



Julia Louisa Lovejoy
Photo courtesy Kansas State Historical Society

**“IN OUR OWN HISTORY”: JULIA LOUISA LOVEJOY
AND THE POLITICS OF BENEVOLENCE IN
BLEEDING KANSAS**

by
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During the 1850s, Julia Louisa Lovejoy wrote many letters to Republican party newspapers, eventually becoming one of the more prominent anti-slavery voices from the embattled Kansas Territory. The letter reproduced below dates from October 1, 1856, when Kansas anti-slavery settlements still felt themselves under siege by pro-slavery forces and when politicians and voters were in the final weeks of an especially heated election season. Written for an audience new to Lovejoy, the *Milwaukee Free Democrat*, the letter shows the author tailoring her rhetoric for readers who might not share the radical anti-slavery opinions she had expressed earlier to her home state newspaper in New Hampshire. In addition to demonstrating Lovejoy’s flexibility as a writer, the letter illustrates how women could secure access to political publications and gain influence over public affairs.

Both Lovejoy’s anti-slavery politics and her desire to make herself a powerful force for moral reform can be traced to her adolescence in New England. A Methodist and an abolitionist since her early conversion in her home state of New Hampshire, Lovejoy envisioned a moral society and looked for ways to aid in its creation. In New Hampshire she started a Sunday school and also taught public school, where she clashed with parents over her attempts to bring Protestant Christianity into her classroom.¹ Teaching, however, failed to satisfy her reformist urges, and she sought other ways to influence society. Writing offered her one of the few socially accepted ways to reach an audience. At age twenty-one she wrote in her diary that “I do ardently long to be in a sphere, where I can enjoy more ample means of rendering myself useful to my fellow creatures. I have a mind, that inspires after high literary attainments—to revel in classic love, or

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philosophical researches, like a Newton, and his contemporaries.” Even though social strictures against women seeking such fame perhaps prompted Lovejoy’s contrite entry five days later that “retirement is sweeter far to me, than the hum of Cities, or the applause of fame,” she clearly hungered for intellectual excitement and public influence.² Being a woman limited her options and forced her to conceal her desire from society and even from herself. However, when she moved to Kansas with her family in 1855, she entered an arena of intense conflict between anti-slavery and pro-slavery advocates. Her daily experiences in the midst of “Bleeding Kansas” would now be of interest to much of the American reading public.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed for United States settlement of the two territories. It included the controversial provision called popular sovereignty, which allowed territorial voters to establish their own policies in regards to slavery. Since the settlers would determine the fate of slavery in Kansas, emigration was transformed into a contest between pro-slavery and anti-slavery advocates. Conflicts between the two groups once they arrived in Kansas became central to the success of anti-slavery politicians across the North who emphasized the brutality of slaveholders and the cultural differences between the northerners and southerners. Republican party newspapers welcomed first-hand accounts from male and female migrants to the new Territory, especially if they highlighted the crimes pro-slavery “Border Ruffians” committed against anti-slavery settlers.³

Julia Lovejoy obliged the anti-slavery editor of the Concord, New Hampshire, *Independent Democrat*, sending four letters to him in 1855 as she traveled west and began her life in Kansas. Lovejoy filled most of these letters with details of her travels—hotels, companions, and weather conditions—but she closed the sequence with a passionate report from Lawrence, Kansas, on August 1, 1855. This letter avoided formal partisan politics, but vividly described the conflict between free soil and pro-slavery factions in the Territory, closing with the thought that “Kansas is the great battlefield where a mighty conflict is to be waged with the monster slavery, and he will be routed and slain. Amen and Amen.”⁴ Such contentious language secured publication for Lovejoy in the 1850s and 1860s, and has since won her prominence as a featured “speaker” on Ken Burns’s documentary *The West*, as well as her own web page on the internet.⁵

After a year of silence, Lovejoy once again began writing letters to the

Concord *Independent Democrat* in the summer of 1856. In four letters in August and September, she detailed Kansas affairs and voiced strong political preferences for the Republican cause. Writing to what she knew was New Hampshire's main Republican party paper, she confidently excoriated slavery, called for its abolition in Missouri, and appealed to northern women to support the candidacy of Republican presidential candidate, John C. Frémont.⁶ These positions, especially her attempts to mobilize women for partisan purposes, stretched the boundaries of appropriate female behavior. While public work of women on behalf of charities like orphanages and poor relief was acceptable because of the benevolent nature of such work, Lovejoy and other female anti-slavery activists encountered criticism because of the politically contested nature of the slavery issue. In 1856, when many anti-slavery women tried to deny the political implications of their work and instead emphasized its basis in moral improvement, education, and family unity, Lovejoy was one of the few women who embraced politics so directly that she mentioned a candidate by name.⁷

This picture of Lovejoy as a radical reformer who sent her work to a home state audience changes with the discovery of the letter below. This piece of correspondence demonstrates both her ambition to influence American politics more widely and her willingness to craft her rhetoric for unfamiliar audiences. Because it was the first of her letters to be published outside of New England, this letter alters our sense of Lovejoy's activities, ambition, and impact. Originally printed in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Free Democrat* on October 10, 1856 and reprinted in another Wisconsin paper, the Monroe *Sentinel*, five days later, the letter indicates that Lovejoy tried to influence as much of the northern electorate as she could reach.

Unfamiliar with Wisconsin politics and even with the woman she addressed, "Sister McReading," Lovejoy made this letter to Wisconsin more conservative than her New Hampshire letters of the same period. By crafting her call for action as a benevolent appeal to aid the poor but worthy settlers of Kansas, as well as by basing her politics in her own observations and experiences rather than abstract theories of morality or economy, Lovejoy deployed rhetorical strategies that helped to guarantee the letter's welcome among moderate Republicans. Lovejoy's letter thus appeals for clothes, bedding, and supplies to help those who have fallen on hard times

through no fault of their own and makes no mention of the Republican Party or its candidates. Like women in many communities across the United States who aided people in distress, readers of her letter could claim that they acted out of charity and compassion rather than from political motives. To help people who “must freeze or starve if not helped!” was Christian duty, not partisan politics. That Lovejoy addressed the letter to a private person instead of a newspaper or editor—and that the editor reproduced it that way—highlighted the private character of the relief work she asked people to undertake.

Julia Lovejoy also protected herself and the women she hoped to spur to action by prefacing her letter as a narrative of “our own history.” It is, in other words, a highly personal account of what the sectional fighting in Kansas had meant for her and her family. She has not, she implies, gone looking for the political limelight; rather, public events have invaded her home, stealing her cow, her husband’s wallet, and her security. If she has taken the liberty of writing a letter that might eventually be published, it is because the public and the private spheres have collapsed into each other, leaving her no choice but to live in the public world. She has literally, she explains, fled her house three times a day, “expecting it to be demolished by cannon balls.” Drawing on her “own history” of her own house, she portrays herself as a woman who enters into public life only because politics have expelled her from her home.

Charity work, however, even if operating through women’s networks and appealing for such items as yarn and children’s clothes, had political meaning. Her letter found its way into two Republican newspapers during the height of the election campaign, where its message blended seamlessly with editorials calling for changes in government policy in regard to slavery in the Territories. Lovejoy presents the free soil settlers who need aid as staying in Kansas out of “duty” and to fight “for God and freedom.” To Lovejoy, God’s duty is not simply the settlement of Kansas but the exorcising of the pro-slavery forces she describes as “infuriated fiends, in the form of men.” She argues that the destitution of the free soil settlers, and their need for remuneration by the northern people, can be directly blamed on the social and economic disruptions caused by the Missouri insurgents and—by implication—the Democratic government in Washington that allows them to carry out their depredations. To provide relief to such people was

inherently politicized by the context into which Lovejoy placed such labors. The Republican newspapers that published her letter argued in their editorials that such efforts would be unnecessary if Republican men eliminated the cause of poverty in Kansas by turning Democrats out of office. Although Lovejoy presented her "own history" as a conservative plea for benevolence, she nevertheless tied her experiences to politics and the decisions about to be made by northern voters. With the nation consumed by the most fiercely contested election since 1840, Lovejoy achieved her "literary attainments" by linking her female world to the political and moral issue of slavery.

Letter of Mrs. Lovejoy

The following letter of the wife of the Rev. Chas. H. Lovejoy, who was here during the last [s]ummer,⁸ has been handed us for publication:

Lawrence, K.T., Oct. 1, 1856

MY DEAR SISTER MCREADING:—Yours of the 19th ult. lies before me, but I feel ill prepared to answer it.⁹ Circumstances have occurred in our own history, this morning, of such a painful character, in these distressing times that I feel in my feeble health, incapacitated to write. Our entire family have been prostrated with fever, for weeks past, all at the same time. No nurse, but an old man upwards of 70—no fine flour in the house—no help only a few hours during the whole! Every heart and house is full of trouble. We have lost two horses, by the "Ruffians" and our cow has been gone about a week, none can tell where, and this morning my husband took out his pocket book, to give a little to help a destitute family, turned round, when two men fled with it, probably driven to it by suffering—every note \$3,00—and every dollar, Mr. L. has, was there; and here we are, nothing but the promise of God to keep up our spirits and keep us from fleeing from this "field of blood." Mr. L. has spent all his property, about \$2,000 here in Kansas, and now he says he intends to make his grave here.—Our P.E., L. B. Dennis last week, said that he and his family could endure no longer, but must leave the Territory.¹⁰ All ready to start, then dared not, beca[u]se duty said "Nay." They have not been robbed as we have been, and not one dollar of remuneration have we received from any source, nor do we expect to, unless God opens the heart of his people,

elsewhere. O sister, volumes cannot tell the suffering, and destitution of this people, caused by infuriated fiends, in the form of men. Houses, and their entire contents burned—cattle and horses driven off—husbands and fathers shot down like dogs, and left weltering in their gore, or their scalps reeking with blood, exhibited as trophies, to their brethren in crime! 'Tis impossible to conceive the terror and consternation that has prevailed here this fall. Three times within 24 hours, have I fled out of our house, expecting it to be demolished by cannon balls, whilst 2,800 blood thirsty Missourians, and Southerners, with their blood red flag was [sic] in sight, determined to destroy the place, whilst only about 100 could be rallied to meet them, the remainder being elsewhere: Bravehearts, and a good Providence saved us then, but some have lost about, or quite all, and must freeze or starve if not helped!¹¹ Please send anything ready made, that can keep any part of the poor body warm, stockings, mittens, flannel shirts, drawers, pants, vests, coats, dresses, children's clothes (for how can a mother "make up" with no house to shelter her?) stocking yarn, bedding &c., anything to keep soul and body together, and God bless and reward the donors! If any kind heart, wants to give a poor Methodist preacher, a warm over coat and cap, to face the blasts of Kansas with, it can be put in to the package with the rest, and labelled accordingly, if for his benefit. O that I had thousands, to clothe these shivering limbs, and feed these hungry mouths! Direct, Rev. Charles H. Lovejoy, Lawrence, Kansas. Many families who have saved enough to carry them home out of a fortune spent, are going back, whilst they have strength left, but we must offer up all, for God and freedom.

Yours truly,

Julia L. Lovejoy

NOTES

1. Diary of Julia Louisa Lovejoy, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, pages 46, 49-50.
2. Ibid. The page numbering in Lovejoy's diary is erratic. These passages are taken from the second pagination sequence, page 29.
3. Two anti-slavery women produced books about Kansas affairs: Sara Robinson wrote a history of the Territory, and Hannah Ropes published a series of her letters describing her experiences. Another Kansan, Clarina Nichols, delivered stump speeches across upstate New York, often in the company of Kansas Governor Charles Robinson, Sara Robinson's husband. Sara T.L. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life. Including a Full View of Its Settlement, Political History, Social Life, Climate, Soil, Productivity, Scenery, Etc.* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1856); Hannah

Anderson Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas: by a Lady* (Boston: J.P. Jewett & Co., 1856). Ropes's book was advertised on the back cover of Thomas Drew, *The Campaign of 1856: Fremont Songs for the People, Original and Selected* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856) under the heading of "THE CAMPAIGN DOCUMENTS. FOR ALL FREMONT CLUBS." Notices of Nichols's speaking tour appear in the *New York Tribune*, September 27 and October 30, 1856. For the political work of Kansas women, see Nicole Etcheson, "'Laboring for the Freedom of This Territory': Free-State Kansas Women in the 1850s," *Kansas History* 21 (1998): 68-84; and Kristin A. Tegtmeier, "The Ladies of Lawrence are Arming!: The Gendered Nature of Sectional Violence in Early Kansas," in John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold, eds., *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 215-235.

4. Julia Lovejoy's letters from 1855 have appeared in "Letters from Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 11 (February 1942): 29-44. Quotation from page 44.

5. Geoffrey C. Ward, *The West: An Illustrated History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 174, 176, 182, 184-5, 206; Ken Burns, *The West*, (Coproduction of WETA-TV, Washington and Florentine Films and Time-Life Video and Television, 1996); www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/lovejoy.htm

6. Lovejoy's public and private letters from 1856 are published in "Letters of Julia Louisa Lovejoy, 1856-1864," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (May 1947): 127-42; and Michael D. Pierson, "'A War of Extermination': A Newly Uncovered Letter by Julia Louisa Lovejoy, 1856," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Summer 1993): 120-23. Her letters from 1857 to 1864 are reprinted in *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (August 1947): 277-319; *Ibid.*, (November 1947): 368-403; and *Ibid.*, 16 (February 1948): 40-75.

7. On the division between women's benevolent work and "political" involvement, see Anne M. Boylan, "Women and Politics in the Era Before Seneca Falls," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (Fall 1990): 365-382; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). For southern women's success in organizing benevolent societies and more sharply limited roles in partisan politics, see Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). For debate about the political or moral basis for women's anti-slavery petitioning, see Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, "'Let Your Names Be Enrolled': Methods and Ideology in Women's Antislavery Petitioning," in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 179-199.

8. Charles Lovejoy traveled East during the summer of 1856 to raise money for Methodist churches in Kansas. *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 15 (May 1947): 127.

9. The Wisconsin census for 1850 and 1860 has no listing under the name McReading.

10. Lovejoy is referring to Presiding Elder L. B. Dennis, who delivered the funeral

sermon for free soil martyr Thomas Barber on November 15, 1855 and later helped found Baker University. D.W. Wilder, *The Annals of Kansas, 1541-1885* (Topeka: T. Dwight Thacher, Kansas Publishing House, 1886), 88, 390.

11. A gathering of about 2,700 pro-slavery men under Acting Governor Daniel Woodson outside of Lawrence in September was dispersed by the order of the newly-arrived Governor, John W. Geary. Samuel A. Johnson, *The Battle Cry of Freedom: The New York Emigrant Aid Company in the Kansas Crusade* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1954), 231-32; Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 155-58. For an overview of Bleeding Kansas, see Gunja Sengupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).