

SARAH G. HUMPHREYS: ANTEBELLUM BELLE TO
EQUAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST, 1830-1907

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Although the biography of Sarah Thompson Gibson Humphreys seems to illustrate the development of a daughter of the planter class from antebellum belle to equal rights activist, by her own account Sarah was never intended by circumstances of heredity or education to be a conventional belle. Descended from a distinguished Southern family, Sarah was the daughter of Tobias Gibson of Mississippi and Louisiana Breckinridge Hart of Kentucky. In an undated autobiographical fragment written late in her life, Sarah described her mother, daughter of Nathaniel Hart and Susan Preston of "Spring Hill," Woodford County, Kentucky, as a woman of "masculine intellect, great force of character and strength of will." Of Tobias Gibson, Sarah wrote:

My father Tobias Gibson came of a long line of clergymen who were the pioneers of Methodism in the South. My father was a man of accurate education, of unusual culture and of broad ideas, far in advance of his time. Although by inheritance a large slave owner he was at heart opposed to slavery. He was also that anomaly amongst Southern men a "Woman Suffragist." He believed and taught me to believe that "taxation without representation" was as unjust to women as to men and he educated me up to the idea that our advancing civilization would sooner or later demand not only the political enfranchisement of women but their equal share in the control of the government.

The family divided its time between its Louisiana sugar plantations and its home in Lexington, Kentucky. Sarah's earliest

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We are particularly indebted to two descendants of Sarah G. Humphreys for material in this paper. Mrs. Sallie B. Morrison of Alexandria, Virginia, provided encouragement and warm hospitality as we worked together to understand better her "ancestor's brocades." Mr. William A. LaBach of Lexington, Kentucky, was also most gracious and helpful to us. We are also indebted to the archival staffs of The Filson Club, the University of Kentucky, the University of North Carolina, Louisiana State University, Tulane University, and Louisiana State University in Shreveport.

memories were of the suffering of the Indians and the slaves. She described her mother's naming the town of Houma, Louisiana, in commemoration of the Indians who lived there and remembered "the stragglng Indians of this tribe who used to come to my mother to exchange their beaded wares for food and blankets. My child's heart was always touched with sympathy for them as I listened to my mother's stories of their wrongs, suffered at the hands of the whites." Sarah felt "tenderest sympathy for the Negroes; in fact at that early age I so hated slavery of every kind that I constantly surprised our Negroes by refusing the birds, squirrels, fawns and young alligators which they brought to me for pets. I could not bear to see anything caged."¹

Human freedom and equality are the central values of Sarah's autobiographical manuscript. While there is no reason to doubt that she was deeply empathetic with the condition of the Indians and slaves — such empathy was common among Southern women particularly — her autobiographical memorandum was written after her own lifelong struggle for independence. It therefore combines the double vision of the mature woman and the perceptive child, and Sarah's memories of her childhood reflect her later experiences in the equal rights movement. Tobias Gibson, for example, was among the one-hundred largest slaveholders in Louisiana, and he acquired most of his slaves by purchase.² Although he may have been opposed to slavery "at heart," as Sarah claimed, and while there is evidence that he was considered a friend of the Negro, there is no evidence that he had any vision of an alternative free labor system for the plantation economy. Sarah's autobiographical statement is nevertheless important because it provides her own interpretation of her development and documents the ways in which she grew beyond the culture which shaped her formative years.

1 Sarah G. Humphreys, autobiographical memorandum, undated, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

2 Joseph Karl Menn, *The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana, 1860* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1964), 415.

Sarah's descriptions of her early years implied that her tastes and preferences were unconventional for her time:

At an early age I developed a decided taste for music, literature, and the outdoor sports that were in those days considered the peculiar pleasures of boys. I detested dolls, dress-making and "playing lady" and the domestic tastes were not cultivated in me by my parents. Until I was fourteen my constant companions were my six brothers. We studied, talked, walked, rode and read together.³

This was actually a common pattern of childhood development for Southern girls, as Catherine Clinton, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, and other scholars have demonstrated.⁴ Sarah's education was also typical of the opportunities provided wealthy and privileged girls. Like other parents of their class, Tobias and Louisiana supervised every detail of their children's education; private schools in Lexington were supplemented by personal tutors in music, dancing, and French. If tutors were not available, the Gibsons themselves gave English lessons.⁵ When she was fourteen, Sarah was sent with her cousin Susan Shelby to Miss Margaret Mercer's school in Virginia. In his affectionate letters, her father urged her to acquire "solid and useful information," demanded high achievement, worried about her health, and encouraged her to eschew mediocrity in all things.⁶

In 1845 Sarah was enrolled in the Philadelphia school of Mr. Charles Picot, a former Napoleonic soldier, who had come to America seeking to find, in Sarah's words, "the political and religious liberty, the equal rights and protection only guaranteed by a constitutional form of government. But he considered this an empty boast as long as there were Negro slaves in the South and white women slaves all over the country." Sarah was in-

3 Humphreys, autobiographical memorandum.

4 Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 54; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 231-34.

5 Tobias Gibson to Virginia Shelby, 16 July 1842, Grigsby Collection, Manuscript Department, The Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky.

6 Tobias Gibson to Sarah Gibson, 2 March 1845, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

spired by this "grand old man," as she called him, and noted that "it is not to be wondered at that the goal of my ambition was not in the ball room or kitchen and that my hatred of every kind of slavery, ecclesiastical [sic], political and social should have been intensified."⁷ She heard the big guns booming in New Orleans during the campaign celebration for General Zachary Taylor in 1848, and she looked forward to a trip to Lafourche Parish to see him if he did not campaign on Bayou Black.⁸ Sarah's school days, enlivened by summer trips to Saratoga Springs and other spas, were interrupted in 1848 when she returned to her family homes in Louisiana and Kentucky, caring for her infant sister Louisiana and her mother, whose health was broken after the birth of her tenth child and the onset of consumption.⁹

Tobias Gibson, like the North Carolina planters described by Jane Turner Censer, believed in hard work and devotion to duty and inculcated that ethos in his children.¹⁰ Sarah's responsibilities were thus heavy although alleviated to some extent by the presence of Mrs. Gibson's sisters and other Lexington kin. Sarah keenly felt the mental and emotional stress, describing, for example, her fears as she lay awake at night listening to her mother's racking cough.¹¹ Her father, often necessarily separated from his wife, exhorted Sarah to do her duty to her mother,

7 Humphreys, autobiographical memorandum.

8 Sarah Gibson to My Dear Brother [Randall Lee Gibson], 25 November 1848, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

9 Sarah Gibson to Mrs. Guion, November 1848, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

10 Tobias Gibson to Sarah Gibson, 2 November 1845, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 53-54. Censer notes that "parents' exhortations to hard work, frugality, self-control, and success do not at all resemble the ideals of leisure and conspicuous consumption that [Eugene D.] Genovese believes southern planters firmly espoused." Tobias Gibson's letters to his children bear out Censer's thesis.

11 Sarah Gibson to My Dear Brother [Randall Lee Gibson], January 1850, Grigsby Collection, Filson Club.

to be useful as well as ornamental.¹² Sarah and her Uncle Nathaniel Hart accompanied Mrs. Gibson to Havana, Cuba, where she died on 20 February 1851. Sarah enjoyed a brief respite at the Louisiana plantation practicing "horsemanship and all the active graces" before returning to Mr. Picot's in the fall of 1851.¹³ This time, however, she was restive within the confines of the school.¹⁴ A reunion with her brothers in Philadelphia during their Christmas holidays, meant to cheer her, was marred by Randall's sickness, but Sarah nursed him through his chills and fever.¹⁵ Indeed, all six of Sarah's younger brothers later praised her care and compassion for them after their mother's death.¹⁶ Worried about her father's solitude and ill health, Sarah was reunited with him in May 1852 when she traveled to their "Live Oak" plantation with her cousins, Joseph Humphreys and his sister, Mary.¹⁷

Joseph Humphreys's courtship of Sarah began on this trip, although they had met four years earlier at a party at the Gibson home in Lexington.¹⁸ Born in 1826 in Woodford County, Joseph graduated from Centre College in 1846, spent one year at Yale, and finished his medical studies in Europe.¹⁹ Acting with

12 Tobias Gibson to Sarah Gibson, 5 October 1850, Gibson Papers, University of Kentucky Library, Lexington, Kentucky.

13 Tobias Gibson to Randall Lee Gibson, 6 May 1851, Weeks Collection, Louisiana State University Library, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

14 Sarah Gibson to My Dear Aunt [Virginia Breckinridge], 22 October 1851, Grigsby Collection, Filson Club.

15 Sarah and Randall Lee Gibson to Tobias Gibson, 31 December 1851, Gibson Papers, Tulane University Library, New Orleans, Louisiana.

16 For example, McKinley Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 17 December 1855, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has noted that "the intensity of the brother-sister relation in the Old South was born of deep antinomies in patriarchal family life, as an island of comfort in a sea of misapprehension and dread of dependency upon mother's love and father's good favor, both often withheld." Wyatt-Brown's analysis, however, does not consider that the death of either parent, and especially the mother as in the Gibsons' case, would necessarily make the oldest daughter a kind of surrogate mother. See *Southern Honor*, 252.

17 Sarah Gibson to My Dear Aunt [Virginia Breckinridge], 17 May [1852], Grigsby Collection, Filson Club.

18 Joseph A. Humphreys to Sarah Gibson, 13 November 1852, private collection, Lexington, Kentucky.

19 John Frederick Dorman, *The Prestons of Smithfield and Greenfield*

the strictest propriety, Joseph did not reveal his feelings for Sarah on the trip south because she was under his protection, but he soon declared himself after they arrived in Louisiana, and they reached an understanding that summer.²⁰ Sarah described her feelings about her impending marriage to her brother Claude:

So you think it very strange that I am really going to be married! I think so too. The truth is I don't believe it, but I *recon* it *must* be so since every body says so—I sometimes sit down and think about it until it seems so queer and I get so frightened when I remember I am under a *promise*, that I feel like jumping into the Bayou or doing some such desperate thing—Tis a great risk to run for a man to give his happiness into another's keeping but how much greater the risk as a woman.²¹

Whatever the unusual, unspecified "goal of [her] ambition" mentioned in the autobiographical memorandum which breaks off before her marriage, she followed the conventional expectations of her culture in her marriage to Joseph Humphreys on 21 June 1853 in her father's Lexington home.

During the ten years of their marriage, Sarah gave birth to five children, three of whom, Lucy, Sarah ("Sallie"), and Joseph ("Joe"), survived to adulthood. Their household also often included her young sister Loulie. Joseph improved "Sumner's Forest," their estate in Woodford County, with orchards, vineyards, and livestock. He brought the first Morgan horses to Kentucky from Vermont, introduced the first portable steam engine to that part of Kentucky, and made extensive enlargements to the house.²² Tobias Gibson, also prospering during the 1850s, enlarged his Louisiana holdings, educated his sons at Andover, at

in Virginia: Descendants of John and Elizabeth Preston through Five Generations (Filson Club Publications, Second Series, Number Three; Louisville: The Filson Club, 1982), 162.

²⁰ Joseph A. Humphreys to Sarah Gibson, 13, 28 February 1853, private collection, Lexington, Kentucky.

²¹ Sarah Gibson to Claude Gibson, 26 April 1853, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

²² Charles Kerr, ed., *History of Kentucky* (5 vols.: Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1922), vol. 5, by William Elsey Connelley and E. M. Coulter, 463.

Yale, Harvard, Transylvania University, the University of North Carolina, and other schools and sent five of the boys to Europe for extended tours and study in Paris and at the University of Heidelberg. He provided Joseph and Sarah money, additional servants, and advice about investments.²³ A glimpse of the Humphreys' lifestyle at "Sumner's Forest" is revealed in the printed menu for the celebration of Joseph's thirtieth birthday on 29 July 1856, when Sarah planned a lavish ten-course feast for some thirty guests, served on the Bohemian crystal collected by Joseph on his European tour by waiters brought from Louisville.²⁴ "Sumner's Forest" and "Waverly" (the home of Joseph's parents) were often crowded with house guests, both friends and kin, and Sarah enjoyed the few brief interludes of solitude that she could find.²⁵

By 1857, however, perhaps as a result of the national economic panic and the disastrous sugar crop of 1856, Tobias began sounding a note of caution about investments in Texas land, Chicago real estate, and other speculations.²⁶ Her father's questions about finances increased as did his expressions of concern about Joseph's health, for which Sarah and Joseph traveled extensively. Despite her father's plea that they not go west looking for a cure but visit instead the Kentucky springs close to home, the Humphreys made a venturesome expedition in 1860 to the Dakota territory "in search of health, diversion, and adventure."²⁷ As they passed through Chicago, the Humphreys party heard Ste-

23 Tobias Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 16 March 1854, 30 November 1854, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

24 "Dining Was A Hearty Art 'Befo' De Wah,'" *Lexington Leader*, 6 August 1936, Gibson Papers, University of Kentucky.

25 Sarah G. Humphreys to Tobias Gibson, 7 May 1854, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

26 Tobias Gibson to Joseph A. Humphreys, 25 February 1857, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia; J. Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953), 173.

27 Tobias Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 9 August 1860, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia; Sarah G. Humphreys, "Impressions of Dakota in 1860," *Field and Stream* (January, 1906): 925.

phen A. Douglas speak to a crowd in front of their hotel. Although they sensed the imminence of a grave political crisis, they continued their journey through Milwaukee, St. Paul, and other villages towards their destination at the Winslow House in St. Anthony, now a part of Minneapolis, where some two hundred guests were lodged, most in search of relief from lung diseases. In an article for *Field and Stream* published the year before her death, Sarah described the buffalo hunt which their party of two men and four women (including the six-year-old Lucy) took into the Chippewa country of the Dakotas. Since women and children were customarily strictly excluded from such dangerous excursions, Sarah, Mary Humphreys, Henrietta Johnston (daughter of General Albert Sidney Johnston), and little Lucy became the first white sportswomen to participate in such an adventure, which was considered a sensational undertaking and of which General Johnston heartily disapproved.²⁸

Sarah's idealistic, even naive, political attitude was reflected in a letter which she wrote to Abraham Lincoln in January 1861, requesting that he resign the presidency for the good of the country. When she and her sister-in-law Mary Duncan Gibson took the letter to Lexington to garner the signatures of as many women as possible, they were discouraged by the "lukewarm" response and abandoned the attempt.²⁹ She and Joseph assisted her brother Toby, who had come home from Europe through Canada, in his efforts to get through to the South in the winter of 1862. She sent ten towels, ham, two jars of pickles, three bottles of catsup, and two containers of maple molasses by Toby to the Southern prisoners in Versailles.³⁰ Since Joseph's health did not permit his service in the Civil War, he and Sarah continued their health-seeking travels during the first years of the conflict. In a letter written while on a fishing expedition on

28 Humphreys, "Impressions of Dakota in 1860," 926, 931-32.

29 Sarah G. Humphreys, journal, 12 January 1861, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

30 *Ibid.*, 21 March 1862.

the St. Lawrence River in 1862, she noted their isolation from news of the war and inquired about reports of the death of Alex Todd (a Humphreys kinsman and brother of Mary Todd Lincoln) in the battle at Baton Rouge.³¹ The frequent changes of climate and consultations with New York City doctors did not improve Joseph's health, however, and he died in that city on 15 February 1863. The death of Sarah's brother Claude, also from lung disease, a month later only added to her sorrow. Sarah returned to New York to complete some business that summer, where she witnessed the draft riots of July and concluded that the Negroes were the greatest sufferers of the violence.³²

Widowed at thirty-three, Sarah was left with three children, aged nine, five, and four, with a large estate to manage in the midst of a civil war in which four of her surviving five brothers were actively engaged. Her younger sister had been sent to France in late 1863 for the duration of the war while her father struggled to keep his plantation afloat in occupied Louisiana. She joined him there for a few months in 1864, for he was convinced that leaving his land meant losing it. Sarah observed at first hand her father's attempt to work with the Union commanders in establishing a labor system utilizing the former slaves whose legal status was still so ambiguous in Louisiana. The Federal provost marshal provided the Gibsons with a guard, but in March the Negroes rebelled and sixteen of them left the Gibson plantations for Tigerville and Houma.³³ Soon after she returned to Kentucky, Sarah's father-in-law died, and she was left with few sources of advice and support.

Her father, however, wrote copiously and often. In that same year, for example, Tobias advised as follows: "As you have now to take care of yourself so [far] as Sumner's Forest is concerned

31 Sarah G. Humphreys to My Dear Mother [Mrs. David Humphreys], 28 August 1862, Gibson Papers, University of Kentucky.

32 Sarah G. Humphreys, journal, 15 July 1863, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

33 *Ibid.*, January through May, 1864; Tobias Gibson to My Dear Sir, 17 January 1864, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

you must take care of your means — little or much — make no accounts — and do not spend uselessly — Know what your manager consumes for all is money — Have your garden & grapery cared for. . . . You must not forget to be informed about your Chicago interests. . . .”³⁴ A male cousin wrote from New York in the same year: “I doubt not that in a little while you will learn to manage Sumner’s Forest with little difficulty but that you will always be imposed upon you must expect — the rule of the world is to cheat a woman & you will soon find that her weakness is not protection against this — ”³⁵ Her father, however, encouraged her:

Women have wonderful resources when tried and . . . I console myself very often when I consider the inheritance to you of a goodly share of endurance & energy on both sides of your house. You must learn to do for yourself — mount your horse, gallop over your place & see what is doing — Have locks & keys — Have a white man near you to attend to stables & stock. In short you must watch & see for yourself. This will improve your heath & save you many a penny —³⁶

Again and again, Tobias urged prudent management: “You must learn one thing if possible, to become *stingy*! To keep what little you have safe and out of the way of giving to others — I know this won’t go very kind with you but when you look at the little ones now dependent on you exclusively you must learn to hold a tight rein over your natural impulses — ”³⁷ He warned her of the drastically changed times: “You must not indulge your feelings at the expense of prudence & the situation *before us all*.”³⁸ In other words, Sarah had to learn to repudiate the open, trusting, and generous lifestyle of her antebellum years. It was a wrenching lesson, but it was during these hard years that her mature understanding of human freedom and equality emerged.

34 Tobias Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 9 October 1864, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

35 Your Affectionate Cousin [?] to Sarah G. Humphreys, 8 November 1864, private collection, Lexington, Kentucky.

36 Tobias Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 26 February 1865, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

37 Ibid.

38 Tobias Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 24 March 1865, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

For the next thirty years, Sarah knew the galling necessity of pinching every penny, striving to hold on to "Sumner's Forest," scheming to keep some share of the Louisiana plantation, and quarreling with brothers who tried to help but failed to appreciate fully the reality of her situation. General Randall Lee Gibson, for example, could not understand Sarah's determination to keep her land:

Owning a handsome blue grass farm—a rich inheritance—turns out to be like owning so much of the blue sky. Why in the name of common sense, do they [Sarah and their brother Hart] hold on to these expensive luxuries—so fruitful of cares & troubles—so barren of good fruits—when they could sell them & if they got only a very *moderate price*, they might live in peace & comfort? Are they wedded to idols?³⁹

In a sense, Sarah and her brothers (Randall included, despite this display of indignation at the folly of others), were indeed wedded to an idol, the same idol of land ownership that had possessed their father. In another sense, however, the land was Sarah's sole hope for the future of her children, the only tangible security in a world turned upside down. Unlike her brothers who were variously lawyers, politicians, and editors, Sarah had no profession; her education had fitted her neither for employment nor for the desperate economic conditions of the postbellum South. Although the Louisiana estate had been divided among his six surviving children in 1868 in order to save it from creditors, Tobias retained active management, and Sarah lived with her father at least a part of every year. His death in 1872 was yet another isolating blow.

Sarah struggled to make the land in Kentucky and Louisiana yield a decent income. She leased the property, borrowed against it, sold off parts of it, experimented with livestock and tobacco crops, cut timber, speculated in oranges and potatoes, and carried on a running battle with her brothers about the management of her affairs. Catherine Clinton has noted that "although brothers

³⁹ Randall Lee Gibson to Louly [Louisiana Gibson], 13 February 1867, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

allegedly took up the cudgels for their sisters' sake, much evidence demonstrates that this overprotectiveness was part of a cultural ritual. Brothers could meddle in a sister's affairs with or without her expressed desire for such protection."⁴⁰ By 1878, however, Sarah had bitterly rejected further assistance from her brothers, and Randall, now a United States congressman from Louisiana, professed deep grief at the rift in their relationship. He begged her to let him help her salvage her property and advised her to leave Louisiana:

Why should you insist on abstracting yourself & your children from the world? How are you to be compensated if they grow up at the mercy of fortune and accustomed to Bayou Black associates if any or none at all. Before the war it *was different* — Father was rich & he had *an establishment* in Lexington — You are poor & things & times have changed... don't imprison your children on Live Oak.⁴¹

Randall's repeated attempts to help her hardly seem the empty cultural ritual described by Clinton, but Sarah distrusted his motives and believed he wanted to claim the Louisiana land for himself alone.

Remembering the ambitious dreams that she and Joseph had shared for their children's education, her inability to provide excellent educational opportunities for them was Sarah's biggest disappointment.⁴² She tutored Lucy and Sallie in French and provided teachers for her son when able. She urged, even nagged, the twenty-year-old Joe to improve himself:

You must not get hurt at what I write about education. I am only anxious and grieved that you have not had better advantages and I write to stimulate you to avail yourself of every opportunity to improve yourself. Read every day and every night, if only *one page*. I write carefully that you may realize the importance of education. If you cannot go to school, then it is important to snatch every opportunity and spare moment to study & read.⁴³

40 Clinton, 57.

41 Randall Lee Gibson to Sarah G. Humphreys, 20 August 1878, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

42 Sarah G. Humphreys to Susan Grigsby, 30 May 1870, Grigsby Collection, Filson Club.

43 Sarah G. Humphreys to Joe Humphreys, 6 October 1879, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

Education meant not only a better quality of life, it also meant economic independence, and Sarah dreaded the possibility of dependence upon her late husband's family, her brothers, or her children.⁴⁴

Although she believed that women's ambition could only be gratified through others, Sarah nevertheless doggedly pursued ambitious goals for herself as well as for her children.⁴⁵ She quietly began writing for publication in the 1880s, surprising her children with her publication in such journals as the *Waverly* magazine of Philadelphia. Sarah cut her journalistic teeth as an unpaid contributor to the pages of *Waverly*, which was a favorite outlet for amateur writers from 1850 to 1908.⁴⁶ Other aspects of her life also improved, although she was still desperately in need of a regular, stable income for her family. When Randall and Sarah finally settled their differences over the Louisiana property in 1883, she obtained "Magnolia" plantation and \$2,100 in exchange for her one-half interest in "Live Oak."⁴⁷ Her relationship with Randall, now a United States senator from Louisiana, improved slowly throughout the 1880s, and she and her daughters visited in his Washington home and used the power of his patronage.

Sarah increasingly saw her own economic plight within the larger context of woman's subjection, and the development of her social consciousness is charted in her letters. For example, after she assisted her cousins in securing Randall's help in obtaining government positions in the Post Office and the Interior Department, she described their situation in militantly feminist terms:

44 Sarah G. Humphreys to Joe Humphreys, 27 June 1879, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

45 Sarah G. Humphreys to Joe Humphreys, 25 December 1881, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

46 Sallie Humphreys to Joe Humphreys, 15 January 1882, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines: 1885-1905* (2 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1947), 2: 41-42.

47 Sarah G. Humphreys to Joe Humphreys, 19 January 1883, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

I talked and talked down his foolish ideas of women being infants in reality as well as in law, so that he was pretty nearly persuaded, and on my return found such a magnificent letter to Lucy from Virginia that I enclosed it to Lee [Randall] and so opened his eyes, that he was dumbfounded with amazement and admiration and respect and stirred his stumps and got places for Susan and Virginia right away. Until he read Virginia's letter breathing the revolutionary spirit of a hero and the noble fidelity and determination of a martyr, with the purity of a saint, he couldn't understand how a woman, a "female thing," a "chattel" in the common law could feel the same human necessities, to eat, to sleep, to be clothed and sheltered and get ahead in the world, that he did. He couldn't realize that a woman felt human aspirations and were open to human convictions and that they didn't all propose to give their lives up to replenishing the earth just to please men — Virginia's letter was a stunner!⁴⁸

Recalling that she was puzzled as a young girl when she once heard her mother say that she prayed to God that "she might have sons, but no daughters," Sarah, in her mid fifties, told her cousin that she understood that prayer. Her mother could not bear to have daughters who would suffer as she had.⁴⁹

The tensions between the utilitarian demands of her womanhood and society's ornamental expectations of a lady were sharply defined for Sarah as she entered mid-life. Similar to the romantic and sexual "woman-lady" tensions of Southern girls recently described by Steven M. Stowe, the mature Sarah experienced the same conflict but in economic terms.⁵⁰ In a letter written on her fifty-fifth birthday, she described an interview with Randall in which she asked his help in borrowing money. He refused to help her borrow, although he offered to give her money, an offer which she in turn refused. The senator lectured her for two hours, reminding her of her errors and shortcomings:

Said the mistake of my life had been that I had always been trying to do something, when I could never have done anything. I should have sat down and been simply a lady, which is the *most* a woman can ever do. My heart was in my mouth when I left the hotel, but I laughed and talked all the same — we can't give up if we are *ladies*.⁵¹

48 Sarah G. Humphreys to Joe Humphreys, 10 June 1883, Gibson-Humphreys Papers, SHC, UNC.

49 Sarah G. Humphreys to Susan Grigsby, 18 February 1884, Grigsby Collection, Filson Club.

50 Steven M. Stowe, "Growing Up Female in the Planter Class," *Helicon Nine: The Journal of Women's Arts & Letters* 17/18 (1987): 204-205.

51 Sarah G. Humphreys to Sallie Humphreys, 17 May 1885, private col-

Randall wanted Sarah to behave as a dependent lady; Sarah faced the grim realities of an independent woman's struggle. Her father had advised that she be both ornamental and useful, but that advice was in conflict with the new circumstances of her social and economic milieu. "Whilst she is trying to *play lady*," Sara wrote, "her *natural protector* is denying and deserting her like Peter, and betraying her with a kiss like Judas did his Saviour."⁵²

Sarah believed that "this country owes woman a *chance* for life and if she exacts it she will have it; but she must expect to fight for it."⁵³ And fight for it she did. She became active in the Kentucky Equal Rights Association, founded in 1838, serving as superintendent of the press and as co-chairman of a special committee to raise the age of consent for girls from twelve to eighteen years of age.⁵⁴ Sarah wrote numerous articles on this issue for newspapers in Louisville, Lexington, and Versailles; circulated petitions to be presented to the legislature; and was scheduled to testify on behalf of the bill before the legislature in Frankfort in January 1894.⁵⁵ Although she arrived too late to testify, she found that the chairman of the legislative committee "tried to make the ladies believe that the age of consent referred to marriage and not to prostitution. I opposed him and wrote an article in the [Louisville] *Courier-Journal* refuting the charge that the ladies did not understand what they were doing."⁵⁶ In her article, she noted that the gentlemen of the legislative committee made a "very ingenious, earnest, determined, and handsome show of this novel interpretation of the 'age of consent.'"

lection, Alexandria, Virginia.

52 Sarah G. Humphreys to Susan Grigsby, 26 May 1883, Grigsby Collection, Filson Club.

53 Ibid.

54 Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage* (6 vols.; Rochester, New York, 1902), *Kentucky*, by Laura Clay, 4: 668-73.

55 Lucy Humphreys Johnstone, scrapbook, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

56 Sarah G. Humphreys, journal, private collection, Alexandria, Virginia.

She pointed out, however, that the ladies' petition to the legislature made no reference to rape or marriage but rather referred to "the crime of prostitution at an age when girls are mentally, morally and physically immature, yet physically capable of crime." She argued that in this crucial transition stage of a girl's life, she needed the law to protect her.⁵⁷ Despite her best efforts, the Kentucky legislature did not change the age of consent.

Sarah also wrote many articles on behalf of woman suffrage. She disputed claims of Biblical and Christian sanctions against equal rights and maintained that "the civil rights of a free citizen" are "the birth right of every American woman. That being equal before God they shall also be equal among men, in all the immunities and rights of free citizens, just as they are equal, where punishment and the payment of taxes are in question."⁵⁸ Sarah argued that woman herself was lacking in dignity and self-respect and that men would help her only if she made a truly heroic struggle for freedom. Responding to the claim that only a small number of women wanted the vote, Sarah noted that only a small number of blacks had been interested in enfranchisement either and that most universally accepted creeds were initially the belief of a minority. Such objections were trivial, she maintained, and equal rights would not only enable women but would also elevate men and advance civilization. She contended that the ballot was woman's only means "of securing her freedom — the freedom to be herself, to live out her own life along the lines of her own choosing, to make the most and best of herself."⁵⁹

57 Johnstone, scrapbook. The age of consent, as well as the age at which girls could marry, was raised from twelve to sixteen in 1910, Helen Deiss Irvin, *Women in Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 99.

58 Johnstone, scrapbook.

59 Ibid. It is interesting to note that Senator Gibson did not vote on 25 January 1887 when the Senate defeated the joint resolution on woman suffrage by a vote of 34 to 16, *Senate Journal*, 49th Congress, 2nd Session, p. 205. Gibson did favor higher education for women, however, and, in his capacity as founding president of the Tulane University Board of Administrators, persuaded Paul Tulane to amend his bequest to allow the inclusion of women.

Sarah's articles and letters appeared in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Lexington Observer*, the *Sugar-Bowl and Farm Journal*, the *Lexington Gazette*, the *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, the *New Orleans Weekly Independent*, *Fetter's Southern Magazine*, and the *New Orleans Daily States*, as well as *Waverly* magazine and *Field and Stream*, as noted above. Sarah wrote on literary topics — Wordsworth and Shakespeare — and for any magazine that would reward her efforts. In the summer of 1888, for example, she made only \$10.00 for an article on "Southern Hunters" published in *Circus Journal*.⁶⁰ She sometimes used the pseudonyms of "Stereo" and "Preston Connelly," commenting not only on women's issues but also on the economic condition of the South, on farm policy, on the Negro question, and on other political and social issues of the day.⁶¹ She called for the creation of more literary reviews and magazines throughout the South: "We need, so to speak, intellectual gymnasiums, where minds may be tried, trained and strengthened by wrestlings which alone fit aspirants for the labor necessary to produce substantial results."⁶² On one level, Sarah's work is as ephemeral as is most journalistic writing. On another level, however, her passionate defense of human freedom and equality embodied an enduring vision of a better civilization that enabled other women to carry on the struggle.

Sarah's regional reputation as a speaker and writer was excellent (and probably controversial among the more traditional). The *Lexington Daily Press* described her as a "woman of remarkable intellect, keen and quick of perception, original in thought." The *Lexington Observer* said that she was "probably the most talented woman in the South, a bold thinker, finely educated, conservative and loyal to her convictions of right and truth,"

60 Sarah G. Humphreys, journal.

61 Johnstone, scrapbook. The significance of "Stereo" is not clear — Sarah may have wished to designate her writing as "solid" or "three-dimensional." "Preston" was the maiden name of her maternal grandmother; "Connelly" of her paternal great-grandmother.

62 Ibid.

while the Lexington *Argonaut* declared that she was "one of Kentucky's brainiest women."⁶³ Laura Clay invited her to write a paper on the Farmers' Alliance or People's Party for the fifth annual convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association; she delivered an address on "Man's True Estimate of Women" at the 1893 convention of that group.⁶⁴ A trainer for the free kindergarten movement, she also read papers at the meetings of the prestigious Filson Club.⁶⁵ When she went to Washington as a delegate to the National Woman's Rights Convention, the Lexington *Gazette* declared that "there will be no brighter or more intelligent delegate in that convention . . . for as a conversationalist she is brilliant and effective. With six months practice, we believe that she would beat half the members of Congress at stump speaking."⁶⁶

Sarah placed no credence whatsoever in the popular idea that men and women should occupy separate (and probably unequal) spheres:

We need each other. God never intended that we should occupy different spheres. He did not put women in Venus and man in Mars or Jupiter. We find ourselves on this earth together—dependent one upon the other. We are born alike—we die alike. We should live alike.⁶⁷

Sarah cited Biblical scholarship to argue that "God is male and female," noting that Arabic and Hebrew scholars revealed that the words for the Holy Ghost and the Holy Spirit were always feminine in the original texts. God thus created "the Almighty *Us*—male and female and called *their* name Adam—giving both the same name, being the same person—two in one, yet a

63 Lexington *Daily Press*, 21 November 1889; Lexington *Observer*, 5 January 1895; Lexington *Argonaut*, 1 November 1896; all in private collection, Lexington, Kentucky.

64 Laura Clay to Sarah G. Humphreys, 11 October 1892, Gibson Papers, University of Kentucky; Johnstone, scrapbook.

65 Johnstone, scrapbook. According to a letter to the authors from James J. Holmberg, Curator of Manuscripts, The Filson Club, 28 October 1987, none of Sarah G. Humphreys's talks to the club are extant.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Lexington *Daily Press*, 21 November, 1899.

unit." When the male and female Adam did not obey, God performed a second creation in which Adam was given form and woman created, "so that they might be company and help for each other." Sarah argued, however, that "only equal halves make a whole" and that equal rights were thus essential to both men and women.⁶⁸

Just as she rejected the idea of separate spheres, Sarah denied the Victorian ideal of the "*womanish* woman." She expressed scorn for "conservative and conventional society ladies, and our weak-nerved, weak-kneed and weak-brained" ladies who could do nothing on their own and needed the protection of men. On an issue such as the use of firearms, for example, Sarah was contemptuous of women who did not know how to handle a gun. Some women, believing in chivalry rather than justice, pictured "men as knights . . . wandering over the world with lance and battle ax in quest of foes to fight for her sweet sake." Not so, Sarah declared, for "the rustle of angel's wings possesses no terrors for mortal man. No, my dear sweet womanly women and lady-like sisters, it don't scare worth a cent." A good Smith and Wesson pistol is better protection than a pair of angel's wings, Sarah wrote, and "it is safer to fire a pistol than fly with your wings":

My daughters and myself have lived for years alone in an isolated country home, both in Louisiana and Kentucky, and enjoyed a sense of perfect security from the fact that our pistols were always ready and in reach, and that we knew how to use them, and it was generally believed that we would use them, which knowledge is in itself a protection.

Sarah argued that women should carry firearms even if the law did not sanction it. She concluded that "firearms in the hands of women will help to civilize our State."⁶⁹

In December 1892, Sarah once again nursed her brother Randall, this time in Hot Springs, Arkansas, just as she had cared

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Unidentified newspaper clipping, private collection, Lexington, Kentucky.

for him that Christmas in Philadelphia forty-one years before. The senator's death marked the dissolution of the final personal symbol of the paternalistic social order against which she rebelled. She continued to divide her time between "Sumner's Forest" in Kentucky, the home of her daughter Lucy, and "Magnolia" in Louisiana, the home of her son Joe. Few of her letters from the last fifteen years of her life are extant, although she maintained her journal until the year before her death. References to short stories and novels appear in her letters, but manuscripts of longer works have not been found. She died at "Magnolia" on 31 May 1907 and was buried in Lexington, survived by her three children and three grandchildren.

Although taught by a strong mother, an enlightened father, and an inspired schoolmaster to cherish equality and to distrust the artificial pedestals of antebellum society, Sarah was inevitably a part of that paternalistic culture. Her life thus evolved, in Ann Firor Scott's phrase, "from pedestal to politics." Sarah represents the grass roots level of what Eric Foner has recently termed "the broad feminist tradition that stressed the common humanity of men and women" as opposed to the narrower movement which emphasized "women's unique moral purity and their responsibility for bringing feminine virtues to bear upon a disolute male world."⁷⁰ Writing, speaking, lobbying, and petitioning: Sarah and hundreds of women like her fought a long series of largely anonymous, losing battles for equal rights. Scott provides a context for understanding the evolving contribution of the women of Sarah's generation:

There were others — women born in the thirties and forties, raised in the antebellum culture but prepared now to shake off many of its presuppositions. The ideological commitment of these women was varied, but each in her own way was a remarkably strong person. Their own abilities and performance cast doubt on the shibboleths about women's inferiority, or her inability to perform hard jobs.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 520.

⁷¹ Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 175.

Sarah G. Humphreys was just such a remarkably strong woman, and Scott's description provides an apt estimate of her private and public achievement.