Caroline Merrick and Women's Rights in Louisiana

by Samantha LaDart

From the earliest period of American history there has been concern over the legal, political, economic, and social status of American women. The situation confronting the antebellum southern woman was one of the most complex. In the South, the feminine ideal was one defined by men and reiterated repeatedly. That ideal, as promoted in southern sermons, speeches, and periodicals, was pious, pure, submissive, and compassionate.

The southern woman was expected to be a model of virtue, a guardian of youth, and restraint on what was believed to be man's natural tendency toward immorality. Ibis ideal was not connected to any gain of female power in the home, nor was it dependent on industrialization and the shift of the home from a workplace to a haven as it was in the North. It was a man-made convention which defied change. George Fitzhugh, a southern social theorist wrote that "so long as she [woman] is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident, and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to improve that weakness" and "woman, like children, has but one right, that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves that obligation to obey." <1>

The feminine ideal was an essential part of the psychology of the institution of slavery. This institution, which influenced every aspect of life in the South, was dependent on obedience and subordination for its survival. The man of a slaveholding household was the "master," and not only of the slaves. Submission from all family members was necessary for the household to run efficiently. Ann Firor Scott, in her book *The Southern Lady,* writes that family members were "expected to recognize their proper and subordinate place and to be obedient to the head of the family. Any tendency on the part of any members of the system to assert themselves against the master threatened the whole, and therefore slavery itself." <2>

It was not until the Civil War that southern women began to challenge their "right to protection" and the "obligation" that went along with it. This was certainly the case in the state of Louisiana. The expanded role of Louisiana women during the war and the Reconstruction which followed was a major catalyst in the women's movement in Louisiana as circumstances forced them in new directions. For the first time, affluent women had the opportunity to emerge from the sheltered role of their sex. These experiences led one woman, fully aware of the denial of equal rights to women, to evolve into the role of a public activist. It was this woman, Caroline Merrick, and her experiences which began the women's rights movement in Louisiana.

Caroline Merrick, born Caroline Thomas on November 24, 1825, came from a solidly southern background. Her father, Captain David Thomas, was from a prominent South Carolina family and migrated to Louisiana as a young man. A veteran of the Battle of New Orleans, he served as trustee of a college (which later became Centenary College of

the Methodist Episcopal Church South) and settled at Cottage Hall Plantation, five miles from Jackson, Louisiana. He is remembered by Merrick in her autobiography as "a firm, courageous, and judicious man loved by many, even his slaves." <3> He was somewhat lenient with Merrick and her five brothers and sisters, but like other southern males, perpetuated the image of the "southern lady" and expected his daughters to live up to that ideal. An example of this occurred once when she and a female cousin of hers prepared to go out for a short ride. Her father refused to let them go saying that it was improper for two young ladies to be seen on the road alone. <4> This experience caused Merrick to realize the restraints placed on her life because of her sex and she commented in her autobiography:

I early ascertained that girls had a sphere wherein they were expected to remain and that the despotic hand of some man was continually lifted to keep them revolving in a certain prescribed and very restricted orbit. When mild reproofs failed there were always other curbs for the idiot and eccentric inclinations. <5>

Like other southern women, Merrick married at a young age. She was fifteen when she married Edwin T. Merrick, a thirty-seven year old district judge of the Florida Parishes. There is no evidence to indicate that she did not enter the marriage willingly or that she ever regretted the marriage. Nevertheless, her recollection that her father thought she "could not enter too soon upon woman's exclusive path and be marching along towards woman's kingdom with a companion in the prime of noble manhood" <6> seems to indicate a certain bitterness towards a society and a father who would dictate such a role for her.

The next twenty years of Merrick's life were marked by the birth of her four children, Judge Merrick's appointment to chief justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court, and a subsequent move from the first home of her married life in Clinton, Louisiana (north of Baton Rouge) to New Orleans. These years were spent child-raising and housekeeping. As the children grew older, a sense of boredom and helplessness began to grow in their mother. She remarked in a letter to a friend that she longed for a "circle of interesting acquaintance ... it has been a sore trial to give up one son to the centenary and my husband to the State and my daughters to school." <7>

The beginning of the Civil War in 1861 finally spurred Merrick into action. The years of the war were years of separation for the family. Her eldest, David, only seventeen years of age, joined the Confederate army in Virginia. When New Orleans fell to Federal troops early in the war, Judge Merrick took refuge behind Confederate lines. While the family was temporarily absent from New Orleans, their home was captured. Merrick and her children remained at Myrtle Grove Plantation (her brother's home on the Atchafalaya River) for the duration of the war.

During this time the plantation was alternately within Confederate and Union lines. Merrick was forced to make hazardous voyages on the river to get supplies. She nursed the sick and wounded of both the Confederate and Federal armies, as well as providing nursing care for her family and slaves on the plantation. In addition to these trials, her son

returned from the Battle of Seven Pines with a complete loss of hearing and the loss of sight in one eye. In spite of all of this, she describes these years in a letter to Frances Willard (leader of the Christian Women's Temperance Union and close friend of Merrick's) "as the happiest epoch of her life." Willard explains this statement by pointing out that, perhaps for the first time, "every faculty of her mind was in lively exercise, for she was entirely dependent upon her own resources." <8> In her memoir, Merrick titled the chapter on Reconstruction "How Women Came to the Rescue," demonstrating her assessment of the role played by the women of the era. She wrote:

It is folly to talk about the woman who stood in the breach of those chaotic days, being the traditional southern woman of the books, who sat and rocked herself with a slave fanning her on both sides. She was doubtless farmed when she wished to be; but ... she was trained to meet responsibilities. So in those days of awful uncertainties, when men's hearts failed them, it was the woman who brought her greater adaptability and elasticity to control circumstances and to lay the foundations of a new order. <9>

Here we see the rise of a new "southern lady," -- one who, with strength and dignity, rose to meet the challenges that faced her. With so many men away from the home, wounded or deceased, Louisiana women moved out of their traditional sphere and took some control over their own lives and the life of their communities. The war had created a generation of women without men and those women, according to Anne Firor Scott, "felt a common impulse to learn about and begin to deal with the world outside of the home." <10>

What had first been groupings of women to support the war effort, became Confederate memorial societies. Eventually, these groups began to branch into charity committees and institutional boards. As long as the women were working for such benevolent causes as community improvement or fund-raising , their new role was accepted. However, as women gained self-confidence and felt pride in their achievements they began to push for further responsibilities. At this point the new role for southern women ceased to expand. Women were faced once again with the problem of their limited powers and freedoms in the patriarchal South.

Caroline Merrick eagerly assumed the responsibilities that the war and Reconstruction placed on her. She served on charity committees and institutional boards. By the end of the 1870's, she also became more aware of the plight of women and desired to do something for her own sex. <11>

In 1878, an inmate at St. Anna's Asylum in New Orleans (a home for destitute women and children) desired to leave one thousand dollars to the institution upon her death. The board of directors of the asylum, including Caroline Merrick as the secretary, stood as witnesses to the will that was drawn up instructing this. When the will was later probated, the women of the board were informed that the will was worthless! Women could not be used as witnesses to a legal document, so the money went to the state.

This incident motivated Merrick into action. A state constitution convention was planned to meet in New Orleans and Elizabeth Saxon (a younger friend of Merrick's who was a more active advocate of women's rights) felt that this would be a good time to bring up their grievances. She and Merrick drew up a petition outlining their disagreements with state law. It pointed out that while women paid taxes, they were denied the right of representation. They were not allowed to hold office, except in cases of special tutorship and specified cases where they could serve as administrators. Women were unable to witness wills or notarial acts, even those involving other women. They stated that women needed the right to vote, but then conceded that the members of the convention may have felt a full vote was asking too much for women, so they asked that women should at least be allowed to vote on school and educational matters, since they involved, to a great degree, women and children. <12>

Merrick then set about obtaining signatures for the petition. Although the other women on St. Anna's board had been greatly distressed over the matter of the will, tradition was hard to break; they refused to sign. In spite of similar opposition, 400 signatures were obtained and the petition was sent to the convention.

Upon receiving the petition, the convention invited the women to the St. Charles Hotel to meet with the state's committee on suffrage. Elizabeth Saxon spoke on behalf of the women, becoming the first woman in Louisiana to speak before a state body on the subject of women's rights. The committee was sufficiently impressed. They granted the women a formal hearing at the June 16 evening session of the convention. At the hearing, Saxon and Dr. Harriette C. Keating (who came from out of state to speak) gave impressive speeches. However, the greatest applause and enthusiasm was reserved for Merrick's talk.

She thanked the convention for its kindness and then proceeded by assuring the delegates that the women of Louisiana harbored no desire for political honors. They were asking, however, for the vote. She said that women were working night and day to improve their sex. They were trying to open new routes of education in order to try and make women "helpers of men, not millstones around his neck." <13>

The hearing before the convention created a sensation and the women were hopeful for positive results. However, their efforts gained only a minor concession: Article 232, which stated that "women twenty-one years of age and upwards shall be eligible of any office of control or management under the school laws of the State." <14> Even this small concession lay dormant for a number of years. In 1885, when Governor Samuel McEnery was asked to appoint a woman to the New Orleans school board he refused. He argued that the new article was inoperative because it did not repeal the laws which came before it stating that if a husband changed his place of residence, the wife would be obliged to follow. Also, the wife could not sign any bond that might be required during her term of office without her husband's consent. Since the husband was bound "in solido" with the wife, as implied in Article 255, then the husband would, in a sense, share the office with her. <15> Despite Merrick's attempts to refute these claims, she was unable to persuade the governor to appoint a woman.

The achievement gained by women in 1879 cannot be measured, however, by these disappointing results. Louisiana women, following the lead of their northern sisters and invigorated by the role they played in the Civil War, had dared to speak out in public. The favorable response of many leading newspapers was a prophetic sign of the future acceptance of a more public role for women. Louisiana women made few political or legal gains during the remaining years of the century, but after 1879, they appeared more and more on the public scene, following a pattern frequently used in southern states from missionary societies to temperance unions and then to women's clubs. <16> These groups served as a kind of a training ground where women were encouraged to think for themselves, to speak for themselves, and to develop leadership skills.

Merrick continued her crusade for women's rights throughout the rest of her life, also following in the pattern of contribution to the community. She was president of the New Orleans, and state of Louisiana chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1892, she organized the first women's suffrage association in Louisiana, the Portia Club, with nine charter members. Encourage by state-wide interest in suffrage for women, committees met in 1896 to form a State Woman Suffrage Association with Caroline Merrick as the president.

Women who followed this pioneer activist became more and more involved in reforms and the political action necessary to accomplish these reforms. It was Merrick, however, who first led the way. She lived to be eighty-three years old, dying in March, 1908. Through her lifetime experiences of restraint on her personal and political freedoms because of her sex, she set upon a crusade to make a positive change in Louisiana. Like many other women, she had come to realize her own full potential and the potential of women as a whole during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods and was reluctant to let that potential be squelched. Women could not go back to their traditional roles after those roles had been so completely modified. It was up to women like Caroline Merrick to define the new roles for women, fully realizing that the possibilities were limitless. Her only regret, as she states in her memoirs, was that she did not live to see "the Louisiana woman vote as unrestricted as the Louisiana man." <17> Her only unanswered question was why there were so many who believed in the rightness of the woman's cause, but would not "come forward and strengthen the struggling vanguard." <18> As women enjoy the many freedoms they have achieved, that question still rings true today.

Notes

1 George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South* (Richmond: Morris Co., 1854), pp. 214-15.

2 Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 17.

3 Caroline Merrick, *Old Times in Dixieland: A Southern Matron's Memories* (New York: Grafton Press, 1901), p. 5.

4 Merrick, p. 11.

5 Merrick, p. 12.

6 Ibid.

7 Carmen Lindig, *The Pat From the Parlor* (Lafayette, LA: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1986), p. 28.

8 Frances Willard, *Woman and Temperance: The Work and Workers of the Women's Christian Temperance Union* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 564-65.

9 Merrick, pp. 75-76.

10 Scott, p. 136.

11 Willard, p. 566.

12 Lindig, p. 37.

13 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Ida Husted Harper, *The History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. III* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881-1922), pp. 790-95.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Scott, p. 142.

17 Merrick, p. 288.

18 Ibid.

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