Men and Women In Northern New England During the Era of the Civil War

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For three families in Maine, the year 1865 was a portentous one, a year not only of endings, but also beginnings. In June of 1865 the parents of John Haley welcomed their son back to Saco after he had served a three-year stint in the Union army. The twenty-five-year-old had fought as a foot soldier in the 17th Maine Regiment of the Army of the Potomac, one of 70,000 men from that state to fight with the northern forces in the course of the war. Haley was a veteran of some of the conflict’s bloodiest battles between August 1862 and April 1865: the Battle of the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Petersburg, and Gettysburg. In the summer of 1865, when he returned to his home town and looked back on the last three horrific years, a time that claimed over 600,000 lives, he wrote:

"Here we are, some with whole skins, and some not so whole. Others have been left behind. For myself, I can only wonder that there is a bone left in my carcass when I think of the wholesale carnage through which I have passed. My bruises are inward. It is all over now, and I can only regard it as a hideous dream – the smoking ruins, the sodden field, the trailing banner, the slaughtered thousands and wailing families, the roar of cannon, the Rebel yell and Yankee hurrah have all passed away, and we again return to peace."  

Yet in the summer of 1865 John Haley now found himself confronted with a new challenge – to forge a livelihood for himself (and his future family) out of a changing New England

economy. All his talents as an observer of human nature, and as a writer of some sensitivity and substance, would not guarantee him a life’s work of either residential stability or financial security. For this young man, the end of the war marked the start of another kind of struggle.

In 1865, the Foster family of Gray, Maine, understood that a true peace between North and South was not yet at hand. Family members welcomed back a son, Samuel, who had fought in the war, but in the winter after Appomattox they bade goodbye to their daughter, twenty-six year old Sarah Jane, who seized the opportunity to venture south, not to shoulder a rifle but to serve as a teacher for the former slaves of Martinsburg, West Virginia. Sarah Jane Foster
eagerly embraced the chance to become useful in the wider war against racial prejudice and discrimination, and she embarked on her journey with a great sense of moral purpose. Writing from Martinsburg in December, soon after her arrival, she noted, “I sometimes hear myself pointed out as a ‘nigger teacher,’ and people, especially children, stare in on passing the school-room, but we are as yet entirely undisturbed, and likely to remain so.”2 Little did this young teacher know that in the months to come she would face severe opposition to her racially egalitarian principles, and that this opposition would come not only from the white townspeople of Martinsburg, people who professed to be loyal to the Union, but also from her superiors within the very organization that sponsored her mission to the South. For Sarah Jane Foster, the result of this opposition would be professional disgrace and ultimately personal despair.

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t was also in 1865 that the Pelletier family began a new life for themselves, moving from St. Hubert, Quebec, to Old Town, Maine. The family of sixteen, including mother, father, and fourteen children, made the trek southward in a covered wagon that was, according to their son Mike, “something like the ones used by the old forty-niners [who moved out to California during the gold rush]. It was hooped and covered with canvas.” Mike Pelletier later recalled, “I guess a lot of other people had left there [Quebec] and he [his father] had heard that there were more jobs over here and better pay.”3 The elder Pelletier readily found work in a sawmill built across the river between the lower end of French Island and Old Town, north of Bangor on the Penobscot River. This family was part of a larger migration of Quebec residents who sought fresh opportunities in the mill towns of New England, working in the lumber, shoe, or textile industries. For the Pelletiers and other

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immigrant households like them, the American Civil War played only an indirect role in their lives. In fact, the largest migration stream out of Canada began soon after the war was over. Still, the economic consequences of the conflict had a profound effect on the fortunes of French-speaking newcomers, one-half million of whom moved to the United States from Quebec and Acadia between 1850 and 1900. These men, women, and children would help to sustain the industrializing northern New England economy - an economy fueled and stoked by the war effort.¹

The larger drama of the Civil War and, more specifically, its impact on individuals, families, and communities in northern New England is reflected in the choices made by John Haley, Sarah Jane Foster, and the Pelletier family during this period of upheaval and dislocation. Indeed, their collective stories - their lives of soldiering, teaching, and working for wages - were emblematic of several themes produced by social tensions and economic developments in the region at the time. These themes include the imperative felt among ordinary people to grapple with the moral and political meanings of the Civil War itself: with class, racial, and ethnic conflicts in a society becoming more socially diverse with each successive generation; with gender issues that surfaced in the context of military combat; with patterns of economic change, especially the transformations wrought by industrialization and commercialization on the northern New England landscape; with the significance of migration of all sorts, into, out of, and within the region; and finally, with the nature of family life within a rapidly changing society.

The Civil War forced Americans to confront life-and-death moral and political issues within the realm of their everyday lives.
Sarah Jane Foster was drawn from her home in Gray, Maine, to the South by the plight of the freed peoples. She threw herself into her teaching and came to love those she taught.

Photo courtesy Wayne Reilly

ment in the North. She was an experienced schoolteacher, the eldest daughter of a New England shoemaker, and the sister of a Union soldier. Foster possessed an independent streak and resented what she considered the drudgery of domestic duties in her own home and in the homes of others within her Maine community. During the course of the war she had attended newsworthy lectures in Portland, given by some of the North’s most prominent abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass,
Wendell Phillips, and Henry Ward Beecher. The young woman would, therefore, seem to represent (at least what Southerners perceived as) a “Yankee” tendency to question and “reform” two sacred relationships in American society: the relegation of women to an exclusively domestic sphere, and the continued subordination of blacks to whites.

In Martinsburg, Foster’s work as a schoolteacher confirmed the rebels’ worst nightmare. She threw herself wholeheartedly into her teaching, came to love the children she taught, and developed close friendships with some of her older pupils, including black men who at times escorted her to and from school. She clearly and unabashedly found the whole experience exhilarating: “I never was in a work that so thoroughly aroused my whole being, and gave life such a zest,” she wrote at one point.5 Her pupils were hard-working and enthusiastic, and by their determination to learn they belied white southerners’ convictions that they were fit only for a life of cotton picking and domestic service. Though “intensely Union,” the white men and women of Martinsburg became bolder in their hostility to Foster’s mission and in their criticism of her person.6 Unwilling to accept her “place” as a woman and as a northerner, unwilling to abide by local conventions of racial separation, Foster posed a threat to their way of life.

Despite whites’ suspicions that Foster represented a vanguard of Yankee busybodies and meddlers, she in fact was decidedly untypical among New Englanders – especially in her commitment to black education and to racial equality. More representative of the region in terms of ideology (and prejudices) was John Haley, the literary-minded soldier. His decision to enlist in the army stemmed not from abolitionist convictions at all, but rather from a boyish bravado of sorts. He later recalled:

A high school teacher had just opened a recruiting office, whither my friend sped to enlist August 5, 1862. As soon as morning dawned, he sought my society and informed me of what he
had done. While it was brought home to me with almost paralyzing shock, no grass was allowed to grow under my feet and my name was promptly plastered onto the roll of those who would answer father Abraham's call. This was August 7. And thus the soldier life began for us until death overtook us or the war ended.7

The Confederates would have taken cold comfort in the knowledge that not every New Englander espoused sympathy for the slaves, or even antislavery principles in general. John Haley himself had no great love for black people. Like most northern and midwestern Republicans, he believed that slavery's major crime was its baneful effects upon the white men and women who lived with the institution: "The system of African slavery that has prevailed here so long, has, no doubt, destroyed much of the finer sensibilities of the Southern people, even of the better class."8 Union loyalists and supporters of the Republican party consisted primarily of northern farmers and small businessmen who hoped to maintain the western territories as free states. By and large these men espoused this view not out of a commitment to blacks' civil rights, but out of a fear that southern slave holders would eventually come to dominate these areas in both economic and political terms.9

Sarah Jane Foster discovered, to her chagrin, that pro-Union sentiments could co-exist with racial prejudice. The good people of Martinsburg disapproved strongly of her willingness to be seen in public in the company of black men, and soon after she arrived, a group of rowdy white youths attacked her schoolhouse one night when she was conducting classes. Later she found herself "slandered by the mob" – that is, ridiculed and scorned by the general white population – and indeed she could no longer find a place to board.10 Her sponsors, officials of the Freewill Baptist Home Mission Society, took it upon themselves to lecture her on her "deportment" and chastise her for creating "the very appearance of evil" as a result of her indiscretions with black men in Martinsburg.11 In April 1866 they transferred her
out of Martinsburg and assigned her to Harpers Ferry, Virginia, for the rest of the school year. The society then stripped her of her teaching commission. In the fall of 1867, Foster applied for, and received sponsorship from the American Missionary Association. But based on information provided by her former superiors, AMA officials decided to send her to an isolated, all-black plantation in South Carolina where, presumably, she would not offend the sensibilities of whites with her zealous approach to teaching.

Taken together, John Haley and Sarah Jane Foster represented the twin thrust of the Union-led assault on the Confederacy: a broad-based belief among Northerners in the superiority of the system of "free labor" and the idea (albeit one held by a minority of the population) that slavery was evil and counter to the will of God. The fact that northern economic self-interest dovetailed so nicely with the nation's historic (if largely rhetorical) principles of equality and freedom goes a long way in explaining the compelling nature of the Union cause, and perhaps its success on the battlefield as well.

In all probability, neither Foster nor Haley had encountered many black people in Gray or Saco. To them, it was the Irish who constituted a new and alien presence in New England. Whenever he remarked upon their presence in army camps, Haley stereotyped the Irish in general as dissolute, undisciplined soldiers prone to desertion and fisticuffs. During a stay in Boston in 1866, Sarah Jane Foster commented upon the depressing sight of factory tenements peopled mostly by the Irish. Here class issues came to the fore. As a group, poor immigrants were employed primarily in unskilled factory jobs and other menial forms of labor. Native-born trade unionists perceived the newcomers as competitors in the job market, and indeed rivalries among native-born whites, blacks, and immigrants over a limited number of jobs heightened racial, class, and ethnic tensions throughout New England. For their part, white workers feared that black people would move north en masse after emancipation, and flood the local job market with eager hands ready to work at low wages. In Boston, on July 14, 1863,
The Civil War exacerbated social tensions in the Northeast. Fearing job competition from emancipated slaves, in July 1864 Boston whites, mostly working-class Irish, rioted in protest of draft conscription.

Working class whites, mostly Irish immigrants, rioted in protest of draft conscription; twelve people died in the melee. Protestant reformers tended to remain disdainful of the immigrants, not only because of their lowly economic status but also because most of them – the Irish as well as French Canadians – were Roman Catholics. Thus the Civil War, rather than uniting the region on behalf of a shared and glorious cause, exacerbated existing social tensions and set the stage for postbellum conflicts between labor and management.11

Although a beleaguered and in some cases persecuted minority, Catholics contended with factionalism and in-fighting among themselves. In Maine, for example, French Canadians soon came to resent the hegemony of Irish clergy within the church. The Irish hierarchy located in Portland made crucial decisions regarding the assignments of priests throughout Maine. La survivance – cultural survival – was persistently opposed by English-speaking clerics. We may assume, then, that the Pelletier family faced several difficult issues related to their assimilation into American life: finding jobs and making a living; retaining their heritage through traditional religious practices; and preserving their native language and community life over the objections of Irish religious leaders.

Before the war, southern slave holders looked northward and saw a society composed of eccentrics of all kinds – abolitionists, women’s rights advocates, dress reformers, labor agitators. In fact, the North was wracked with
internal tensions. The professional classes remained wary of working people and contemptuous of the poor; whites found numerous ways to express their prejudice toward blacks; native-born workers saw immigrants as competitors in the labor market; and Protestants felt threatened by the rapid increase in the Roman-Catholic population. The war years intensified these conflicts as northern New Englanders confronted life and death, bread-and-butter issues related to wartime sacrifices and scarcities.

During this period, debates over womanhood and manhood contributed to the social turbulence of life in northern New England. For example, military conflict exposed cracks in the middle-class gender ideology of the cult of domesticity. Sarah Jane Foster made no secret of the fact that she found housework enervating and genteel visiting among neighbors dull and meaningless. Like other educated and thoughtful women of the region, she struggled to find a place for herself in the great drama of the day through teaching and writing. In her fiction, she reveals herself to be committed to the broad outlines of "women's sphere" – the notion that women are naturally nurturing, gentle, and altruistic – but in her life she rejected conventional domestic employments and pastimes and embraced the adventure of southern teaching. The conflicts she faced in her own mind were mirrored in the writings and reform activities of a whole generation of women who sought to carve out a "wider sphere of usefulness" for themselves – a public, political sphere based on the assumption that a new, expanded and socially-conscious definition of "true womanhood" demanded it. Thus Foster was joined by other women abolitionists who felt that their special sensitivities qua women allowed them – even compelled them – to speak out against slavery.15

While women pondered their place at home, and outside the home, men found themselves tested on the battlefield. John Haley's trial by (gun) fire, of course, amounted to proof of his manhood as traditionally defined; and yet he wrote with some degree of equanimity about courage, his words foreshadowing Stephen Crane's "The
Red Badge of Courage," written a generation later. In December 1863 Haley penned the following passage in his diary, after he had watched the execution of a private from the 4th Regiment of Maine, a man charged with "cowardice in the presence of the enemy":

Doubtless there are cases of **desertion** so glaringly aggravating that they should be dealt with summarily, but no man should be shot like a dog for **cowardice**, this not being a matter within the control of the individual. Some will, I’m sure, argue that a coward of this type shouldn’t enlist. This would be good logic if it could be shown that all men know themselves. But they do not. Men are moved by great popular currents, and enthusiasm of this kind is often mistaken for courage. We cannot judge men from the mere fact of enlistment. They are honest and patriotic and no doubt meant to do all they enlisted to do, but it is
one thing to talk about ‘staring Death out of countenance,’ and quite another to do it. Alas for human miscalculations, they so often miscarry. \(^{16}\)

Haley’s observation that not all men “know themselves” highlights the discrepancy between idealized social expectations on the one hand and the unpredictability of the human psyche on the other. The institutionalized slaughter called war forced men of both races and all colors to face themselves, some for the very first time.

In this new world of scared and famished soldiers and strong-willed and determined women, gender relations shifted in novel and frightening ways. For example, in their encounters with southern and border-state women (black and white), northern soldiers had few precedents to draw upon. John Haley includes in his diary references to several conversations with white women who had the ability, but not always the inclination, to sell or give him something to eat when he was hungry. After emerging exhausted from the fighting at Gettysburg – a battle in which he witnessed “men’s heads blown off or split open, horrible gashes cut; some split from the top of the head to the extremities as butchers split beef” \(^{17}\) he was in no mood to haggle with cunning Pennsylvania housewives charging high prices for food:

After all we have sacrificed for them, the women have the contemptible meanness to charge us two dollars for a loaf of bread that could be bought for seventy-five cents in Rebel Maryland. Even the proverbially mean New England Yankee would blush to ask twenty-five cents for it. One old female sauerkraut had the sublime and crowning cheek to cut a loaf into twelve slices and ask twenty-five cents a slice. \(^{18}\)

Haley seems to be asking himself: Where is the loyalty that a Northerner should show to a fellow Northerner? And where is the deference that a female civilian should show to her male
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defender? Like the southern ladies who cursed and spat upon Union soldiers to express their hatred for all things northern, women peddlers had the ability to provoke and offend men who had never found themselves in a similar situation before.19

Sarah Jane Foster found herself caught up in yet another version of Civil-War era gender wars when she ran into opposition from her male superiors at the Martinsburg school. She was indignant that society officials presumed to tell her how to conduct herself either in or outside her classroom, and in this regard her determination mirrored that of other northern teachers impatient with school principals and superintendents, society officials, and mission home directors – men who had no formal experience teaching school and no first-hand knowledge of pedagogy. Wrote Foster in her application to the American Missionary Association, the second organization that eventually sponsored her: “No pupil will pass over half learned tasks under my supervision. I have taken children from the Alphabet to three letter words in two or three weeks more than once.”20 Whatever insecurities she might have felt in other areas of her life, she brought to teaching a sense of professionalism which male clergymen and administrators lacked. Thus Foster’s letters to her superiors combined the deferential language that a younger woman owed to an older man and a lay person owed to a minister with the bold language of a competent and seasoned teacher.21

War-time social conflicts of all kinds foreshadowed long-term trends caused by a changing regional and national economy. The Midwest began to compete with New England in marketing meat and grains to the Eastern Seaboard. A system of subsistence agriculture was yielding to a commercializing economy, one in which farm families were forced to rely increasingly on odd-jobbing during certain seasons of the year.22 For example, the Acadians who were expelled from their homes in Canada in the mid-eighteenth century and had settled in the St. John Valley of Maine were by this time operating farms growing wheat, oats, and buckwheat. Fathers and older sons were engaged as woodsmen and mill
workers in the winter, and women tended gardens and spun wool from sheep in the summer.23

These changes spelled hard times for ordinary families, whether or not they lived on farms. When he was only ten years old, John Haley had to leave grammar school and take work in a mill in order to support his family; between the ages of ten and seventeen he was an alley boy in a York mill, where he earned 50 to 75 cents per day—a sum substantial enough to be of great value to the Haley household. In an area of the country known for its devotion to the ideal of public schooling, many families had to rely on the labor of children to make ends meet; formerly unified farm families splintered into households of individual wage-earners.

Meanwhile, the industrial revolution was drawing people off the countryside and into textile and shoe factories; these two industries were fully mechanized by 1860. For proud artisans now reduced to menial labor, the process of “deskilling” was a wrenching one, and sparked violent confrontations between workers new to factories and their bosses.24 Yet the course of industrialization was uneven. In the Pelletier family, the father took a job in a sawmill, working fifteen hours a day for $1.50.
Referring to the lack of associational or union activity among early French-speaking immigrants to Maine, his son Mike recalled that "After a man had worked fifteen hours a day about all he felt like joining was a mattress."25

John Haley came from a family that was neither farming nor working class; yet he, too, exemplified certain larger transformations in northern New England. His career after the war was not unusual for someone quite intelligent (and presumably well read), but lacking in formal education and the privileges that came from being a member of a well-to-do family. After his return to Saco, and over the next twenty-seven years, he held a wide variety of jobs: he worked in a Saco water power shop and then as a night watchman for the Portland, Saco and Portsmouth Railroad; he served as York County's first telegraph operator; and then had a very brief stint as a farmer on a landholding called Toad's Island; he worked as a bookkeeper with the Saco and Biddeford gas-light companies, and as a reporter for the Saco Times and the Saco Record; and he proved to be a successful investor in the American Telegraph-Typewriter Company, which finally brought him a measure of financial security. Finally, by 1892, he had found his calling as the Dyer Library librarian, and managed to send his only daughter to Wellesley College, where she graduated in 1897.

Haley's peripatetic career was emblematic of the upheavals in New England society, and those upheavals are revealed through patterns of migration and labor mobility.26 Declining agricultural opportunities for young men impelled many of them to move west, and the consequent unbalanced sex ratio in New England produced large numbers of unmarried women like Sarah Jane Foster, women who became teachers or mill workers in order to support themselves and their aging parents.27 Town-based industries drew farm folk off the surrounding countryside and immigrants from as far away as Ireland and as near by as Canada. Northern New England then was a society in motion, a fact seemingly at odds with contemporary Currier-and-Ives prints, images of placid country villages frozen in time.
Always sensitive to larger social and economic trends, family life registered these changes in a number of ways. Indeed, the varieties in household form and function suggest the fate of individuals, specific social groups, and whole communities. Sarah Jane Foster had six siblings; but families of this size (among the native-born population) were becoming increasingly rare in New England. She of course never married (she died in 1868 of yellow fever which she contracted while teaching in South Carolina), and represented the spinster as a New England icon of sorts – an older woman who remained active in a larger world of teaching and reform. John Haley was his parents’ only son (his three sisters all died when they were young). Haley himself had two children, and his daughter Adelaide, the Wellesley College graduate, taught in Boston schools for twenty-five years. Like Foster, Adelaide Haley remained single her whole life.

In contrast, the Pelletier family eventually consisted of at least fifteen children; Mike was born eight years after his parents emigrated to the United States. Beginning at age ten, he would go into the woods each winter and help his father cut a season’s worth of firewood – ten cords. By the time he was fourteen he was helping to support the family by rafting logs all summer for fifty cents a day. The low wages paid to mill workers made it more likely that the children would start to work at an early age. Yet Mike fondly recalled his life as a child in a big, close-knit family – the concerts they performed for each other, parents and various children playing the accordion, harmonica, or violin; clog dancing and candy pulls; “straw rides” together.

The northern New England family was an enduring institution, but it was also a variable and sensitive one, a barometer of changes in the workplace.

We return finally to the defeated rebels. The war itself, the liberation of the slaves, and the process of reconstruction all confirmed in the minds of Southerners that New England was inhabited exclusively by wily peddlers, abolitionist fanatics, and self-righteous schoolmarms, all of whom who had little purpose in life except, hell-bent, to see the former slaves lord over their former masters, and the
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vanquished Confederates humiliated in as many ways as humanly possible. Of course the Yankee counterpoint to this view was the Northerners' conviction that the South consisted of only two types of people - aristocratic masters and mistresses living on vast, lush plantations, on the one hand, and their degraded bondsmen and women, on the other. In fact, of course, the vast majority of Southerners were black and white men and women not so different from most Northerners - men and women who wanted to take care of their families, make a living off the land if they could, and willing to move around in search of better prospects if they could not.

The fact that so many people on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line shared so much in common became lost amid the slave owners' strident exhortations that war must be waged to preserve slavery, but if the conflict settled that question once and for all, it left unanswered larger questions about the relations among different groups of people in a rapidly changing society. Ethnicity, religious affiliation, race, class, gender, power, and justice are questions we still grapple with in one way or another today. And for that reason the Civil War, with its many meanings, will continue to hold compelling interest for all of us.

NOTES


6Ibid., p. 33.

7Silhker, ed., Rebel Yell and Yankee Hurrah, p. 13.

8Ibid., p. 60.

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Ibid., p. 52.

Ibid., p. 11.

See for example Silliker, ed., The Rebel Yell and the Yankee Hurrah, p. 192.

Reilly, ed., Sarah Jane Foster, p. 15.


Ibid., p. 107.

Ibid., p. 108.

For recent essays on changes in gender ideology during the Civil War, see Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Reilly, ed., Sarah Jane Foster, p. 15.

This theme is explored in more detail in Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).


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