While the women claimed to speak and present one definition, there was much more going on. Different groups spoke, presenting their own understanding on the topic. Some of the speakers used the language of womanhood to explain and justify the extension of women's role beyond the home. The language of womanhood became a tool to explain what the speakers and exhibits were trying to say about women.

The parts that make up the Woman's Building provide a fantastic opportunity to examine material culture, as well as speeches and presentations. Analyzing this space has taught me a great deal on the importance of refinement, understanding women's roles, and the influence women had at this time. The women involved were determined to make the Centennial a success, but in doing so they made sure that they would not be forgotten.

CHAPTER ONE

Planning Womanhood

The Exposition grounds were bustling on the fourth of May 1897. Men and women, dressed in their best, ventured into the different buildings to see the attractions celebrating Tennessee's centennial of statehood. A sizeable contingent headed to the northwest corner of the grounds. Gleaming in the sunlight, the Woman's Building stood proud and welcoming to all those who graced her doorstep. The building was a vision of perfection to all who saw it. As visitors moved into the building they got the impression of entering an elegant home. It was a remarkably different feeling than walking into any other building at the Exposition. Designed by local artist Sara Ward Conley, the structure imitated the Hermitage, Andrew Jackson's former residence.

As visitors entered they were greeted with an elegant foyer. Standing in the doorway to this space the visitors took in the ornate room. Paintings and floral arrangements adorned the walls and tables around this entrance. A marble fountain stood directly before them. Behind it was a large staircase split into two branches that continued onto the second floor, at the top of which was a large circular "rose" window depicting the "Apotheosis of Woman."¹ When visitors came to this window, they were able to take in the décor of the replica home.

¹ "Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee, and They Always Speak for Themselves: Women had the Floor," *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897. The women who are studied in this thesis were all white. African-American women were not included in the Woman's Building. A Negro Women's Department did exist but was only mentioned in Herman Justi's history in regards to the Negro Building. There is no indication there was a special day that African-American women visited the Woman's Building other than the designated "Negro Day." This does not indicate they were not active. African-American women had their own women's organizations that worked during this time period, as discussed in Anne Firor Scott's article "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Association." Anne Firor Scott,

The Assembly Hall was the space designed to showcase women's most recent accomplishments of the mind. The room was large and open to accommodate the crowds expected for events. This would be the home of speeches, meetings, concerts, and social gatherings throughout the Exposition. The walls were a gray-pink color with green drapes on the windows. Oak furniture was placed around the room for seating. Plants stood on marble stands and paintings hung on the walls around the room for decoration.

However, the building was intended to represent more than just a home. Obviously, the exhibit represented the domestic space of elite, fashionable women who, in turn, saw themselves as the social and moral leaders of Tennessee. In this regard, the building was intended as a temple to their version of womanhood— as the rose window presents—and to indicate the many activities in which white, elite women engaged. The building was intended to display the social and moral power of Tennessee's polite women.

Kate Kirkman, director of the woman's exhibition project, spoke openly and directly about this political purpose. Kirkman's address on opening day was simple yet effective. Her speech introduced the image that she and the Woman's Department wanted to convey. First, she praised the pioneer women who originally came to Tennessee, noting that they “developed the highest traits of womanhood in these perilous times; they molded the bullets and loaded the guns for the gallant defenders of their home altars and

“Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations, *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no.1 (February 1990): 7; Herman Justi, ed., *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition Opened May 1 and Closed October 30, 1897* (Nashville: Brandon Printing, 1897), 195.

lent a tender charm to the rude but rough toil of pioneer life.”² This charm did not end, Kirkman stated, as women had continued to work for the progress of the state.

After a round of applause, Kirkman continued her speech. She called for men and women to work together: “If we are ever to attain the highest ideas of civilization, it must be by the persistent and united efforts of man and woman each toiling in their own God appointed sphere.”³ In explanation of woman’s role Kirkman asked “what is woman’s work?” She answered that “anything and everything that may be necessary to preserve the sanctity of the home and the freedom of the state.”⁴

As Kirkman spoke these words giving the appearance of a solid and clear definition of woman’s role, her definition was vague enough to allow for different views of womanhood to come forward. What she presented was more of a starting point for others to interpret. The protection of the home and freedom of the state could and would be taken to different places.

After another round of applause and pointing out the collaboration with the woman’s groups from previous expositions, Kirkman declared the doors officially open in hopes that “every visitor to this Exposition will find an object lesson to stimulate to higher effort and grander results.”⁵ On this note, Kirkman stepped back to her seat amongst the cheers of the crowd.

² “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

³ “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

⁴ “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

⁵ “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

From the elegant appearance of the building and Kirkman's florid speech-making, the observer would get the impression that Tennessee's elite women represented a united front in their cause of recognizing women of their station as the soul of Tennessee's civilized progress. However, they were not united at all. As much as they wanted to portray themselves as part of a single womanhood, as individuals they were anything but a single entity. Indeed, the very project of creating the woman's building caused open, public disagreement and argument.

The Early Days: Why an Exposition?

To achieve this tremendous scene that was presented at the opening of the Woman's Building, years of labor and work had been required. The beauty, organization, and all that would be displayed throughout the six months the exhibit lasted was an achievement of pride. But all this did not come together easily or quickly.

The idea for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition originated in a set of letters written by a Mr. Douglas Anderson. Anderson sent letters to multiple papers across Tennessee in August of 1892 urging that an exposition mark the one-hundredth year of statehood. According to him, Tennesseans " should celebrate the occasion because they are a progressive people; because an exposition would redound to the pecuniary benefit of the State; and keep alive State pride."⁶ These letters were largely ignored until fall of 1893 when the issue was raised again by W.C. Smith. Smith was a prominent Nashville

⁶ Justi, ed., *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 13.

architect who brought the idea forward to the city's Commercial Club.⁷ The members quickly grasped onto the idea, but the process came together slowly. By 1894, a committee had been established to look for support from Tennessee's counties. After the initial meeting, the members decided that the proposed exhibition should feature culture as well as commerce, and so this group resolved to add a woman's department.⁸ Thus, these first meetings set the groundwork, but it would take four years for everything to come together.

Expositions were popular events throughout nineteenth-century America and Europe. These events "provided manufacturing and commercial interest with opportunities to promote the mass consumption of their products."⁹ For their part, business leaders in Nashville wanted to use an exhibition to create a new image of the South. As historian Bruce Harvey explains, "expositions, which had a tradition of showing the enormous scope of human activity from technological inventions to music, had enormous potential to put southerners in a more favorable light, and to improve their image and standing in the rest of the country."¹⁰ As Nashville promoters saw it, an

⁷ Bruce Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent: Atlanta, Nashville, and Charleston, 1895-1902* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 32.

⁸ Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 34. There were a multitude of different groups and committees that were part of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. The Woman's Department and Woman's Board both refer to the main organization for the work done for the Woman's Building. The board was made up of many members broken up into smaller committees to handle specific rooms or tasks. The Executive Committee was a small group of women who oversaw the entire Woman's Department. The Centennial Company was the organization made up of Tennessee men that handled the business and organization of the entire exposition.

⁹ Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

¹⁰ Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 17.

exposition would show the world the progress that Tennessee had made. The celebration of statehood helped to set their event apart. Just as important, the emphasis on the state, patriotism, and the work of women would help to make it more than just a commercial event. The anniversary of admission provided the opportunity to show Tennessee's refinement, not just its prosperity. To fulfill this cultural role, women were necessary.

Women's buildings had been an important part of bringing cultural and refinement to expositions. The first woman's building appeared at the exposition in Vienna in 1873. While Vienna was the first, Chicago in 1893 set more important precedents. The Windy City's building was the first to be designed by a woman and run by women auxiliaries. As well, it only exhibited items created by women.¹¹ The success at Chicago created a standard for Tennessee women to look to when designing and organizing years later. The state's elite took the lessons they learned from watching their counterparts in Chicago to make their building in Nashville.

This is where the story begins for the Tennessee Centennial's structure. Women were involved early on in this project. Herman Justi wrote that "the women stood as a wall between the Exposition and the possibility of failure."¹² Their hard work, and determination created a building that would be a highlight of the fair.

¹¹ Mary Pepchinski, "Woman's Buildings at European and American World's Fair, 1893-1939," in *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World's Fairs*, ed. T.J. Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 187.

¹² Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 143.

Mrs. J. Harvey Mathes is credited as being one of the first women to vow support for the project. Mathes was the first State Regent of the Daughters of the American Revolution of Tennessee and was responsible for starting fourteen chapters of the organization.¹³ In addition, Mary L Baxter, president of the Ladies Hermitage Association, added her name and connections. As the volunteers gathered, a Woman's Board was elected in November of 1894. Mrs. John Overton was elected president, with Mary Boyce Temple as Vice President, and Mildred Mathes as Secretary. During Overton's short time as president, she and her administration assisted in planting a tree on the State Capitol grounds in April of 1895.¹⁴ This was one of the first Centennial celebrations to be held. Overton resigned two months later.

Mrs. Hu L. Craighead was quickly elected to succeed Overton and began the intensive work of planning the exposition. Craighead began by appointing commissioners to the department from across the state. Bettie M. Donelson was appointed to help as chair of the Executive Committee. It was in this time that fundraising became one of the most important tasks the group undertook.

The women used a variety of methods to garner funds for their cause. One of the most profitable of these efforts was a woman's edition of the *Nashville American* and the *Knoxville Tribune*.¹⁵ These special editions were each written and edited solely by

¹³ Mrs. Thomas Williams [Martha S.] Willis, ed., *History of the Tennessee Daughters of the American Revolution* (Knoxville?, Tenn.: Tennessee DAR, 1991), 10.

¹⁴ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 144.

¹⁵ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 144.

women and sold for funds going to the Woman's Department. Other efforts included a Nashville showing of *Ben Hur*, classical concerts, and concessions in the Woman's Building for sale.¹⁶

Another major way they succeeded in raising money was getting other groups and states involved. The Woman's Department was made up of committees dedicated to certain tasks; a few of these were Ways and Means, Fine Art, Library, Music, Space, Building and Interior Decoration, to name a few.¹⁷ Each of these committees were tasked with organizing their specific area. Different groups could request space for exhibits, which lightened the financial load on the department as a whole to fill the space. Groups from various counties reached out and requested room space. The women of Cheatham county supplied the Model Kitchen, while the women of Maury county made the Mount Vernon room, other rooms were filled by groups from other states. The women of Georgia furnished one such of these rooms. One of the participants involved in the set up of the Georgia room had been a major figure in the Atlanta Exposition. These women were connected across the country which helped to fill the building.¹⁸ The space was theirs to decorate and design, thus sharing the load with other women and bringing more exhibits into the building. By the fall 1895, work was proceeding nicely.

¹⁶ Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 232.

¹⁷ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 154-158.

¹⁸ Virginia Grant Darney, "Women and World's Fairs: American International Expositions, 1876-1904" (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1982), 127; "In Woman's Building," *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

Women's Clubs

The expeditious work of designing and funding the Woman's Building would not have been possible without the foundation of the women's club movement. These organizations were some of the most powerful of their time. Organized women were a force to be reckoned with and were a defining feature of nineteenth-century womanhood and society.

Women's groups grew in number after the Civil War. Anne Firor Scott argues that women's clubs began in the church. "For many married women church work was the essential first step toward emancipation from their antebellum image of themselves and of 'women's sphere'."¹⁹ In Scott's view church work incubated emergent leadership and organizational work. As the process progressed, women formed groups outside of the church. Temperance societies were next in Scott's progression of women's clubs. The Women's Christian Temperance Union was the largest. Founded in 1874, it grew in influence and action after Frances Willard took leadership in 1879. In particular, the W.C.T.U. found fertile ground in the South. The third and final step in Scott's progression was the founding of women's clubs devoted to education and self-improvement. These associations were dedicated to a multitude of purposes and quickly grew to deal with many social issues.²⁰

¹⁹ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 140.

²⁰ Anne Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984), 217.

As their purposes multiplied, the number of clubs grew in the late nineteenth century, in part because "women's increased exposure to the participants of work of established clubs inspired their emulation in greater and greater proportions."²¹ Karen Blair notes, "clubs were generally composed of women who shared a common background of some sort."²² Depending upon the club, it would grow with the addition of other women with a similar interest or experience, which could range from an emphasis on a school or religion, to a similar interest in literature, history, or larger topics like motherhood or suffrage. Scott identifies that another contributing factor to this growth was the expositions. "The development of clubs was also stimulated by various expositions and world's fair which brought people together and focused attention upon women."²³ There had to be organization to create and fill these exposition spaces and working through a women's club was the most effective way to accomplish this task.

The growth in the number of these clubs provided an opportunity for elite women to develop a vision of proper, refined womanhood. These groups provided training grounds for women in politics, society, reading, grammar, and public speaking. Blair observes that "women may have shied from criticism of their grammar, but they did not fail to learn to organize committees, plan and execute club programs, use parliamentary procedure, and study general themes from several perspectives, and chair meetings, often

²¹ Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Refined, 1864-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), 61.

²² Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, 63.

²³ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 156.

by using a rotating chair so everyone would gain experience. Club members gained a little knowledge, some selfishness, and self-confidence, attributes that had always been available to most men." ²⁴ These women's groups provided a place for women to learn and put these new skills into action. Scott reflects on this, writing that "It will also show how much associations allowed some women to train themselves for new roles in the society; a process that in itself led to a profound social change."²⁵

By 1897, the South had experienced this growth, and Tennessee was experiencing the benefits of organized women in action. There were already groups that had been organized within churches, but many had been established for veterans, memorialization efforts, and other philanthropic interests. Don Doyle argues that "Nashville women had a longer tradition of organized philanthropy than their counterparts in Atlanta."²⁶ One of the most noted was the Ladies Hermitage Association. Doyle points out that this group became, "the most socially prominent among several recently organized patriotic and social clubs."²⁷ Founded in 1889, the group dedicated itself to preserving Andrew Jackson's mansion. The wives of major Nashville businessmen and politicians joined up. The influence of Jackson's home and the association was all over the Woman's Building. The association was given prominence on convocation days. The Hermitage convocation was run by the Ladies Hermitage Association and was the first convocation to be held in

²⁴ Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, 69.

²⁵ Anne Firor Scott, "On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility," *The Journal of American History* 71, no.1 (June 1984): 10.

²⁶ Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 224.

²⁷ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 146.

the Woman's Building. The members of the group were even given the honor to have its president give Kirkman a gift at the opening ceremony for the Woman's Building.

While the Ladies Hermitage Association was one of the more dominant groups, there were many others that were involved in the Woman's Building. Advocates for women's suffrage, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Conference of Women's Clubs, to name a few, played a role in planning the building. Each of these groups was dedicated to a specific task and recruited a certain type of woman-white, privileged women. Nonetheless the women in clubs had something in common, a uniting factor. They were all women of privileged society who were working for some sort of cause. For the women in Nashville, and the state, there were plenty of causes and groups to fill the building with exhibits and activities.

Unwomanly Women

With the momentum of the Exposition and women's club movements behind them, Tennessee's organized polite women seemed to have an easy path to creating their building for the Centennial. However, the planners faced complications. Specifically, there were two: clarifying their role within the larger Centennial Exposition Company, and conflict amongst themselves. These problems revealed the risks of trying to organize the cause of an exalted womanhood.

The issue that arose from the Centennial Exposition Company was determining the status of the organized women. The members of the Woman's Board did not see themselves as merely another group to be directed by the overall directorship.²⁸ The

²⁸ Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 231.

women's contingent decided to separate their work from the larger Centennial Board. Harvey implies that the Tennessee planners were reacting to what they saw in Chicago because they were reflecting back on what they had been through.²⁹ One of the first decisions of the Woman's Board was to not fundraise for the Centennial Company. All funds raised went directly to the Woman's Board for their own use. In return, the board agreed to promote exhibits and the exposition.³⁰ This promotion would be helpful, but it left the Centennial Company to sort out its own funding.

In November of 1895, the women petitioned the Centennial Company, "We desire you to empower this department," the Woman's Board asked, "with the authority to meet together, formulate its own by-laws, elect its own officers, fill vacancies that may occur from time to time, & have the power to place 21 additional women in said department, provided it is deemed best."³¹ This autonomous department would oversee the Woman's Building, its activities, and have a separate board that was solely in charge. A month later the Centennial Company officially gave them the power requested. The birth of this official department gave the group its own seal and the ability to elect its own officers.³² This allowed Kirkman the opportunity to gain power and in turn created the internal conflict.

²⁹ Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 231.

³⁰ Harvey, *World's Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 231.

³¹ Undated Resolutions, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee (hereinafter TSLA).

³² Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

Craighead stepped down from office after the Woman's Board was given power to make decisions on its own. Donelson wrote that Craighead had done this so that the women could elect their own leader.³³ This led to a showdown between two major women in Nashville society: Bettie Donelson and Kirkman.

Donelson was from a prominent family in Nashville and a distant relative of Rachel Donelson Jackson. She was active in Nashville society and multiple women's clubs. In particular, she was part of the Ladies Hermitage Association. She also joined the suffrage movement and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.³⁴ She was active early in the organization of the Woman's Board and worked with Craighead in the efforts to fundraise.

For her part, Kirkman was a Memphis native and the granddaughter of Catherine and Jacob Thompson. On December 31, 1886 she married Van Leer Kirkman in a grand affair in Memphis. The Kirkmans built an estate, called Oak Hill to the south of Nashville, where they raised horses and their three children.³⁵ Kirkman's husband was involved in the Centennial Company when she was voted in as president of the Woman's Board. Kirkman's move into this position of power caused a rupture.

³³ Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

³⁴ "Women's Studies at the Tennessee State Library and Archives," TSLA, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/women%E2%80%99s-studies-tennessee-state-library-and-archives>.

³⁵ Anne Toplovich, "Kate Thompson & Van Leer Kirkman: 'A Brilliant and Noted Wedding,' December 30, 1886," The Tennessee Historical Society, December 29, 2017, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.tennesseehistory.org/kate-thompson-van-leer-kirkmana-brilliant-noted-wedding-december-30-1886/>.

Donelson saw Kirkman's ascension as a pure power grab. The former wrote to Susie Gentry, another board member and part of the Library Committee, "that the rule or ruin faction of the Woman's Board was at work on the Presidency and working hard to root out the old members" and that Kirkman would "exterminate the whole board."³⁶ Donelson went on stating that the voting session would be a "monkey and parrot show" and urged Gentry to come to the meeting. Kirkman won the election and took the role of president, but it was highly contested. The arguments centered on the use of voting by proxy in the department. Women were selected to vote in the stead of another who could not be there and designated as the proxy. The argument over proxies split the department.

Donelson's response was to resign and to publish a scathing letter about what had happened. As such, it is a particularly revealing letter because Donelson shifted the conflict from a personal clash with Kirkman to the principles of refined womanhood. The letter is not just an indictment against the usage of proxies, but a discussion of proper womanly behavior.

Donelson got straight to the point. She compared the proper behavior of organized women with the presumably sordid behavior of men. In the process she also suggested that a double standard was at work: "In conventions composed of men, it is allowable that even our law-makers may throw ink stands, paper weights, etc., and the report goes out all right; but if women in convention stand firm for principle preferring to use brain and

³⁶ Bettie M. Donelson to Susie Gentry, February 17, 1896, Box 2, Folder 5, Susie Gentry Papers Addition, TSLA. Donelson's letter is the only documented response that was found. Kirkman's response is unknown.

tongue to those of paper weights, etc., the report invariably goes out that those women are 'fussing,' hence I do not regard the rupture in our Board as a fuss but a most deplorable, serious affair."³⁷ It might be that disagreements among the women were dismissed as 'fussing', but for Donelson, this was a disgraceful event.

The disgrace came from the behavior of the women involved. Donelson's resignation was simply a response to it. Donelson argued that Kirkman and her cronies were a "star chamber." They wrote by-laws and ended her position, only notifying her an hour before the meeting. Worse, they did this within a private residence and without the knowledge of the entire board.³⁸ Stating the obvious, Donelson noted that "this seemed to me a late hour to notify me, after two months' time in which to report, so I presumed one or two members feared if notified earlier, I would adopt the political juggling heretofore practiced by some of my colleagues and solicit votes of my own retention."³⁹ Thus, Kirkman and her cohort were playing the sordid political games of the Democrats and Republicans. Kirkman and her followers met in secret and purged an unwanted member. As Donelson portrayed it, she acted the womanly part, expressing feminine outrage at the corruption and chicanery. Earlier she had reached out to women involved with the Atlanta and Chicago expositions to see if they had dealt with the same problem. She then worked with other women in the department to sign a petition. She faced taunting at the loss of her position within the board. Her final act was sending out her letter to explain

³⁷ Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

³⁸ Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

³⁹ Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

all the work she had done and why she had been forced to leave. Through it all she remained “self-poised to accept the decapitation when it came.”⁴⁰

The conclusion of her letter summed up her condemnation of Kirkman and her cronies. “Many regret, and none more than I, the deplorable, the unholy scramble for notoriety resorted to in our Tennessee board.” She continued, “alas, a few members have caused us to be recorded as breaking all former records of women’s boards, outranking many political jugglers, thus branding the entire womanhood of the State in such a manner that it will take perhaps one hundred years to redeem, as woman alone bears the blame.”⁴¹ Thus, according to Donelson, Kirkman was worse than men who threw paper weights because women should demand more of themselves. Their worthiness should always be transparent.

As it happened there was more to this disagreement than a violation of proper procedure. Harvey argues that a serious political divide separated the two women, although it was never mentioned.⁴² Donelson had a different agenda in mind for the exposition. She was an active member of Tennessee’s suffrage movement as well as the Ladies Hermitage Association. Her activism was well known and, in the years, following the exposition would only grow.

Kirkman, however, wanted to downplay or avoid the voting rights question. She would give the suffrage movement the chance to present its case, just like any of the

⁴⁰ Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

⁴¹ Printed statement by Bettie Mizell Donelson, Box 2, Folder 8, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, TSLA.

⁴² Harvey, *World’s Fairs in a Southern Accent*, 234.

other groups that were scheduled to present. But suffrage was never highlighted or made central. Kirkman's version of the Woman's Building that remains in the memory of the state is one where women's work was a combination of traditional roles, and an acceptable expansion of these outside of the home. Kirkman spoke specifically about "God appointed spheres" at the opening. It was these spheres that speakers would work to define and explain. Herman Justi defined this focus as "to promote higher education and broader culture, to enlarge the sphere of woman's activity and influence."⁴³

Kirkman never argued that the vote was necessary for woman's activism. She sought an alternative way to increase the influence and realm of women in nineteenth-century society. Her vision of what the Woman's Department should be was more subtle than Donelson's, if no less expansive.

The goal of the Exposition was to showcase the "New" Tennessee while honoring the past of the state. The Fair would display Tennessee's manufacturing and agriculture potential, but also its refinement and civilized character. It was thus important that organized elite women be involved. As Don Doyle puts it, "the southern lady has been such an important point of regional pride since antebellum times."⁴⁴ This tradition was necessary to continue. After the building was completed in 1895, the next enormous task in front of the women was to determine how to fill it.

⁴³ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 151. Justi did not mention the falling out between the women. He only mentioned that Donelson had resigned.

⁴⁴ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 148.; Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 146.

CHAPTER TWO

Displaying Womanhood

The President's Parlor gleamed in the sun light. The room was adorned in blue and gold paint and designs, the designated colors of the Woman's Department. Tables and chairs filled the room and helped create an appropriate space for men and women to converse in the most refined way of the time. A piano sat in the corner by the window, waiting for someone to take note and strike up a tune to add to the atmosphere of elegance. It was a place of meeting where conversation ranged from the mundane to the philosophical. Men and women mingled and spoke of books, politics, and the latest gossip. But only certain people were welcomed into the parlor – those of a respectable class who knew how to behave by its standards. They were the privileged class whose work was focused on that of the mind and the theoretical.

Down the hall was a room that created a different atmosphere. The Model Kitchen had pots bubbling, pans baking in the oven, and dishes being prepped for food. Aromas filled the air as people in the room were being instructed on how to create certain dishes. Later in the day a group of children would fill the same space to learn about how to prepare meals and about the “art of cooking.” Housekeepers, children, and privileged men and women all viewed and occupied this space throughout the day.

Further down the hall lay a room that displayed the products of women's industrial efforts. The Patent Room housed items that were invented by women. These items covered a wide variety of uses from those for the home to the factory. Visitors could enter the room and marvel at all the female mind had imagined and then physically created. This room displayed women's inventions.

As they walked through their building, women of Tennessee saw a space that to them represented a unity of womanhood. But the physical reality did not match this perception. The parlor, the Model Kitchen, and the Patent room crafted distinct versions of womanhood, each with different tasks. Each room and the items within it was specifically chosen to what womanhood was. For the exhibit creators, womanhood was a single thing. However, the very different rooms with their very different tasks suggest something more complex.

These different spaces show that there were numerous narratives about women. How could some women view all these different spaces and yet see them as united? Somehow these women of privilege could both compartmentalize and unify their view of themselves.

The Privileged Woman's Space

Gentility had an important role in the behavior and work of the women in the late nineteenth century. The privileged class of Tennessee's women acted within the bounds of this refined lifestyle and worked to present it in the Centennial and their homes. Richard Bushman's work *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* provides the framing for understanding this. He offers a detailed analysis of the refined culture of this period, including a discussion of the kinds of objects and physical spaces that Centennial exhibitors developed.



Figure 1. Main Hall, Woman's Building, Source: *Art Album of the Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition: Held at Nashville, May 1 to October 31, 1897*. Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., Publishers, 1898.

The designers wanted to do more than create a pleasant looking building. The exhibitors represented women of the middle and upper social classes that gave them freedom, and a need to be socially responsible. Rooms in a house reflected these values. Refinement was at the heart of their designs. The Woman's Building reflected this refinement in the exhibit rooms.

As they saw it, middle- and upper-class women had an essential role to play in the society of the late nineteenth century. Society held women of privilege up as the civilizers of society, the “exemplars of refinement’s highest virtues—taste, sensibility,

and delicacy—models for men to conform to.”¹ Mrs. Charles Grovesnor, a Woman’s Board member, stated that “[The] Woman of today is what the man of the past has unintentionally made her – the embodiment of his strongest longings, the survival of his highest ideals.”² The fact that Mrs. Grovesnor used these words in this way tells a great deal about how women saw themselves and were seen by society. She was referring to a specific group of women. She meant only the most privileged, refined of all women. Such a woman “[wa]s what the man of the past has made her.” But this was not intentional. Grovesnor made a point to use the word “unintentionally.” Women were the center of moral authority, men were the centers of action. Women’s role as moral authority reflected what men wanted to be, and what everyone should strive to be. Thus, Grovesnor saw women as “the embodiment of his strongest longings, the survival of his highest ideals.”³ Women represent values that men could not attain on their own. Women would civilize the home, men, and society.

The parlor was a critical room to this civilizing project. The parlor was defined as a “region of repose where ease ruled in defiance of the exertions of the economy.”⁴ The space was full of goods, tables, chairs, porcelain pieces, and other items. It would also include such notable objects as pianos or parlor organs which reflected the wealth of the

¹ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 440.

² “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

³ “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

⁴ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 263.

owner.⁵ This instrument was often located in the room for music to be played as people sat and discussed the hot topics of the day. All of it reflected the wealth of the family. The items within the parlor, according to Bushman, exemplified “repose, polish, economically useless knowledge, beauty, and decorative activity, all pointless in the marketplace and factory.”⁶

The parlor was physically and culturally a prominent space within the home.⁷ It was seen as one of the highest examples of privilege. The space had specific rules and codes of conduct that dictated every action. Manners dictated behavior as people gathered together to discuss a variety of topics. How a person acted in the parlor could show if they had been raised or educated in the world of polite society. Every action was performed in a specific way, and a misstep clearly defined a person as lacking refinement and class.⁸ Thus it was important that the parlor was the room most identified with women. It was the room in which they spent a great deal of time. It served a dual purpose as being a space used for both public and private times for the family.⁹ This was the place where women wielded the most influence and power in the home.

⁵ Kenneth L. Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 156.

⁶ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 264.

⁷ Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 23.

⁸ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 273.

⁹ Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, 25.

The President's Parlor brought this power of refinement to the Woman's Building. The first time the parlor was used was on Tennessee Day, when a reception was held for "distinguished visitors from a distance" after a luncheon at the Roof Garden Café.¹⁰ Herman Justi, the Centennial's official chronicler, did not list these visitors by name, but they had traveled to the event and were important enough in society to earn the description as being "distinguished." They were worthy of being invited to the President's Parlor.

One group that was listed by name as being hosted in the President's Parlor was the First Lady of the United States and her entourage. President William McKinley and his wife, Mrs. Ida McKinley came to the fair for the celebration of Ohio Day. There are two recorded instances of the President's Parlor being used during their visit. On the evening of June 11th, the first day of the presidential visit, a reception was held for the group. After a meal held in their honor, the president and entourage moved to the Woman's Building and straight to the parlor, where they were received by Kate Kirkman and other members of the Woman's Board. It was here that the President greeted many of Nashville's elite as they came to welcome him.

The next day, Mrs. McKinley and the other ladies of her party were brought to the Woman's Building for a breakfast in her honor. Justi describes Mrs. McKinley's entrance into the building. "At one o'clock, Mrs. McKinley, entered the Woman's Building on the arm of General [Russell] Alger, and she was then taken in charge by Mrs. Kirkman and

¹⁰ Herman Justi, ed., *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition Opened May 1 and Closed October 30, 1897* (Nashville: Brandon Printing, 1897), 227.

Mrs. Alger, who drove out in the carriage with her and they escorted her to the President's Parlor. She sat by the large open window of this room and conversed pleasantly with the ladies present."¹¹ Mrs. McKinley's visit brought her directly to the President's Parlor where she reigned as the most privileged woman in America. It was the space that the Woman's Board wanted to show off, and was the room that provided the most refined decoration in the building. It was the perfect place to hold a reception for the First Lady. It was the space that would allow these national guests to see what the women of Tennessee could show their cosmopolitan sophistication. The room provided the perfect stage for all the women to show off their manners and their minds.

For practitioners of refinement, a library also mattered as a room. As Richard Bushman states, "no single item was more essential to a respectable household than a collection of books, and no activity more effectual for refinement and personal improvement than reading."¹² The involvement of women in literature through reading and writing spread ideas about morals, values, and refinement to readers. Works written by women in the nineteenth century were to share a message whether it be about genteel society, religious beliefs, or moral lessons.¹³ Just as having proper manners set one above the others in the parlor, being knowledgeable and well-read indicated civilized superiority.

¹¹ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 252.

¹² Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 282.

¹³ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 227.

For this reason, the Woman's Library, was the most expensive room in the Centennial Building. It was created to show the power and breadth of the female mind. The members of the committee reached out to friends and prominent women across the country to find works to fill the shelves.¹⁴ Mrs. Ann Snyder, honorary chairman of the Library Committee, encouraged a member of her board to "take an inspecting turn in the libraries of your friends, see if you cannot find some old Treasures, in the line of Women Writers. They are the sweetest – Miss Susie, don't you think so? If successful promise, the greatest care and same return after the exposition."¹⁵ When asking for works Mrs. Snyder said to look in the libraries of friends, specifically referring to women of the middle and upper class who would have had a library in their home. This is not reaching out to the community about women authors but pulling them from the homes of the wealthy and established women of Nashville. Snyder's requested also included "old treasures." She was not just looking for recent literary achievements by women writers, but for those from the past. Snyder, in other words, sought to create a comprehensive library showing women's writing over time. What resulted was a room with multiple bookcases and over three thousand books on the shelves.¹⁶

There was something more to these books though. They were not randomly chosen, or easily acquired. The Library Committee looked for all types of works to fill

¹⁴ Mrs. Ann E. Snyder to Susie Gentry, August 10, 1896, Box 2, Folder 5, Susie Gentry Papers Addition, TSLA.

¹⁵ Mrs. Ann E. Snyder to Susie Gentry, August 10, 1896, Box 2, Folder 5, Susie Gentry Papers Addition, TSLA.

¹⁶ "In Woman's Building," *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

the shelves. "Standard works as well as novels and all classes of works of fiction. We are working for an exhibit in our library to excel all others before us."¹⁷ This desire for excellence meant that works were accepted from other women of privilege around the country. One example of this was highlighted in an article about a loan of books by Mrs. Mary Spring of San Antonio, Texas¹⁸ It shows the variety of titles ranging from a work on the history of San Antonio, to a compilation of musical compositions to poetry.¹⁹

¹⁷ Mrs. Ann E. Snyder to Susie Gentry, September 25, 1896, Box 2, Folder 5, Susie Gentry Papers Addition, TSLA.

¹⁸ "Bright Books from Texas," *Nashville Banner*, June 4, 1897.

¹⁹ "Bright Books from Texas," *Nashville Banner*, June 4, 1897.



Figure 2. Library, Woman's Building. Source: *Art Album of the Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition: Held at Nashville, May 1 to October 31, 1897*. Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., Publishers, 1898.

The Assembly Hall was another space in the Woman's Building where mind and manners were physically on display. Full of oak furniture with green draperies along the windows, the room was a large open space that could welcome larger numbers for events. Lectures, meeting, musical concerts, and large receptions were held in this room. A major feature of the room was the design on the ceiling, "a happily conceived allegory of woman's work in the Centennial."²⁰ A photo of the room in Justi's *History of the*

²⁰ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 147.

Tennessee Centennial shows two large windows. Tables and chairs fill the center space with plants and painting lining the walls. The decorations are simple yet tasteful, allowing for the room to be changed into a space that could be used for an elegant reception, or a lecture. It was a central place for conversation and entertainment in the building. The design of the room retained a sense of decorum while being adaptable for different situations, allowing for plenty of different options to create the most presentable and respectable space.

The Assembly Room was arguably one of the busiest rooms in the building. The space was regularly filled with people attending the convocation presentations throughout the length of the exposition, lectures, receptions. These meetings, called convocations, on a variety of topics were held by different groups for example, higher education for women, suffrage, and women's clubs, as just a few examples.²¹ Each time the room was used it was decorated with flowers and the appropriate setting, whether that be tables and chairs, or a simple set up for lectures. The atmosphere of the room had to fit the program that was to occur within the room. Some events required much more work in table design and layout than others.

The ultimate example of this was the reception held for Mrs. McKinley. A photo of the table display gives a glimpse of the atmosphere these women worked so hard to create. The image shows ferns and other small green plants filling the center of the table while vases of flowers are spaced evenly around the outside of the plants. Small

²¹ *Catalogue Woman's Department Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition, May 1 to October 31, 1897* (Nashville: Bruce Hinton Press, 1897), 9.

candelabras were placed around the table as well. On the edge of the table stood gleaming dishes with multiple utensils on each side. It was quite a display to behold.



Figure 3: Reception for First Lady, Woman's Building Source: *Art Album of the Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition: Held at Nashville, May 1 to October 31, 1897*. Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., Publishers, 1898.

The party was impressed with the extravagant display. Mrs. McKinley described the reception saying. "It was quite the daintiest breakfast I have known. Everything was deliciously tasteful and enjoyable."²² Mrs. Alger, wife of Russell Alger, Secretary of War, stated that "no entertainment which she ever attended in the country or abroad

²² "What the Visitors Said," *Nashville Banner*, June 14, 1897.

compared in beauty of decorations and daintiness and hospitality with it.”²³ Critically, both Alger and McKinley used the words “daintiest” and “daintiness” to describe the scene presented. By definition, the word is meant to signify something graceful or elegant, but also petite. The word implies a more delicate elegance, one that has been typically associated with femininity. No decoration was overbearing, no item placed that would be dark or overly dominating.

The article went on to describe that the visitors were “perfectly elated with the consummate taste of Mrs. Ed Fall shown in the arrangement of the tables and decorations.”²⁴ The pleasure that the women of Mrs. McKinley’s party took from the décor and table arrangements can be seen as a magnificent compliment to the women. They proved that they were capable of creating a display that was entertaining and refined to the highest degree. The “consummate” taste shown by Mrs. Fall, and the fact that she is specifically named here solidifies her place as a refined woman. These women were proving how advanced the women of Tennessee were to a group of the most notable women in the United States as their taste in decorations was an extension of the women themselves. This highlighted that the elite women of Tennessee knew how to appropriately stage a reception that could garner high compliments and praise. These women of Tennessee were doing more than just showing what they could do, they showed what they were expected to do.

The study and presentation of history also mattered to elevated women. The Centennial Exposition, as a celebration of a century of Tennessee statehood, made history

²³ “What the Visitors Said,” *Nashville Banner*, June 14, 1897.

²⁴ “What the Visitors Said,” *Nashville Banner*, June 14, 1897.

a major topic. The Exposition's history building dedicated multiple rooms to the history of the founding of Tennessee, including two displays created by women's groups: the Ladies Hermitage Association and the Daughters of the American Revolutions. Women presented history in their own building as well, using their authority to exhibit their views of the state's past. What they did chose to showcase or omit gives insight into what they considered important or believed was necessary for them to highlight.

For example, the Colonial Bedroom, assembled by the women of Sumner County, created the feeling of a home, but also domestic refinement as defined in the early eighteenth century. It was boasted in promotions that every object in the room was at least one hundred years old if not more, and that most of the larger pieces had a connection to a noted historical figure.²⁵ In a newspaper article discussing the opening of the Woman's Building, some of the objects in the room are listed, including, "the clock and bed of General Winchester of Revolutionary fame; a table that was Martin Van Buren's; mirrors that belonged to Andrew Jackson; a very old toilet table now owned by Mrs. Scott Baker; a candelabra 135 years old, and the gun that General Harry Smith carried through the Revolution."²⁶ All of these items were on display for visitors to gaze upon, and be impressed with their connection to historical figures and how old the items were. They provided a visible display of history and a tangible representation of the past.

²⁵ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 44; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 149.

²⁶ "Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee," *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

The article also noted that “every article is a relic.”²⁷ It is significant that a distinction is made in describing these objects. The word relic implies that the items were not only old but have historical value because of their age and connection to a person of historical significance. Relics were displayed throughout the building and their important association was intentionally noted for all to appreciate.

Similarly, The Ladies Hermitage Association Room brought together history, relics, and the involvement of women’s groups. Their room was dedicated to Andrew Jackson. It was part of the two rooms that were under the control of the ladies of Rutherford County. The room was filled with painting of Jackson and his wife, Rachel, and furniture from the Hermitage, which the Ladies Hermitage Association had worked to preserve and restore. Some smaller objects were on display. Souvenirs made from hickory trees at the Hermitage were available for sale, allowing people to buy a piece of history.²⁸

This room was just one place that the Ladies Hermitage Association was able to connect with major audiences. The room itself was dedicated to Andrew Jackson and highlighted his importance to the people of Tennessee. Jackson was an incredibly well-known and venerated figure. The point of the exhibit was to display the furniture and relics which belonged to a famous man, the man held as the best example of the state. Moreover, during his lifetime he had been dedicated to the Union. He thus connected visitors to a time before the Civil War, to a hero from Tennessee who fought to preserve

²⁷ “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

²⁸ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 47. These souvenirs were sold for the benefit of the Ladies Hermitage Association.

the nation in word and deed. It allowed people to focus on the unity of the country instead of the pesky question of persistent sectionalism. Jackson was part of the early of history of Tennessee that the Women's Board emphasized.

This theme of the early history of Tennessee continued in the Mount Vernon exhibit. The women of Maury County put together a room to highlight George Washington, along with some of the men in the early history of the state. The furniture was copied off colonial designs and was to be donated to Mount Vernon at the end of the Exposition for the "Tennessee Room" there.²⁹ Other items on display included: a military chest belonging to General Washington, a Book of Common Prayer printed during George I's reign, a peach cobbler dish originally owned by Jane Knox, mother of President Polk, and Ordinance Books originally owned by General Greene.³⁰ Unidentified relics of the time were also on display, on loan from the Jane Knox Chapter of the DAR from Maury County. All of these items placed Tennessee in the historical narrative of the eighteenth century, while also exemplifying the best of the items that Tennessee had at the time. These items demonstrated how people of the time lived a refined and privileged life.

And privilege was the point. The described purpose of the room was to "commemorate the link existing between Tennessee history and Revolutionary History, when the Tennesseans, under their leaders, Sevier, Shelby, Robertson, Campbell, and

²⁹ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 35.

³⁰ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 35.

others and their involvement in the history of America.”³¹ The list only contains wealthy, well-known men, who would be most recognizable to a national audience and would have the money to live a more refined lifestyle in the eighteenth century. It created a picture that Tennessee, as a southern state, had never been an area behind the times.

This historical presentation continued on a larger scale in a Log Cabin on the side of the Woman’s Building. When looking at the two buildings, a visitor sees the humble frontier home standing next to the refined and advanced Woman’s Building. The interior of the log cabin was described in an article in the *Nashville American*, “here the big fireplace, the swinging kettle, the oven, the wash pot, the rude furniture, all tell in eloquence louder than words what the wives and others of a hundred years ago underwent for their husbands and sons.”³² Specifically noted were the “rude” conditions that ruled women’s lives during the borderland period: wash pots, fireplaces, and clay floors made the point.³³ The author noted the sacrifices that women made for their husbands and sons, The drudgery of women’s work was done for her family. There was no discussion of her mental or cultural learning, but of the physical trades in which she was involved to keep her family fed, clothed, and safe.

The article goes on to compare these to “the elegant furnishing, the gas range, the curtains, rugs, bric-a-brac and other costly luxuries that the woman of today considers a necessary part of her comfort.”³⁴ Every item described in the log cabin had a specific

³¹ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 35.

³² “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

³³ “Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

³⁴ “In Woman’s Building,” *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

purpose or was a tool, while in comparison the Woman's Building not only had useful items but also "bric-a-brac." The author of this article, almost mockingly, observed that items found in the Woman's Building and the "modern" home were things of comfort. They emphasized the refinement of the home and were necessary for that reason. Regarding physical necessity, this "bric-a-brac" served no practical purpose. For this reason, in comparison to the items in the log cabin, some of the items seemed trivial. But they were a testament to the progress in the South. They demonstrated that privileged women no longer had to do physical work. They now experienced an ease that "pioneer women" could not have imagined. The women who designed the exhibits lived a life free of many of the responsibilities of "pioneer women". Slavery had given their mothers and grandmothers free time. Now, as Scott wrote, " thanks to the increasing availability of factory-made goods and of poorly paid black and white household servants, these women were relieved of much domestic responsibility and were finding, or making for themselves, steadily widening opportunities in the new urban-industrial world."³⁵

Thus, as these historical display rooms demonstrated, the world that women inhabited had changed dramatically. In 1897 they were totally removed from the lives most of their borderland foremothers had experienced. The items showed a vast change in women's roles in the home. In the log cabin womanhood was defined around physical domestic labor. In 1897, by contrast women were involved in a larger realm of activities, and a lifestyle that allowed for the enjoyment of goods and refined lifestyle. Women of the middle and upper class had moved towards the parlor and the library, leaving servants

³⁵ Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991), 80.

to do the cooking. In these spaces, women continued to connect history to the advancement of refinement in the state

The Decorative Arts room highlighted this historical movement. The artwork was displayed in the largest room on the second floor of the building.³⁶ The walls were adorned with a frieze depicting fall leaves.³⁷ While every room displayed something, this room was specifically laid out to showcase creations by women's hands and minds, including needlework, 143 paintings and other wall décor, and multiple cases full of china, lace, miniatures and embroidery.

This art represented more than just the talent of women from Tennessee. It showcased their involvement in the arts, which would be expected of the most refined women. The exhibit displayed different types that showed the variety of activities. As such, the exhibits demonstrated the work that the women of Tennessee were capable of creating. Every piece chosen for this room represented the quality and talent. In short, the leisure taken away from physical labor allowed them to create feminine and intelligent artwork.

The lace exhibit continued the display of the beauty that women could create. It featured ninety-eight cases full of lace from across the globe along with some other handcrafted items. This exhibit was placed in the annex—the last space added to the building—and laces were loaned by the Smithsonian. The Woman's Department

³⁶ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 29.

³⁷ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 29.

Catalogue described them. “These rich laces hang around the room in profusion, and the arrangement is such as to impress their beauty on every visitor.”³⁸

The exhibit was a beautiful display but was not directly tied to the history of Tennessee. All the items were borrowed and so highlighted the most cosmopolitan of women’s achievements. Lace conveyed a cultured, privileged lifestyle. It took time to produce and money to buy.

Women Inventing: Patenting a New Role for Women

The Patent and Inventions Room created a vision of women very different from the one presented by the parlor and the library. Displayed here were the results of women’s practical nature: tools, hands-on labor, and workshops. This was a far departure from the woman sitting in the parlor, or painting in a studio. It was a different kind of creation that placed women into a variety of new industries. And the variation was expensive. All sorts of items were included from such household devices as an “invalid’s bed, baking and roasting pans, window cleaner reel, and an egg whip,” to more technological items such as “Pullman Car, car coupler, typewriter appliances, and a washing machine.”³⁹ These inventions covered a broad spectrum.

The Patent Room organized a display of objects designed by women that went beyond the home. The items were usable in places like the factory or stable. Inventions such as smoke protectors or more commonly called smoke detectors, car couplers, and

³⁸ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 59.

³⁹ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 39.

washing machines showed women's involvement in railroads and industry.⁴⁰ Justi noted the novelty. "The room and its unique exhibit proved that woman's mind had invaded and mastered this field of human action."⁴¹ In other words, Justi called attention to a boundary crossing. Many of the items had been displayed previously at the Atlanta Exposition, but to Justi this was still an exhibit outside of the norm. Displaying the creation of women in the fine and decorated arts made sense, for this was expected from refined women. The invention of a new mechanical object was not. Thus, Justi used the word "invaded" to refer to this field of inventing. He insisted that women had burst into the field unexpectedly, intruding on what had been a male field. More than this, women were not simply invaders in this field, they had become masters of it.

Dividing History: Picking and Choosing What "History" to Display

For all the emphasis that women placed on displaying the history of Tennessee in their building, a certain time period did not have much dedicated to it. Confederate history was noticeably absent from the major historical displays throughout the building. Civil War relics were listed as being on display in the building in various cases, or could have been in the unlisted collections, but a larger discussion of the event was absent.

By 1897, the group most involved in the memory of the Confederacy was the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Founded in Nashville in 1894, the organization had five primary tasks, according to Karen Cox: "to define women's responsibility with

⁴⁰ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 42.

⁴¹ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 149.

the Confederate Celebration: memorial, historical, benevolent, educational and social.”⁴² Despite this sweeping charge, the organization appeared to have little presence at the Centennial Exposition. As listed in Justi’s History, the UDC was part of the lineup for the Confederate Day parade, as the second to last group. It was not listed as having an exhibit in the Woman’s Building. The other two references to the UDC were similarly vague. Although Justi stated that “the Confederate and Mexican Veterans, the Grand Army associations, the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Ladies Confederate Memorial Associations, and all kindred patriotic associations are invited and expected to contribute” to the Centennial, his *Official History* only specifically notes their involvement in the Confederate Veterans Day celebrations.⁴³

In fact, the UDC’s involvement did not extend past the History Building. The Woman’s Building had no exhibit specifically designed by the UDC even though there were exhibits set up there by the Ladies Hermitage Association and the Daughters of the American Revolution.⁴⁴ In fact, many women’s groups had “special days” which had celebrations, or lectures held by the group or on specific topics. Some of these days were listed in the woman’s department catalogue: “Hermitage Association of Nashville, Suffrage Day, Household Economics Day, Watauga Chapter of the D.A. R, The General

⁴² Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 18-19.

⁴³ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 130.

⁴⁴ Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 48-49.

Federation of Clubs, Daughters of the American Revolution, Council of Jewish Women” to name a few.”⁴⁵ The UDC was not present, so much so that the history of the UDC does not even mention the Tennessee Centennial Exposition.⁴⁶

But the UDC women did meet. They had a highly publicized gathering, garnering an entire article in the *Nashville Banner*. The meeting was held in the hall of the House of Representatives in the Capitol building.⁴⁷ “The hall was filled with prominent visitors and loyal sons and daughter of the Confederacy.”⁴⁸ It was a large event, where Mrs. M.C. Goodlet, president of the Tennessee state division of the UDC, stated that “in our prosperity we have not forgotten to honor and perpetuate the memory the gallant men who were left on the battlefields or those who have since passed over the river.”⁴⁹ The Exposition was Tennessee’s modern prosperity, but the Civil War was still present in their memory. According to the UDC, the growth of business and other endeavors had not changed the values of the South, and they still honored those who had been lost in battle. This meeting was held on June 21, 1897 during the time of the Exposition. But it was not celebrated at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, nor was it held in the Woman’s Building as so many other meetings and convocations had been. It was

⁴⁵ *Catalogue Woman's Department*, 9.

⁴⁶ Annie E. Cody, *History of the Tennessee Division United Daughters of the Confederacy* (Nashville: Cullom & Ghertner, 1946), 15.

⁴⁷ "Daughters at Capitol," *Nashville Banner*, June 22, 1897.

⁴⁸ "Daughters at Capitol," *Nashville Banner*, June 22, 1897.

⁴⁹ "Daughters at Capitol," *Nashville Banner*, June 22, 1897.

intentionally not held at the Woman's Building or presented in conjunction with the larger Exposition.

The UDC membership included many of the female white elite of Nashville. They were women well known to each other and involved in similar organizations. Analysis of membership records in 1896 and 1897 for the Ladies Hermitage Association, the UDC, and the DAR provide an interesting picture. There is a great deal of overlap between the women who were involved in these organizations and the women who were listed in the Nashville portion of the State Board of the Woman's Department. The list of women from the Nashville portion of the Woman's Department Board shows that at least five women were a part of the UDC.⁵⁰ The leadership of the UDC was not excluded from the Woman's Board leadership but their organization and the Lost Cause were absent from the Woman's Building.⁵¹ This raises the issue of why they intentionally separated the work of the UDC from that of the other organizations. These women made a conscious decision to keep the Civil War and a larger discussion about it out of their space.

Instead, women chose to highlight the fact that Tennessee had been a valued member of the nation. The women of the board specifically chose to take ownership of those moments in history and to display them. They highlighted the transition from the

⁵⁰ Nashville Chapter No. 1, U.D.C., 1894-1907, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Tennessee Division, Record and Collected Materials, 1828-2013, Oversized Volume, TSLA; Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 154-58. Several names from the UDC documents and the Justi volume overlap. There could be more women than I have found, but this would be difficult to verify. Woman's Department documents record women by their husbands' names. The UDC records cite women by their own first names.

⁵¹ John A. Simpson, *Edith D. Pope and Her Nashville Friends: Guardians of the Lost Cause in the Confederate Veteran* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 125. Simpson ties together some of the women who were part of multiple Nashville organizations. But there is no mention of the UDC at the Tennessee Centennial.

rural frontier days to the 1890s. They showed the material progress of the state and highlighted how Tennessee was in line with the rest of the nation. The issues of secession and the war were pushed to the side, and only brought forth when the UDC aimed at honoring soldiers.

A Model Kitchen for Who?

The Model Kitchen was possibly the most interactive room throughout the Woman's Building. It was a physical model of what the ideal kitchen should be. The women of Cheatham County were behind the funding and furnishing in this room. But there was more to this room than a simple kitchen design. A graduate of the Philadelphia Cooking School, Mrs. S. F. Conwell, was hired to give cooking lessons throughout the Exposition from May through October with the lessons on hold during the hottest parts.⁵² These lessons were targeted at women and children of a certain social stratum.⁵³

A refined woman was a woman who did not have to cook for her family. The middle and upper-class women were expected to have housekeepers or servants to handle this task. This raises a question as about the cooking lessons. Justi made the general point that “many women and children were given new views on the art of cooking, and, what is of more importance, the art of living.”⁵⁴ The *Nashville Banner* referenced two types of classes. One was a children's class directed at young women while the other involved

⁵² Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 150; During the two hottest months of the summer the demonstrations were halted due to the weather, but it appears the kitchen was still open for visitors to see.

⁵³ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 150.

⁵⁴ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 150.

housekeepers.⁵⁵ These “practical cooking lessons” were directed at two seemingly conflicting groups.

Young women of refined birth in the late nineteenth century were less likely to be found in the kitchen. Like their mothers, they would be expected to marry well, and hire a housekeeper to take care of these tasks for them. Suddenly, there seemed to be a shift. “Not only have the grown-up folks been aided, but by forming a children’s class Mrs. Conwell has started an excellent movement regarding instructing young girls in practical cookery.”⁵⁶ Cooking and the understanding of it was transitioning. Cooking was to be practical and efficient, and refined women were to be part of it.

Some of these lessons were directed at housekeepers, as stated in the *Nashville Banner* article. “The women of Cheatham county, who furnished as their exhibit this Model Kitchen, have met with great success in their undertaking; and the daily cooking lessons given there have been a source of benefit and pleasure to housekeepers, and through Mrs. Conwell many new ideas on the culinary arts have been introduced.”⁵⁷ Another article on the Model Kitchen in the *Nashville American* stated that “Mrs. S. F. Conwell, the teacher, made the menu a subject for a talk on economy in housekeeping, giving many practical points in making the most of left over materials.”⁵⁸ The phrasing of this shows a shift occurring in the late 19th century. The use of the phrase “economy of

⁵⁵ “The Woman’s Building,” *Nashville Banner*, July 17, 1897.

⁵⁶ “The Woman’s Building,” *Nashville Banner*, July 17, 1897.

⁵⁷ “The Woman’s Building,” *Nashville Banner*, July 17, 1897.

⁵⁸ “Woman’s Building Notes,” *Nashville American*, May 15, 1897.

housekeeping” means something different than just to take care of a home. It implies something more scientific. Cooking is a precise science and can be managed and made efficient. “This lesson is one of much interest to Southern housekeepers where colored help usually wastes sufficient to feed another family.”⁵⁹ Based on this statement, these elite white women acknowledged they had little to do with the kitchen. This statement also highlights a struggle between African-American housekeepers and the white upper class. What these privileged women might claim as “waste” could translate into a simple misunderstanding in how much food to make or how to serve and preserve it.⁶⁰ But these lessons were specifically to be for housekeepers, and young girls, not for the white privileged women who organized the event. This is the beginning of home economics.⁶¹ Thus, as Centennial exhibitors defined it, cooking was not merely a task, but an art, which led to the “art of living.” The “art of cooking” was now blended with “practical cookery.” Both were to be taught in the kitchen.

Celebrating Women: Honoring Women at the Fair

Refinement was central to the celebration of women at the Centennial Exposition. September 30th of 1897 was even dedicated to them. The day was titled “Kate Kirkman Day” in honor of the work she had done, which “had brought the Woman’s Department to grand success.”⁶² Activities were chosen “thus exemplifying the three great missions

⁵⁹ “Woman’s Building Notes,” *Nashville American*, May 15, 1897.

⁶⁰ Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 34.

⁶¹ Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 7.

⁶² Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 265.

in woman's life – the mother, or woman at home; the artist, or woman in the studio; and the belle, or woman in society.”⁶³ Justi, in this quote, specifies the three places that women were assigned in the late nineteenth century. The home, the studio, and the parlor were the areas that women were to excel in, and the places that women were expected to be. Justi was simply summarizing the popular perception. These “missions,” as he called them, glorified roles that women were expected to play.

Kirkman Day put these missions on display. The morning was dedicated to a baby show, the afternoon to a flower parade in the afternoon, and the evening to a reception. The activities consumed the whole day and drew an incredible crowd. People watched the “battle of the flowers,” where the parade of carriages, adorned with flowers, drove up and down Capital Avenue. Judges admired the display and awarded prizes to the best decorated. In the evening, the Woman's Department opened their doors with an extravagant gathering. Flowers and music filled the building until the evening finished with a firework display.⁶⁴

However, in contrast to the celebration event, the Woman's Building created a more complex vision of women. The Decorative Arts room had an entire space to show the refined accomplishments. As well, the president's parlor and the other reception spaces throughout the building showed off woman's civilizing talent.

But then there was the Patent and Invention Room. The items here were not art pieces, but practical devices. The Model Kitchen, for its part, was the home, but was

⁶³ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 265.

⁶⁴ Justi, *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, 265.

about a variety of cooking. There was presentation of motherhood as literal child raising. The discussion of children and their education was physically represented in the Children's Building, a separate space in the Exposition. Thus, if Kate Kirkman's Day created an imagine of unified tradition, the Woman's Building suggested that the exhibitors had a more complex and compartmentalized understanding of turn-of-the century womanhood.



Figure 4: Flower Parade, Tennessee Centennial Exposition. Source: *Art Album of the Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition: Held at Nashville, May 1 to October 31, 1897*. Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., Publishers, 1898.



Figure 5: Kate Kirkman's cart on Kate Kirkman Day. Source: *Art Album of the Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition: Held at Nashville, May 1 to October 31, 1897*. Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., Publishers, 1898.

CHAPTER THREE

Presenting Womanhood

What set the Woman's Building apart from others was not just the multitude of exhibits that filled the rooms and halls. Rather, the convocations brought attention and notoriety. As these convocations became important, the building became a backdrop. They were vital because the participants discussed women's moral authority in education, government, and social issues.

What was the moral authority these women discussed? Men were, according to the convocation participants, too invested in politics and government. Male power was corrupting. As these women saw it, the political world depended on bribery, influence peddling, and a host of other disreputable actions. Men had to get their hands dirty in politics and other unsavory actions to accomplish anything. Worse, males of the lower classes fell into pitfalls of vice. Countering this required privileged women to step in.

As convocation participants saw it, it was necessary for women to provide that stabilizing force, to be a beacon of propriety. They would define respectable, civilized behavior with their person and demeanor. The convocation participants insisted that women were refined, appropriate, and ideal. They were the embodiment of what civilization should be.

Over the six-month period that the Centennial was open, these convocations helped to show this civilization. After the formal opening of the Woman's Building, the Assembly Room became the scene for meetings of different groups and organizations. The Woman's Department organized days when each group took their time in the

spotlight to discuss their respective organization's goals and how they saw women in society. The convocations ranged from Suffrage Day to the Daughters of American Revolution Day to College Day. Speakers, from near and far, took the stage, and included the well-known Jane Addams. Notables such as Susan B. Anthony and Anna Shaw were in attendance.¹

Historian Don Doyle describes the Woman's Department as having adopted a "deceptively conservative veil" when it came to their displays. This statement also rang true for the convocations. As in their displays, a far less conservative tone was hidden underneath the presentation. There were four main topics that were discussed and will be examined here: the impact of women's moral authority on society, the positive impact of women's education, domestic protection and the role of the state, and the proper definition of women's labor. Through these topics convocation participants established their definition of women's proper role in Industrial America.

Women, according to participants, would stabilize nineteenth century culture. Their moral authority would shape their position in society. In the convocations, participants reiterated the importance of this role and provided examples of women's success.

Women's moral authority was one of the first topics addressed in the convocations. The first day was dedicated to Jackson. The Ladies Hermitage Association was dedicated to Andrew Jackson's home and history. Jackson was a local and national hero, one of the largest masculine images. But Jackson had a been influenced by women.

¹ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South, 1880 – 1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 148; Herman Justi, ed., *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition Opened May 1 and Closed October 30, 1897* (Nashville: Brandon Printing, 1897), 151.

Woman's virtues created a better society not just in their direct actions but in what they inspired and imprinted upon men. One Mrs. Baxter made the statement that "lessons from the life of one who highest ideals were those that clustered around womanhood. The noblest feelings of his nature, the tenderest sympathy, the most exalted chivalry was brought out by his admiration and profound respect for women."² The best parts of Jackson-his strength of character, his honor and integrity-were taught by women. Women were the guiding moral influence for this president and war hero. But interestingly enough, none of those women were discussed, just Jackson. Baxter emphasized this because the manliest of society had been created and guided by women and their authority. No one should be exempt from women's moral authority.

The Role of Moral Authority

Women's moral authority was most often referenced using the term "influence." The term influence was very specifically chosen to describe the power women wielded. The organizers of the women's building meant to convey that they have power, but it is an authority that directs the world around them with a soft touch. Women's authority was not the kind of power that would take charge or domineer over people, like a dictator. Women's role was subtler, but equally strong. These organizers saw it more as a gentle guiding hand as opposed to the iron fist of control.

² "First of the Great Convocations," *Nashville Banner*, May 4, 1897. The statement was read by Mrs. Gertrude McMillan as Mrs. Baxter was ill. But the speech was written by Baxter and credit was attributed to her for the speech. The speech was given on the aptly named Hermitage Day, in honor of the home of Jackson.

This influence was discussed by Mrs. Kilvington on women's ability to shape and mold men. She said that "a cheerful, self-respecting, industrious class of women will send to the polls earnest men, with intelligence to study and work out the vital questions of the day."³ There were two main points that Kilvington made in this statement. Kilvington is listing the important characteristics of privileged women. The second, more meaningful point, was the product of their moral labor. Women influence would inspire and mold men. These men were made "earnest", diligent, serious, and studious, dedicated to solving the problems of the time. Women's influence would improve men, and make them better citizens, better men, and better people all around.

Women's moral influence was paramount for men and children as well. Motherhood was an important topic for participants to address, as children were. The issues of their duty and influence were a key topic to address. Mrs. Albert S. Marks shared that "God places in the hands of the mother when he lays a babe in her arms a power greater than any other on earth. It is with her alone whether she will train the babe for duty and heroic action at every step in the pathway of life, giving her time and best thoughts to it, or to fritter away her days on fancies and frivolities."⁴ Marks pointed out the responsibility and importance of what mothers had to do. Marks argued that women's actions and choices shaped children and what they will become in society. If the mother is there to "train the babe for duty and heroic action" the child will grow up to be an

³ "Industrial Education Day," *Nashville American*, May 26, 1897.

⁴ "Third and Last Day," *Nashville American*, May 7, 1897.

upstanding citizen. But if she was "to fritter away her days on fancies and frivolities" instead of focusing on teaching her children, the result would be disastrous.⁵

The concern that women were neglecting their duty, and the consequences for women's moral authority, were tremendous. One of the biggest threats to a child was the lack of maternal guidance. Marks addressed this idea of women "frittering" time out of the home. Women's role was to be present in knowing what was occurring in the home. One speaker made the statement "tis better to read parliamentary law, if only for pastime than to while away the hours with progressive euchre."⁶ In this statement, the women are at least making efforts for self-improvement, and the resulting increase in her education, as will be discussed later can only have positive outcomes. But the distant and distracted mother was a danger to the society. The mother who was present was necessary to bring the best qualities to her children and craft what society should be.

This discussion on the mother's influence and power took center stage at the Mother's Convocation, a time dedicated to the importance of mother's involvement with children. According to participants, children were trained from the start to look at their mothers as guides for correct behavior. Mrs. Fleming from the Chicago City Normal School stated that "poise, equilibrium, of the body and soul, serenity, cheerfulness in the mother and nurse affect the little one as the sunshine does the young plant."⁷ Fleming listed characteristics of mothers: grace, balance of mind and body, tranquility, and

⁵ Third and Last Day," *Nashville American*, May 7, 1897.

⁶ "Second Day of Convocation," *Nashville Banner*, May 5, 1897.

⁷ "Mothers' Council at the Expo," *Nashville American*, May 11, 1897.

happiness. These were the qualities that would be remembered and influence children. It was these characteristics that were essential for children to follow in society.

But there was someone else in the homes of privileged families who had just as much influence as mothers, nurses. Children were kept in the nursery, where most of their activities occurred, all under the direction of their nurse.⁸ According to historian Karin Calvert, “wages were low enough during what was actually a period of deflation that even families of very modest means could hire a young girl to help with the house and look after the children.”⁹ The amount of time that children spent with their nurse influenced their behavior similarly to the mothers. Fleming noted that the nurse has an equal responsibility to the mother in affecting children’s character. What mattered was that from either mother or nurse, children were taking in these examples and learning to follow the same behaviors. But this ties back into the behavior of the mother. Mothers must know about the character of those around her children, and what was being introduced to them from the outside. The moral character of women in their household was just as important as that of the mother. It was important for improvement of the character of women who could influence children, and by extension the rest of society.

Education for the Elite

Education provided the pathway for this improvement. The College Day Convocations highlighted the importance of educated women. Mary Boyce Temple, a

⁸ Karin Calvert, “Children in the House, 1890 to 1930,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, ed. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 81.

⁹ Calvert, “Children in the House,” 81-82.

Vice President for East Tennessee on the Woman's Department board stated that "the College woman was not only prepared to support herself, but she was socially, morally, and intellectually better. Her influence was broader."¹⁰ Temple emphasized three areas of social improvement, "socially, morally, and intellectually."¹¹ She argued that college would improve women on all fronts. She tied such training directly to classroom. So, according to Temple, college made women better in society, as well as more intelligent. While this was important, the potential to improve morality was an even more important. The increase in these areas made their influence "broader." Education provided access for the privileged young ladies to step into the world on their own and impact it.

Another speaker agreed with Temple's view on education. Harriet Terry, a representative of Smith College, took to the stage on the topic of "The Responsibility of the College Woman to Her Community." She declared that "woman's influences move the world, so if woman is trained in the highest sense her influence can but be of the best."¹² Terry was straightforward. The world was shaped and moved by female influence. The better that these privileged ladies were educated, the higher their mind and manners, the better the world could be. Terry and Temple both understood what education for women was, an opportunity to increase women's influence in quality and quantity.

¹⁰ "College Day Convocation," *Nashville American*, May 20, 1897.

¹¹ "College Day Convocation," *Nashville American*, May 20, 1897.

¹² "College Day Celebrated," *Nashville Banner*, May 19, 1897.

This was a shift from past understandings of education, according to the convocation speakers. "Once [woman] was admired, complimented, indulged," but now, stated Mrs. Looney, "she is all that still and more her opinion is carefully weighted and thoroughly respected."¹³ Formerly women were merely "admired, complimented and indulged." They were not turned to for wise advice but were objects to be appreciated. But there had been a progression from this. She says women were being appreciated but along with this appreciation was a new respect for their thought and opinions. There had been a shift as Looney saw it that women were now more than just objects of indulgence, but thoughtful active participants in society. Education helped to create this path for women.

But education was not limited to the standard college. What kind of education then was suitable? Education was a broad term that encompassed not only college but technical schools as well. One speaker, Minnie Pasley, was a representative from the Mississippi Industrial Institute and College. During her speech, she said discussed the school she represented saying, "This College was the first industrial college for women in the world and its establishment marked a new era in the South, and in the world. It was established in the most conservative of the states and struck a deadly blow to the old idea that superficial culture was sufficient for women."¹⁴ As Pasley saw it, the success of her school refuted the idea that "superficial culture was sufficient for women." This type of education was part of a "new era" in women's education in the South. Pasley goes on to

¹³ "The Second Day's Work," *Nashville American*, May 6, 1897.

¹⁴ "College Day Convocation," *Nashville American*, May 20, 1897.

explain the necessity for this new type of education. “Women, however, were at a disadvantage in lack knowledge of business methods and too many of them took on temporary employment which gave little or no experience.”¹⁵ For women to succeed, they needed to be educated. The “superficial culture” that Pasley referred to the lack of business knowledge women were able to acquire. Woman had stepped out into these new roles as “men found themselves unable to do what was necessary for their daughters, and they found their way into the avocations of the bread winner.”¹⁶ It was necessary for women to have greater access to education in all fields. The success and safety of the home was on their shoulders and education provided the means to do this.

Education provided women with tools to work within the state in their effort for home protection. Home protection was one of the most important tasks women controlled. Their moral influence provided a platform to argue what was necessary to protect the home. They sought to utilize the power of the government to succeed in legislating to correct society. Women’s influence was dedicated to fixing the problems that faced society. Mrs. Locke described this by saying “Life waits for her to reconstruct and redeem it.”¹⁷ Women had to take the flawed society and rebuild it. This flawed society could not be redeemed without women’s intervention. They would use the government as a tool to protect their homes.

¹⁵ “College Day Convocation,” *Nashville American*, May 20, 1897.

¹⁶ “College Day Convocation,” *Nashville American*, May 20, 1897.

¹⁷ “Great Day for the Women,” *Nashville American*, May 12, 1897.

Home Protection and Government Intervention

This effort to protect the home and redeem society was done through government intervention. Historian Susan Pearson writes that "courts across the United States were only too happy to use their power to offer protection to women, children, and other dependent classes."¹⁸ Pearson cites arguments made by the WCTU in the name of "home protection" that were used against polygamy, obscenity, and alcohol. "Indeed," Pearson states, "government sponsored censorship enjoyed wide popular support among middle class Americans."¹⁹ Women were the ones fighting to have these laws enacted. Supporters "believed that the antebellum moral polity's means of reassuring a moral citizenry – Republican mothers, the churches, revivals, moral suasion – had to be reinforced by strong moral laws."²⁰ By legislating morality "legal restraints were essential to maintain, even more to advance, civilization – to preserve and perfect the moral order."²¹ Women sought to utilize the power of the government to try to fix the problems that were rampant in society.

Speakers at the Tennessee Centennial addressed home protection and government involvement in their speeches and discussions. These two were closely tied, so much so that Kate Kirkman in her opening speech argued that woman's work was "to preserve the

¹⁸ Susan J. Pearson, "A New Birth of Regulation: The State of the State after the Civil War," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 3 (September 2015): 427.

¹⁹ Pearson, "A New Birth of Regulation," 427.

²⁰ Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865 – 1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 80.

²¹ Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, 81.

sanctity of the home and the freedom of the state."²² Good government came from the home, and the ideals and values that were taught there. When Kirkman referenced the "freedom of the state" she was discussing how women's labor would create social and political stability. The properly run home would create government.

The reasons that women were left to defend the home was due to the failures of men. Failed men provided justification for women in their argument for suffrage. These speakers on suffrage discussed how women's vote was needed to protect women and children. In her speech a Mrs. Huntington is quoted saying that women "demanded the ballot ... as a protection to the helpless widow and the great army of young women who were forced to work for themselves, and in many cases, support worthless husbands and brothers."²³ According to Huntington, the "helpless widow" and the "army of young women" were forced out into places that they should not have to be, all because their men were "worthless." This failure caused chaos, and women paid the price. Of course, Huntington also set a boundary on suffrage. The vote would be a response to the domestic threat - a means to protect womanhood and those being driven out of the home because of male failure.

Huntington intentionally identified women as victims. Historian Gaines Foster notes the importance of this claim. "Portraying women as victims rather than perpetrators of these sins reflected the persistence of cultural assumptions about the moral superiority

²² "Yesterday Belonged to the Beautiful Women of Tennessee, and They Always Speak for Themselves: Women had the Floor," *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

²³ "Equal Suffrage Association," *Nashville American*, May 12, 1897.

of females."²⁴ The problems that faced society were caused by men. Women were the innocent victims of their behavior. This innocence placed them on a pedestal, outside society and above the immorality that pervaded society. From this position, women were able to use their influence on the government to reform the society around them.

Women's involvement in government would allow them to reform both the state and society. Virginia Clopton illustrated this idea. She stated that "when women got the ballot no man who hadn't led a pure life would dare offer for an office, because he would know the women would sift him. It would make better officers and give better government."²⁵ According to Clopton women would not be running for office. Rather, they would act as a safeguard or a filter. They would pick through the men running for office, allowing only the best to get through. Women would protect the home because they had placed men in government who would be influenced by them to make the best decisions. Government would be improved, but it would not corrupt women. Women would reconstruct the government for the better.

The idea of using suffrage for home protection and moral regulation drew criticism. There were claims that suffrage would destroy woman's special place. Frances Griffin responded to these by stating that "she would not be willing to do anything a southern woman would consider unwomanly."²⁶ Griffin insisted that women were

²⁴ Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, 79-80. The quote continues saying "as well as the late nineteenth century demographics of public sin." Foster brought this up to emphasize that men were the culprits of "public sins."

²⁵ "Equal Suffrage Association," *Nashville American*, May 13, 1897.

²⁶ "Equal Suffrage Association," *Nashville American*, May 13, 1897.

political in this sense. Suffrage reinforced the home. It was an extension of their tasks and roles in the home.

According to the supporters of suffrage, proper women simply had to move into the public sphere. Huntington insisted that "the ballot for woman was the only solution of the present existing trouble, the only thing that could end the vast empire of darkness and wrong."²⁷ In her mind, women's votes were the only way to stop evil in society. As voters they would work from the outside to clean the inside of government. Voting would reflect women's moral influence. Women's politics would push men from the outside.

This vision of moral superiority helped to define the purpose of women's work. At the Tennessee Centennial the subjects of the convocations ranged from suffrage to motherhood to women's rights. At the heart of all the speeches and discussions was the concept of work. P.H. Manlove argued that "woman's work is but an extension of her home life, and its sweet relations, its duties, and its pleasures, which bring their own great reward. Woman's work is to uplift humanity wherever it can be done without injury to herself or her family."²⁸ Manlove emphasized in her definition that women's work was an extension of her role in the home. Manlove echoed a similar sentiment that had been expressed by women not long before. Julia Ward Howe spoke on the topic in 1884 and the new opportunities that were open to women, but still maintaining their role in the home.²⁹ The labor women did at home—the domestication, the refinement, the teaching

²⁷ "Equal Suffrage Association," *Nashville American*, May 13, 1897.

²⁸ "The First of the Great Convocations," *Nashville Banner*, May 4, 1897.

²⁹ Miki Pfeffer, *Southern Ladies and Suffragists: Julia Ward Howe and the Women's Rights at the 1884 New Orleans World's Fair* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 88.

of morals—would continue out into the world. In doing this woman would be "uplifting humanity."³⁰ At the same time, Manlove cautioned, none of this activity would threaten the stability and well-being of the family.

As the organizers of the Tennessee Centennial saw it, while women's work was focused on uplifting humanity through their work in domesticating and refining society, men's labor was much less idealistic and more problematic. Men's work is most clearly seen in the image of corporations. These corporations put men to work, often in dangerous conditions, paying minimal wages to laborers. All the while, the heads of companies grew richer by the day. According to social critics Henry George, "the tendency of what we call material progress is in nowise to improve the condition of the lowest class in the essentials of healthy, happy, human life. Nay, more, that it is still further to depress the conditions of the lowest class."³¹ Men's work was dominated by shady business practices, risking lives for profit, and amassing wealth. While men's work was about pushing down anyone and everyone to be at the top, women were dedicated to uplifting humanity.

In contrast to the world of men, women worked and were expected to be above questionable decisions or moral reproach. The *Nashville American* noted that "the Woman's Department has been conducted solely with a view of portraying the art and industry of women along the higher lines of development, both in the state and the

³⁰ "The First of the Great Convocations," *Nashville Banner*, May 4, 1897.

³¹ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty, an Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and the Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth—the Remedy* (London: D. Appleton, 1908), 8.

nation."³² The paper observed that the building was a representation of "art and industry," but these were not just rough sketches, or crude creations. They were from the "higher lines of development." Higher lines of development referred to the amount of effort and thought that went into these creations. The art and industry produced by women was of high quality and great investments of time and effort. These were not simple creations. These were artistic products and complex inventions. Along these same lines, Mary Boyce Temple described what women had strived to create. "Her Highest efforts of both hand and brain are here. Skill in needlework, in culinary matters is no less proudly exhibited than is shown her best in architecture, in art, sculpture, and decoration. While as writers, inventors, scientist, and teachers, new wonders of her ability are unfolded."³³ Work, said Temple, was of the "highest" caliber. Much was expected of these women who were held to this high standard. The best of all their works were displayed at the Tennessee Centennial, from things they made to things they created whether in machinery, art, or words.

The high expectations and standards set for women were held for every aspect of their work. This especially was true for their efforts with the poorer classes of people. Women had a great deal of work to do as Loulie M. Gordon claimed. "The age is rich in necessity and this therefore, rich in glorious opportunity. The suffering of the poor, the temptation of the humble, and the ignorance of many all make an appeal to noble souls which woman is meeting to the full measure of earnest and sacred thought and wonderful

³² "Work of the Woman's Department," *Nashville Banner*, May 1, 1897.

³³ "Gorgeous Beyond All Comparison," *Nashville American*, October 1, 1897.

capacity.” Gordon emphasized the need to help, protect, and educate those who were in need. More important, Gordon argued that women were the people to solve the problems. This is what women were to do: to be active in working for others. She described women as possessing "noble souls." They were driven to help and work "to the full measure of earnest and sacred thought."³⁴ Women were to work with great vigor, to remedy the ailments of society.

In Gordon’s mind, the importance of women’s moral work required mothers to instruct their daughters in it. She stated that "not only should [woman] go on her mission of helpfulness to womankind herself, but it should be her highest duty to her daughters to teach them early in life that God has placed the same responsibility upon their lives."³⁵ According to this statement, women have a "mission of helpfulness,” and they should train their daughters to do the same. They had to teach their daughters that this would be their role. The idea of moral authority had to be passed on to female children. Privileged young women were to domesticate society: to guide it with their influence and be the moral examples to look to for personal refinement and acceptable standards of conduct.

As Tennessee Centennial women saw matters, these roles for women were different from what they had been historically. P. H. Manlove's statement at the opening Hermitage Convocation set a new tone for what these women were not. She said that “women are no longer mere gargoyles on some family temple" nor a "slave to the

³⁴ “Traveling Library Idea,” *Nashville American*, May 27, 1897.

³⁵ “Traveling Library Idea,” *Nashville American*, May 27, 1897.

spinning wheel and needle."³⁶ Women guarded their homes, but not as mindless stone statues. They should be full of "energy, ambition, and progress."³⁷ They were not slaves to the work in their home; they had progressed.

Gordon also clarified this supposedly new moral role for women's labor. Gordon stated, "For this is the lovely spirit of women's work today: not self-culture, none of it is selfish, none of it was personal. None of it is sordid."³⁸ This statement emphasized that women's work was directed solely to improve the world for others. Gordon clarified that women were working for the good of humanity. She did this by defining women's work in terms of what it was not, to clarify what it was. This was not a revolution or extremism on their part. This was the normal progression of their role. Women were influencing and moving society. Gordon used the word "sordid" in her statement. She wanted to explain that these actions and effort to redeem and reconstruct society were not an attack on society, but part of their work as women.

Thus, the organizers of the Tennessee Centennial convocations were envisioning a version of the late nineteenth-century "new woman." However, convocation speakers imagined nothing like the flapper image of the 1920s. They avoided any hint of brassiness and aggression. Indeed, the orators took great care to couch their activism in language that was cast as somehow "traditional." More than that, they created an imagery of exaggerated "passive femininity" that seems ludicrous to twenty-first century readers.

³⁶ "The First of the Great Convocations," *Nashville Banner*, May 4, 1897.

³⁷ Anna Northend Benjamin, "Woman's Work at the Tennessee Centennial," *Godey's Lady's Book*, August 1897, 125.

³⁸ "Traveling Library Idea," *Nashville American*, May 27, 1897.

But Tennessee Centennial women's advocates were being careful and crafty. Mrs. Looney set the tone. Like the other commentators she drew the picture of an "ideal womanhood" in one of her references, but instead of discussing suffrage or labor Looney opened by describing this ideal being as "one beautiful in face and form." Only then did Looney cite a being "whose heart is full of noble aims and tender sympathy, one whose well trained mind is quick to see the right, and earnest in the endeavor to execute it."³⁹ For Looney, as with the other commentators, women should cultivate the "well-trained mind" and the ability to "see the right" and act upon it. But in this description, it was just as important to be "beautiful in face and form."

The organizers of "Kate Kirkman Day" agreed with Looney's sentiment. This event to honor Kirkman featured, not suffragettes with banners, but a flower parade and a baby show. The sun shined down on carriages and traps that rolled through the Exposition grounds. The *Nashville American* reported on the parade that featured carts bedecked in flowers and greenery. Describing the festivities, the *American* commented that "there was no glinting steel except in the accoutrements of the escorts."⁴⁰ This was a significant observation. Steel traditionally was associated with weapons, and physical labor, more masculine things. In this context, the author of this article was commenting on how the flowers, and the femininity of the day overpowered anything masculine.

In their coverage of Kate Kirkman Day, reporters referred constantly to flowers. "The carriages seemed to be, so many beds of flowers moving on wheels of bursting

³⁹ "The Second Day's Work," *Nashville American*, May 6, 1897.

⁴⁰ "Gorgeous Beyond Comparison," *Nashville American*, October 1, 1897.

buds, and the occupants in their bright gowns were the choicest flowers that spring from Southern soil”⁴¹ The description used here was apt, for these were the choice women of Tennessee properly decorated. And these women were training their successors, for, as a reporter said, “young girls formed a bouquet of beauty.”⁴²

Kate Kirkman was the star of the parade, of course. As she rode down the streets of Nashville she was described as a queen. “Never was a queen so fair, and never came a queen so royally.”⁴³ With such exaggerated descriptions Kirkman was made the epitome of womanhood. She graced the covers of programs, and souvenirs sold to the masses. News reporters went into detail to describe her carriage, her clothing and the décor placed on it. With such a flourish, Kirkman was turned into an idealized combination of pure loveliness and virtue.

The final celebration of Kirkman was done in fireworks. The final image displayed across the night sky was that of Kate Kirkman in portrait. Describing it a reporter stated that, “no picture has been burned at the Centennial this year that could compare with this one, but the artist rarely has so lovely a subject.”⁴⁴ It was the beauty, grace, and efforts of Kirkman that were praised as she stood as the example of refinement and womanhood of the nineteenth century.

⁴¹ “Gorgeous Beyond Comparison,” *Nashville American*, October 1, 1897.

⁴² “Gorgeous Beyond Comparison,” *Nashville American*, October 1, 1897.

⁴³ “Gorgeous Beyond Comparison,” *Nashville American*, October 1, 1897.

⁴⁴ “Gorgeous Display of Pyrotechnics,” *Nashville American*, October 1, 1897.

Conclusion

Over six months, the Woman's Building at the Tennessee Centennial stood as the model home and beacon for the display of womanhood. Every piece that was displayed, every convocation planned, every speech given was all created to define proper women. It was a difficult task. On the one hand, there was the refined woman: a lady of grace, and elegance in a tastefully decorated home. The lady of refinement was displayed in every piece of lace, every work, and every artifact displayed throughout the Woman's Building. On the other hand, there was another part to womanhood: the woman of clubs, movements, and actions. Convocations over the months emphasized women's abilities, and the benefits that she presumably gave to society. According to Centennial organizers, women's work was being taken into new territory; women were to take their influence and abilities and become modern women. Proper "new women" would "uplift humanity." As Centennial organizers saw it, well-trained women would clean up society. "Life waits for her to reconstruct and redeem it."⁴⁵ But, of course, such "new women" could not scrub society while confined to their own individual homes. Proper women had to be out in the world.

⁴⁵ "Great Day for the Women," *Nashville American*, May 12, 1897.

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