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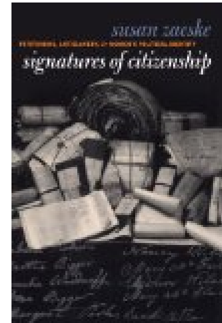
Susan Zaeske. *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xiii + 253 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-5426-6; ISBN 978-0-8078-2759-8.



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Petitioning for Citizenship

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Susan Zaeske's *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* has contributed to the very rich historiography of women's antebellum reform movements. Over the past twenty years, the role of women within the anti-slavery movement has been clearly documented, transforming the understanding of women's direct and indirect involvement within the antebellum political sphere. Reform in the nineteenth century, specifically abolition, provided political opportunity for women, allowing them direct entrance into an arena once only inhabited by men. As women participated within their local, and eventually national, antislavery societies, their domestic spheres spilled into national political debate. Zaeske's work explores the role of women's antislavery work from the 1830s through the Civil War; however she focuses upon petition drafting and signing, a unique departure from the existing historiography. Many historians of the antebellum era have assumed that petition signing was a natural part of the antislavery movement; however, Zaeske demonstrates that it was an integral development within the struggle. *Signatures of Citizenship* explores the role of petition writing in the anti-slavery campaign, why it became popular, particularly for women, and how it changed antebellum reform movements, including the developing crusade for women's rights.

Although women used the right to petition during the Revolutionary War to receive widow's compensation or on behalf of their husbands, petition writing developed a new meaning during the antebellum era. Women affixed their names to anti-slavery petitions throughout the early 1830s, representing an early example of women exercising a political agenda that would influence national policy (p. 12). Zaeske explains that petition signing offered women a new method by which they could assert citizenship and "figured centrally in the larger, ongoing, fluid struggle over defining and redefining antebellum American citizenship" (p. 28).

Traditionally, women were urged to refrain from direct political action, compelled to support a virtuous citizenry by nurturing and educating the next generation of American leaders from within the domestic sphere. Republican Motherhood left little if any room for women to become directly involved with political matters on the local or national level.[1] Abolition and the era of petition signing served as a huge departure from women's activism of the past for it called upon women to engage political issues such as slavery, the annexation of Texas, and a host of other national concerns. As women became involved in abolition through local institutions such as female anti-slavery societies in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, they committed themselves to the power of the petition, often walking from door to door, down the narrow streets of antebellum cities in search of support. In 1834, few women would directly petition Congress to end African slavery; however that would change quickly.

By 1835, women's petition writing and direct political action would characterize and transform abolition.

According to Zaeske, the twenty-fourth Congress assisted anti-slavery crusaders when they succeeded in tabling all petitions regarding the abolishment of slavery. When John Quincy Adams was called to vote upon this measure he cried, "I hold this resolution to be a direct violation of the constitution of the United States, the rules of this House, and the rights of my constituents" (p. 71). What became known as the gag rule sent a wave of fury and righteous indignation through abolitionist communities, and although Congress passed the resolution with the hopes of stemming the tide of numerous anti-slavery petitions, their actions created the opposite response. The first gag rule actually inspired female abolitionists to dedicate themselves to petition writing during the summer of 1836. Aside from the intensified commitment to end slavery, female abolitionists accused slaveholders of conspiring to destroy northerners' civil rights (p. 73). Abolitionists instructed women to ignore Congressional leaders and to follow their own conscience with respect to the evil connected to the trade of African men and women. As petitions continued to flood Congress, a second gag rule was enacted, prompting female abolitionists to do more than simply sign petitions based upon moral obligation. Zaeske clearly demonstrates that this second gag rule moved women to declare themselves citizens with a Constitutional right to petition Congress. Female duty no longer served as the impetus to petition, linking the petition to citizenship.

As more and more women, both black and white, began to fill the ranks of anti-slavery activists, the political identities of these women transformed. Zaeske demonstrates that women began to sign petitions alongside their male counterparts. Similarly, they discontinued the tradition of signing petitions using only their surname and began to insert both their first and last names. Female abolitionists entered into public dialogue without the consent or approval of male guardians, thus challenging traditional gender norms. Zaeske writes, "When married women signed petitions, they defied not only general prohibitions against women expressing political opinions but also the belief that there was no need for women to speak independent of their husbands, an act that challenged biblical and legal doctrine" (p. 108). Female academies founded during the early republic prepared many women to engage in anti-slavery activity. With literacy and formal education in their possession, women began to routinely place their signatures upon petitions, rejecting the laws of coverture and asserting themselves as politically active citizens.

However the importance of the petition began to lose steam by 1840, as a host of issues fragmented the American Anti-Slavery Society. Central to the split in the society was the question of women's participation in the AASS, specifically the decision to appoint a woman, Abby Kelley, to the business committee. Garrison supporters in favor of immediate emancipation, nonresistance, moral suasion, and women's participation in leadership roles within the society won the vote; however the AASS would remain changed forever. Garrison opponents would form the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and kept the question of women's rights separate and apart from abolition. The AASS remained committed to the fight against slavery; however neither organization could ever recreate the fervor and direction witnessed during the 1830s. Many anti-slavery women discontinued the strategy of attaining signatures via door-to-door petitioning.[2] Yet Zaeske asserts that abolitionists, both men and women, became more political during the 1840s as they adapted to the emergence of a party system and the development of party politics. By the 1850s, women such as Catherine E. Beecher, who had been an outspoken opponent of women's petitioning, began to sign her name to petitions.

The fracture of the national organization spilled over into local societies, prompting the female anti-slavery society in Boston to disband.[3] The decline in organized abolition did not, according to Zaeske, prohibit women from petitioning Congress to end slavery. Women continued to petition throughout the 1860s, inserting their opinions regarding the most important political issues of the era. In addition, the tone of later petitions differed from those of the 1830s, for women disengaged from deferential pleas and put forth bold demands as citizens of the United States. Petitioning would lead to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment and, eventually, to the long awaited Nineteenth Amendment, confirming women's position as voting citizens.

Zaeske has made a wonderful contribution to the study of women's involvement in U.S. political culture. Her exploration into the rhetoric of female anti-slavery petitions adds yet another perspective upon the transforming political identities of educated female reformers.

Notes

[1]. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 235-236.

[2]. Jean Soderlund, "Priorities and Power: The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 78-79.

[3]. Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 25-28.

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