

**“She Can Never Be Happy Without All or Some of the Family with Her”:
Women’s Lives on the Early National Frontier**

by

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Abstract

When it comes to the early American frontier, a great deal is known about the men who moved to form the first permanent settlements. Much less has been told about the women they brought with them, the fundamental role these women played in the creation of successful frontier colonies and the labor they performed as part of that success. This blind spot limits the understanding of early American frontier spaces. Without acknowledging the labor and presence of women brought to the frontier, there cannot be a true understanding of its formation or its success. This thesis examines the emotional, reproductive, and economic labor of women who were brought to the early American frontier as part of the first generation of permanent settlers, paying attention to the political and gendered world in which they were living and subconsciously navigating. Male independence was dependent upon the labor of these women, so much so that they were a necessity to these migrations to the frontier. They participated in a type of settler colonialism that mirrored that of early American colonies both in the gendered expectations they experienced and in the success of the settlements built. In this thesis, diaries from women who migrated to the frontier of Alabama and Florida in the early 1800s are examined. Letters written from girls and women who moved to the frontier of Alabama and Kentucky ranging from the late 1700s to the early 1800s are examined as well. These primary sources come from middle to upper class white women, the source base most often available from the period, and provide rich details about what life on the frontier was like for the authors.

This thesis, by examining the emotional, economic, and reproductive labor these women performed, looks to reinsert women's labor into the narratives and understandings of the formation of the frontier and its success, as well as illustrate the integral role played by those whose labor was purposefully devalued due to their gender and dependent status.

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Introduction

The early national period was a time of discovery, of American idealism, and of many firsts for a new nation recently freed from its monarchical constraints. For many people this freedom allowed them to begin to look towards the edges of the established borders of the country, toward the frontier spaces and territories that lay just beyond their grasp but that were alive and attainable in their imaginations. Men packed up their families, their wives and their children, and set out for these frontier places in the West and the South, hoping to find the independence and success their forefathers had found when settling America's colonies. Once on the frontier, the women who had been brought to these spaces undertook three essential kinds of labor: emotional, reproductive, and economic labor. Each of these labors helped not only define the experience women had on the early national frontier, but they helped shape the frontier itself. Women's reproductive and economic labor were necessities for the success of the settler colonies Americans were attempting to cultivate on the frontier. Women's bodies were very literally needed to create the next generation that would populate and strengthen the new settlements. Their economic labor was needed for the financial stability of their families and the further domestication of the frontier. The emotional labor they each personally performed as a result of living in a new and isolated terrain far from their families informed how they experienced the frontier and how they worked to keep in touch with those they left behind.

Those moving to the frontier experienced feelings of melancholy, sadness, and homesickness. Women were sometimes forced to leave behind their families and friends,

communities of tightly knit social circles they had learned to depend on for life's great events. They were also forced to leave behind established hometowns and cities where in Post-Revolutionary America things were beginning to change for both men and women's gendered expectations. For men, these changes encouraged them to strike out as individuals, and better not only themselves but also the Republic. For women, these changes reflected a desire to also participate in the strengthening of the Republic, as well as themselves, in a new form of motherhood. For those wives and daughters who found themselves on journeys to the frontier, however, they did not experience the same evolution in gender that those in areas like the East and Mid-Atlantic did.

Those who moved from southern states and regions to frontier territories that would become southern states brought with them a highly-gendered and patriarchal society, as well as the institution of slavery. In their attempt to recreate American society, they recreated the society they knew, which differed from that of the Northeast. While in the North women began to engage in the marketplace "first as members of households and gradually as individuals," in Southern society and on the Southern frontier this did not happen.¹ Male dominance in Southern society played an important role in everyday life and was accepted as a way of life. The very character of the southern frontier differed from the North due in large part to the presence of enslaved men and women, the economic reliance on whom kept the South largely rural. This meant that the population centers and cities of the South were not highly populated or easily linked, which "did not establish models for the transformation of the women's experience" the same way it had in the more urban areas of the North.²

¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: NC, The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 42.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

In the earliest frontier settlements of the South, while slavery did exist, it was not imported and maintained in its exact form. Even the wealthiest families who moved into the most remote areas experienced a decrease of the benefits that came from slavery as they struggled on the frontier. While enslaved people struggled much more, food could be scarce, illnesses ran rampant, and life was unpredictable for everyone, white and black. While the frontier was in no way an equalizer, for those first settlers, it was momentarily disruptive in systematically rigid lines.

For the first groups of settlers who moved to frontier locations in the South, there was likely little difference from those frontier locations in other areas of the country, particularly for the first women settlers who worked to make these settlements permanent. They experienced similar expectations regarding their reproductive labor, and experienced similar emotional labor as women who settled in the north and later in western frontier locations. Slavery is an important aspect of the story of these first generations of settlers in the South as it led to differing expectations for the enslaved people and affected their lives in a dramatic and often traumatic way, uprooting and tearing them away from everything they knew. However, slavery as an institution does not appear to have altered the experience of the first generation of white women, (especially regarding reproductive or emotional labor), to such an extent that the first generation of Southern white women's experiences were dramatically different from those of the first waves of white women in other frontier areas.

This thesis argues that in the earliest American frontier spaces, the clock was essentially set back for the women who first helped settle these areas. As participants, willing or not, in the settler colonialism of the first generation of the frontier, these women and girls did not experience the same types of changes taking place on the East Coast in this era, especially in

terms of expectations surrounding their reproductive and economic labor. Isolated from the changes happening in the newly formed United States in faraway territories, they embodied the gendered norms of the colonial era, which better facilitated the aims and needs of these fledgling settlements. While the evolution of women's labor in the three areas discussed above may have come to the frontier as soon as the second round of settlers began to migrate to these now-established communities, for those initial colonists, it was essential that women's roles be more tightly controlled and held stagnant if they were to colonize the frontier with the same success their forefathers had once colonized the East and Mid-Atlantic. These early frontier colonies and territories were dependent upon the labor of women in order to obtain permanent populations as well as communal and financial success. The labors performed were gendered and therefore often seen as women's duty, but that did not negate the true weight of their importance. Without the presence of these women, and the successful performance of these labors, these frontier colonies might not have found the permanence necessary to continue.

The independence of men in these early frontier settlements hinged upon the ability and labor of the women they had brought with them when they migrated to the frontier. The households they built not only created permanent settlements for the United States, but also created a singularly politicized and gendered space.³ Within these rigidly gendered households, women worked performing emotional, reproductive and economic labor, contributing to the household. The male head of house's independence was dependent upon the labor of others, and required these others remain largely invisible, or at least that their labor be devalued.⁴

³ Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 146.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

Women's work, upon which a functioning household rested, was increasingly invisible in the Post-Revolutionary period, with greater economic emphasis placed on the type of work men participated in instead.⁵ This devaluing of women's work, turned their labor into an expectation of their sex, invisible to others and worth little economically. This erasure reinforced the dependence women had on their male heads of house and further reinforced the independence men stood to gain. Women worked making soap, weaving and sewing clothes for the household to wear, made candles, slaughtered and stored animals for food, and performed multiple other labors that made life possible for their families while living on the frontier.⁶ Male independence was therefore impossible without this invisible female labor, labor that established and ran fully functioning households, allowing men to venture out of the home and pursue what was considered to be "valued" labor.

However, the labor women performed had great value. Without the labor of women, the necessary households and the work that came from them would not have been created and sustained on the early frontier, which in turn would have crippled the attempts to sustain permanent settlements. The children women had, and the labor those children performed was vital to the survival of frontier colonies. Giving birth to and raising children was therefore a vital part of women's labor on the frontier alongside the other economic labors they performed. Men understood the importance and necessity of the labor of women, not only in creating these permanent settlements, but in creating the households and performing the labors that granted them their independence. Male independence was dependent upon women's labor on the frontier,

⁵ Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*, (Chapel Hill: NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 114. Klepp is building on Jeanne Boydston's path-breaking work on women's labor in this period in *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwives Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, NY: Vintage House, 1990), 243.

which is why it is of such importance to examine the types of labors women performed there. The labor women performed on the frontier is imperative to understanding how these frontier spaces formed and were eventually successful. The very idea of American white male independence was dependent upon the emotional, economic, and physical labor of women, particularly in these early frontier spaces.

If American men were to embody the post-Revolutionary ideals of individualism and independence on the frontier successfully colonizing and recreating the agrarian communities they had come from, the presence of women and therefore their labor was paramount. These ideals and the society that inspired them rested on the silent work of women, who labored producing and rearing children, caring for the sick, feeding and clothing families, participating in field work, producing food in gardens, and performing other backbreaking tasks of labor daily. Male independence relied directly on the labor of the women whom they had brought with them to the frontier to perform these backbreaking tasks day in and day out, and was as a result dependent upon it. The white men who forcefully migrated enslaved people to frontier territories were even more dependent upon the labor of others, owing their worth and independence to the work they forced the enslaved men and women they owned to perform. Male independence in these frontier territories was a myth, dependent upon the labor of silent others: women, children, and the enslaved, who worked performing the reproductive, economic, and emotional labor necessary for frontier settlements to survive.

While performing the physical, reproductive, and economic labor they came to the frontier to perform, women had to grapple with the emotional toll that homesickness was taking on them. These feelings of melancholy and sadness at their removal from their homes and families were not new, but I argue, a truly shared part of the early national frontier experience.

This shared American experience regarding homesickness through the centuries is what Susan J. Matt explores in her book *Homesickness: An American History*. Matt traces homesickness in America from its earliest instances among the first colonists, such as the Puritans and Protestants, who longed for a home across the ocean but “believed that sadness and pain were signs of an unholy life.”⁷ Matt tracks the societal reactions to homesickness in American culture, such as this Puritan belief, throughout her book, identifying the evolutions that took place as the country itself evolved. In her exploration of the first half of the nineteenth century and the pioneers that began to move to the frontier, she examines how Americans committed themselves to the new political order and the ideas of individualism. More Americans were on the move in this period than in any era before or after, yet they were generally “worried about the miles that separated them from loved ones.”⁸ In this period, Matt asserts that unlike the Puritans before them, Americans now did not hide their emotional pain but instead sought to balance their grief with “a sunny disposition in the face of life’s challenges.”⁹ Matt examines how marginalized and minority groups such as enslaved peoples and some women, who had no choice but to migrate and could do little about their circumstances, had to deal with their homesickness for a long time as it did not easily fade. She examines letters and diaries, as well as newspapers and other primary sources to get a feel for how these migrants truly felt during the periods in which they lived. She covers a wide array of time, continuing over a wide course of American history, looking at the role homesickness has played in all the great American migratory movements, not only for those migrating without choice, but for those going willingly as well.

⁷ Susan J Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

For those women who experienced these migratory movements and the accompanying homesickness, there was also a painful awareness that they were losing an entire community of female or family friendships that were of great importance for a wide variety of reasons. These communities were greatly valued among women during a time when life's biggest moments such as childbirth, weddings, and illnesses were part of rituals undertaken by these circles. The social aspect of these friendships was also of vital importance, and the isolation of the frontier contributed to the desperation women felt at keeping these communities in tact via correspondence. In her article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Rituals Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," Caroll Smith-Rosenberg examines the emotional ties between women formed with one another in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, arguing these relationships appear to "have been an essential aspect of American society."¹⁰ These relationships were of all types and were of incredible importance to the women who held them, and Smith-Rosenberg looks to evaluate them "within a cultural and social setting rather than from an exclusively psychosexual framework" using the letters and diaries they left behind.¹¹ Within her analysis, Smith-Rosenberg argues that women developed supportive networks that "accompanied virtually every important event in a woman's life, from life to death."¹² She contends that these networks allowed women to develop intimate friendships with each other that were recognized as a "socially viable form of human contact – and as such acceptable throughout a woman's life."¹³ Those friendships and mutual dependencies were encouraged in female relationships, and women were encouraged to rely deeply upon each other. Smith-Rosenberg

¹⁰ Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" *Signs*, 1, no.1, (1975), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

concludes that perhaps the nineteenth century even allowed women a degree of latitude of movement on the sexual spectrum that many would have otherwise have been denied.

It is in fact this idea that Rachel Hope Cleves addresses directly in her exploration of an early national lesbian couple in her microhistory, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same Sex Marriage in Early America*. Cleves examines the language in letters sent between female friends during this era of friendship, as well as an in-depth look directly at the letters and diaries of a well-known lesbian couple living during the period: Charity and Sylvia Drake. It is in the letters between the two of these women, and the letters written between Charity and previous friends and lovers, that Cleves spends a great amount of her history, parsing apart word usage and how passion and emotion ran so high during this period of intense republican friendship. In the second half of her work, Cleves focuses on the couple themselves, examining how they were able to live in a fairly “open” way, how they contributed to their community, and how they continued writing in their own personal diaries, allowing for further analysis of their relationship. While not all passionate friendships of the early national period were homosexual as (we understand the term today) as Smith-Rosenberg points out, Charity and Sylvia’s was a same sex relationship, and Cleves’ history is an exploration of how these women’s passionate “friendship” turning into something much more. The language of these letters is important to Cleves, as it can tell the modern historian a lot about the relationship between the two people who are writing to each other. In the letters and diaries used in this study, the language used is often striking for its honesty and openness regarding the emotions the women were feeling as they lived and worked on the early national frontier. They did not care to hide how they were feeling as they were separated from those they loved, and the family and friends they had left back at home often replied in kind.

In her book *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*, Nicole Eustace explores a different kind of passion than the one that drove the friendships both Cleves and Smith-Rosenberg studied. Eustace focuses on the War of 1812, which she contests was driven by “the desire for more aggregate increases in land and people.”¹⁴ She looks to find the meaning of the war in books and broadsides, as she argues for its places not only as a military event but a cultural event in American history as well. She is focused on this cultural impact: what drove and influenced the war and the legacy it left behind in American culture for years to come. Eustace looks at how emotions and passions were used to garner support for the war, even when it was not going well, and how patriotism for the nation was used as a great motivator. She argues that sharing in the emotional and patriotic experience of the war allowed even those who did not fight to be motivated to support “the continued right of U.S. settlers to people new ground” and it was argued that “love of spouse and love of nation were two sides of the same coin.”¹⁵ Expansion into new territory that was being fought on during the war became a focal point of these emotional feelings during the War, and it became seen as patriotic duty for them to be settled by Americans. The ability to love and marry freely was also seen as patriotic, as was the ability to have a family. Eustace argues this was key – America did not need to win battles or sign treaties, but all Americans needed to agree that to be truly American “lay in the freedom to pursue romantic love and the opportunity to maximize reproduction.”¹⁶ If they could do that, they could not really be defeated, and in their quest to fulfil not only their true American duties, westward expansion would become a necessity. For women, Eustace writes that while many held reservations regarding the inequities they shared in marriage with their husbands, it was their

¹⁴ Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 233.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

patriotic duty, particularly after the war, to marry and give their husbands and their nation thanks for the protection that was provided to them.

The culture during and after the War of 1812 helped in normalizing and justifying westward migration, infusing the very action of migration as something patriotic and necessary for the health of the nation. In the state of Florida, a territory that had been inhabited for a long time by a variety of peoples, Americans employed the use of settler colonialism to settle the territory. This colonialism was heavily gendered, and necessitated the presence and use of white women and their bodies in the active act of colonization through reproduction and economic labor. While this was the tactic used in most frontier spaces, Laurel Clark Shires argues in her book, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida* that the territory provided a unique setting and version of settler colonialism given its background. The mixture of people already living within Florida's borders made Americans nervous, with runaway slaves, free blacks, Seminole Indians and Spaniards all taking up residency in various areas of the territory. There was an emphasis on driving these people, particularly the freed blacks and Indians, out of the territories permanently via relocations and wars. When by the 1830s these efforts had failed, the United States began to craft policies that specifically worked to bring white women to the territory for the purpose of permanent settlement. Shire examines the white women as colonizers themselves, and argues that in doing so she is linking "histories of Manifest Destiny back to its beginnings."¹⁷ She argues that white women were the civilizing agents of American society, and that in making their homes both domestically and through this civilizing effort, they performed "Expansionist Domesticity," making white women

¹⁷ Laurel Clark Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 13.

vital actors in American colonization of the Florida territory.¹⁸ She explores the use of those same women in Indian depredation tales – how these stories were used to garner sympathy and rage and justify violence against indigenous peoples. Shire argues that white women were useful propaganda pieces for the second Seminole War, and used as an excuse to drive out those who were unwanted and non-white on the Florida frontier under the pretense of protection. She adds their labor, property, and the children they produced all “frame colonization as natural or inevitable, joining white settler colonialism to Manifest Destiny.”¹⁹

While Shire is interested in women’s reproductive labor on the Florida frontier as an aspect of settler colonialism, in *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitations in America 1760-1820*, Susan E. Klepp engages with the question of the overall downswing in numbers of births happening in America after the Revolution. Compiling data and statistics on a wide variety of demographic groups as well as searching primary sources like letters, diaries, and visual images. Klepp is interested not only in the how, but the why of declining birthrates. She examines the variety of ways women and their partners delayed or put off having children, as well as the idea that women have, during this time in certain places, begun to exert independence over what they can in their own lives, redefining motherhood and asserting control over their own bodies. Her analysis focuses on the Mid-Atlantic colonies and states due to the breadth of sources that such an undertaking requires. She concludes that fertility transition was, in itself, a radical change, where women made a choice “to disavow past practices and switch to various family-planning strategies,” and made an effort to gain some control over their bodies.²⁰ This change in the east and Mid-Atlantic was not immediately reflected, however,

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 201.

²⁰ Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 275.

in the frontier colonies that Americans began to migrate to after the Revolution. Women were encouraged for the health of the nation and in the name of patriotism to continue having children, and were isolated and cut off from medical treatment and female networks that would have helped them employ techniques women in the East were using to limit their birthrates. It was necessary for the first generation at least in these frontier settlements to fill the spaces with children to create a new generation that would see themselves as the true inheritors of the land, firmly entrenching the permanence of the settlement.

Honor Sachs explores frontier settlements and the questions surrounding them in Kentucky in her book *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier*. By looking at frontier settlement and national expansion in Kentucky through the lens of masculinity, the gendered expectations and differences become apparent. Sachs looks at what white men were expecting upon migration to Kentucky thanks to the new rhetoric of individualism and male independence that became so prevalent after the Revolutionary War, and how upon not receiving the economic success and domestic happiness they expected they began to reject the United States government authority over themselves and their families. This discussion is incredibly gendered, as Sachs looks at how men, women, children, and all others effected by the migration into Kentucky attempted to navigate the new post-Revolutionary world where liberty and success on the frontier had become so intertwined for men. Sachs provides important discussion on the frontier myth and the ideologies that propelled frontier settlement during the early national period. Her analysis of the male push towards independence and erasure of female labor during this period play an important role in the gendered economic analysis of the women that are working during this time.

Sachs and Shire are two of the only authors who consider women and gender on the early Southern frontier. Most of the literature on Southern gender in the antebellum period focuses on the last several decades of slavery, and on long-settled areas of the South. These works, while not focused on the frontier South, provide in depth analysis on Southern gender roles, often attempting to trace their evolution through time and place, providing insight on the pervasive and dominant place those gender roles held in the South. While Sachs is concerned with the frontier of Kentucky, in *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, Stephanie McCurry concerns herself with the yeomen farmers of South Carolina and their families. McCurry is concerned with the yeoman households, power, slave society, and gender relations in the antebellum south, which she focuses on through the lens of South Carolina. In her research on the power dynamic between yeoman heads of house and plantation heads of house, she writes she came away convinced the power yeoman male heads of house held within their own homes was just as important as it was in large slaveholding households, and that “domestic dependencies have critical meanings.”²¹ White yeoman farmers did not always own slaves, but were still masters of their homes, which McCurry argues was of political significance in the highly-gendered South. Also of significance was the work white yeoman wives and daughters performed, including working in the fields alongside slaves and their male heads of house. This was a breakdown of political and gendered significance in the South, and was hidden by the farmers who had to use white women workers in their fields. Similar but necessary breakdowns also took place on the frontier, complicating the ideal of gendered labor.

²¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 1995), viii.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese does not look at breakdowns in gender and politics in the South in her book *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, but instead looks at the unmoving lines that held between class and race in the antebellum south and how the lives of white and black women were affected by these class and race lines. She examines the advantages and disadvantages of being both a black and white woman in the south, and explores the relationship between the two. She tells the story in relation to the plantation household, and how the domination of the male master of the plantation “weighed heavily on slaveholding and slave women alike, but with very different consequences.”²² Using diaries, the recollections of slave women’s children and other primary sources, Fox-Genovese details what the lives of both white women and slave women were like in the highly-gendered Old South. She concludes that for white women, gender defined them from the time they were old enough to understand they were female. Enslaved women, by contrast, remained caught between the gender conventions of two separate communities and as a result, never fully received a full “definition of womanhood so pervasive that it constituted the core of her identity.”²³ Slave women could not protect their gender identities while operating in the Old South, and lost the ability to have a socially definite one of womanhood.

While Fox-Genovese deals with relations between race and class in the Old South prior to the Civil War, Thavolia Glymph is concerned with the household as a private and public space where slaves and freed black women worked before and after the Civil War. She looks at the types of work they performed and the types of lives they lived after the war brought them their freedom. She argues that black women did not model their homes and domestic lives after the white plantation mistresses they had formerly worked for, and fought for compensation and a

²² Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 373.

restructuring of the domestic work they found themselves once again doing. Glymph also examines the relationship between mistresses and slaves as this transformation takes place, and the shift that happened because of the end of slavery. Glymph's focus on white women as slaveholders who were complicit in the antebellum labor system is important, as it places white women more squarely in exploitative positions of authority over slave women during this time. White women who owned slaves, while operating in their own highly-gendered worlds, were also aware of the power they held and could exert as slave-owners. White women on the frontier were aware of the power they held over the slaves they owned as well, with the antebellum power dynamic that Glymph argues is a present part of southern frontier settlement.

The early national frontier was a place of turmoil and change. The Revolutionary War had ended, there was a new government in place, and to the west and the south what seemed like never ending land stretched outwards, beckoning Americans to come and stake their claims. Newly minted male American citizens looked to these territories as opportunities for a new chance, as a place to exert their own individualism, and some as a way to replicate the wealth they were leaving behind. Those who came to these first American frontier territories brought with them their wives, and if they had any, their children. At a time when white men were actively encouraged to pursue their own individualism and American politicians wanted the frontier populated and settled by good American families, there could have been no greater act of patriotism. The reality of those unsettled frontier territories was, however, that they were incredibly isolated, often far flung from American cities or towns, and often in dangerous or contested lands. For the first Americans who moved into these areas with permanent settlement in mind, it meant leaving behind everything they had ever known, and recreating white agrarian

civilization almost from the ground up. It was lonely, isolating, and dangerous, and for those who had come to the frontier under obligation to their spouses or guardians it was all those things and more.

Chapter One: Emotional Labor on the Frontier

Margaret Austill was a young girl living on the Uchee Creek in Washington County, Georgia when her father, like many men at the time, made the decision to uproot his family and move them to the recently acquired frontier land of Louisiana. In her diary, Austill tells of a “bright morning in the Spring of 1811” when the “wagons were loaded and three families were assembled at fathers house.”²⁴ Austill called it a sad day, describing their lives in Georgia as one where the family had lived “happily and made money rapidly.”²⁵ This, however, did not matter, and to the west the family was to go.

For Austill and her family, the move out to Louisiana was an incredibly dangerous time. She described the fear she experienced as the party crossed what would one day become the state of Alabama and entered into Creek territory as they made the trek to their new home. Austill described the many difficulties of a frontier trip– the “large creeks to cross with slender bridges made by the Indians” whom she said would charge them high tolls.²⁶ Determined not to pay them, the men would force their slaves to “cut trees and make a bridge,” which as Austill wrote would upset the Indians greatly, causing the pioneers only more trouble as they travelled through the untested terrain.²⁷

²⁴ Margaret Ervin Austill, *Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country and of Childhood in Clarke County 1811-1814*, SPR237, Alabama Dept. of Archives and History, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The experience Austill wrote of in her diary was her own, written and relayed through her own eyes. But this type of story - one of an early American pioneer family facing danger as they cross the wilderness - has captivated American storytellers for generations. Tales of harrowing journeys taken in covered wagons, brave souls crossing unknown lands and charting dangerous territories in search of a better life for their families, have all contributed to the idealized portrait of the “American Pioneer” or “Frontiersman.” As Richard Slotkin writes in his book *Gunfighter Nation*, this myth of the American frontier has been told for over three centuries, spanning various mediums, and is America’s “oldest and most characteristic myth.”²⁸ The purpose of the myth, its original ideological task, “was to explain and justify the establishment of American colonies,” such as those established on the frontier during the early national period.²⁹ Slotkin also notes that when history is translated into myth the way the history of America’s frontier has been, “the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or heroes.”³⁰ For the early American frontier, these heroes are often portrayed by men like Daniel Boone or Davey Crocket – men who were absolutely real and historical figures, but are not truly representative of every American’s frontier experience. Because of this, it is important to examine those Americans who undertook these journeys and lived on the frontier, and did not become mythic folk legends. By examining ordinary Americans, particularly ordinary Americans like those women and girls (like Austill) who took part in the westward movements and expansions of the early republic, such an important time in American history can be more fully understood and studied.

²⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, NY: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

Women often play minor roles in these stories, serving as actors, or as plot points in men's stories, one dimensional characters who are mentioned and then forgotten. Women are, however, three-dimensional people, and their stories, feelings, and points of view are critical in constructing historically accurate accounts of movements and time periods such as the mass migrations and expansionist settlements that occurred in post-Revolutionary America. The women who joined men on these harrowing journeys and in these new remote homes were wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters, but they were also individuals who had their own thoughts, feelings, and observations about what was happening to them and around them, even if they had no say.

Women's experiences in early American migration are important for the different outlooks and opinions, as they experienced the same things many men did, but through a different perspective. Feelings of melancholy and sadness permeated these migrations for most people, and were so well attested to and acknowledged that homesickness itself was thought to be an actual ailment, with doctors maintaining that "the only cure was to return sufferers to their homes before the conditions turned fatal."³¹ Scholar Susan Matt writes that while many Americans moved during this time, the process and the emotional toll was traumatic. These moves were not natural, and forced people to break the "old bonds of fealty and obedience" that had previously kept colonial communities intact.³² Men were encouraged, particularly in the new political age of post-Revolutionary America, to seek out a new individualism, to participate in the pursuit of happiness, and to do so, they had to break these old ties. Women's ties to their female, domestic, and familial communities were still very much intact however, and they were

³¹ Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

³² *Ibid*, 36.

not encouraged to chase after a new individualistic political reality in the same manner that the men were. Women were raised to “regard family relationships as sacred connections, divine in origin, and therefore precious and worth conserving.”³³ Issues of conflict arose when men married women who were not raised in the same manner, did not feel the same way, and turned their newly individualistic ambitions towards the American frontier.

The relationships and networks many women maintained via correspondence and personal diaries allows an insight into frontier America that might otherwise be overlooked. Strikingly, even for women from different backgrounds, of different ages, and in different locations, they lived a very similar experience: one of abrupt change, loneliness, sometime danger, and a forced acceptance of their new lives. This chance and acceptance was not only limited to those who moved away, but also affected those they left behind. Everyone in a person’s life and closely knit network was altered by these moves. These changes shaped these women, and as a result shaped their interactions with their surroundings and each other.

A result of the trauma of losing their homes and the rituals that came with female love and friendships, women of post-Revolutionary and antebellum America experienced the acute homesickness Matt describes. This chapter will examine the concept of homesickness and the emotion in the letters and diaries of women from post-Revolutionary and antebellum America. The language of the letters and diaries will be explored, with attention paid to the emotion of the words used and the understanding this lends to what it was like to have participated in these westward movements in the early republic as a woman. The letters and diaries come from women spread in Kentucky, what would become Alabama, and the Louisiana territory. These women did not know each other, but often expressed similar feelings and emotions that resonate

³³ Ibid., 41.

even today. They are white, mostly middle class women, since those are the type of women whose families could save and archive their letters and written works. The impact of class and race will be explored in a later chapter. What these women experienced because of their relocations to these places and how they felt about it is of incredible importance to the study of the frontier in American history, as interwoven into its fabric as the storied men of folklore. While men also experienced feelings of homesickness and sadness, they were encouraged to break ties and explore their individualism while women had been encouraged to develop and maintain close bonds they were then forced to break. This added a gendered component to the homesickness and sadness they experienced as they moved onto the frontier.

While the post-Revolutionary war generation of Americans were busy creating their own culture, throwing off their monarchical patriarch and blazing their own, new path, they were also searching for a sense of calm. At a time when everything seemed and felt so unstable, there was a push to look back and remember the good days of simple, yet happy agrarian lifestyles, a virtuous and simplistic way of living that would preserve American freedom and liberty for centuries to come. If the newly acquired territories could be settled by good and self-sufficient American farmers, as Thomas Jefferson hoped, the nation would be ensured success and longevity.³⁴ While everyone had their own motivations, it seems on the surface that a good many shared Jefferson's idealism. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, migrants from both outside the United States and from within its borders began to search out new land in the recently acquired territories that now lay within the country's boundaries. Migrants looked for better farm land, better lives than the ones they left behind, and better jobs. Some took dangerous military or guide postings in dangerous and isolated areas, while others looked to

³⁴ Elizabeth A. Perkins, "The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky" *The Journal of American History*, 78, no. 2 (1991): 486.

create, or recreate, the wealth they had left behind in a new and untamed place. While the famous Oregon Trail and Overland Pioneers would come some time later, these first migrants endured many similar hardships, emotionally as well as physically.

In the letters and diaries of the women who accompanied their husbands or families on these migrations, there are common threads found in the language used of melancholy, ennui, depression, or longing to reunite with those they left behind. This of course comes as no surprise, knowing how incredibly important the female friendships and networks they had been forced to leave behind had been in their lives. In post-Revolutionary America and the decades that followed, the new American generation worked to create their own culture, including new ideals for manhood and womanhood, part of which included new ideas of friendship.³⁵ These friendships, particularly for women, were of great importance. Rachel Hope Cleves points out in *Charity and Sylvia* that popular novels of the time encouraged expression of deep feelings among friends, and this allowance of expression gave women a place to safely express their emotional thoughts and feelings safely and freely, among peers.³⁶ As Nancy F. Cott argues in *Bonds of Womanhood*, these female friendships were of great importance for women, because no matter how close a man and women were, the woman was ultimately the man's subordinate. In these female friendships, women were able to find true equals, and could trust that their emotions and expressions were secure and valued.³⁷ Not only were female friendships important for the purposes of communicating among peers one's true emotions and opinions, but in communities around America, as Carol Smith-Rosenberg argues, due to biological realities like pregnancy and

³⁵ Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same Sex Marriage in Early America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁷ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Women's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), 187.

childbirth, female worlds and networks developed, which were incredibly important, and provided “emotional richness and complexity” of devotion among women in a socially acceptable way.³⁸ During early national America, these female worlds were of great importance to the women that inhabited them. Women’s lives revolved around their homes, and they formed intricate rituals surrounding the parts of life that came with womanhood. As Smith-Rosenberg writes, milestones like marriage and childbirth involved these communities, and were built around these female rituals, with women “living in emotional proximity to each other.”³⁹ To be taken from these rituals, from these networks, and from these emotional proximities then, would be incredibly traumatic for anyone, and was particularly traumatic for the women involved. Susan Matt argues additionally that in the nineteenth century, Americans “extolled domestic life as the chief source of happiness and virtue, celebrating the warmth of mother love,” and to be taken from that would be disruptive to all of those who had been previously involved in a person’s domestic life.⁴⁰ While those who migrated suffered great sorrow, those who were left behind did as well. They also had experienced the disruption that came with these westward migrations and the breaking up of their female networks and rituals, and felt similar emotional duress. Westward migration left few unscathed.

The women who left with their families or with their husbands for new places missed their homes ardently. They missed their friends, their families, the towns they had grown up with and the conveniences they were used to. Missing these things does not make them weak, or less worthy of the admiration American folklore has bestowed upon them. In fact, it might make them more worthy of it. They were simply human, American women who were thrust into a new

³⁸ Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America” *Signs*, 1, no.1, (1975): 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁰ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 37.

place, a new life, and did what they could to maintain the ties they had created and so meticulously cultivated in their homes before they were uprooted. They made sure to make note of each letter they received, and begged for more from all the friends and family they had left behind. At times they tried to remain upbeat and happy about their new circumstances, while at others they were blunt about the loneliness and sadness they were feeling.

Strong female relationships and open emotional communication were both common things in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is therefore unsurprising that letters written in the post-Revolutionary and antebellum periods from different areas of newly opened land and territories share a common weight of emotional language. Some diaries even share the same forthright descriptions of emotional agony and turmoil. The emotions expressed and language used reflected the type of letters and communications written during the periods, but on a deeper emotional level, the language reflected a true traumatic experience and deep pain that women across the country were struggling to cope with as they were ripped way from almost everything and sometimes everyone they knew, with little no say in the matter.

An example of this type of home front disruption took place when Mary Adair's sister moved to Kentucky sometime before 1797. The territory had been formed into a county by the legislature of Virginia in the winter of 1775, and only had ten years of significant white population growth to support American settlement.⁴¹ Compared to Adair's native South Carolina, Kentucky was a rough and distant land that had only recently been granted statehood.⁴² It might as well have been a million miles away. She missed her sister deeply and wished she could be visiting her instead of simply writing yet another letter to her. She wrote that "when I

⁴¹ Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 6.

⁴² Lewis Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 24.

think of the distance that is between us I quite despair of ever seeing you except you move to this country and this I sincerely wish for your sake as well as my satisfaction.”⁴³ Smith-Rosenberg argued that “A sister’s absence for even a week or two could cause loneliness and depression and would be bridge by frequent letters.”⁴⁴ This permanent separation caused Adair great pain and sadness, and disrupted her life back home as she thought of her sister far away living on the Kentucky frontier.

Adair hoped for her sister to return, and remarked that she did not understand why she stayed in the first place, when “from the account of sickness and the sickly appearance of all that comes from that part of the world I am surprised that any stays that can get away.”⁴⁵ She seemed to know that she would not be able to convince her sister to return home, or understood that the choice was not her sisters to make, and instead seemed to relent that perhaps the only way to be happy again was for the whole family to join her in Kentucky. “Mamay thinks she never can be happy without all or some of the family with her. The old lady has her health very well and says she would rather live in a little smoky cabin in Kentucky than in a good house in Carolina if she could but have you and Betsy and your families near her and without that she will never be happy anywhere.”⁴⁶

There can be no denying the emotional disruption Mary Adair felt because of her sister’s relocation to the frontier. Adair viewed Kentucky as a place that was unsafe, filled with sickness, and the cause of her own personal emotional pain. But for Adair, and her Mamay, what mattered most was the reunification of their family and of their all-important female network. Adair’s

⁴³ Mary Adair to Sister, March 16th, 1797, Adair-Hemphill Family Papers, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

despondence in recognizing that she may in fact never see her sister again due to the distance between them was an emotion that women and men across America were forced to grapple with. Both those who made the migratory movements out west and those they left behind often only found comfort in the hope that they would one day be reunited in heaven.⁴⁷

It was a time of incredible disruption for Americans, and the intensity of emotions reflected that, not only in friendships or in excitement about creating a virtuous republic, but in the fear and sadness of leaving home as well. Communication across distances was not easy, and travel even a short distance took its toll. The price of paper was high, and as a result, those who wrote letters crammed as much information as they could onto what space they had, hoping to receive as much as they gave.⁴⁸ Even the most adventurous souls moved out to the American frontier lands early on suffered from homesickness and talked about it often and without regret, worried about what their restlessness said about their character at a time when love of home and mother was so important, but in conflict with the new push towards male individualism. Pioneers filled their conflicted heads with romantic visions of self-sufficient households, and it was in this context, Honor Sachs writes, that “ordinary men and women migrated into a contested landscape against the forces of ongoing violence.”⁴⁹

Even for those women who moved with their nuclear families, there were still family members and friends they were leaving behind, often at a high emotional cost. Revisiting Margaret Austill and her journey through Creek Country that began in the year 1811 helps to illustrate this point. Austill remarked that while she was a child without any great attachments formed, it was still a remarkably sad day when her father decided to move the family from

⁴⁷ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 37.

⁴⁸ Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia*, 12.

⁴⁹ Sachs, *Home Rule*, 8.

Georgia to the Louisiana territory. She wrote that while some extended family members joined them in the loaded-up wagons that met early that spring morning of the family's departure, there were many that were being left behind as well. Still a young child herself she was sad, but not as sad as her sister, five years her senior, who was "weeping bitterly."⁵⁰ Austill wrote "I was all talk; she said to me 'Do hush, you too will rue the day.'⁵¹ While Austill never goes on in the short diary entry to say if she does, in fact, rue the day, the emotional toll that the move took on her sister left an unmistakable impression on the small girl.

Why make the move in the first place, knowing the emotional toll it could have? Austill recounted that her father owned the first sawmill and cotton gin in Washington County, and mentioned that the family had over one hundred slaves. They had wealth; it can be assumed they were living in a comfortable manner. The move into the Louisiana territory that Austill recounted was a violent one, with the family forced to spend time sheltered in a fort hastily built during the Creek War. Austill recounted the morning of the move, her father's sister memorably pulled a flask of rye rum from her pocket, before saying that while she wished her family luck, she knew "the next I hear will be that you have all been scalped by the savages, so be on your guard, for war will surely come, and that soon."⁵² Despite the danger, despite the familial ties left behind, and despite what can be assumed was a fairly comfortable life, Austill's father still made the choice to move to the relatively unknown but clearly dangerous territory. Austill is clear that this was her father's decision, and his alone, something she never appeared to question him on, despite how badly things turned out. As pioneer families go, Austill and her family were hardly anomalies. In fact, between 1800 and 1850, around half of the American population was on the

⁵⁰ Austill, "Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country".

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

move, crossing state lines and changing residences, with more people moving around and migrating within American borders than in any comparable later time.⁵³ These movements could be attributed to the push of a new political order that manifested in the wake of post-Revolutionary America. There was a restlessness among American people after the Revolutionary war, yearnings that Sachs argued found their best expression in the American frontier.⁵⁴ Millions of Americans packed up and moved their entire lives, as a new political order pushed ideas of individualism and the pursuit of happiness for men, a happiness that could be achieved and a restlessness and yearning that could be filled by moving to untamed territory and domesticating it with white agrarian civilization.

The move itself was hard for many of the people and women who undertook it. While Austill wrote about her childlike fascination with the danger and treachery of the trip, she also mentioned the discomfort of having to do things such as sleep on the tree root covered ground, telling her mother that she would “rather just in the river than lie here.” To which it is worth mentioning, her mother replied, “Perhaps it would be best for us all to jump in the river.”⁵⁵ This, Austill wrote, finally made her lie down still. Matt notes that pulling up stakes and moving was difficult for most that decided to do so, and that Americans bore witness to “the real difficulties of migration and the emotionally trying process of embracing individualism.”⁵⁶ While Austill saw things through the eyes of a child, others who migrated did so with the weight of knowing they were leaving everyone behind, and in doing so were striking out on their own, willingly or not.

⁵³ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 36.

⁵⁴ Sachs, *Home Rule*, 3.

⁵⁵ Austill, “Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country.”

⁵⁶ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 38.

It is hard to know from these letters and diaries if these women and girls were willing participants in their relocations. It certainly would not have mattered either way as legally, under the law a wife was “the possession of her husband”, and was obligated to be obedient to him.⁵⁷ Women had no legal existence of their own if they were married or were under the age of eighteen, and as a result, their willingness as a participant in frontier migration is hard to know. While some women may have been willing to move, or may have wanted to migrate, if they were married or living as a minor, the choice still was not theirs to make.

The night of January 15th, 1823 was a cold one – ice was “lying in large cakes along the side of the road,”⁵⁸ but Jane Woodruff was ready to leave Charleston, South Carolina behind her. Already she had lost three children, both parents, and had dealt with multiple yellow fever outbreaks as well as a recent hurricane. In her mind, nowhere could be as dangerous nor as full of sorrow as Charleston. She and her husband as well as their only living child, a daughter named Christine were making the trek to his home state of Georgia, but that was not to be their final destination. They were instead headed for the newly acquired frontier of Florida – but they had to get there first.

While there is not correspondence of hers available, in her diary, she does not seem to be overall that upset. The hardships she had faced in Charleston leading up to her departure from it had left her feeling numb. With her parents gone and with many of her infant children dead, she was possibly in a great deal of emotional pain. Tragedy had struck Charleston repeatedly in the time leading up to the Woodruff’s family departure as well, and Woodruff’s numbness to leaving behind her siblings could have been affected by the multiple yellow fever outbreaks and disasters

⁵⁷ Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136.

⁵⁸ Clarkson Family Papers, MS 23, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 54.

she had experienced in such a short amount of time. It was not until she was standing on the deck of a steamboat as it made its way to Savannah, watching the shore of South Carolina melt away in the distance, that Woodruff finally says she felt anything about leaving her family behind. She wrote in her diary to her children of the indescribable feeling, finally unable to keep it to herself any longer, she “could not help breathing out the following lines:

“My native land I’ve left behind,
My sisters, brothers, all resigned,
But ah, how soothed my sorrows are,
By my true love who brought me here.”⁵⁹

While Woodruff does seem to share the sorrow and sadness many women and men felt during this time of high migration at leaving her family behind, unlike others she comments that she is at least comforted by the love of her husband. She is sorrowful at leaving her native land of South Carolina, and at leaving behind her brothers and sisters, but she is not devastated. Woodruff’s sorrow is less resigned, and more accepting, she does not seem to be going to Florida against her will.

These moves did not just affect those who migrated, but those who were left behind as well. One such woman who was left behind was Ann Anderson, who wrote a dear friend Nelly in 1809 from Soldiers’ Retreat in Louisville, asking her to if she could press “Mr. Massie to move to this country and if passable, to Jefferson, that you may be again with your friends.”⁶⁰ In this

⁵⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁰ Ann Anderson to My Dear Friend Nelly, February 19th, 1809, Bullitt Family Papers – Oxmoor Collection, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky. (hereafter “BFP – Oxmoor, FHS)

short letter that is the most important part to Anderson – that her friend do what she can to return home from where she has gone. In fact, she closes the letter shortly afterwards, where she wrote “my spirits are depressed and I scarcely know what I write. Write as soon as you can.”⁶¹

Expressions of grief for those who had moved and those who had stayed are common in these types of letters, as seen in this letter from Anderson to her friend Nelly as well as the letter from Mary Adair to her sister some 20 years earlier. Anderson asks Nelly to please ask Mr. Massie to move back to Jefferson, reflecting the idea that Nelly was perhaps not in control of her own fate when it came to where she lived and why. Many, if not most women believed they had little to no choice but to accompany their husbands, even if they were frankly unwilling and scared to leave their homes behind. Women were obligated both by law and by societal expectations to obey their husbands, but as Matt writes, “many found it hard to do so when faced with the reality of leaving their extended families, perhaps forever.”⁶² Their trepidation also applied to the friendships and female networks they had built and created that were so necessary for women’s daily lives – leaving these behind for what could be a lonely life ahead was an incredibly difficult thing to do.

The letter between Anderson and Nelly shows how important not only familial connections were, but friendships as well. This letter shows another important aspect of the disruptions of migrations that took place during this time. The friendships and communities that had been built up by both men and women were disrupted and forever changed upon the migration of one or more of the members of a social circle. In letters written between friends it can be seen how important it was to women to keep these ties close, and to keep these friendships going even across the distances. Letters often mentioned when the last letter had been

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 53.

received from the author – sometimes as a direct hint that it had been too long since a letter had been sent, or as an excuse as to why it had taken so long for the author to receive her response in a timely manner. In a letter written to her friend Helen in 1809, Elizabeth G. Gwathemy wrote that she in fact received the letter she had sent a whole month late, but that she had read it with great pleasure and it had come “in a time when I wanted comfort for I was in few with the pleasy, and unused as I was to sickness, she who has the appellation of being the live lyeest girl in the county, was indeed low spirited.”⁶³ These letters between friends were important – they helped with these feelings of sickness and sadness brought on by the disruptions of migration.

In letters received by a woman named Mildred Ann Fry of Danville Kentucky from her friend Helen (the same Helen who had been writing Elizabeth), the move into a newly opened area in the midst of a great deal of turmoil can be explored more easily. Having moved to Fort Stoddert in the Mississippi territory of what would become Alabama, Helen wrote to Fry often. She often asked not only about family and friends but of the town Danville itself, having moved with her family to somewhere that was essentially a foreign place. In one letter she wrote that “I am glad to hear that Danville is so much livelier than it used to be, for I like my friends to have pleasure if I cannot partake of it. I suppose my little town will be very much altered ere I see it, for it will be many many years before I return to the place of my nativity.”⁶⁴ Helen misses her hometown and acknowledges it may be a long time before she is able to ever see it again. Missing a community and hometown was common for migrants, as well as early colonists in American history. They all knew that what they had been used to was no longer there, they were forced to resign themselves to their new lives and new lands. In fact, as people moved they tried to bring their culture and hometowns with them, recreating and restoring what they had left

⁶³ Elizabeth G. Gwathemy to Helen, February 29th, 1809. BFP – Oxmoor, FHS.

⁶⁴ Helen to Mildred Ann Fry, May 14th, 1815. BFP – Oxmoor, FHS.

behind.⁶⁵ They attempted this by bringing more than the bare essentials for survival, with women in particular bringing household goods to try and recreate the homes they had given up and left behind when they migrated.⁶⁶ These attempts to recreate home did not always help, and often migrants like Helen turned instead to their memories and to longing, but this could instead worsen their homesickness, etching deeper their pain instead of easing it.⁶⁷

Later on in the same letter, Helen confesses to being lonely, even though a new regiment had been stationed nearby. She was, she confessed, more comfortable around ladies than gentlemen, or at least some ladies. In later letters, she continued to ask about Danville, even comparing her new surroundings and places she visits to it. She admits to Fry that St. Stephens is “quite insipid” and that she hopes “Danville is not so now, for a Belle is never satisfied without she had one flattering around her.”⁶⁸ She confessed she wished she were home, and able to go to the Springs with Fry, because then she could perhaps start to feel well again. She wrote “O Ann, this country is so lonesome, I can hardly stay in it, Father will be at the Courts for two months one of my brothers is going to Georgia, and Mother and myself will be left at home with the children who to be sure are noisy enough to keep anyone alive.”⁶⁹ It is clear from the language used here – there is no real attempt to hide it – that Helen is desperately lonely and missing home and her friends she left behind there. While she has her nuclear family with her, she is stuck in a new place far away from the life she had previously cultivated and understood. She bluntly states her misery, and does not shy away from letting her friend know how sad she truly is.

⁶⁵ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 8.

⁶⁶ Perkins, “The Consumer Frontier,” 489.

⁶⁷ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 55.

⁶⁸ Helen to Mildred Ann Fry, September 1st, 1815. BFP – Oxmoor, FHS.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

What Helen is also missing, she believes, is a chance at the life she was meant to have as a Belle. Her predicament is different from the others discussed thus far – she is not a child, nor is she married. She’s an adolescent, who prior to her relocation to the frontier, fully expected to become a Kentucky Belle and enjoy the little time she had to be a somewhat free and independent young woman before she was married and became a plantation mistress. Danville had been established in 1787 by the Virginia legislature, and while it was not a large town, it was thirty miles from Lexington, and offered Helen more than Mobile did.⁷⁰ While a girl’s years as a Belle were brief, antebellum southern women’s lives were shaped by their outcome. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes, “many young women reveled in their years as belles, which merged with their courtships and ended with their marriages.”⁷¹ As Stephen Berry notes, in the nineteenth century, “courtship relied on what was called “sparking.”⁷² Men and women were brought together to see if they sparked. If this basic compatibility test was passed, courtship could begin. For belles, this was their time to shine, where interactions “turned on banter and breeding – not anecdotes and feats of strength.”⁷³ It was all this that Helen had been expecting to experience in Danville, Kentucky, and none of it was possible now that she had been removed to the frontier in Mobile.

Helen is not only upset that she has been removed from her friends and family networks that she was most likely in the process of building and beginning to understand the importance of, but she is also now understanding that her entire process for courtship and marriage has been altered in a way she was not prepared to deal with. She had no role in the choice made to move

⁷⁰ Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky*, 205.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Gender and American Culture)* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 208.

⁷² Stephen Berry, *House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided by War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Press, 2007), 31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

to the frontier in Mobile, so many miles away from what was presumably the only world she had ever known. The blunt emotional weight in her letters is important to understand how distraught and shaken she truly was. Like all these women, Helen was forced to deal with the mixed feelings and isolation that came with moving to a new place, as well as the realities that life was no longer what she had expected it would be. By looking honestly at the emotions that were being so plainly expressed, the complexity and difficulties of such moves and what they did particularly to the happiness and mental stability of the women can be reinserted into the discussion about pioneer life in Early America. Over time the moves would become easier, the emotions easier to deal with and understand for those who moved (or so they hoped). However, there was always a longing, a nostalgia for home that presented itself to these Americans who moved so far away from all they had known.

Helen is an example of this. In a letter written to Fry in 1816, she admits that while she still greatly misses Danville and that her “desire to see it, or rather some of the inhabitants is as great as ever” she finds herself to be “quite satisfied with this country.”⁷⁴ While her mother quips that if her friends knew what society there was in Mobile they would pity her, Helen is quick to write that in fact, she is learning a great deal and making due with what she has available. It seems she is learning to deal with her yearning for home and her reality that she will most likely not be returning there for some time, if ever. As Matt points out, homesickness did not fade away easily, or ever entirely go away at all. What did happen instead was that the men and women who were so homesick began to believe in reunions, and in the lives they were building in their new homes and lands. Helen does not seem to have completely given up on the possibility of

⁷⁴ Helen to Mildred Ann Fry, April 29th, 1816. BFP – Oxmoor, FHS.

reuniting with her friends and her beloved hometown, but she seems to have given her new surroundings more of a try than she had previously, trying to make what she had in front of her home.

She is quick to mention however, that she suffers greatly from ennui, and takes what she calls “ennui” walks almost nightly with her brother and sister to go and view the ruins of the Fort and the graves that surround it. Helen was still struggling two years later with the melancholy and nostalgia that came along with the homesickness of moving from Kentucky to the Mississippi territory. Matt suggests that this struggle many women had was due in part to the gendered way in which women and men were raised. While men surely felt homesickness and nostalgia, women were raised to “regard family relationships as sacred connections, divine in origin, and therefore precious and worth conserving; men seemed less worried about moving on.”⁷⁵ The difference is apparent in their letters, and even when Helen tried to put on a good face, she cannot help but mention that she nightly feels ennui, and must take walks to try and alleviate this feeling that she cannot seem to shake herself of. There is also the heavy undertones in this letter that Helen is not only feeling sadness at her isolation, but at the hardness of living on the frontier. She and her siblings, in their nightly visits to the graves surrounding the fort so close to their homes, are no longer (if they were ever) unaware of the dangers that surround them in their new home. Helen is no longer the adolescent girl from Danville, upset that she cannot be a Belle. She is more introspective, depressed, and the harsh realities of the dangers of life on the frontier seems to have caught up to her.

Paying attention to the emotions being written out in these letters and diaries is important in order to understand the life Americans were living during this time. Edmund Burke, an

⁷⁵ Matt, *Homesickness an American History*, 41.

English philosopher in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, believed nothing “shaped emotion as much as language did, saying ‘there are no tokens which can express all the circumstances of most passions so fully as words.’”⁷⁶ Paying attention to the words written by these women, even if they are not always the most eloquently written prose, is important to fully grasp how they felt about the situations that they were being forced and thrust into. Those who were left behind felt a great sense of loss at the family and friends they were sure they would never see again, at least in this lifetime. Those who moved away were forced to cope with leaving behind their family units as well as the communities and towns they had grown up in and around, and the entire way of life they had known was forced to belong to their past. They did not know if they would ever be able to see their loved ones again, or see their hometowns.

They wrote home constantly, hoping for any tidbit of news they could gather. In the case of the women who remained behind, the letters often asked those who had moved to return to them, to come back home, and to make their families whole again. Those who left asked were blunt about their wish to return home, but did not talk about the possibilities of doing so. They talked openly about their feelings of sadness and loneliness in these new places, and how desperately they missed what they had left behind. In a culture and country where more than half of the population was on the move, into territory that was new and dangerous, these feelings were unavoidable. It is important to note them however when discussing the great American pioneer and the way that the nation was formed during the time after the American Revolution. The realities that these women faced in having to lose everything in what seems to be a helpless way are worth noting. In fact their resilience in the face of these losses make them even stronger,

⁷⁶ Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), xv.

as they openly and honestly tried to find some type of happiness, like in the case of Helen, or as they tried to make the best of a trying situation like Austill. The way they felt about the situations they had been put into mattered, if not for how they felt, for how they dealt with them despite those feelings.

The sadness these women felt, the emotions and distress they so clearly enunciated time and time again in their letters and in their diaries as they helplessly migrated across the American frontier, is interwoven into the fabric of its very being. To understand the American frontier, and understand the gendered experiences of it, one must look past the glory of the Daniel Boones and instead focus on the pain and suffering of those who migrated to the frontier with no say, instead coming because of domestic and societal expectations laid before them because of their gender. These women and girls had no say, no choice in the matter before them, but they left behind how they felt about the realities of their situations, and their pain, and the pain of those they left behind reverberated across generational lines and into the very fabric of the American historical past.

Chapter Two: Reproductive Labor on the Frontier

Women's reproductive labor played a crucial role in the formation and sustainment of the early national frontier. The earliest settlements and colonies would have eventually folded into nothing had it not been for the reproductive labor of the women brought along on the migratory trips into frontier lands. Children and growing families provided the nation and the male familial heads with the justification they needed for both settling and taking more and more land. Beyond the drive of the newfound individualism and hope for a truly agrarian American society capable of supporting itself, a thriving populace that necessitated the never-ending look towards the west meant women were a necessary and interwoven part of the formula that was westward expansion.

After the American Revolution, Susan Klepp writes in *Revolutionary Conceptions* that “in the overwhelmingly rural British American colonies as a whole and in rural areas of the Mid-Atlantic region, birthrates began to fall.”⁷⁷ This fact was not true, however for the south or for frontier regions. Klepp stipulates the reasons for this could be many, and that these places of “settlement where labor was scarce and land available, where profit could continue to come from an increase in human resources” would not originally have been places where family limitation and therefore declining birthrate would have made sense.⁷⁸ She argues further that women in

⁷⁷ Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 25.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

these fringe frontier settlements had been effectively cut off from effective medical tools such as midwives, pharmacists, druggists, physicians, new medical knowledge, and the support networks they had built and maintained with their friends and family. She states that “only slowly could those sources of women’s knowledge be reconstructed in new settlements.”⁷⁹ Additionally, as the new nation became more sure of its footing and Republicans took power, the idea of the power of the patriotism of procreation, and the obligation of reproduction did as well. Nicole Eustace writes in her book *1812, War and the Passions of Patriotism*, that before and after the War of 1812, ideas concerning expansion and reproduction and how they related became so interwoven and connected they became a part of U.S. traditional thought on the matter, where the belief was that “access to more acreage allowed families to grow larger. But the reverse proposition also applied. The bigger the nation’s population, the more numerous were the claimants available to seize the land through settlement.”⁸⁰ There is a “key relationship between population and territorial expansion.”⁸¹ Women were necessary actors in this territorial expansion.

When after the Revolution the male gender ideal shifted to one focused so intently on that of individualism and Republicanism, it became important for territorial expansion for women’s roles to initially remain stationary and unchanged. If the first groups of women who migrated to the frontier were to begin to strive for the same type of individualism and freedoms that men were now actively pursuing, the population of the newly opened territories could possibly be in danger and the nation would not be strengthened. Women’s bodies, used as objects and viewed for what they could and the labor they could produce, were a necessary building block for the American nation. As Eustace writes, even in these areas of expansion, there was evidence not all

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 119.

⁸¹ Ibid.

women wanted to have so many children, however, “men remained staunchly in favor of maximal reproduction, with marital fertility remaining high throughout the coming decades especially so in the frontier areas.”⁸² As discussed earlier, women most often did not want to move to the frontier, but had little to no choice. The same logic applies to providing the reproductive labor that would populate and strengthen the patriarchal claims of both the nation and their husbands over the land of the frontier itself. Women’s reproductive labor was a necessity for their husbands if they were to lay successful and sustained claims over land in this newly opened territory.

The necessity of women’s reproductive labor for successful permanent settlements was not a new concept. Americans followed mechanisms of colonization that had been in use for decades, creating settlement colonies across the frontier territories and borderlands they were hoping to turn into permanent homes. These hoped for permanent colonies were created by the settlement of families; men, women, and children who brought with them the culture, political structure, and social beliefs of the home they had migrated from. These frontier spaces in the United States were often passively or unofficially colonized by settlers, meaning that the government, “rather than sending out settlers formally charged with civilizing conquered territory” would instead simply fail to stop them from doing so.⁸³ This method helped to relieve the government of direct responsibility of engaging with the native populations that already lived on and claimed the land as their own. Once violence between two groups inevitably erupted, this passive settler colonization allowed the military to act and commence removal of the indigenous peoples without being portrayed as the instigators of the incidents at hand.

⁸² Ibid., 163.

⁸³ Laurel Clark Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 5.

This type of settlement slowly but surely opened more and more land, with white women playing a direct role in its colonization. Their reproductive labor – the children they produced, the work they did in raising them, the homes they created and the culture they helped to import – helped rebuild frontier spaces from “wild” or “uncivilized” places once dominated by the indigenous peoples who once lived there, to once instead dominated by white American culture and society. The children white women had, either on the frontier or that they brought with them and raised there, eventually considered themselves to be the true natives of the territories and states they now inhabited.⁸⁴ The second generation of European American’s very presence helped to solidify and create the permanent status of the colonies their parents had helped to settle, and without the labor of women that would not have been possible.

Annie Christian and her family were an example of a young family that migrated onto the frontier to populate it. Annie Christian was a settler who brought her six young children with her when she and her husband migrated to the Kentucky frontier in 1785. In a letter addressed to a Mrs. Fleming, dated April 11th, 1772, more than a decade before Christian was brought to Kentucky, she wrote that she had the “pleasure of informing you that I was safely delivered of a fine daughter on Friday the 27th of March, thanks be to the Lord I have been extremely well since.”⁸⁵ On June 12th of the same year, she reported – again to Mrs. Fleming – that “my too little girls are both hearty and Sally grows very fast.”⁸⁶ She commented again on July 3rd how “Little Sally grows surprisingly and is so good a child I think she won’t be much traveling.”⁸⁷ Upon the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁵ Annie Christian to Mrs. Fleming, April 11th, 1772, Bullitt Family Papers, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter, BFP, FSH)

⁸⁶ Annie Christian to Mrs. Fleming, June 12th, 1772, BFP, FHS.

⁸⁷ Annie Christian to Mrs. Fleming, July 3, 1772, BFP, FSH.

families move in 1785, Little Sally would have been around thirteen years old, and a valuable participant in the household labor and childcare of and younger siblings she had, particularly once the family had reached the frontier. Children, no matter from what class of family, were of great value. They “could provide first unskilled labor and then skilled labor, and did not need to be paid.”⁸⁸ In a frontier territory such as Kentucky, daughters would have helped Christian with her task of creating a domesticated home, and would have been tasked with helping with the never-ending part of reproductive labor that was the childcare of any younger children as well. Clothing, food preparation, and items that were perhaps unavailable on the frontier but necessary for living would also be provided by the labor of able children. It was also assumed that upon a parents old age, children would take up the care of the parent, as the parent had once cared for the child.

The reproductive labor of women and the number of women and children who moved into frontier territories like Kentucky played an important role in their development as settlements. In 1776, there were only two hundred white settlers living in Kentucky.⁸⁹ However, with young families like the Christians and others moving in after the Revolution, that number exploded. As Sachs writes, “Kentucky experienced unprecedented levels of population growth as boosters and promoters beckoned eastern inhabitants to enter the garden.”⁹⁰ In 1790, the population of white settlers and enslaved peoples had reached a combined total of 73,677, a number that would nearly triple in the next ten years.⁹¹ The hunger in America for territorial expansion is highlighted in Kentucky’s rapid population growth, and thanks in part to the necessity of the labor that women and children provided, men who were intent on permanent

⁸⁸ Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 71.

⁸⁹ Sachs, *Home Rule*, 21.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

settlement of the frontier were not likely to leave them behind. To domesticate and to settle the frontier, they needed all the labor that women could provide, particularly the reproductive labor. As Mary P. Ryan writes in her book, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, the frontier itself was a temporary space. Without the reproductive labor of women, it would have stayed that way. “In the very process of reproducing themselves the pioneers filled up the wide-open spaces and built a community of households.”⁹² Essentially settling the frontier and domesticating the space, they allowed the next generation to look even further westward. Without the reproductive labor (including the childcare and healthcare that kept the children alive) that was expected of them, these frontier spaces would have remained temporary, and the westward movements stagnant.

The importance of women’s reproductive labor is obvious when looking at the frontier areas they were brought into. Many of these territories were contested and dangerous, with battles and fighting that often bloomed into larger contests consuming the lives of all those who lived in the area. A dangerous and contested area like this is the kind that Margaret Austill and her family moved into when they tried to move in to the Louisiana territory in the spring of 1811. When it became clear it would be too dangerous to continue their journey further than they had already come, they chose instead to settle in what would become Alabama, in a place called Clarke County. While they were able to live in relative peace for some amount of time, soon the Creek Civil Wars erupted around them.

This danger was always possible – and was never a secret. Before the family ever departed, Austill’s aunt, Mrs. Jenkins, warned the family that war with the Native Americans was inevitable.⁹³ Still, armed with the knowledge of obvious danger, Austill’s father continued

⁹² Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 20.

⁹³ Margaret Ervin Austill, *Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country and of Childhood in Clarke County 1811-1814*, SPR237, Alabama Dept. of Archives and History.

on with his wife and two daughters into the dangerous and contested territory – as did a great many others. When war did finally erupt and the Austill’s were forced to escape their home and seek shelter in a hastily erected fort, Austill’s mother sent their horse and cart to help another family escape as well. Austill described the family as “a large family of small children.”⁹⁴ Like the Austill family, they, or most likely the patriarch of the family, had decided the risk of living on the frontier outweighed the danger to the family. Women and the products of their reproductive labor were a necessity – they provided the reproduction of American society and anchored the settlements making them permanent, allowing for the true domestication and taming of the frontier. This outweighed any possible and probable danger that could be foreseen.

Of course, there was danger for women simply in performing the task of reproductive labor during this time, on the frontier or not. Laurel Clarke Shire writes that “while the perception of the risk of death in childbirth was greater than the actual risk in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women at the time were products of a culture that often spoke of pregnancy in the same breath as death, either of the mother or the baby.”⁹⁵ Childbirth was risky and it was even riskier on the frontier, both for the mother and for the child. There were “high death rates among children – both in the countryside and in the city, nearly one in five children died in the first year of life.”⁹⁶

Jane Woodruff had a good number of children – but not many survived beyond the first few years if not months of their lives. Before migrating to the frontier of Florida, Woodruff gave birth to a total of five children, and lost four. Woodruff did not complain about her pregnancies – the children were taken by bowel sickness and fevers instead of during difficult childbirths.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny* 95.

⁹⁶ Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 70.

When the Woodruffs left Charleston, it was with their only surviving child, a six-month-old girl named Christina, born in 1822. Woodruff writes that that her daughter was the only comfort she had in her distress of losing her other children and leaving Charleston.⁹⁷ Unfortunately for Woodruff, leaving Charleston behind meant leaving behind the white wet nurse she had depended upon, the steady and reliable medical care, and the female network she had created of sisters and friends. While Charleston had been unlucky for Woodruff in childbirth, the frontier was even more notoriously difficult and dangerous for all women who came to it.

Just like in Kentucky and in Alabama, women's reproductive labor played an important role in the settlement and domestication of the Florida frontier. Shire writes that men were well aware of the benefits of this reproductive labor that women performed, and as a result "many women who came to Florida in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s had children soon after arriving, eventually producing large families."⁹⁸ Woodruff was no exception to this rule. In September of 1824, less than a year after arriving in Florida, she was once again expecting a child. It was a particularly dangerous time for Woodruff to be pregnant and having a child. Food stores had been dangerously low on the plantation for some time, with the entire plantation relying on venison brought to them by the occasionally friendly Indian for food.⁹⁹ To make matters worse, for some time the slaves on the plantation had been quite ill with fevers and sickness, with only a pregnant Woodruff to care for them. It had been a month of dying slaves and livestock, when suddenly Woodruff finally succumbed to the illness as well. It is not surprising that she did. Most women on the frontier were often at risk thanks to a "poor diet and lack of good medical care"¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Clarkson Family Papers, MS 23, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 53.

⁹⁸ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 96.

⁹⁹ Clarkson Family Papers, 82.

¹⁰⁰ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 95.

which caused harder than necessary pregnancies. If births were successful, their “children also faced high disease rates in Florida, and many died in the first few years.”¹⁰¹ Woodruff instinctively knew when she fell ill that she had fallen into preterm labor and that the birth of her child was “inevitable.”¹⁰² She wrote that her husband did “everything he could to hid his uneasiness,”¹⁰³ and that she, for her part, tried to suppress her own feelings as well.

The child did not come for a few days, and they tried to send for a doctor, but even wealthy white women like Woodruff often went though childbirth without medical aid on the Florida frontier.¹⁰⁴ She wrote that she delivered a son with “no one but an old negro woman out of the field”¹⁰⁵ and that she “soon saw from his contenance that he could not live.”¹⁰⁶ She soon was the only one awake to “listen to the dying moans of my child, which were becoming more and more faint; at last they ceased all together.”¹⁰⁷ At daybreak, Woodruff’s husband ordered a coffin built, but the plantation had at that point been so overrun by death there was no more wood to spare for an infant’s coffin. A shelf from the plantation house’s piazza was torn down to be used instead for a child that had lived a mere five hours.¹⁰⁸

Experiences like Woodruff’s were terrible, but they were not unique. The reproductive labor of childbirth and the terror of death were spoken of in the same breath for a reason, especially on the frontier. These fears meant little, however – women on the frontier were expected to have the children of their husbands and help create more substantial permanent settlements for their families and nation. In Florida this reproductive labor was particularly

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Clarkson Family Papers, 85.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 96.

¹⁰⁵ Clarkson Family Papers, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 88.

important, like in all frontier territories. The population in Florida went from some 34,730 white settlers and enslaved blacks combined in the 1830s to 140,424 in only thirty years.¹⁰⁹ By 1850, 41% of the total white population was under the age of fifteen, some 21,148 children. Of the black enslaved population, under fifteen's made up 45.4% of the population – some 17,384 children.¹¹⁰ Whether or not all of these children were born in Florida does not particularly matter, what those numbers show is how truly vital the reproductive labor that women provided was to the continued growth of newly attained frontier territories.

Woodruff herself continued to have children, despite having already lost five of six previous babies. In February of 1826 she gave birth to a child in St. Augustine, opting to stay in the city instead of return to the frontier plantation in the Florida wilderness she usually occupied with her husband some seventy miles away and only reachable by river. In St. Augustine, Woodruff wrote that her main occupation was “in attendance on my two dear children.”¹¹¹ This occupation was, she claims, the order her husband gave her before he left – to “never leave the children, or suffer them long to be out of sight.”¹¹² Raising and watching the children was another portion of the expectations when it came to reproductive labor. A woman's responsibilities when it came towards children and the labor they should perform hardly ended at birth. This fact was true even for a rich white woman like Woodruff. They were expected to care for the children, to watch them, keep them healthy, and to raise them in the way their husbands expected. Once daughters were old enough, they helped their mothers with younger children. Sons also began to perform tasks of gendered labor as well. A woman's reproductive labor did

¹⁰⁹ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 96.

¹¹¹ Clarkson Family Papers, 97.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

not end simply because a child was born. Children were valuable, especially on the frontier, and it was necessary for mothers to perform continued reproductive labor throughout their lives.

Once children reached a certain age, they were integrated into the labor of the frontier household. Female children were expected to participate in helping their mothers with younger children, as well as with other domestic tasks. In early settlements, frontier households would have been isolated on the borderlands and resembled the homes Laurel Thatcher Ulrich describes in *A Midwives Tale*. Women would have relied on the labor of their older children to help keep on top of things such as “soap making, candle-making, slaughtering, and endless sewing” along with the added burden of looking after any younger siblings they had.¹¹³ These household economies became more efficient as the children got older, and could free their mothers from tasks such as childrearing, babysitting, and domestic chores that took up long amounts of time. Those extra hands would have been incredibly useful while they were available, for as Ulrich notes, “only by constant effort could a woman conquer her possessions.”¹¹⁴ Household work took a great amount of daily effort, from the cooking and cleaning to the creation of necessities for staying clean and healthy, it was a grueling everyday task. The female children learned from their mother, and from the chores and the hand they had in raising their siblings, how to be good mothers and wives themselves. This labor the children provided prepared them for their own married lives while also helping their parents in the act of creating permanent frontier settlements.

¹¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwives Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, NY: Vintage House, 1990), 243.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

One such young girl living on the frontier who participated in this type of labor was Helen, a young girl who moved to the Alabama portion of the Mississippi territory from Danville, Kentucky. Helen wrote to her friend Ann from near Fort Stoddert on September 1st, 1815, complaining about having to look after her younger siblings. She wrote “Father will be at Courts for two months, one of my brothers is going to Georgia, and Mother and myself will be left at home with the children who to be sure are noisy enough to keep anyone alive.”¹¹⁵ Helen did not want to be forced to stay at home and care for noisy children on the isolated Alabama frontier, but as a daughter old enough to contribute to the labor of the household she had no choice. (Her mother most likely did not either.) In reality, “Women’s lives were centered on procreation and childrearing.”¹¹⁶ They had very little say in the matter, and a child like Helen would have had even less. In a sparsely populated territory like Alabama, this reproductive labor was all the more important. In 1810, the Alabama territory’s total non-Native population was a total 9,046 people combined, with 6,422 white and 2,565 enslaved.¹¹⁷ In order for the territory to grow, women, and the children that were the direct result of their reproductive labor, were a dire necessity. By 1820 the number of people living in Alabama had risen dramatically, bolstered by the admission of Alabama to the United States the year before in 1819. Now with 127,901 residents, Alabama was fully anchored and settled by white Americans and the enslaved people they had forcefully brought with them, thanks in no small part to the women and the reproductive labor they performed.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Letter to Mildred from Helen, September 1st, 1815. Bullit-Chenoweth Family Papers, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

¹¹⁶ Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 61.

¹¹⁷ “ADAH: Alabama History Timeline”, Alabama Department of Archives and History, www.archives.alabama.gov/timeline/al1801.html

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

It is of course incredibly important to remember that white women alone were not performing reproductive labor. Enslaved women were also forcefully brought onto the frontier of the early national period and forced to perform the same type of reproductive labor but for different reasons and with different results. While white children were valuable to their families for the labor they produced and the claims that they strengthened, slave children were valuable in a different and much more tangible way. Not only did a slave child provide a new slave for his or her owner, but if the child was healthy, it was an increase in what the slaveholder owned. White settlers “depended on the reproductive and physical labor of enslaved black women, which made slavery profitable and sustainable.”¹¹⁹ The reproductive labor that enslaved women were forced to provide for the white owners was one that could see their children used as leverage against them, ripped away from them and sold at any time, and always the women knew as soon as the child was born that it belonged not to them, but to someone else. The reproductive labor enslaved women performed helped create and sustain the American economic system of slavery, especially in areas like Alabama and Florida, from the very moment people began to migrate to these frontier territories. Black enslaved women’s bodies were objects that procured and produced enduring wealth and labor on the land that they worked and for the owners that they worked for.

While it is hard to find diaries and letters from enslaved women where they discuss the forced reproductive labor they performed on the frontier territories they inhabited, the white women who owned them mentioned them in their letters and diaries, allowing modern day historical analysis of that labor. White women were aware of the value of enslaved reproductive labor. Upon finally arriving at the family plantation in Florida, Woodruff finds herself concerned

¹¹⁹ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 12.

when she finds out that food stores had run out and the slaves had been living off of food they could find on the land. Her biggest concern revolved around the fact that “there had been two births on the place after the negroes got there.”¹²⁰ She wrote that of the food stores they had brought for themselves she gave “to each woman who was nursing a child” a “pint of grists. The poor creatures seemed very thankful for it.”¹²¹ She had given considerably less to those other slaves who were hungry, but she knew that the value of the enslaved women’s children was too great for a white family just starting out on the Florida frontier to allow the children and the mothers to go hungry.

As enslaved women probably only knew all too well, that care Woodruff showed to them likely have only lasted so long. If their labor was required, it would not matter at all that they were nursing a newborn child. In fact, “mothers could be forced to wean their infants when their labor was needed.”¹²² The enslaved women’s reproductive labor also put them even more cruelly at their owners’ mercy. “Children might be whipped, sold, or given away as presents without consulting parents.”¹²³ The threat of this torture constantly hanging over an enslaved woman’s (or man’s) head was a valuable asset to her white master or mistress. The process of childrearing for enslaved mothers is another dark area where diaries do not provide any real clues or answers. Slave children were put to work or sold away by the white planters and farmers who owned them. As a result, enslaved women experienced a different type of reproductive labor on the early national frontier than white women did.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹²¹ Ibid., 70

¹²² Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 76.

¹²³ Ibid., 76.

The reproductive labor performed by women on the frontier during the early national period was of vital importance to the very survival of the frontier itself as a successful space of American expansion and American republican values. Frontier spaces themselves were not permanent; they had to be made into permanent, non shifting spaces that eventually connected with and reflected the rest of the nation. Men could not do this alone. It took women – and their bodies – to bridge the gap between temporary and permanence on the frontier, filling the space with white children who would root themselves to the frontier territories as their home. In doing so, women’s reproductive labor allowed frontier spaces to transform from empty temporary spaces, to communal and thriving towns and cities. The reproductive labor they provided on the frontier was no different than the reproductive labor they had provided prior to the Revolution. While birthrates fell in the East, the women who had been forced to move to places so unknown and far from those they loved were tasked with essentially recreating what they had left behind through their physical reproductive labor.

Child birth was not easy on the frontier, and was often dangerous given the lack of medical care that was easily accessible, even for those who had money. Most children did not live beyond their first year of life, and this led to women having many children during the years they were capable, as families hoped for children that would live to be old enough to care for their ailing parents one day. In rough conditions where diets were poor and disease stricken children and parents led to sickness and death often, the emphasis on reproductive labor on the frontier was one not only for the nation but for the family’s survival. Child labor was necessary even for the wealthiest planters moving to the frontier. In such rough and difficult lands, the skilled and unskilled labor of children was a necessity and deeply needed for families to survive and get by. Men who moved with their families knew this, often weighing the danger of moving

into heavily contested territories against the knowledge that without their families they would not do well financially enough to survive. As children grew the type of labor they undertook changed, with girls helping with and participating in child rearing, a stage of reproductive labor that often took a great deal of women's time.

Reproductive labor was not only important for white women in order to populate the frontier with white American families, but it was important to slave owning plantation owners as well. Enslaved women's reproductive labor was extremely lucrative for slave owners, and was therefore an important part of the labor expected of them upon migrating to the frontier. Slave children were of great value, giving the slave owner not only leverage against the slaves he owned, but also increasing the number of slaves he owned as well. Adding to the number of people who could work in the fields producing for the slave owner was a great advantage, and as a result the reproductive labor of enslaved women was valued. For the enslaved women themselves it was a kind of hell, watching children grow up knowing all too well that one day they could be abruptly and forever separated. However, this reproductive labor helped add to the labor force and cultivate the land of the frontier territories slave owner's inhabited, making this labor even more valuable and sustaining and stretching the American economy of slavery even further west as Americans continued to migrate.

For men, the years after the Revolution encouraged them to chase their individualism and expand westwards towards the frontier, creating an American agrarian society that would strengthen the new nation and give them greater wealth and power than they could have previously imagined. For women, they were encouraged to remain committed to the same constraints that had been placed on them before. While some women worked out ways to hold

off on unwanted pregnancies or space out children over time, others, especially in the frontier territories and in the South were not so lucky.

All women who migrated to the frontier performed reproductive labor, some by choice, and others by force. Their husbands and other white men knew the power of this labor, they knew how powerful each child was to the newly forming places they had decided to settle down for a time were. Each child was the future of the territory he or she was born in, with each generation solidifying the communities their parents had carefully laid for them once they had settled the area. The women who had these children suffered pain and sadness and watched many children die for the few who could live, often without any say as to whether or not they wanted children in the first place. It was not their place to have an opinion on such a matter. It was instead their job to produce as many children as they could, for the health of the frontier, and for the health of their families as well.

Chapter Three: Economic Labor on the Frontier

Annie Christian was a lot of things during her life. A Kentucky frontierswoman, she, her husband, and their six young children moved to the Beargrass Creek area where they helped to found Fort Williams in 1785. The Fort was needed to help defend the settlement that had sprung up around the salt deposits found nearby that Christian's family controlled. Named Bullitt's Lick, the salt works were valuable property, and the town that formed around them came to be known as Saltsburg. Christian had no way of knowing that in less than a year after moving to the frontier of Kentucky, her husband would be shot in Indiana. He was able to make his way home, dying of his wound in the front yard of the cabin where he and his family resided in Louisville, leaving behind a widowed Christian and six newly orphaned children.¹²⁴ Christian, because of her widowhood, became the manager of her own estate, and of the family business, running Bullitt's Lick. It would be a safe assumption that in 1785, before tragedy struck, Christian would have assumed her life in Kentucky, while different, would have followed a similar pattern to that of her life in Virginia. She would have assumed her duties and obligations to be the same, those of a domestic housewife and mother. She most likely would have assumed she was going to have even more children upon moving to Kentucky. That was not to be the case.

Kentucky was an incredibly dangerous place to live, particularly for men, during the early years of its formation. While it was certainly dangerous for women and children as well,

¹²⁴ Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 47.

the danger for men lay in the need of their bodies for defense in militias and as targets of violence. A large number of women were widowed and children were orphaned on the frontier of Kentucky, as men had to leave the protection of home behind to engage in military duty. “Prominent men who had brought their families with them to establish claims were particularly vulnerable,” Sachs writes, and this vulnerability can be seen in just how quickly Christian’s husband met his demise upon moving his entire family to the frontier of Kentucky.¹²⁵ For Christian, her husband’s vulnerability and death led her to the management of “one of the biggest and most profitable industrial enterprises west of the Appalachian Mountains.”¹²⁶ Everyone moving West and living on the frontier needed salt for preservation of food and winter survival, and in the region of Kentucky that Christian lived in, she was now the one who could provide them with it. Managing the saltworks in her minor son’s name, Christian had become financially stable and independently wealthy in her widowhood on the frontier. So much so in fact that in a 1787 letter to her mother-in-law, she urges the woman to divide her estate among her other grand children in her will, as the Christian children will all be undoubtedly taken care of. She wrote “Fortune your dear son received from his parents so that at his death he provided plentifully for his dear children and most generously left me an Independent Fortune which I must leave to my Children at my death. These reasons makes me wish you to divide your estate amongst your other grand children.”¹²⁷ She was capable of providing for her children both during her life and after it.

While Christian’s story is extraordinary, women’s economic labor on the frontier was vital. They worked to help create financial stability for their households, whether it was through

¹²⁵ Sachs, *Home Rule*, 22.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹²⁷ Annie Christian to Elizabeth Christian, May 9th, 1787. Bullitt Family Papers, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter, BFP, FSH).

actual paid labor like Annie Christian's management of the saltworks, or in their contribution to the creation and maintenance of the settlements and communities they were hoping to turn into permanent colonies. Prior to the American Revolution, women's economic contributions to their families and communities were celebrated and seen as the answer to a patriotic duty to both nation and family. However as Honor Sachs argues, migrants in Post-Revolutionary era no longer felt this way, and began to harbor "expectations of yeoman households and autonomous family farms" with "women's labor becoming increasingly suspect, associated more with family failure than with patriotic zeal."¹²⁸ This shame now associated with female labor did not lessen the need for it on the frontier. Instead, it became minimized and invisible where possible, deemed less important than what was considered masculine work. If women's work was to become invisible and more regulated in people's minds as unimportant and not worth pay, it did not lessen the actual effort and physical labor it took to perform it. While the frontier depended upon the masculine ideal of independence for settlement, that independence was in many cases dependent itself upon the "unpaid, domestic labor of the dependent women who would feed, clothe, and raise the next generation of citizens."¹²⁹ This work, coupled with the economic labor women provided to help support their families, was instrumental in creating permanent settlements on the frontier.

Not every woman on the early national frontier was able to take control of their financial independence like Christian had been able to do upon the death of her husband. Christian's husband had been well off, and she was therefore in a position as a woman of means to use and

¹²⁸ Sachs, *Home Rule*, 62. See also Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

exploit a system of “close advisors and friends to help sort through her affairs.”¹³⁰ However, some women were able during this time to maintain some financial independence without men, much in the same way Christian controlled her affairs after her husband’s death. In Rachel Hope Cleves’ book *Charity and Sylvia*, she examines the effort the early national same sex couple put into remaining financially independent without the help of a man’s income. She found that women found opportunities to earn cash in “outwork” industries such as sewing. Working from sun up to sun down sewing for those who lived in their town, Charity and Sylvia experienced a “steady demand for their services that made it possible for the two women to support themselves without the earnings of a man, but only through nonstop labor.”¹³¹ While sewing was typically a domestic labor seen as women’s work, they had been able to turn it into a fairly lucrative business, using it as a means to earn their total independence and remain financially afloat during the troubles of the nineteenth century economy. They provided such an example that many women and girls came to learn from them - the reward for the grueling and taxing work was more than worth the pain it may have caused in one’s fingers and wrists.

For those women who moved to the frontier with a male figurehead in their families, this type of financial independence would have been difficult. As Sachs notes, “women, children, slaves and other household dependents contributed to and benefited from male independence, but they were excluded from the power and privilege of such status.”¹³² Instead, women moving with their husbands or fathers contributed their labor to the economy of the household or farm, working in the home or in the fields. On the frontier, white women faced challenges and obstacles to life they had not faced in the hometowns they had moved from – dealing with new

¹³⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹³¹ Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same Sex Marriage in Early America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 167.

¹³² Sachs, *Home Rule*, 48.

illnesses, new dangers, and new difficulties that would not have presented themselves in their old lives. In these ways, women and men shared similar experiences in regards to what they experienced as they worked their way across the frontier hoping to create permanent homes. While women were expected to create homes and perform domestic duties, they also helped in more “masculine” areas of work – including the fields and farming. While this was particularly true for yeomen farmers and their wives, for those first upper middle class people settling the frontier, it was true as well.

The Florida frontier was not kind to Jane Campbell Harris Woodruff. She and her family as well as their slaves had been living there for almost a year when the news that the sloop coming from Charleston had sunk with four hundred dollars’ worth of supplies on board made the situation on the frontier even more dire. “Our situation was deplorable indeed” she wrote, “but we were so thankful to find we still had a tolerable supply of corn. We were now again without a mouthful of meat.”¹³³ They caught any animal they could, including opossums, raccoons, and hawks. Indians brought them meat, which sustained them until supplies finally arrived in December, months after they were expected.

It could not have come at a better time, as they had, by December, been living under the constant veil of sickness “which had raged on the plantation” affecting Woodruff herself as well as many of the slaves.¹³⁴ It was 1824, and they had barely been there a year. As Conevery Bolton Valencivs wrote in his book, *The Health of the Nation*, adjustment to new lands took a physical toll, and to the Woodruff family and those that had come with them (most by force), Florida was indeed a new land. It was common for those who moved to new areas of the country

¹³³ Clarkson Family Papers, MS 23, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 93.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

to settle the frontier to fall ill, and at the time “medical understanding emphasized that a period of sickness was necessary to accustom each individual’s body to the region’s native ailments.”¹³⁵ In Florida, as in most Southern places, this meant malaria, usually identified by chills and fever.

This sickness is the kind that ravaged Jane Woodruff’s new Florida frontier home soon after she had arrived. The first to fall ill were the enslaved men and women working the plantation fields, and it was Woodruff’s domestic duty to care for them. The nearest doctor was over seventy miles away, and was not called for the illnesses of the enslaved people. Woodruff wrote “several of our negroes were taken with violent fevers,” “every day brought three or four negroes in. My time was now taken entirely with nursing the sick.”¹³⁶ This was life on the frontier for women, carrying out domestic duties in extreme conditions, performing labor that would create homes and domesticate the frontier.

While women often had no choice regarding the move to frontier locations, they were still expected to perform their duties as wives, mothers, and women upon reaching their new homes. Men seeking new land and to embody the new individualistic ideals the early national Era “depended upon the labor of white women, children, enslaved people, and male kin.”¹³⁷ Women not only performed the personal emotional labor that was discussed in the first chapter, but they had to perform the actual physical labor that came with moving to and domesticating the American frontier.

¹³⁵ Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 23.

¹³⁶ Clarkson Family Papers, 95.

¹³⁷ Laurel Clark Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 72.

Frontier journeys were notoriously difficult for all who were involved. For Woodruff, even the first day was a struggle, with the weather dipping below freezing and the sky falling dark around five in the afternoon while the family still had several hours left to travel. Near the end of their first day's journey, they came to a body of water. Woodruff's husband made the decision to try to cross it, ordering the driver of their carriage onward. It became clear as they made their way however, that this decision was a grave mistake. The horses quickly were too deep in the water, and the Woodruffs were on their first day already in a life-threatening position. Yelling and hoping for help, they sat "waiting in a state of great anxiety" as the horses could have overturned the entire family into the river had they become "restive" at any moment in time.¹³⁸ The Woodruffs were lucky and were eventually plucked from the river by the ferryman who had heard their calls, telling them had they "advanced even a few yards further" they "should have all been lost."¹³⁹ They were only a day out of Charleston, and already Woodruff had experienced the dangers of migrating to the frontier.

While later migrations might bring to mind covered wagon trains and travel parties that rode together west on the famed Oregon Trail, Woodruff's migration to Florida was varied. She began her journey in a carriage, but after four days of travel across land, she and her family boarded a steamboat, where it seemed to finally hit her that she was leaving the "land of her nativity."¹⁴⁰ Woodruff not only missed her brothers and sisters, but one could guess based on her immediate sick reaction to the boat's lurching and movements that she missed the dry, solid ground she was leaving behind her as well. Little did she know she had barely begun her journey. The steamboat brought Woodruff and her party from South Carolina down the coast to

¹³⁸ Clarkson Family Papers, 55.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.

Savannah, Georgia, where upon landing the Woodruffs spent a single night before once again travelling over land in a carriage on their way to the frontier of Florida. Coming to a place called the Ogechee Bridge, they were told the cause way could most likely not be passed. Woodruff's husband, in her words, begged her to take her daughter, with her daughters nurse, and walk the three fourths of a mile over the bridge as he carefully drove the carriage. Woodruff wrote that her husband "attempted to drive the carriage over, I kept close behind. And truly I never saw so dreadful a road. The carriage was nearly upset several times. At last the right hand horse sank into a hole which completely covered him up, all except his head. The other horse fell upon him and the carriage was overturned."¹⁴¹ It took hours to extricate the horses, using poles to pry them from the mud that had sucked them down up to their necks. After this incident the Woodruff family travelled only a short while longer, until Woodruff's husband was able to place her in a boarding house as he continued on to survey land in nearby Florida. Her journey was not over, but for the time being at least it would be less eventful.

Jane Woodruff's recollections of her initial journey to Florida illustrate the everyday dangers men, women, children, slaves, and all others who participated in these migratory journeys faced. Her experiences were not particularly extraordinary, nor were they peculiar. If anything, her experiences were similar to those that others experienced as they travelled. All faced danger. Wealthy white families who were migrating with slaves were able to use slave labor to help alleviate some of the more difficult and dangerous parts of the journey, using slave labor in the same manor they would have had at home. Laurel Clarke Shire writes in the book *"The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida"* that "most adult slaves walked between fifteen and twenty five miles each day on journeys into Florida.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 59/60.

Whites slept in tents, but enslaved blacks slept under open skies and in all kinds of weather. Black women cooked for everyone in the caravan while whites rested.”¹⁴² Woodruff does not mention any slaves on the initial leg of her journey until the harrowing day on the Ogechee Bridge. It is not Woodruff and her husband who free the horses, but “the negroes”, who she mentions only once on this journey, along with this first mention of her daughter’s nurse.¹⁴³ Perhaps Woodruff did not feel the need to mention the slaves who joined her and her husband on their migratory journey in her personal recollections. The perceived audience for her diary was to be her surviving children, who would of course had known their parents had owned slaves. What is important is to recognize that these slaves were being forced on this migratory journey from Charleston to Florida, and were experiencing the harrowing and dangerous journey in even worse conditions than those Woodruff described experiencing herself.

Margaret Austill’s journey began over a decade before Jane Woodruff’s. Leaving from Georgia in the spring of 1811, Austill was still a child as she and her extended family began their migratory trip towards the Louisiana territory. Unlike Woodruff, in her diary, Austill is more descriptive of who joins her family on their journey, noting that her “uncle Daniel Eades, his wife, and one daughter, Mr. Billy Locklin and wife, and about one hundred slaves men, women, and children” joined her family as they packed their belongings and loaded the wagons for the journey.¹⁴⁴ While Woodruff faced a good deal of natural danger, Austill’s journey immediately delves into the dangers pioneers faced as they travelled through contested territories. She wrote that the party soon left Cherokee territory and entered Creek territory, marking a noticeable shift in the atmosphere. They began to sleep with the wagons “fixed around the encampment, the

¹⁴² Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 71

¹⁴³ Clarkson Family Papers, 60.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Ervin Austill, *Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country and of Childhood in Clarke County 1811-1814*, SPR237, Alabama Dept. of Archives and History, 1.

women and children and negroes in the center, the men keeping guard with guns as we made a formidable appearance of defense.”¹⁴⁵ She wrote that one day they had been followed for miles by the Indians before finally settling down to camp in an old field, tired and afraid. “The night was spent in terror by all but the next day some of the Indians came to us and said it was Tecumseh stamping his foot for war.”¹⁴⁶ For a child, the night must have been memorable, surrounded in circle by wagons and men with guns, while the Indians spent the night around them in Austill’s words, “grunting out their prayers.”¹⁴⁷ They were not in friendly territory, that much was clear.

They were migrating across contested borderlands and territory into even more contested territory, which was made even more dangerous by the brewing civil war within the Creek Nation. In the frontier territory that Austill’s party was travelling over, they themselves were, to the Creeks, unsettling “reminders of the rapid transformations of the southwestern frontier”¹⁴⁸ that was taking place right before their eyes. As Daniel S. Dupre wrote in, *Alabama’s Frontiers and the Rise of the Old South*, “in 1805 Creek leaders had agreed to allow the construction of a postal road that came to be known as the Federal Road.”¹⁴⁹ This road alarmed the Creeks, and it was reported that while from 1801-1802 only 800 people had travelled the path, the number had jumped to 3,700 travelling over it between October 1811 and March 1812.¹⁵⁰ While Austill’s party may not have used the Federal Road to travel across Alabama on their way to Louisiana, it is clear that the jump of settlers and pioneers traversing across their territory made the Creeks suspicious and nervous, and perhaps for good reason.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 2

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Daniel S. Dupre, *Alabama’s Frontiers and the Rise of the Old South* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 214.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Similar to Woodruff, Austill writes of difficulties in passing over rivers and creeks, made even more difficult by the never ending rain, which washed away the roads. When the Austill party came to the Alabama River, Austill wrote that they were faced with large creeks over which the Indians had constructed slender bridges, “which they demanded toll at a high price for every soul that crossed.”¹⁵¹ Rather than do so, the men turned to slave labor to save them money, and perhaps to show a level of dominance over the Indians who were demanding money from them for safe passage. Much like Woodruff’s party had used their slaves to help them out of difficult and laborious situations on their journey to Florida, Austill’s party forced their slaves to labor on their journey to Louisiana. Austill wrote “rather than pay, the men would make their Negroes cut trees and make a bridge, which gave the Indians great anger and they would threaten us with death.”¹⁵² At a time when tensions were high as white settlers and pioneers began to encroach upon Native American territory more and more, this antagonistic attitude would seem to be one that should have been advised against. Regardless, Austill’s party continued, eventually crossing the Alabama River and stopping in Clarke County. This is where their journey ended, with Austill’s father purchasing a small claim, their plans to continue on to Louisiana derailed when the Creek Wars broke out in 1813.

While these stories of women’s hardships and the danger of travel to the frontier during the early national period are interesting as they show the inherent danger and possible death that came with these journeys, their purpose is important. While not all women were as willing to go on these journey as Woodruff appeared to be, none of them had a choice, and they all participated, willingly or not, in the act of expanding and settling the United States territories and expanding the borders beyond anything they had been before. While it may have been new post-

¹⁵¹ Austill, “Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country”, 2.

¹⁵² Ibid.

Revolution male gender ideals about individualism and Jeffersonian agrarianism that led many men to make the choice to journey through the frontier, women brought with them their unchanged gender ideals and roles. As a result, upon arriving at their new homes in whatever territory they had been taken to, they set to work domesticating the frontier, creating homes and trying to recreate the places roles and places they had left behind. However, as some women found, this was often difficult, as they were now expected to do more work than ever before, and step outside the boundaries of what they were comfortable with. There were many factors outside of their control – distance, danger, weather, etc. – that affected the work women did while living on the frontier during the early national period, but they worked hard and did what they must.

During the early national period, America was a nation of people who were on the move, looking for something else, something new in a land far away. These migrants called themselves “movers” and “improvers” as they looked to fulfill the post-Revolutionary Jeffersonian ideals that now so pervaded the nation.¹⁵³ Honor Sachs writes that at the end of the eighteenth century, “Jeffersonian Republicans ascended to power by promoting the agrarian potential of vast western lands and celebrating the yeoman household ideal.”¹⁵⁴ To spread American ideals, it would take male individualism – their new roles in their new country allowing them to venture out into new territory, claiming it and “taming” it – and making it wholly American. But it would take women as well, theoretically in their same unchanged domestic roles as mother and wife, creating and maintaining good American domestic households, and helping to “tame” and Americanize the frontier in their own way. The role women played matters, because even those women who were unwilling – who did not want to leave their homes and were devastated when they were forced to

¹⁵³ Valencius, *The Health of the Country*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Honor Sachs, *Home Rule*, 4.

do so – still participated in this Americanization and domestication of the frontier. This participation is why, as Shire puts it, “settler women must be understood as colonizers who were simultaneously complicit” in the settling of the American frontier.¹⁵⁵

Jane Woodruff’s diary provides valuable insight into the type of work white women were doing – particularly in such a difficult frontier region. The territory of Florida had been acquired by the United States in 1821, only a few years before the Woodruff family made the decision to try their luck in the area. It had not been an uninhabited frontier land before the United States gained the territory, but had instead long been a contested borderland where Spanish, British, Africans, escaped slaves, and Native peoples lived and farmed land for years out of the reach of the United States. In 1821 Americans began to pour into the territory as soon as it was opened to them, moving into the upper and central parts of the territory in hopes of creating successful permanent settlements and farms. Most people chose to live near and around the St. Johns River, clustered between St. Augustine and Jacksonville.¹⁵⁶

This area was where Jane Woodruff’s husband was most interested in purchasing land. While she sat in a house he had purchased in St. Mary’s, Georgia, he and two slaves took off on their second trip into Florida. “He was very anxious to commence settlement in that country.”¹⁵⁷ Woodruff wrote. By now it was June of 1823, Florida had been open for two years, perhaps explaining the reasoning behind Woodruff’s husband’s eagerness – he was hoping to get in and get the best land while he still could. That fall he finally purchased Spring Garden, “a plantation of two thousand acres on the St. John’s River, 70 miles below St. Augustine.”¹⁵⁸ Woodruff wrote

¹⁵⁵ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 12.

¹⁵⁶ Corinna Brown Aldrich and Ellen Brown Anderson, *Echoes From a Distant Frontier: the Brown Sisters Correspondence from Antebellum Florida*, ed. James M. Denham and Keith L. Huneycutt, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁵⁷ Clarkson Family Papers, 62.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

that they “were now in high spirits preparing to make a settlement there,” noting they had everything ready by November of 1823.¹⁵⁹ Woodruff’s husband initially left without her, as “that part of the country was so little known that it was with the greatest difficulty he found an Indian-Negro guide,” building a small log cabin and leaving behind a contingent of slaves to start working the land.¹⁶⁰ Woodruff busied herself packing and preparing, finally boarding a small ship with her husband and their belongings and heading onto the St. Johns River in February of 1824.

Woodruff was introduced to the difficulties of frontier life immediately upon her arrival. The slaves that had been left behind as well as those that had come ahead had been without food for a full five days, living on bitter –sweet oranges and palmetto cabbages. Woodruff writes this was of great concern as there had already been two births on the plantation, and most of their food stores were stuck on their boat, which could not come close enough to the plantation to be unloaded.¹⁶¹ It was an eventful and harsh welcome to her new reality. Normally, upon arrival to Florida, or any frontier area, migrants had to wait for their homes to be built. However, Woodruff, coming from a place of great wealth and advantage, had been able to stay in Georgia while her husband had constructed a log home for her on the plantation. The house was open, and according to Woodruff, more healthy as a result. Daylight could be seen through every log, but Woodruff immediately “set to work to make our little chamber as comfortable as possible. I arranged everything with as much neatness and convenience as was practicable.”¹⁶² Woodruff immediately went about trying to make her new log cabin into an actual home. Women who moved to frontier lands often felt this way, “as those tasked by antebellum prescriptive literature

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶¹ Clarkson Family Papers, 68.

¹⁶² Ibid., 70.

with making homes, they felt a great responsibility to create new domestic spaces that approximated those they had left behind.”¹⁶³ Woodruff spent a good deal of the diary talking about the type of domestic work she did upon arriving at the Florida frontier. This is a marked change from how she described her life in Charleston, where she never talked about chores beyond taking care of her sick mother or children.

Perhaps this distinction comes from the clear differences in the type of work and amount of work Woodruff found herself doing upon moving to the frontier. The daughter of a doctor in Charleston, she was afforded an at home tutor and given a good education for the time, which included music lessons. She talked most often about spending summers on the island, flirting with the federal troops who were stationed at the Fort in Charleston and the courting she experienced with her future husband. Her life in Charleston had been easy compared to what she was now experiencing in the frontier of Florida, where she was now expected to be the mistress of a large plantation, seventy miles from the nearest city, and without her family or friends around to visit or help. Additionally, as Woodruff would find soon upon her arrival, “women on frontiers often worked harder than women elsewhere and at some tasks considered men’s work in more settled parts of the country.”¹⁶⁴ Women on the frontier did not just labor inside the home – they labored outside of it as well.

Woodruff performed both her normal domestic duties, and labored outside as well. She was tasked, as was normal, with domestic duties like cooking, but even these could be complicated by simply living on the frontier itself. There were times they were running low on food, or, in one particularly memorable part of the diary, Woodruff was forced to serve meat filled with maggots, as there was nothing else to eat. The ship tasked with bringing fresh supplies

¹⁶³ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 72.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

to Spring Garden had sunk before reaching the plantation, and the situation was becoming perilous. Woodruff was forced to “pick out maggots half an inch long” from venison she had previously salted and cut, and she herself is only able to stomach eating the dish after spooning a helping of stewed cucumbers over the top in order to cover it.¹⁶⁵

This incident is telling for several reasons – first, frontier life was a gamble for all involved. The men who chose to haul their families and slaves to these locations were taking a great risk – the ship sinking was out of their control but affected each person living on the plantation. Also, women like Woodruff may not have been prepared for some of the difficulties they were to face. The venison meat she had salted and cut was infested with maggots, most likely meaning it had rotted. This most likely meant the meat had not been properly salted and cured. Woodruff, through no fault of her own, had not been prepared for this type of frontier life, and while she did not write about the struggles that caused her in her diary, in moments like this it showed.

Woodruff herself seems struck by just how difficult life on the frontier is, and how hard she and all those around her are being made to work. There were no luxury moments of rest on the frontier. In describing her daily work, she wrote that there was seldom the ability to rest for even “ten minutes through the day.” She goes on to say that “Sometimes I did not sit down to rest from breakfast, except at dinner, until night.”¹⁶⁶ This work, which included working in the fields alongside her husband, storing and preserving foods, cooking meals, keeping house, and helping to oversee the slaves was difficult and time consuming, but for a plantation mistress and wife this was what was expected, particularly on the frontier. Shire states that white women such

¹⁶⁵ Clarkson Family Papers, 82.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

as Woodruff who moved to and began to domesticate the Florida frontier had to participate in “almost every kind of work” as part of the necessity of living successfully on the frontier.¹⁶⁷

It is important to note that while Woodruff was certainly working much harder than she would have had the family remained in Charleston, she still had it much easier than most. The family had a large number of slaves – some 250 at one point – indicating not only that they had a great deal of wealth, but that while Woodruff was working hard at her new frontier life, she was doing so with the help of forced slave labor. While Woodruff occasionally mentioned the enslaved labor that she and her husband had working on their large plantation, she never gives names to these enslaved peoples, and only talks about them in relation to her own story.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes that antebellum women like Woodruff lived “in a discrete social system and political economy within which gender, class, and race relations shaped their lives and identities.”¹⁶⁸ While Woodruff might have been removed from her former social system and political economy, she had brought with her the lessons she had learned while living in them. While all white households relied on women’s work, “those who owned enslaved people also exploited labor of enslaved people for the benefit of white families.”¹⁶⁹ Woodruff and her family benefitted from the enslaved labor they had brought with them to Spring Garden, and while she had to work harder there than she had ever before, without the labor of enslaved people the creation and sustainment of this frontier home would have been impossible.

This was true for most well off white families who migrated, particularly in southern regions. Margaret Austill’s family also migrated with slave labor, and these slaves made it easier for the families in the Austill party to settle down in Clarke County once they had arrived. While

¹⁶⁷ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 40.

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Gender and American Culture)* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 37.

¹⁶⁹ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 83.

it is difficult to look at written diaries of slave women during this time, as they simply do not exist, through diaries like Austill's we can see how it was not only the physical labor of white women that domesticated frontier lands, but the forced physical labor of enslaved women as well.

For Austill, one slave in particular stood out. One day, sometime after the Austill family had settled in Clarke County, she, her mother, and their slaves were alone "when a man rode up to the gate and called to mother to fly for the Creek Indians had crossed the Alabama, and were killing the people."¹⁷⁰ As the women all collected their bonnets and Austill's mother collected her silver before taking off to run down to the river to try and cross into Choctaw Nation, the cook, an enslaved woman named Hannah, refused to leave. Austill wrote that Hannah told her mother "Missus, I will stay at home and take care of things and take you something to eat if I can find you, the devils are afraid of me you know."¹⁷¹ They left Hannah without much protest, traveling to a place called Carney's Bluff, where men were working through the night to erect a fort against the Creeks.

While other forts were being overrun and breaking up, the fort where Austill was at fared better. She attributed this better fate to Hannah. "She made the garden, milked the cows, churned the butter, raised chickens, and came every other day to the Fort with a large basket on her head."¹⁷² While Austill and her family, along with many other settlers, lived as refugees inside the Fort, as they feared being scalped and killed by the Creeks, Hannah continued the physical labor required to keep herself and others alive on the frontier. The type of work Austill described Hannah doing would have been normal work done on the frontier and in the domestic gender

¹⁷⁰ Austill, "Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country", 3.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷² Ibid.

roles that the women occupied in the home, however, it seems in Austill's recollection Hannah was doing all of the work alone. The labor of enslaved peoples like Hannah, "forced by threat of violence and a dehumanizing racial regime, was central to the creation of white American homes," and in this case, to keeping Austill and her family alive in a frontier fort as they sought refuge from the Creek Indians.¹⁷³

Austill also wrote in her diary how the women inside the fort began taking on domestic work, doing what they could with what they had under extreme conditions. While many historical accounts talk about the way "white frontier women appear to do the same quotidian labor in a different place, perhaps with more difficulties, fewer comforts, and added loneliness," a Fort while they feared for their lives in contested territory points to, perhaps, how important white women's work truly was in frontier spaces, no matter the danger.¹⁷⁴ While Austill's family was able to count on slave labor for their well-being, others most likely counted on women continuing their domestic labor in such a hectic and different place like the Fort. Without this physical labor, they would have gone without basic things, like clothing. Austill wrote that all the women in the Fort "had spinning wheels and looms in the Fort, for it was the only way clothes were obtained in those days."¹⁷⁵ Women's physical labor was a necessity on the frontier – even during the worst times that one could have imagined.

While most women had little to no say as to whether or not they actually wanted to relocate their lives to the frontier lands their husbands or fathers had chosen for them, they had to go regardless. Once they arrived, they were expected to continue the same type of work they had been doing in their previous settled homes, the domestic labor expected of women had not

¹⁷³ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 20.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷⁵ Austill, "Memories of Journeying Through Creek Country", 6.

changed. After the revolution, gender roles for men and what was expected for them had been revolutionized in order to better suit and fit the new nation. They were encouraged to chase a new individualism, an agrarian dream that would allow them to settle the nation and its new territories, to bring democracy and the new American life and government with them wherever they went. Women's gender roles did not change at all, and perhaps there was a reason for this. In order for men to settle the frontier and be capable of obtaining the individualism that was now so sought after in these frontier lands and contested territories, these men needed women whose immediate reaction to a new place was to set out and begin domestication. As Shire points out, while women often resisted frontier migration, the work they did upon arrival was significant to the expansion of slavery and American land. "In fact, that men compelled white women to go should highlight just how important their presence and labor were to those who brought them."¹⁷⁶ Women were a necessary part of the frontier migrations taking place in the early national period. They were needed to create homes and domesticate the areas and recreate the places they had come from.

White women were not alone in the work they performed on the frontier lands they migrated to. Thanks to the diaries left behind by upper class white women, the slave labor performed by those who had been ripped away from their families and transported to frontier lands can also be shown for its importance, not only on the journeys to the frontier, but once the groups had arrived as well. While women like Woodruff certainly experienced work that they would not have done in their previously homes, and were often forced to cross out of their domestic duties into much more physical roles on the frontier, they were also able to have enslaved peoples doing what can be assumed was harsher, and more taxing work for them. Not

¹⁷⁶ Shire, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny*, 16.

all those who migrated held slaves. In fact, most did not, and most who migrated were not able to purchase land outright either. However, those who did bring slaves and recreated the plantations they had left behind, in doing so further domesticated the frontier, bringing with them entrenched ideals of class, race, and slavery.

Women's labor on the frontier, emotional, and physical, matters to the history of the early national frontier. They helped to shape the very way the frontier was molded from the beginning, creating the homes, fields, and gardens the settlers and pioneers lived in and ate from. They spun the cloth that was turned into the clothes that the men, women and children wore on their backs. They were forced out of their zones, eating rotten food to stay alive and caring for those sickened by malaria, or living in fear in forts as wars raged around them. These types of labor actively matter when looking at the roles women played in the frontier context in the early national frontier. They were equal parts of the creation of, and sustaining of these frontier lands, building and bridging the frontier to mainland back home through their labor and the ideologies they brought with them.

Conclusion

Permanent territorial expansion in the early national frontier would not have been possible without the women who came to live and work in those territories. Their emotional, reproductive, and economic labor all contributed to the building of these permanent settler colonies and the re-creation of American society and values in land once dominated by Native Americans and other European nations. Their experiences traveling and living on the frontier left them emotionally vulnerable as they were disconnected from their former lives and loved ones, leaving even those who willingly moved to deal with harsh new realities and difficult times that only the frontier could have presented them with. While in established cities and towns gender roles and thinking were evolving, by necessity these women began to slip backwards in time, living as their mothers and grandmothers did, hoping to achieve their same successes in establishing these permanent settlements. These women were necessary actors in early national territorial expansion, as the use of their labor and their bodies was invaluable not only to their husbands, fathers, and families, but to their nation as well.

The women who settled the frontier may have known that it was their patriotic duty to have children and raise them as good Americans. They may not have known the great political purpose they served in doing so. Childbearing on the frontier served a political purpose on the frontier like the purpose it had served years earlier in the colonies. One of the greatest resources the United States had was its people, and women's bodies were a tangible way of creating more

wealth for the nation. While in the established states in the young nation the fertility rates fell, the first generation of frontier settlers did not follow this trend. They instead fell back on old colonial traditions of having big families. The pressure to produce large families was intense due to both public and private pressure, and failure to do so was seen as a reflection of the abilities of the women themselves, “of their husband’s masculinity, and of the country’s prosperity.”¹⁷⁷ On the early national frontier, as in colonial America, the prosperity and strength of the nation was tied to the prosperity of the American family.

While on the frontier the ideal American family reflected that of the early colonial American family, living an agrarian lifestyle with many children, in the original thirteen states the ideal for women was different. After the Revolution, fertility rates began to fall, and the concepts of motherhood itself began to change. Revolutionary rhetoric and debate called into question and challenged ideas of luxury and extravagance, emphasizing instead frugality and prudence. Restraint and self-control in all areas were promoted, and women were thought to play a key role in promoting these virtues as wives and mothers who “would mediate between the family and the state by adopting self-control and between the present and the rising generation by replicating republican virtue.”¹⁷⁸ This prudence became linked to births and children themselves as children became seen as part of the realm of the male economy. Now, in post-Revolutionary America, procreation had become less about fertility and strengthening the nation through numbers, and more about correct timing, the right number of births, and duty.

¹⁷⁷ Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*, (Chapel Hill: NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 70. In her work Klepp is building on Linda K. Kerber’s seminal formulation of Republican motherhood in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁷⁸ Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions.*, 113.

These two different types of women's reproductive labor were happening at roughly the same time in the early national period. While they may seem to be in conflict, they both served similar political purposes for the nation. On the frontier, the purpose of women's reproductive labor was similar to that of the women who had settled the colonies generations before. They were to reproduce and strengthen the populace of the nation. Fertility of both the land and the people promoted the strength of the United States, and if the women who settled the frontier had as many children as possible, it would increase the strength of the nation without draining the numbers of people living in the cities and towns in the already-established states. The children these women had would help root the United States claim to these frontier lands more firmly, creating the permanence of the settlements needed for further expansion. For the women living in the East, childbirth had changed to become centered around the virtue of restraint, viewed strictly as natural and as part of the male economic realm. Women were expected as wives and mothers to now mediate between the family and the state and play the role of a good American mother, bringing the virtues of the Republic into the home itself.

Both types of women played exactly the role the nation needed them to play to strengthen the nation. Their bodies, their children, and their roles as mothers had been politicized, and while some women used this to their advantage to exert greater control over their bodies, it had also made them incredibly valuable and necessary members of the early national period. Women and the role they played served the vital interests of the government through their reproductive labor. Depending upon where a woman lived, the state had differing visions as to what role that woman was to play to better strengthen and better the nation. On the frontier, as in the earlier colonies, the role for women was one that had her having as many children as possible for as little economic cost. For those women living in the established cities, towns and states of the new

nation, being good Republican mothers who practiced the virtues of liberty, frugality, and prudence, served the nations new interests in raising good male and female citizens who would become the new generation. While women exerted control over their bodies and practiced these same ideals in limiting the number of children they had, for the state, the greatest achievement would have been the citizens they raised who contributed to the growing nations populace.

For those women living on the early national frontier their reproductive labor was only part of the labor they performed while living in the settler colonies they worked to create. They also performed feats of both economic and emotional labor that are important to the historical understanding of how the early national frontier was formed. The journeys they undertook were dangerous, filled with the unexpected and the unnerving. The sadness they carried with them from their homes to the new settlements affected them deeply, yet they continued to do the work required of and asked of them in order to create the homes and permanent settlements needed for a better life. They labored in making their homes, in raising their children, in caring for the sick, and sometimes even in the fields. They played an important and valuable role in the creation and settlement of frontier settlements, producing the children that would one day call themselves the natives of the land they worked to cultivate, and strengthening the nation itself in doing so.

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