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Lori D. Ginzberg. *Untidy Origins: A Story of Women's Rights in Antebellum New York.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 222 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2947-9; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5608-6.

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Rethinking the Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Feminist Movement

According to conventional teaching nineteenth-century feminism and the women's rights movement burst forth in 1848 when Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and others held the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. However, in *Untidy Origins*, Lori Ginzberg persuasively argues that the origins of the women's movement are not so neat and tidy. What led her to this conclusion was the discovery of a petition presented and read to the New York constitutional convention by Democrat Alpheus S. Greene in August 1846. The authors of this petition, that "firmly demanded 'equal, and civil and political rights with men"' (p. 7), were six farmwomen from Jefferson County in northern New York. According to Ginzberg, the fact that women were clearly engaging in "both private conversations and public appeals for women's political rights years earlier" than 1848 demonstrates the need to rethink the "origins of the nineteenth-century feminist movement" (p. 7). [1]

Untidy Origins explains how the ideas of the petitioners concerning political identity and citizenship developed and secondly, what may have led these six individuals to believe in and formally express their right to full political membership in their nation. These "were ordinary rural women who lived in dense and particular personal and economic and political networks" (p. 25). They settled new communities on the northern New York frontier and as such were isolated from "the prosperity and the intellectual bustle of their state" (p. 25). Simultaneously they were clearly a part of the larger "conversation" concerning the meaning and rights of citizenship. What shaped their world and actions was the process of migration, settling a new community, establishing farms with their husbands, and supporting kin and community networks, all of which most likely gave them a strong sense of identity and place. They were not necessarily rebelling so much against a woman's place in provincial life, as they were expressing "[t]heir pride in what they had built and their indignation that [under New York law] it was nevertheless not fully theirs" (p. 81).

Professor Ginzberg begins by presenting a history of ideas concerning the definition of citizenship as it related to women's political identity in nineteenth-century America, considering, for example, classical republicanism, the working-class movement, and the influences of Protestantism. Chapter 3, "Property and Place" then shifts to placing the lives of the six women petitioners into historical context. Jefferson County was an isolated region to which these families, as members of the property-owning class, "introduced farms, markets, churches, legal stability, and political communities" (p. 50). Experiences of this nature combined with the extensive and economically critical work performed by farm wives "made the women's political and legal inequality particularly salient" (p. 51).

The six petitioners were members of families and communities that consisted of "politically alert and engaged people" (p. 126). The strong influence of Protestantism and the "ongoing religious discourse" concerning the "role and status of women" (p.85) was a strong intellectual influence for women. Farm journals and newspapers were extremely important in disseminating ideas and played a central role in shaping "conversations in people's kitchens as well as in convention halls" (p. 99). Through newspaper editorials, ideas concerning "the rights of African American men, property rights, and the basic laws of New York" (p. 124) reached into household kitchens and became the focus of discussions. Likewise, "antislavery activism, rights talk, and women's civic identities emerged and merged, in [the] political life" (p. 109) of Jefferson County. Professor Ginzberg also points to the probable influence of the nearby Iroquois on "rights talk" in Jefferson County because the status and political rights of Iroquois women within their society

offered a sharp comparison of possibilities.

August 1846 marked the New York constitutional convention. Besides the mainstream economic and political issues which required attention, the matter of full citizenship and the rights of African-American men was a central topic. So was the matter of property rights for married women, which Ginzberg discusses in detail. By contrast, the petition of the six women from Jefferson County received no publicity and the petitioners became lost to history, that is until now. That the petition was presented, printed in full, and made its way into the published version of the "convention debates" meant that "the grievance of a half-dozen women was registered, offering a dissenting view of citizenship and belonging" (p. 153).

Lori Ginzberg's account of the intellectual and social processes that brought the 1846 women's rights petition into being is one that ultimately takes the story beyond a simple categorization of "women's history" as it deftly weaves together local, social, political and intellectual history. *Untidy Origins* is a highly readable, well-documented book that offers an extensive and useful bibliography. This thought-provoking work will serve well in both undergraduate and graduate courses in U.S. History and Women's Studies.

Notes

[1]. Professor Ginzberg notes that "other petitions that are being, and likely will be, discovered" are challenging the Seneca Falls origin of the nineteenth-century feminist movement (p. 7). She also notes that recently "historians of women have undertaken a critical revision of the traditional narrative of women's rights" (p. 10). This includes the work of Nancy Isenberg, Bonnie Anderson, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Susan Zaeske, Sally Roesch Wagner, and Louise Michele Newman.

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