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Becoming American: Mormonism and the Mainstream

James Crockett Harris III

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When one reminisces about the turbulent time in American history known as the sixties, images of psychedelic drug users, the Beatles and Martin Luther King come to mind. Strangely, religion seems to have flown under the radar in memories of this period, unless one is discussing Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Although not often associated with the 1960s, religious tolerance was at quite possibly its highest point in the history of the United States.¹ This period in fact proved to be a critical turning point for one major religious body: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “Mormons,” as followers of the faith were referred to by outsiders since their religion’s inception in the 1820s, have always been known as the strange, cultish step-cousin of Protestant Christianity. In the 1960s however, something palpably changed in how outsiders perceived Mormonism and the Mormon Church.

Religious groups have traditionally been wary of conforming to cultural expectations and norms, and Mormonism was no exception. The slow acceptance of Mormonism by mainstream America seemed slow at best and nonexistent at worst from the founding of Joseph Smith’s religion in the early 19th century through the mid-twentieth century. Suddenly, in the 1960s, the Church appeared to have magically embodied those qualities that American outsiders stood for. How then did the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints change from being a religious outsider to part of mainstream American culture during this era?

This is a complicated question, and not one with straightforward answers. Currently, historiography is quite expansive yet at the same time inconclusive. The major works on the

history of Mormonism as related to American culture have been covered in three major works: Matthew J. Bowman’s *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* Lee Trepanier and Lynita K. Newswander’s novel, *LDS In The USA: Mormonism and the Making of American Culture* \(^2\) and Richard N. Ostling’s *Mormon America: The Power and The Promise*.\(^3\) These three pieces cover the history of the Latter-Day Saints Church from its inception up to the present day. While all three contain useful information regarding the history of the Church, each makes the argument that Mormonism’s convergence with mainstream America was a slow process that took almost 200 years from start to finish. In contrast, my research suggests that acceptance into the American mainstream did not take this amount of time but actually occurred during the “long sixties,”\(^4\) a period in which the Latter-Day Saints solidified themselves as an integral part of American culture.

There was no one day that marked the start of Mormonism as a staple of American culture, nor was there an explicit mass understanding of this change during the 1960s. Nevertheless, when examining the 60’s and Mormonism in hindsight, we can begin to understand the trends and patterns that clearly demonstrate the convergence of Mormons with the mainstream. The three key areas that display this are: political involvement, race relations and the civil rights movement, and the worlds of academia and economics. In the Civil Rights movement, Mormons were able to connect with both sides of the struggle through member’s unofficial and official affiliations. In politics, their power as a voting group drew the attention of the major party’s candidates, enabling Mormons to field a legitimate contender for the


Republican Party presidential nomination in 1968. Finally, in economics and academia, big names in these fields were publically recognized as successful, educated Mormons.

**Inception**

In order for full comprehension concerning the Mormons journey to mainstream America, a brief history of the frequently tormented religion is required. Started by Joseph Smith Jr. in New York, the faith is founded upon various revelations that their leader had in his late teens and early 20s. Beginning in 1823, these visions focused primarily on gold plates which were inscribed with “The Book of Mormon,” which described the tribes of Judah that were on the North American continent. Throughout the 1830s and 40s, Smith steadily gained a following in New York through his charisma and evangelical methods, but was forcefully driven from the area due to religious persecution. This persecution was from protestant Christians in the area who viewed Mormonism as social and religious threat due to their alien beliefs. From there, the Mormons moved quickly across the U.S., first to Illinois and finally to Salt Lake City, Utah, which would be their final resting place.5

In Utah, the religion further solidified its various beliefs and teachings, and worked to separate itself from American culture. Their beliefs were such that they were both blatantly unacceptable in the U.S. (polygamy) and some that were so foreign to protestant Christianity they were unable to explain and reconcile these beliefs with other religious groups. Though they eventually gained admittance to the Union as a state after facing through internal strife and external pressure to do so, they remained a religious outsider to American society and culture for over a century. Throughout this period Mormonism remained shrouded in mystery to the general public.

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American public, often negatively associated with the group’s former practice of polygamy. David O. McKay, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of The Latter-Day Saints from 1951-1970, talked to the Los Angeles Times about his firsthand experience of this undesirable association while on mission in Scotland in the early 20th century. “Many a housewife slammed the door in my face, saying as she did so: ‘You don’t get my daughters, you polygamist!’”7 This mindset illustrates the general consensus about Mormons both in the United States and abroad.

It is astonishing then, that a culture that dismissed Church members as polygamists and outsiders, would so readily accept them into the mainstream. This change in perception by the general American public during the 1960’s was due to the public’s interaction with Mormons in the three important areas of American social and political life: involvement in national political campaigns, changing attitudes about race, and the interaction between the Mormon Church and the worlds of Academia and Economics. We will first examine the political sphere, which in turn had a direct impact on how issues of race were treated within the Mormon Church. Then we will look at the convergence of the Church with the mainstream through the both academia and economics. Although these realms have only little, if any, relationship to the political realm and the Civil Rights Movement, they provide further evidence of the union of Mormonism to mainstream American life.

Politics

The 1960s shows the interesting relationship between the Church and politics, and how politics acted as a catalyst which pushed Mormonism towards mainstream America. During this time, Mormon voters had a heavy influence on the state of Utah and also on the surrounding

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western states of Nevada, California and Arizona. This large voting bloc demanded that Presidential nominees address the Church in order to win their votes in the Electoral College. Presidents and presidential hopefuls thus attempted to relate to the Mormons, and in doing so legitimized them as a credible Christian sect. This relationship between politicians and members of the Mormon religion was one of the largest steps in the convergence of Mormonism and the mainstream.

Politicians from outside the Church displayed their acceptance of Mormonism by directly addressing Mormon voters. In 1963, for example, John F. Kennedy delivered a speech at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah. There, he highlighted several key points by which Mormons were able to relate to the larger American society, and which proved that Mormons imbibed characteristics of typical Americans and cared about the same issues that they did as voters. In his speech, Kennedy delved into how Mormons were, and always had been, model Americans who exemplified moral qualities and behaviors that defined this nation’s central values.

“Of all the stories of American pioneers and settlers, none is more inspiring than the Mormon trail. The qualities of the founders of this community are the qualities that we seek in America, the qualities which we like to feel this country has, courage, patience, faith, self-reliance, perseverance, and, above all, an unflagging determination to see the right prevail.”

This comment warmed the Church to Kennedy’s side, by acknowledging their past not in terms of polygamy or other strange practices, but as a people whom were historically linked to

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admirable American qualities. This sentiment was an important signal to the public that Mormons were “true” Americans as one of the greatest leaders of the decade praised them for their “American” qualities.

Further signaling that Mormons were true Americans was one of the main topics that Kennedy covered during his speech: communism. He considered communism one of, if not the, greatest threat to America during his administration. This subject stirred fear in the heart of American listeners and this fear linked Mormons to the general American public.

“...we would be inviting a Communist expansion which every Communist power would so greatly welcome. And all of the effort of so many Americans for 18 years would be gone with the wind. Our policy under those conditions, in this dangerous world, would not have much deterrent effect in a world where nations determined to be free could no longer count on the United States.”

If history is any indicator, nothing does more to bring a people together than fear of a common enemy, and the threat of Communism was the greatest enemy America had faced after two world wars. These statements, along with others made about communism in the speech by President Kennedy, are but one example of how political platforms were able to merge Mormonism with mainstream America.

Richard Nixon however, may prove to have been the strongest political link between Mormons and non-Mormons during the sixties. Although in the 21st century his name is analogous with lack of morals and political suicide, in 1960 former Vice-President Richard Nixon was loved by many Americans for his political platform as well his military and political

career. In 1960, he ran for President for the first time against John F. Kennedy.\textsuperscript{11} Although the race ended in his defeat, newspapers chronicled Nixon’s interaction with the Latter-Day Saints across the United States, signifying the Church’s place in American society, as well as the acceptance that major political leaders had extended to the Church. For the first time in the history of the United States, the Mormon Church backed a presidential candidate.\textsuperscript{12} The words Nixon spoke in Utah while receiving his endorsement reinforced his party’s acceptance of Mormons through the world of politics. The \textit{Los Angeles Times} made note of these words and their significance in an article from October 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1960:

“The interview began with the presentation to the candidate of a genealogical chart showing him to be an eighth cousin of Reuben Clark, a first president of the church ranking immediately below Dr. McKay and of Mary Todhunter Clark Rockefeller, wife of Gov. Rockefeller. The chart showed their descendence from William Brinton and Ann Bagley in colonial Pennsylvania. “All we ask in Utah is the vote of our relatives,” Nixon quipped.”\textsuperscript{13}

Both the way in which the President of the Mormon Church introduced Nixon, and the way in which Nixon tried to woo the vote of Utah serve as signs that as early as 1960 Mormonism was far along in legitimizing itself as part of the American mainstream. The act of referring to himself as a “relative” of Mormons is the most intimate relationship the Mormons had thus far to a political figure who was clearly not Mormon, no matter what Nixon or McKay wished Church

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Lytle, M.H., \textit{America's uncivil wars : the sixties era : from Elvis to the fall of Richard Nixon}. 2006, New York: Oxford University Press.
\end{itemize}
members to believe. Inversely, as this statement connected Nixon to the Mormon community, it also signified the welcoming of Mormons to the greater American “family.”

These interactions between key political figures of the 1960s and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints are just one aspect of the Mormon’s involvement in the political realm; The Church itself endorsed a candidate for the Presidency, the second Mormon to ever decide to submit their name as a nominee: George Romney. His first campaign resulted in being elected governor of Michigan in 1963. Being a state election, this naturally garnered less national attention than a race for a national office would. In 1968 however, Governor Romney ran for the Republican nomination for President. Although he eventually withdrew his name from the Republican primaries, the widespread acceptance of his attempt proves that Mormons had become secure in their place in American culture. Trepanier notes this acceptance, but refers to it mildly as “religious tolerance.”

“…in 1968, a Mormon, George Romney, sought the Republican nomination for the White House. In 1844, Mormons were considered outcasts and ultimately persecuted in the United States. But the 1968 presidential election year could be characterized as one of religious tolerance and respect for Mormons. Americans had come to accept Mormons as American citizens in a period where an ideology of religious tolerance was predominant among the political elite, and religion after John F. Kennedy’s election to the presidency in 1960, played little role in the public mind.”

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There can be no doubt that George Romney’s foray into a national election was a pivotal point in the social journey of Mormons.

Rather than the “religious tolerance,” asserted by Tepanier being the sole reason for Romney’s success, an argument can be made instead in relation to Catholicism and John F. Kennedy, as vaguely alluded to in the previous excerpt. It would be quite a stretch to say that Catholicism, though considered slightly strange due to their need for a Pope by mainstream Protestants, ever had the same amount of disapproval aimed at it as the Mormons did. However, the oddness attributed to Catholics was evident when Kennedy ran for President, and questions were raised about his alliance to the Pope. After his election however, all doubts subsided and there were no second thoughts about Catholics. Many in America thought that the same would hold true for Romney, and if elected, Mormonism would be considered a normal Christian religion.¹⁵

This comparison indicates that though Mormons were no more distant from mainstream America than Catholics were before Kennedy ran for President, despite their outsider status. The argument could then be made, that it was not the act of Kennedy being elected President that normalized Catholicism, but rather the act of him running as a legitimate candidate; the same fashion in which Romney ran for President. This sentiment was stated in the Los Angeles Times on November 27th, 1966: “Romney’s emergence as the front-runner for the GOP nomination marks a milestone for the Mormon Church in the long road from the violent persecution it faced in the 19th century to the point where one of its members is in the race for the nation’s highest

office.”¹⁶ Later, Thrapp’s article expresses the positive reaction from the Mormon Church concerning Governor Romney’s possible presidency: “The fact that Governor Romney is now spoken of for President pleases many Mormons today, but it does not surprise them.”¹⁷ These statements, made in one of the nation’s leading newspapers, provide evidence for the argument concerning the relation between the Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. Mormons were happy that their religious beliefs were no longer considered taboo in American culture after a long persecution, but were not surprised by this as they were already on the cusp of acceptance before George Romney’s bid for candidacy.

In conclusion, the political realm proved to be key in the acceptance of Mormonism in American culture during the 1960’s. Both non-Mormon politicians, and Church politicians alike made strong advances in solidifying the place of Mormonism in culture. However, if the political realm stood alone as the only interaction with American society, Mormonism may still be a religious outsider.

**Changing Racial Attitudes**

From the beginning of Mormonism up until the late 20th century, African Americans were banned from the “priesthood,” of the Latter-Day Saints Church, due to the Mormon belief that people of African lineage were born with “The Curse of Cain.”¹⁸ This belief persisted, astonishingly enough, until the year 1978.¹⁹ An internally disputed belief, the argument could be made that the in-Church schism concerning this tenet of faith helped Americanize the Church

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during the tumultuous period of the 1960’s, in the sense that it mirrored shifts in the greater American consciousness.

It is not possible to separate America in the 1960s from the civil rights movement and the fanatical groups formed in its wake, nor the inverse. Race and racism were divisive issues in American life, with outspoken proponents on both sides of the line. The John Birch Society was an extremist group during the 1960’s. Although the Society reserved their hatred mainly for communists, they were also vocal concerning the issue of segregation, positioning themselves as against equality for the races. Throughout the 1960’s, the LDS Church faced claims from outsiders about being affiliated with this pro-segregation group. These claims, which the Church publically refuted, helped Mormons align themselves with the greater American public. This occurred in the sense that it took the focus away from their more peculiar religious beliefs, and placed it on social viewpoints which every mainstream religion had to face.

During this situation, The Latter-Day Saints were consistent in their disapproval of being associated with the John Birch Society (because of their theology concerning African-Americans) as a whole, yet promoted their intrinsic American value of Church members having the freedom to decide whether they would want to be in non-Church groups:

“We deplore the presumption of some politicians, especially officers, co-ordinators and members of the John Birch Society, who undertake to align the church or its leadership with their partisan views...[however] The church recognizes and protects the right of its members to express their personal political beliefs, but it reserves to itself the right to formulate and proclaim its own doctrine... We encourage our members to exercise the

right of citizenship, to vote according to their convictions, but no one should seek or pretend to have our approval of their adherence to any extremist ideologies.”

This notion of freedom to disagree on social and political matters than the religious body one is affiliated with was an example of Mormons not being a “cult” but rather a traditional American faith.

This is not to say however that the negative attention given to the Mormons for their theology banning African Americans from the priesthood and accusations about a relationship with the John Birch Society always contributed to aligning Mormons into the mainstream. In a 1969 *New York Times* article entitled “Mormons: Still No Place in The Pulpit For Blacks,” by journalist Edward B. Fiske, Fiske blasted the ban on blacks in the Priesthood saying, “How in this age can any American institution with nearly three million members raise second class citizenship to the level of principle? How can it maintain a virtually unchallenged authoritarian rule when most similar systems are besieged with internal dissent?”

He was not the only journalist to voice this concern. John Dart of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that, “Mormons are accused of racism by militant Negroes,” and this seemed to be an underlying concern of many Americans. In the context of the times however, accusations of racism were much preferred to the accusations of polygamy pointed only at Mormons which were so prevalent less than 50 years before.

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Ironically, Mormon’s also supported the Civil Rights Movement which helped the Church to merge into mainstream America from another direction. Although the Latter-Day Saints faced heat from the public because of their seemingly racist theology concerning African Americans, George Romney, who could arguably be the face of Mormonism during the mid to late 1960s, was a strong proponent of the civil rights movement in his state of Michigan. As author Lee Trapanier explains,

“In his first State of the State address, [Governor] Romney declared that “Michigan’s most urgent human rights problem is racial discrimination,” and he created the state’s first civil rights commission. One of the first to praise the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Martin Luther King, he personally led a civil rights march in Detroit in 1965. Romy also strongly disagreed with the conservative wing of the Republican Party, especially on civil rights, stating, ‘Whites and Negroes, in my opinion, have got to learn to know each other’”\(^{24}\)

These views supporting Civil Rights, spoken by one of the most well-known followers of the Mormon religion, helped ease the racist accusations being thrown at the Church.

This dichotomy of both the Church’s anti-civil rights views and its most prominent member’s pro-civil rights stance can appear irreconcilable at first. However, after examining the evidence available during this era it is clear that both of these views fulfilled different roles which were equally necessary in solidifying The Latter-Day Saints as prototypically American during the 1960s. The Church’s view on African Americans being lesser than whites took the focus away from their storied past and focused the public eye instead on their social stances.

George Romney’s public support and approval of the civil rights movement enforced the view that like other Churches, the Saints were not a cult controlling their followers but instead had a following of people with different viewpoints and opinions. The varying viewpoints themselves seem to stand as a symbol of how divisive the Civil Rights Movement was during the mid to late sixties.

**Economics and Academia**

During the 1960s the Mormon Church made strives toward the mainstream in the realm of economics and academia as well in the 1960’s. In 1966, the *New York Times* ran an article concerning a new intellectual journal produced by Mormon scholars. The inception of an academic journal by the LDS Church was a key step in becoming conventionally American. “*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought,*” was the first academic journal released by Mormons, and worked to end the stereotype that Mormons were purely religious and unconcerned with education as a people. The article itself proclaims how Mormons are no longer confined to their western habitat and indeed are active members of both the academic and non-Mormon world as a whole. “‘Mormons have long remained isolated from their neighbors by choice and by necessity’ he [Johnson] said. Today, however, more than half of the church’s members live outside Utah, and Mormons are ‘participating freely in the social, economic and cultural currents of change sweeping twentieth century America.’” The public took notice of this journal, impressed that Mormons were no longer self-imposing a scholarly isolation.

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If the fact that Mormons were actively producing an intellectual journal is not evidence enough of their entrance into the social mainstream, that they were becoming less isolated geographically also attests to their entrance. In 1970, the New York Times ran an article entitled, “Mormons Trade Hills for Skyscrapers in Spreading Faith,” chronicling the Church’s progress from a western phenomenon to a nationwide staple of religion. It is interesting that the New York Times would run this article as opposed to the Salt Lake City newspaper. In of itself, this is evidence suggesting that the Mormons were no longer confined to just Utah, but were being accepted as mainstream Americans by the media.

In addition to both the academic and social progress, Mormons could quite possibly be considered the most financially savvy religion in America during the 1960s. Although the church, “vigorously denounces and discredits any attempt to estimate its finances,” it was estimated that the Church was taking in roughly a million dollars a day in 1962. In a country built on the foundations of capitalism and of reaping what you sow, Mormons clearly embodied the Protestant work ethic so valued in the 1950s and 1960s. Their economic prosperity gave them credibility among wealthy Americans and enabled them to interact more with the outside world through the opening of new temples and other LDS Church establishments, “A visitor’s center containing $260,000 worth of displays and artwork was opened to the public this week on the grounds of the Mormon Temple in West Los Angeles.”

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forum to show their religious beliefs as being Christian, as well as their power and economic stability.31

Another example of how the realm of economics merged Mormonism with the mainstream, is through the person of David M. Kennedy. Kennedy, a Mormon, was the “chairman of the board of the Continental Illinois Bank, the biggest bank in Chicago.”32 This position made him the face of the Mormon church in economics. He would go on to lead his bank to being the eighth largest in the nation, with branches at multiple locations overseas, and also to serve as the Secretary of the Treasury for Richard Nixon.33 The media referred to him as, “one of the most deliberate and contemplative men in the Administration,”34 and he became one of the most highly respected bankers and economists in the country. His allegiance to the Latter-Day Saints was attributed as the foundation for his work ethic and integrity, with never a bad word said about the church. David M. Kennedy was the face of the Latter-Day Saints in the economic world, and as such represented them faithfully and honorably.

In both academia and economics, it was highly publicized in the 1960s that Mormons were heavily involved on a national level. There is no doubt that these advancements in withdrawing from the shell of religious isolationism and into the public eye contributed to the overall acceptance of Mormonism as being apart of mainstream America.

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Conclusion

After examining the role of Mormons in 1960’s American culture, it is clear that they were a growing, driven and intellectual group of people. It is also clear that by the end of the era, they were no longer considered outsiders by Americans. From politics to racial attitudes to academics and economics, in every aspect of public life the Mormons exemplified American qualities and aligned themselves with the nation founded on Christian values.

In politics, the speeches given by Kennedy and Nixon represent the acceptance of Mormons into the “American family”. The issues that these politicians addressed to the Mormons were the exact same issues they would have addressed to any other Christian community, harping heavily on the fear of communism, and also attempting to relate oneself to the community through family ties. George Romney’s attempt for the White House represented the first legitimate chance that a Mormon had to win the highest office. The lack of concern about his religious beliefs by the American public also insinuated the Mormon’s acceptance in the political realm.

In racial issues, the Mormon Church’s approach concerning its adherent’s political viewpoints was similar to that of any other Christian Church: that recommendations could be made, but in the end politics and the Church are separate, and the Church would not force a vote in either direction (segregation or equality).

Academically, Mormons finally seemed to catch up with the rest of the United States, by issuing the first Academic Journal written by Mormons. Although BYU had already been established, the act of sending out an academic journal into the greater public represented the Mormons rising from their intellectual shell. Economically, leaders in the field who were Mormon represented
the intelligence and fiscal responsibility of Mormons in general. They were moral and showed America that Mormons were in fact like everyone else, including their bank. In conclusion, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints was successfully a staple of mainstream American culture after the long sixties.35 Due to the Church’s involvement in politics, race issues, academia, and economics they proved to Americans that they were no longer the strange cult which outsiders had long attributed them to be. Rather, they embodied the values of the average American and were increasingly involved in the greater national and global context on issues which historically would have been deemed outside their control. Finally able to distance themselves from their troubled past, the Church of the Latter-Day Saints can be secure in the knowledge that they are, at long last, completely American.

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Secondary


Mother Earth and Mother Activist

Kebbi Wedeking

The University of Iowa

Colloquium for History Majors (American)

Taught by: Landon Storrs
By the late 1960s the second wave of feminism had changed the outlooks many women had on the world around them. Women were beginning to question roles handed to them by previous generations; many wondered if their place was really limited to the home, taking care of children and performing their wifely duties. These women were not only questioning the roles they played as mothers and the relationships they had with their families, but the roles they played as humans and the relationship they had with Mother Earth. Women began to look outside the four walls of their homes and began to realize that the patriarchal system of unsustainable farming and capitalism had left the earth in decay.

For centuries men had discussed nature in feminine terms and used terms like “Mother Earth”, tying women together with nature throughout history. Nature and the women of the time were perceived as unpredictable, full of wrath and vengeance, and often beautiful and mysterious. Women of the feminist movement knew that if the earth was to be repaired they would have to use this perception of closeness to nature for ecological change. Feminists of the second wave movement became inspired to change the ecological practices of the past, and came together to fight for the earth and the cause of environmentalism.

The connection with nature that women had shared for centuries was often damaging to both women and nature. If one looks solely at the United States, it becomes clear that the patriarchal system of private property (and who is the head of the household) has had a direct correlation to women, nature, and the advantage taken of them. When the Puritans landed on the virgin land of the Americas, they thought this land was radically different from the one they had left. They felt it was free to the first person to claim it. Puritan men brought their families and belongings with them on the boats from England, but more importantly they brought the belief of
private property. They began to gain titles for land, build houses for their families, and most importantly, build fences to protect their private property. Unlike the Native Americans from whom the land was taken, Puritans believed they had the right to own property that was solely theirs and they had control over what the land was used for. The landscape of America was quickly changed from a land of untouched landscapes, rivers, and wildlife; to a land of fields, fences, and domesticated animals. Nature had been controlled by men who ignored the rights of nature and shaped it to benefit them. Trees were cut down to build houses, fences were put up to protect their land, and ecosystems were destroyed in the process. While this ravaging of nature was occurring, the same beliefs were applied to women. Women were taken as prized virgins that men could shape and change to fit their needs, not there for companionship but to serve them and comply with their demands. This correlation between the views of nature and the views of women were not imagined by housewives stuck with the daily tasks of a household, but were painted vividly in the works by men of that time.

Men of the nineteenth century, when writing about the progress that had been made and the hope that came with westward expansion, often used feminine language to describe the land. Henry Colman wrote in 1833 that “Here men exercises the dominion over nature…commands the earth on which he treads to waken the mysterious energies…to impart sustenance and power, health and happiness to the countless multitudes who hang on her breast and are dependent on her bounty.”¹ Nature, like women, as the language suggests, only existed to multiply and produce offspring. As the frontier expanded so did this belief: nature and women were continually taken advantage of in the name of destiny, human (male) rights, and a capitalistic society. As Carolyn Merchant writes, “The narrative of frontier expansion is a story of male energy subduing female

nature, taming the wild, plowing the land, recreating the garden lost by Eve...Once tamed by men the land was safe for women.” In the 19th century, men in the fields allegedly tamed the land and in the process made it more civilized and desirable, while men in their houses tamed their women to have the same characteristics.

The twentieth century brought not only change to how nature was viewed and treated, but also how women were viewed. Preservationists like Aldo Muir and Gifford Pinchot began to see nature less as a place to control and more of a place in which to find refuge in. Nature was impossible to control, and by trying, Americans were destroying the natural beauty and power it held. These romantic preservationists believed that the beauty of the wild lands had to be preserved and appreciated for what it was: a place of refuge and peace. The view of nature slowly began to change from a place that only existed to provide food and shelter, to a place that was beautiful and necessary in its own right. Men of the Sierra Club began fighting to preserve national parks and areas like Hetch Hetchy in the San Francisco area. While men in the Sierra Club were fighting for the appreciation of nature, women in the Suffrage Movement were fighting for equality and some of the same rights men had. Women believed it was their right to vote, to have a voice in politics and policies that affected them and their families. With the granting of female suffrage in 1920 came the recognition that much like nature women had the right to be appreciated for who they were and the rights they had. Women and nature had a voice, but it was still meek and almost impossible to hear when speaking out against the patriarchal way of life and the system of capitalism it employed. Change was brewing, but it would take a monumental event to enforce changes in the way both nature and women were treated.

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3 Ibid
On September 27, 1962 Rachel Carson published her famous novel *Silent Spring*. In her novel Carson urged people to stop the wasteful and destructive use of pesticides like DDT and other chlorinated hydrocarbons. Through an eloquent writing style and the use of comprehensible science, Carson was able to inspire a generation to question the status quo of environmental policy. In particular, Carson was able to inspire women. She forced women to look at the food they were ingesting and feeding their children, food that had been slathered in dangerous quantities of pesticides. In her biographical article Eliza Griswold shows the reader that “Carson knew that her target audience of popular readers included scores of housewives. She relied upon this army of concerned citizens both as sources who discovered robins and squirrels poisoned by pesticides outside their back doors and as readers to whom she had to appeal.”

She used an imaginary spring where nature had been silenced, aimed at the suburbs and at the women who ran the families that inhabited them; women were critical to her success because they could relate to the issues. To Carson it was not about protecting the patriarchal uses of nature like hunting and camping; the use of pesticides had to be stopped because women were passing chemicals to their newborn children through their breast milk.

Women were becoming empowered through the feminist movement of the 1960’s and began to speak out and protest against social injustice and often taboo topics that affected their daily lives. The environmental movement collided with the feminist movement to form a symbiotic relationship between the movements. As feminists gained a voice and became more socially prevalent in their communities, the environmental issues came to light. Conversely, environmentalism gave many housewives a topic they could relate to and led them into the feminist movement. As Eliza Griswold discusses in her article covering the life of Rachel Carson,

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“Carson believed women were necessary for change.”\textsuperscript{5} Rachel Carson’s \textit{Silent Spring} served as the catalyst the second wave of feminism needed to undertake the grass roots movement of environmentalism. Much like \textit{Feminine Mystique} by Betty Friedan, Carson challenged the male-dominated status quo and made women realize they could work together for change. Both of these works showed other women that although their place might historically have been in the home, they did not have to be there anymore and they could even use this to their advantage. While Friedan claimed women that the model of female fulfillment was not fulfilling and encouraged women to strive for more than just the menial everyday tasks that fell to housewives, Carson encouraged women to take their knowledge of the inner workings of a household and use that to fight for environmental protection and end of use of pesticides.\textsuperscript{6} Women had long been tied to nature and to the home, and in the second wave of feminism these two stereotypes were used to change the rights that both women and the earth were given.

Feminists who were involved in the fight for environmental protection were often not stereotypical feminists, those who primarily cared about issues like gender inequality and women’s rights. While most cared about women’s issues and women’s equality, many had no desire to work outside of the home. They were not angry that they had forced into the home, instead they were angry that the role they played as housewives had an adverse effect on the earth. These issues were close to these women’s hearts, as Adam Rome observes, “The suburbs were domestic places-and women traditionally were caretakers of the domestic threats to environmental quality in suburbia were threats to the women’s sphere. The stakes were the sanctity of the home and the well-being of the family. For many middle class women, therefore, the environmental cause seemed a natural extension of their concerns as housewives and

\footnote{5 Vera Norwood, \textit{Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature}. Chapel Hill, 1993}

mothers.”7 Women took action, because they saw the earth being abused and knew they were the only voice that would speak up for it. Women had known for centuries that the way men treated the earth was just a reflection of the way men were treating them. When these women began to realize that they were valuable not just as wives and mothers but as humans, this belief quickly transferred to the way they viewed nature.

This was not the first time women had spoken out in defense of the environment. Many women in the progressive movement made it clear that they agreed with the beliefs of preservationist Pinchot and Muir.8 These women were not as vocal as the women in the second wave of feminism and did not make the impact that feminists made. It took the combination of women being empowered by the feminists around them demanding change and an environment that was quickly and obviously deteriorating. Most of these women did not even consider themselves feminists, but the work they did contributed to the feminist movement. More importantly it allowed these women to see what feminists around the country were crying out, realizing they could be politically active citizens who could enact change outside their homes.

As with many feminist causes environmentalism was fought for on a grass-roots level.9 Women wrote to other women attempting to show the harmful effects the current policies were having on the earth and urging them to fight for the cause. These articles focused on ways that women could effect change in their homes and around their community. Women were encouraged to think globally but act locally, focusing on where they could have the biggest impact on environmental change. In an article published in *The Argonaut* in 1970, women wrote to one another about practical ideas to act out this change. Women were encouraged to look

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9 Ibid
around their own homes and find products that could either be thrown out or replaced by more sustainable products. The author makes women think about these things by asking “do you really need an electric toothbrush- or an electric can opener for that matter.”\textsuperscript{10} She then continues by informing the reader that these are unnecessary and should be taken out of the home because “conserving electricity reduces home and office operating costs and reduces thermal water pollution at generating plants.”\textsuperscript{11} Women were also encouraged to look at the neighborhoods they lived in and instead of complaining to “do something about it” by cleaning vacant lots and letting their yards go “natural” to conserve water and prevent the spraying of chemicals.\textsuperscript{12} The second part of this article, published separately, encouraged women to look at the household chemicals they were using, specifically laundry detergent. The author of the articles discusses how environmentally and humanly damaging the phosphates in these soaps can be and encourages women to simply use soap and soda.\textsuperscript{13} Women were encouraging one another to stop acting solely out of convenience, but to become conscious of their surroundings and the actions they take on a daily basis. The environmental feminists knew that if change was going to occur, it would first take place in the home, with issues women dealt with every day. Protests brought awareness to issues, but everyday modifications to the way women lived caused the biggest change.

Air and water pollution was an important issue for feminists fighting for environmental change. While the pollution could not often be seen, except in large cities where smog was an obvious problem, the effects of this pollution were evident in the problems people were

\textsuperscript{11} ibid
\textsuperscript{12} ibid
experiencing. People who lived near factories, who usually had low incomes, were getting sicker and sicker and scientists were quickly finding their proximity to factories as the correlation. Feminists encouraged other women to pay attention to the air quality in their area and how it was affecting their health and the health of their family. They posed questions like “will you continue to pay these externalities with your body and the bodies of the people you love, or will you work to the end the attitudes that make excess production unnecessary and more immediately to make those who use our air and water pay for what they use and cleaning it up.” 14 Women were angry that this pollution was happening to their families and this language was apparent in the questions they asked and the texts they wrote. Their work with the feminist movement had taught them not to stand idly by and watch the air they breathed and the water they drank become more and more toxic. When united they had a strong voice that made it possible for change to be accomplished and they were going to use it.

Women writers became more prevalent in ecological journals and other scholarly works during the 1930’s and 1970’s. As demonstrated previously, they wrote in order to not only present the facts on an understandable level to other women, but to encourage these women to fight for change in their towns and cities. Kathleen Wood Laurilla, an Iowa resident during the second wave of feminism, encouraged women on college campuses to get involved for the environment.15 In her letter to these college women Laurilla showed how important it was for these young women to get involved on a local level, and to show the impact they could make. The grassroots level is what drove this movement, and women talking to other women made the largest gains for the movement. Women in California were able to pass one of the first state laws regulating land use. Women in New York were able to form a group against air pollution with

15 Kathleen wood Laurilla collection located in the IWA Box 30
more than twenty thousand members. These women were passing others on the street pushing baby carriages or talking to other moms at the playground, all the while spreading information about the feminist and environmental movement and showing others the impactful changes they could make. Even Ladybird Johnson became involved in 1965 with her efforts to pass the Highway Beautification Act.16 Women were becoming involved with the feminist effort to prevent environmental destruction and these grassroots organization were gaining and voice and making an impact on the world around them; almost always without the help of men.17

Shirley Briggs was another Iowa resident who, inspired by Rachel Carson, fought for the environment and helped to enact change in the way the environment was treated. Carson and Briggs spent a great deal of time together in the 1940s with the Fish and Wildlife service, learning about different ecosystems and enjoying the beauty and refuge that nature held18. These two women bonded quickly and kept a friendship that lasted until the death of Carson in 1964. Briggs continued the legacy of Carson’s work by serving and helping to lead the Rachel Carson Trust from 1970 to 1992. The goal of the trust was to “help to provide the thorough and convincing materials needed […] for conservationists striving to improve conditions.”18 Through the trust, Briggs was able to carry on the legacy of Rachel Carson and continued to show younger women how a strong female could lead and accomplish change by providing the information for feminists and activists to act on.

When an ecological crisis occurred women would be there to fight for their own rights and the rights of the environment. In 1969 a large oil spill occurred of the coast of Santa

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17 While there were environmental groups led and participated in by men, the Sierra Club being the largest, women were often forced into clerical roles in these organizations. Women found that their voices were best heard on the grass-roots level with other women fighting beside them. The environmental movement was not lead completely by women, but for my research I focused on the impact women had in predominately female groups.
18 Ibid
Women quickly came together and drove the grassroots organization Get Oil Out to stop the offshore drilling and prevent future spills. Women knew that these spills had unforeseen consequences and as subsequent spills have shown, these spills have consequences that take years to fix.

In 1973 Women in Wisconsin came together to stage a protest against the establishment of a nuclear power plant in their community. The League Against Nuclear Dangers, or LAND, worked within their community raise awareness of the dangers of nuclear power by releasing a large amount of red balloons with postcards attached to them representing different radioactive substances. The postcard also asked for those who found the balloon to send the postcard back to the women at land to represent the distance that airborne chemicals from these plants could travel, some were returned from states as far as Ohio and West Virginia. LAND was led by women who wanted to help their community and keep it safe for their children and families, middle-class housewives, many of whom did not even have college educations. These housewives who were often mocked for their lack of education and choice of activism, educated themselves on the issue of nuclear power and attempted to appealed to more than just those in power by choosing not to us the “male-dominated efforts: petitions, graphs, and charts.” Through grass-roots change these women of Wisconsin were able to prevent a nuclear power plant from being built in their town, and continued to take active roles on the state and national level.

Love Canal is another example of women responding to an ecological crisis on a grassroots level. Love Canal was a quiet suburb of Niagara Falls, New York. Comprised of

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19 Ibid
21 Ibid
22 Ibid
mostly blue-collar workers Love Canal was close to “a dump of more than twenty thousand tons of toxic waste.” In 1978 a resident of Love Canal, Lois Gibbs, became concerned when her children both became seriously ill and she began to realize that her neighbors were having a disproportionately high rate of miscarriages and still births. This toxic dumpsite was not in a field miles from town; it was under the school where Gibbs’ children along with hundreds of others attended school every day. Gibbs blamed the high rate of disease and infant mortality on this dump site, and worked for two years to enact change. Gibbs wanted the location of the site and the families affected by this toxic waste moved, and fought alongside other women to have the state authorities look past the fact they were women and take the issue seriously. The women of Love Canal were written off as uneducated and overly emotional, and men of the local and state level would not listen to the concerns they raised over the safety of their community. It was not until these women took extreme action and “had vandalized a construction site, burned an effigy of the mayor and been arrested in a blockade that government officials began to take notice.” With the unconventional action taken by Gibbs and other women of Love Canal, and research supported by male scientists, over 900 families were relocated from Love Canal. Love Canal proved that women could enact change and make an impact not only on the local level but on the national level as well. Lois Gibbs continues to fight for environmental protection and assists other women in fighting against this injustice in their communities.

The impact these women made goes beyond the second wave of feminism: environmental policies have been made into laws, and a new generation of ecofeminists continues to be inspired by the work of their predecessors. Because women took up Rachel Carson’s cause, policies like

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the Clean Air Act and the Water Pollution Control Act have been made laws on the national level. Women coming together in Love Canal and fighting for their families saved the lives of many in the community and gave birth to the environmental health movement. Women all across the country came together to protect their communities and their families, raising their voices and concerns to change the way the environment had been treated for centuries. The work of these women was never done, and the second wave of feminists allowed for women of the women of the late 1980’s and 1990’s to begin the ecofeminists movement. While often more radical than the movements of the sixties and seventies, ecofeminists gained much of their inspiration from the women of the feminists movement and the impact they had on the environmental movement. The legacy of these women continue as young women read *Silent Spring* and *Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement* and realize the changes that can be made in their own communities.

Women were necessary in the environmental movement and without the work they put forth, the change that was enacted in the 1960s and 1970s would not have occurred on the scale it did. Women were inspired by other women, like Rachel Carson and Lois Gibbs who forged the path for women to have a voice in environmental policies. Women who were involved in the feminist movement needed the women in the environmental movement to allow them an outlet to fight for the rights of the environment. Women in the environmental movement needed women in the feminist movement to provide them with a voice and a system that empowered them to fight what they were passionate about. Women were critical to the environmental movement and without these two movements coming together the change that occurred in 1960s and 1970s would not have been possible.
Bibliography

Primary


- Kathleen Wood Laurilla collection located in the IWA Box 30

- Shirley Briggs Collection located in the IWA

Secondary


- Vera Norwood, *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature*. Chapel Hill, 1993