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Bringing daylight with them: American writers and Civil War Washington

Eve Esther Rosenbaum
University of Iowa

BRINGING DAYLIGHT WITH THEM: AMERICAN WRITERS AND CIVIL WAR WASHINGTON

by

Eve Esther Rosenbaum

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Eve Esther Rosenbaum

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English at the December 2014 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Kathleen Diffley, Thesis Supervisor

Linda Bolton

Rebecca Entel

Ed Folsom

Leslie Schwalm

To Madeline

History and elegy are akin. The word 'history' comes from the ancient Greek verb meaning 'to ask.' One who asks about things – about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell – is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.

Anne Carson
Nox

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ABSTRACT

Bringing Daylight with Them: American Writers and Civil War Washington explores the capital during wartime, a city remade by the thousands of new residents and visitors searching for government jobs, for their loved ones in the city's numerous military hospitals, or for a place to escape the bonds of Southern slavery. Among those who made their new homes in the city were writers – poets, novelists, journalists, editors – who then wrote about their experiences and their new city in ways that helped readers see for themselves what Washington was like during the Civil War. This project imagines three of those writers – Elizabeth Keckley, Lois Bryan Adams, and Walt Whitman – who produced drastically different takes on the capital and their places in it.

For Keckley, a former slave turned dressmaker to Washington's most fashionable women, including Mary Todd Lincoln, the capital was a labyrinth of power and influence. Learning to navigate it was vital to her status as a business woman in the growing free Black community. Adams, a Michigan poet and journalist, was a correspondent for a Detroit newspaper and a clerk in the Department of Agriculture. Her weekly "Letter from Washington" captured the movement and flow of a city made riotous, while coming to terms with the sacrifices of war and questioning a government's responsibility to its citizens during wartime.

While so many writers represented Washington as a temporary space for themselves, as it was for so many who found themselves in the capital during the Civil War, Whitman lived there for nearly a decade, experiencing both the rush of war and what came after. Through a study of his poetry and prose, Washington emerges as not just the

government seat but ultimately as a place of personal and professional fulfillment. *Bringing Daylight with Them* reads both the texts of wartime Washington and the city itself to understand how writers built the capital in the public's imagination.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Bringing Daylight with Them: American Writers and Civil War Washington explores the capital during wartime, a city remade by the thousands of new residents and visitors searching for government jobs, for their loved ones in the city's numerous military hospitals, or for a place to escape the bonds of Southern slavery. Among those who made their new homes in the city were writers – poets, novelists, journalists, editors – who then wrote about their experiences and their new city in ways that helped readers see for themselves what Washington was like during the Civil War. This project imagines three of those writers – Elizabeth Keckley, Lois Bryan Adams, and Walt Whitman – who produced drastically different takes on the capital and their places in it.

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LANDING SOMEWHERE IN CARNIVAL TIME

In a photograph from 1858, the new capitol dome in Washington is still a vague idea, just a thin metal rod rising above the white building, giving the viewer no hint of what this dome will eventually become. Pennsylvania Avenue in front of it is wide and paved with dirt, and the photographer has positioned himself in the middle of the street some distance off, looking southeast, capturing both the unfinished dome and the city life in its shadow. Three horse-drawn carriages are parked beside the curb, and the trees lining either side of the street are bare. It must not yet be spring. To the far left, cut off by the edge of the photograph and beneath the row of low brick buildings, a banner reads, "GREAT BOOK SALE." There are no people (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The unfinished Capitol dome in 1858, looking southeast down Pennsylvania Avenue. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

In this moment, captured three years before the Civil War would bring untold changes to Washington, the city looks like the sleepy, half-built Southern town that visitors wrote home about. The capitol building, still unfinished as its two wings were added and a new iron dome put in place, looks scarcely taller than the buildings in front of it. Its magnificent white, however, captured even in this faded print, sets it apart from the muddy city life at its base. The exterior of the dome would be completed in December 1863, when the Statue of Freedom (or the Statue of Liberty, as it was known in the nineteenth-century) would be set in place and a thirty-five gun salute would sound, marking this momentous event for each state in the Union, even those currently seceded. Of course, the guns fired that day were echoes of the bloody conflict engulfing the nation. Washington was no stranger to the sounds of artillery, as the city itself had served as the base for the Army of the Potomac since the first shots had been fired at Fort Sumter. Yet the celebratory gunfire that day, December 2, 1863, was a signal to the country that the Union could survive even this.

This project examines Washington during the war years through a specific lens: the work of writers who came to the city and constructed it in their texts even as it was being rebuilt and made over by its residents into a capital that could truly be a reflection of its country. The writers here span a significant moment in Washington history, as the city moved from war to Reconstruction, and they wrote about its myriad transformations, the movements of everyday life on its streets and the martial air unique to the capital city. The writers in this project land in Washington for different reasons – Lois Bryan Adams as a correspondent and government clerk, Elizabeth Keckley to make her fortune as a modiste to society women, and Walt Whitman as a poet and government worker who would find his calling in the military hospitals – but all would

come to understand that in the seat of government there was no distinction between public and private lives.

Bringing Daylight with Them: American Writers and Civil War Washington examines how writers new to the city during wartime both created the city for their readers and constructed professional and literary connections in a city that was still seen as inhospitable to intellectual pursuits. As each writer found his or her place within the capital, they relied on – or helped form – networks that established them as players within their day-to-day lives as well as in the careers they hoped to advance while in the capital. Each writer may have come to the city with different objectives, but ultimately they each found that in order to succeed it was necessary to cultivate relationships and seek access to circles that often seemed to operate through the prestige of exclusion, whether due to race, class, gender, occupation, or the lingering effects of Southern power on a capital being made over as a Northern undertaking. When Lois Bryan Adams told her readers back in Detroit about the city, she noted that new, industrious Northern arrivals had "brought daylight with them" (204), throwing off the darkness of Southern influence and remaking the city in their own image, free of the legacies of slavery and the urge to secede. Like those new Northern arrivals, the new breed of writers arriving in Washington were well positioned to write about life in the capital and the intricacies of governmental and social obligations.

In Washington, government buildings were built next door to private residences; soldiers could bake their bread in the basement of the capitol and bunk down beneath congressmen's desks. A hotel could become a military hospital and then become a hotel once again; the rooms where Louisa May Alcott tended her dying charges could shift into the hotel bar at the terminus of the streetcar line where Whitman and Peter Doyle would drink at the end of the day. The

Patent Office could house displays of inventions by American citizens while soldiers lay suffering on the floors of this temporary hospital, months before Whitman and Adams would serve as clerks in the same building, years before President Lincoln would host an inaugural ball in the same rooms where Whitman remembered the agonized cries of the dead and dying. Private citizens would come to town for government work and rent rooms in public boarding houses, along with thousands of other government employees, senators and representatives included.

The writers chosen for this project have very little in common except for the city space they inhabit. They emerge from different parts of the country and come to Washington with significantly different projects, both personal and literary. Elizabeth Keckley arrived in Washington first, in 1860, having bought her own freedom in St. Louis through her work as a dressmaker. It's unlikely that she saw her time in Washington as impetus for a writing project, but her proximity to the Lincoln family, and her close friendship with Mary Todd Lincoln in particular, enabled her to write an intimate memoir of the White House during wartime.

Lois Bryan Adams, come to Washington as a correspondent for a Michigan newspaper, was specifically invested in the city as the seat of government during the war and how the government functioned both at war and in its day-to-day operations. As a federal employee, she brought her readers inside the halls of government to show them how the system worked for them and – as her time in Washington brought her closer in touch with the brutalities of war – how it operated in a time of crisis. Adams filled her newspaper letters with everyday moments from the city as a newcomer might experience them – what it was like to live in a boardinghouse, how to navigate the streets in a city where the mud was famous for ruining the bottom hems of dresses, or how to find injured Michigan soldiers in the labyrinth of Washington hospitals. Like

Whitman, once Adams immersed herself in the city of hospitals, they became her primary focus, forcing her to question in new ways the responsibilities – and the inadequacies – of the federal government.

Walt Whitman, who came to Washington after finding his injured brother in Fredericksburg, stayed until the early 1870s and had the opportunity to experience Washington during both the carnival of wartime and the postwar efforts to smooth over the rough edges of a city still only half-built. Whitman, whose wartime writing is so enmeshed with his work in the hospitals, would need to work on both suturing his experiences into his writing and figuring out how to live in the city once the apparatus of war had been disbanded.

While there is no shortage of critical texts on Washington during wartime, *Bringing Daylight With Them* is the first to specifically study the literary output of writers who were not native to Washington but found themselves in the capital for the first time, using their physical surroundings to comment on the national crisis and its aftermath. Just as these writers stepped off of the train into a city being overhauled and rebuilt, they too were engaged in a project of rebuilding: they were constructing the realities of a wartime capital for their audiences during a time of national uncertainty. Washington, and its emblematic architecture, served simultaneously as an inspiration for their work and as a moldable reflection of how they imagined the national city should be, beyond what it actually was.

The texts these writers produced engage with private moments in public spaces, governmental spaces, that owe their strength to the city's porous spheres. Political decisions had a real impact on the city and its residents. The emancipation of Washington's slaves served as a petri dish for the implementation of a broader proclamation, which is celebrated by Alcott from the window of her sick-room. She envisioned freed African Americans joining hands and

dancing in celebration around the White House, a government edifice turned domestic interior where Keckley prepared Willie Lincoln's body for burial. In Washington, the streets were paved with the stories of its visitors – military and civilian alike – and the city itself was regenerated, rebuilt, and reimagined with each new narrative incarnation.

In an 1869 letter to his brother, Thomas U. Walter, the architect of the capitol, answered his brother's questions about the Statue of Freedom. His brother asked: why is the statue female? Walter answered, "[I]n all languages which have no neuter gender the noun 'Liberty' is feminine, and of course it must be represented by a female. So with virtue, charity, philosophy, [and] architecture." His brother asked, what is the ornament on top of her head? Walter responded that in his original sketch, the statue wore a liberty cap until Jefferson Davis, then in charge of the War Department and responsible for the capitol renovations, protested, "[W]e were never slaves, and that the liberty cap don't apply to us as a nation." Davis, Walter noted, wanted her headdress to be something that could "serve as a cap without being a cap (for that belongs to manumitted slaves)." Finally, his brother asked: What does she hold in her hands? Walter explained that in her right hand she holds "a sword, the symbol of protection, in her left hand a wreath, the symbol of peace, and at her left side she has the national coat of arms" (Walter letter). When the final piece of the statue was raised that day in 1863, Jefferson Davis had already been installed in Richmond as the president of the Confederacy, and the Statue of Freedom stood above Washington, clutching the country's future in her hands.

Meanwhile, on the streets stretching outward from the newly domed capitol, Washington too had undergone a significant transformation. The city, like the statue, wore a hat with

multiple meanings. It was the center for war activity along the eastern seaboard and a camp for thousands of soldiers passing through on their way to the front. Overflowing campsites were stationed within the city and its neighboring territory.[1] It was the seat of the federal government and under constant threat of attack from the Confederate army. It was the site of the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, which had gone into effect less than a year earlier, and it was also the temporary home to thousands of freed and runaway slaves, living in harsh conditions in contraband camps on the outskirts of town and in shacks and alleys throughout the capital. Like Freedom, who could never fully wear the cap of liberty, these former slaves rejoiced in their escape from bondage but were still waiting for help from a city that tried to ignore their most basic wants, pushing them into freedmen's camps that seemed like anything but the promised land.

Washington was also the most heavily fortified city in the world, surrounded by fifty-three forts that protected its government buildings from attack. According to Noah Brooks, a Washington correspondent for the Sacramento *Union,* there was a sense of "uneasiness" pervading the nation's capital during the war, and the forts made "a complete circle around the capital, their guns being trained to sweep every possible road or route leading into the city. Rifle-pits were cut from point to point, making a continuous line of defense." Washington, he wrote, was enclosed "as with a wall" (25). It was a city of the dead and dying, home to more than forty hospitals in and around city limits, where injured soldiers lay beneath the care of an army of doctors as well as civilian nurses, women from all walks of life who answered the call to

[1] There may have been a constant military presence in Washington, but for the most of the war, the majority of the troops stationed there were untrained militia and the recuperating wounded, not skilled soldiers the city could defend on as a defense against the Confederate army (Green 261). A woman residing in Washington wrote in an 1861 letter, "You would not know this God-forsaken city, our beautiful capital, with all its artistic wealth, desecrated, disgraced with Lincoln's low soldiery" (qtd. in Froncek 216).

nurture young America back to health. Because of its hospitals, because of its armies, and because it was the seat of the federal government, Washington saw its muddy streets transformed during the war into a destination for people who poured into its hotels and boarding houses. Some were looking for their injured loved ones, hoping to find their sons and husbands and brothers in one of the thousands of hospital beds. Others came for a government job or appointment, counting on the apparatus of war to necessitate a larger federal workforce. Still more came as newspaper correspondents, scribbling notes from the congressional press gallery or remarking on the bustling avenues, sending back their observations across the country to readers hungry for news from the capital. Made riotous by the throngs of the newly arrived, the city had been transformed by the end of the war into an expanding metropolitan center.

For many writers, Washington's tumultuous streets and the intersecting functions of institutions in a wartime capital enabled them not only to bring the city to life on the page but also to pull and stretch at its half-completed ideals, shaping it into the kind of place they wanted to write home about, a city as malleable on the page as it was in its unfinished design. Their work helped turn a sleepy city into the kind of place that could inspire a nation to continue sending its sons into battle and to continue believing in the endurance of the Union. Of course, beneath the half-built white government buildings, the sounds of martial bands marching down Fourteenth Street and over the bridge to Virginia, and the swarms of people bringing life to the avenues, Washington was still a center of vice, gambling dens, corrupt politicians and, as Whitman would write in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson soon after arriving, a reflection of America, one "brought to hospital in her fair youth" (*Letters* 45). What was before the war a provincial backwater with only 75,000 residents in 1861, quickly found its resources strained and its boarding houses overflowing. As Whitman remarked in *Specimen Days*, "Here in

Washington, when these army hospitals are fill'd (as they have been already several times,) they contain a population more numerous in itself than the whole of Washington of ten or fifteen years ago" (LA 761).[2] By the 1870 census, the city held more than 131,700 residents, nearly doubling the population of just ten years before.

Even before the fighting began, though, Washington had been known to outsiders as a city of loose morals and violence where, as an 1858 Senate committee reported, "Riot and bloodshed are a daily occurrence. Innocent and unoffending persons are shot, stabbed, and otherwise shamefully maltreated, and not unfrequently the offender is not even arrested" (Green 215). According to historian Margaret Leech, "Americans did not visit Washington for pleasure. . . . [T]he city bore an unwholesome name among the pious folk of the nation. It was darkly imagined as a sink of iniquity, where weak-minded bachelors were exposed to the temptations of saloons, gambling hells and light women, and the prevalence of hotel life was instanced as proof of the city's immorality" (12). Washington society was oriented primarily around the president and Congress, with the city enlivened during Congress's winter residence and then falling quiet during the slower summer months.

Despite the possibilities of the new dome, before and during the war Washington wasn't much to look at. The National Mall was a mess of mud and sewage, with cattle yards and a slaughterhouse surrounding the stump of the Washington Monument. Unfinished government buildings spread widely over the city of unpaved streets running from the White House (an unimpressive structure to foreign and domestic visitors alike) to the unfinished capitol building, shrouded in black scaffolding. What was supposed to be a "city of magnificent distances" was

[2] Constance Green breaks down the 1860 population: 60,764 white residents, 11,131 free African American, and 3,185 slaves. By the 1870 census, the city held 131,700 residents, 88,298 of them white and 43,422 free African Americans (21).

instead a provincial town of pickpockets, government officials, and unsanitary living conditions (Morris 49). The magnificent vistas were nothing more than an oft-repeated jibe; in a diary kept by a Louisiana man come to Washington in hopes of winning a government appointment, the author turns the magnificent distances into "malignant distances" (Daniels).[3] In 1868, a Washington travel guide stated, "The magnitude of the plan of the city, and the distances of the public edifices from each other, seem to have retarded its growth" (*Morrisons'* 10).[4]

The war led to an unrelenting assault on the city's fragile infrastructure and the nonstop movement insinuated itself into the daily lives of the populace.[5] Constance Green, in her history of Washington, wrote that the streets, already in dismal shape, were made worse by the constant flow of military traffic:

> Heavily laden wagon trains jolting through the city and the hooves of thousands of horses, mules, and cattle thudding by toward the Army corrals and slaughter houses cut the avenues and streets to ribbons; teamsters and cavalrymen riding on the sidewalk to avoid the muck in the roads demolished the footways too. (256-7)

In fact, the most remarked-upon aspect of the city was the weather and the trouble it caused the city roads, with the excess of dust in the hot, dry summer and the impassable mud in the rainy

[3] In his study of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cities, Dell Upton asserts that when cities of that era developed their urban grids, they were "projected far beyond current needs and took decades to fill out, or in most cases even to be surveyed" (3). Perhaps Washington – with its well-planned but half-built streets – lagged behind visitor expectations for their capital city. See Upton's *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Space in the New American Republic* for a more complete discussion of antebellum cities and the problems urban residents faced, including noise, smells, lack of sanitation, the hell of being surrounded by countless strangers, and the mixture of mud, refuse, and human/animal feces that turned city streets into open sewers. Washington was one of the last cities on the eastern seaboard to install a sewage system, which was added during and immediately following the war, as city planners also began leveling and paving the streets.

[4] Later editions of this guide would praise Washington's modernization and its broad avenues.

[5] Once the war had ended, Emily Edson Briggs noted in her newspaper column of January 31, 1866, that residents were "no longer awakened in the small hours of the night by the rumbling of the Government ambulances bringing the wounded and dying from the battlefields to the hospitals. We shall never forget that peculiar sound, unlike that produced by any other vehicle. . . . [T]he movements were always slower than a funeral march" (10).

season. Jane Gray Swisshelm, a Washington correspondent from Minnesota, wrote in 1863 after her arrival in Washington:

> The street in front of the President's house and War Department has the gutter heaped up full of black, rotten mud, a foot deep and worth fifty cents a cart load for manure. It appears to be a matter of national pride that the President is to have more mud, and blacker mud, and filthier mud in front of his door than any other man can afford. (269).

Its unfinished buildings and muddy streets may not have inspired patriotic fervor or glowing letters home about the scenery, but for writers stepping off the train for the first time, the city – and its wealth of mud and dust – offered a multitude of narrative possibilities.

When Tribulation Periwinkle steps off the train in Washington, she notes that it truly is a "city of magnificent distances," but her use of the clichéd line seems more obligatory than spontaneous. She quotes it, she says, "as I suppose everyone does," when they first see the city, but only because she feels she must (*Hospital* 67). Trib, as her readers immediately learn, is not easily impressed. Like her fictional alter ego, Louisa May Alcott arrived in Washington in December 1862 to serve as a nurse at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown. She lasted just six weeks before her battle with typhoid forced her home again in January. However, she documented her short stay in letters to her family, which were published serially in the Boston abolitionist newspaper *The Commonwealth* during the spring of 1863, and then lengthened and collected into the book-length *Hospital Sketches* during the summer of that year.[6] The original

[6] Contemporary reviews stress that the publisher would donate at least five cents from every copy to the "support of orphans made fatherless or homeless by the war" (qtd. in Clark 10) and hoped that while portions of the text had

letters have not survived, so there's no way to tell the extent of Alcott's revision between the time when she wrote to her family and when she edited those letters for a more public audience, but the intimate and moving hospital scenes Alcott offers in Periwinkle's voice are generally taken as a strong indication of Alcott's own experiences.

Like other writers come to Washington during the war, Alcott portrayed the city as both an unruly wartime capital and also a patriotic city filled with citizens doing their best to aid their ailing country. She acknowledged the dangers for a woman alone in the city and then glossed over her less reader-friendly experiences for her concerned audience back home. The novel offers only a partial record of Alcott's time as a nurse, and seems engineered more to inspire confidence on the homefront – especially when taking into account the Battle of Fredericksburg,[7] which flooded the hospital with wounded and dying men immediately after her arrival, as well as Union discouragement during the spring and summer of 1863 when *Sketches* was published. However, like the heavily fortified city Alcott and Trib inhabited for those few weeks, even a sealed-in space could offer great opportunities for freedom.

From the outset, Alcott balanced the desire for new experience with the desire to be of use. The adventure she sought in Washington was tempered by her domestic duties, both to her family and to her country, but was also enabled by them, as it was her caretaking abilities that brought her to the action. It was also her familial obligations that kept Alcott from allowing the

already been serially published, "what is new to the public must be copied by no unscrupulous editor; it would be like robbing a charity box in the vestry of a church" (qtd. in Clark 13).

[7] Whitman's brother was wounded in this same battle, and while Alcott was dealing with her first post-battle nursing experience, Whitman was hurrying to the front in Virginia, and then made his way to Washington around the new year. Whitman and Alcott overlapped in the capital for only the first few weeks of January 1863, but it was the success of *Hospital Sketches* that would encourage him to write about his own wartime experiences. In a letter to his friend, James Redpath – the publisher of Alcott's book -- on October 21, 1863, he remarked that his "idea is a book of the time – worthy the time – something considerably beyond mere hospital sketches . . ." (Whitman Archive).

full experiences of wartime Washington to be revealed in her letters home and, later, in the published *Sketches*. She constructed the hospital as a familial space in which she served as mother to her sick and wounded charges. Within this essentially feminized interior, Alcott removed all traces of danger, sexual desire, or unfeminine longing for the excitement of battle. The frenzy, and therefore the peril, of the city street is either glossed over and ignored or experienced at a safe remove, leaving Trib to narrate an expurgated version of Washington as she wants her readers to believe she experienced it. Alcott's self-censuring text is intriguing particularly when read against other women writers who came to Washington and how they chose to represent their place in the militarized capital, both in their public and private writing.

When Trib first arrives in the city, alone and unaware of how to get to Hurly Burly House (the fictionalized version of the Union Hotel Hospital) – which sat on M Street in Georgetown,[8] one of that city's busiest thoroughfares – she is directed into a hack by a "friendly gentleman," who acts as her escort and tour guide, whether or not she wants or needs one, "pointing out the objects of interest which we passed in our long drive" (*Hospital* 67). It is from inside the hack that Trib gets her first taste of Washington's topsy-turvyness. On Pennsylvania Avenue, she states, "with its bustle, lights, music, and military," she feels as though she has "crossed the

[8] Georgetown was founded in 1751 as part of Washington County, though it was distinct from Washington City; by 1863, the Washington correspondent for the *New York Observer and Chronicle* called it "a part of Washington, as Brooklyn is of New York, being only separated by Rock Creek" ("Washington Sketches" 221). The explosive population growth in both cities during and after the war pushed their boundaries even closer together. By 1871, Georgetown and Washington would be united as the District of Columbia and, according to Katheryn Scheider Smith, after the war, "the physical distinctions . . . began to blur" (9). Local historian Mary A. Mitchell noted that Georgetown was "a town on a fence, a borderline town where prominent citizens stemmed from both sides of the Mason Dixon Line" and where "the two strains rarely mixed, either at the altar speaking the marriage vow, in church, or at the doctor's office" (84). Like Washington, Georgetown was a strange mix of dusty thoroughfares and underdeveloped farm land, overrun with soldiers, army wagons, and unpenned farm animals, which Alcott gleefully records in *Hospital Sketches*. Adams reported that Georgetown had "streets as shabby and filthy as any Washington can boast, and is full of ancient, dilapidated houses, quaint old structures with moss-grown roofs and crumbling walls" (39). However, one of her first stops once she arrives in Washington is to the charming Georgetown house of E.D.E.N. Southworth, a popular and much-admired author of novels like *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap*.

water and landed somewhere in Carnival time" (68). Alcott's street descriptions are significantly different from how Adams, Keckley, and Whitman describe their own experiences with Washington's busy thoroughfares.

For Keckley, the streets are merely a means to an end: she travels them from her lodging place within one of Washington's African American neighborhoods to the houses of her wealthy clients or, most importantly, to the White House. Keckley is less interested in the street as a metaphor for the capital in wartime; she is always moving, always on her way someplace more important. For Whitman, too, the street is what takes him from his boarding house to his government job to the hospitals, and then home again. While his published wartime writing is mostly concerned with the hospitals and the men he meets there, there are several instances in which he walks the streets late at night, when the carnival seems to have been cleared of its chaos, and he writes about the poetic nature of the white government buildings in the moonlight, a balm of sorts after a long day of hospital work. While Whitman is a natural observer of the streets, he positions himself within his writing as observer rather than participant, the critical eye as witness and chronicler. Adams, on the other hand, in her lively and humorous letters about the Washington street, seems constantly on the verge of throwing herself into the swarm, getting lost in it, and emerging with stories to send back home. Like Alcott, her stories are tempered and more innocuous than tumultuous, but she is invested in the life of the street more than the other writers considered in this project. For Adams, the street is Washington's grand stage.

The Washington Trib encounters is filtered through her own perception of what her readers should be allowed to see, and differs significantly from other contemporary accounts.[9]

[9] Hannah Ropes, the matron of Alcott's hospital, kept a diary during her time there, and her descriptions – both in her diary and in letters to her daughter and mother – of the city and hospital life both confirm Alcott's stories and offer a far less idealized glimpse into their daily lives. Upon arriving, she writes to her daughter that "Washington is decidedly the ugliest and dirtiest city I ever saw. One finds nothing pleasant until you mount the Capitol and look

Alcott may assert that her nurse stepped from the train into carnival time, but it is other writers, like Adams, who seem to move through the carnival and to capture it on the page. Alcott's carnival is always seen from a distance, at a remove from her daily experiences. Once Trib is falls ill and can no longer perform her nursing duties, she decides that fresh air and sun are the perfect cures, and sets out from the hospital, venturing "so far as a lone lorn female could venture in a city, one-half of whose male population seemed to be taking the other half to the guard house" (97). Her comment is facetious, as she reports traveling from her squalid Georgetown hospital, up to Georgetown Heights, and then into Washington to visit the better-appointed Armory Square Hospital and to the Senate chapter of the Capitol building, quite a distance from where she began.

While at the Capitol, Trib wanders through the Senate chambers, looks at the statues she can't identify and ends up at the Statue of Freedom, still a year away from her permanent place on top of the dome, and standing "flat in the mud, with Young America most symbolically making dirt pies, and chip forts, in its shadow" (101). She notes the sunlight illuminating Freedom's forehead and:

> in her hand, some summer bird had built its nest. I accepted the good omen then, and, on the first of January, the Emancipation Act gave the statue a nobler and more enduring pedestal than any marble or granite ever carved and quarried by human hands. (101)

off over the open beautiful country" (50). When her daughter asks if she can visit in August 1862, just six months before Alcott would arrive, Ropes replies, "Now, it would not do for you to be here. It is no place for young girls. The surgeons are young and look upon nurses as their natural prey" (57), a sentiment Alcott keeps from her own writing. Ropes' death from typhoid spurred Alcott's own removal back to Concord.

Alcott's imagery here of "Young America" molding and shaping Washington's vast quantity of mud in the shadow of Freedom, and new life hatching within her hand, turns the dissonance of Washington into a generative site for America's future, where the white and black children playing together can live and work on equal terms.

At no point, beyond the off-hand remark about the guard house, do Alcott's readers ever sense that she or her narrator view Washington as a violent, crime-ridden city in constant fear of enemy attack. Trib never fears for her safety; she is utterly independent. Free from the rules of the hospital and from her role as caretaker, Tribulation is her own woman, and only her illness has the power to curtail her autonomy. As Trib finally steps out into the muddy Washington streets, she filters out the carnival that greeted her arrival. The narrative, in effect, encloses the city as effectively as the forts that kept out attacks from all sides, enclosing Trib within the story and within the city.

As Trib's health deteriorates further, she becomes even more confined to her room and limits her comments on the city to the small patch of street she can see from her window. The city that emerges in these scenes is colorful and boisterous, but never unmanageable, if only through a well-illustrated vignette. She truly becomes a spectator, looking out of the window and recording the sights and sounds that most interest her. She remarks on the farm animals running loose,[10] the fashions of the day (both somber and ridiculous), and soldiers going to and from the hospital. In one of the most striking scenes viewed from her window, Alcott recalls the

[10] According to Mary Mitchell, there were so many loose animals even post-war that the city "ordered everyone fined who kept his stable within two hundred feet of his house," and that because animals roamed where they pleased, "instead of taking the animal to the shed, the milkman had to take stool and pail to the cow" (3).

celebrations on New Year's Eve 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect.[11] Trib reports:

> As the bells rung midnight, I electrified my room-mate by dancing out of bed, throwing up the window, and flapping my handkerchief, with a feeble cheer, in answer to the shout of a group of colored men in the street below. All night they tooted and tramped, fired crackers, sung "Glory, Hallelujah," and took comfort, poor souls! in their own way. (106)

While it may have been the typhoid keeping Trib inside on such a momentous occasion, no doubt the carnival atmosphere right below her bedroom was most appropriately narrated from a remove, her feeble cheers an appreciation of the celebrations below but not part of them. Yet Trib imagines the celebrations continuing even beyond the limited scope of her window, as she envisions what would happen if freed African Americans had "taken hands and danced around the White House . . . [N]o President could have had a finer levee, or one to be prouder of" (106). As Trib describes the joining of hands around the White House she engages with it as both the official seat of President Lincoln, whose proclamation made freedom possible for these men, but also as a private residence whose inhabitants could and should be celebrated with the very human desire to clasp hands and perform their happiness through the freedom of their bodies. Trib's body is ensconced behind the windowsill, but her imagination and her narrative – in this one moment – consider what liberty could be like.

[11] Slavery had ended in Washington on April 16, 1862, when President Lincoln signed a bill specifically ending slavery in the District of Columbia, which included Washington, Georgetown, and Washington County. The bill required immediate emancipation of all slaves in D.C., and provided $300 in compensation per slave to owners who were loyal to the Union. In the nine months following the bill's passage, the Board of Commissioners approved 930 petitions for the freedom of 2,989 slaves (National Archives).

Because she left Washington almost immediately afterward, Alcott would never get to see the results of emancipation in the District of Columbia. *Hospital Sketches* illustrates a narrow moment of the wartime capital. Other writers, including those discussed in this project, spent the war years and after learning the city and recreating it for their readers, including its frustrating inadequacies and its unique celebrations. They would illuminate parts of a city that was at once sequestered from outsiders and shifting to accommodate each new wave of inhabitants. In the end, each would encounter the capital in their own way and construct a portrait of what life was like in the shadow of the Capitol dome.

CHAPTER ONE

HOW ELIZABETH KECKLEY DRESSED AND REDRESSED TWO FIRST LADIES OF THE WHITE HOUSE

In her memoir of Civil War Washington, Elizabeth Keckley recounts a moment from Christmas Eve of 1860. She has stayed late at the home of Jefferson and Varina Davis to finish the dressing gown a devoted wife planned to give her husband for Christmas. This is only weeks before Davis would resign his seat in Congress and move his family south, to become president of the Confederacy. The holiday scene is quietly domestic, detached from the secret meetings taking place elsewhere in the house at all hours of the day and night. Senator Davis, looking "somewhat careworn" (68), watches the tree being trimmed and notices Keckley sewing, even after midnight. She tells him it's important to Mrs. Davis that the gown be finished, and he understands that it's a gift for him. He asks her about the fabric and she says, "It is a drab changeable silk" (68), a weave made up of two or more different yarns that can change color based on the light. In her memoir she continues, "I might have added that it was rich and handsome, but did not, well knowing that he would make the discovery in the morning" (68). He leaves the room, not wanting to ruin his wife's surprise.

This moment is how Keckley asks her readers to remember Jefferson Davis in 1868 – not as the president of the failed Confederacy, running from Federal troops in a cloak Keckley made for Varina, but as a considerate husband who sought to bring some joy to his wife even in a difficult time. Keckley reflects on that dressing gown, worn, she says, "I have not a shadow of a doubt, by Mr. Davis during the stormy years that he was president of the Confederate States" (69). Indeed, in this narrative, the demands of state are distinctly bound to the demands of

fashion and the act of clothing the body. For Keckley, who bought her own freedom and eventually became one of the most sought-after dressmakers in 1860s Washington, it was the intimacy of dressing, of the constructing of fabrics, of foundations, that connected domestic concerns with the affairs of state, where the political rituals of dress determined what clothing said about someone's station, and what a person's social sphere said about his or her access to clothing, regardless of whether it was the first lady or a former slave living in one of the city's contraband camps. Keckley's positioning of her most influential clients – and herself as a keen chronicler and confidante – is as much the story of their fashionable connections as it is the story of her own access to power within both white and black Washington, and her skillful maneuvering from background player to engineer.

Before the war started and Southerners abandoned Washington for the upstart Confederacy, Keckley spent a few months working for Varina Davis and the other powerful women in what was socially a Southern town, where she built her business and her reputation as an exclusive modiste. She arrived in Washington in the spring of 1860, having recently purchased her own freedom in St. Louis by working for that city's society ladies. She was hoping to start a new life in the capital's thriving and well-established black community in the field for which she was already known: dressmaking. In her 1868 memoir, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, Keckley relates the kindness shown to her by the Davises, even as their own position in town grew precarious and they made plans to leave, joining the thousands of other Southerners who were closing their Washington houses and fleeing south. Mrs. Davis, assuring Keckley that the war was both inevitable and rapidly approaching, tried to persuade her to accompany them by saying, "I will take good care of you. Besides, when the war breaks out, the colored people will suffer in the North. The Northern

people will look upon them as the cause of the war, and I fear, in their exasperation, will be inclined to treat you harshly" (72). She assured Keckley that, in a few months, when the war was over and her husband had moved into the White House, Keckley could return and take her place as dressmaker to the first lady. Keckley reports that she considered the offer but ultimately "preferred to cast [her] lot among the people of the North" (73). When her memoir was published three years after the war's end, Keckley had little to lose by portraying this scene as she did, informing her readers that she respected Mrs. Davis enough to reflect on going south with her after having only recently bought her freedom.

Keckley did end up working as a dressmaker for the first lady, but for Mary Todd Lincoln rather than Varina Davis. Still, the cozy scenes Keckley offers her readers of the Davises' private, domestic lives, portraying them as kindly patrons and loving parents, hint to the scenes to come later in the book, when she finds herself a friend and confidant to Mrs. Lincoln during the tumultuous years of civil war and its aftermath. Keckley wrote her memoir in the fall and winter of 1867 and 1868, when the war had ended and neither Mary Todd Lincoln nor Varina Davis were first ladies any longer. Both had already become infamous for their articles of clothing – Mrs. Lincoln because of her disastrous attempt at selling her wardrobe in New York and Mrs. Davis because of the circulating story of her husband's mad escape in women's wear. In her narrative, Keckley constructs herself as a protagonist not only as an employee charged with creating the family's clothing, but also as a vital member of one household after another, someone trusted to observe, if not participate in, a family's most intimate moments. It is precisely because she then chooses to reveal these private scenes to her readers that Keckley's account suffered from scathing reviews and wholesale condemnation from the public and the press, leaving many to wonder at the gall of an African American woman who would expose the

Lincolns' private business. Keckley positions herself as a member of the Lincolns' inner circle during the Civil War and of the Davises' before it, when the White House was a coveted prize for the Confederacy and the embodiment of the union's national hopes.

While Varina Davis may have promised to bring Keckley south with her, the main focus of *Behind the Scenes* is Keckley's desire to work for Mary Todd Lincoln and "the ladies of the White House" (79), as well as Mrs. Lincoln's desire to be taken seriously as part of Washington society, with the White House as its natural center. Unlike Mrs. Davis, who had moved to Washington as a young bride and had grown up into her role, Mary Todd Lincoln had only lived in the capital for a few months in 1847-1848 while her husband was in Congress. When she returned as first lady, she had no existing social network and was unfamiliar with how the city functioned. Employing a modiste who worked for so many other society women could only help her move into what she considered her proper role in a city run on connection and image.

Mrs. Lincoln may have been ready to embrace Washington but according to her biographer, Laura C. Holloway, she found herself surrounded by "people who were ready to exaggerate her shortcomings, find fault with her deportment on all occasions, and criticize her performance of all her official duties (174). Keckley, though claiming in her book that "if I have betrayed confidence in anything I have published, it has been to place Mrs. Lincoln in a better light before the world" (xiv), portrays the first lady alternately as vain, shrill, and petulant, needing constant reassurances from her husband and her dressmaker to calm her and make her presentable to the public. The first lady, as portrayed by Keckley – her supposed friend and confidante – appears to behave in private just as the press and Washington gossip portrayed her in public, and Keckley steps aside as the protagonist of her own story in favor of Mary Todd Lincoln's life and drama. While the first half of *Behind the Scenes* reads like a conventional

nineteenth-century slave narrative, with Keckley's own history and ultimate freedom, once Mrs. Lincoln enters the tale the narrator steps back to narrate what she saw as a Lincoln confidante and ultimate insider.

Throughout the book, Keckley uncovers the intimate, familial scenes of the Lincolns as they inhabited the White House, and in her memoir the White House is primarily portrayed by Keckley as a domestic residence. Even at the Davis house, Keckley was privileged to witness the comings and goings of important Southerners, heading to and from secret meetings with Jefferson Davis, who may have been a slaveholder and staunch Confederate, but still treated Keckley with respect. In her recounting of these tumultuous years, Keckley beckons to but ultimately elides the realities of official life in Washington to create a humanized, familial space, one obsessed with fashion, gossip, and social status, yet relying on official society to determine domestic rules and hierarchy. At the same time that Keckley makes a name for herself within the African American community in Washington as a business owner, a woman of letters, and the founder of the Contraband Relief Association, she mostly pushes that part of her life into her own book's margins, making the Lincolns her default family and collapsing her own story into theirs. In her description of the Lincolns, their society, and especially the construction of their clothing, Keckley creates a personal architecture, an architecture of the body, at a time when Americans were coming to terms with the overwhelming number of soldiers' dead and wounded bodies. Keeping her focus on the domestic White House, rather than on its governmental function, allowed Keckley to create a national home during wartime, where the simple acts of daily life and the enticements of dress and society gossip contribute to the inevitable defeat of slavery and the Union's restoration.

Elizabeth Keckley was born Elizabeth Hobbs in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, in February 1818, the daughter of a slave and her master. Rather than giving the baby her master's name, Agnes Hobbs chose the name of her husband, George Hobbs, a slave on a nearby plantation and the man Keckley would ultimately name her own son after. Interestingly, Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln were distantly related by marriage as, according to Jennifer Fleischner, a cousin of Keckley's master, Armistead Burwell, "had married a Todd, a distant relation of Mary's" (6). Keckley's life before moving to Washington was largely dictated by the financial difficulties of her owners, as she was moved throughout Virginia, to North Carolina, and ultimately to St. Louis, living with and serving multiple Burwell children as they established their own homes. It was while living in Hillsborough, North Carolina, that Keckley gave birth to her son, George, the product of a four-year non-consensual relationship with a white man in town named Andrew Kirkland. Keckley does not reveal his name in *Behind the Scenes*, where she writes:

> [F]or four years a white man – I spare the world his name – had base designs on me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I – I – became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into this world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position. (39)

Like other slave narrative written by women, Keckley's story is littered with examples of sexual exploitation and abuse, from her own birth to the birth of her son. While Keckley gave her son

her own maiden name, Hobbs, as an adult George chose to use Kirkland, his father's last name, and eventually he enlisted in a white regiment under that name.

Before moving to St. Louis, Keckley worked for the Burwells in Petersburg, Virginia, the largest town she'd lived in to that point, with 15,000 people in 1850. It was also the most commercial and had a large free black population made up of "unmarried, self-supporting women" (Fleischner 124), where, according to Suzanne Lebsock, women "outnumbered the men three to two" and "headed more than half of the town's free black households," making up "almost half of the paid free black labor force" (90).[12] Lebsock noted that women made up forty to fifty percent of free blacks "who managed to accumulate property" and were "more likely than their white counterparts to refrain from legal marriage" and therefore were "more likely to retain legal control over whatever property they did acquire. Free black women were in some respects Petersburg's most autonomous women" (90). This would have been the first time Keckley saw free black women in charge of their own fates, and in charge of their own economic productivity.

Moving yet again, this time to St. Louis with the family of one of Burwell's daughters, Keckley would finally be able to put her talents to use, buying her own freedom. As she writes in *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley, her mother, and the rest of the Garlands moved to St. Louis to join Mr. Garland, an attorney, who had already settled there ahead of his family. When they arrived, they "found him so poor that he was unable to pay the dues on a letter advertised as in the post-office for him" (44). They were so poor that they decided to put Keckley's mother out to service, to work for other families. Keckley writes, "The idea was shocking to me. Every

[12] Wilma King states that the most common occupation for free black women in Petersburg in the 1840s and 1850s was washerwoman, with 232 women working in that area. Other jobs, though far less common, with only a handful of women, were cooks, chambermaids, house servants, seamstresses and, perhaps most importantly for Keckley, mantua makers and dressmakers (69). Free black women also worked in the medical field as nurses, midwives, cuppers, and leachers (62).

gray hair in her old head was dear to me, and I could not bear the thought of her going to work for strangers" (44). Even from an early age, Keckley's mother had taught her how to sew and make dresses, and this was the first opportunity for Keckley to develop a range of clients beyond her master's family, and to begin to see the economic value of her work for the right kind of patron.

As she would later in Washington, Keckley was soon working for some of the most important women in St. Louis, a town known throughout the South for its fashion sense. Even Mary Todd Lincoln, before meeting Keckley, had heard of her through friends in St. Louis, and she trusted their recommendations. Once Keckley started hiring herself out as a dressmaker, she "kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months." She was "working so hard that others might live in comparable comfort, and move in those circles of society to which their birth gave them entrance" (45). While she may have been bitter about laboring to support the Garland family – rather than working for herself as a free woman – it was the contacts she developed during those years that ultimately led to her freedom; the society ladies of St. Louis loaned her $1,200 to purchase herself and her son. Her patron, Mrs. Le Bourgois, said to her, "You have many friends in St. Louis, and I am going to raise the twelve hundred dollars required among them" (54). Keckley and her son were finally free on November 13, 1855, and she left town in 1860, having paid back every cent that was loaned to her. She was ready to ply her needles for the ladies of Washington with a clear understanding about the importance of friends with connections.

When Keckley settled in Washington, she became part of a significant and established community of free blacks who lived in the city before the Civil War, unusual for a city of that era, especially one where slavery was still legal. In 1850, as Frances Powell notes, more than

three quarters of the black population in Washington was free, and by 1860 the total was more than four-fifths (274).[13] In 1860, out of a population of 61,122, according to Melvin R. Williams, there were 9,209 free blacks and 1,774 slaves living in the capital (173). After Emancipation, Powell states, "the proportion of black people to the total population nearly doubled" (274). Most free residents were skilled or unskilled laborers, working as seamstresses, waiters, drivers, servants, or in construction, and very few owned property. There were, however, successful residents who founded churches, private schools to educate their children – as Washington had no education system in place for African Americans – and built an active and thriving community.

While black Washington grew and prospered even before the Civil War, residents faced significant hardships including the continued presence of slavery, and black codes meant to restrict their movement and freedom. Keckley's first encounter with black codes happened immediately upon her arrival, when she was working for $2.50 a day but had to purchase a license as a free black woman living in Washington. She wrote, "I was notified that I could only remain in the city ten days without obtaining a license to do so, such being the law" (65). Not only would Keckley be required to obtain a license, she would also need to keep it with her at all times. African Americans who did not have their paperwork, and did not know a white person who could vouch for them, ran the risk of being jailed, sold into slavery, or mistaken for a runaway slave.[14] As she did in multiple instances throughout *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley once

[13] Powell asserts that while the African American population continued to grow, the proportion of the black population as part of the whole declined between the 1850 and 1860 censuses, most likely due to efforts by the government to limit the "burgeoning black population," as well as "stricter enforcement of severe black codes already on the books," and a significant increase in the white population – nearly 69% between 1850 and 1860 (274).

[14] Edna Greene Medford notes that the "inability or disinclination of District officials to ascertain the legal status of blacks sometimes resulted in the illegal detaining of free men and women and the incarceration of slaves who had run away from rebel masters (not to mention runaways from loyal Unionists)." Even Lincoln, in the summer of

again called on one of her clients – a woman from a well-known and respected family – who went with her to the mayor and "succeeded in making an arrangement for me to remain in Washington without paying the sum required for a license; moreover, I was not to be molested" (65).[15] Others were less fortunate than Keckley, and the black codes hampered black residents, slave and free. Restrictions and fines were imposed for being out past 10 p.m. or for playing cards (Richardson 19). According to Sandra Fitzpatrick and Maria R. Goodwin, the fine for being out after curfew was in place as early as 1808, but in 1810 was changed from five dollars to six months in jail for a free person or forty lashes for a slave (29). Keckley's narrative makes it clear that while her race kept her subject to these unjust laws, her status as a dressmaker to important women from important families exempted her from their harshest restrictions.

For many years, Keckley boarded with an African American family at 388 Twelfth Street in a brick house just north of K Street which was, according to Fleischner, "the unmarked boundary that separated the white core from the black neighborhoods" (191). Other scholars, however, point to the fact that, based on census records from 1850 and 1860, black and white residents were not as segregated by neighborhood as they would be in the twentieth century, even if the two communities may not have intermingled socially. According to Steven Mintz, even though "the races lived no further than one or two blocks from each other" they "inhabited racially homogeneous blocks, with only household servants and a very few black businessmen

1861, "encouraged the return of runaways to their Virginia owners" in order to "appease southern slaveholders and to restore the Union quickly" (13).

[15] *The Black Washingtonians* asserts that "[s]urvival under such conditions depended on blacks' forming alliances with white people, preferably with men of wealth or power who would vouch for a black person's character in writing – as required by city statutes – and act as a safeguard for that individual's freedom. This dependence created a galling and insecure existence but was preferable to not having an endorser at all" (6). The most widely known incidence of a free man being abducted and sold south, where no one could vouch for his free status, is the recent film *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and the slave narrative it was based on, by Solomon Northrup.

and professionals excepted from this pattern" (236). Powell, however, asserts that free blacks lived in all wards of the city, and that "while some residential segregation existed, there is also evidence that black and white families often shared the same address. . . Many white residences were found in close proximity to black residences" (279). Regardless of their proximity, however, African Americans in Washington experienced the city in significantly different ways from their white neighbors.

While free blacks outnumbered slaves in Washington, there was still a significant presence of enslaved people in Washington, Georgetown, and the surrounding District. According to Williams, women made up a little more than 50% of slaves, and 72% of slaves in 1860 were aged thirty or younger (177). Washington had been a center for the slave trade until it was outlawed in 1850. It was common to see rows of chained slaves walking through the city, heading for the port in Georgetown or to one of the many slave pens downtown, including right next to the National Mall. According to David Lewis, "The auction block, the lash, and the manacled gangs on their way to the South" were common sights for residents and visitors to the capital (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 27). The majority of slaves within Washington City and Georgetown served in domestic roles, including as housekeepers, seamstresses, and cooks, as well as in construction jobs or as skilled and unskilled laborers, often making it difficult for free blacks to find employment in those same fields.[16]

Early on, many of the households within Washington City that owned slaves were built on the plantation model, with a large house and numerous outbuildings including dairies, sheds, slave quarters, kitchens, and stables. Each estate dealt with slave living arrangements in a

[16] *The Black Washingtonians* notes that not only did free blacks compete with slaves for similar positions, but after the 1820s, when a large number of Irish immigrants began settling in the area, Irish immigrants were also often hired for unskilled laborer positions, rather than free blacks (5).

different way. Some slaves lived in outbuildings or cabins, some in rooms on top of stables, while others were housed on the ground floor of the main house, near the kitchen and workspaces. As John Michael Vlach notes, however, regardless of where slaves slept, "The harsh disciplines of servitude seen in early Washington were no different than the routines followed in the usual plantation quarters in neighboring Maryland and Virginia. In much the same way that boxes were used to hold goods, slave houses were little more than boxes constructed to hold people" (6). As the city grew and the street plan developed by Pierre L'Enfant was put into effect, many of the large estates were divided into increasingly smaller city lots. This significantly changed the housing of slaves within the city, as the separate buildings that had previously enforced a physical distance between white and black living spaces were less common. By the mid-nineteenth century slaves in the District now lived in the main house, in cellars, attics, or "some out-of-the-way place." Because so many slaves lived in the backyards of their master's house, Vlach notes that yards were "seen essentially as slave spaces" (66). As lots, and therefore houses, became smaller, many slave-holding families even allowed their slaves to board elsewhere, usually within the community of free blacks. In that way, some slaves in Washington were acquired a taste of freedom in ways that their rural counterparts could only imagine.

Washington and the District contained yet one more distinct African American community, one that was not city-born: the thousands of contraband streaming into the city and living on the edges of the capital in squalid contraband camps.[17] By 1863, there were already

[17] Kate Masur reports that while the influx of contraband to Washington started slowly, by the summer of 1862 "it had grown to significant proportions." Some arrived on their own or with their families, while others came as part of a larger community or group leaving a specific area, like 50-75 who escaped from Maryland's Anne Arundel and Prince George's Counties, just a short distance from the capital. Several hundred came from Fredericksburg, Virginia, in June 1862, most of whom were members of the Shiloh Baptist Church, and "soon after their arrival in Washington they began working to reorganize the church, join the local federation of Baptists, and begin a school. Such developments thrilled black residents of Washington. . ." (27). Clearly the social and economic circumstances

more than 10,000 contraband in Washington (*Black Washingtonians* 71). Between 1860 and 1870, around 29,000 new African American residents moved to Washington, and the numbers continued to expand into the 1870s (Masur 28). Contraband camps were often located near the forts that surrounded the city, and freed slaves were housed in barracks that had originally been built for soldiers. The government also erected tents and wooden barracks in an effort to provide at least some shelter to the new arrivals, though as the camps grew bigger the living conditions quickly deteriorated (*Black Washingtonians* 71). Washington residents, who formed associations and societies to help the contraband, held benefits through their churches and distributed food, clothing, and other necessities to those who had arrived with little to no possessions, no money, limited education, and no way of supporting themselves. Keckley too did what she could for this new population.

But she inhabited a world far different from the majority of the black community, especially as her business expanded and she grew from a seamstress working for a few dollars a day to a modiste employing other seamstresses and dressmakers to produce clothing for some of the most powerful women in Washington. She became part of the black elite, even joining what Fleischner calls the "elitist" Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, "the 'palest' of black churches" (207). Despite the black codes and the persistence of slavery in Washington, Kate Masur argues that "antebellum black Washingtonians managed to develop a robust associational life, much of which was rooted in churches" (20). Masur states:

> As emancipation dawned, they brought their churches, mutual aid societies, and other associations into the streets of the city, demonstrating to one another and to

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of freed slaves moving to Washington were diverse, with some ready to become active in black Washington's more established communities, while others – freed or escaped slaves with no prior education or community ties – were more desperate for assistance.

> the white public their worthiness of participation in the city life of the community and, by extension, their insistence on recognition as citizens. More than any other institution, African American churches mediated between the relatively autonomous world of black Washington that had developed under the strictures of slavery and the white-dominated world of official politics. (8)

As Keckley became more established she used her position to try to better the lives of the contraband. In the summer of 1862, she and forty women affiliated with her church founded the Contraband Relief Association. She wrote, "If the white people can give festivals to raise funds for the relief of suffering soldiers, why should not the well-to-do colored people go to work to do something for the benefit of the suffering blacks?" (113). She collected donations from the Lincolns, Frederick Douglass, and other powerful people, offering her help to the poor and newly freed, but still reminding her readers of the significant differences between the middle-class established black community in Washington and those newly arrived. Just as she had relied on one of her respected customers to help her legally remain in the city, Keckley asked her clients to support her charitable works. Showing herself as an established member of the most powerful African American church in the city, and trading on her clout as the president of a benevolent organization, enabled her to position herself within her narrative as having as much political clout as white women whose lives may have also revolved around their social obligations and charity work.

Even in St. Louis Keckley called her customers "patrons" as she would continue to do once she established herself in Washington. Keckley understood that it was through these well-heeled ladies that she would truly launch herself and her business. Indeed, it was through word of mouth among neighbors and friends that Keckley would find herself working for Varina

Davis, having previously been employed by Davis's I Street neighbor, Mrs. Margaretta Hetzel. Even by 1855, according to Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax's diary, I Street was becoming "very fashionable" with "many fine mansions being built between Connecticut and Pennsylvania Avenue" (45). Keckley worked primarily for women who lived in Washington all year, who made the city their permanent home, and who understood that having a fashionable dressmaker was just as vital as having a fashionable address.[18]

The fashion of the late 1850s and early 1860s tells a fascinating story about the preoccupations of American women in the lead-up to war, especially among those who could afford to import fabrics from overseas and actually mimic the fashion plates in *Godey's Lady's Book* (Figure 2), rather than living vicariously through them. During these years, the hoop skirt would achieve its largest circumference, corsets would get tighter, waists smaller, and ornamentation ever more ostentatious. While many of the ladies of Washington may have signed on to the National Ladies' Covenant in 1864, promising they would buy only domestically produced fabrics and accessories, there was no doubt that the rapid rise in Washington's population and the spirited society of the capital at war led to greater and greater excess in fashion. Even Mary Todd Lincoln, while indicating her support of the Covenant, couldn't stop from buying imported fabrics and laces for her own gowns.

[18] The right look was important for men too, as Virginia Clay, wife of Alabama Senator Clement Clay, noted in her memoir, *A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-66* (1905). When arriving in Washington in 1853 for her husband's first congressional term, the men were wrapped in "blanket shawls," as was customary for "Southern gentlemen" when traveling. They arrived at the National Hotel and tried to check in, but the clerk said there was no place for them. Mrs. Clay, sure this was a mistake, told the clerk who they were and he gave them their rooms. Mrs. Clay learned, from her first moment in Washington, "the potency in Washington of conventional apparel and Congressional titles" (25). Mrs. Clay also explained that it was common for women to share their favorite dressmakers among their friends, like her modiste Mrs. Rich, who was so happy with the work Mrs. Clay sent her way that after the war, when Mrs. Clay returned to Washington to beg for her husband's release from prison, Mrs. Rich made her a dress for free.

Figure 2: Steel fashion plate from the February 1865 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book.*

One of the most important accessories a woman of good standing could possess was an accomplished dressmaker. In the 1864 edition of *Boyd's Washington and Georgetown Directory*, Keckley's entry reads: "Keckley Elizabeth (col'd), wid[ow] James, dressmaker, b[oar]ds 388 12th west" (188). In the business listings at the end of the book, Keckley's name appears halfway down the list of "Dress and Cloak Makers" of Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington, again marked "col'd," one of seven African American dressmakers out of a list of forty-five in the three cities (528). It is difficult to know whether the other African American dressmakers crossed the racial divide by working for both white and black residents. Members of the increasingly affluent and professional free black community of Washington could have

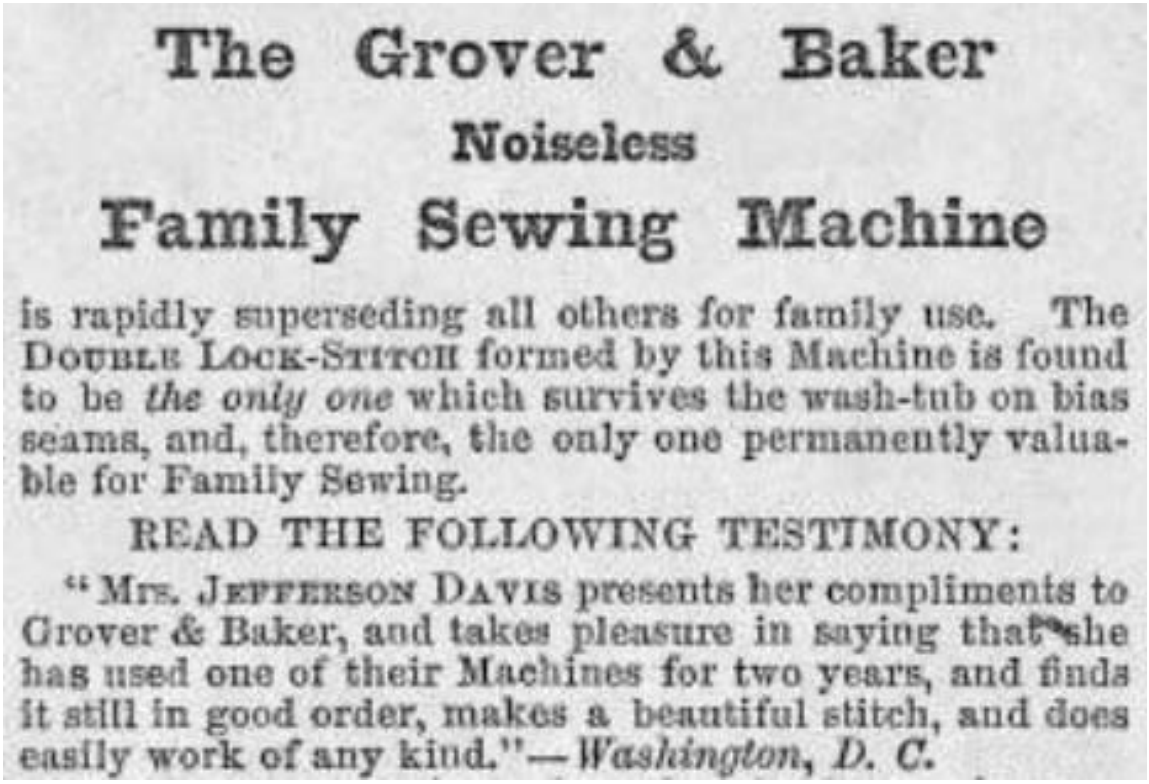
afforded to purchase handmade clothing (as opposed to one of the ready-made clothing shops in the city) and had attained the necessary skill level for this profession.

Mary Todd Lincoln and Varina Davis both owned sewing machines; Mrs. Lincoln was well known in Springfield for being a very accomplished sewer and for making all of her children's clothing, and Mrs. Davis even allowed her name and testimonial to be used in an advertisement for The Grover & Baker Noiseless Family Sewing Machine (Figure 3). Even in the 1860s, most Americans made some or all of their clothing in the home, but women like the first lady and the wives of wealthy congressmen relied on a well-connected modiste who could clothe them in the latest fashions and most luxurious fabrics.[19] In a town run on power and status, a woman's dress showed both that she understood her own place in the social hierarchy and that she was also aware of how others would read, and therefore judge, her wardrobe choices. Fashion critic Joanne Entwhistle argues that even today, "when we get dressed, we do so within the bounds of a culture and its particular norms, expectations about the body and about what constitutes a 'dressed' body" (11). In her discussion of Victorian dress culture, Christine Bayles Kortsch asserts that Victorian women were schooled from a young age in two forms of literacy: reading text and reading fabric, which would include "not only the wearing, producing, purchasing, or embellishing of clothing and textiles, but also the regulating and interpreting of both women's and men's garments" (4).[20] Even if women couldn't – or didn't – sew, they

[19] In *Emily Dickinson and the Labor of Clothing*, Daneen Wardrop gives an detailed account of how the Dickinson women would have acquired their clothing, with the family hiring a seamstress "to work in their home for several days, making or revising the patterns, adjusting the fitting, and beginning the early stages of needlework" (48). Finishing the pieces would be left to the family. In 1854, Varina Davis wrote to her mother, asking her to visit, and saying, "I have a girl who sews in the house who would soon fix you up, and we would not see any one until you choose" (75-76), revealing both her access to a dressmaker and her mother's possibly unimpressive wardrobe.

[20] Alison Bancroft argues that the garment "is not an independent, fully formed entity that is superimposed on the blank canvas of a woman's body. On the contrary, it exists only when it is in the process of being worn" (2). It is impossible to separate the performative aspect of fashion, and the social queues that performance exerts, from the body wearing the garment.

"learned to interpret the social codes in various patterns and types of material" (24). In Washington, wearing the wrong clothing was a sign that someone didn't understand how official society worked, something that Mary Todd Lincoln struggled with as first lady.[21]



The Grover & Baker

Noiseless

Family Sewing Machine

is rapidly superseding all others for family use. The DOUBLE LOCK-STITCH formed by this Machine is found to be *the only one* which survives the wash-tub on bias seams, and, therefore, the only one permanently valuable for Family Sewing.

READ THE FOLLOWING TESTIMONY:

"MRS. JEFFERSON DAVIS presents her compliments to Grover & Baker, and takes pleasure in saying that she has used one of their Machines for two years, and finds it still in good order, makes a beautiful stitch, and does easily work of any kind."—*Washington, D. C.*

Figure 3: Sewing machine advertisement with Varina Davis's testimonial appeared in *Harper's Weekly* (September 29, 1860).

Fashion in Washington changed in the 1850s and into the 1860s, reflecting a shift in both European and American tastes of the era. After the early decades of the nineteenth century,

[21] Even Varina Davis needed to learn the ways of Washington as a young bride. She explains in her memoir that one year early in her marriage, as her husband was preparing to leave Mississippi for the capital, he left her behind at her mother's house, saying that her wardrobe was entirely inappropriate for her official position as his wife. In her memoir, too, Mrs. Clay of Alabama recalls helping women who were new to the capital find their sartorial footing, not wanting them to be humiliated by their lack of knowledge in the area of Washington fashion mores.

where a more slender silhouette dominated, the dresses of the 1850s saw skirts growing to ever wider proportions, with narrower waists kept in line by whale-boned or steel-lined corsets. Like they did to Marie Antoinette in her day, the fashion world looked to the wife of Napoleon III, Empress Eugenie of France, for guidance. They married in 1853, and the fashion world fell in love. When Eugenie's skirts were wide, so too were the fashion plates in ladies' magazines like *Godey's,* telling American women that pendulous hoop skirts were in.[22] *Godey's* published articles such as "How the Empress Eugenie Wears Her Bonnet" in August 1855 (displaying "fully her face and hair" without looking like it would fall off from behind) and "Items of Paris Gossip" in November 1857, with a report on her latest order of "beautiful pocket-handkerchiefs." There was even a color named after her, Eugenie blue, which readers could see in real, live color through *Godey's* hand-colored steel plate engravings, and the periodical named items after her, such as the Eugenie collar, or a Eugenie crocheted bag. Mrs. Lincoln was a great follower of Eugenie and would clip periodical articles about her. Later, when the effort to sell her wardrobe post-war was deemed a disaster, she would note that Eugenie had sold her clothing with no loss of status or criticism from the press.

As a sought-after dressmaker, Keckley needed to know not just how to construct a garment but also how to interpret the codes inherent in the Southern-leaning elite culture of pre-war Washington, where even the wrong fabric choice or the wrong type of bodice could expose a woman as an outsider. She needed to show her patrons that she was an expert in the habits of a

[22] The circumference of the hoop skirt grew throughout the 1850s and 1860s until it reached its peak in 1865. Press in Europe and the United States mocked the outsized proportions of women's dresses, like *Punch*, which, in 1862 said this of the crinoline: "Not all the powers of ridicule, nor the remonstrances of affection have been able to beat down that inflated absurdity, called crinoline! It is a living institution, which nothing seemingly can crush or compress" (Qtd. in Waugh 136). Joanna Richardson noted wryly that a "woman could hardly get into her carriage . . . and her husband had to sit on the box outside" (237). Others joked that women's skirts were so big that men couldn't get close enough to offer their arm, or that children had to climb their mother's "flounces as though they were ladders when they want to kiss her" (Hallensleben 146, 147).

small coterie of powerful women to which she herself could never belong. Still, Keckley made it clear – both to her patrons and to the readers of her memoir – that she subscribed to the rigid social mores of her time and place. She writes that in the summer of 1864, Mrs. Lincoln came to her apartments to consult about a dress. She steps back from the story to explain: "And here let me remark, I never approved of ladies, attached to the Presidential household, coming to my rooms. I always thought that it would be more consistent with their dignity to send for me, and let me come to them, instead of their coming to me" (152). Indeed, her standards were so strict that, after the war, when she walked into the White House to see President Johnson's daughters at work on their sewing machines, she was shocked. She writes, "The sight was a novel one to me for the White House, for as long as I remained with Mrs. Lincoln, I do not recollect ever having seen her with a needle in her hand" (225). One of Johnson's daughters asked her to cut and fit a dress for her to finish sewing herself, a common practice for women of the era. Keckley abruptly stopped working for them. In a memoir that would be roundly criticized as having been written by a former slave who didn't know her place, Keckley repeatedly made it clear that she had a keen understanding of who fits where in Washington's social hierarchy, and how the city's women should be dressed or spoken to, and what was appropriate for their place in society.

Keckley's early nod to the Davises was also an opportunity in her book to insert herself into the world of social Washington and its strategic alliances, proving she understood, as every successful Washingtonian must, that the real work of government took place in the ballrooms and at the dinner tables of the most fashionable families. Washington society could be fickle and unimpressed by even the most politically savvy women in town, as Varina Davis found in the mid-1840s when she was a young Congressman's wife, making her way from Mississippi as a new bride of nineteen. Mrs. Clay would describe social Washington in terms of the topography

of the city itself, "which is made up of many small circles and triangles, into each of which run tributary streets and avenues. In social life, each division in the Congressional body was as a magnetic circle, attracting to itself by way of defined radii those whose tastes or political interests were in sympathy with it" (73). The goal for any new member of capital society was to learn the geography of the fashionable streets and to ignore the other, the lesser.

Jefferson Davis held multiple positions, and thus the Davises moved in multiple – and increasingly powerful – social circles. They lived in Washington off and on throughout the next fifteen years while he served in both houses of Congress and as Secretary of War, only leaving permanently after Davis resigned his Senate seat to become president of the Confederacy. Like many other political families, the Davises lived all over the city during their years there, at times in boardinghouses or even a shared house with other congressmen and their wives, as well as private homes, often renting a new furnished house every year. Boardinghouse living, they discovered, was not their style. As Mrs. Davis wrote to her mother in January 1850, they had tried to board on the west end of town, but "there was a mess of clerks, and that sort of people there, and wretched living" (*Letters* 59). Some residences were better than others, like a twenty-three room house, where she wrote to her mother that, should she and her father visit, they had "five spare bed rooms and two carriages – so that we would have elegant times" (*Letters* 75). As Mrs. Davis wrote in her memoir, "The house had twenty-three rooms in it, and our family were four in number. It was in those days one of the most spacious dwellings in Washington" (542). At other times they lived, as they did in 1858, in a "small and badly arranged" house at 238 G Street, which they couldn't wait to vacate (*Unconquerable Heart* 231), or in two different houses on F Street, the second being in an area that was increasingly more fashionable.

Like others come to Washington for their jobs, whether as elected officials or those who served them, the Davises were just as transient, though perhaps better able to project a settled air through their often spacious and pre-furnished homes. As a newly married couple in the 1840s, the Davises did not entertain much, since they lived in shared spaces and ate at a congressional mess, a communal arrangement that allowed congressmen and their families to dine together. They rarely socialized; Jefferson Davis was wholly uninterested in the social aspects of political life and would refuse, as Carol Berkin has noted, to "throw himself into the whirl of dinners, receptions, and parties that occupied the evenings of many of his more astute colleagues" (123). Davis noted in her memoir that "[v]ery little of Mr. Davis's time was devoted to the claims of society. . . . In consequence, we went out but little, and spent our evenings together, he in making the more important corrections in the printer's proof of his speeches – after which I attended to the minor details – or in dictating letters to his constituents . . ." (414). Avoiding society would not help him in Washington, nor in Richmond, as it would lead "many to consider him aloof and rigid" (Berkin 123).

Mrs. Davis, on the other hand, more successfully navigated that world, as she had essentially grown up during her fifteen years in Washington; she was also twenty years younger than her husband and better able to adapt to the social responsibilities of her position. Unlike her husband, and unlike Mary Todd Lincoln, she was a great success, known for her wit and liveliness. She could, according to her biographer Joan E. Cashin, "bring a dinner party to life, and she knew how to defuse an uncomfortable situation with humor" (81). One journalist, who found her husband "polite but rather austere," noted that it was her "'amiability' that won her husband many friends" (81). Like Varina Davis, Keckley too would seek to establish herself within the social networks of the capital, if only to work her way up to creating dresses for

increasingly fashionable and important people, culminating in what she saw as the ultimate prize: working for the first lady.

Once Jefferson Davis became Secretary of War in 1853, Mrs. Davis was first able to prove her mettle as a hostess but, according to Berkin, she was far less interested in what she saw as the shallow pursuits of Washington's truly elite society, and she was "neither rich enough nor feminine enough to meet their standards. She made no effort to disguise her preference for serious conversation with men rather than gossip with ladies. Her own guest list included more scientists, scholars, novelists, and poets than some felt seemly" (143). Her parties and dinners also included both Northerners and Southerners, and in fact both Davises treasured the friendship of William H. Seward, even though they fundamentally disagreed on the slavery question. Seward nonetheless saw to it that a nurse reached Mrs. Davis through six feet of snow when she was deathly ill after childbirth.[23] Berkin notes that both Davises "seemed content with life on the margins of Washington's most elite social circle" (144). There were moments, though, where Varina shone, including one costume party thrown by a Senator from California in April 1858. She went as Madame de Stael, the "French-speaking Swiss author who influenced literary tastes across Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was a persona that fit Varina comfortably, for de Stael was brilliant, witty, and often acerbic" (Berkin 149). Throughout the party, Davis spoke in fluent French to those who could understand her, and if they could not, she used broken English. Virginia Clay noted that Varina "annihilated 'all who

[23] Varina Davis explained in her memoir: "This was the 'year of the snow,' when it drifted against the houses and in the streets to six feet in some places. . . . Mr. Seward heard I was at the point of death, and that the lady, a near neighbor of hi, who was nursing me . . . could not get a carriage to bring her to our door at the corner of F and Fourteenth Street. Though he did not know us, he had his own fine horses harnessed to a sleigh, and brought [her] to me – but with broken harness and at some peril. This service introduced him to us, and after all those long years of bitter feuds, I thank him as sincerely as my husband did to the last hour of his life" (571). This telling story illustrates the fact that even while tensions ran high in the capital, relationships beyond politics were often friendly and warm, something that would get lost as the country pushed closer to war.

had the temerity to cross swords with her' that evening" (149). Davis may not have been at the center of Washington's swirling social circles, but she commanded enough attention and held enough power that her increasing celebrity as a hostess gave her a significant advantage with both the men and women in official Washington, a connection that Elizabeth Keckley would use to her own advantage as dressmaker to women of influence.

Mrs. Davis, however, did not always relish her role. In a constant flow of letters to her mother, she seems worn out by her hostessing duties, which only grew in number and complexity as her husband became better and better well known through the 1850s. In 1854, she wrote home to Mississippi:

> I have been literally run off my feet the month of December. . . I fear my heart will not be improved by my sojourn here. Every day I have about 30 calls, and the only way to do is to get in a carriage, and ride up and down to avoid them. The fact is I never led such an unsatisfactory life in all my days. One week I give a dinner, and a party the next week, and every Tuesday morning a reception, to which about sixty people call, sometimes more, and I must stand until half past four, from 12 in the morning. And then my servants and housekeeper distract me with complaints of being run to death with company, and Sam in the midst of it all is occasionally threatened with the croup and keeps me on the qui vive about him. (74)

Yet for all that Mrs. Davis must have disliked her obligations as a political wife, she was still very much a part of official Washington, and a celebrated part at that, which her turn as Madame

de Stael proves. The Davises were intimates of presidents and their families, and entertained everyone of importance at their home.[24]

As the war approached, guests understood that sectional differences were to be left behind when attending a social gathering. Davis noted that "all tentative subjects were avoided by the well-bred of both sections; it was only when some 'bull in a china shop' galloped over the barriers good breeding had established that there was anything but the kindest manner apparent" (574). Mrs. Davis felt so connected to Washington that as it became apparent she would soon be leaving the city, Keckley recorded her patron's uncertain feelings about her future role as first lady of the Confederacy. Keckley wrote, "Mrs. Davis was warmly attached to Washington, and I often heard her say that she disliked the idea of breaking up old associations, and going south to suffer from trouble and deprivation. One day, while discussing the question in my presence with one of her intimate friends, she exclaimed: 'I would rather remain in Washington and be kicked about, than go South and be Mrs. President'" (70). Keckley's revelations about the inner workings of the Davis household and Mrs. Davis's hesitation help soften her portrait of the Confederate first lady, rehabilitating her image as palatable to Northern readers after the war.

But in the years leading up to the Civil War, Washington society became more outrageous and extravagant than ever, with Davis writing in an 1858 letter that it would "take the pen of Laurence Sterne or Jonathan Swift" to capture the atmosphere, which residents compared to the court at Versailles, with the "turbulence of society, the new faces, new fashions, and competition for status" (80). According to Cashin, "Hostesses vied with each other for creative

[24] Varina Davis recounts in her memoir just how casual and comfortable presidents felt in the Davis home. While entertaining President and Mrs. Pierce at her summer house just outside of Washington, she recalls "such intimate talks, such unrestrained intercourse and pleasantries exchanged." One day, as President Pierce was talking about his good friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, he put his hands in his pockets as he talked. "Mrs. Pierce cast an appealing look at the reluctant hands, to which the President answered, 'No; I won't take them out of my pockets, Jennie! I am in the country and I like to feel the comfort of it!" (558).

ways to amuse their guests, one of them installing movable panels in the ceiling over the dinner table and showering her guests with flower petals between courses" (80). In the late 1850s, when partisan politics had not yet divided social Washington, when Northerners were mixing with Southerners and Republicans and Democrats were moving in the same circles, society was still largely Southern in temperament, if not in allegiance. Northerners, according to T. C. DeLeon's *Belles, Beau and Brains of the '60s* (1909), belonged to the "caravan," arriving in December with Congress and leaving in March for home or "for water places and seaside in the swelter of the long season" (35). They were, DeLeon explains, in society but not of it. Southerners, on the other hand, "could not live in their plantation homes in summer, and having once sipped Potomac water, *would* not in winter" (34). It seems only fair to note, however, that the Davises rarely spent a full year in Washington; they went home to Mississippi or north for vacation. There were, of course, families who remained in Washington year round, but it appears that even transient Southerners could leave and return with no damage done to their social status, while Northerners might not have been given the same opportunity, at least not by Southern hostesses.

By the end of 1860, just when Varina Davis was asking Elizabeth Keckley to come south with her, Washington embarked on the most spectacular season yet, spurred on by those who thought this might be "the end of the Old Wreck," as De Leon called the capital (37). He wrote, "Dinners, balls, suppers followed each other," as attendees made splashes with "dress, jewels, and equipage" that "cost sums undreamed of heretofore" (37). By the time Mary Todd Lincoln reached the White House, the wearers of those jewels and dresses felt a "dull, vague unrest" over Washington, "as though the city lay in the shadow of a great pall or was threatened with a plague" (40). Mrs. Davis watched her husband resign his Senate seat in early 1861, and they left

town, selling most of their furniture, releasing their servants, and saying to her friends that leaving Washington "felt like death," that she had to "'wrench' herself away" (Cashin 102). Other Southern officials, clerks, and congressmen were packing up their families and heading south, starting what De Leon called, "the passage out of Egypt in modern dress" (40). For a dressmaker trying to establish herself in the city just as so many well-connected women were leaving, it was important for Keckley to rely on the connections made between Northern and Southern women, and she built up a client list of those who would remain in Washington for the duration of the war, ultimately using this leverage to work for the incoming first lady.

Mary Todd Lincoln never achieved the style or social station of Varina Davis, but she also found herself compared unfavorably to Miss Harriet Lane, the darling of late-1850s Washington and President Buchanan's ward and niece. During his tumultuous presidency, when it seemed like Buchanan was steering the country straight toward crisis, Lane distinguished herself as an impeccable hostess and the center of elite society. After her parents' death in 1839, when she was nine years old, she chose to live with her uncle, which was, according to Brown's history of first ladies and their dresses, a "wise" choice because "he was the guide who gave her the training and social experience to match her beauty and natural charm." It was a winning combination that made her, in Brown's phrase, "one of the most popular of all the ladies who have acted as the Nation's hostesses in the White House" (67). Lane kept the White House filled with flowers and captivated those at gatherings with a "mixture of spontaneous gaiety and charm" (67). She was so well liked that ships were named after her, and wartime news reports would mention the *Harriet Lane*, a U.S. Navy ship that saw multiple battles and was eventually captured by the Confederacy.

Not only was Harriet Lane the center of official society during her uncle's presidency, she was also the center of the city's small yet fervent fashion world, where she had first pick of all the new styles. She was precisely the kind of patron who could have vaulted Keckley to the top of her profession, because she was kindly regarded by women from different social strata and had them clamoring to follow her sartorial lead. Sara Pryor, the wife of Congressman Roger Pryor of Virginia, wrote a memoir about her time in Washington, *Reminiscences of Peace and War* (1904). In it she recalls the small shop run by a "stern" Madame Delarue and her daughter Leonide, proprietors who "could be coaxed to preserve certain treasures for humbler folk" (5). Delarue "imported as many (and no more) hats and gloves as she was willing to sell as a favor to the ladies of the diplomatic and official circles" (5). If a woman didn't rank highly enough, she would never even get to see the best pieces coming in from overseas. One night, while Madame Delarue was sleeping, Leonide sent a note to Mrs. Pryor, telling her to "come *tout de suite"* to see the new bonnets, letting her choose one before anyone else could see them. Pryor recalls, more than half a century later, that just this once, she "bore away a 'divine creation' of point lace, crepe and shaded asters before Madame had seen it. Otherwise it would have been reserved for Miss Harriet Lane . . ." (6). Poor Leonide suffered the consequences and "was not much in evidence the rest of that season" (6). Even entering a chocolate shop could put a woman in her place. At Gaultier's, "the palace of sweets," Mrs. Gaultier sat at her counter in an armchair and would "tell you the precise social status of every one of her customers, and what is more, . . . put you in your own" (5), a talent Keckley would need to learn, as both modiste and narrator. Although Washington in the 1850s was comparatively small and half built, even a congressman's wife knew that just getting to see the most fashionable bonnet, let alone being allowed to purchase it, was a moment of triumph in a city of rigid social stratifications, just as

Keckley understood that pleasing the wives of important politicians could open doors for her into increasingly exclusive circles.

Unlike the first lady who would follow her into the White House, Harriet Lane never inspired passionate judgment of her character, whether negative or positive. Mrs. Pryor was drawn in by Lane's youthful charms and was a regular guest at levees, parties, and trips to the theater, though she remarked that while Lane was "universally admired," she "lacked magnetism" (52). Acting as her uncle's first lady, however, she was "[a]lways courteous, always in place, silent whenever it was possible to be silent, watchful and careful, she made no enemies, was betrayed into no entangling alliances, and was involved in no contrempts of any kind" (53). T. C. De Leon said she possessed a "gracious chill" (33). Her curtsy, dangerous as it was with the giant hoop skirts of the 1950s, was the "perfection of deference and grace" and she had "exquisite taste in dress" (53). She was, in short, quite a bit simpler than Mrs. Lincoln, an interloper from Illinois who would never compare with her predecessor's style or unobtrusive persona. Harriet Lane had only a few short years at the center of society before her uncle left office, unlike Varina Davis who had been a fixture for decades. Even so, her youth and perhaps especially her willingness to take on the role of hostess while not calling attention to herself would make for a complicated transition to Mary Todd Lincoln's more heavy-handed style. If Mrs. Lincoln imagined she could easily step into the role so effortlessly filled by Lane, she would soon see how difficult this transition could be.

As much as Keckley wanted to work for the "ladies of the White House," Mary Todd Lincoln wanted to be taken seriously as part of Washington society. According to W. A. Evans, she hoped to be successful in her role as first lady and to impress both Washington notables and visiting dignitaries, wanting to make the "Washington resident society" so pleased that "they

would help to establish a background for her husband's efforts" (164). She thought she could develop relationships with foreign administrations and could "talk about their literature with their representatives, and with those from France in their own language," perhaps understanding the importance of foreign allies during wartime though not quite how to achieve her goal (164). Unlike Varina Davis, who did develop relations like these, Mary Todd Lincoln underestimated just how rigid the role of first lady could be, with its unyielding expectations and official duties.

In a shift from the first ladies before her, Mrs. Lincoln "interfered with household management," which should have been more of an honorary responsibility than a real undertaking. She fired staff and overspent the budget given to her by Congress to update a rundown White House. She saw herself, essentially, as the head of a domestic household, when in reality she was a temporary resident of a house that didn't truly belong to her. In fashioning herself as Mrs. President, Holloway argues, she exposed her "lack of training in organization and administration. Had she left more of this routine to others, she would have escaped some of the censure that was poured on her head" (165). Mrs. Lincoln may have seen reflections of herself in Empress Eugenie and may have imagined that her welcome into Washington society would mirror the empress's own journey into the hearts of her countrymen. As *Godey's* reported in their December 1862 issue, in an article titled "The Influence of Dress and Color":

> When Eugenie de Montejo espoused Napoleon III, envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness were arrayed against her. She was not royal, she was not French, she rode on horseback, she had English blood in her veins, an English complexion, and most probably English tastes. When she returned from Notre Dame after the marriage ceremony, the vast crowds assembled near the Tuileries to view her entry there gave her no welcome, received their empress in silence;

> yet in a few months France unanimously pronounced her *charming*. She had none of the conventional manner prescribed to royalty; she laughed when she should have been grave, and wept when she should have been composed; she wore fancy dresses, offensive to court etiquette, yet in spite of all this . . . she was pronounced charming. . . . [W]e have no hesitation in saying that one cause of her popularity with her own was her being, beyond all comparison, the best dressed woman in the empire. (606)

As an outsider from Spain (with Belgian and Scottish blood), Eugenie was able to win over the French because, as the same article states, "The French look upon the toilet as a work of art, and pay the same tribute to it that we do to any other artistic production. They accepted and valued her success as another proof of the supremacy of France in this as in other matters" (606). Eugenie mirrored back to her people the best of what they saw in themselves and they adored her for it. Mary Todd Lincoln, on the other hand, with her lavish taste and Southern upbringing in a city newly remade in the North's image, remained out of touch.[25] When she flouted conventions, rather than winning people over to her side, she alienated them. She may have been ready to embrace Washington but she found herself surrounded "by people who were ready to exaggerate her shortcomings, find fault with her deportment on all occasions, and criticize her performance of all her official duties" (Holloway 174). This would continue throughout her term as first lady and into her widowhood, when Keckley captured Mrs. Lincoln's most personal failures then published them for the world to read.

[25] Donna McCreary notes that Mary Todd Lincoln was interested in fashion even as a girl, and that she was "known to have enjoyed fine horses, a good joke, and an exquisite wardrobe. As a member of the aristocratic Todd family, Mary was raised on the social plane where ladies were concerned about the width of their ribbons, the length of their skirts, and the latest Parisian fashions" (186). As a Southern woman in a town filled with Unionists, and the wife of a Black Republican president, she was out of touch with elite residents of either sympathy.

While Keckley asserts in her memoir that Mrs. Lincoln is a dear friend, and that she published *Behind the Scenes* as a way of showing how much the world misunderstood the former first lady, the scenes she chooses to present show a far different picture. As with her portrayals of the Davises, politics are a constant backdrop, but for Keckley the White House is primarily a home, a place for President Lincoln to roughhouse with his children and soothe his wife's nerves. In multiple scenes, the president is portrayed as kind and calm, an involved father. His wife, on the other hand, is the nagging presence in the room, revealing her petty jealousies and constantly worrying over appearances. In one scene, meant to stand in for what Keckley presents as a common occurrence, the Lincolns are dressing for a reception, and the president teases his wife, inquiring about which women he should or should not talk to that evening. In Keckley's account, the president asks, "Well, mother, who must I talk with to-night – shall it be Mrs. D?" Mrs. Lincoln responds, "That deceitful woman! No, you shall not listen to her flattery." The president presses on, saying, "Well, then, what do you say to Mrs. C.? She is too young and handsome to practice deceit." Mrs. Lincoln answers, "Young and handsome, you call her! You should not judge beauty for me. No, she is in league with Mrs. D., and you shall not talk with her." When the president insists that he must be allowed to talk to someone (as he buttons his glove "with a mock expression of gravity"), his wife responds, "I do not know as it is necessary that you should talk to anybody in particular. You know well enough, Mr. Lincoln, that I do not approve of your flirtations with silly women, just as if you were a beardless boy, fresh from school" (124). The reader, and Keckley, understand that the president is joking, egging on his wife who is portrayed as incapable of understanding a joke. That the conversation revolves around deceitful, untrustworthy women is a sly nod from Keckley to Mrs. Lincoln's lack of respect from society women and her clear distrust of their motives. In her memoir,

Keckley undercuts Mrs. Lincoln's supposed power within her small family, and within the White House itself, by reminding her readers that, in reality, Mary Todd Lincoln was just as hated and distrusted by the Washington elite as they were by her.

Keckley again chooses to highlight Mrs. Lincoln's distrust of other women when she includes a scene from 1864, a conversation between the two women as Keckley sews in the White House. The first lady discusses the tradition where, at receptions where the president "selects a lady to lead the promenade with him," the president is exhibiting his position in the room, "and yet he offers his arm to any other lady in the room, making her first with him and placing me second." She states that the "dignity that I owe to my position, as Mrs. President, demands that I should not hesitate any longer to act" (144-5). Keckley says very little about this conversation, other than to tell her readers that Mrs. Lincoln did in fact insist on this change, and that from then on she either entered the room with her husband, or he "walked alone or with a gentleman" (145). While this is a small moment, Keckley never hesitates to reveal the first lady's jealousies, positioning her as the often petty hindrance to her husband's long-suffering good nature.[26]

Where Harriet Lane was seen as the perfect young hostess for her president uncle, and Varina Davis's charm and social graces drew people to her socially challenged husband, Mary

[26] Keckley makes it clear from the beginning that she was not the only person spreading details about Mrs. Lincoln, and that some of the worst offenders were those very society women the first lady warned her husband against. Keckley writes in the introduction: "I do not forget, before the public journals vilified Mrs. Lincoln, that ladies who moved in the Washington circle in which she moved, freely canvassed her character among themselves. They gloated over many a tale of scandal that grew out of gossip in their own circle. If these ladies could say everything bad of the wife of the President, why should I not be permitted to lay her secret history bare . . ." (xv).

These were the women Keckley relied on for her livelihood, and the women she clearly felt she understood, as she called them her patrons, learned their secrets, and used their connections to grow both her business and web of connections. What she overlooked, however, was the unbreachable difference in class, circumstance, and race, proving finally that while Washington was a vibrant city of mixed population, it was nearly impossible to change one's circles of influence.

Todd Lincoln was thought by many to be a drain on the president. People distrusted her need to be involved in issues that fell outside of the purview of her role as first lady. In the press and in social conversation she was called The Lady President and La Reine because she tried to influence both her husband's decisions and who did and did not receive lucrative government appointments. When ordinary Americans were being asked to sacrifice their sons to the Union Army, Mrs. Lincoln was borrowing heavily to update her house and wardrobe, frivolous concerns at a time of hardship and war. Even before a disastrous reception in 1862, Mary Todd Lincoln was criticized for her love of fine clothing and accessories, and her spending habits were spread across the press, with stories about her purchase in New York of a $1,000 shawl for herself and a $650 shawl for her cousin, Elizabeth Grimsley. Some biographies still report this story as true, while others call it a fabrication, an argument made also by Mrs. Grimsley, who stated that the only time she ever got to own such an expensive shawl was in those stories. Just like she tried to control the running of the household, something that was more of an honorary position for the first lady, Mrs. Lincoln brashly aimed to be heard and consulted far beyond her recognized domestic sphere. It was perhaps her presumption more than anything that gave her a reputation for excessive and unpalatable hubris, something that did not serve her well as she sought to take her rightful place at the center of official Washington society.

There is an instance, however, where Keckley's depiction of Mrs. Lincoln is considerably kinder and where she allows her readers to feel a pity for the first lady that is absent in so much of her account. In one of the most poignant chapters of *Behind the Scenes,* Keckley writes about the death of Willie Lincoln and the lavish reception given at the White House while he was ill, only days before he died. If Keckley had been looking for an incident to prove Mary Todd Lincoln's misplaced priorities or to criticize her for her social ineptitude, this would have been

an ideal moment, as the event was a debacle from start to finish. However, in Keckley's narrative, this scene becomes a portrayal of family loss and uninhibited grief. Other writers did admit that Willie's death was one of the foremost tragedies soon to come in Mrs. Lincoln's life. What Keckley avoids, however, unlike so many other writers to cover the same events, is blaming Mrs. Lincoln for forging ahead with the reception for 500 of the most exclusive and important members of Washington society while her son lay dying upstairs. When Keckley writes about this party, she does so for two reasons. First, to underscore that despite the circulating gossip, Mrs. Lincoln did want to cancel but was advised against it by many people. Even Willie's doctor assured her that he was on the mend, proving that she was not heartless enough to insist on entertaining while her child was near death. And second, that Keckley was not only entrusted with sitting watch over the child while the party raged downstairs, but also that she was eventually asked to perform the most intimate act of all: preparing Willie's body for burial.

Keckley did not attend the disastrous reception, so her description of the festivities is brief. She writes:

> The reception was a large and brilliant one, and the rich notes of the Marine Band in the apartments below came to the sick-room in soft, subdued murmurs, like the wild, faint sobbing of far-off spirits. Some of the young people had suggested dancing, but Mr. Lincoln met the suggestion with an emphatic veto. The brilliance of the scene could not dispel the sadness that rested upon the face of Mrs. Lincoln. During the evening she came up-stairs several times, and stood by the bedside of the suffering boy. (102)

While the party would come to be seen as one of the first lady's biggest missteps, Keckley chooses not to focus on critics but on the suffering of a worried mother. Mary Todd Lincoln doesn't speak in this scene – the only voice readers hear is Keckley's. Even in the moments before the party, when the president teases Mrs. Lincoln about the low neckline on her dress, Keckley does not record Mrs. Lincoln's response. Instead, she "turned away with a look of offended dignity" (101). There are few moments in *Behind the Scenes* when the first lady is afforded any true measure of dignity at all, which makes this even more unique.

Writing this scene more than five years after the event, Keckley knew how harsh the public and the press were regarding what they saw as a gaudy spectacle, but she restrains her own critique and gives her friend and employer a space to grieve, if only on the pages of her dressmaker's memoir. Keckley remained, at least temporarily, a sympathetic confidante, revealing to Mrs. Lincoln's critics that while she may have been playing at being the perfect hostess, she was really a frantic mother slipping away as often as she could to check on her ailing son. Mrs. Lincoln hoped this event would launch her into the social stratosphere, where she had always felt she belonged, but it only confirmed her persistent inability to understand the rules of Washington. What she got instead was mockery, harsh and intensely personal criticism, and a pillorying in the national press for her immodest dress, her lavish expenditures, while boys were dying on the battlefield.

The party on February 5, 1862, was widely reviewed in the press, and used in contemporary biographies as an illustration of Mary Todd Lincoln's uncontrollable personality. Keckley reports that Mrs. Lincoln's first public appearance that year was at a reception on New Year's Day, and then a "brilliant levee" (95). During a dress fitting the day after, according to Keckley, Mrs. Lincoln decided that, rather than giving a "series of state dinners every winter,"

which were very expensive and, though Keckley does not say so, paid for by the President and his family rather than the government, she could focus instead on "three large receptions" (95). These official events, as Keckley again fails to mention, would not be charged directly to the Lincolns. Mrs. Lincoln tells her idea to the President, who argues that they shouldn't break with the regular custom just to save money, but his wife responds:

> Public receptions are more democratic than stupid state dinners – are more in keeping with the spirit of the institutions of our country, as you would say if called upon to make a stump speech. There are a great many strangers in the city, foreigners and others, whom we can entertain at our receptions, but whom we cannot invite to our dinners. (95)

In Keckley's retelling, her husband concedes the point and Mary Todd Lincoln begins preparations for the lavish reception.

While it may have been true that a reception was "more democratic" than a state dinner, the fact is that, according to Lincoln biographer Michael Burlingame, this was the first "exclusive Washington fete" since one given by the wife of President Tyler twenty years earlier. The "exclusiveness of the event made it seem like a throwback to the aristocratic 'drawing rooms' of Martha Washington and a repudiation of the egalitarian practice introduced by Thomas Jefferson" (282). By inviting some and excluding others, Mrs. Lincoln was drawing battle lines in an official society that already wanted little to do with her. Many were offended when they did not receive invitations, even though nearly a year into her husband's first term, Mrs. Lincoln found that many of the prominent members of Washington society were boycotting any event held at the White House. They refused to attend for a number of reasons, many having to do with her Kentucky history and her brothers' enlistment in the Confederate Army.

According to the noted journalist Ben "Perley" Poore, who included a significant recounting of the event in his two-volume memoir about life in Washington, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (1886), "Those within its charmed circles would not visit the White House, or have any intercourse with the members of the Administration" (115). However, now that they were being denied access, rather than choosing not to attend, they were even more disgruntled. According to Burlingame, by "antagonizing those who were excluded," Mrs. Lincoln made another "social blunder" (282). Perhaps among the biggest of the blunders was that invitations were not given to members of the press, who petitioned the White House and bitterly fought for access to the party but were denied. Having been shut out of the most exclusive event of the new year, the press was not inclined to look favorably on the party or its hostess.

Ruth Painter Randall, a somewhat kinder biographer than Burlingame, asserts that Mrs. Lincoln was once again led astray by bad counselors, and that her intentions for this party were good, if misguided. Randall notes, "In Mrs. Lincoln's mind there had been possibly at first only the desire to refute the charge of crudity by showing how beautifully she and the President could entertain" (288). Even Burlingame, whose portrayal of Mrs. Lincoln is at times unquestionably harsh, agrees that Mrs. Lincoln did have at least a few supporters. He writes, "Mary Lincoln's motive in breaking with tradition was evidently to silence criticism that under her stewardship, White House entertainments had failed to match the splendor of parties given earlier by Southern leaders' wives" (282). Another critic argued that while state dinners had been the custom at the White House, a custom honored by the President and the First Lady, Mrs. Lincoln "thought it more efficient and economical to have a few stand-up parties for hundreds of guests than to hold

a long series of weekly parties accommodating no more than forty people at a time" (282). He asserts, however, that Mary Todd Lincoln had far more critics than she did defenders.

Once the event was approved, Mrs. Lincoln threw aside all ideas of economy. She hired the New York firm Maillard's, whom Baker called "possibly the most expensive caterer in the country" and ordered "champagne and wine from another New York firm, Clement Heerdt's on Water Street" (206). Five hundred invitations were issued and on the evening of the event, with Keckley there to watch over Willie, the first lady dressed (Figure 4). Poore remembered her sartorial choices in his memoir more than twenty years later, including "a floral head-dress, which was not very becoming." Her dress was white satin "with low neck and short sleeves. It was trimmed with black lace flounces, which were looped up with knots of ribbon" (115). Baker notes that the "loamy white silk, decorated with hundreds of black flounces" was in "sympathetic remembrance of Queen Victoria's Prince Albert, who had died two months before" (206-7). The President was dressed in his "black swallowtail coat" and the staff had been dressed "in new mulberry-colored uniforms, the color complementing her new solferino-edged china set" (206). Multiple attendees were deeply critical of the first lady's dress, that flounced and looped loamy silk that was long in back and dangerously low in front. Even Keckley was prompted to recall the president's response when he first saw it: "Mother, it is my opinion, if some of that tail was nearer the head, it would be in better style" (101). It was no secret that Mary Todd Lincoln was thought to have a very high opinion of her bosom, and that she purposely chose low-cut dresses to show off her best assets.

Figure 4: Mary Todd Lincoln in 1861, photographed by the Matthew Brady studio. While this is not the dress Mary Todd Lincoln wore to the reception, it is a strong example of the type of dresses she favored, with a low bodice and "flower pots" on her head. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

The president was not the only one to notice his wife's décolletage. Senator James. W. Nesmith from Oregon wrote a scathing letter to his wife about the first lady's dress, which was "a great deal too long at one end, and quite as much too short at the other." He wrote:

> The weak minded Mrs. Lincoln had *her bosom* on exhibition, and a flower pot on

> her head, while there was a train of silk, or satin dragging on the floor behind her of several yards in length, as I looked at her I could not help regretting that she had degenerated from the industrious and unpretending woman that she *was* in the days when she used to cook old Abe's dinner, and milk the cows with her own hands. (qtd. in Baker 221)[27]

The press, still bitter over having been denied invitations, criticized her dress, her lavish expenditures, and the fact that she had the party at all. *The Liberator* claimed that the event had been worthy of "a woman whose sympathies are with slavery and with those who are waging war" and not "worthy of man or woman with ears open to the wails of the bereaved throughout the country" (qtd. in Randall 289). Another excoriated her for "disgraceful frivolity, hilarity, and gluttony, claiming that "The White House may have its Delilah" (qtd. in Baker 289). Whatever criticisms had been thrown at the first lady since her husband had taken office seemed to be magnified by the details of the party, all of which confirmed the very worst about their out-of-touch Mrs. President.

Unlike the homey descriptions Keckley offers of that quiet Christmas Eve sewing for Jefferson Davis, with secession and the war looming but the demands of politics kept at bay for at least one festive moment, the scene offered by party attendees seemed to prove just how removed Mrs. Lincoln was from the war raging just a few miles away. Oblivious to her critics, the guests started arriving at nine p.m, with the doorman issued strict instructions to admit only those with invitations. Baker describes the crowd:

> The generals (few under that rank had been invited) arrived first in dress uniform,

[27] Other women in the crowd were also not free from his scorn, as he reported to his wife that none of them were beautiful but were "all distinguished for paint and big Hoops." Among the ladies that evening were "big fat dowagers in low-necked dresses who would have excited the envy and admiration of a Dairyman" (qtd. in Baker 221).

> and they included the handsome, mustachioed George B. McClellan, who, for the last several months, had been dashing about Washington intent on his mission of transforming raw farm boys into well-drilled soldiers. Present as well in full court dress, though they arrived later, were the cock-hatted, besworded, overdecorated diplomatic corps. Finally, there was the government – the cabinet, the Supreme Court, and selected stars from the House of Representatives and the Senate. In their black coats they were as colorful as crows among peacocks. . . (206)

There were so many officials at the reception that Perley noted, "Vice President Hamlin might have called the Senate to order and had more than a quorum of members present" (116). The Marine Band was set up in the hall, playing a song written especially for the party, "The Mary Lincoln Polka" (Baker 207), though the president insisted that there not be dancing, out of respect for the soldiers in the field (Burlingame 282). Dinner was to be served at eleven, and with all of the guests crowded in front of the doors, word spread that the steward had lost the key to the dining room. Someone in the crowd called out, "I am in favor of a forward movement!" and someone else answered, "An advance to the front is only retarded by the imbecility of the commanders" (Poore 119). General McClellan laughed, the key was found, and the crowd made their way inside.

Maillard had put together an overflowing buffet of turkey, duck, ham, terrapin, and pheasant, and constructed sugar sculptures of military themes such as Fort Pickens and the Ship of State (Baker 207). The whole evening had a distinctly martial flair, and while the "entertainment was pronounced a decided success," according to Perley, "it was compared to the ball given by the Duchess of Richmond, at Brussels, the night before Waterloo" (119). Few would agree with Perley that the evening had been a success and, indeed, criticism was hurled at

Mrs. Lincoln from all corners, though not from Keckley. From the start, even those who were invited took umbrage at the fact that the party was to occur at all. The Republican Senator from Ohio, Benjamin Wade, declined to attend and said, "Are the President and Mrs. Lincoln aware there is a Civil War? If they are not, Mr. and Mrs. Wade are and for that reason decline to participate in feasting and dancing" (qtd. in Baker 206). At least two critical poems were published after the event, giving this debacle the air of national scandal it seemingly deserved. One poem, written by Eleanor G. Donnelly and published in the *New York Sunday Mercury* on February 16, 1862, was called "The Lady-President's Ball," and was supposedly narrated by a dying soldier who could see the festivities through the White House windows. The poem reads in part:

> What matter that I, poor private,
>
> Lie here on my narrow bed,
>
> With the fever gripping my vitals,
>
> And dazing my hapless head!
>
> What matters that nurses are callous,
>
> And rations meager and small,
>
> So long as the beau monde revel
>
> At the Lady-President's Ball!
>
> . . . . .
>
> Hundreds, ay! hundreds of thousands
>
> In satins, jewels, and wine,
>
> French dishes for dainty stomachs
>
> (While the black broth sickens mine!)

And jellies, and fruits, and cold ices

And fountains that flash as they fall,

O God! for a cup of cold water

From the Lady-President's Ball

In this representation, the "Lady President" flits like Marie Antoinette through rooms dripping with jewels and gourmet delicacies. She hobnobs with the men ultimately responsible for this soldier's fate, while he shrinks beneath the careless service of nurses employed by the "*beau monde,*" growing sick on measly portions of spoiled broth. Here, there has been a complete breakdown in the system, where those who should be caring for the soldiers are too dazzled by the richness of the scene to remember their patriotic duty, led by their irresponsible first lady. Unlike Eugenie, Mrs. Lincoln's mentor in how to indulge in ostentatious predilections while still keeping the hearts and minds of the ordinary people, the first lady seemed incapable of winning over her detractors.

The second poem, written by a Philadelphia poet named George Boker, was published in the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* and reprinted in *The Liberator.* Boker points to Keckley's role as Mrs. Lincoln's dressmaker, as it criticizes her zeal for fashion and for spending money on frivolous accessories. His poem encourages other American women to give up their expensive fashion and focus instead on a more appropriate piety during a time of war:

I charge you, maids and matrons of Columbia,

To veil your faces, and this thing disown;

Let her disport herself among her fiddlers

Alone – yes, in the sight of God – alone –

If the queen *must* dance!

Oh! the queen must dance!

Ah! woman, woman doff your gaudy velvets,

Your foreign laces, and your flashy rings,

And clothe your vanity in decent raiment,

And busy you about more holy things[.]

Following this stanza, the poet recommends to Mrs. Lincoln that she go to the hospitals and become a nurse, dancing for the soldiers instead of for her own selfish fun, that she go to the campfires and do whatever she can for the fighting soldiers. In both poems, the excesses of presidential entertaining are specifically attributed to Mrs. Lincoln's poor judgment and even poor taste. She is cast as a woman capable of ignoring the suffering visible from the White House windows in order to appease her own sense of vanity or need for social climbing. For Boker, the expensive fabrics – the gaudy velvets, foreign laces – keep Mrs. Lincoln from fulfilling her holy duty as a president's wife in wartime. Indeed, as the queen in the poem, she is no longer the democratically elected wife of the people's representative, but a monarch who serves nothing but her own pleasure.

What these accounts omitted was what Keckley reveals in a moment of unexpected narrative empathy. She writes, "The brilliance of the scene could not dispel the sadness that rested upon the face of Mrs. Lincoln. During the evening she came up-stairs several times, and stood by the bedside of the suffering boy. She loved him with a mother's heart, and her anxiety was great" (102). For Keckley, a woman who relied on intimate access to her clients' homes and bodies, it wasn't the gaudy party downstairs – with its selective and elite guest list – that reflected the Lincolns' true priority. The inner circle was in Willie's room, watching him as he rested, keeping his fever down, and worrying over him as the party raged downstairs. In this one

narrative reprieve, Keckley allows Mrs. Lincoln to just be a mother, while alerting her readers to the fact that only intimate friends get to see the powerful at their most vulnerable.

Willie died a few days later and Keckley writes, "Mrs. Lincoln's grief was inconsolable. The pale face of her dead boy threw her into convulsions. Around him love's tendrils had been twined, and now that he was dressed for the tomb it was like tearing the tendrils out of the heart by their roots" (104). It was Keckley who washed the body and dressed him for burial, proving her ultimate access to the Lincolns and their custom of dress even in death. She recalled this scene later in the narrative as she described standing over President Lincoln's body, pushing through the "members of the Cabinet and many distinguished officers of the army . . . grouped around the body of their fallen chief" (190). These powerful men part for her as she enters the room, giving her the access that, at least in the narrative, she so clearly deserves. In the too frequent moments of grief suffered by the Lincoln family, Keckley emphasizes her own position as the one who prepares the body, the one who stands with the president's men and performs the rituals of mourning, the one who causes great men to acknowledge her position.

By 1867, when *Behind the Scenes* was written, Mrs. Lincoln had already suffered from more than just Willie's death – first the president's assassination, then her destitution and constant pillorying in the press. This did not prevent Keckley from her often harsh commentary on the woman she claimed was her friend and close confidante, or even from publishing Mrs. Lincoln's private letters at the end of her memoir. And yet, Keckley steps back and permits Mrs. Lincoln to grieve, to show literally what happened behind the scenes of those cruel and mocking accounts of that night. After all, Keckley too had lost a son. Just months before, in August 1861, her only son George was killed in battle, fighting and dying alongside General Nathaniel Lyon in Missouri. George had dropped out of Wilberforce University and had enlisted as a

white soldier named Kirkland, after his father. George's fate is noted briefly amidst the lengthy outpouring of love for Willie Lincoln. In the only mention of his death, Keckley writes, "Previous to this I had lost my son. Leaving Wilberforce, he went to the battlefield with the three months troops, and was killed in Missouri. . . . It was a sad blow to me, and the kind womanly letter that Mrs. Lincoln wrote to me when she heard of my bereavement was full of golden words of comfort" (105). This is the only mention of George's death, and yet her loss is infused into the book, substituting the grief of a nation for the grief of one mother, the ritualized washing of Willie's body the stand-in for a nation of mothers who could not do the same for their own dead sons.

While Keckley never draws a comparison within *Behind the Scenes*, there is a clear connection between the moment when she announces George's death in battle and Mrs. Lincoln's own refusal to let her son, Robert, join the Union army. Still in mourning for Willie more than a year after his passing, Mrs. Lincoln refuses to allow Robert to enlist, saying that she could not bear to make another "sacrifice" (121). The president reminds her that "many a poor mother has given up all her sons . . . and our son is not more dear to us than the sons of other people are to their mothers" (121). Mrs. Lincoln responds by again stressing the sacrifice of her other son, and says, "His services are not required in the field, and the sacrifice would be a needless one" (122). Throughout *Behind the Scenes*, Mrs. Lincoln is clearly portrayed as a woman who suffers multiple losses, from her son to her husband to the standard of living she has grown to expect as the president's wife. Keckley invites her readers to sympathize with her, but only partially. Mrs. Lincoln may use the word "sacrifice," but Keckley makes clear through her characterization that her patron has never truly sacrificed for the betterment of a cause, for another person's wellbeing, or for the health of the Union. Keckley does not call attention to it,

but she has sacrificed a son; has sacrificed her labor for the benefit of a family that claimed ownership over her; and ultimately sacrifices her career in order to help rescue her friend, Mrs. Lincoln, in her hour of need. The president has sacrificed the sons of his nation, a loss that he does not take lightly. Mary Todd Lincoln is unable or unwilling to see the costs of her actions, even when, in *Behind the Scenes*, they overwhelm her.

In the final scenes of her memoir, Keckley relates to her readers where and why she is writing her book, what led her to expose her friendship with Mrs. Lincoln to the world. In the fall of 1867, with her dressmaking business thriving in Washington, Keckley leaves the capital for New York, where she helps the former first lady try to sell her wardrobe, with disastrous results. The sale becomes a spectacle (Figure 5) but fails to raise any large sum for Mrs. Lincoln to live on, and she leaves New York with the understanding that Keckley will take care of the details. With her business shuttered and no money from Mrs. Lincoln, Keckley finds herself sewing in a cold garret room, taking in work like she was a young seamstress again, just learning her trade. *Behind the Scenes*, then, becomes a way for Keckley to earn her fortune. She writes, "If poverty did not weigh me down as it does, I would not now be toiling by day with my needle, and writing by night, in the plain little room on the fourth floor of No. 14 Carroll Place" (330). Keckley has sacrificed her position in Washington and her business in order to help Mrs. Lincoln, but as Keckley portrays her in the final pages of her book, Mrs. Lincoln has sacrificed only her friend, caring little for Keckley's fortunes while bemoaning the failure of her dress-selling scheme.

Figure 5: *Harper's Weekly* illustrates Mrs. Lincoln's disastrous attempt at selling her wardrobe. Published October 26, 1867.

Through her work with the Contraband Relief Association, Keckley understood that the ability to clothe oneself is a most basic need. On the other hand, a woman with a wardrobe large enough to be a spectacle could not understand the small humiliations of poverty and need. Keckley positions herself as somewhere in the middle, as a woman who created herself from nothing and therefore, perhaps, has little narrative sympathy for those who can't or won't do the same, whether because of grief or a sentimental longing for the past. Her actions as president of the association may have been kind but her descriptions of the contraband were often less so:

"The love for the past," she wrote, "was so strong that they could not find much beauty in the new life so suddenly opened to them. Thousands of the disappointed, huddled together in camps, fretted and pined like children for the 'good old times'" (140). Like many elite members of the free Black community, Keckley felt less of a connection to the contraband – though she had purchased her own freedom less than a decade before – than she did to the white women who relied on her for their wardrobe and therefore their established place in Washington society. Keckley organized relief efforts for the contraband and sought to help them raise themselves out of what were essentially refugee camps on the outskirts of town, but she viewed them as relics of an outdated system, clinging to their subjugated past because it allowed them the only home they knew.

Keckley recounts one meeting with a "good old, simple-minded woman," who was struggling with the transition to freedom in the North. "She thought, as many others thought," Keckley writes, "that Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln were the government, and that the President and his wife had nothing to do but to supply the extravagant wants of every one that applied to them" (141). This old woman, whose former mistress had given her two new shifts every year, couldn't understand why she had already been in Washington for eight months and Mrs. Lincoln – whom she called Missus Government – had yet to give her even one shift. Keckley continued, "I could not restrain a laugh at the grave manner in which this good woman entered her protest. . . . She thought the wife of the President of the United States very mean for overlooking this established custom of the plantation" (142). Keckley, who had used her skills as a modiste to purchase her own freedom and the freedom of her son, was making dresses for the first lady; but those dresses were not being passed down to the thousands of the contrabands living in camps with no employment, no source of clothing, and certainly no modiste to sew for them. This

woman did not realize that she was in fact speaking to the woman who made Mrs. Lincoln's dresses and therefore clothed Mrs. Government herself. But she did understand that Mrs. Lincoln was not one to share her abundant attire with women who now had no access to a wardrobe of their own.

Mrs. Government's inattention to this was a harsh reminder of the ironic generosity of the South, where the power hierarchy was brutal but transparent in its dynamics. In Lincoln's new world, post emancipation, Keckley's narrative highlights that clothing, and access or lack of access to it, was ultimately a political and a social concern, defining in a very public manner just how influential the dressed body could be. Keckley allows her readers the comparison of a woman who would sell her wardrobe, financed to a large extent by the public and to benefit herself, and a woman who longs for the small comfort of knowing her body would be clothed, regardless of circumstance. Keckley navigates between these two extremes, and between the extremes of a city that held onto its rigid social structure even as its people sought a new sort of freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

"A BEEHIVE ON SWARMING DAY": LOIS BRYAN ADAMS AND THE BUSTLE OF CIVIL WAR WASHINGTON

When Lois Bryan Adams arrived in Washington in October 1863, she immediately mailed back her first column as special correspondent to the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*. Adams, like the most intrepid travel writers, took her readers into the muddy avenues between the unfinished government buildings to show them the real flow of the capital. In her first column, sent when the city still seemed new and wondrous, Adams wrote home about the sheer mass of life that seemed to form an endless parade at all times of day or night. Written on October 9 and published in the *Advertiser* on October 15, 1863, her first column began with calling the city "a beehive on swarming day, all bustle, activity, and apparent confusion" (33). There seemed to be no order, with people thronging the streets and sidewalks, lounging in front of stores and restaurants. She described two kinds of people: those "timorous" ones who stood on the side, waiting for the "ever-flowing river to pass by," waiting their turn, and then the "fearless" ones, who pushed into the crowd, regardless of military wagons, streetcars, soldiers on horseback, and the crush of life trying to get where they needed to be.

Adams wrote that the "streets and sidewalks are filled from wall to wall with the mixed and hurrying throng, coming and going as if life depended on their speed" (33). She was astonished by the mix, the flood of diversity:

> The shops and stores are full, the windows and doors are full, people throng through all the highways, swarm through alleys and through by-ways; rich and

> poor, young and old, foul with rags, and decked with gold, the nabob and his dusky brother, once a slave, now pass each other on the freeman's level and all together conspire to make lively times in Washington. (33)

To Adams, both the street and the sidewalk were similarly filled with chaos, though she carefully contained it within a rhymed and metered prose. In her column, she made the distinction between the areas traditionally reserved for human traffic and those given over to vehicles and horses, and noted the population's apparently willful ignorance of the difference. In Washington, her first lesson was that the flood of humanity cared little for traditional divisions.

Adams was a devout pro-Unionist and supported emancipation. The co-mingling of the races on the Washington street proved to her from the start that the city was being made over as a true Northern capital, now that the slave traders and Southern sympathizers had been driven out or underground. She finished her letter with a description of a "grand procession and celebration" where Black "odd fellows" marched "in their showy regalia, with bands of music playing" and perhaps more importantly, "with stars and stripes floating over them along the whole line of their advance" (35). Adams ended her letter with a poignant reminder of what was at stake in the country at large, shown in the microcosm of Washington. She reminded her readers that the throng of life passing in front of her existed in part because it had won the freedom to do so.

It was not the soldiers marching proudly under the flag, at least not in this first letter home. The soldiers here were part of the chaos, running aimlessly through the street or lounging in restaurant doors. Rather, it was the newly freed slaves, marching to the martial drums and claiming their right to express their patriotism, that reminded Adams of the necessities of a brutal war, one which has asked her readers to sacrifice their sons, and the dedication necessary to

support what she called the "cause of truth and right" (35). Even as she recorded the spectacle, Adams alerted her readers to the underlying politics of her observations, that the celebration of a free Washington was dependent on *all* people being allowed to celebrate and assert their freedom. She also made clear that even private life in Washington was in constant contact with government life. There was no separation between public and private in the capital city.

While her columns covered the final two years of the war, including heartbreaking vignettes of boys dying alone in hospitals and the frightening (if short) two-day siege of Washington, the vast majority of the letters were filled with the youthful exuberance of a city bustling and busy with new life, new vigor, and the blessings of freedom. On the page, Adams narrated what she saw as the constant flow of ideas, of people, of information in a city that had opened its doors to newcomers and to the changes they brought to what was a slow and backward Southern capital. Adams encouraged her readers to think of Washington as more than just a distant city of lawmakers. Instead, it had the potential to be the source of creation for a new national identity, one born of streets where freed people of all races mingled and joined together to build a united government that could emerge from the war stronger and more truly united. In a city where public and private, government and ordinary citizen, soldier and civilian, could share the public arena, Adams crafted a narrative of the potentials of representative democracy.

Adams too found herself as both private citizen and government employee. She was a staunch supporter of Lincoln and came to Washington not only to write for the *Advertiser* but also to take a position as clerk in the newly formed Department of Agriculture. She was one of the first women employed by the federal government, but one of the many literary writers and journalists who turned to such appointments for their steady salaries. At $600 per year, she made

exactly half of what her male counterparts did. Still, it was more than what most working women could hope to earn, and Adams left Michigan to both serve the federal government in her day job and to write about it in her column. Adams was not new to the world of newspapers. The second child in a family of ten, Lois Bryan was born in New York in 1818 and moved to Michigan with her family in 1823 as they became part of the first wave of settlement in what would eventually become Ypsilanti. According to a biography written by a friend in 1891, Adams was educated in Ypsilanti by a teacher named Mrs. Norris, "a lady of great literary attainments," who "established a taste in Lois for the higher and nobler things of the mind, as well as literature" (314). After Adams' death, her sister would recall that she was "something of a recluse, and sought little society aside from that of her home, her books, her pen and the muses. She used to sit day after day on the banks of the St. Joseph River, writing in her blank books, which we now have, filled with her earliest and sweetest poems" (qtd. in Memoir 313). In 1841, Lois Bryan married James R. Adams, the editor of the *White Pigeon Republican*, then later of the *Centreville Democrat*, and when they moved to Kalamazoo in 1845, the *Kalamazoo Gazette*. He died of consumption in 1848 and Adams never remarried. They had no children.

After James' death, Adams moved to Kentucky where she taught school for three years. While living in the South, she started contributing articles to the *Michigan Farmer*, the "state's leading agricultural periodical" (Leasher 14), and she moved to Detroit in 1856 to become editor of the paper's household department. Two years later, she bought a stake in the paper. At the *Farmer*, Adams was the business manager and she also continued writing and editing the household department until the paper was sold during the war. When Adams arrived at the *Farmer*, she inherited a traditional women's page but soon renamed it the Household Department because she believed that other members of the family, not only wives, would be interested in

homey topics. The motto, according to Evelyn Leasher, the editor of the only collection edition of Adams' columns, stated, "She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness" (101). Adams published her columns without her first name, only identifying herself as "L.," though Leasher asserts that Michigan readers would have recognized her pen name. When she released her first and only book, *Sybelle and Other Poems* (1862), she published under her first initial as well, perhaps so that her loyal readers would recognize that she was the well-known newspaper columnist. Offering poems (frequently her own), letters from readers, recipes, and puzzles for children, the department allowed Adams, according to Leasher, to "achieve a response from her readers," and to "establish a friendly tone that would make her readers feel they were acquainted with the editor and also make them wish to become better acquainted" (15). Adams would sustain that intimate tone in her letters from Washington, assuring her readers – regardless of gender – that she could retain her warmth and accessibility even when writing from a place of sustained chaos.

In her columns, Adams used what Patricia Okker has termed the "sisterly authorial voice . . . characterized by a relative informality and an assumed equal and personal relationship between editor and reader" (23). Common among women editing periodicals in the nineteenth century, this voice encouraged a spirit of freedom and intimacy between writers and their audience. Because Adams depended on her readers for contributions to her department, she ensured that they felt like they both knew her and trusted her. The Household Department became a conversation between reader and editor, a tactic common among periodicals of the era. In service of this friendship, Adams often spoke directly about her own experiences, reassuring her audience that though she lived in the city, she was well-versed in the ways of farm life,

having grown up on the frontier and understanding the hardship that came with creating a new, viable settlement.

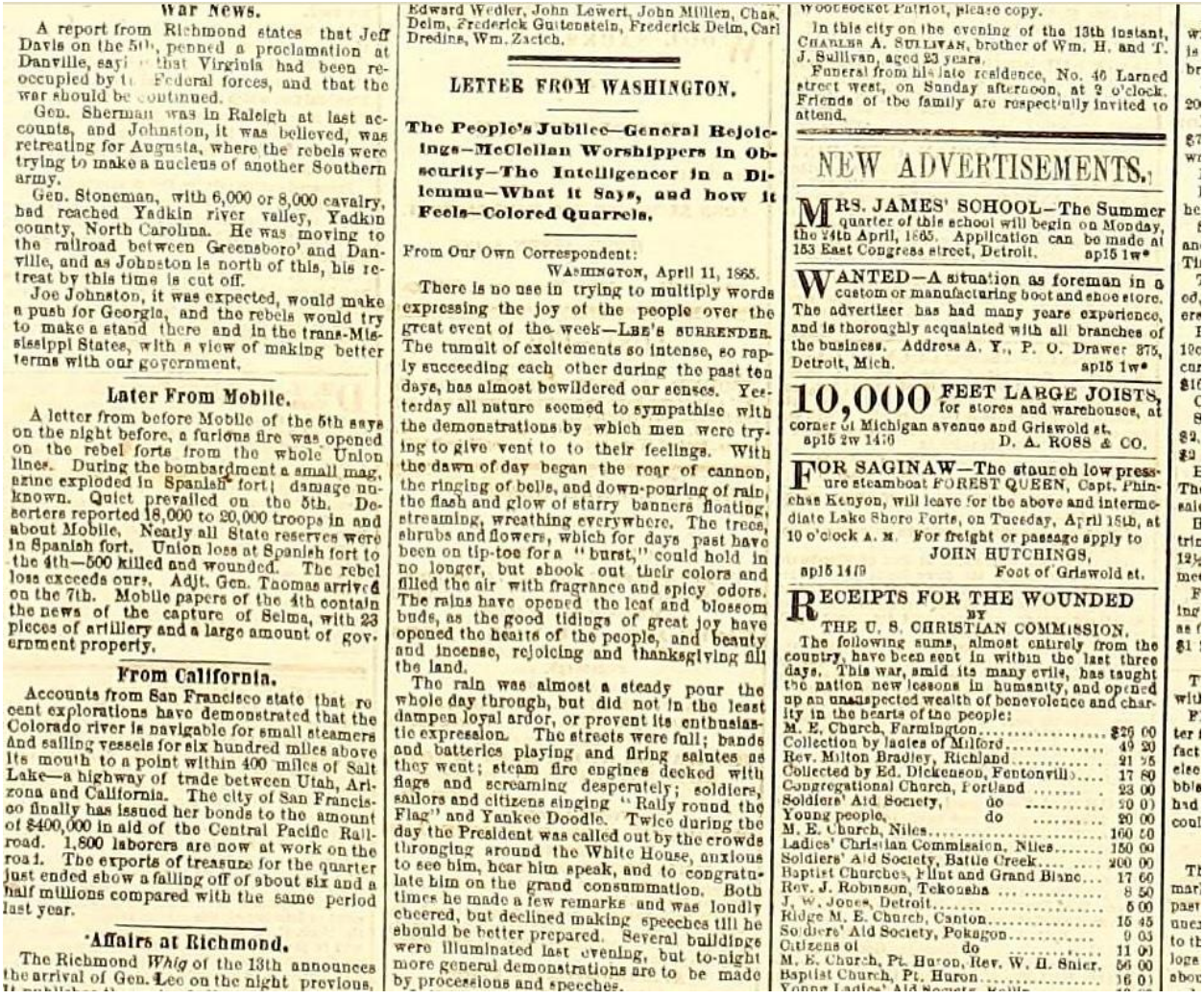
In her column from the December 1856 issue, Adams encouraged readers to submit by asking them to think of her as a friend who understood the unique experiences of a Michigan farmer's wife. Even though she currently lived in Detroit, and worked outside of the home in order to support herself, she asked for them to use her column as a space to talk about themselves and their experiences, and to share that with other women who shared their same concerns, much as she had done. Adams wrote:

> I trust that after this long explanation, you will not feel as though you were writing to a stranger, or to one who had no interest or sympathy with the toils and pleasures of a country life. There are a thousand things in your daily experiences that it would do you good to write, and that others would be benefitted by knowing. In the Household circle, wives, mothers, and daughters should speak freely, instructingly, cheerfully; and we trust they will. (qtd. in Leasher 109).

Adams' column for the *Michigan Farmer* would help establish the voice she would continue to use as a Washington correspondent for the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*: one fully connected to her readers on a more personal level than a traditional correspondent, who might only send straightforward reports on the congressional session or troop movements. Adams would carry the voice of a women's page editor to the capital, and the *Advertiser* would expand its wartime coverage to include the intimate details of Adams' life as a woman living and working in the capital.

Whereas the *Farmer* was a magazine geared toward rural readers, with columns and features that would appeal to farmers and their families, the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* was

a four-page urban daily that looked more like the newspapers of other urban centers than the weeklies that dominated all but the largest cities during the mid-nineteenth-century. The *Advertiser* was Detroit's Republican-leaning paper (while the *Detroit Free Press* supported Democrats), which was very much in line with Adams' own politics. Her letter appeared on the fourth page of each issue, running in the column next to substantial telegraph reports from the front and around the country. The *Advertiser* published a significant amount of national news, as well as news from throughout Michigan. Published under the headline "Letter from Washington," (Figure 6) and attributed to "Our Own Correspondent," there was no way to tell the name – or even the gender – of the author unless the reader was already familiar with her work. Unlike a smaller weekly or a magazine, there was no section specifically toward women or the home, so Adams' letters were fully integrated into the body of the newspaper, which meant that her coverage of female clerks, women's fashion, and visits to Washington hospitals (among other topics) received just as prominent a placement as other news of the day.



War News.

A report from Richmond states that Jeff Davis on the 5th, penned a proclamation at Danville, saying that Virginia had been re-occupied by the Federal forces, and that the war should be continued.

Gen. Sherman was in Raleigh at last accounts, and Johnston, it was believed, was retreating for Augusta, where the rebels were trying to make a nucleus of another Southern army.

Gen. Stoneman, with 6,000 or 8,000 cavalry, had reached Yadkin river valley, Yadkin county, North Carolina. He was moving to the railroad between Greensboro' and Danville, and as Johnston is north of this, his retreat by this time is cut off.

Joe Johnston, it was expected, would make a push for Georgia, and the rebels would try to make a stand there and in the trans-Mississippi States, with a view of making better terms with our government.

Later From Mobile.

A letter from before Mobile of the 5th says on the night before, a furious fire was opened on the rebel forts from the whole Union lines. During the bombardment a small mag. azine exploded in Spanish fort; damage unknown. Quiet prevailed on the 5th. Deserters reported 18,000 to 20,000 troops in and about Mobile. Nearly all State reserves were in Spanish fort. Union loss at Spanish fort to the 4th—500 killed and wounded. The rebel loss exceeds ours. Adjt. Gen. Thomas arrived on the 7th. Mobile papers of the 4th contain the news of the capture of Selma, with 23 pieces of artillery and a large amount of government property.

From California.

Accounts from San Francisco state that recent explorations have demonstrated that the Colorado river is navigable for small steamers and sailing vessels for six hundred miles above its mouth to a point within 400 miles of Salt Lake—a highway of trade between Utah, Arizona and California. The city of San Francisco finally has issued her bonds to the amount of $400,000 in aid of the Central Pacific Railroad. 1,800 laborers are now at work on the road. The exports of treasure for the quarter just ended show a falling off of about six and a half millions compared with the same period last year.

Affairs at Richmond.

The Richmond *Whig* of the 13th announces the arrival of Gen. Lee on the night previous.

Edward Wedler, John Lewert, John Millien, Chas. Deim, Frederick Guttenstein, Frederick Deim, Carl Dredine, Wm. Zacich.

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON.

The People's Jubilee—General Rejoicings—McClellan Worshippers in Obscurity—The Intelligencer in a Dilemma—What it Says, and how it Feels—Colored Quarrels.

From Our Own Correspondent:

WASHINGTON, April 11, 1865.

There is no use in trying to multiply words expressing the joy of the people over the great event of the week—LEE'S SURRENDER. The tumult of excitements so intense, so reply succeeding each other during the past ten days, has almost bewildered our senses. Yesterday all nature seemed to sympathise with the demonstrations by which men were trying to give vent to to their feelings. With the dawn of day began the roar of cannon, the ringing of bells, and down-pouring of rain, the flash and glow of starry banners floating, streaming, wreathing everywhere. The trees, shrubs and flowers, which for days past have been on tip-toe for a "burst," could hold in no longer, but shook out their colors and filled the air with fragrance and spicy odors. The rains have opened the leaf and blossom buds, as the good tidings of great joy have opened the hearts of the people, and beauty and incense, rejoicing and thanksgiving fill the land.

The rain was almost a steady pour the whole day through, but did not in the least dampen loyal ardor, or prevent its enthusiastic expression. The streets were full; bands and batteries playing and firing salutes as they went; steam fire engines decked with flags and screaming desperately; soldiers, sailors and citizens singing "Rally round the Flag" and Yankee Doodle. Twice during the day the President was called out by the crowds thronging around the White House, anxious to see him, hear him speak, and to congratulate him on the grand consummation. Both times he made a few remarks and was loudly cheered, but declined making speeches till he should be better prepared. Several buildings were illuminated last evening, but to-night more general demonstrations are to be made by processions and speeches.

Woodstock Patriot, please copy.

In this city on the evening of the 13th instant, CHARLES A. SULLIVAN, brother of Wm. H. and T. J. Sullivan, aged 23 years.

Funeral from his late residence, No. 46 Larned street west, on Sunday afternoon, at 2 o'clock. Friends of the family are respectfully invited to attend.

NEW ADVERTISEMENTS.

MRS. JAMES' SCHOOL—The Summer quarter of this school will begin on Monday, the 24th April, 1865. Application can be made at 153 East Congress street, Detroit. ap15 1w*

WANTED—A situation as foreman in a custom or manufacturing boot and shoe store. The advertiser has had many years experience, and is thoroughly acquainted with all branches of the business. Address A. Y., P. O. Drawer 875, Detroit, Mich. ap15 1w*

10,000 FEET LARGE JOISTS, for stores and warehouses, at corner of Michigan avenue and Griswold st. ap15 2w 1416 D. A. ROSS & CO.

FOR SAGINAW—The staunch low pressure steamboat FOREST QUEEN, Capt. Phinehas Kenyon, will leave for the above and intermediate Lake Shore Ports, on Tuesday, April 18th, at 10 o'clock A. M. For freight or passage apply to JOHN HUTCHINGS, ap15 1419 Foot of Griswold st.

RECEIPTS FOR THE WOUNDED BY THE U. S. CHRISTIAN COMMISSION.

The following sums, almost entirely from the country, have been sent in within the last three days. This war, amid its many evils, has taught the nation new lessons in humanity, and opened up an unsuspected wealth of benevolence and charity in the hearts of the people:

M. E. Church, Farmington	$26 00
Collection by ladies of Milford	49 20
Rev. Milton Bradley, Richland	21 25
Collected by Ed. Dickenson, Fentonville	17 80
Congregational Church, Portland	23 00
Soldiers' Aid Society, do	50 00
Young people, do	20 00
M. E. Church, Niles	160 50
Ladies' Christian Commission, Niles	150 00
Soldiers' Aid Society, Battle Creek	200 00
Baptist Churches, Flint and Grand Blanc	17 60
Rev. J. Robinson, Tekonsha	8 50
J. W. Jones, Detroit	5 00
Ridge M. E. Church, Canton	15 45
Soldiers' Aid Society, Pokagon	9 05
Citizens of do	11 00
M. E. Church, Pt. Huron, Rev. W. H. Snier	56 00
Baptist Church, Pt. Huron	16 00

Figure 6: Image of Lois Bryan Adams' column from the April 15, 1865, issue of the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, immediately after the South's surrender.

As a seasoned publisher and writer, Adams understood her role at the *Advertiser*, and what sort of columns from Washington her readers wanted to see; it was not her job to report on breaking news or troop movements. Without access to the telegraph, any information like that would have been old news by the time her column was published a week later. Instead, as the former editor of the Household Department, Adams crafted what read more like travelogues sent home to family and friends about an extended trip. In an intimate voice, she depicted daily life

in the capital and took her readers on tours of the White House and the Smithsonian, describing the national city that belonged to them as citizens, even if they had never seen it. Writing as if directly speaking to friends back in Michigan, she took the impersonal, riotous city and enclosed it in familiar, homey language, making this city of strangers feel intimate, familiar, and above all, safe, even in its eccentricities. Even when those in town understood that the South could attack at any time, she reassured her readers back home of Washington's, and therefore the nation's resilience. In effect, Adams domesticated the public space of her newspaper column.

When Adams arrived in Washington, she became part of a large community of correspondents living and working in the capital, sending their columns back to papers across the nation. And like Adams, a significant number of them – male and female – were novelists or poets and also held government positions. Before the Civil War, it was necessary to find other means of support because correspondents were only paid for the months when congress was in session. Donald Ritchie notes that while some correspondents worked all year, covering other governmental news, the rest "returned to their papers to take less desirable assignments or scrambled for other sources of income" when congress left town (4). Many correspondents ended up working for the very politicians they wrote about, and they were hired as congressional secretaries and clerks, giving them access and necessary connections. Ben Perley Poore was a master at finding powerful and wealthy patrons, and using his "wit and drawing room charm" to enrich both his writing and himself. Ritchie notes that Perley "wrote speeches for congressmen, clerked for three committees, and collected more than his share of federal patronage and subsidy. Poore spent the money as fast as it came in" (77). His popularity lasted through the war, and over the course of the conflict he wrote for multiple papers, often under pseudonyms, and he

continued to hold an esteemed place within official society, as his invitation to Mary Todd Lincoln's disastrous party makes clear, since the press were not invited.

While Perley maintained his reputation, there were new correspondents coming into town with the start of the war. By 1860, there were more than 2,500 newspapers throughout the country, and they wanted news from the front and from the capital. In his study of Civil War newspapers, Brayton Harris reports that getting news from Washington could be expensive, with the telegraph transmission of a 2,000 word newspaper column costing about $100 from Washington to New York, and even more expensive from Washington to other cities. At the same time, the payment to the reporter might be less than $10, making it necessary for even full-time reporters to have second jobs (Harris 6-7). A column like Adams', which depended more on the crafting of the language than the timeliness of the information, would not have been sent by wire. This was true for a number of columns written by women, and in the 1870s, the fact that they did not have access to the telegraph would mean that they were barred from the congressional press gallery (Ritchie 145).

The telegraph office was located on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Fourteenth Street, and anchored what came to be known as Newspaper Row (Figure 7), as Donald Ritchie explains, because of "its many ramshackle newspaper offices. Correspondents gravitated to 'the Row' because . . . it lay within walking distance of the executive departments, and the horse-drawn F Street trolley connected it to Capitol Hill" (78). While reporters would try to hold on to whatever exclusive information they had, there was also a sense of camaraderie among them, and they referred to themselves as "a fraternity and 'reportorial brotherhood'" (79). Perley recalled that some correspondents (like himself) wrote for so many newspapers simultaneously that "they had difficulty finding room to hang all the identifying signs that publishers sent to their 'own

correspondent'" (79). Adams did not write about her interactions with other correspondents, so it is difficult to know whether she frequented Newspaper Row, but the masculine descriptors the "reportorial brotherhood" attached to themselves makes it unlikely that many women were welcomed into their network.

Figure 7: Washington's Newspaper Row, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Published January 1874.

However, there were female correspondents in Washington besides for Adams. Maureen Beasley notes that most of them were from the West or Midwest, "where women enjoyed greater freedom than in the East" (23). All were divorced, single, or widowed, like Adams, and if any had children, they did not have more than one. Beasley states, "the nineteenth-century woman

Washington correspondent emerges as an independent individual of above average intelligence with a flair for words who turned to newspaper work from financial necessity" (23). Beasley argues as well that most of them were more interested in economic issues as opposed to political issues, though Adams seemed to be interested in the political questions of the day, and could recognize the leaders of the suffrage movement when she encounters them in Washington. Like Adams, other female correspondents like Jane Gray Swisshelm and Grace Greenwood were drawn to Washington by the promises of abolition and emancipation. For Adams, the freedom of the Washington street translated to the exuberant freedoms she described in her first columns back to the *Advertiser*, when the city was still fresh and the crowds of people seemed open to the flow of new residents and new ideas.

The Great Equalizer

In her second letter, Adams again turned her attention to the street, and this time to the condition of both the unfinished government buildings and the state of the roads. Like others arriving during the war, she was unimpressed by the city's "grandeur," how it looked more like the beginnings of a capital than a fully realized city. Washington, she wrote, "is yet in its infancy, or, more properly speaking in its misshapen, unformed, straggling childhood" (35). Buildings were either unfinished or already falling down, and the city as a whole, both in its architecture and its people, was a mix of "the sublime" and the "ridiculous," "beauty and deformity" (35). As she would throughout the length of her column, Adams attributed this backwardness to the city's Southern roots and its history of slavery, with little attention paid to the usefulness of the capital beyond its congressional season. The unsightly architecture, the

inconvenient houses, all spoke to her of a city still held back by its past. What she was encouraged by, however, was what she saw as the industrious Northern influence making its way through the city streets, brought to town by the influx of new residents and visitors, and carried through the air by the ever-present Washington dust.

Like all new arrivals to Washington, Adams wrote extensively about Washington weather and its unavoidable impact on the condition of the roads. Ankle-deep mud in the rainy months and through the winter, and in the warm months, swirling dust storms and a layer of dust coating everyone and everything in the city. One of the first ways she established the bustle of Washington life, and its absence of boundaries, was through the element of dust. For Adams, Washington was a city where public and private, government and citizen, had no real boundaries. The functions of the family were aided, or even perfected, by the government, and the city streets she described in her letters were never just the place for public exhibitions. Instead, the private lives of Washington's residents and visitors spilled out onto the street, uncontained by the structures of a city that was too small to hold its dramatically increased population. In a letter published March 11, 1864, Adams described the constant dust storms overtaking the avenues. She asked:

> And what do you think the poor mortals down below and in the midst of all this blinding storm are doing? Will they shut themselves within till it is past? Why should they? The wind and dust are within as well as without. Through loosely hung doors and rattling windows they pour, and revel on velvet carpets and among lace and silk draperies. From basement to garret, from the gritty dishes on the dinner table to the dust covered pillow on which you would lay your head, it is all about the same, in doors and out, dust, dust dust. (87)

For Adams, dust was Washington's great equalizer, following the elite into their mansions or travelers into their rented rooms, brought into the White House on the bottom of women's skirts as they attended Sunday afternoon receptions. The dust slipped into places that Adams as an outsider could never see, and she invited her readers into Washington homes, even if only to follow the dust.

Dust made identity malleable in a city where a person's name and rank meant everything. It enabled the shifting of identities and the flow of people and ideas to move freely, to circulate among a new population that she imagined would be open to new ideas about equality and justice. Dust helped sweep in new people, Northern people, who helped remake the capital in a spirit of Yankee reform. The Northern outsiders had, according to Adams, "brought daylight with them" into the city (204). She was careful to note, however, that besides for clerks, government appointees, soldiers, and others who planned to stay a while, so many of the new visitors were there searching for sons and husbands lying injured in one of the many military hospitals in and around the capital. These visitors "stand at the corners wistfully looking for the letter or figure that indicates the name of the street they have lighted upon. They glance into your face with anxious earnestness, and if they see an encouraging look thereon will very likely inquire the way to some one of the dozen hospitals" (182). Regardless of their mission, however, these visitors "help inevitably to make up the apparent gaiety of the scenes in which they mingle" (170). Adams was quick to remind her readers that a city built to house the federal government had become, in this time of war, a city of hospitals holding the injured and dying bodies of those fighting for that government's survival. For Adams, there was a constant pull between the carnival of influx and the somber dust of loss. Not all dust was somber, however. Dust, and the layer of anonymity it afforded to everyone caught in its wake, allowed Adams to

transport her readers to a city where even identity is formed externally and put on view for all to see. This vision of the new capital is illustrative of the potential for a new, stronger Union, swathed in the protection of transformative dust, one that allowed old ideas to be swept away and instead, new, progressive ideas to flow freely.

Adams was a firm believer in the possibilities of a strong federal government, especially now that it had eliminated slavery (at least partially, and if only symbolically), one that could look after the best interests of its people, even in a time of great crisis. Washington was changing, she asserted, as the slow Southern town was being forced to adapt to life without slaves, and to industrious Northerners disrupting the status quo. For Adams, Northern influence would permanently stamp out the mumbles of treason that could still be heard from the established society and fill the capital with those who wanted to make this government town a place for new opportunity and Yankee hustle.

Even the famous Washington mud and dust served as great equalizers, as on dusty days "Washington people do not pretend to recognize each other . . . Senators, contrabands, and the civilized classes are all on an equality then; all apparently made of the same material – clay, and common, yellow, potter's clay at that; all look, and smell, and feel of the earth, earthy" (86). On a dusty day, she wrote, a congressman who was not paying enough attention to where he was going, "[b]linded by Washington dust . . . might run a tilt into the Goddess of Liberty herself, and could scarcely be charged with 'malice after thought' if found on her pedestal when the storm was over, and she prostrate at its foot with a broken neck" (88). Unlike Alcott's representation of the statue, with a bird's nest in her hand and young America playing in the mud at her feet, fashioning a new nation from the fertile soil, Adams saw Liberty as vulnerable in the dust storm, able to be set free from her pedestal and thrown into the foot traffic, her brown-

coated patina no different from the people swarming around her. Even the sheer exhibitionism of the Washington street could not be kept at bay during a dusty, windy afternoon, as people of all races and classes pushed through the "dusky blackness," rendering every person a brownish tint (87).

Gender, too, could be transformative in the dust, as Adams recounted the scene of a woman on a street corner, whose crinoline was desperately trying to free itself:

> The wind catching the crinoline, pulls and strains and wrings it, till the fastenings give way, when lo, a skeleton falls to the ground, and the relieved lady goes on her way rejoicing, while a sable contraband of the masculine persuasion steps into the patent spiral, draws it up carefully, fastens it about his waist, and marches solemnly behind her. (87)

On the dusty streets, people were free to discard the trappings of one identity and pick up another, try it on, and then continue on their way as if this were an everyday occurrence. To Adams' readers back in Detroit, this must have seemed like a scene from a comedy. The freedom of the dust meant the freedom from traditional expectations, if only while the wind blows.

The Heat of Bloom and Battle

Like most new arrivals to Washington, Adams lived in a boardinghouse, a private room in what essentially became a public house, with strangers living side by side in the crowded city. When strangers made their home in Washington, they did so in what she called "overcrowded hive[s], where lodgers left for the day to go about their "honey and money-gathering" before

returning to the minimal privacy of a private house that has been opened to the public (184). For this privilege, she wrote, families would squeeze themselves into small, dirty spaces with bad landlords and swindlers who could legally steal the belongings of one tenant to pay off the debts of another. However, Adams also recognized that this strangely public way of living among so many people meant that she had the opportunity for new experiences, to be separate from these throngs of strangers while also appreciating unexpected moments. In a column from May 1864, she described how summer nights, open windows, and a city filled with strangers could bring an unforeseen delight. From the window of her room, she could see into the windows of two men who played the flute and the violin, "and almost every night while away the evening hours which such notes as are thrilling all the air around them now" (147). And from a window in her same building she could hear a piano, "just now being touched by skillful hands, and accompanied by a voice that has held thousands under the spell of its enchantment" (147). The sounds of Washington were a patchwork of human interaction.

The close living quarters and infamous Washington heat led to more than just spontaneous concerts through bedroom windows. Adams reported that once those industrious workers left their hives to make honey and gather their money, they came home just long enough for their "labors of the toilet" before heading back out into the street. After sunset, she explained, the newly refreshed workers congregated in "flowering draperies of lawn and lace, and other airy fabrics" (184). Washington heat made for lively evening promenades and spontaneous gatherings on front stoops and sidewalks. The street became a stand in for the living that could but wouldn't be done indoors. These office workers and their families sought comfort on the street, under a cool moon. She wrote that they were "as much at home on the pavement as in the parlor" (185), not using the parlor to gain influence or cement social power

but to escape the offices and boardinghouses that confined them throughout the day. These were not the fashionable women of Washington that Keckley dressed for evening receptions but the seamstresses, shop girls, and clerks who made the city run. Adams was constantly aware of class difference and placed herself most comfortably with those who worked, not those who hired people to work for them.

These gatherings were family affairs, with parents and children both enjoying the coolness of the evening street. The children, she wrote, are like "bevies of spring butterflies and nothing else," wearing their "airiest, gauziest dresses, with bright sashes, with bare arms and necks" (185). The older girls, too, "who have been bound all day to the copying desk, the counter, the needle, or other means of making a living, have put off their weary faces with their working dresses, and come out now with pleasant smiles and pretty muslin toilettes to be happy in the moonlight" (185). Unlike the women of influence who populate Keckley's memoir, Adams' attention here to fashion is not about power but about freedom, with bright colors and airy fabrics that seem to light the evening street.

At the same time, she compared people with flowers, both brightening up the street in early May. She used the language of fashion again to describe the lilacs "that made this 7th of May the gala day it has been. It was the lilacs that arrayed themselves in robes of satin sheen" 145). The people crowding the streets and markets "were like a walking flower garden to look at. Hands, arms, hats, and baskets were purple with lilac blooms. . . For once there was universal freshness, sweetness, and beauty in the Washington market, even in the midst of all its filth" (146). She delighted in the procession, the freshness and vitality of the street made new by the spring, by the industrious workers reclaiming the avenues for their own merriment.

It may be a cliché, but Adams did notice that the winds in Washington were changing, and some of the longtime residents were figuring out how to cope, or even thrive, in this new era, whether they liked it or not. Former slave owners turned their homes into boardinghouses, gathering "their revenue from their rent-roll and the pockets of boarders and lodgers, instead of from the multiplication of pickannies [sic] as before time" (89). And the houses that were built to make things as hard as possible on slaves – with the kitchens far from living quarters and shared water pumps a significant distance from residences – were now inconveniencing new owners, who found themselves working for their tenants rather than relying on slave labor. Some were even living in those inconvenient kitchens, having rented out every other bit of space.

Adams wrote about kitchens a few times throughout the run of her column, including when she first arrived and noticed that Washington houses – those without kitchens in separate buildings – have been built with the kitchens on the ground floor, and with the main entrances up "clumsy looking stairways" while the kitchen doors open onto the street. She continued:

> Looking down a street with all these staircases and kitchen doors in full view, gives one the idea that the houses have been torn inside out. They look ungainly and outlandish enough. The streets themselves are in keeping with the houses appearing to have been turned upside down by some convulsion of nature and not yet settled into the staid and proper deportment streets in a civilized city are expected to assume. (36)

Like her column, then, the Washington street is a mix of the public and private, with the private spilling out onto the public street, leaving no distance between the domestic interiors of the city and the unfinished chaos of the unpaved roadways. Adams too mixed the public with the domestic, sharing details of the city that invited her readers to see the bustle, to see this national

city as partly theirs because they are Americans, and because she herself, as friend and tour guide and familiar voice, is also partly theirs.

If Adams' vision of a new Washington depended on Northern persistence rather than Southern stagnation, then once again she turned to a kitchen to show just how Yankee ingenuity could help propel the capital into a new era. In her letter dated February 23, 1864 and published in the *Advertiser* on February 29, Adams covered a fair held at the Patent Office in honor of George Washington's birthday. Decorated by a "little army of soldiers, clerks, and others," and "officered by . . . lady managers," the fair brought together "stands, booths, bowers and fairy-like arbors . . . all brilliant with the 'red, white, and blue,' draped, festooned, and bound and blended with the twining wreaths of evergreen" (83). In the evening, the "hall is warmed by registers, and well lighted with gas, and presents . . . a scene of bewildering beauty and dazzling splendor" (83). As part of the fair, one of the booths was a recreation of a mid-eighteenth-century New England kitchen, with women in period costume reenacting what their foremothers may have done in their own private homes: "one is spinning at the big wheel, another at the little one; one winding yarn from old-time swifts, one carding; young girls churning, knitting and paring apples. . ." (85). Unlike the dusty Washington kitchens opening directly onto the street, allowing passers-by to see inside what had once been a slave's domain, the New England kitchen, surrounded by the pomp and gas lights of the fair, brought the hard work and clean living of the Yankee matron out of the privacy of the home and into a public space as a form of instruction. For Adams, who was used to writing for the industrious farmers' wives in rural Michigan, this kitchen was a sure sign that a new Washington, and a new Union – one devoted to the hard work of nation building – was possible.

Adams asked her readers to see the decay settled into the small spaces of a still unfinished city, one that had perhaps been left to rot before a bracing Northern influence threw open the curtains on the Southern remnants. And these antebellum relics were not afraid to share just how little they thought of these new changes, and Adams gave voice to their woes in her columns, if only to show how out of touch they were with the new status quo. She quoted one woman who bemoaned that "Washington does not seem itself at all. It is just overrun with the commonest kind of people, these Northern Yankees and Western rail-splitters and clodhoppers with their families, who seem to fancy that the world belongs to them. . . I don't suppose we shall ever have society here again as it was before the war! What a pity it is!" (91). Adams, with very little pity, turned to her readers and said, "Yes, indeed; what a pity it is that so much elegance and finery should have to give way before the onward march of a higher and purer civilization" (91). Her readers imagined that unlike correspondents like Perley, Adams would have little interest in ingratiating herself into official society for better access to the day's news.

Adams was endlessly fascinated by women who complained about the Northern hordes descending on their fair city. One "dilapidated Miss Flora," touching her "haggard cheek with rouge and pearl," said: "[A]las, Washington is not what it was. Common faces, coarse hands, dresses chosen and made for economy rather than taste; no style, no refinement, no aristocracy; but then, with such a President, and such a crowd as have swarmed here after him, what better could be expected" (184). In this complaint are heard the echoes of grievances against Mary Todd Lincoln, her inability to conform to Washington expectations, and the prejudices Washington women may have harbored against her even before her arrival. Unlike the women Keckley devoted herself and her business to serving, Adams had little sympathy or interest in the trappings of elegant society, and considered it an impediment to the more modern civilization

she advocated for through her column, one that would modernize the capital and therefore the country it served. Keckley purchased her own freedom, but she was still born and raised in the South, and when she arrived in Washington she sought out – whether by choice or by circumstance – women who were Southern in their upbringing and allegiances. Not all of her clients were Southern, especially once the war started, but it was the recommendation of like women who led her to work for Varina Davis in the late fall of 1860.

The circles Keckley worked for, and those she represented in her memoir, represented for Adams the stagnation of Washington society. She wrote about women's clothing in her letters, but was largely uninterested in what she saw as the shallow, unnatural culture grown soft and dependent from slave labor, caring more for appearance than moral advocacy. Keckley's business depended on the continuation of the old Washington, the Washington of Varina Davis, even though she had left town for a different sort of capital. Adams, on the other hand, while acknowledging that the old elements of Washington still existed, praised what she saw as its regeneration, spurred on by those Yankee and Western rail-splitters and clodhoppers and their persistence. She wrote: "Let us hope the present with bequeath to the future some nobler standard of merit than mere elegance of dress. The vigorous life concentrating here has power, if rightly organized, to make this the nation's intellectual as well as political metropolis" (92). Having rid itself from slavery and its Southern roots, Adams argued that the new capital city was "politically the vital portion of our almost redeemed republic, and socially absolved from the hideous bonds that cursed it mentally, morally, and physically" (92). Adams saw the old Washington in women's gowns and in the backward architecture of its houses, its dusty open kitchens, representative of concerns that that can be scrubbed clean in the light of day, rather than whispered about in secret, closed-door meetings like those Keckley witnessed as she sewed.

While Adams often sounded hopeful about the future of the Union and the changes she saw in Washington, she was not oblivious to the suffering of the wounded and dying in the city's hospitals, nor to the battles taking place only miles from the capital. Unlike Whitman, who begins visiting the hospitals soon after his arrival in the city, Adams does not mention her own hospital experiences until after the Battle of the Wilderness, which took place May 5-7, 1864, exactly the moment where she wrote home about the music floating in through her boardinghouse window, and the parade of lilacs down the Washington street. She acknowledged the gaiety, recognized the beauty of the scene and of the music, but for the first time since she arrived in the city and started writing her letters, she brought the interior of the hospital into her columns. Though she had acknowledged the abundance of military hospitals and injured soldiers in the city throughout her writing, it was only after the Wilderness that she brought her readers inside the hospitals, sending home lists of names of Michigan boys, their injuries, and which hospital they had been sent to. Her columns take on a new, urgent tone, bringing this vital information back to her loyal family of readers.

On May 13, Adams published her first list in order to, she said, "relieve the anxiety of friends" whose sons are "scattered as they are among so many thousands" (149). Now, in the hospitals, the mixing of strangers in Washington was not cause for celebration but rather a hindrance to concerned relatives who may have found it difficult to find one bed in a city filled with thousands. In the columns that follow, she devoted herself almost exclusively to more lists of the wounded, as the information became available in the chaos following the battle, and descriptions of both the hospitals themselves and the people moving through them become her foremost concern. She recounted the sheer number of wounded:

> It gives one a singular sensation to stand at the entrance of one of these hospital

> wards and look down the long line of narrow beds on either side, each with a prostrate human form upon it, and to think that these are but a handful to the many thousands who have been shot down in defense of the Government . . . and know that there is still another and another beyond, all full; and branching off from these in every direction, ward after ward with their hundreds of pale and patient sufferers and multiply these by many hundreds more, aye, even thousands in some of these sad receptacles of heroism, and yet we have but a faint idea of the greatness of the sacrifice our nation has placed on the altar of freedom. (151-152)

The sacrifice was that the sons of those farmers would never get to plow their family fields, to live in the glorious freedom that this war would make possible. For the first time, Adams began to question the sacrifices that a government could ask from its citizens, even as she used her column inches to reassure her "friends" back in Michigan that someone was looking out for their children, the children of their fair state.

Adams' descriptions of hospitals and patients were rarely graphic. She was more concerned with the flow of information back home, rather than a fully descriptive story, keeping in mind the desperate mother in Michigan who perhaps could not travel to Washington to find her son. Adams did not hide every sad moment or shattered bone, but she was ever mindful of the distance between the capital and the *Advertiser*'s reach. She wanted her readers to know that their sons were being properly cared for and visited by kind strangers like herself. Like a letter home to a loved one, Adams' columns became a site of intimate communication, an account to "give satisfaction to anxious friends" that she had personally visited these sons of Michigan and that they have survived, that they have made it through the impersonal federal system of army

hospitals and have been found by someone with a shared past. As a volunteer in the hospitals, she used her column as a way to encourage her readers to collectively think of Michigan boys as their sons, and to contribute to their well-being. Yet again, the private in Washington had been made public. The intimate care of broken bodies, the bedside whispers of a soldier who may never make it home again, all find their way into how Adams told the story of these Union soldiers, beckoning their loved ones to Washington; and if they couldn't be there, then she allowed them some comfort that their sons were being cared for by a friend and neighbor.

As she spent more time in the hospitals, she learned to focus not just on Michigan soldiers but to spread her attention to as many of the sick and injured as possible. At first, she wrote that she was hesitant to bother soldiers if they were not from Michigan, thinking they would not appreciate her interruption. She recorded a conversation with one soldier who reminded her: "We are all Uncle Sam's boys together; we have no State, till this war is ended right; it is our whole country we're fighting for, and we all like a cheerful word from our country's friends" (152). Just like Washington dust concealed differences and made identity malleable, a hospital bed concealed state alliances, dressing each occupant as uniquely American. Adams filled her columns with lists of Michigan soldiers, their hospitals, and the extent of their injuries, but she also used that space to remind her readers that every state had sent their sons to battle, and the hospitals in Washington housed them all together, making no clear distinction between one state and the next. As she continued her hospital visits and spoke to more soldiers, she used her columns as a way to document her learning process regarding both how to engage with the a conflict that necessitated such a large population of sick and injured, as well as how to fully capture her experiences on the page without causing significant worry to her

readers. Like a considerate friend would, she included important details but elides the violent or the truly heartbreaking for a more generalized sense of urgency.

As her columns began to focus primarily on hospitals, Adams showed less sympathy for the throngs of Washington residents searching outdoors for relief from the summer heat. Whereas only a few weeks before she praised the procession of lilacs, in her letter published on May 27, 1864, she now questioned the frivolity and ease of a Washington afternoon. "[C]omfort-lovers" now "gather in little knots under the breezy shadows of trees in parks and pleasure grounds; they stretch themselves at the foot of old oaks crowning the grassy ridges that skirt the city boundaries" (156). Adams began to allow a cynical edge into her column, when she continued: "It might naturally be thought that in a place and time like this there would be few seeking their own pleasurable comfort in this selfish way, but human nature in Washington is much the same as everywhere else, and has a large proportion of selfishness in its composition" (156). For Adams, the one relief from the heat was to put aside personal comfort and tend to the comfort of the wounded soldiers, where "[i]t is worth many an hour's toil through heat and dust to witness the change a half hour's visit will make in the faces of occupants of these hospital wards" (157). She assured her readers that it was still possible, despite – or perhaps because of – the heavy sacrifices of wartime, to put duty before personal comfort, just as the soldiers did to protect the Union. Her respect for the soldiers was unyielding. Her sympathy for, and interest in, the flowing crowds was tempered by what she saw in the hospitals. And she was less willing to overlook the failures of the federal government, to defend its constant need for new bodies and new sacrifice.

The Weedy Ranks of Government Business

From her earliest days in Washington, Adams worked as both a correspondent and a clerk in the Department of Agriculture, which allowed her to write newspaper columns devoted to the important labor being done in cultivating and distributing seeds throughout the nation, a mandate that again blurred the lines between public – the government office distributing seeds for next year's harvest – and private – farmers planting those seeds on privately held farms. As a clerk, Adams joined a large community of mostly out-of-towners come to Washington to make their fortunes, meager as they were.[28] A government appointment rarely paid enough to support a family, and as administrations and officials changed, mass layoffs were commonplace. Despite these drawbacks, thousands of hopefuls descended on Washington every year in search of jobs, many of them novelists, newspaper correspondents, and journalists. Ben Perley Poore wrote in his memoir that "with the army and its camp-followers, there came a number of *literati* to accept clerical positions in the Departments" (122-3). John B. Ellis, who wrote a guidebook to Washington yet seemed to hate nearly everything about it, devoted a few unflattering pages in his 1869 book to government employees, a class made up of "[p]oets, preachers, lawyers, doctors, artists, authors, merchants, mechanics, and loafers" (370). Ellis' remarks were characteristic of writing about clerks during the war and after when numerous contemporary Washington accounts deplored (often in equally unflattering language) the transient population of government workers. Walt Whitman served as a clerk during the war years and in the early 1870s, as did his literary cohorts and close friends William Douglas O'Connor and John

[28] Horace Greeley apparently advised clerks unhappy with their pay to move west rather than "beseeching Congress to give them bigger salaries" (Whyte 16).

Burroughs, as well as his former publisher Charles Eldridge. Washington poets John and Sarah Piatt were clerks, as was correspondent Jane Grey Swisshelm.

Women were first permitted to become clerks in 1862, when they were initially hired to work in the Treasury Department. According to Cindy S. Aron, 128 women applied for a clerk's position in 1862-1863, and out of the 6,000 federal employees in Washington that year, women made up only 176 of those clerical workers (835). These women, Aron stated, "created the first large-scale female clerical labor force in the United States" (846). As with their male counterparts, a significant number of female clerks were not Washington residents prior to taking their position, showing that women looking for work were part of the tens of thousands moving to Washington during the war years, much as Adams did. While their circumstances may have varied, a significant number of these women shared a common background. At least 65% of them had fathers employed in white collar professions, and most were white, middle class, and native born. The majority of female clerks were well educated, with 94% having attended school through at least age sixteen, and at least a quarter having attended private academies or seminaries (Aron 837, 838). Yet as of 1862, these women started applying for positions in the federal government which paid them an average of $600 a year (compared to $1,200 for male clerks), which the *Washington Star* thought was sufficient, yet was barely enough to support themselves in the expensive city, let alone care for families. Many women were single and lived in boarding houses, or shared rooms with other single women to save money. Others were widowed and had no other source of income.

All female clerks, regardless of marital status, faced the widespread public perception that they had either traded sexual favors to get their jobs, or were using sex to keep them. Ellis wrote about the women of loose morals who appeared to populate the federal workforce. He

remarked on an evening at the National Theater, as he was standing to the side, watching the audience leave, when he heard two men talking. One said to the other that they should leave, as they had already seen all the ladies there were to see. The rest of them, apparently, were "only Treasury Clerks!" (383). According to Ellis, it was "impossible to tell how many of these female clerks are pure women, or how many impure," because even the "black sheep" protested that they were innocent. Ever the gossip, Ellis noted that "a woman's virtue is made by the price of such an appointment," and that he would encourage all good, moral women to find any other kind of work (386). According to Aron, however, there were few other types of work for middle class women to take on while still maintaining their social standing. Because Washington had never developed a strong manufacturing sector, factory work was almost nonexistent. To hire oneself out as a domestic would have meant an unacceptable drop in social class. Aware that taking a position as a clerk called their morality into question, many who applied for work wrote that they were "of good moral character" and from a "respectable and worthy family" (Aron 849). Even as society questioned their morals or their right to work outside of the home, the first generation of female clerks did what was necessary to support themselves in an aggressively expensive capital city.

Still, not everyone welcomed women's entrance into the workforce. Even Jane Grey Swisshelm, herself a clerk and a woman who had worked outside of the home for years as a writer and editor, was critical of women taking jobs for which they were unsuited, using connections to politicians or department heads to get their appointments, despite this being a well-known tradition in Washington for both sexes. Swisshelm herself, after arriving in Washington in 1863, called on fifteen congressmen who would support her in her efforts to get a clerkship in the War Department, and once they sent their recommendations to Edwin M.

Stanton, the Secretary of War, she was appointed to his office (Hoffert 94). However, Swisshelm was quite critical of women who used their personal charms to get their jobs and saw this play on feminine wiles as a significant barrier to why women were not accepted as equals in the workplace.

Swisshelm and others noted that many women acted in the copy room as if they were in the drawing room, not recognizing the different social standards required by each. The men, too, were unable to separate women's lives into two separate spheres – so long they had expected women to remain firmly planted in their natural domestic state – that they constantly addressed them as "ladies," something Swisshelm argued stood directly in the way of an equal, congenial work environment. She wrote in her newspaper column of the War Department, where she clerked:

> Of the clerks employed here, there is not one in twenty who can go into a room where women are employed, and transact any business with one of them without in some way reminding her of her womanhood. They are "sorry to trouble the ladies," or they "hope the ladies are quite well," or "it is a pity to have the ladies shut up in the offices in such fine weather," or "it is bad for ladies to come out in such unpleasant weather." In some ways the ladies are to be deferred to or encouraged, and their shortcomings excused because they *are* ladies. The idea of treating them as copyists and clerks, simply this and nothing more, is beyond the mental caliber of almost any man with whom they are brought into personal relations, while the "ladies" in their dependent position, feeling no assurance of continued employment on any settled principle, naturally resort to personal favoritism as a means of getting bread. (308)

Swisshelm argued instead that men and women should be given jobs for which they were qualified, and that all employees should learn to recognize the difference between their social lives and their work lives. As most Washingtonians understood, however, the work of the federal government – and the power one held within it – was conducted equally in the office and in the drawing room. Like so much in Washington, as Adams discovered and reported on through her column even in the workplace there were no clear boundaries between public and private, between how one conducted her social affairs and how she presented herself in her place of business.

Adams visited other departments and reported on the women working throughout the federal government. She spent the most time, however, in her own department, Agriculture. The Department of Agriculture was founded by President Lincoln in 1862 and took over the responsibilities that had previously belonged to the Department of the Interior. The mission of the new department was to "acquire and to diffuse among the people of the United States useful knowledge on the subjects connected with agriculture . . . and to procure, propagate, and distribute among the people new and valuable seeds and plants" (20). In her letters, Adams devoted countless pages to the inner-workings of the department, telling her readers about how its workers gathered as much information as they could about the science of farming and different specimens of fruits and vegetables. She wrote in her letter from February 1, 1864, "These fruits, when all brought together, will be so classified and arranged that one may see at a glance the changes produced upon the same species by different climate and soil, and the various modes of cultivation" (72). Once the department has more room, she said, they will gather examples from across the country, study them, and create a museum of the nation's bounty. The museum will also "have on hand seeds, plants or cuttings of all the perfect ones, for public

distribution. Thus, a man, by stating the nature of the climate he lives in, and the soil he wishes to cultivate" can grow the perfect harvest from government-supplied seeds (72).

As Adams described the work of this department, Washington, the city that can't even build itself properly, became the source of the country's agricultural bounty, devoting itself to the needs of all regions, paying particular attention to what grows best where. Adams alerted farmers to the uniqueness of each individual region, and that all regions – presumably North and South reunited under the Union flag – would be represented in the museum. With the image of clerks sitting at tables, putting seeds into envelopes and mailing them to farmers throughout the country, Adams reversed the flow of resources – soldiers, farmers – flooding into the military camps in and around Washington, and instead positioned the federal government as caretaker of the family farm, concerned for the farm's success and dispensing the scientific advice and cuttings for planting, mailing back the seeds necessary for a successful harvest. Here, too, the public and private worlds overlap in Adams' prose, and she allowed her readers back home to imagine that even as their country was under attack, the government was still concerned with the success of the individual and the flow of both people and information throughout the nation.

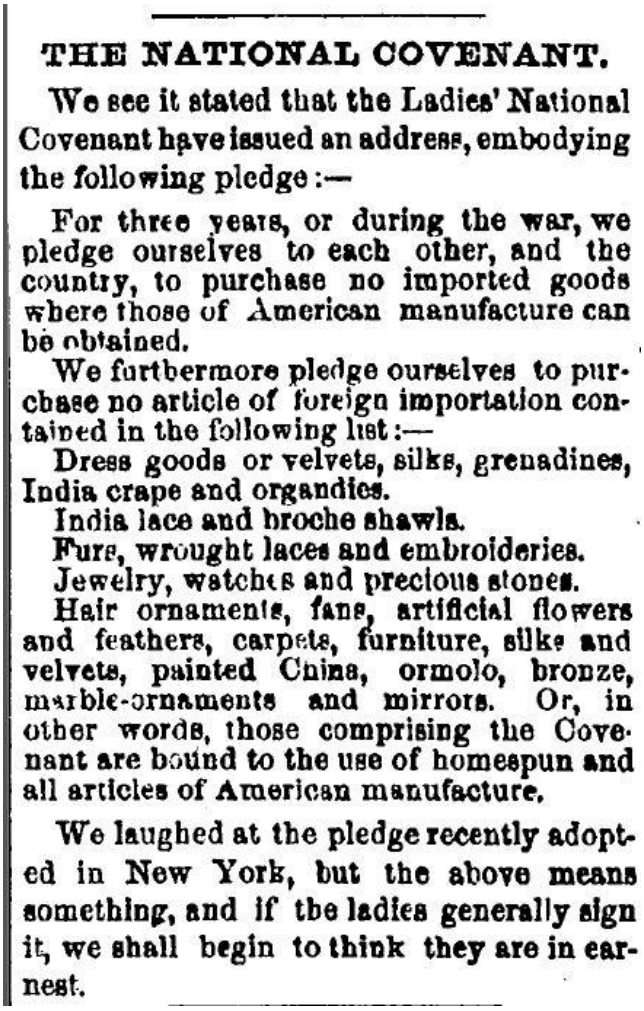
While Adams praised the work of the Department of Agriculture, as she lived in Washington longer this type of government work disappeared from her letters; especially once she started visiting military hospitals, her focus shifted to the ways in which the functions of government progress without accounting for potential damages. If the capital city was a town run by and for the government, then who stands to question when the federal departments – and the clerks who do the day-to-day work – cause more harm than good? Adams' growing discontentment with the war machine comes through her columns. Anger and doubt begin to seep in, and there are moments of pause, like when she states, "Death becomes fearfully familiar

in places and times like these" (160). In her column immediately following the siege of Washington, when the city was getting back to normal after a lot of worry but not much action, she wrote, "the valorous government clerks, after enduring the hardships of war for several hours, returned yesterday, covered with dust and glory, to do duty at their desks and ledgers once more" (175-6). After spending so much time in the hospitals, Adams did not try to hide her distain for office workers who only play at war.

This was especially true when she turned her attention to the furtive secessionists still living in Washington, who had been rounded up during the siege and put into prisons for safekeeping but who were now "released and restored to favor" (176). What the siege revealed, she explained, was just how deep the secessionists had infiltrated the government, and how the government was being duped, its gardens turning to weeds: "The truth is," Adams stated, "Uncle Sam's house, garden, and, for that matter, some of his large fields, too, have become weedy and foul beyond description" (176). Her focus was no longer on the excitement of building a museum where the best seeds and plants would be cataloged and studied, kept for the betterment of a nation of farmers. Instead, the only plants the government seemed capable of growing were "rank pigweeds" and "nettles" (176).

Although Adams came to feel that the government was overrun with less than desirous elements, she maintained a slight optimism, keeping Washington women from joining the weedy ranks. She did this by once again supporting a political act in a domestic space—this time in the realm of clothing. While Adams may not have been interested in high fashion or in the women who lived to dress, she did take great interest in a meeting to adopt the Ladies National Covenant (Figure 8), a pledge that would keep American women from buying items from overseas: "for the suppression of extravagance in dress and to prevent the ruinous importation of foreign

goods" (134). She found it amusing that the women in charge of the covenant and the meeting were precisely those women who were part of official Washington society and therefore those women most likely to buy imported goods. The goal was to encourage domestic production of fabric and other goods, and to take the pledge that they would only buy American-made items for three years or for the duration of the war. Adams attended the meeting and noted that in this instance, women who generally used their resources in support of their important husbands instead lent their clout to influence other women to support American manufacturing.



THE NATIONAL COVENANT.

We see it stated that the Ladies' National Covenant have issued an address, embodying the following pledge:—

For three years, or during the war, we pledge ourselves to each other, and the country, to purchase no imported goods where those of American manufacture can be obtained.

We furthermore pledge ourselves to purchase no article of foreign importation contained in the following list:—

Dress goods or velvets, silks, grenadines, India crape and organdies.

India lace and broche shawls.

Furs, wrought laces and embroideries.

Jewelry, watches and precious stones.

Hair ornaments, fans, artificial flowers and feathers, carpets, furniture, silks and velvets, painted China, ormolo, bronze, marble-ornaments and mirrors. Or, in other words, those comprising the Covenant are bound to the use of homespun and all articles of American manufacture.

We laughed at the pledge recently adopted in New York, but the above means something, and if the ladies generally sign it, we shall begin to think they are in earnest.

Figure 8: Ladies National Covenant, as described by the *Saturday Evening Post* on June 11, 1864.

While some periodical coverage of the convention either questioned the success of such a project, others focused on the importance of the participants. In an article from the *Circular* on May 9, 1864, the author noted that the leaders were "A number of wealthy and influential ladies – wives of Senators or otherwise distinguished" and that already "[s]ome of the wealthiest women of Washington have already donned the domestic calico" (64). The *Circular* praised the Covenant, arguing that, as it spread to New York, a "reform in dress, so long needed, will be thus

commenced by the leaders of fashion in the two great centers of social and political influence in our country. If the war can in some measure break the bondage of women to dress and foreign fashions, and inaugurate the reign of good sense and simplicity – its effect on the free north will be hardly less beneficial than on the slavery-cursed south" (64). While the author praises the effort, it seems unlikely that the Covenant would have been taken as seriously had the leaders not been important and fashionable.

Other publications patronizingly responded with "amusement," as did *The Round Table*, in its article from May 14, 1864, when its author stated that

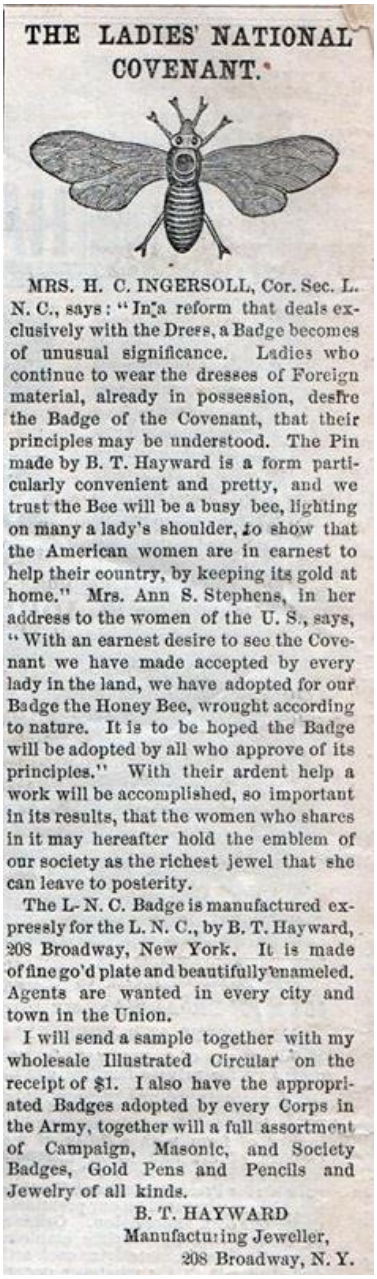
> [i]t is with some curiosity, not unmixed with amusement, that we have observed the organization. . . .We are inclined to believe that this species of self-denial, so wonderful in woman, will be confined, if practiced at all, strictly to the ladies of the convention, for it is not a mania likely to become very contagious. The wives and daughters of the newly made millionaires are not likely to be seized with a sudden impulse to wear California diamonds, Merrimac print shawls, calico bonnets, and cotton dresses and parasols, in preference to the more costly gems and garments which now adorn them. Moreover, we see no particular reason why they should. (338)

Mary Todd Lincoln, ever the trailblazer, refused to take part in the Covenant, claiming that "her shopping would bolster the import-export market and was part of a plan to reassure European nations about the American economy" (Clinton, NY State Archives). While the Covenant did receive coverage in a number of publications, few seem to have attended the meeting. Adams, on the other hand, devoted two full columns to the event itself, and was therefore able to offer a more complete picture to her readers beyond the basics of the covenant itself. Adams,

unsurprisingly, was uninterested in the status or social position of the women in charge, though she acknowledged the fact that these women who tended to orbit their powerful husbands were here using their positions to advocate for increased domestic production and the sacrifice of fine fabrics for the good of the war effort, counting on their stature to entice other women to join the cause. But Adams cared little about their fame and more about the possibility of women playing a larger role in national politics, and she remarked on the representative women from all states who attended the meeting and sat with their respective delegations, voting on the language of the pledge and debating the merits of various addendums. The government, she seemed to be saying, could benefit from the talents and efforts of women – regardless of their husband's position or their own wealth or status.

Of course Adams, with her keen eye for the absurd and a healthy dose of humor, offered her readers an insider's view of the proceedings. To her surprise, rather than the women speaking for themselves, all of the talking was done by one man, who was constantly rushing between different delegates, to enable the women to state their cases. She stated, "It was an awkward piece of business all around. The ladies who had thus far taken the lead, being too modest 'to speak in meeting,'" could only speak through this man. "This kept him running up and down about every other minute; a lively time he had of it all though, and it was most lucky that he happened to be one of the most accommodating gentlemen alive" (135). While this was common for the era, Adams still imagined that in a movement started by and for women, that they would have allowed their own voices to be heard, rather than through a male proxy. She also noted that the initial proposal was quite a bit weaker than the one that ultimately passed, with the covenant taking effect on July 4 of that year, rather than immediately, and that those who pledged would only refrain from purchasing imported items "not absolutely necessary"

(135). The women who took the pledge, in order to show their support, would wear a badge made to look like a bee, "with wings enabled according to nature, worn with a tricolor ribbon, a little in front of the left shoulder" (140) (Figure 9). The initial vote was near unanimous, with only one woman from Massachusetts who voted no because she felt the language allowed for too many loopholes.



THE LADIES' NATIONAL COVENANT.

MRS. H. C. INGERSOLL, Cor. Sec. L. N. C., says: "In a reform that deals exclusively with the Dress, a Badge becomes of unusual significance. Ladies who continue to wear the dresses of Foreign material, already in possession, desire the Badge of the Covenant, that their principles may be understood. The Pin made by B. T. Hayward is a form particularly convenient and pretty, and we trust the Bee will be a busy bee, lighting on many a lady's shoulder, to show that the American women are in earnest to help their country, by keeping its gold at home." Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, in her address to the women of the U. S., says, "With an earnest desire to see the Covenant we have made accepted by every lady in the land, we have adopted for our Badge the Honey Bee, wrought according to nature. It is to be hoped the Badge will be adopted by all who approve of its principles." With their ardent help a work will be accomplished, so important in its results, that the women who shares in it may hereafter hold the emblem of our society as the richest jewel that she can leave to posterity.

The L. N. C. Badge is manufactured expressly for the L. N. C., by B. T. Hayward, 208 Broadway, New York. It is made of fine go'd plate and beautifully enameled. Agents are wanted in every city and town in the Union.

I will send a sample together with my wholesale Illustrated Circular on the receipt of $1. I also have the appropriated Badges adopted by every Corps in the Army, together will a full assortment of Campaign, Masonic, and Society Badges, Gold Pens and Pencils and Jewelry of all kinds.

B. T. HAYWARD
Manufacturing Jeweller,
208 Broadway, N. Y.

Figure 9: Advertisement for the bee pin representing the Ladies National Covenant. Published in *Mme. Demorest's Mirror of Fashion*, September 1864.

Adams reported, "Little Massachusetts went on to say that she also discovered in the pledge, as read, a loophole through which any one might crawl into all the foreign fabrics they

might desire. That clause, 'absolutely necessary,' might be made to cover a broad range, according to the habits and tastes of the ladies adopting it" (135). The comment from Massachusetts led other women – ordinary, non-important women – to start voicing their concerns about the weakness of the measure, and a woman from Kansas "delivered a stirring little speech, full of pith and patriotism, referring to the hardships, privations, and self-denials of our soldiers in the field, and asking if their wives, mothers, and sisters could not, for their sakes, deny themselves for a time these luxuries of dress, that were draining the country of its gold, and thus embarrassing and endangering the Government?" (136). She stated, "They wanted no half way work in the matter, and . . . nothing but the total abstinence pledge would answer" (136). Adams approvingly recounted the rhetorical vigor of these ordinary women, so dedicated to supporting the soldiers and their sacrifices. In this way, she imagined a more representative government, one where women too, engaged with the important issues of the day, had the power to effect change. "They were not the compromising, temporizing sort of women," she wrote admiringly. "If they were to have an organization they must have it on a correct basis; they would join no other" (137). Unlike other publications that stressed the importance of the powerful women in the room, Adams and her readers understood that it was the regular, nameless women who effected real change. It is also perhaps important to note that while the important women made their statements through their male spokesperson, "Little Massachusetts" and her sisters in the audience felt free and emboldened to speak for themselves.

Of course, no democracy is without its fool, and Adams lightened her column with what she saw as the silly concerns of women who did not understand the meaning of sacrifice: "I cannot sign such a pledge while I am in mourning, for this crape, you see, is all imported," one woman stated. When she was informed that crepe was indeed produced in the United States, she

replied, “Ah yes,” she replied, with a deep-drawn sigh, “but the quality is nothing like this!” Other women asked where on earth they were to get linen and ribbons, and were told again that such things could be found from American manufacturers. Perhaps most amusingly, Adams recounts the huffiness of one woman who “wondered if such things as blankets were made in America; she couldn’t sign no pledge to go without blankets for three years; that was the hull o’ *that* story as far as she had anything to say!” (139). While Adams includes their protests to enliven her column and to expose the drastic reaching some would to in order to avoid signing onto the pledge, she was encouraged by the women who want to do something to help their country, and hopeful that even small shows of support could lead to a shared sense of sacrifice and commitment.

For a woman grown discouraged by the carnival of Washington, it was the small moments of care, sacrifice, and humanity that would help her maintain that slight optimism, even in the face of growing disillusionment. Her columns could at once capture the joy of unbridled flow in a city flush with new life and new possibility even as she deplored what she grew to see as the self-serving acts of a government intent on its own survival at the expense of young lives. She could favor the flood of new seeds crossing the continent to enrich the soil of private farmers while mourning the limbs of those same family trees. The legacy of wartime Washington, as seen through the intimate voice of Adams’ letters home, promised the full protection of a city filled with dedicated public servants who, in the end, just might create a new and more representative union.

CHAPTER THREE

"THIS GREAT, WHITED SEPULCHRE":

RECONSTRUCTING WASHINGTON, RECONSTRUCTING WHITMAN

> This Washington is a great place – you see how
> funny the world is governed – & lots of queer doings
> that outsiders never dream of –"
>
> – Walt Whitman, 1866 letter to his mother

As Elizabeth Keckley toiled in her New York garret to bring her tell-all memoir to life, Manhattan's own poet was still in Washington. He was visiting the few remaining hospitals and enjoying some new-found success as one of the city's literary celebrities, working, as did so many of his contemporaries, as a government clerk and contributing to the vibrant intellectual life in the postwar capital. Walt Whitman published heavily in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Between 1870 and 1872, he released the fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the second to appear since the Civil War. Except for the annexes he sewed into the later printings,[29] and the distribution of poems from *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps* throughout the text, this edition included only thirteen new poems which were, according to biographer Gay Wilson Allen, "all fairly short and individually of no great distinction" (192). Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this new edition was the place of publication listed on the title page.

[29] These annexes are *Passage to India* and *After All Not to Create Only*. Gay Wilson Allen adds that in this new form, including the annexes, "*Leaves of Grass* comes to a great climax, and probably what Walt Whitman intended to be the end of this book and the beginning of a new one. . ." (92-93). Eventually the annexes, which included both old and new work, would be incorporated into the body of *Leaves* and the poems diffused to various clusters.

Whitman once again kept his name off the title page, leaving only "Leaves of Grass. Washington, D.C. 1872." For the first and last time, the nation's capital makes an appearance as the location of Whitman's life-long poetic project. Interestingly, the other small volumes he published in the early 1870s – including *Passage to India, Democratic Vistas,* and the 1865-66 *Sequel to Drum-Taps* – also locate Washington as the place of publication, though only *Sequel* was actually printed there. The reverse of the title page for the 1871 *Leaves* and the cover of the paperback edition notify readers that the book has been "electrotyped" in New York. But there is no denying that Washington is the site of this newly expanded text and of Whitman's other literary output from the mid-1860s through the early 1870s.

Washington could never mean to Whitman what New York did and could never take the place of New York in his poetry. There is no "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Washington the son," a "Dweller in Washington my city." [30] But what emerges through a multi-genre examination of his work and his time in Washington is that, for Whitman, Washington was not merely situated between North and South, Union and Confederate. For him, it was the ultimate interstice, a constant unworldly zone neither home nor foreign, but increasingly more familiar and inhabitable. As the war receded further into the past, Washington itself took on its own project of reinvention, moving from the center of war to a vibrant, growing city fit to be called a capital. Like the city he slowly came to inhabit, Whitman also underwent a radical shift. He gradually but dramatically altered his writing voice.

His poetry was no longer that of a New York rough (whether a real or invented persona), a Bowery b'hoy pumped full of sexual bravado and outrageous ego. His new poetry, like Whitman himself, became more mature, more reserved, less exuberant and uncontainable. In

[30] A play on lines from "Song of Myself" and "Starting from Paumanok," respectively.

Washington, as Jerome Loving observes, Whitman "revised his original [poetic] vision. It was a movement from the One to the Many – as the poet reconceived himself in the third person" (Loving 32). The speaker in these new poems was more the observer than the actor. Whitman drastically reworked his poetry to reflect the nation as it was during and after the Civil War, torn and bleeding but ultimately redeemable. Washington as the nation's capital couldn't help but experience a similar makeover. Precisely at the moment when Washington underwent its physical and social transformation after the war Whitman began to identify the city as a place where he could gain a measure of literary success, and a place that could ultimately find its way into his writing. It was also a time when Whitman found himself part of a burgeoning literary community in Washington, among poets and other writers who valued him as an influence, who worked on his behalf to grow his national and international reputation, who opened their homes to him, and who gave him an intellectual and familial community that could ultimately enable Whitman to call Washington his home.

There is a significant difference between the Washington he wrote about in his prose and the city that holds only a slight presence in his poetry as a site of violence, of squandered potential, and as representative of a nation's bloody feud. Through a study of his prose, this chapter will examine the ways in which Washington, by the early 1870s, emerged as a site of everyday life, a center of intellectual pursuits, and a city struggling with the social ramifications of Reconstruction. Whitman does allow Washington to emerge in a few poems but, in contrast to his prose, he never moves beyond the years of war. These striking differences between his Washington prose and poetry will illuminate the difference between Whitman's growing reputation as a writer based in D.C. – one who participated in and then wrote about its postwar

social and intellectual opportunities – and the communal, mending vision of America he wrote into *Leaves of Grass* that could not or would not leave the war behind.

Washington's presence in the poetry remains slight. Although it was the site of what biographer Henry Seidel Canby called Whitman's "last, but also his most mature, period of creation" (251), Whitman never explored Washington in his poetry as he did the New York of his youth or the West of his old age and imagination. The nation's capital did, however, make appearances in his work throughout the war and after, as he wrote about the city constantly in his prose – in correspondence with family and friends; in other, more public forums like his letters from Washington published in the *New York Times* and other New York and local Washington newspapers; and in the notebooks he kept that eventually became the source for *Memoranda During the War* and *Specimen Days*.[31] Notably, only in his later Washington writing – that which originated during the early 1870s – did he begin to situate himself as a Washington resident and not as a transient observer. Until then, the Washington he represented in his work was only the federal capital and never a city in its own right, with a life separate from its national and political functions. For Whitman, as for many transients, it was a city of boardinghouses, home to Congress and the president, the place of government clerkships and military hospitals. The city he almost always presented to his readers marked him, then, as a temporary resident.

He certainly stayed longer than others who came and went almost constantly throughout the war, but his prose is indicative of his status as visitor, and the city's near absence from his poetry is further proof. Like Lois Bryan Adams, who died shortly after the war ended but who

[31] As will be discussed later, Betsy Erkkila notes in *Whitman: The Political Poet* that while Whitman represented *Memoranda* as "verbatim renderings" of notes made during the war, they are, in fact, only a "remembrance and reinvention of the war written a decade after its close." The narrator is, in Erkkila's phrase, "like his poetic persona, a fictive creation" (207). This is significant when attempting to reconstruct Whitman's Washington during the war, rather than in the years following, which makes his wartime letters a vital resource for understanding events as they happened.

would almost certainly have remained in Washington otherwise, Whitman seemed content to make his permanent home in Washington postwar. In his letters to Washington friends after what he imagined would be a temporary removal to Camden, New Jersey, to convalesce, he assured them that his change was temporary and would last only until he had recovered. He was, unfortunately, never quite well enough to return. Among all of the writers discussed in this project, illness and death drove all but one from Washington and for Keckley, it was a minor stroke late in life that caused her finally to return to Washington for the remainder of her life. Unlike others who seemed to come with a purpose and leave when that purpose was complete, Whitman and other writers seemed content to become permanent transients in a city that offered a host of opportunities for the literarily ambitious.

Focus in this chapter will not be on Whitman's service in the military hospitals, nor will it be on the specifically battle-focused Civil War poems, for one reason: his interaction with soldiers from across the nation on the battlefields and in the hospitals temporarily allowed Whitman to escape the city in which he currently found himself. The convergence of troops from across the nation in Washington during the war years was unique to that time and place, but it also enabled Whitman to construct these men in his writing as representative of their own states: heroes of the fractured union assembled in one set of strategically staged hospitals, but not truly of the place, isolated from the realities of Washington. The hospital scenes he allowed his readers to glimpse are self-contained, and Whitman as nurse is contained within them. Rather, the concern here will be the other Washington, that strange city in which Whitman found himself once he left the hospitals and once the hospitals, too, had left Washington. Once he left his brave young soldiers, he occupied a city of half-completed monuments and open sewers and the politicians who moved between them.

"No Fit Capital Here Yet": Whitman and the Capital at War

By 1872, Whitman had been living in Washington for a decade. The story is familiar enough now: how he quickly left New York in December 1862 after hearing that his brother George had been wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, George's superficial facial wound and the nine days Walt spent with him in Virginia. How he ultimately decided to stay on in Washington, hoping to find a government position and becoming a volunteer nurse in some of the 40 military hospitals in and around the nation's capital. By the early 1870s, the last wartime hospital had closed its doors and the wounded soldiers had returned to civilian life. Whitman nonetheless remained in Washington, working as a clerk, publishing in newspapers and periodicals when he could (both domestically and abroad), and bringing out two new and heavily revised versions of *Leaves of Grass*, what he called in an 1866 letter to his friend Abby Price, "that unkillable work!" (Glicksburg 107). Although he had lived in Washington for some time before publishing the 1867 *Leaves*, Whitman decided both to publish it in New York and to keep that city's name on the title page. What changed, then, in the years between 1867 and 1871 to make Washington the chosen place, even if only in name, for his later publications?

Interestingly, Whitman also chose the 1871 edition to introduce the words "Washington City" into two poems; both had been published previously in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* and would remain in the "Drum-Taps" cluster for all further editions. To both "How Solemn as One by One" and "Spirit Whose Work is Done," Whitman added the subtitle "(Washington City, 1865)." These are the only instances in his life-long poetic output in which Whitman chose to mention Washington by name. Both come toward the end of the "Drum-Taps" cluster, when the Civil

War had already been fought and won, and the soldiers were leaving their regiments for home. This tying of the poems to the specific location is as significant as Whitman's placement of Washington on the title page of this edition of *Leaves* and his other early 1870s publications. For the first time, the city in which he experienced war, peace, and a measure of literary success emerged slightly from the shadow of New York, Whitman's birthplace and familial home. And more importantly, Washington was identified as a space caught between war and peace, much as Whitman was himself.

In "How Solemn as One by One," the returning troops file by him on the street and he sees their faces as masks. He sees behind the masks to the real people, and finds them to be "kindred soul[s]" that could never be killed, even by a bullet or a bayonet. Only the masks could be destroyed but not the souls they hide. Whitman then extends the image further by directing it to a "you," the readers, at whom he will "glance upward out of the page," and to whom, along with the soldiers, he directs the "thought of [his] whispering soul" (453-4). This poem recalls the lists of names running through his notebooks and then through *Memoranda* and *Specimen Days*, cataloguing wounds, regiments, and the individual desires of his hospital-bound soldiers. The expressionless faces the troops wear on their parade are nothing more than masks because Whitman has seen men like these – and perhaps even some of these particular men – at their worst, when all artifice was stripped away.

He does not, however, feel that same draw to those surrounding him on the street. It is a link only between Whitman and the soldiers, and Whitman and the readers. Any connection between readers and soldiers passes solely through him, who won't avert his gaze from the men except to glance at the readers before looking back. Although it may seem that Whitman is indistinguishable from others in a crowded street scene, he knows that his readers see all,

because he has allowed them this access, has allowed us to know these men has he has known them, and not just as a mass of strangers. He knows his readers can pick him out among many because of the strong connection they have forged through his poetry, and because there is an individual "soul" connection among three groups of strangers, fashioned around this scene: the poet, the subject, and the reader, all brought together through the lines of the poem.

Before the subtitle was added in 1871, firmly locating this as a street in Washington in 1865, the scene was unmoored from linear time and grounded place, and the poet could be speaking of any number of situations familiar to his contemporaries. Once the tag was added, however, the poem drew on the specificities of year and locale; perhaps equally as important, the tag grounded Whitman as strongly as it did the poem. It drew on his other writing dealing with similar topics, not least of which was the other "Drum-Taps" poem with the same identifiers, "Spirit Whose Work is Done." As the only two poems in the cluster that identify Washington as their setting, they are distinct from the early poems like "Beat! Beat! Drums," or "Eighteen Sixty-One" that are a push toward war (spoken by someone who had never experienced it), and from the battlefield and campsite poems like "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night." These document the hardships at the front and the bonds between comrades, something Whitman intimated that he had far more experience with than he actually did, since he spent only a very limited amount of time near the front.

Instead, these two Washington poems bring the war onto urban streets and allow for an intersection between military and civilian life that was an everyday occurrence in the nation's capital, and of which Whitman was a daily observer. "Spirit Whose Work is Done" is a poem commemorating the end of the war, a memorial to "many a savage scene" that the nation has just experienced. The poet watches the war fade as if it were a "spirit of dreadful hours" which could

now release its hold on the land. Now, as "the sound of the drum, hollow and harsh to the last" surrounds him, he stands on the street yet again and watches the "immortal ranks, return, return from the battles" – ranks made up of both the living and the dead, as all have participated in the awful sacrifice and have gained a kind of mass, anonymous immortality. He sees "forests of bayonets" leaning on young men's shoulders as they appear "in the distance, approach and pass on, returning homeward." As the troops march past, the poet calls out to the spirit of war:

> Touch my mouth ere you depart, press my lips close,
> Leave me your pulse of rage – bequeath them to me – fill me with currents convulsive,
> Let them scorch and blister out of my chants when you are gone,
> Let them identify you to the future in these songs. (456)

Unlike the more peaceful homecoming in "The Return of the Heroes," or the kindred souls of "How Solemn as One by One," here the poet tells the spirit of war to possess him and inspire his writing; rather than leave the world in peace, the same convulsive, violent energy that tore into the Union should now channel its destructive power into these war poems. The war lives on the page with battle-like intensity, and the drums are just as loud here (fittingly, in "Drum-Taps") as on the front lines.

Interestingly, Whitman often spoke of the act of kissing the soldiers in the hospitals – not in a sexualized context, though surely there was at least an inkling of sexual desire behind his devotion to America's young men brought to hospital. In his wartime letters and then later, in his conversations with Horace Traubel near the end of his life, he noted when the sick and dying men would kiss him before he left the hospital for the night. In the poem, however, it is not a soldier or even a regiment of soldiers whom Whitman asks to "press [their] lips close." It is the

war itself, which made it necessary for the "forests of bayonets" to exist at all. Again, without the line "(Washington City, 1865.)," the poem exists unmoored to location, and the location here is vital. Washington, as the capital city, symbolic of the larger Union under threat, is the fitting site for a street-side review of returning troops, whether poetic or historical, as it was for the Grand Review in May 1865 (Figure 10), which Whitman attended and wrote about in *Memoranda During the War*. A contemporary newspaper account of the Grand Review stated: "The army marched through Washington and then, as an army, disappeared forever; absorbed into the body-politic, a million men of war turned men of peace in a single day" (qtd. in Froncek). Whitman employs a similar language. At that moment, in the spring of 1865, no other city could harness the unique convergences of time and place, government and military, death and everyday life the way Washington could. Perhaps though, when he initially wrote the poem, Whitman was still too close to the losses of wartime to recognize Washington's centrality to what he wanted his poems to express.

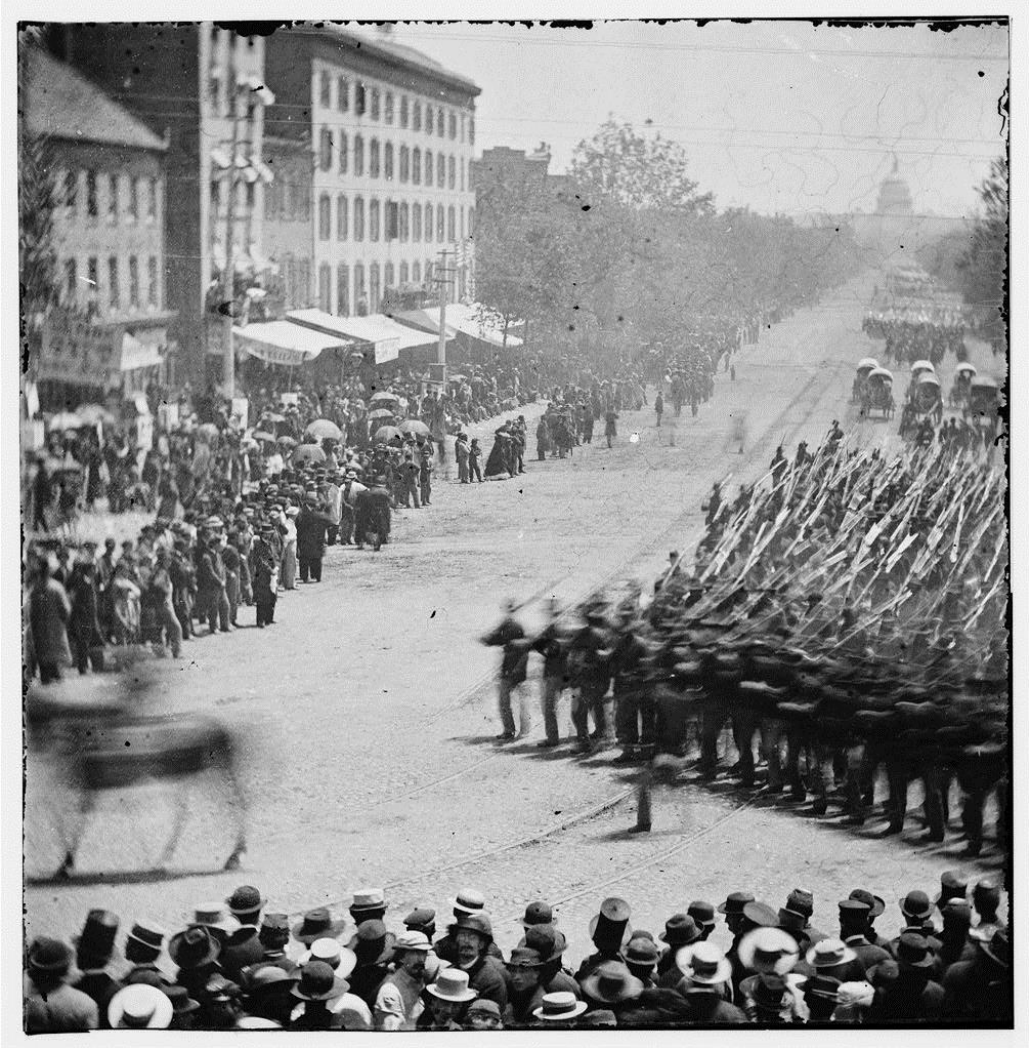


Figure 10: Grand Review, March 1865. Units of the 20th Army Corps, Army of Georgia, passing on Pennsylvania Avenue, near the Treasury Department. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

"How Solemn as One by One" and "Spirit Whose Work is Done" mark the arrival of soldiers in Washington immediately after Appomattox before they return to their families. Both are street scenes, with Whitman among the crowd, watching these processions and feeling an unbreakable, intimate bond with these lines of young men even though the poet remains a sidewalk observer and the men have no personal contact with him. In a third and similar poem,

"The Return of the Heroes,"[32] Whitman follows these men past the now-deserted Washington camps and onto the fields they have returned home to harvest, turning their guns into tools to plow the land, perhaps utilizing the seeds packed and shipped throughout the country by Adams and her fellow clerks, who distributed the seeds for modern crops to these new young farmers. In this poem, Washington is the unmentioned pause between war and peace, where the soldiers must regain their civilian identities and use the consequences of the last few years to build a strong and vibrant nation, sown on the fields out west, so different from the city they are leaving. At first glance, the poem has no outward relation to Washington. The soldiers, returned home from battle, lay down their arms and turn from the machinery of war to the machinery of harvest.

The farming Whitman describes here is not the small family farming of the past – each growing enough for its own needs – but high-tech, mechanized farming in search of a product to serve a nationalized marketplace and embody a growing nation. Each state, each region, produces something different, and through the interconnected (and reconnected) national transportation system and the nationalized market for goods, the country becomes whole once again. "Harvest the wheat of Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin," he commands. "Harvest the maize of Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee . . ." (LA 491). Harvest everything the land will produce, and don't worry that the dead will be forgotten: their bodies will fertilize the earth; they will nourish the production of this fruitful land. This is a familiar theme for Whitman; in poems like "This

[32] Originally titled "A Carol of Harvest, for 1867." The poem appeared first in the September 1867 issue of *The Galaxy*, a periodical which, in its short life span (1866-1878) was kind to Whitman and published a good selection of his prose, including the essays "Democracy" (December 1867) and "Personalism" (May 1868). These eventually became the foundation for *Democratic Vistas*. Other than "A Carol of Harvest," poems published in its pages included "Outlines for a Tomb" (January 1870), "Warble for Lilac-Time" (May 1870), and "O Star of France" (June 1871) (Grier 349). In August 1867, the magazine editor wrote to John Burroughs, one of Whitman's closest friends in Washington, in hopes that Whitman would be willing to write a poem celebrating the new harvest season: "It seems to me that this glorious harvest of 1867; sown & reaped by the returned soldiers, ought to be sung in verse. . . . Walt Whitman is the man to chaunt the song. Will you not ask him to do it for *The Galaxy*?" (*Correspondence I* 1336).

Compost," the dead are not really dead but living through the earth's renewal. But by the harvest year of 1867, the earth has had to absorb tens of thousands more bodies, some too young or strong to have been ready for death. Just as the farmers of necessity absorb the consequences of war into their new crops, Whitman must absorb the war and these bodies into his carol.

As for the living, Whitman here sees the returning procession of soldiers as he did in "How Solemn as One by One" and "Spirit Whose Work is Done": from the streetside. He watches them stream back into the city, "camping awhile in clusters of mighty camps" before returning home (489). But before he tells them, "Melt, melt away ye armies – disperse you blue-clad soldiers, / Resolve ye back again, give up for good your deadly arms," he writes them into a moment of silence, much like his quiet moonlit stroll to the Patent Office in his wartime prose:

> A pause – the armies wait,
>
> A million flush'd embattled conquerors wait,
>
> The world too waits, then soft as breaking night and sure as dawn,
>
> They melt, they disappear. (489)

That pause, the interstitial space between war and peace, between military and civilian, wounded and recovered, is Washington. As in the earlier poems, Whitman cannot yet mention Washington by name, but the city appears even in the apparent absence.

It is only appropriate that the poet who spent so many years in the theater of war should bring his poem-armies back to the city once more before allowing them to disappear and disperse across the continent, and that he should do so in multiple poems. The armies "stream northward" into the city, out of the conquered South, and make camp, possibly in preparation for the Grand Review. Then they return to their fields and take up the modern machinery of the new harvest. "Toil on, Heroes," Whitman writes, "toil well!" These industrious men are, he writes in the

preface to the 1871 *Leaves of Grass*, "A new race, a young and lusty generation sweep[ing] in with oceanic currents, obliterating the war, and all its scars, its mounded graves, and all its reminiscences of hatred, conflict, death. So let it be obliterated" (1028). From this obliteration, however, emerges the realization that Whitman is not quite sure how to deal with Washington after the war has ended. He pushes his soldiers west, to help rebuild the country, but he remains in the city that brought the war to him on a daily basis. In this poem, as in the majority of his Washington writing, Whitman is an observer, standing on the city street and watching the parade as it passes, watching the young soldiers move through Washington one final time before they scatter back North and West, to the American homes that will welcome them. It is a common trope in Whitman's writing – the poet is at home on the streets and in the crowd yet he remains separate, remains the watcher and not the watched. He remains once the men who brought him there have walked past him, leaving the city and the poet behind.

Whitman's Washington writing spans a significant moment in the city's history as it moved from war to Reconstruction, but like his poetic persona – on the street but still separate – there was little reason for Whitman to celebrate the city as he did New York. His wartime situation, similar as it was to that of so many others at the time, would indicate no pressing need for him to acquaint himself with Washington as a city beyond the reaches of the federal government and the Union army. In his prose from the war period and immediately after, including his letters to family and friends, he approached Washington in this very way: as a city of hospitals, as the seat of government, and a rather unpleasant place to live. Even in his earliest letters he expressed dissatisfaction with his surroundings. In a letter to his brother from February 13, 1863, Whitman talks about his disillusionment with the grandeur of the Capitol building while the city itself had been turned into a hospital:

> These days, the state our country is in, and especially filled as I am from top to toe, of late with scenes and thoughts of *the hospitals,* (America seems to me now, though only in her youth, but brought *already here* feeble, bandaged and bloody *in hospital*) – these days I say Jeff, all the poppy-show goddesses and all the pretty blue & gold in which the interior Capitol is got up, seem to me out of place beyond anything I could tell – and I get away from it as quick as I can when that kind of thought comes over me. (*Selected Letters* 49)

This letter, strongly reminiscent of one sent to Emerson the month before, is not unexpected from a man spending most of his time among sick and dying boys, patriots for this country Whitman loved above all. In the gaudiness of the Capitol building, he saw the direct antithesis to the sacrifices being made by ordinary citizens, the disconnect between the people and the leaders governing them.

He would say years later, according to David Reynolds, that the soldiers "saved him and saved America by displaying all the qualities he associated with ideal humanity" (*Walt Whitman* 127). In the showy artifice of the Capitol building and the demagoguery of the politicians within, Whitman could only see the opposite. The Capitol dome (Figure 11), still unfinished when Whitman arrived in the city and topped with what he called a "rude and mighty derrick," seemed to him more fitting than other extravagant displays of power he found elsewhere in the city, performing its duty to the union, much like the soldiers he revered. Ed Folsom, in his discussion of this passage, notes that the derrick is a "tool of enactment, lifting, piece by piece, the materials that would build a unifying dome . . . the sign of the 'modern,' a new technology 'obedient' to the makers of a forming democracy" ("That Towering" 90). For Whitman, newly arrived in the capital, the metaphorical potential of construction equipment seemed more in line

with his vision of the country's future, dependent more on the hard work of these strong American men than on the gilded excesses of politicians.

Figure 11: Construction of the Capitol dome, circa 1861.
Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

His early letters from Washington were all colored by this same dissatisfaction with the capital and the workings of the national government. In March 1863, in a letter to friends in New York, he wrote that his first impressions "were not favorable; but on the whole, the city, the

spaces, buildings, &c make no unfit emblem of our country, so far, so broadly planned, every thing in plenty, money & materials staggering with plenty, but the fruit of the plans, the knit, the combination yet wanting – Determined to express ourselves greatly in a capital but no fit capital here yet. . .” (*Selected Letters* 52). Sarah Luria argues that Washington was conceived as a living embodiment of the Constitution and would be “a malleable space for the projection of political visions” (xii). The street design, with one branch of government connected to another by way of expansive avenues, provided “a site where the abstract concept of the nation could be experienced as a physical reality” (xxiii). The city had been designed to serve one purpose, and at that, at least by the mid-nineteenth-century, it had failed. Its planned streets and stately buildings spoke to Whitman of its lost potential.

In a note from April 7, 1864, finally published in *November Boughs*, Whitman described a stroll down Pennsylvania Avenue during the day, amid the full press of the city – “the forms, the faces, all sorts crowded together, the worn and pale, the pleas’d, some on their way to the railroad depot going home, the cripples, the darkeys, the long trains of government wagons, or the sad strings of ambulances conveying wounded. . .” (LA 1203). These tableaux are often repeated throughout his prose. In this Washington “panorama,” as Whitman himself called these scenes, the action unfolds before him as if it is a play and he a member of the audience. Each player has his part and knows it well. Only Whitman, recording it in his notebook, is the outsider; he remains the source of perception and attempts a synthesis of the multiple factions of the Washington street.

For Whitman, the journeys between beds, between wards within the hospitals, become like the streets he traverses in the city itself. Luria notes that the hospitals built in Washington during the war were in the pavilion style, with long corridors that felt like streets and permitted

greater air circulation than in the old hospitals. She writes that for Whitman, "the hospitals provide an improved Washington. . . . There is now a system that can endlessly expand and bring order to the entire city" (64). While the pavilion style hospitals may have been a necessary improvement, there is a distinct difference between Whitman's hospital writing and his Washington, street-scene writing. It is as if the hospitals exist in a separate location from the streets he walks daily to and from work and his rounds. The hospital corridors couldn't be a continuation of the city streets because he was unable to identify caring for the soldiers as a distinctly Washington occupation.[33]

The majority of *Memoranda During the War* (and the part of *Specimen Days* that deals with the war, incorporating *Memoranda*) is taken up with Whitman's visits to the hospitals, the soldiers he met and tried to comfort, and the daily horrors of fresh wounded brought in from surrounding battlefields. When he speaks of Washington, it is of the sights on the street and the buildings he sees by moonlight. As Daneen Wardrop writes in her discussion of *Memoranda* as a nursing narrative in the tradition of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*, *Memoranda* takes the form of bricolage, of "notes composed on the spot and put together so as to retain the immediacy of the experience" (27). The informal titles and short sketches give "notice that the author wrote in a rush of experience, offering a pastiche of observations" (27). While some sketches appeared in the *New York Times* during the war, most were edited and assembled approximately a decade after the war had ended. These observations can be viewed as contemporary reminiscences of

[33] Indeed, hospital visits were part of Whitman's New York life as well as, according to the Whitman Archive, Whitman "visited the Broadway Hospital for several years beginning in the 1850s, developing close personal friendships with many of the sick and wounded and with the physicians" ("City Photographs"). He wrote a series of articles for the *New York Leader* in 1862 about that hospital.

wartime Washington, but the selective nature of collage necessitates an incomplete reading of the 1860s prose Whitman chose to include.

There are moments in *Memoranda* where Whitman does record the liveliness of the street, much as Adams does in her early letters. He remarks on the weather and the people surrounding him. In August 1863, he records the heat and its effect on the population:

> There has lately been much suffering here from heat. We have had it upon us now eleven days. I go around with an umbrella and a fan. I saw two cases of sunstroke yesterday, one in Pennsylvania avenue, and another in Seventh street. The City Railroad Company loses some horses every day. Yet Washington is having a livelier August, and is probably putting in a more energetic and satisfactory summer than ever before during its existence. There is probably more human electricity, more population to make it, more business, more light-heartedness, than ever before. (29-30)

He immediately follows that with a description of the armies, headed from Fredericksburg to Gettysburg, who 'struggled, fought, had out their mighty clinch," missing the capital as they move from camp to camp. Washington, in this image, suffers only from the temperature, and not the heat of battle. Unlike Adams, Whitman's concern, at least in *Memoranda*, are the soldiers and their movements, and how they end up in his hospitals. However, as mentioned previously, *Memoranda* was not compiled and published until long after the war had ended and Whitman was no longer a Washington resident. Adams' letters were published in the moment, with only a few days passing from when she wrote and mailed the letter to when it was published in the *Advertiser*. For Adams, her city reflections were of the moment, and gave her readers an image of Washington as she currently lived it. Whitman, on the other hand, shares his impressions of

Washington as a memory, dropped every so often as a break between stories of the young men he brings to life again in his reminiscences.

Washington as an actual city plays a small role in these wartime and immediately post-war sketches, most often serving as a general backdrop for troop movement and transport of the wounded and dead. In one such section, titled "Ambulance Processions," Whitman described thirty ambulances moving up Fourteenth Street on their way to the hospitals. He wrote, "This is the way the men come in now, seldom in small numbers, but almost always in these long, sad processions" (22). At times, the streets of Washington, like the corridors in pavilion hospitals, are little more than pathways between the front and its inevitable consequence. It often seems as if the city is to Whitman one hospital encompassing miles of patients. Whitman wrote in another sketch, "Within sight of the capitol, as I wrote, are some thirty or forty such [hospitals], at times holding from fifty to seventy thousand men. Looking from any eminence and studying the topography in my rambles, I use them as landmarks" (*Prose Works* 66). And he was never far from these hospitals. As Kim Roberts has noted in her mapping of Whitman's places of work and lodging throughout the city, he was constantly in the center of the action, sometimes living and working on the same block, with the hospitals nearby.

Understandably, then, there is little distance in his writing between his private life and his work in the wards. In fact, his personal life nearly disappears from his writing in favor of a catalog of young, injured men and their needs. Dried blood appears to stain some of his Washington notebooks, evidence that Whitman brought his writing to the hospitals even as he brought the hospitals into his writing. On the first page of *Memoranda* he addresses the blood stains on the "forty such little note-books" he has kept from the war years. He writes:

> I wish I could convey to the reader the associations that attach to these soil'd and

> creas'd little livrasions, each composed of a sheet or two of paper, folded small to carry in the pocket, and fasten'd with a pin. I leave them just as I threw them by during the War, blotch'd here and there with more than one blood-stain, hurriedly written, sometimes at the Clinique, not seldom amid the excitement of uncertainty, or defeat, or of action, or getting ready for it, or a march. (3)

As Katherine Kinney states, this dried blood indicates the "intimate proximity" of bodies – Whitman's and the soldiers' – and the "closeness of his labor and the writing" (176). While there is no denying the importance of Whitman's hospital work and how it shifted his poetic voice, the hospitals were in fact distinct from Washington. Even if the pavilion style mimicked the city streets, nothing identified hospital corridors as particularly Washingtonian. Once in the hospitals, Whitman walked through a microcosm of the nation, not its capital. Like Adams, who initially went searching for boys from Michigan in the wards, Whitman started his rounds by visiting injured soldiers from Brooklyn, but soon expanded his rounds to anyone who might need his assistance, including Confederate soldiers. Whitman visited indiscriminately, writing down each man's name and what state he hailed from. He recorded where they were from but still saw them essentially as national representatives, not just as soldiers from a specific state; he therefore distributed his time and his small gifts with no regard for state divisions.

There are other times in his prose when Whitman observed not only the chaos of war but also the buildings surrounding him and how the war impacted the city's landscape. One significant landmark he returned to multiple times in *Memoranda During the War* and then in *Specimen Days* was the Patent Office. In an entry for October 20, 1863, Whitman recounted what he called a "Silent Night Ramble" after leaving the hospital at 10 p.m. following a "self-imposed duty" of five hours. He walked through the streets of Washington, up Pennsylvania

Avenue and then over to the Patent Office (Figure 12), which "look'd rebukefully strong, majestic there in the delicate moonlight. The sky, the planets, the constellations all so bright, so calm, so expressively silent, so soothing, after those hospital scenes" (LA 762). He remained there until long past midnight. This contemplation of buildings by moonlight is an important theme in Whitman's Washington writing, which includes a remarkable stroll past the White House, and a similar silent reverie. But the Patent Office, with its rich symbolism and multiple functions, is where Whitman chose to return twice more in print.

Figure 12: United States Patent Office, circa 1846. Photographed by John Plumbe. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

That Whitman himself worked in this building between January and June 1865 – including the fateful months when the war ended and Lincoln was assassinated – makes his fascination even more poignant; he experienced firsthand the multiple capacities of Washington's official architecture. The building he encountered on his nighttime walk is the same building he described the previous February as a makeshift hospital, with wounded and dying soldiers lined up between glass-enclosed cases showing off the country's greatest inventions. The Patent Office is at once a "majestic" representation of the federal government and "strange, solemn, and with all its features of suffering and death, a sort of fascinating sight" (762, 741). Because the events of wartime Washington are tied so strongly to its buildings, and because Whitman saw the buildings as repositories for a suffering nation, there is little distance between architecture and wartime utility. Even in the quiet moonlight, the Patent Office is a symbol of war.[34]

This collapsing of function becomes even more evident in a section of *Memoranda* which was left out of *Specimen Days*, a section in which Whitman returns to the building to observe preparations for Lincoln's inaugural ball. Hours before the ball begins, he looks at "the gorgeous array'd dance and supper-rooms" and is forcefully reminded of the wartime scenes and the bloody aftermath of battle, when the now decorated spaces were filled with the dead and dying:

> I could not help thinking of these rooms, where the music will sound and the dancers' feet presently dread – fill'd with a crowded mass of the worst wounded

[34] Luria notes that the Patent Office was built on the site designated by L'Enfant to be the National Church. Whether or not Whitman was aware of this fact, the building's wartime past and its role as repository for the country's industrial innovation inspired his reverence. "Unifying technology," notes Luria, "*was* the church" (56). Whitman would address this in poems like "The Return of the Heroes."

> of the war, brought in from Second Bull Run, Antietam and Fredericksburgh. To-night, beautiful women, perfumes, the violin's sweetness, the polka and the waltz; but then, the amputation, the blue face, the groan, the glassy eye of the dying, the clotted rag, the odor of wounds and blood, and many a mother's son amid strangers, passing away untended there (for the crowd of the badly hurt was great, and much for the nurse to do, and much for the surgeon.) (205)

Within this one scene is every contradiction and ironic disconnection that Whitman observes in Washington and that permeates his prose from that period: the blatant excesses of the federal government and its willingness to persist in indulgence even as the war continued. The landscape of Washington, especially during the war and immediately after was too contained and contaminated, too permeated by suffering and conflict for Whitman to observe the city and see anything but the war and the elegant and off-putting contrasts to the war. This would not always be the case. Washington the early 1870s would be a far different place, and Whitman's prose would come to reflect the changes and growth the city would undergo. But his wartime prose, and the poetry that brought the war into *Leaves of Grass*, could never move beyond that definitive historical moment.

Although post-war Washington is almost entirely absent from Whitman's collected prose, including *Memoranda During the War, Specimen Days* and *November Boughs*, it does emerge in his letters as a dull place, where he went about his daily governmental work and his own literary work once the troops were gone. In a November 22, 1868, letter to his friend John Flood, a streetcar conductor in New York, Whitman remarked: "I don't know whether it would be very pleasant to you here, Jack, for this is a stupid place compared to New York . . . There's not much excitement in Washington – at least none that I take any interest in" (*Correspondence II* 70). For

the first time he was living a fairly stable existence. As Roger Asselineau points out, the post-war years were the first in which Whitman, though moving between government positions, "resigned himself to the monotonous routine of a clerk's life" (177). Of course, as Asselineau also notes, Whitman took extended leaves of absence during which he went back to New York to supervise the publication of his books, and he probably spent a good deal of his time in the office "engaged in literary, rather than governmental pursuits" (180), though the trove of recently discovered governmental documents written in Whitman's hand proves that he also did the work for which he was being paid.

The city itself in the mid- to late 1860s was still emerging from the hard years of war and was barely on the way to becoming the engaging capital that Whitman would celebrate in the early 1870s. Horace Greeley wrote in the late 1860s that "the rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting, the mud is deep and the morals are deplorable" (qtd. in Green 312). There was no sewer system in place yet and therefore no paved streets, since it seemed illogical to pave them before the system was installed. As can be glimpsed from Whitman's letter to John Flood, there was very little excitement in town and even less when Congress recessed.[35] His letters overall relate his everyday existence as not particularly exciting. To his brother in 1866 he wrote, "[A] clerk's life here is not very interesting" (*Correspondence I* 275). In a January 1867 letter to his mother, he wrote that going to the opera was "the first amusement I have been to in a

[35] Emily Edson Briggs wrote in her column for March 27, 1867:

> Washington is a live city. It has two states of existence, sleeping and waking. When Congress is in session it is wide awake; when Congress adjourns it goes to sleep, and then woe to the unfortunate letter-writer, for her occupation is gone – everything is gone – the great men, the fashionable women; the great dining-room in the principal hotels are all closed, small eating houses disappear; even stores of respectable size draw in their principal shop windows. . . . Only the clerks in office, the real honey bees in the great national hive, work, and work incessantly, and keep Washington from degenerating into an enchanted city. . ." (34)

year" (306). And through a brief mention of the city in his poetry, Whitman alerts his readers that he was still less than impressed by the grandeur of the federal buildings.

In the 1867 poem, "The City Dead House," Whitman, once again wandering the city streets, comes across the body of a young prostitute dumped in front of the dead-house. Her corpse is all he notices, not "stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet," but only "that wondrous house – that delicate fair house – that ruin!" (L 494). Her immortal body, at once soul and flesh, is a house more valued "than all the rows of dwellings ever built / Or white-domed capitol with majestic figure surmounted, or all the old high-spired cathedrals" (494). Even the recently completed Capitol building, topped by the Statue of Freedom and representative of a healing nation after the brutal war, is not as beautiful – cannot hold as much power – as the abandoned body of a prostitute. It is a stinging rebuke to the excesses of government Whitman wrote against so strongly during the war, and the Capitol dome, defining the Washington skyline, towers over a city still coming to terms with its past. Whitman, too, was unable to move past the disappointments of war. But by the early 1870s, Whitman's Washington was to emerge as a city he could learn to embrace, one he would welcome into his prose, into two of his Civil War poems, and onto the title pages of his new books.

"Forming a Distinctive Metropolitan American Character": Washington in the Early 1870s

In the essay "Democracy," first published in *The Galaxy* in December 1867, Whitman imagined that the future capital of the United States might move out west, perhaps to the Mississippi Valley, where the city could be replanned and built anew. He wrote, "It is possible, nay likely, that in less than fifty years, [the capital] will migrate a thousand or two miles, will be

refounded, and every thing belonging to it made on a different plan, far more superb" (975-6). Emerging from the scarred Washington of the 1860s, it is no surprise that the poet who urged the troops homeward to fertile western fields would envision a capital wholly untouched by the taint of civil war. But when Whitman finally connected this and other essays into what would become *Democratic Vistas* in 1871, he chose to have Washington, D.C., appear on the title page as the place of publication. As previously mentioned, this was only one of a number of early 1870s publications – including the new edition of *Leaves of Grass* and *Passage to India* – that were printed in New York but have Washington on their title pages. There had been significant changes in those few years both in his personal and professional lives, as well as in the city itself, that made Whitman locate his literary output in a city that he had previously appeared to dislike, or at least not care for in the way he did New York.

Though Whitman still visited New York each year, by the early 1870s his family no longer lived there. His brother George moved to Camden, New Jersey, in 1869, and Whitman's mother joined him there in 1872. Another brother and Whitman's favorite sister-in-law had moved to St. Louis and his elder brother died in a New York insane asylum in March 1870. Whitman's familial home was no longer in Brooklyn, as it had been for most of his life. Rather, he now had the opportunity to create a new, welcoming family in Washington, at least partially through his relationship with Peter Doyle. After meeting him on a streetcar in the winter of 1865, Whitman, according to Martin G. Murray, "relished the opportunity to be part of the young man's large family circle" (*Encyclopedia* 188). The early, Washington years of their thirty-year friendship allowed Whitman to create an extended familial system in his adopted city that – while it could never replace the deep love he had for his mother – made Washington more than just a temporary residence. His mother's move to Camden and her death soon after signified an

unofficial end to Whitman's New York years; he would never live there again, preferring instead to remain in Washington until his stroke forced him to Camden and, initially, to his mother's old room in George's house. Loving notes that Whitman "probably experienced his greatest society in Washington," surrounded by friends and supporters including John Burroughs, William Douglas O'Connor, and Peter Doyle. His growing literary reputation, supportive social circle, and adoptive family were instrumental in Whitman's increasing regard for the city; it could now be more than a place of hospitals and corrupt government – it could be a familial place as well.

From the moment Whitman stepped off the train in Washington in December 1862, he relied on assistance from his friends to find his way in the city. He had been pickpocketed in Philadelphia and arrived in Washington with no money and few resources. What he had, however, was the friendship of William Douglas O'Connor, whom he had met in Boston through their mutual publisher, Thayer and Eldridge. O'Connor helped Whitman locate his injured brother – still in Virginia after the battle at Fredericksburg – and got him the money and papers he would need to travel to the front (Asselineau 143). O'Connor was a writer and clerk at the Lighthouse Bureau, a job his wife Nelly had encouraged him to take after the failure of his novel, *Harrington: A Story of True Love* (1860).[36] Nelly had worked in the Lowell textile mills and on progressive newspapers like the abolitionist *Liberator* and the women's rights periodical *Una* (Bair 667). Both O'Connors were staunch abolitionists, committed to women's rights and prohibition, and far to the left of Whitman on nearly every social issue (Morris 74). Regardless

[36] According to Morris, O'Connor hated being confined to an office. He said to a friend, "I am like a caged tiger walking around endlessly, mad as I can be that I am wasting my life in this infamous office" (qtd. in Morris 74). Perhaps he would have better appreciated the position if he had treated it as Whitman did. In a letter from 1865 included in full by Traubel, Whitman wrote to his brother, Jeff: "I take things very easy – the rule is to come at 9 and go at 4 – but I don't come at 9, and only stay till 4 when I want, as at present, to finish a letter for the mail – I am treated with great courtesy, as evidence of which I have to inform you that since I began this letter I have been sent for the Cashier to receive my *pay* for the arduous and invaluable services I have already rendered to the government" (qtd. in Schmidgall *Intimate* 181).

of their political disagreements (which would ultimately prove the undoing of their friendship), Whitman found himself taken into the O'Connor's household as he decided to extend what was to have been a ten-day sojourn in Washington into a more permanent situation.[37] They helped him look for a room in one of the many boardinghouses around the city, and he ultimately took a room on the second floor of the same boardinghouse where the O'Connors lived. He joined them for meals and conversation that often included other writers-turned-government-clerks, like their old publisher Charles Eldridge, who had also come to town in search of government work, having lost his publishing house at the beginning of the war.[38]

Eldridge helped Whitman find his first clerkship, working for the paymaster, Major Hapgood. Eldridge was a deputy clerk in that office and Whitman became a part-time assistant, working a few hours a day "copying payrolls and earned enough to support himself without giving up his freedom of movement" (151). When Whitman recounted his years with Hapgood to Horace Traubel, he said: "It was at that little desk in Hapgood's office that I did most of the writing of that period. I wrote letters: some for the *New York Times*, some for *The Tribune*, some for a Brooklyn paper: these letters met with a certain show of acceptance: I made a fair living by it and was satisfied" (*Camden 1* 77). With his cheap living accommodations, short work hours, and meals provided by the O'Connors, Whitman was free to spend his time writing and visiting the hospitals.

The O'Connors also provided him with a social circle which Barbara Bair argues was a stand-in for the "companionship and stimulation Whitman had experienced at Pfaff's beer cellar

[37] Morris states that Whitman initially intended to remain in the capital for no more than ten days, in order to "visit some of the Brooklyn boys confined to the hospitals" (71). He ended up staying for ten years.

[38] As Whitman related to Horace Traubel in the last years of his life, Thayer and Eldridge were ruined by the war through the "loss of their Southern credits." Eldridge was a "good accountant, bookkeeper, clerk generally: so, with a little influence, he readily got a berth at Washington" (*Camden 1* 77).

in New York," during the "raucous and stimulating evening gatherings of intellectual friends" (664). At the same time, she states that Nelly O'Connor was "unconditionally nurturing and good company" like Whitman's mother, Louisa, but was also an "intellectual who knew and comprehended his work" (664). Whitman found in the O'Connors' rooms both the comforts of home and the intellectual stimulation of a salon. Even after Whitman had moved out of their building, his relationship with them remained close. During a discussion with Traubel in 1889, Whitman read him part of a letter Nelly O'Connor had sent him in 1868 and Traubel recounts:

> W. was much affected by this letter. He sort of excused himself. Wiped the tears out of his eyes. "It's not so much what's in the letter, Horace, as what it leads me back to, what it stirs up in me, what its tender indirections are. The O'Connor home was my home: they were beyond all others – William, Nelly – my understanders, my lovers; they more than any others. I was nearer to them than to any others – oh! much nearer. A man's family is the people who love him – the people who comprehend him. . . [B]y all the real tests the O'Connor family was my family. . ." (525-6)

Like Eldridge, O'Connor was also responsible for securing employment for Whitman in the Interior Department and then, after he was fired for being the author of the "immoral" *Leaves of Grass*, found a new position for him at the office of the attorney general (Bair 670). David Reynolds argues that the fame Whitman saw "later in life rested on the firing from the government by the Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan" (134). Beyond finding him a new position, O'Connor published the pamphlet, *The Good Gray Poet* which, Reynolds asserts, started the "Whitman Myth: the image of the poet as a neglected genius who was thoroughly patriotic, personally exemplary, and almost spotless in his writings. Versions of this sanitized

image would be pounded home time and again for the rest of Whitman's life, by the poet himself and by others" (134). Whitman's rising fame was bolstered by his friends in Washington like O'Connor who saw to it that not only would his writing reach new and larger audiences but also the persona, the wound dresser, the bard larger than life.

Another young writer who would help reorient Whitman's reputation and welcome him into his home was John Burroughs, whom Whitman met in 1864 on the streets of Washington. Burroughs was, according to James Perrin Warren, "[f]or the fifty years from 1870 through 1920 . . . the most famous and widely published nature writer in America" (1). But at that time he was still an aspiring author who looked up to Whitman for his success. Burroughs would eventually publish nearly thirty books, and Perrin argues that Whitman "exercised the longest-lasting and most profound influence on his career as a writer" (42). Whitman encouraged Burroughs to begin submitting articles to magazines (Whitman Archive), and while "Whitman encouraged Burroughs to develop a literature of nature . . . Burroughs in turn influenced Whitman by sharpening Whitman's eye for precise detail in observing nature" (Whitman Archive). According to an 1896 interview with Burroughs by Walter Blackburn Harte, Burroughs recalled that Whitman visited his home quite often, especially on Sunday because he was "very fond of Mrs. Burroughs' buckwheat cakes" (qtd. in Schmidgall *Conserving* 53). As with the O'Connors, the Burroughs felt a tremendous amount of affection for Whitman and made him a part of their family. Harte wrote about his Sunday morning visits to the Burroughs, that they "were spent in talk, until noon, and immemorial talks they were. It was an education, a profound spiritual experience, to listen to the poet, who seemed to hold all the sweetness and bitterness of human life in his large vision . . ." (54). Burroughs would publish a book, *Notes on Walt Whitman, as*

Poet and Person (1867), which was heavily revised and at least partially written by Whitman himself, who at times sacrifced the truth for a good story.[39]

Whitman's new social circle was not limited to literary friends, as his relationship with Peter Doyle was one of the most significant of the war years and after, and provided another substitute family in place of the dysfunctional one he had left in New York. Doyle was a former Confederate soldier and part of a large Irish family living in Southwest Washington. He was a horse car conductor for the Washington and Georgetown Railroad Company, and he met Whitman one evening in either 1865 or 1866 while on his route, as Whitman made his way home from Burroughs' house in a storm ("Pete the Great" 50). According to Doyle, "He was the only passenger, it was a lonely night, so I thought I would go in and talk with him . . . We were familiar at once – I put my hand on his knee – we understood. He did not get out at the end of the trip – in fact went all the way back with me" (qtd. in "Pete the Great" 50). Until Whitman left Washington, they were "constant companions" (54), and they would spend the evening together in the bar at the end of Doyle's streetcar line, the Union Hotel in Georgetown.[40] They would spend hours walking in the woods around the capital, the forts and barracks protecting them and giving them ample places to walk. Whitman recalled years later to Traubel that they would often "go on for some time without a word, then talk – Pete a rod ahead or I a rod ahead. Washington was then the grandest of all the cities for such strolls. . . The air, the stars, the moon, the water – what a fullness they imparted! what exhilaration! (*Camden* 511-512). Murray states

[39] In the article on Burroughs on the Whitman Archive, the author states that, in *Notes on Walt Whitman*, "we see Whitman shaping his public personality, even at the expense of accurate biography; for example, Whitman is alleged to have traveled to the Western United States, although in fact his first such trip took place decades later" (Whitman Archive).

[40] The Union Hotel was the same building where Alcott served as a nurse in December and January 1862-1863. Shortly after she returned home, the hotel-turned-hospital was once again restored to a hotel.

that Whitman's new-found literary social circle was a large part of his social contentedness in Washington; it was more likely that his "new-found confidence in love was, in large measure, a result of his satisfying friendship with Pete" (63). Unlike O'Connor or Burroughs, or even Eldridge, Doyle could do nothing for Whitman's reputation, could not help him secure a better clerkship or place articles in newspapers. But he could offer his devotion and open his large family to Whitman, adding to the sense of stability that Whitman found in Washington in the postwar years.

Beyond the growth in Whitman's postwar personal sphere, Washington was undertaking a major modernization project that would replace the inferior infrastructure of the war years. By 1871, and in the years that followed, Washington was quickly modernizing. Work throughout the city began at once: paving the streets, installing sewers, leveling hills, and erecting massive stone buildings that would hopefully allow the city to finally live up to its "magnificent distances" at last. Of course, in the rush to begin multiple projects simultaneously, the city soon consisted of what Green called "miles of incomplete sewers, half-graded streets and half-paved sidewalks" (349). Nevertheless, progress continued, and with it came the planting of trees and a booming real estate market. More than 1,200 new buildings went up in 1872 alone, and by 1873 Washington was an entirely different city. There was no more talk of moving the capital out west. That same year, Mary Clemmer Ames, a D.C. correspondent for the New York *Independent*, wrote: "The old provincial Southern city is no more. From its foundations has risen another city, neither Southern nor Northern, but national, cosmopolitan" (72). Whereas before the streets were covered in dust, resembling what she called "Saharas," now planned circles with fountains had been placed where streets and avenues intersected, with "belts of flowers and troops of children, and restful seats for the old or the weary" (73). The endless ruts

worn into the road by processions of ambulance wagons were smoothed and paved over. The troops of Union soldiers had been replaced by "troops" of children playing around the new fountains, watched over by their resting elders. The streets Whitman saw during the war as leading from one hospital to the next – and as the site of military processionals to and from the front – were now free from the dust and mud of the national conflict. Indeed, the streets became avenues of opportunity for a robust and growing country.

Along similar lines, in a speech given in Washington in 1875 and again in Baltimore in 1877, Frederick Douglass praised the improvements to Washington even as he criticized the continued racism and governmental corruption of the postwar years. He remarked that the most "charming features" of the new Washington were the fountains throughout the city that sent "their pure, bright, crystal spray high in the summer sunlight" (14). Washington's famous mud and contaminated water, typified by the now filled-in canal, were slowly being replaced by the "abundance and display of pure water" (14). Douglass repeated the word *pure*, emphasizing the success of city planners in making the city livable. The capital, he stated, had been lifted out of more than sixty years of mud and mire" (16). The image presented by Ames and Douglass is of a city at last providing leisure time activities and offering the opportunity to enjoy its wholesome pleasures.

February 1871 was a month of three significant achievements. First, Washington and Georgetown merged to create one territory, the District of Columbia. Second, the Corcoran Gallery opened its doors. And third, the district's main thoroughfare, Pennsylvania Avenue, was fully paved and open to the public. February 20 kicked off a three-day celebration of parades, races, and balls, which Whitman attended and wrote about. At night, according to Green, "calcium lamps, gas jets, and Chinese lanterns illuminated the thoroughfare for admiring throngs

and for carnival-costumed people en route to the masked balls. At the Corcoran Gallery . . . foreign diplomats and other distinguished guests danced in the picture-lined halls" (338). The *Evening Star*, one of the Washington daily newspapers, devoted significant coverage to the carnival both before and after the event. In the lead-up, the *Star* printed schedules and descriptions of the festivities. On Saturday, February 18, 1871, the front page invited readers to the "Grand Carnival and Masquerade Ball at the National Theatre" on Tuesday evening, February 21, or to the "Grand Carnival Ball at Masonic Temple" on the same evening. Ads for masquerade costumes followed a notice for "Niagara by Moonlight," a "great painting" which would be exhibited and "illuminated with over two hundred other fine Paintings" on Monday at Barlow's Gallery. Men's clothing stores advertised new frock coats and winter suits for the carnival, and R. Silverberg let it be known that "if you need FLAGS, CHINESE LANTERNS, SASHES, MASKS, GOLD OR SILVER TRIMMING PLUMES, or anything else necessary for DECORATION, ILLUMINATION, MASQUERADE for the Tournament or the GREAT CARNIVAL," to please visit the store at 312 7th Street, near Pennsylvania Avenue.

Monday's issue advertised that day's races – foot races, goat races, horse races, velocipede races – while Tuesday, February 21, praised the first events and promised even more spectacle to come: "Washington has cause to feel proud of the success which has so far attended her 'grand carnival and fete.' Any shortcomings yesterday, and there were some few, it being our first attempt at a celebration on such a scale, were more than atoned for last night, when the capital city presented a fairy-like scene, which has never been equaled on this continent. That noble thoroughfare, Pennsylvania avenue, was a blaze of light from the Treasury to the Capitol." The rockets, fireworks, lanterns, and colored lights illuminated the avenue, "which was covered with a surging mass of humanity, all in their Sunday best, all good humored, and all enjoying a

spectacle the grandeur and beauty of which impressed itself on the most *blasé* of sight-seers." For that one week, it seemed like the only news in the capital was about masques and sack races, people enjoying themselves and celebrating a new era for their city.

Whitman's brief retelling of the celebration in a letter to John Flood reads far differently from his somber recounting of an earlier celebration: Lincoln's inaugural ball at the Patent Office. Now, in 1871, rather than invoking the memories of war, he painted for his friend a picture of gaiety and "enchantment." The crowds, he wrote, were "endless" and wore "fancy dresses, or wore masks – & went around having fun," the women as much as the men. The Avenue is "very wide. I should think three times as wide as Broadway" (*Correspondence II* 118). In his previous letter to Flood, Whitman had mentioned how "stupid" Washington was in comparison to New York, but now the avenue that swept past the White House and other important governmental buildings trumped Broadway, a street of personal importance to the young Whitman. For the first time, even for something as insignificant as street width, Whitman had favorably compared Washington to New York.

At the same time, Whitman's letters took on a more genial tone, and slights against his adopted city grew rarer. Rather than the "monotonous" life he told friends he was living in the late 1860s (76, 83), he now seemed engaged in what Washington had to offer. In letters that contain none of the disillusionment pervading the earlier correspondence, Whitman described the city as active and inviting. He wrote to William Michael Rossetti on January 30, 1872, that "Washington is a broad, magnificent place in its natural features – avenues, spaces, vistas, environing hills, rivers &c. all so ample, plenteous –" (*Correspondence II* 159). The forts

surrounding the city had been dismantled and the area was now an open, natural wonderland ripe for exploration on his countryside walks with Peter Doyle and Nelly O'Connor. He continued by describing his life, which was "upon the whole, toned down, flowing calm enough, democratic, on a cheap scale, suitable, occupied sufficiently, enjoying a good deal – flecked, of course, with some clouds and shadows" (160).

Washington had been mostly good to him and he had created a mostly comfortable life for himself with close friends, his government position, and his increasing literary reputation. He was publishing steadily in periodicals and newspapers, releasing international editions of his poetry, while his books were being reviewed and discussed in multiple publications.[41] As Washington's reputation grew, Whitman's grew along with it. He was now a D.C. poet, and noting that by placing "Washington, D.C.," on the title pages of his books was a good indication that either he wanted readers to associate him with the capital city, or that he already expected it and wanted to avoid confusion regarding his place of residence. By 1871, he had lived in Washington for eight years and released two new, post-war editions of *Leaves of Grass*. New York was at this point as much a part of his past as the Bowery b'hoy of the 1855 edition; the new, more established Whitman wrote the future of a chastened, postwar American democracy in the nation's expanding capital.

And Whitman had no difficulty being his own best promoter. In "The Authors of Washington," one of two newspaper articles discovered by Martin G. Murray that Whitman wrote for the *Evening Star* in 1872, he ranked himself third in his comprehensive listing of Washington writers, following only his two close friends, William Douglas O'Connor and John Burroughs (Murray 159). These two articles – the other being "Washington as a Central Winter

[41] For a comprehensive listing, see Joann P. Krieg's *A Whitman Chronology*.

Residence" – are essential to understanding Whitman's views on Washington in the early 1870s, which are overwhelmingly favorable. That the articles were lost to Whitman scholarship until 2003 makes them a vital new source for postwar Whitman studies; they are an important part of Whitman's Washington journalism with their commentary on the city's growing reputation and the literary circles Whitman moved in while he lived there.[42]

In "The Authors of Washington," Whitman identified the city as an emerging "literary center" due to a variety of causes including the mild climate, the "libraries and scientific collections for reference," and "the opportunity for government employment or newspaper letter-writing not incongenial with literary pursuits" (158). Of approximately 70 writers discussed in the two-part article, a number were employed as government clerks (or married to clerks), much like Whitman, Burroughs, and O'Connor were, and he celebrated the benefits this population had brought to the city, remarking that they

> form an element of our population not to be overlooked in estimating the position which Washington is destined to take in literature and science. It would seem, with such a large writing element in our midst, that a first-class magazine ought to succeed here. . . . (159)

In his own entry, Whitman emphasized his growing reputation, though he remarked that it was his fate "to be neglected by publishers, insultingly slurred by critics and sundry official magnates in his own country" even as his fame continued to grow in Europe, no doubt a commentary on his firing from his clerkship at the Indian Affairs Bureau in the Department of the Interior when

[42] Before the Civil War, there were few writers in Washington other than journalists. When Thackeray visited in 1853, according to Green, he "enjoyed being lionized in the American capital during his lecture tour . . . but he was not impressed by any local literary lights at the parties given in his honor" (225). Of course, Thackeray wasn't the only writer to visit the capital, and there were others, like E.D.E.N. Southworth, who made the city their home. Until the war, however, Washington did not have a well-developed literary scene.

the Secretary of the Interior found a copy of *Leaves of Grass* in Whitman's desk and was shocked by its immoral contents (159).

The long and encompassing catalog of Washington authors was, as Murray notes, a "characteristic feature" of Whitman's poetry as he was "a compulsive enumerator" (170). Here, however, he turned his attention to the other men and women helping make Washington a center of learning and the arts. His list contains authors in various fields, including law, fiction, history, science, and religion, illustrating the diversity of Washington's new literary circles and how the Civil War had brought an entirely new class of people to the city, many of whom had made Washington their permanent home, much as Whitman clearly intended to do. His article not only offered a list of D.C. writers but also, according to Murray, emphasized "their role in Washington's literary society" and therefore covered the full range of intellectual life in the capital by the early 1870s.

This impressive collection of Washington writers is a strong companion piece to Whitman's other article, "Washington as a Central Winter Residence," which appeared in the same issue of the *Evening Star* as the first installment of "The Authors of Washington." According to Murray, both articles "attest to Whitman's affection for his adopted home and to his immersion in the life of the city" (151). Whitman began by lauding recent structural improvements which would help turn Washington into a "first class winter residence" (152). Washington was, according to him, "forming a distinctive metropolitan American character. Perceptible centers of Literature, Science, Art, and Society are already here and are rapidly crystallizing" (152). Whereas before the war Varina Davis and other political wives and hostesses could control the social character of what was essentially a government town, Whitman saw the influx of writers and intellectuals as a new way to define how the capital could be

represented throughout the world: as a center of intellect and creativity rather than a center of backroom political machinations.

Washington was now fulfilling its potential as an American metropolis and was more than the backwards town waiting anxiously for the Congressional session to enliven its season. It had much to offer its residents and guests flocking to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Library of Congress, the Botanical Gardens, and the Smithsonian, as well as to the debates in Congress and the Supreme Court (152). Washington's intellectual offerings were no longer inferior to those of other American cities but a draw to students and scholars alike, who were attracted in part by the significant changes to Washington's physical appearance. Whitman wrote that the social attractions would only increase

> as the city is adorned, improved, and made equal in comfort and elegance to its natural advantages of position and climate. For the first time in the history of Washington the city has streets sufficiently well paved to allow pleasure-driving every day through the winter, and the brilliant spectacle on Pennsylvania Avenue of an afternoon is a foretaste of what the future will show when the wealthy of the country shall congregate here, as it is beginning to do, for its winter Newport or Saratoga. (152).

There is no lingering evidence of the man who advocated shifting the capital out west, to a city of new potential and unspoiled streets. Rather, Washington now fulfilled Whitman's perception of a fit national representative place, one that would draw artists, scholars, and wealthy residents alike. The lasting effects of the Civil War are nowhere to be seen in these generous descriptions. Whitman had at last moved beyond the war and allowed the city to do the same.

The Civil War could be (and was) written about from anywhere. But after gaining the perspective offered by passing years and a now updated city, Whitman could more clearly tie his poems to the war in Washington as he experienced it. When Whitman identified Washington on the title pages of his books, he indicated that he was now part of a diverse and significant literary community in the nation's capital, one just as devoted to him as he was to it, one ever expanding and gaining recognition as the 1870s progressed. He became a Washington writer and *Leaves of Grass*, his most important and ever-evolving work, was by the 1871 edition, prominently identified as a Washington publication. And when in that same edition, Whitman added "(Washington City, 1865.)" as a tagline to his two poems in the "Drum-Taps" cluster that presented the march of troops through the city, he firmly associated the war with that particular time and specific place.

It is difficult to say whether Whitman would eventually have included a more explicit postwar Washington in his poetry had he lived there for an even longer period of time. After suffering a stroke on January 22, 1873, he left Washington for Camden and remained there until his death in 1892.[43] His letters from the time indicate that he did plan to return to Washington after his recovery, but whether by choice or circumstance, he never lived there again. Perhaps if he had grown old in Washington, *Leaves of Grass* by the end of his life would have been a vastly different collection, surrounded as he would have been by the capital city's diversity, the federal government and his life as a clerk, and the intellectual community he had just begun to explore in his articles for the *Evening Star*. What can be said for certain, however, is that when Washington had moved beyond the war years – when its streets were no longer muddy, rutted processionals

[43] Whitman's hospital work had taken a toll on his health and he periodically fell ill with "fits of dizziness, violent headaches, and insomnia." Asselineau reports that on January 23, 1873, while reading a novel in his office, he felt ill and went home. When he woke the next day his left side was paralyzed (182). It was Nelly O'Connor, along with Peter Doyle and John Burroughs, who cared for him until he left Washington for New Jersey (Bair 675).

between hospitals and its buildings no longer merely representative of government excesses during wartime – Whitman, too, could embrace the city's potential for growth, leisure, and professional fulfillment. Broad, planned avenues and pure-water fountains had replaced the diseased hospital corridors, and Whitman, in his prose, represented this changing city for both a private audience in his letters home and a public audience in *Memoranda During the War* and *Specimen Days*, as well as his Washington journalism. That he was never able to work the city into his poetry, beyond the two tagged Civil War poems and the title pages of his books, suggests that he may have considered himself a poet *in* Washington but not of it, as he was the youthful poet of the New York streets. The shifting city, however, permeates his prose. Whitman was at last able to envision Washington as a fit national capital, representative of a nation on the mend.

CODA

Of the three writers discussed in *Bringing Daylight with Them*, only one moved to Washington with the intention of writing about the city, with a clear place of publication, and the means of support already in place. Nevertheless, all three arrived in the capital as visitors and ended up making Washington their home, as so many did during the tumultuous years of war. They supported themselves as clerks and as dressmakers, as journalists and sometime-poets, but all three were part of a larger group of writers settling in the capital at that time and developing what would eventually become a large and well-respected literary community. It is unlikely that Elizabeth Keckley, Lois Bryan Adams, and Walt Whitman knew each other, though Adams and Whitman did both clerk in the same building – the Patent Office –in different departments. Regardless of whether their paths crossed, and regardless of their significantly different projects and life experiences, all three encountered a city in the midst of a transformation, both in its physical appearance and in its population, and wrote about their place within it.

Elizabeth Keckley did not move to Washington to write. Nevertheless, the connections she made and the network she built of powerful women enabled her to write a memoir that would expose both the prewar concerns of the Southern ruling class as well as the intimate life of a White House at war. Keckley's text is one largely concerned with access, and how a former-slave-turned-dressmaker relied on her own Southern history and knowledge of the mores of high society in order to build her business, eventually coming to work for – and be part of the intimate circle of – the first lady. *Behind the Scenes* was written at a moment when Keckley's connection to Mrs. Lincoln had left her destitute and stranded in New York, the consequences of the first lady's own fall from grace after her husband's assassination. It was a moment when writing the

stories of the many famous women she'd encountered, and exposing the secrets she'd learned during her years spent sewing and listening in their bedrooms and drawing rooms, was the only way she could earn enough to support herself. What Keckley captures in her narrative are the private moments of very public men and women, put on display in order to illustrate her own transcendence of traditional lines of race and class.

Slavery was abolished in Washington on April 16, 1862, nearly eight months before the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, and the federal capital became an example to the divided nation for how a city grown reliant on forced labor could remake itself as a true capital for a new kind of union. Washington became a representative test case to see how a Southern town could survive and even thrive post-slavery. For Keckley, having left St. Louis for the capital and established herself as a successful part of Washington's free black community, *Behind the Scenes* mirrored traditional slave narratives in structure, but ultimately gave voice to a woman who succeeded enough to move within powerful circles and used her success to help those who were newly free and still searching for a new life in the capital. As the founder of the Contraband Relief Association, Keckley harnessed the power of the elite black community to help the thousands of contraband living in abject poverty on the margins of Washington society, relying on her contacts to raise money for her efforts. Just as she depended on her patrons to spread word about her business to their friends, she also asked her powerful network for money to support those former slaves who came to Washington, just as she had, hoping to make a better life for themselves. Keckley's early career in the capital relied on the old network of Southern women because she understood who held the most influence, but her interaction with the contraband shows that she was both comfortable in old circles while still making use of Washington's new Northern order.

For Keckley, success was not measured merely in how many dresses she could sell but in the communities of influence she could access. As a woman who clothed Washington's elite women, she understood that the dressed body could expose power and privilege. The fashionably dressed maintained their positions precisely because their garments conveyed insider knowledge, the ability to both blend with the crowd and to assert individuality and influence. Keckley also understood, however, that true power, true clout, came through access to the unclothed, unadorned body, the body before it had been sheltered behind foundational garments. As Keckley presents her rise as sought-after dressmaker to the political wives of Washington, she asks her readers to understand that the moment when she finally arrives is the night in which Mary Todd Lincoln stumbles, the night of the disastrous party. Keckley stands watch over Willie Lincoln as he dies, and then she washes and prepares his body for burial. This is not a moment about fashion but a moment about access, about the most powerful family in the world opening its arms to enfold her. Keckley's memoir, in effect, is both the story of powerful Washington families and a testament to her own place within that system.

While Keckley could bring her readers into the parlors of powerful women, Lois Bryan Adams repeatedly proved herself to be uninterested in what happened in those private rooms or with men and women who cared more for their dress than for the soldiers dying in nearby hospitals. Adams' network was vastly different from Keckley's, because of lack of access and lack of interest. Instead, through her weekly letters, Adams showed her readers new, more egalitarian forms of Washington networks: those of government clerks, ailing soldiers, and the mass of humanity thronging the streets of the capital. Adams was glad to see the dissolution of old, Southern networks because it meant that Washington could be made over under the influence of Northern idealism, where the most important women were not the most fashionable

but rather the most invested in progressive labor and volunteerism. While Keckley privileged secret meetings and private conversations, Adams advocated for a new kind of public discourse, one invested in openness and commitment to bettering the nation, where even the domestic workings of a colonial kitchen were put on open display as an example of the hard work that could help rebuild the broken union.

Adams' columns show that she, too, was invested in how Washington was essentially a space where private, intimate moments were enacted on a public, often national stage. In her writing she illustrates that the work of the federal government was done not by nameless, faceless drones, but rather by individuals who took pride in their work, whether it was feeding sheets of paper into printing presses or mailing seeds to farmers across the country. And when they completed their work day, they spilled out of their offices, out of their stuffy boardinghouses and made the streets their homes, turning the muddy, dusty capital avenues into public living spaces. The women Adams reveals in her writing hold very little power and yet are identifiable to her readers, whether as mothers watching over their ailing sons in hospital or working to afford even a small room at a public boardinghouse. The Washington she constructs is less one of fancy balls and silk gowns and more one of a space inhabited by regular people.

As her time in Washington grows longer, she starts to reveal more than the good anecdote, or the funny street scene, and she criticizes these regular people for what she comes to see as their callousness – or perhaps just their obliviousness – to the suffering that surrounds them as they search for pleasure or even relief from the relentless heat. Adams uses the public forum of her column to question the role of the federal government and therefore the public's expectations for the everyday workers who may hold little power but can still influence the outcome of the war. Like the backward construction of Washington architecture, where the

private and public have no clear division, Adams argues that the federal government, relying on the individual to do its work and fight its battles, may ultimately ask too much.

Adams, on the other hand, is not above asking the private citizen for sacrifice, because she truly believes progress is only possible when individuals act in the public good, whether or not the government does the same. She applauds those who come to Washington looking to make it a more illustrative capital, who see the dying soldiers not as representatives of individual states but as a collective union of interlocking fortunes. Her disillusionment with the capital comes as she recognizes that the old order has not been fully dismantled, but still hides – and undermines – what she sees as the push toward a more representative, free union. Her illustration of daily life in the capital, with its bustling streets and constant flow between private action and public necessity shows that her networks are significantly larger than Keckley's, and more open to evolution.

While Adams is part of a large contingent of men and women who came to Washington as correspondents for newspapers across the country, she was also one of many government clerks who made their way to the city during the Civil War. Her columns rarely discuss other writers, even those serving as clerks, and she never fully identifies herself as a clerk even as she brings her readers into government offices, but there is no doubt that she is one of many journalists and poets who earn their living as federal clerks. Walt Whitman was also a poet, a journalist, and a clerk. He may not have come to Washington specifically to work and write, but once he landed there he made the city his home for nearly a decade and built up a network of clerks and writers around both personal and professional commitments. While Adams' networks were vast and largely made up of strangers, Whitman's network – like Keckley's – was professionally useful and afforded him insider status in a city where he knew few people. Like

Keckley, who relied on her network in order to gain business contacts, Whitman's Washington network helped him gain clerkships, find publication opportunities, and bolster his growing reputation as he started publishing more widely in national and international publications.

Whitman roamed the capital streets and wrote about the government buildings, the martial atmosphere, and the abundant nature that surrounded the city. He also captured Washington during a decade of substantial transformation, arriving with the new year of 1863 and writing about it throughout the war and during Reconstruction, when the half-built city that capital visitors mocked throughout the 1860s became a little less muddy, a little more representative of what he imagined the Union could become. Now, in the early 1870s, the carnival atmosphere that intrigued those arriving in Washington – but also promised unsavory elements and the opportunity for danger or topsy-turveyness – was restructured into a three-day fair in celebration of lighted streets, paved avenues, and the bringing together of Washington, Georgetown and the outlying areas into one District of Columbia, a fit capital at last.

Whitman's fortunes and celebrity rose with the building of the city, and it was the close network of friends and associates who helped guide his expanding reputation. Like his friends, and like Keckley and Adams, he was not native to Washington but he ultimately developed strong ties to the area, leaving only once his declining health forced him to go. While *Leaves of Grass* may never have specifically reflected the years he spent in the capital, the influence of the Civil War on the book cannot be overstated. In the ensuing decades, as his book expanded to accommodate and envelop Whitman's wartime poetry, it became clear that the capital changed him as a writer and changed how he conceived of his life-long poetic project, one that he carried with him to the hospitals, making edits as he sat by the bedsides of dying soldiers. Whitman's Washington would ultimately encompass the war as he experienced it.

Like Adams, Whitman expressed deep concern about the federal government and how it would change during the war and Reconstruction. As he imagined the new capital moving out west to the Mississippi Valley, a place unspoiled by the excesses and bloodshed of the current government, he too was critical even while collecting a federal paycheck, supporting his writing and the gifts he brought with him to the hospitals. Like Keckley, he relied on a larger network of benefactors to supply the funds for his charitable work, a network that extended far beyond the borders of Washington City.

By the early 1870s, both Lois Bryan Adams and Walt Whitman had left Washington for good. Adams had planned to remain in the capital but after a visit home to Michigan in 1870, she suddenly passed away. Whitman, after suffering a stroke and the death of his mother in 1873, left for Camden, New Jersey. Though he initially imagined that he would move back to Washington after his recovery, he never did return. Only Elizabeth Keckley stayed in Washington for another twenty years, moving back after publishing *Behind the Scenes* and continuing to work as a dressmaker until the early 1890s. She then began teaching sewing at Wilberforce University in Ohio, the college her son had attended before his death. She worked at Wilberforce until the late 1890s, when she returned to Washington and lived at the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children, one of the institutions founded by the Contraband Relief Association, which she had started. Keckley died in obscurity in 1907.

Very few of the writers who lived and worked in Washington during the Civil War are known or read today. And yet, when taken as a group, their literary and journalistic output reveals a new estimation of the national capital during wartime. While many books have been written that explore Washington and its place as the seat of government, or as the home base for the Army of the Potomac, what has been missing until now is a study of the city as a place of

workers, of families, of friends, and of literary ambitions. A place open to newcomers who sought their fortunes in government offices, or sought a new kind of freedom on its streets, a place to reinvent themselves even as the city was being remade and reimagined. There is much more work to be done on this largely obscure collection of writers and how they contributed to the literary legacy of the capital. When Lois Bryan Adams imagined that Northerners were "bringing daylight with them," as they broke through the old, stultifying atmosphere of Washington, she could also have been talking about a new breed of writer, one new to the city and yet building it fresh for their eager readers and the larger literary community they had created.

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