



## DISCOVERY

Edited by  
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### **Female Presence in Religious Archives: Discovering the Documentation of “Forgotten [Church] Members”<sup>1</sup>**

While reflecting upon the subject of revivalism during the earliest stages of my dissertation research, as well as the broader topic of women and religion, I was influenced by the observations of historians Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and R. Marie Griffith. Both scholars contended that the nature of women’s religious experiences should be studied in the context of belief. Their conclusions inspired me to consider what religious belief itself—the daily as well as the weekly, the private as well as the public—had meant to nineteenth-century women.<sup>2</sup> During this time, I also revisited Ann Braude’s influential essay, “Women’s History *Is* American Religious History,” and then considered Catherine Brekus’ recent contention that “it is still difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an expansion of a paper included in a panel session, “Materials and Methods in Early American Religion: A Roundtable,” held at the Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in March of 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: New Questions and Old Models in the Religious History of American Women,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985): 465–471; R. Marie Griffith, “American Religious History and Women’s Old Divides and Recent Developments,” *Reviews in American History* 25 (1997): 220.

‘find’ women in many articles and books about American religious history.”<sup>3</sup> Their work had convinced me that I wanted to identify and examine female religiosity so the larger narratives of American religious history and, even more particularly, nineteenth-century American history, can shift in new directions.

At the beginning stages of my project, I searched for archival sources about women’s religious experiences in the revival culture of nineteenth-century New York. Although I perused various manuscripts as well as published primary sources about revivalism, my initial efforts did not result in the fruitful discoveries I had anticipated. To my dismay, various archivists could not direct me to many documents relating to women’s religious experiences, but each seemed to make the following types of comments: “We have a letter Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote,” or, “We have a collection that mentions Seneca Falls.” I wondered, Why did they see women’s history as, and only as, the story of the women’s rights movement? Was this a matter of interpretation, or lack of extant information?

According to some historiographical works, the omission of women can indeed be traced to a lack of sources. Consequently, women’s religious experiences taking place in New York during the 1800s have often become mere demographic details described in a single sentence or tucked away in a forgotten footnote. For example, in his classic work, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York*, Whitney Cross justifies his lack of attention to the female population as follows: “Although women had reached the threshold of their modern freedom, they were still so much the forgotten members of society that little satisfactory direct evidence about them has survived. Properly, they should dominate a history of enthusiastic movements, for their influence was paramount.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly Cross is acknowledging female presence in that sentence, but his larger implication is that women’s history is not a possibility in this particular context.

Likewise, historian Paul Johnson dismisses female experiences as he defines the causes and effects of the revivals in Rochester, New York, as the efforts of the emerging middle class to dominate the working class for economic gain.<sup>5</sup> In this context, he briefly notes that “women formed the majorities of the membership of every church at every point in time.”<sup>6</sup> Yet he, too, fails to explain why he is making this broad generalization, how he has drawn this conclusion, and what it entails. The rudimentary

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Braude, “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” 92, in *Retelling US Religious History* Thomas A. Tweed, ed. (Los Angeles: U California P, 1997): 87–107; Catherine Brekus, “Introduction: Searching for Women in Narratives of American Religious History,” in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* Catherine Brekus, ed. (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 2007), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Cross, 84.

<sup>5</sup> Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, 108.

acknowledgment that the number of female revival participants exceeded that of males seems to suffice. And, as a result, the role of the antagonist again subsumes that of the protagonist.

Although some works, such as Mary Ryan's *Cradles of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865*, or Nancy Hardesty's *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, certainly acknowledge the female experience in the revival culture of nineteenth-century New York, their particular emphases are not religious. Ryan, for example, focuses on the origins of the middle class family—thus emphasizing the domestic nature of nineteenth century revivalism, while Hardesty contends that the roots of feminism are located within these revival movements. Indeed, she focuses on the political and social power women attained as a result of engaging in public religious movements. Although both works make important contributions to women's history and thus American history, neither book allows readers to glimpse into the religious worlds that meant so much to so many women. Religion, such conclusions imply, was a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself.<sup>7</sup>

As I reflected upon the limitations both scholars and archivists had posed, I began to fear their assertions were correct. Although I kept finding fascinating material, none of it gave me a strong sense of how women were experiencing and writing about religion. Would lack of documentation by and about women limit my project? Did women who were not politically astute keep records? Would I need to search journals and sermon notes written by men, hoping for any reference to a female experience? And would the male lens alter how stories were told? Could religious experience, as religious experience, be historically valued? Or was it too subjective? I longed for an “aha” moment; I wanted to discover answers to the questions that had driven my dissertation prospectus. Indeed, I wanted to probe the boundaries others had set.

Answers began to come when I made a trip to the Methodist Library at Drew University, and, just an hour before my departure, at the suggestion of a Ph.D. candidate who happened to ask me what I was working on, discovered the papers of Methodist convert Catherine Livingston Garrettson. Her rich experiences, and the powerful way in which she wrote about them and thought about them, convinced me further that stories of female religiosity exist and that they are not appendages to American history (as the limiting comments made by scholars like Cross and Johnson imply); they *are* American history. Nor was religious experience only an explanatory catalyst, a way to uncover what many consider more *important* themes. Garrettson's story convinced me that I could indeed do the kind of work I had proposed, and that I needed to make return trips to Drew.

Catherine's writings, replete with accounts that explore her religious

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<sup>7</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981); and Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).

experiences and sensibilities, reveal the various textures that defined female religious life in the nineteenth century: personal agency, fluid class boundaries, the importance of both the experiential and the theological, the continuous centrality of complete conversion to Christ, the desire for sanctification and the sharing of religious insights woman to woman and woman to man, as well as man to woman. Furthermore, her journal entries make it clear that her religious commitment resulted in the sacralizing of the daily, the ordinary, the trivial. Simply stated, she did not limit religion to the Sabbath. It was the central element of her everyday life. Her religious experiences were . . . religious.

The longevity of Catherine's writings, i.e., 68 years of journal entries, enables her accounts to become a template for nineteenth-century female religious life. Since the majority of her story is centered in the time and place of Burned-Over District revivalism, it reveals much about the period historians have called the Second Great Awakening. In addition, the thoughts and experiences she recorded portray the story of revivalism's lasting impact: an account of devotion, a search for answers, and a process of personal change. Catherine's accounts depict her evolving sense of identity.

Catherine's story hinges on conversion, on deep personal change. As a young unmarried woman, Catherine Livingston, a member of the wealthy and politically powerful Livingston family of New York, socialized with the most elite members of society. Struck by the meaninglessness of her worldly existence, she began to search for religious understanding. During this time, a family servant introduced her to the writings of John Wesley. While reading his texts, Catherine discovered the doctrine of sanctification.<sup>8</sup> In reference to this experience she later noted, "these books had opened to me the way to get religion and the only way to keep it when attained." Keeping religion, by immersing herself in the process of sanctification experientially while also seeking an intellectual understanding of this theology, became the central theme of the remainder of Catherine's life. Her "heavenly race," as

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<sup>8</sup> It is significant that Catherine was introduced to Methodist teachings by the family's housekeeper; by more "elite" members of society, Methodism was considered a religion for the lower classes. Believers, however, considered it a spiritual equalizer. Nathan Hatch notes that "Methodism in America transcended class barriers and empowered common people to make religion their own." He further suggests that Methodists advanced three themes that captivated Americans: God's free grace, the liberty of each individual to accept or reject that grace, and the validity of popular religious expression—"even among servants, women, and African Americans. Led by unlearned preachers committed to sacrifice and to travel, the Methodists organized local classes or cells and preaching circuits at a rate that alarmed more respectable denominations." From 1776 to 1850, "Methodists in America achieved a virtual miracle of growth, rising from less than 3 percent of all church members in 1776 to more than 34 percent by 1850, making them far and away the largest religious body in the nation and the most extensive national institution other than the Federal government." Nathan Hatch and John Wigger contend that early American Methodism attracted "people on the make" thus fostering social mobility. Consequently, Wigger contends, they became "prominent among the nineteenth century's emerging middle class" (Nathan O. Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," *Church History* 65.2 [June, 1994]: 175-189; and John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* [Urbana: U Illinois P, 1998], 174-175).

she called it, could be traced to the choices she made (by exercising personal agency) after reading Wesley's text.

Because Catherine had discovered the importance of personal religiosity, she learned to renegotiate every aspect of her identity.<sup>9</sup> Her decision to become a Methodist, for example, required that she renounce many of her social privileges. As a result, she redefined her "status hierarchies."<sup>10</sup> For Catherine, the development of inner spirituality superseded external relationships. Fully committed to her faith, a faith she had discovered through the tutelage of her servant (lower class teaching upper class, woman teaching woman), she stripped herself of the advantages she had been raised with and became involved in a religious organization that implicitly and explicitly made status unimportant. Methodism proposed that everyone—female and male, black and white, poor and rich—had equal access to God's grace.<sup>11</sup> Rather than connecting herself to the "true women" of her social class, therefore, Catherine separated herself from anything she considered too worldly.<sup>12</sup> Her social world was subsumed by the importance of attaining personal sanctification. Catherine had indeed redefined herself as a Methodist, a spiritual pilgrim, and, most significantly, an individual who was a child of God.

A careful study of Catherine's journals reveal universal elements of the conversion story: They detail her growing sense of religious awareness, personal awakening, revival attendance and spiritual birth, as well as external expressions of religiosity and the ever-present search for sanctification. Perhaps the greatest value of her personal papers is their longevity; they allowed her to elaborate in great detail upon the ongoing process of sanctification through her continuous commitment to Christ.

Although several historians have acknowledged the gradual development of the conversion experience, they often fail to view the search for sanctification

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18.2 (Summer, 1966): 155; Candy Gunther, "The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Rachel Stearns," 577–595.

<sup>10</sup> Candy Gunther, "The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Rachel Stearns, 1834–1837: Reinterpreting Women's Religious and Social Experiences in the Methodist Revivals of Nineteenth-Century America," *Church History* 65.4 (December, 1996): 581.

<sup>11</sup> John Wigger contended, "Methodism was created as much by women and it was by men" because it "depended on women and men working in tandem." He further noted that women made up the numerical majority of the early Methodist movement. Between 1786 and 1801, they composed 57 to 66 percent of the total Methodist membership in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. In addition, women made up the majority of class meeting members. Women often played a key role in establishing the church (John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* [New York: Oxford UP, 1998], 151–152).

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," 155; Catherine Livingston Garrettson to Mrs. Edward Livingston, (February 11, 1839), Box 2 Folder 26, Methodist Library, Drew University; Catherine Livingston Garrettson to Edward Livingston, (August 28, 1804), Box 2, Folder 25, Correspondence 1804–1836, Methodist Library, Special Collections, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey; Catherine Livingston Garrettson to Edward Livingston, (October 13, 1821), Box 2, Folder 25, Methodist Library, Drew University.

as a continuation of the revival story.<sup>13</sup> As John Wigger concluded: “The holiness ethos fostered by Methodism was more powerful than any abstract theological innovation of the time.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, John Wesley’s teachings had a far-reaching impact on nineteenth-century revivalism that encouraged spiritual pilgrims, i.e., those seeking salvation, to search for a personal understanding of important doctrines: sanctification, holiness and perfection.<sup>15</sup> Catherine’s engagement in this quest suggests that scholars such as Ann Douglas and Barbara Welter went too far in concluding that religion was entirely sentimentalized and feminized, that ecstatic experience trumped a rigorous intellectual quest for theological understanding. Catherine clearly valued both.

The desire to experience and understand sanctification dominated Catherine’s journals and correspondence. As a devout Methodist, she opted to become “formless clay in the hand of the potter.”<sup>16</sup> Her religious choices, past and present, resulted in constant change—change marking the continuation of her conversion process through the grace of Christ. Describing her resolution to endure, she wrote, “My mind is still engaged for the best of heaven’s gifts . . . I will not let go.” Yet she does not ignore the spiritual struggles that comprised her *daily* religious life. Catherine anxiously awaited the blessing of sanctification. Perpetually frustrated by what she perceived to be personal spiritual shortcomings, she continued to plead with God to grant the gift she so desperately sought. In an expressive journal entry she declared, “My soul waits upon thee with ardent expectations. My faith says now Lord Oh! send me not empty away.” Forty-six years earlier she had made a similar plea: “I am emptied, but not filled; I dare say sin is at present destroyed. But I am

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh suggests that entire sanctification “was often narrated as a further conversion,” but he only devotes three pages to this discussion, and his evidence is drawn solely from the conversion narratives of male preachers (D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005], 252). See also Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God’s Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986); and Catherine A. Brekus, “Writing as Protestant Practice: Devotional Diaries in Early New England,” *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 19–34.

<sup>14</sup> John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> According to John Wigger, sanctification was the “central theme of the earliest Methodist preachers in America.” By the nineteenth century, he suggests, Methodists preached less about this subject. They “minimized [Wesley’s] concept of Christian perfection.” Although it “remained a conspicuous aspect of American Methodism,” it meant less to “American Methodists than it had to Wesley.” While interpretations of perfectionism and sanctification certainly varied, an interest in the doctrine did not decline in the personal lives of nineteenth-century women. I would contend that journals, memoirs and correspondence written by such individuals remain focused on doctrine of sanctification. The desire for salvation, which culminated in the belief that individuals could become perfected and holy is the personal preoccupation of many different women from a variety of denominational backgrounds. While the theological definitions varied, the desire to become perfected through the grace of Christ served as the catalyst behind nineteenth-century revivalism and the conversion that resulted from and continued after these meetings (Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 20).

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Livingston Garrettson *Autobiography*, Methodist Library, Drew University, 7-10.

not filled with joy, and faith, I have not that access, my soul pants . . . I have no witness, of sanctification.”<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, Catherine discovered that just as emptying her soul from sin took time, filling it with the grace that accompanied sanctification likewise required a continuous process of cultivation and growth. She slowly recognized that her choice to accept the pilgrimage toward holiness necessitated a lifetime of internal transformation.<sup>18</sup> She had been changing—she was being sanctified—all along.

Discovering Catherine’s story proved to be a significant turning point for my dissertation, and it has become an important foundation for my future scholarship. As I worked my way through her journals I wondered if other female-authored accounts existed in denominational archives—so my search continued, this time, far more successfully. As I traveled to various repositories, this time knowing what I was looking for, I discovered women’s journals, diaries and correspondence (most of which have been overlooked). I realized that many libraries are unaware of the richness of the materials they hold relating to women’s spirituality, and that these often-undiscovered gems provide fresh insight and perspective into broader themes of American religious history, women’s history and literature, as well as essential details about lived religious experience and, in the case of the particular project I have been describing, new insights into the history of the Burned-Over District.

As the journals, diaries, correspondence and memoirs of nineteenth-century New York women are set “side by side” with Catherine’s writings, common patterns of religiosity emerge; these records make it clear that the process through which women grappled with the doctrine of sanctification allowed them to redefine conversion as a lifelong transformation rather than an event; they also suggest that how women worshiped, what they read, how often they prayed, what they wrote in their journals, whom they interacted with, to what extent they shared their beliefs and served others—these things mattered to them. The daily as well as the weekly, the private as well as the public, impacted their personal lives and their cultures. Their stories were not only available; they were rich and meaningful.

The identities religious women forged also helped them transcend nineteenth-century depictions of their gender as inherently domestic.<sup>19</sup> Piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity—the four “cardinal virtues” of “true womanhood”—were centered in the “proper sphere” of the home, where a woman became “an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own.” True womanhood was expected to be the one constant in a world rife with change; as Barbara Welter explained: “a true woman was

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine Livingston Garretson Journal (February 4, 1799), Box 2 Folder 7, Methodist Library, Drew University.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18.2 (Summer, 1966): 155; and Candy Gunther, “The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Rachel Stearns,” 577–595.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), 5.

a true woman, wherever she was found.”<sup>20</sup> And yet, as women attended revival meetings and experienced spiritual birth, they abandoned the comfort of continuity—found in gender and social norms—by making choices that required change. Consequently, the continuous quest for salvation culminated in cultural paradox: women encountered conflict between the prescribed role expectations of true women as “empty vessels” and their personal spiritual desires.<sup>21</sup> Although nineteenth-century women tried to behave in the ways “women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature” told them good women should behave, those striving for sanctification developed a sense of closeness to God which encouraged a stronger sense of spiritual autonomy and individuality.<sup>22</sup> As these “empty vessels” realized they could be filled with the grace of Christ, they continually refocused and redefined their spiritual commitments, which in turn altered their self-perceptions. Domestic work and social situations became seemingly unimportant in comparison to religious ambitions. Having redefined themselves as spiritual pilgrims searching for sanctification, women encountered “new directions” and “repeated redirection” along the pathway of life.<sup>23</sup>

Such archival discoveries revealed that periods of personal awakening, the revival itself, immediate spiritual birth experiences, and the decision to join a specific church begin rather than conclude women’s religious stories. For many New York women, these events became catalysts for a lifelong transformation through which their spiritual and temporal lives became aligned. Their journals make it clear that religious experiences encouraged women to determine what they valued most rather than allowing society to dictate the kinds of decisions a “true woman” should make.<sup>24</sup> If the impact religiosity has had on these women’s lives is ignored, then the ways in which spiritual agency strengthened female identities is dismissed.

The personal writings of Catherine Livingston Garrettsen are about more than one woman’s spiritual journey; they become a template for how women lived and expressed their religiosity in nineteenth-century America.

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” 151–152, 155.

<sup>21</sup> Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 20–21.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Spacks, “Selves in Hiding,” in *Women’s Autobiography*, ed. Estelle C. Jellink (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), 112–132.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860,” 151–171.