
**Reviewed by** Cynthia Patterson (University of South Florida)

**Published on** H-Florida (August, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

This slim volume should be a must-read for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and early career scholars working in the field of women’s history. As the title suggests, the volume serves as a bibliographic reference highlighting the key books and articles published over the last fifty years broadly treating southern women’s history. More specifically, the volume serves as a celebration of the accomplishments of the Southern Association for Women Historians (SAWH), founded in 1970. *Sisterly Networks*, edited by long-time SAWH member and former SAWH president, Catherine Clinton, is the third volume in the Frontiers of the American South series published by the University Press of Florida, a series edited by William A. Link. The volume includes a foreword by Link, introduction by Clinton, five chapters from long-time SAWH members, three helpful appendices, professional biographies of the contributors, and an index.

In his foreword, Link notes that he began attending SAWH meetings and receptions at the Southern Historical Association (SHA) annual conferences thirty years ago as a young scholar. He declares the SAWH “a critical incubator of new and dynamic scholarship” in the field (p. vii). Clinton’s introduction traces the prehistory of the SAWH, focusing on the contributions of early “pathbreakers” in the area of women’s history, such as Julia Cherry Spruill, Willie Lee Rose, Mary Elizabeth Massey, and A. Elizabeth Taylor. She credits the SHA for electing women presidents in greater numbers between 1930 and 1980 than did the larger US organizations, such as the American Historical Association (AHA) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH), noting that the SAWH was organized at an annual meeting of the SHA. While generally lauding SAWH founders and early leaders, Clinton readily admits of “missteps” along the way, related to the contributions of male scholars to the field and the (implied rather than stated) somewhat slower incorporation of scholarship from/about Black women and LGBTQIA scholars/scholarship into the field.

Chapter 1, “Barbarians at the Doorbell: Tales from the Archives,” also authored by Clinton, her-
alds the efforts of archivists and librarians to provide access to oft-hidden materials by preparing and publishing finding aids and by driving collecting practices. Clinton relates her early experience as a graduate student with “gatekeepers” who created roadblocks for women to access archival materials (p. 21). However, the bulk of the chapter praises the (mostly women) librarians and archivists who collected materials, curated resource guides, created and published handbooks, and established research centers for the study of southern women’s history.

In “Testing Our Mettle: Women’s and Gender History in the Battle over the Civil War,” the focus of chapter 2, Michele Gillespie celebrates the contributions of women historians to a more nuanced gender and racial understanding of the Civil War and the Confederacy. That said, she bemoans the fact that these insights have largely failed to gain traction in popular understandings of the Civil War or the teaching of these events in academic departments. Gillespie also notes that while the academy has diversified hiring practices, women constitute 52 percent of lecturers but only 24 percent of full professors and even lower percentages of department chairs and deans (p. 40).

Chapter 3, “A Place Where Women Can Feel Valued, or Why Academic Professional Associations Matter, Especially for Women,” by Melissa Walker, focuses on the “two important things” that the SAWH has done for women academics: “advance the careers of individual female historians and encourage, develop, and legitimize the study of women’s history” (p. 58). Walker particularly notes the role of active SAWH members in mentoring young scholars and in sponsoring (financially) a series of prizes to recognize the best books and articles on southern history authored by women. Like Clinton, she admits to some early “conflicts,” particularly around race, pointing out that Black female historians report both “racism from white feminist scholars and sexism from black nationalist male scholars” (p. 66). However, she asserts that the recent work of SAWH historians affected not only southern history but US history as well, by introducing “the idea of overlapping identities,” what scholars now refer to as “intersectionality” (p. 72).

Cherisse Jones-Branch, in chapter 4, “‘Can the Sistas Get Some History, Too?: Transformations in Southern Black Women’s History,” reprises her presentation given at the Milbauer Symposium, “Strange Careers: Fifty Years of Southern Women’s History,” held at the University of Florida in November 2018. Jones-Branch’s essay traces her twenty-year experience with the SAWH from 1998 as a young graduate student to the 2018 symposium. The essay represents a veritable “who’s who” list of southern Black women’s historians and notes the importance of both activism and scholarship to the construction of their work. Jones-Branch states that much of Black women’s history has hitherto focused on women in urban locations. She argues for more scholarship—such as her own on women affiliated with the South Carolina Agricultural Extension Service—that brings to the surface the voices of rural Black southern women.

In chapter 5, “Present at the Birth of a New History: A Southern Midwives’ Tale,” Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore argues that the success of the SAWH rests on “five major interventions that rewrote Southern history at large” (p. 99). First, the association wrote two hundred years of southern women’s history. Second, in doing so scholars “created a new genre of writing” that combined the personal and the political. Third, in addressing race, class, and gender, these scholars contributed important “critical insights” into intersectionality (p. 100). Fourth, scholars contributed to new “deeply gendered interpretations of the Civil War.” Fifth, in moving beyond regional histories of the South, scholars connected “Southern concepts of race and gender” to national political issues (p. 101).
The three appendices also contribute to the significance of this volume. Appendix A records a roundtable conversation held at the 2018 Milbauer Symposium in which panelists, including the five contributors to this volume, both reflect on their SAWH experiences and issue calls to action for the future of the association. Appendix B lists SAWH presidents from 1970 to 2020, as well as the titles of the major addresses given at the SAWH meeting at the SHA annual conference. Appendix C provides the titles of the eight volumes in the Southern Women Series published by the University of Missouri Press between 1994 and 2009.

In both summarizing achievements of the past fifty years and charting future challenges for the SAWH, this volume proves an essential work for any scholars interested in US women's history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58196

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.