

**Frances Willard, Lynching and Race:**  
**The Moral Failings of an Iconic**  
**Progressive Reformer**

Adèle Catlin Bernhard  
Department of History, Barnard College  
Senior Thesis Seminar  
Professor Mark Carnes  
April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frances E. Willard was one of the most famous women in America. Senator Shelby Cullom of Illinois, a personal friend of Willard's, declared to President Theodore Roosevelt that her name "is familiar wherever the English language is spoken."<sup>1</sup> W.T Stead, an editor of the *Review of Reviews*, gave Willard the title, "The Uncrowned Queen of American Democracy."<sup>2</sup> In 1905, seven years after Willard's death, the congressional members from each state presented two statues for the Statuary Hall in the U.S Capitol to honor their most influential and admirable state citizens. The representatives of Illinois choose Willard, the only woman selected by all of Congress, for her leadership as president of the largest women's organization of the time, the Women's Christian Temperance Union from 1879 until 1898. In his speech commemorating the statue, Cullom proclaimed, "The world is a better place because Frances E. Willard lived. She devoted her life unselfishly to the cause of humanity, and she brought sobriety into the homes of untold thousands; and at her death, she left an organization that has been, and will continue to be, a potent factor for good in the world."<sup>3</sup>

As president of the WCTU, Frances Willard transformed the evangelical group from a relatively unknown collection of reformers confined to the northern Midwest to the largest women's organization in the world by 1890. In 1879, when she took the position as the group's second national president, the WCTU had

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Adams Gordon, *The Life of Frances E. Willard* (Evanston, IL: National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1921), 298, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t1mg7g98t;view=1up;seq=7>.

<sup>2</sup> Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago, 1970: University of Chicago Press), 222, Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, 299-300.

27,000 members. Willard made it her mission to expand the WCTU and strengthen its political affiliation. She made female suffrage a priority. During her presidency, she allied the WCTU with the National Prohibition Party, with the condition that the party would include women's suffrage to its platform. She built a similar relationship with the Progressive Party and went on to create the Home Protection Party. Willard used the argument of "home protection," the need for women's involvement in the public sphere to guard the safety of the private sphere, as a way to use conservative means to promote radical objectives such as women's suffrage.

The image of Willard as a revered and loving reformer originated in the first biographical work by Anna Gordon, who was Willard's longtime personal secretary and confidant. Gordon published *The Life of Frances E. Willard* in 1912 with an introduction by Willard's close English friend and fellow temperance reformer Lady Henry Somerset. Gordon and Somerset depicted Willard as a just moral crusader. As Somerset outlined in the opening pages of her introduction, "Frances E. Willard is the greatest woman philanthropist of our generation. I do not hesitate at the use of this word "greatest.""<sup>4</sup> Somerset went on to further claim the impeccable caliber of Willard's leadership by describing it as "prophetic" and enabled Willard to successfully "steer clear" of any and all barriers and challenges she faced. In closing, Somerset credited Willard for "furnishing the women, not only of a great continent but the world over, with a just realization of their rightful position, by her safeguarding gospel: "Womanliness first — afterward, what you will."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, ix.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, ix.

Gordon nearly surpassed Somerset in praising Willard. Gordon called Willard “a great soul,” “...conscious aglow with divine light,” and having the “life of a genius.”<sup>6</sup>

Gordon and Somerset constructed a narrative of Willard’s life as uncontroversial and perfectly embraced by the public. Gordon wrote, “Her name, to use Milton’s well-known phrase, is ‘writ large’ in the annals of her time. A nature with such variety of gifts, such combinations of excellences, drew to her side not only those committed to the reforms and philanthropies for which she particularly stood, but all lovers of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Wherever Willard went, Gordon gushed, she experienced “universal friendliness.”<sup>8</sup> Gordon even cited Senator Cullom’s implausible praise of Willard as a reformer whose “...advocacy of reform in temperance never made her offensive to any class of people.”<sup>9</sup>

The scholarly literature on Willard following Gordon and Somerset largely followed this trend of praising Willard. In 1944, historian Mary Earhart historicized Willard with more nuance in *Frances Willard; from Prayers to Politics*. Earhart had gained access to newly released correspondences and scrapbooks that gave more information about Willard’s work outside of suffrage and temperance. Earhart found Willard to be a tactful leader who built support for progressive reformist positions within a religiously conservative base.<sup>10</sup> In reviewing her work, scholars like Blake McKelvey applauded Earhart for providing a “more dynamic and fuller

---

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, 1, 333, 340.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, 340.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon, *The Life*, 299.

<sup>10</sup> Jack S. Blocker, "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: A Biography by Ruth Bordin," *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (June 1987): 193, doi: 10.2307/1908575.

picture” of Willard.<sup>11</sup> Historian Gladys Bryson agreed by acknowledging Earhart for not directly following Willard’s “apostles” like Gordon and providing critical analysis and a more objective stance.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on Willard’s greater political and economic aspirations rather than solely temperance reform, Earhart’s work further gained praised for being “...an earnest and competent effort to rescue an extraordinary woman from her idolaters.”<sup>13</sup>

During the 1980’s, historians such as Ruth Bordin, Willard’s most recent biographer, and Jack Blocker further endorsed Willard’s use of feminine ideals of women safeguarding the home as a way to promote liberal policies. Bordin, referred to Willard as “St. Frances of American womanhood”.<sup>14</sup> Both Bordin and Blocker emphasized Willard’s initiatives beyond temperance such as women’s right to vote, public kindergartens, separate correctional facilities for women, and Protestant ecumenicism.<sup>15</sup> Bordin that she wrote her biography “...for a later feminist age” by highlighting Willard’s radical push for women to take a larger active role in the public sphere<sup>16</sup> As Bordin attested, she sought to provide a historical analysis

---

<sup>11</sup> Blake McKelvey, "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics by Mary Earhart," *New York History* 26, no. 4 (October 1945): 514, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23149944>.

<sup>12</sup> Gladys Bryson, "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics. by Mary Earhart," *American Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (September 1945): 158, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2771423>.

<sup>13</sup> Louise M. Young, "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics by Mary Earhart," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 239 (May 1945): 225, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1024790>.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Birgitta Anderson Bordin, *Frances Willard: A Biography* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), xi.

<sup>15</sup> Blocker, "Reviewed Work," 193.

<sup>16</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, xiv.

beyond the static sainthood mythology initially established and diversified the understanding of Willard's impact.<sup>17</sup>

From Willard's first biographers through Bordin, historians have described Willard in many ways — as a temperance reformer seeking to save the nation from demon rum, as a protector of the domestic sphere, and as an early day feminist who prepared the stage for activist women in the late 20th century. But the varying degrees of enthusiasm for Willard caused historians to minimize her decisions to make alliances with racist organizations and to justify lynching and other crimes against African Americans. Willard's presidency of the WCTU was not smooth sailing as she confronted the predicament of gaining favor from southern temperance reforms in exchange for accepting and at certain points outright promoting their racism. The great challenge, then, is to understand how a right-minded woman reformer could become so deeply bound up in vile racial politics and ideas. That requires a reconsideration of the pivotal years after the Civil War, when Willard strove to use the WCTU as a catalyst to bridge the North and South together. Her ideological journey dating back to the formation of her religious views in her youth helps unveil how these crucial years arose.

Her diaries as a young woman before her time involved in the WCTU and her speeches given while on tour of the South as president of the WCTU provide insight as to how she became associated with white southerners who favored lynching to preserve racial hierarchy in the post-Civil War era. Her diaries show how much stress the Civil War caused Willard and her desire to live in a unified country. Her

---

<sup>17</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, xiii.

religious views embodied this desire for inclusion as she so willingly sought to bridge differences between people. After the Civil War and as Willard matured, she prayed that temperance would effect the reconciliation of the North and South. In her autobiography, Willard believed that in making Northerners and Southerners temperance reformists, she could find common ground amongst previously battlefield enemies.

In seeking to build common ground between Northerners and Southerners, Willard found no benefit in addressing issues of race, even though by 1896, lynching African Americans was widespread, particularly in the South. The Reconstruction Era was riddled with violence directed toward black communities.<sup>18</sup> The rights gained through the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments that granted African Americans citizenship and African American men the right to vote posed a threat to whites, who sought to perpetuate racial inequality through lynching, segregation, and Jim Crow laws. In much of the nation, Willard found it difficult to raise issues of racial injustice while also trying to build her support amongst southern white WCTU members.

Her speeches promoting the WCTU to Southern audiences reflected the struggles Willard faced in allying the North and South in the context of opposing racial views. Willard became caught between the demands of civil rights activists and white southern women advocating supremacist agendas.<sup>19</sup> As such, she looked

---

<sup>18</sup> "Lynching in America," PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-lynching-america/>.

<sup>19</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 222.

for ways to appeal to both so that she could pursue her vision of having one nationally cohesive temperance movement.

Frances Willard was born on September 28, 1839, near Rochester, New York. One of five children, Willard grew up in a household that upheld egalitarian principles. Her father, Josiah Willard, was a member of the Free Soil Party and the Methodist church.<sup>20</sup> Josiah pursued an active role in public life by also becoming a leader of the Wisconsin Agricultural Society and introduced Lincoln when he came to address members in 1859. Both a staunch supporter of Lincoln and a devout follower of the Methodist tradition, Josiah raised Willard with the values of abolitionism and religious principles.<sup>21</sup> Her mother, Mary Willard, provided instruction on reading and writing. Willard's autobiography confirms that Mary provided reading materials that included Methodist and Free Will Baptist Sunday books as well as Anti-slavery Society volumes.<sup>22</sup>

When Willard was still a young child, Josiah moved the family from New York to Oberlin, Ohio to pursue a life of ministry at Oberlin College. The Willards found a strong and vital abolitionist community that they embraced. Willard reflected in her autobiography that amongst some of the literature that she first read was *The Slaves Friend*, which taught abolitionist values to children. As she remembered, the reading

---

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Birgitta Anderson Bordin, *Frances Willard: A Biography* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Richard W. Leeman, *Do Everything Reform: The Oratory of Frances E. Willard* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Leeman, *Do Everything*, 4.



“stamped upon me the purpose to help humanity, the sense of brotherhood, of all nations as really one, and of God as the equal father of all races.”<sup>23</sup>

During the Civil War, Josiah Willard made his family’s cellar a stop along the Underground Railroad.<sup>24</sup> As noted in her diary, Willard at age twenty expressed her political support for Abraham Lincoln when he was first elected president in 1860 and wished that she could have voted for him like her father and brother Oliver.<sup>25</sup> Her admiration for Lincoln grew with the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. In her autobiography, she exclaimed, “... four million of wretched beings became this day constitutionally free, and the feeling in their hearts of what a gift this freedom is to a human soul. It was a thing that thrilled me beyond my power to tell, one that I am thankful has transpired in my experience, and that I shall think over with frequent pleasure”.<sup>26</sup> Willard would try to uphold these sentiments throughout her life, including her time as president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. She would refer to President Lincoln as, “our beloved Lincoln, the emancipator.”<sup>27</sup>

Along with abolitionist principles, Willard grew up in a family of temperance reformers. The temperance movement in America garnered momentum during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with Protestants initially leading the charge. Growing fears of excessive alcohol use fueled the temperance cause. Public drunkenness at social,

---

<sup>23</sup> Let something, xxiv.

<sup>24</sup> Sharon Anne Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow* (n.p.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Frances E. Willard, *Writing Out My Heart: Selections from the Journal of Frances E. Willard, 1855-96*, ed. Carolyn Gifford (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1995), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years; the Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago, IL: H. J. Smith), 4022-4024, Kindle edition.

<sup>27</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 4448.

political, and religious events gave reformers the rhetoric to argue that drinking alcohol would ruin the newly formed United States and call for the need of reliable and respectable sober citizens.<sup>28</sup> The Willards participated in the movement by signing personal pledges not to drink and giving support to temperance candidates.<sup>29</sup> In 1858, Josiah even moved the family to the dry town of Evanston, Illinois. Willard described her new hometown that “Temperance was a matter of course in this ‘Methodist heaven.’”<sup>30</sup>

However, Willard did not always adhere to views her father sought to instill in her. Before 1860, Willard struggled to embody the faith and adhere to the kind of life her father expected. During her early days as a student at the Female College of North Western, Willard openly stated her distance from Christianity. In a letter to William P. Jones, the president of the Female College, she proclaimed herself to be “a great sinner” for her doubt in God. Her lack of faith left her “cold as an iceberg” and “unconcerned as a stone.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the criticism she inflicted upon herself, she felt neither ashamed nor proud of her defiance. Willard believed it would be a continuous struggle to grasp the surrender to God and accept the fundamental teachings of the Methodist faith.

For Willard, the battle was internal and thus caused a barrier between her and her community. She knew that practicing and believing in the religious teachings would enable her to take part in and receive the embrace of the congregation. Willard sought to better herself and her understanding of the world,

---

<sup>28</sup> Let something, xxiv.

<sup>29</sup> Let something, xxiv.

<sup>30</sup> Let something, xxiv.

<sup>31</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 28.

but could not do so through religion. As a student, Willard garnered a reputation for skipping Sunday services, resisting salvation, and regularly challenging her teachers.<sup>32</sup> In the same letter to Jones, Willard acknowledged how congregants would celebrate her “return to the fold” if she were to speak in church, but the thought of praying and preaching made Willard feel fraudulent and “hypocritical.” Though she stated, “I am willing to attend Church, though it interferes very much with my progress in science.”, she understood herself to have a “dark wicked heart.”

<sup>33</sup> To Willard, membership in the Methodist Church was not just a label, but also a testament to personal values and moral understandings.

Willard resisted Christianity until, at the age of twenty, after surviving a bout of tuberculosis, she had a spiritual awakening that drew her to the Methodist faith. Her near-death experience caused her to have a monumental shift in her spiritual life. In January of 1860, a little over six months after her recovery, Willard wrote in her diary:

I have united with the Methodist church because I like its view of the doctrine taught in the Bible, better than those of any other branch of God’s militant Church, because I have been reared in it, and for me to attach myself to another would cause great sorrow and dissatisfaction in quarters where I should most desire to avoid such consequences....[but] Before I ever declared myself determined to live, being helped by God, a Christian life, I resolved to educate myself in unsectarian spirit. I honestly believe that I regard all churches, the branches rather of the one Church, with feelings of equal kindness and fellowship.<sup>34</sup>

Willard’s spiritual awakening signified a joyous occasion. Having recognized the need for religious acceptance to feel part of the community, she found peace in

---

<sup>32</sup> Leeman, *Do Everything*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 29.

avoiding the “sorrow and dissatisfaction” of the Methodist Church. Willard had the self-awareness to recognize that though she aligned herself with the Methodist faith, others followed different religious paths. Her respect for differing religious practices carried through her time as President of the WCTU. Willard would later shock conservative Protestant members by taking initiatives to incorporate Catholics and Jews into the work of the WCTU.<sup>35</sup>

Willard was able to reconcile her newfound faith with her scientific beliefs. In her diary entry on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1860, she wrote, “If it be true that we need to say “God help us! When we think ourselves strong,” I believe that the opposite is equally true, - nay, that we need *Him* most when most distrusting our own capabilities.”<sup>36</sup> Her reliance on God served as a way to use her intellect for the greater good. As she went on to claim, “...ask the Kind, Infinite Helper, to mold [me] by His providences...let them be what they will so that every year [I] may grow ...”<sup>37</sup>

For Willard, the teachings of the Methodist faith perfectly aligned with her support of abolition. The “equal kindness and fellowship” translated to the belief that all Americans ought to be free from slavery. A few weeks after writing her diary entry proclaiming her alliance with the Methodist Church, Willard noted on Methodism, “There is neither male nor female, bond or free, but ye are one in Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Willard valued the Methodist egalitarian stance that all are on the same

---

<sup>35</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 105.

<sup>37</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 57.

footing in the eyes of Christ. She abhorred the “narrow-mindedness and bigotry” exhibited by other members of the church but chose to focus on the spirit of unity.<sup>39</sup>

Willard found further reconciliation between her religious and social views through the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher, a Congregationalist preacher and supporter of women’s suffrage. In February 1860, Willard copied Beecher’s “Woman’s Influence in Politics” address in which he claimed that regardless of gender, when a person has a gift from God, they must fulfill their “prophecy” and use it. He further claimed that women are “...as much called to act and has much right to act as [men have].”<sup>40</sup> Willard praised Beecher for speaking the truth with such eloquence. His words inspired her and filled her with gratitude to be in “...the midst of the Reforms and Inventions and Civilization of the Present Age.”<sup>41</sup> The progressive values that Beecher exuded brought Willard hope that her religious principals could be used to pursue reformist goals.

However, in Willard’s personal views, despite her religious advocacy that people of all races and genders are equal to God, she expressed sympathies towards racial differences. In comments about Edmonia Lewis, an African American female artist, she met while visiting Rome in 1870, Willard observed, “She is...unusually good-looking for her race, though she has its salient characteristics of physiognomy and voice”.<sup>42</sup> Willard found it an “anomaly” for Lewis to live in Rome and be an artist because of her “proscribed race.”<sup>43</sup> Though the trip to Europe provided the

---

<sup>39</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 60.

<sup>41</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 328.

<sup>43</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 329.

opportunity for Willard to broaden her interactions outside of the homogenous demographic she grew up in, she still lacked experience in facing issues amongst a diverse population.

When Willard returned to Evanston from Europe in September 1870, her journey towards becoming an official temperance leader took shape. In 1871, she began to receive local public recognition when she became the first president of the newly established Evanston College for Ladies. When the college merged with Northwestern University, Willard became the dean of the women's division. However, the same year the WCTU began in 1874, Willard left her job in education.<sup>44</sup> Willard became introduced to the organization that summer through her attendance of the first Gospel Temperance Camp Meeting in Maine and visiting temperance reformers in New York City. After taking part in temperance organized public demonstrations, Willard received and accepted the offer to become the Chicago chapter's WCTU president. From there, she gained national attention by becoming the organization's correspondence secretary of the National WCTU, which required her to travel across the country making speeches and establishing more local chapters.<sup>45</sup> In 1879, Willard then became elected president of the WCTU and held the position until her death on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1898.

When Willard became president of the WCTU in 1879, the country was still working to find coherence between the North and South in the wake of the Civil War. Temperance held the reputation of being a crusade of northern reformers and even churches erupted in divides along the Mason-Dixon line. When Willard took

---

<sup>44</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 7.

over the WCTU, the group consisted of mostly white middle-class women from the northwest. The WCTU was geographically isolated during a time of greater regional polarization. Even Willard's religious ties to the Methodist church could not inherently bridge North and South sentiments. The Methodist church split during the war between the Methodist Episcopal Church in the North and the Methodist Church South.

During Reconstruction, members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, who traveled to the South to help freedmen and reorganize the southern churches, met hostility from southern Methodists.<sup>46</sup> Willard remarked on the resistance of northern imposition when she visited the South in 1881 to gain support for the WCTU. A southern woman approached Willard and stated, "We were suspicious...we thought [the WCTU] had come down here, as the carpet-baggers did, to serve their pockets and their ambitions by our means, but we don't think so now."<sup>47</sup>

Willard's ability to overcome white southerner's hostile stereotypes of northerners benefited the national expansion of the WCTU. One of Willard's greatest acclaimed achievements as president of the WCTU was her ability to spread the WCTU outside of the Midwest to create one of the largest national women's organizations. This in large part had to do with her dedication to incorporating southern membership. Willard saw the South as not only an opportunity to gain new territory for the WCTU but also as a way to strengthen the Union after a bloody civil war. Temperance was not just a reform policy, but also a bridge to ally the

---

<sup>46</sup> William W. Sweet, "The Methodist Episcopal Church and Reconstruction," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 7, no. 3 (October 1914): 149, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40194198>.

<sup>47</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 8098-8099.

North and the South through a common cause. Willard reported in autobiography, "South "Solid" for the prohibition of the liquor traffic might be exchanged for the South Solid against the North, by such a realignment of those moving armies of civilization popularly called " parties," as would put the temperance men of North and South in the same camp."<sup>48</sup>

Willard took pride in the prospect that her temperance work could offer the broader national narrative. Willard continued to praise the South in her autobiography with the resounding faith that, "I never expected to speak with pride about the Solid South as such, but surely I may do this now that it is becoming solid for the " dry ticket," and you who dwell there may be glad that the Northern heart is fired once more, this time with the same war-cry as that which fires the Southern, and it is " protection for our homes." That is the spell to conjure by. That is the rallying cry of North and South, Protestant, and Catholic, of white and black, of men and women equally."<sup>49</sup> In this sense, Willard's Methodist teachings on equality merged with her political work. Regardless of geographic location, religion, race, or gender, there existed equality amongst all various groups. Thus Willard's strengthening ties with the South proved crucial in her desire to carry out Lincoln's union legacy.

Willard drew a correlation between Lincoln's efforts to preserve the union with her own temperance work in quoting Lincoln's first inaugural address. In quoting it she declared, "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from many a sacred hearth and patriot's grave, all over this broad land, shall once more swell the

---

<sup>48</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 8104-8105.

<sup>49</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 9731-9734.



chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angel of our nature.' The angel is the temperance reform, and the fulfillment of that prophecy we have lived to see."<sup>50</sup> To Willard, her appeasement to southern temperance reformers fulfilled the dream of a unified nation. The WCTU served as a symbol of national coherence that brought common ground amongst citizens so fundamentally divided. On the subject, she concluded in her autobiography, "I found that the era of good feeling had indeed set in, and that nothing helped it forward faster than the work of temperance, that nothing would liberate the colored vote so soon as to divide the white vote on the issues, "wet" and "dry..."<sup>51</sup> Willard had faith that temperance would quell both regional and racial tensions. Temperance would strengthen African American voters, who she saw as assured allies.

As Willard's presidential leadership took shape, her focus on the South shifted towards appeasing southern sentiment for the sake of instilling northern and southern coalition. Willard understood that southern and northern WCTU members were not in perfect unison. As president, one of her first widespread administrative changes was to decentralize the organization so that local and state chapters would have more autonomy over their policies. On a political side, Willard recognized that many southern WCTU chapters wanted to dismiss the Home Protection ballot, which advocated for women's suffrage. However, many northern chapters advocated for full suffrage. In providing local chapters the ability to set their own agendas, Willard skirted around this divisive issue.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 9736-9739.

<sup>51</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 373.

<sup>52</sup> Leeman, *Do Everything*, 16.

Throughout the rhetoric surrounding the North and South, Willard also sought to avoid controversy around race. As the South remained racially divided, segregation dominated race relations. Despite Willard's promotion of a movement based on equality, when conducting WCTU work in the South, she adhered to the policy of segregated meetings.<sup>53</sup> Willard could attend black meetings as the primary speaker and in January 1896, reflected on one such gathering in South Carolina, "In the evening I met the colored people who packed the courthouse and addressed them securing large additions. As is my habit, I said no word to show I knew they were another race. It has been my lifelong custom to speak to all classes regarding humanity. It helps their self-respect for Old Father Man is a great relative!"<sup>54</sup>

Willard avoided directly addressing racial inequalities amidst the context of racial tensions within the WCTU. While Willard grew up with values of human equality instilled in her and they continued to serve as personal beliefs throughout her adulthood, she also relied upon the approval of southern WCTU members, a substantial number of who were white and advocates for lynching.<sup>55</sup> One such member, Carrie Belle Kearney, a WCTU Mississippi member and later first woman elected to the Mississippi State Senate, publicly claimed that evolution would cause the extinction of African Americans. She believed that European immigrants should replace black labor. "Place them in direct competition with the Negro in the struggle

---

<sup>53</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 393.

<sup>54</sup> Willard, *Writing Out My Heart*, 393.

<sup>55</sup> Stan 116.

for existence and let the fittest survive. The victory must ultimately lie with the Caucasian.”<sup>56</sup>

However, in 1893, after lynching rose to unprecedented rates in 1892, Willard passed a WCTU anti-lynching resolution. That year, she remarked in her presidential address, “Our duty to the colored people have never impressed me so solemnly as this year when the antagonism between them and the white race have seemed to be more vivid than at any previous time, and lurid vengeance has devoured the devourers of women and children.”<sup>57</sup> Yet Willard remained loyal to her southern counterparts who promoted lynching as a way of providing justice in cases of alleged rape of white women by black men.<sup>58</sup> Willard did not protest the claims made by WCTU members of protecting white womanhood through the terrorization and murder of African Americans.

In more public statements, Willard followed the trend of oppressing the status of African Americans. In excerpts from the WCTU’s official newspaper, *The Union Signal*, Willard wrote about her perception of the role of African Americans in the temperance movement. She intended for the publications in *The Union Signal* to keep WCTU members in touch with her activities and serve as a platform to broaden her scope of leadership. By doing so, Willard set the standards that WCTU members were expected to hold. In early April 1881, Willard proclaimed that passing prohibition laws in the South would not be too challenging because she believed African American to have docile and “home-like” characteristics that would make

---

<sup>56</sup> New Woman 103.

<sup>57</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 216.

<sup>58</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 216.

them easily impressionable.<sup>59</sup> In further emphasizing that her view of African Americans is in relation to serving white values, Willard wrote, "The colored population is very readily influenced to make common cause with the whites for the defense of their homes, and the fore gleams of the 'era of good feeling' between the two classes are the dawning light of the temperance awakening."<sup>60</sup> Willard reiterates the notion that African Americans are in need and at the hands of white oversee. She did not advocate for a return to slavery but showed support towards black reliance on white oversight. Willard paints this compliance as marking an "era of good feeling" during a time and place in American history when race relations across the country, particularly in the South were not the "symbols of a dawning light" that Willard projects them to be.

In October 1890, Willard identified herself as a "true lover of the Southern people."<sup>61</sup> She told *The Voice*, a widely circulated British newspaper, "The Anglo-Saxon race will never submit to be dominated by the Negro so long as his altitude reaches no higher than the personal liberty of the saloon and the power of appreciating the amount of liquor that a dollar will buy."<sup>62</sup> To *The Voice*, she further claimed, "Better whiskey and more of it' has been the rallying cry of great dark-

---

<sup>59</sup> Frances E. Willard, "The Southern People," in *Temperance and Prohibition Papers* (n.p., 1977), previously published in *National Liberator*, August 28, 1881, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1000676294>.

<sup>60</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 63.

<sup>61</sup> Frances E. Willard, "The Race Problem: Miss Willard on the Political Puzzle of the South," *The Voice*, October 23, 1890, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1000684720>.

<sup>62</sup> Willard, "The Race,".

faced mobs in the Southern localities where Local Option was snowed under by the colored vote.”<sup>63</sup>

Even with the publicized racial violence in 1890, Willard painted the African American community as a problem to the wellbeing of white Americans. In the interview with *The Voice*, she observed, “The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt.”<sup>64</sup> Towards the end of the interview, Willard refers to lynching as part of the solution for the racist belief that black men’s drinking threatens white women and their families. Willard stated, “The safety of women, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities at this moment so that men dare not go beyond the sight of their own roof-tree.”<sup>65</sup> She indicated that the power of lynching, which primarily occurred through hanging a person by the neck from a tree, provided a way to safeguard the vulnerable from uncontrollable black men.

In light of Willard’s comments, she continued to pursue strengthening southern ties with the WCTU and embraced the region with great acceptance. In her autobiography, Willard described that her trip to the South in 1881 “...made me quite in love with the South.”<sup>66</sup> She at first received warning that a southern audience would not welcome her Northern temperance background, but Willard took no heed to the advice. Instead she found, “But instead of this, their liberality of sentiment was abundantly equal to the strain; their largest churches were filled with the best, most influential and thoughtful people; their ministers were more united and earnest in the temperance cause than ours at the North; their editors,

---

<sup>63</sup> Willard, "The Race,".

<sup>64</sup> Willard, "The Race,".

<sup>65</sup> Willard, "The Race,".

<sup>66</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 396.

without the slightest subsidizing, were as kind and helpful as my own brother could have been.”<sup>67</sup> Willard also continued by praising the racial hierarchy the South continued to uphold. She applauded, “The native population is so regnant, colored population is of such home-like nature, and the foreign element so insignificant in influence and numbers that temperance has an immense advantage at the South.”<sup>68</sup>

While Willard trip reflections went largely unnoticed at the time, Willard’s *Voice* interview quickly gained criticism, particularly from Ida B. Wells, an African American activist for racial and gender equality, who went on to publicly refute Willard’s claims and discredit Willard as an open-minded and accepting reformer. Before any interaction with Willard, Wells began an anti-lynching campaign in 1892 after a white mob lynched three black businessmen in Memphis. In response to the Memphis lynching, Wells wrote an editorial in the local paper that she part-owned protesting the lynching, which resulted in such intense death threats that she moved to New York to continue her fight.<sup>69</sup> In New York, she wrote and published “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases” through the publication of *The New York Age*. In “Southern Horrors,” Wells wrote, “...the new alarm about raping white women...Nobody [in the black community] in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a

---

<sup>67</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 396.

<sup>68</sup> Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty*, 396.

<sup>69</sup> Duster, *Crusade for Justice*, 48.

reaction; a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”<sup>70</sup>

Wells gained recognition from white liberals and received opportunities to take part in speaking tours. During her first tour to Great Britain, a member of the audience questioned her about Willard’s remarks in the recently published *The Voice* interview. Wells responded, “The only public expression about which I knew [she made] had seemed to condone lynching.”<sup>71</sup> Members of temperance movement quickly challenged Wells and so upon her return to Britain for her second speaking tour, Wells brought a copy of the Willard interview in *The Voice*. Not only did Wells decide to quote from the article, but also to give a copy of the interview along with a letter to the editor of the newspaper *Fraternity*.<sup>72</sup> In the May 1894 issue of *Fraternity*, Wells’ published letter stated that Willard not only failed to condemn the lynching of black men but also, “went even a step further in putting a seal of approval upon Southerners’ method of dealing with the negro.”<sup>73</sup> Wells faced immediate pushback from Lady Somerset. According to Wells’ autobiography, “It was even worse that [Lady Somerset] wrote a letter to the editor of *Fraternity* the next day in which she again threatened that if the interview appeared, she would use her influence to see that I got no further opportunity to be heard in Great Britain.”<sup>74</sup> Despite Lady Somerset’s threats, *Fraternity* decided to publish Wells’ article.

---

<sup>70</sup> Parker, "Desiring Citizenship," 60.

<sup>71</sup> Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago, 1970: University of Chicago Press), 222, Kindle Edition.

<sup>72</sup> Duster, *Crusade for Justice*, 222.

<sup>73</sup> Parker, "Desiring Citizenship," 60.

<sup>74</sup> Duster, *Crusade for Justice*, 227.

In speaking out against Willard during her second British tour in 1895, Wells openly addressed Willard's position on lynching and made it clear that both Willard and the WCTU supported the violent practice.<sup>75</sup> Wells went so far as to claim, "Here we have Miss Willard's words in full, condoning fraud, violence, murder, at the ballot box; raping, shooting, hanging and burning."<sup>76</sup> Willard did not explicitly use such language, but Wells nonetheless chose to expand upon Willard's seemingly ambiguous stance.

As part of her anti-lynching campaign, Wells accused Willard and the WCTU of justifying violence against black men in the name of protecting white women, especially from rape. In her publication, *Southern Horrors*, Wells outlined cases of white women seducing black men and afterward charging them with rape. Wells referred to white women as "willing victims."<sup>77</sup> Her statement shocked white temperance movement members, especially those in the WCTU. Yet her claims aligned with her criticism of Willard as a racist defender of the white woman.<sup>78</sup>

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a friend of Wells and fellow anti-lynching activist, supported Wells in also criticizing Willard for taking a pro-lynching position. Like Wells, Ruffin used her publicized role as a leader of racial reform to question the racial views of Willard. Ruffin played an instrumental role in the African American women's club movement during the late 19th century. A prior member of the New England Women's Club, Ruffin split off in 1892 to create the Women's Era Club and the associated newspaper, *The Woman's Era*, which was the first national

---

<sup>75</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 113.

<sup>76</sup> McMurry, *To Keep*, 211-212.

<sup>77</sup> Duster, *Crusade for Justice*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 117.



newspaper by and for African-American women.<sup>79</sup> Ruffin asked Wells to speak to members at a club meeting and dedicated her organization to the anti-lynching crusade.

Through the publication of *The Woman's Era*, Ruffin called into question Willard's stance on "the color question." In a July 1895 issue, almost a year after Wells' article in *Fraternity*, Ruffin claimed that a majority of African Americans who knew of Willard referred to her as a "temporizer" for speaking on race depending on her audience.<sup>80</sup> As Ruffin noted that Willard, as "head of a tremendous organization" was "obliged to be politic, and for the Welfare of the W.C.T.U. not to antagonize any section of this country."<sup>81</sup> In giving Willard the benefit of the doubt, Ruffin wrote, "Doubtless, Miss Willard is a good friend to colored people, but we have failed to hear from her or the W. C. T. U. any honest, flat-footed denunciation of lynching and lynchers."<sup>82</sup>

Similar to Wells, Ruffin ended up accusing Willard of sympathizing with lynchers for the protection of white women. In the summer of 1895, Ruffin released an article in *The Woman's Era*, titled *Apologists for Lynching*, in which she labeled Willard as an apologist. Apologists for lynching were those who took the white supremacist position that lynching was needed to oppress African Americans for the

---

<sup>79</sup> Maude T. Jenkins, "Letters," *The Women's Review of Books* 16, no. 12 (September 1999): 5, DOI:10.2307/4023208.

<sup>80</sup> Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, "Miss Willard and the Colored People," *Woman's Era*, June 1, 1895, 12, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1006932727>.

<sup>81</sup> Ruffin, "Miss Willard," 12.

<sup>82</sup> Ruffin, "Miss Willard," 12.

wellbeing of white people, particularly white women.<sup>83</sup> As Ruffin described apologists, “[They are] up to their ears in guilt against Negro women, they offer as their excuse for murdering Negro men, Negro women and Negro children, that white women are not safe from the Negro rapist.”<sup>84</sup> Ruffin went on to make a direct connection with Willard and another temperance leader, Laura Ormiston Chant, in stating, “And for these murderers, lynchers and burners, for these latter-day saints, who preyed for two and a half centuries on their helpless slave women, we are told that Francis Willard of America, and Laura Ormiston Chant of England, have entered the list as apologists.”<sup>85</sup> In classifying Willard as an apologist, Ruffin remarked that Willard would protect white lynchers. “These two fearless defenders of the right would let no liquor dealer escape, but would apologize for the white criminal, if the victim be Negro man, woman or child,” Ruffin added.<sup>86</sup>

In her last article on the matter, Ruffin fully condemned Willard as an unabashed supporter of lynching to punish criminally accused black men. In the August 1895 issue of *The Woman's Era*, Ruffin referred to an editorial article published in *The Woman's Signal* that named Willard and Lady Somerset as the article's editors. *The Woman's Signal* piece advocated lynching as a form of just punishment. Too often, Willard and Somerset edited, convicted rapists received “...inadequate punishment” and as such, “It is such crimes and such travesties of

---

<sup>83</sup> Arthur Franklin Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Mineola, NY: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Ebook.

<sup>84</sup> Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, "Apologists for Lynching," *Woman's Era*, June 1, 1894, 14, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1006932720>.

<sup>85</sup> Ruffin, "Apologists for Lynching," 14.

<sup>86</sup> Ruffin, "Apologists for Lynching," 14.

justice that have made lynching possible in the United States.”<sup>87</sup> From the article’s stance, Ruffin concluded, “What interests us most is the fact that these ladies, [Willard and Lady Somerset] out of their own mouths, convict themselves and stand self-confessed endorsers of lynch law.”<sup>88</sup> The *Christian World* joined Ruffin in condemning Willard: “It is pitiable beyond measure that there should be apologists of lynching within the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. It is a calamity that these apologists should be numerous enough to control the Union in America, and to make the *Women’s Signal* the organ of their views.”<sup>89</sup>

However, soon after Wells and Ruffin publicly denounced Willard on the national stage in Britain, Willard, along with fellow reformers, rushed to her own defense. Willard got to directly address Wells’ criticism in her WCTU Presidential Address on November 16, 1894, by announcing, “It is my firm belief that in the statements made by Miss Wells concerning white women having taken the initiative in nameless acts between the races, she has put an imputation upon half the white race in this country that is unjust, and, save in the rarest exceptional instances, wholly without foundation.”<sup>90</sup> In this regard, Willard discredited Wells’ criticism including evidence used from *The Voice* interview. Willard referenced white women’s pro-lynching acts as “the rarest exceptional instances” disavowed lynching as a systematic racial issue to an infrequent individual choice. To Willard, Wells’

---

<sup>87</sup> Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, “Lady Somerset and Miss Willard Confess of Themselves Apologists for Lynching,” *Woman’s Era*, August 1895, 17, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1006932724>.

<sup>88</sup> Ruffin, “Lady Somerset,” 17.

<sup>89</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 226.

<sup>90</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 205.

pro-lynching accusation went beyond a personal attack and to the extent of condemning white women as a whole.

Willard further sought to remove herself from the growing controversy in her 1894 fifteenth Presidential Address by condemning lynching. "It is inconceivable that the W.C.T.U. will ever condone lynching, no matter what the provocation, and no matter whether its barbarous spectacle is to be seen in the North or South, in home or foreign countries," she declared.<sup>91</sup> Willard then proposed the following resolution, "*Resolved*, That we are opposed to lynching as a method of punishment, no matter what the crime, and irrespective of the race by which the crime is committed, believing that every human being is entitled to be tried by a jury of his peers."<sup>92</sup> Then she added: "An average colored man when sober is loyal to the purity of white women; but when under the influence of intoxicating liquors the tendency in all men is toward a loss of self-control, and the ignorant vicious, whether white or black, are most dangerous characters."<sup>93</sup> Soon after her address, in February 1895, a group of influential reformists, including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Julia Ward Howe, published a letter on Willard's behalf in the face of Wells' accusations. They believed Wells went too far in her charges and sought to restore Willard's public image. <sup>94</sup>

Yet despite her professed opposition to lynching and backing of other reformers, Willard continued to convey support for treating African Americans as a threat to white Americans. Willard promoted the protection of whites from blacks in

---

<sup>91</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 204.

<sup>92</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 204.

<sup>93</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 204.

<sup>94</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 117.

her address with the assertion: "I also said that in the South the colored vote was often marshaled against the temperance people by base political leaders for their purposes, and still hold to that statement."<sup>95</sup> Willard upheld the notion that the African American vote is weak in the face of political manipulation and unreliable in supporting the morally sound legislation endorsed by the temperance movement. She further questioned the capabilities of African Americans as citizens during a speech she gave in Illinois on August 28th, 1881. She proclaimed, "...that in [the black man's] ignorant blindness, remembered only that their freedom had come thro' the Republican Party, and the masses of them voted against the law as an essence of the Democratic Party."<sup>96</sup>

Even beyond constitutional rights, Willard again brought forth the concern of drunken African American men as a danger to white women. She remained firm in her conviction that white women need protection to maintain their high value in society. As Willard expressed, "Furthermore, I said that the nameless outrages perpetrated upon white women and little girls were a cause of constant anxiety, and this I still believe to be true..."<sup>97</sup> The "constant anxiety" implied that white women were always under threat and thus must always have a certain level of safeguarding.

Though briefly mentioned, Bordin raised the controversial issue of Willard's stance on lynching that no other Willard biographer before her analyzed. In four pages of her book, Bordin outlined the publicized dispute from 1894 until 1895 between Willard and Ida B. Wells. After summarizing the events, Bordin concluded,

---

<sup>95</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 204.

<sup>96</sup> Willard, "The Southern," in *Temperance and Prohibition*.

<sup>97</sup> Gifford and Slagell, *Let Something*, 204.

“Eventually the fracas died down...” and then transitioned to Willard’s time in London during 1895.<sup>98</sup> While Bordin provided some of the details and context for the tension between the two reformist leaders, historian Gerda Lerner remarked, “[Bordin] is not blind to her subject’s weakness — her account of Willard’s contradictory position on race and lynching is judicious and fair — but she does not probe deeply enough into the contradictory elements of Willard’s psychology to make us understand her. In Bordin’s biography, she appears once again in flat outline — the supreme organizer embodied in her organizational achievements.”<sup>99</sup> What remains missing from the scholarly work on the dispute between Willard and Wells along with Ruffin.

While Bordin largely met praise for her biography on Willard, to Lerner’s point, the racial controversy remained mostly unexplored in the decades to come. After Bordin, Linda O. McCurry wrote a biography of Wells, *To Keep the Waters Troubled* (1998), but similar to Bordin, McCurry brushed past the controversy.<sup>100</sup> It was not until 2006 when Maegan Parker published her article specifically on the topic that the relationship between Willard and Wells was developed in some detail.

Parker focused her thesis on the debate of white women’s sexuality and moral character. Similar to Gail Bederman, who wrote on the cultural history of

---

<sup>98</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, 222.

<sup>99</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Reviewed Works: Frances Willard: A Biography by Ruth Bordin; From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, 1910-1928 by Christine A. Lunardini; Carrie Catt, Feminist Politician by Robert Booth Fowler," *The Women's Review of Books* 4, no. 12 (September 1987): 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4020149>.

<sup>100</sup> Maegan Parker, "Desiring Citizenship: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Wells/Willard Controversy," *Women's Studies in Communication* 31, no. 1 (2008): 76, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/198272695?accountid=10226>.

gender and race in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Parker argued that the difference between Willard and Wells was how they viewed female sexuality. Willard relied upon the notion that women are inherently pure and need protection, by way of the public sphere, from the uncontrollable lust of men. Parker then argues that Wells took an opposing position grounded in specifically white women's capabilities to be sexually manipulative to make accusations against innocent black men.<sup>101</sup>

Even with Parker's thorough depiction of the Willard and Wells debate on lynching, scholars often simplify the story to a disagreement just between Willard and Wells based on assumptions of their beliefs at the time. Willard was not merely a symbolic figure of white women's racist agenda to protect white womanhood nor did Wells act alone as commonly portrayed.<sup>102</sup> The evolution of Willard's convictions regarding race received no mention and the additional criticism produced by Wells' fellow civil rights activist, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, also were omitted. Scholars have yet to answer the question of how a person such as Willard, who devoted her life to progressive reform and followed a Methodist faith rooted in the acceptance and embrace of others, found herself in the middle of claims of racism against her? Willard was not just a career social activist, but also a person devoted to a religion because of its inclusive principles and grew up in an abolitionist household in the Midwest. These are not circumstances that make one immune to racist beliefs, but in studying the topic of lynching between Willard and Wells, there is a lack of observation of Willard's ideological background.

---

<sup>101</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 66, Ebook and Parker, "Desiring Citizenship," 58.

<sup>102</sup> Bordin, Parker, DuRocher, Newman Bederman.

While Bordin makes reference to Willard on the topic of lynching and Parker approached the controversy between Willard and Wells through sexuality, there lacked a sufficient look at the issue. Willard's comments on lynching were not a mere passing conversation, nor were they just a point of conflict to Wells' reformist stance. It is not enough to skim the surface and just provide a broad narrative. There is also the danger of zooming in so closely to the dispute that words taken in specific moments define an entire legacy.

It can be tempting to avoid diving into a point in a historical figure's life that fails to coincide with the already established legacy. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Willard's biographers have opened the door to a deeper understanding and shifted away from reverence to a more objective stance. However, the central theme remains to maintain Willard's pedestal to some degree. Willard did accomplish so many of the goals she set out to accomplish. There is good reason to celebrate many aspects of her life. She devoted her work towards making society a better and safer place and met multiple successes. She brought the WCTU to the international stage and by doing so increased the exposure of women to the public sphere. She involved herself well beyond the topic of prohibition and sought to promote the well being of others in a wide array of reformist circles. Women's suffrage, Christian Socialism, the Populist Party, and the Labor movement were among the causes she supported and publicly backed.<sup>103</sup> Willard's progressive ideology was a defining feature of her leadership and legacy, but it was not the sole characterization of who she was.

---

<sup>103</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 76.



How Willard chose to lead the WCTU and offer her services to other organizations was in the midst of tumultuous times in American history. The Civil War loomed over Willard's childhood and even as an adult in the post-Civil War aftermath, Willard bore witness to the scarring the war left behind. As a leader of a national movement, Willard faced the task of joining groups of people who had recently engaged in bloody and traumatic warfare. Not only was the history of violence on the table, but also the transformation of American society with the abolition of slavery. This change brought a multitude of reactions. For some this meant emancipation and for others, it meant a threat to the status quo of a white-dominant racial hierarchy. As much as Willard sought to focus her mission on nationwide temperance, there was no way to avoid the issue of race when attempting to build a cohesive movement. As a leader, Willard needed to make decisions about who to include, how to attract new members of different beliefs, and how to execute objectives in a way that reflected the core values of the WCTU.

This was by no means a straightforward or easy task and in part, Willard did approach the challenges with an open mind and welcoming attitude. Willard's upbringing in the Methodist Church provided her ideals of equality and acceptance. She grew up in a family and church community that promoted the tolerance of differences and treating fellow human being as children of God. The enthusiasm she held for incorporating the South into the WCTU and her encouragement of African Americans to join the movement were some of the ways she expressed her deeply rooted religious and moral teachings.

However, to end the portrayal of Willard there would be an injustice to her as a person. To paint her in a specific light strips away the complexities of her life that make her so fascinating to try to understand. Living most of her childhood in primarily demographically homogenous communities may not have best-set Willard up to understand racial differences. During her trip to Europe, the shock she had when seeing a black woman shed some light on Willard's possible naïveté. Her lack of exposure was not a reflection of something she had intentionally done wrong, but it shaped her outlook and understanding of the world around her.

Granted, it was around her comments on race during her time as president of the WCTU that controversy erupted. At this point in her life when criticism from Wells and Ruffin became publicized and she made a formal statement on racial issues, particularly lynching, in a presidential address, it can be tempting to only measure Willard's character in that context. Willard made remarks about the African American community that supported racist ideology and in certain cases sought to justify brutal forms of violence. But it is easy from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century standpoint to assign a label or cast judgment and then end the conversation. But to understand Willard as a person requires studying her in as many ways as possible. Her ideological evolution, the circumstances she faced as a public leader, and her personal history all shaped how she decided to handle and articulate her position on racial disputes.

For her time, Willard was a radical who envisioned an ideal not yet achieved but believed that the pursuit was worth the effort. In her endeavor, Willard made upsetting claims and faced grievances as a result of such actions. Though Willard

retracted some of her stances, denouncing lynching was not the same as denouncing racism. Racism can exist and create harm even without the violent mechanisms of lynching. Though she had a national platform, Willard did not apply pressure against the forms of institutional racism that transcended into the daily lives of Americans. Her leadership was not a perfect reflection of the Methodist ideals she proclaimed to follow since she was a young adult. Her publicized views on race raise the reality of inequalities enforced by people who may at the same time advocate for justice and protection. Reformists are not immune to biased and bigoted positions. Willard even called for a “do everything” platform that aimed for a societal transformation grounded in morality and fairness, but she could not escape prejudice and the mentality of dividing people into hierarchical groups.<sup>104</sup>

The narrow-mindedness Willard displayed did not spring out of nowhere. People represent their own historical narrative and to uncover more about Willard’s life requires a probing into her development of ideas and the kinds of expectations put before her. Willard was determined to create a lasting movement that would span across the United States. Whether her positions on race reflected personal views, the attempt to appeal to potential WCTU members who would share such beliefs, or a combination of both, serves as a reminder that no matter how positive an activist’s intentions and results may be, there are always complexities and contradictions to add to the story.

More so than previous biographers, Bordin received critical acclaim her objectiveness and willingness to draw attention to Willard’s flaws. In 1986, Bordin

---

<sup>104</sup> Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, 76.

was the first Willard biographer to write a book about her life with the use of diaries unavailable to historians before her. In 1982, Willard's diaries were discovered in the WCTU library. Before the diaries, historians like Earhart struggled to write comprehensive work on Willard because Gordon destroyed many of Willard's personal papers. Historian Harrison Thornton claimed that Gordon committed "intellectual perjury" by burning Willard's personal letters and documents that would challenge the imagery of "St. Frances."<sup>105</sup> Though Bordin came across the diaries midway through her writing process, Bordin focused her work on providing a holistic portrayal of Willard and challenge the limited view of Willard as presented by Gordon. She sought to expand the study of Willard's life beyond the temperance cause.<sup>106</sup>

We still face issues of race in part from the incomplete unpacking of the baggage that our glorified historical figures carry. For over a century, historians and most other people have failed to explore the racially charged motives that shaped her actions. The omission of this aspect of her life, in which she addressed and failed to adequately oppose lynching, is a disservice to history. Historians should strive to unveil the truth with as much objectivity as possible. By such a standard, there is a necessity to analyze all of Willard's life with as much accessible and accurate information available. To ignore tensions and controversy when narrating her legacy only further perpetuates the attitudes of inequality and injustice by leaving

---

<sup>105</sup> Harrison John Thornton, "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard by Mary Earhart," *Revista de Historia de América*, June 1946, 97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20136790>.

<sup>106</sup> Bordin, *Frances Willard*, xiv.

them unresolved and accepted through silence. Knowledge and awareness open the door to resolution.

Willard's racist tendencies were shared by white suffrage leaders like Susan B. Anthony, who on the one hand led and advocated for the expansion of women's rights, but on the other, discriminated against the participation of minority women in the movement.<sup>107</sup> An even more parallel comparison between Willard and the racist practices of the suffrage movement would be to Alice Paul, who ensured African American women would walk at the back of suffrage marches as to hide their involvement from Southern White suffragettes who demanded the exclusion of African American women.<sup>108</sup> Both Willard and Paul attempted to win the favor of white southerners by endorsing racist words and actions.

Though Willard does not stand alone as a women's rights leader with cases of racist behavior, her story nonetheless deserves individual attention. Her religious journey combined with her controversial moments as president of the WCTU raises questions of how religious values of egalitarianism and acceptance can at times merge or repel against progressive politics. Given Willard's narrative, she fits into the period's social forces of conservatism, progressivism, racial tension, and national uncertainty. A combination of factors that seem paradoxical, but coexist with one another. Willard wrote of universal acceptance grounded in religious teachings and yet also promote racism. Religious and racist are not mutually

---

<sup>107</sup> Jen McDanel, "White Suffragist Dis/Entitlement: The Revolution and the Rhetoric of Racism," *Legacy* 30, no. 2 (2013): 245, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/legacy.30.2.0243>.

<sup>108</sup> Sidney R. Bland, "New Life in an Old Movement: Alice Paul and the Great Suffrage Parade of 1913 in Washington, D. C.," *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.* 71/72 (1972): 666, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40067792>.

exclusive, and the integration of the two is a further example of the contradictory nature that warps humanity. Willard's embodiment of the complexity of human nature, despite the disintegration of the WCTU and the temperance movement, brings further context to the late 19th century and how that history impacts the formation and actions of social movements today.

## Bibliography

- Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Ebook.
- Bland, Sidney R. "New Life in an Old Movement: Alice Paul and the Great Suffrage Parade of 1913 in Washington, D. C." *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.* 71/72 (1972): 657-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40067792>.
- Blocker, Jack S. "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: A Biography by Ruth Bordin." *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (June 1987): 193-94. doi:10.2307/1908575.
- Bordin, Ruth Birgitta Anderson. *Frances Willard: A Biography*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.
- Bryson, Gladys. "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics. by Mary Earhart." *American Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (September 1945): 158-59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2771423>.
- Carby, Hazel V. "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 262-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343470>.
- Cook, Sharon Anne. *Through Sunshine and Shadow*. N.p.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039>.
- Dillon, Mary Earhart. *Frances Willard; from Prayers to Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1944.
- Duster, Alfreda M., ed. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*. Chicago, 1970: University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.
- Dye, Susan Earls. "Evangelical Domesticity: The Origins of the Women's National Christian Temperance Union under Frances E. Willard." Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1980.
- Giele, Janet Zollinger. *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

- Gifford, Carolyn De Swarte, and Amy R. Slagell, eds. *Let Something Good Be Said: Speeches and Writings of Frances E. Willard*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Gordon, Anna Adams. *The Life of Frances E. Willard*. Evanston, IL: National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1921.  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t1mg7g98t;view=1up;seq=7>.
- Gusfield, Joseph R. *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Hagen, Ryan, Kinga Makovi, and Peter Bearman. "The Influence of Political Dynamics on Southern Lynch Mob Formation and Lethality." *Social Forces* 92, no. 2 (December 2013): 757-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43287811>.
- Jenkins, Maude T. "Letters." *The Women's Review of Books* 16, no. 12 (September 1999): 5. DOI:10.2307/4023208.
- Leeman, Richard W. *Do Everything Reform: The Oratory of Frances E. Willard*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992.
- Lerner, Gerda. "Reviewed Works: Frances Willard: A Biography by Ruth Bordin; From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, 1910-1928 by Christine A. Lunardini; Carrie Catt, Feminist Politician by Robert Booth Fowler." *The Women's Review of Books* 4, no. 12 (September 1987): 11-12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4020149>.
- "Lynching in America." PBS.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-lynching-america>.
- McDanel, Jen. "White Suffragist Dis/Entitlement: The Revolution and the Rhetoric of Racism." *Legacy* 30, no. 2 (2013).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/legacy.30.2.0243>.
- McKelvey, Blake. "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics by Mary Earhart." *New York History* 26, no. 4 (October 1945): 512-14.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23149944>.
- McMurry, Linda O. *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*. N.p.: Oxford University Press, 2000.



- <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/reader.action?docID=241289>.
- Myres, Sandra L. "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: A Biography by Ruth Bordin." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (January 1988): 44.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40490938>.
- Parker, Maegan. "Desiring Citizenship: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Wells/Willard Controversy." *Women's Studies in Communication* 31, no. 1 (2008): 56-78.  
<http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/198272695?accountid=10226>.
- Pinar, William F. "White Women and the Campaign against Lynching: Frances Willard, Jane Addams, Jesse Daniel Ames." *Counterpoints* 163 (2001): 487-554. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42977758>.  
Pinar provides specific detail of the accusations made between Willard and Wells in England in 1894. The source also outlines the role of the press and particularly Wells' use to promote her point.
- Raper, Arthur Franklin. *The Tragedy of Lynching*. Mineola, NY: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. Ebook.
- Ruffin, Josephine St. Pierre. "Apologists for Lynching." *Woman's Era*, June 1, 1894, 14.  
<http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1006932720>.
- . "Lady Somerset and Miss Willard Confess of Themselves Apologists for Lynching." *Woman's Era*, August 1895, 17.  
<http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1006932724>.
- . "Miss Willard and the Colored People." *Woman's Era*, June 1, 1895, 12.  
<http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1006932727>.
- Stansell, Christine. *The Feminist Promise: 1972 to the Present*. Modern Library, 2010. Kindle.
- Strachey, Ray. *Frances Willard: Her Life and Work*. New York: F.H Revell, 1913. Ebook.
- Sweet, William W. "The Methodist Episcopal Church and Reconstruction." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 7, no. 3 (October 1914): 147-65.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40194198>.

- Thornton, Harrison John. "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard by Mary Earhart." *Revista de Historia de América*, June 1946, 95-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20136790>.
- Willard, Frances E. *Glimpses of Fifty Years; the Autobiography of an American Woman*. Chicago, IL: H. J. Smith. Kindle edition.
- . "The Race Problem: Miss Willard on the Political Puzzle of the South." *The Voice*, October 23, 1890, 8. <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1000684720>.
- . "The Southern People." In *Temperance and Prohibition Papers*. N.p., 1977. Previously published in *National Liberator*, August 28, 1881. <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1000676294>.
- . *Woman and temperance; The Work and Workers of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union*. New York, NY: Arno Press, 1972. First published 1888 by Park Publishing & CO. EBook.
- . *Writing Out My Heart: Selections from the Journal of Frances E. Willard, 1855-96*. Edited by Carolyn Gifford. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1995.
- Young, Louise M. "Reviewed Work: Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics by Mary Earhart." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 239 (May 1945): 225-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1024790>.