Juliette's Chicago

When Juliette Kinzie settled permanently in Chicago in 1834, she regarded the town as an extension of her own household, responsible for promoting a common good largely through private efforts. So it is not surprising that she was a community builder, supporting churches, schools, hospitals, musical groups, and a range of societies. Much of this supportive work took place in her parlor. Juliette was intent on establishing a Yankee culture in the West and building a foundation for a future Chicago. The large role of private spaces and organizations was particularly evident in new western cities like Chicago where there was no existing social infrastructure to rely on.

Juliette's letters and writings point to the broad participation of women in this informal public sphere. It was not possible to sharply segregate work from home in early Chicago because there often were no distinct physical boundaries between public and private spaces.[6] Business and institutional meetings were held in homes, so women like Juliette were integrally involved in public activities not as "an alternative to domesticity," but as part of a household world.

Juliette's role in early civic culture rested largely on networks of kin and friends that are difficult to document. Her letters and novels, however, take us inside the private world of her household, offering rare insight into the gatherings for conversation, reading, storytelling, painting, drawing, and other pursuits that formed the basis for Chicago's early public sphere. Ironically, while chroniclers and historians created narratives based on Juliette's history *Wau-Bun* and her other writings, they disregarded her seminal role in early Chicago. Only rarely were the networks she described captured in institutional histories or newspaper accounts, which focused on the work of men in businesses, government, and formal institutions.

Juliette was part of a group of families that made Chicago not just a place where money was gained (and lost) but also a setting where urban life could flourish. Her life reminds us of the broad reach of informal networks, the "kinship and credit ties that emanated from New York and New England" and transformed Chicago into an urban place. These families came to Chicago not only to make money, but also to create a society.

Early Chicago civic culture was dominated by private associations that women like Juliette could participate in even though they had no independent political status. This privatism meant that personal connections held considerable sway over public issues ranging from police and fire protection to schools, orphanages, and hospitals. A small state and a small formal market offered space for women to exert some influence.

Civic culture, which today we often equate with political culture, was then far less tethered to government. It emerged from the efforts of households to create the services and organizations that would replicate a society familiar to migrants from the Northeast. Because of this, Juliette's limited individual political rights mattered less to

her than we might expect. She was part of a public sphere that emerged more as an extension of households than from any level of government. She viewed civic culture not as sharply different from her home but as expanding outward from it. In Juliette's view, women's role, as expressed by her contemporary Catharine Beecher, was to be "first in the family, then in the school, then in the neighborhood, then in the world."[10] This fluidity allowed Juliette Kinzie to play an important role in Chicago's early civic life. Without women like her, Chicago would have remained a small settlement far longer.

Traditionally, historians have told the story of Chicago's early rise by looking at the speculators who boosted real estate. Almost all of this speculating was done by men, leading historian Bessie Louise Pierce to suggest in 1937 that early Chicago "was preeminently a man's city." Their work was indeed vital to the city's economic growth, but Chicago also grew as an actual community, not just as parcels of real estate. This entailed the work of building houses, creating schools, and founding key institutions. Yet even when Pierce discussed the emergence of a "fabric of society," she still focused almost exclusively on the work of men.

Juliette's life reveals that the growth of Chicago did not flow solely from the success of the real estate market. Instead, it rested on a group of men and women who created households that together laid the foundation of Chicago as a city. Juliette and John Kinzie's substantial brick house is emblematic of this process. Although the couple built their home from profits gained in real estate speculation, it was not a speculative venture. The house was initially an ostentatious display of wealth, but it was also an anchor that steadied a large extended family through the ups and downs of the business cycles.

Within houses like this, there took place the work of social reproduction—of raising children and fostering communities—that was so much a part of the family claim on women. Households made possible the rise of Chicago, just as surely as it rested in real estate speculation and federal investments. Household work was not ancillary to the task of city building but an essential part of it. And it was work that men and women did together, largely outside the formal market.