

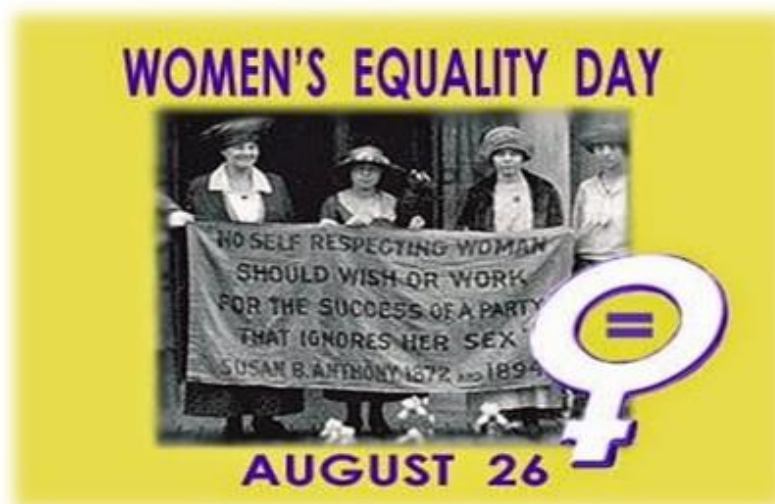
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #181

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### Women's Suffrage (Part One): The Anti-Suffragists



Did you know that August is the only month that does **not** have a major national holiday?

August does have several major religious holidays, but its most important secular holiday is August 26 – “Women’s Equality Day.” This year it falls on a Monday, but it is always Aug. 26 commemorating the day in 1920 that the 19th Amendment – the Susan B. Anthony Amendment – was adopted. It simply states:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. [1]

Although it does not use the word “woman,” it was the final triumph of women’s 70-plus year effort to secure the vote. The earliest suffragists did not initially seek the vote. They were primarily concerned with gaining women their economic and social rights. However, they quickly realized that without political power they were reduced to petitioning men to grant them their rights. They decided to seek political power. In America, political power resides in the right to vote.

The American women’s suffrage movement began in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the first ever women’s rights convention argued for it in the convention’s “Declaration of Sentiments.” Over the ensuing 72 years, Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and a legion of other women fought for the right to vote to more effectively campaign for women’s economic, cultural, and social rights.

Not everyone agreed with them.

And, in a great paradox, with a woman for the second time the nominee of a major party for president of the United States, 104 years after adoption of the 19th Amendment, in 2024 we hear right-wing figures questioning the social value of women voting. Peter Thiel, one of the founders of PayPal and a Silicon Valley “zillionaire,” said:

The 1920s were the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics. Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women – two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians – have rendered the notion of ‘capitalist democracy’ into an oxymoron. [2]

Thiel would only be a curiosity, but he is the chief sponsor and benefactor of Republican Party vice presidential nominee J.D. Vance, who almost daily demonstrates his hostility to women’s rights. Among other things, Vance opposes no-fault divorce even in cases of domestic abuse and violence, has compared abortion to slavery, called women without children “cat ladies,” accused working moms of being bad parents, and has said universal child care is “class war against normal people.” [3] His embracing of Kevin Roberts, president of The Heritage

Foundation and chief architect of Project 2025, which seeks to return America to a world of stay-at-home moms and working dads, only adds to his anti-women persona.

I ask myself, “What is going on here?”

Upon reflection, 176 years after Elizabeth Cady Stanton began the American women’s rights movement, 104 years after women secured the right to vote, and 52 years after passage of Title IX, Americans have still not settled the issue of a woman’s role in society.

It is an old, old issue. It raises fundamental questions about how society should be organized. History sheds valuable light on the issue, because if a woman’s right to vote is still indirectly challenged in 2024, the original anti-suffragists made similar arguments in the 19th century?

They came in two buckets. Of course, in the first bucket were men who opposed women’s suffrage. Like J.D. Vance and Rush Limbaugh before him, many were unapologetic, if hypocritical – one wonders what they said to their wives and daughters – misogynists, while others, paradoxically wanted to protect women by restricting their freedom.

In the second bucket, however, and it usually comes as a surprise to 21st century women, the leading anti-suffragists were women. This was true in the middle of the 19th century and again in the 19-teens as the possibility of women’s enfranchisement grew greater and greater.

Why would women oppose suffrage? The answer is both complicated and subtle. The lives of three of the most important women anti-suffragists help explain the issue.

In the mid-19th century, Sarah Josepha Hale and Catharine Beecher, two of the earliest and most important anti-suffragists, were living contradictions. Their defense of women’s traditional role as keeper of the domestic hearth, as the rock upon which **HOME** and, therefore, society rested was contradicted by the lives they actually led.

Who was Sarah Josepha Hale?



She was – **is** – probably the most important woman in American history about whom you have never heard. Why? Because she opposed women’s suffrage and thereby earned the suffragists and their feminist heirs’ undying –**hmmmm**, not animosity, but disdain.

Why was she important? Because she was America’s first professional woman. She was one of the first women in American history to earn her living as a professional writer and editor. In fact, she was one of the first women to rise to the top of any profession. In her case, publishing as the editor of the 19th century’s leading women’s magazine – **Godey’s Lady’s Book**. Among the millions of words she wrote, she also wrote a children’s poem I am all but certain you know by heart. If given the first two lines, you will automatically fill-in the next two lines, if not the entire poem:

“Mary had a little lamb,  
Its fleece was white as snow ...”

She was a sort of combination Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart – a champion of the arts and the art of making a **Home**. Brides wear white because Sarah Josepha Hale told them it was chic to do so. Americans celebrate Thanksgiving because Sarah Josepha Hale described the archetypical Thanksgiving dinner in her first novel **Northwood: Life North and South**. She then conducted a 30-year campaign petitioning presidents to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. She finally succeeded in 1863 when Abraham Lincoln declared the final Thursday in November a national day of Thanksgiving.

Along with Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, John Pintard, and Thomas Nast, she was one of the inventors of the American Way of Christmas. You have Christmas trees in your home because Sarah Josepha Hale made them fashionable.

An extremely intelligent woman – educated by first her father, then her brother, who shared his Dartmouth College educational materials with her, and then her husband and partner, David Hale – she became a widow in her early 30s. Left with five children, she refused to take in sewing or run a millinery shop, which were just about the only jobs available to a woman in early 19th century America.

She decided to become a professional writer, an almost ridiculous aspiration in her time. She did it. She then advanced to publishing and became an editor. One of those working moms who would have been ridiculed by J.D. Vance, Hale was a professional woman whose children were raised by relatives, although with her

loving, if long distance, attention. They all succeeded because of their mother's guidance and example. In some ways, she was the original "Supermom."

She championed women's education, helped found Vassar College, sponsored Elizabeth Blackwell, America's first female physician, and practically invented the American notion of philanthropy. When the original, male-led campaign to fund the Bunker Hill Monument failed, she organized a women's movement and raised the necessary funds. When she learned of the plight of women widowed when their seafaring husbands died at sea, she founded the Seaman's Aid Society in 1833.

Yet she opposed women's suffrage.

Why?

Because, although forced by widowhood to live a different type of life, she fervently believed in the concept of **Home**, the concept of true womanhood with woman as man's moral superior, and the cult of domesticity. She thought that if women **descended** – that is the word she'd have used – into the sordid world of politics and voting they would sacrifice their moral superiority and any power they had over men. Call her naïve, but it was the prevailing ethos of the time. In so many ways a progressive visionary concerning women's welfare, in this one respect, she was blind.

Why?

Because of the power of the *Cult of Domesticity*.

Which was what, exactly?

Amid the social turbulence of early 19th century America, men's and women's roles in society, particularly among the middle- and upper-middle classes, got sorted into two spheres –men's sphere and women's sphere. Men's sphere was the world of culture, commerce, sports, and politics. Women's sphere was the **Home**.

**Home** in the early 19th century was the great engine of assimilation that would make "Americans" of the disparate peoples peopling the new republic: native born of multiple ethnicities, the conquered Indigenous people, freed Black Americans, and immigrants. The idea of **Home** was white, gendered, and Christian. As Richard White says in *The Republic for Which It Stands*, "it contained manly men and womanly women united in monogamous marriage to reproduce families." [4]

The heart of *Home* was woman, who, morally superior to man, tamed his baser instincts and created the values upon which society rested. Hale opposed women's suffrage because she believed it would compromise women's moral superiority and the power it gave them. Hale understood that women in their "invoking of the gendered home involved seizing a weapon of considerable power." [5] Hale, although she opposed women's suffrage, by the force of her life's work for women's rights, she ironically undermined that notion of *Home* she cherished.

Although 21st century scholars think the entire system was more complicated and nuanced than it is usually described, in its essence it was a bifurcated world and value system in which woman's role was the keeper of the home and family. Woman's chief values were piety, purity, submissiveness to male authority, and domesticity. Feminist historian Barbara Welter called it the *Cult of True Womanhood* [6] American literature's greatest expression of the entire social system and its discontents is Louisa May Alcott's classic *Little Women*, which we discussed in *Book Note #128*, which can be found [here](#).



By either name, the system's chief apologist was Catharine Beecher, a member of the incredible Beecher family. One of her sisters was Harriett Beecher Stowe of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fame and one of her brothers, Henry Ward Beecher, from his pulpit in Brooklyn's Plymouth Church, was the foremost Protestant minister of the era advocating abolitionism, temperance, and women's rights.

Like Sarah Josepha Hale, Catharine Beecher was an advocate for women's education and a free, quality public education made available to all – boys and girls, rich and poor. The very public life she lived advancing those causes contradicted the values she preached.

When her fiancé died at sea, she never married. She never had children. J.D. Vance would call her a "cat lady." Although she cared for her father and siblings after her mother's death, she never *actually* had a family or *Home*.

She was a professional woman advocating for education for all, particularly for women. She founded one of the first schools for girls in the United States that provided an education beyond what we would call elementary school – the Hartford Female Seminary. She advocated for a comprehensive program for female education that included intellectual, social, and physical education for women.

Her ***A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School***, advocated for women's physical education. It was the definitive statement of the Cult of Domesticity. Founding what would become home economics, its primary thrust was to advocate for women's role as keeper of society's moral norms and values – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Later, in 1869, with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, she published ***The American Woman's Home***, describing the ideal model of an American woman and her home.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was a lukewarm pro-suffragist, but Catharine was an adamant anti-suffragist. She opposed suffrage for reasons similar to Hale's. She believed that women would be corrupted by the sordid world of politics. She believed a woman's role was to instruct children, in particular their male children, to be morally upright and politically progressive, which for her meant anti-slavery, pro-temperance, and defenders of the ***Home***. In short, a woman's role was to make their sons fit to lead society. It is sometimes called "Republican Motherhood."

Despite the opposition to women's rights, by the late-19th century, as a result of the progress in women's rights, the Cult of Domesticity was weakening as the "New Woman" emerged. A feminist ideal that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the "New Woman" symbolized a profound shift in expectations for a woman's role in society. The "New Woman" challenged traditional gender norms. She sought greater personal autonomy, education, and career opportunities.

Central to the idea of "The New Woman" was the rejection of the Cult of Domesticity that women's primary roles were as wives and mothers confined to the domestic sphere. Instead, the "New Woman" pursued higher education and entered the workforce in unparalleled numbers.

She entered professional fields such as medicine, law, and journalism. Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman physician. The famous journalist Nellie Bly exemplified the "New Woman" as she bested Jules Verne's "around the world in 80 days" by doing it in 76. Jane Addams, a social reformer and activist who co-founded Hull House in Chicago, embodied the spirit of community service and social activism that the "New Women" embraced. Her Hull House provided social and educational opportunities for working-class women.





“The New Woman” also embraced changes in personal lifestyle and appearance. These women were often seen riding bicycles, a symbol of newfound freedom and mobility. Fashion reflected this shift, with more practical clothing replacing restrictive corsets, allowing for greater physical activity and comfort. By the late 19th century, women had become major figures in the world of entertainment and with the advent of motion pictures and recorded music emerged the phenomenon of the “Flapper” flouting conventional values. Later in the silent film era, Louise Brooks exemplified the truly modern woman, but before her Nora Bayes and Trixie Friganza became major stars in vaudeville. In addition, Friganza

played a major role in the pre-World War I suffrage movement.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in poetry, was a graduate of Vassar College, which Sarah Josepha Hale helped found. She led a bohemian life in New York City’s Greenwich Village and Cape Cod’s Provincetown -- unimaginable in her mother’s, much less her grandmother’s, time. Anna Maria Jarvis, a highly successful businesswoman, founded “Mother’s Day” in partial atonement for having rejected the values of the mother she loved.

The “New Woman” marked a major transformation in America’s social and cultural landscape.

Even in 2024, the earth-shaking impact of the “New Woman” still roils American politics. In fact, it is undoing the “New Woman’s” great-great-granddaughter’s progress that animates Project 2025 and other early 21st century right-wing reactionaries.

Twenty-first century reactionaries were anticipated by the anti-suffragists of early 20th century who rejected the “New Woman’s” emergence. They asserted the same arguments as Hale, Beecher, and the early anti-suffragists. Founded in the late in the 19th century but by the 19-teens led by prominent philanthropist Josephine Dodge, the New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage had become the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. It and similar organizations in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the East based their opposition to women’s voting on the continuing cultural power of the Cult of Domesticity.





They argued that women's primary role was in the home as mothers and caretakers. They contended that women's suffrage would lead to social instability by challenging established gender norms and roles. They claimed that politics was a corrupt and morally degrading sphere that would harm women's character and purity. They emphasized the principle of states' rights, arguing that the issue of suffrage should be decided by individual states rather than through a federal mandate.

In short, they believed women's suffrage would lead to a breakdown of the family, destabilize society and government, and lead to women's moral corruption. The anti-suffragists wanted to protect women from the evils of politics and feared that a liberated woman or, more accurately, the absence of a liberated woman from the Home, threatened society's moral balance and stability.

In a great irony, undercutting their own arguments – much like Hale and Beecher before them – the anti-suffragists became professional women building organizations opposed to suffrage, arguing for women's education, and by the example of their own lives contradicting the values they alleged to champion. As Susan Goodier says in *No Votes for Women: The New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement*, “While the conservative anti-suffrage women certainly wished to preserve the existing social order, they nonetheless accepted, celebrated, and even advocated the entry of some women into the public sphere” [7] where, as noted, “public sphere” was men's sphere of influence in contrast to woman's role as head of the “home sphere.”

The incoherence of the old guard anti-suffragists mirrors the incoherence of 21st century right-wingers advocating for a return, in Stephanie Coontz's memorable phrase, “to a way we never were.” I find it incomprehensible but all too believable that in the summer of 2024 a major American “think tank” and one of the two major American political parties is arguing against women's rights.

But perhaps I shouldn't be surprised.

Fading as they may be the power of the Cult of Domesticity and the Cult of True Womanhood's lingering appeal still shakes American society. We have not yet arrived at an equitable and workable definition of *family*. Project 2025 wants a return to a homebound wife and a working husband as the panacea that will cure an ailing America. Yet, if I counted correctly, there are several dozen women involved in developing its agenda, their contradictory behavior a replay of the 19th century anti-suffragists. On the progressive left, no one has yet articulated a comprehensive definition of home.

This might strike some as an academic debate, but from its roots in American culture to the most recent social media posting and cable news talking-head

discussion, it is the essential, the core inflection point in the culture wars raging in American society. That dates at least to when Pat Buchanan declared them at the 1992 Republican national convention if not all the way back to the New York Radical Women's Coalition that declared "women's liberation" at 1968's Miss America Pageant.

I do not have a simple or even a complex answer to the challenge but solve it Americans' must. Project 2025 and J.D. Vance's wishes notwithstanding, I do not think American women are going back to submitting to male authority nor should they.

I do have this piece of advice: if women want to ensure that the progress their foremother's fought for is not undone, then they need to heed Susan B. Anthony's advice in the poster at the beginning of this **Book Note**. She said, "No self-respecting woman should wish or work for the success of a party that ignores her sex." In 2024, you can substitute for a "a party that ignores her sex," a party leadership that belittles, undervalues, and degrades women.



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"Josephine Jewell Dodge 2.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Josephine Jewell Dodge 2.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed August 6, 2024.

**End Notes**

1. “19th Amendment” at **Legal Information Institute of Cornell University** available at [19th Amendment | U.S. Constitution | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute \(cornell.edu\)](#) accessed August 13, 2024.
2. Mathis-Lilley, Ben, “Vance Nomination Reignites Age-Old Question of Whether Women Should Be Allowed to Vote” in **Slate** available at [Vance Nomination Reignites Age-Old Question of Whether Women Should Be Allowed to Vote \(msn.com\)](#) accessed August 13, 2024.
3. Camera, Lauren, “J.D. Vance’s Anti-Women Policies Take on New Significance if Harris Tops the Ticket” at **U.S. News** available at [J.D. Vance’s Anti-Women Policies Take on New Significance if Harris Tops the Ticket | National News | U.S. News \(usnews.com\)](#) accessed August 13, 2024.
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5. Ibid.
6. Cf. Welter, Barbara, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” in **American Quarterly** V. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1966), pp. 151-174.
7. Goodier, Susan. **No Votes for Women: The New York State Anti-Suffrage Movement**. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 42.

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