# *Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk* by Amy S. Greenberg (review)


Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz

Journal of Southern History, Volume 86, Number 1, February 2020, pp. 158-159 (Review)

Published by The Southern Historical Association
*DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2020.0045*

In the 1850s, independent presses freed from the shackles of congressional sanction amplified the sectional animosities playing out on Capitol Hill. The press sharpened congressmen's accountability to their electorates back home, who expected their representatives to uphold sectional rights. Revolutions in communications—rotary printing presses, railroads, and the telegraph—quickly relayed controversies in Washington to far corners of the nation, while New York City–based newspapers sought to make money through sensational reporting. Goings-on in Congress thus pumped into the public sphere the raw emotion that made compromise impossible. But, as Freeman hastens to point out, such emotion was animated by valid grievances and gross injustices, rather than the overreactions of a so-called blundering generation.

Combining prodigious research with a wonderful eye for detail and a feel for sensory perception, Freeman has produced a work that offers an immediate and palpable sense of the coming of the Civil War.

Brooklyn College, City University of New York GUNJA SENGUPTA

*Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk.* By Amy S. Greenberg. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. Pp. xxiv, 369. $30.00, ISBN 978-0-385-35413-4.)

In this engaging biography, Amy S. Greenberg brings to life "the first politically effective partisan First Lady" (p. xiii). Framing the study are two 1848 events: the U.S.-Mexican War and the Seneca Falls Convention. As Greenberg's careful research reveals, Sarah Childress Polk championed the former but had no use for the latter, despite the many ways she herself deployed power.

In her youth, Sarah Childress was interested in learning, books, and politics. She knew Andrew Jackson and other powerful Democrats, including up-and-coming politician James K. Polk. After their 1824 marriage, she relished parlor politics and assisted in her husband's political rise, which saw James Polk elected first as a U.S. congressman and then as governor of Tennessee. In her capacity as what Greenberg terms "communications director," Sarah Polk wielded power but always under the guise of deference (p. 65). As First Lady, she presented herself as a model of thrifty Jacksonian anti-elite values and of Christian womanhood; aware of the value of appearance, she refused to dance at the inaugural ball. Americans wrote to her with requests for favors, implicitly acknowledging the power she held. And she was powerful: she once banished Martin Van Buren's son from White House social events.

After James K. Polk's premature death, the young widow lived long after the Civil War, which the debate over the fate of slavery during the U.S.-Mexican War had foreshadowed. During the Civil War, Sarah Polk continued to use her position as a lady—and a former First Lady at that—to claim neutrality and special favors from Abraham Lincoln. She met with Union officers who were eager to hold on to her allegiance—while she concealed Confederate property on the "neutral ground" of Polk Place, her Tennessee plantation (p. 217). After the war, she continued to wield power, working to uphold her husband's reputation and being courted by Frances Willard for support of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

Sarah Polk, Greenberg asserts, was "a true believer in Manifest Destiny" (p. 141). She was also a firm supporter of slavery. Though apparently averse to separating

families, she came into her own as "a cotton planter" after her husband's death (p. 187). She thought of herself as a good mistress, but Greenberg reveals how this self-perception "stood in stark contrast to [Polk's] efforts on behalf of slavery" and to her treatment of the enslaved population at Polk Plantation, from whom profit was exacted at high human cost (p. 190).

Greenberg describes her subject's aversion to the radical ideas about woman's place that were current in the America of 1848, noting that she was "so powerful she had no need for women's rights" (p. xix). In addition to a canny wielding of womanly deference, another fact enabled her political power: she and James Polk had no children. Greenberg asserts that neither Polk lamented this fact, and it certainly allowed Sarah to wield a womanly power that was unconstrained by the travails, dangers, and hardships of childbearing and childrearing. Who she would have been able to become if she were a man never seems to have occurred to her (or caused her to question her ideal of womanly deference), but one wonders if she might have felt more constrained by the so-called womanly sphere she claimed, if she had been mother to a half dozen children while chasing (and loving) politics and power.

This richly researched book is a compelling read. Greenberg deftly brings into the work secondary scholarship on topics ranging from women and politics to slavery to help interrogate both Sarah Polk and the primary sources the author has amassed. This book will interest historians of women and presidential politics and especially those interested in conservative women in American history. Phyllis Schlafly and Ivanka Trump, Greenberg notes, "are political heirs of Mrs. James K. Polk," Sarah Polk's preferred name throughout her life (p. xxiii).

Eastern Illinois University BONNIE LAUGHLIN-SCHULTZ

*For Duty and Honor: Tennessee's Mexican War Experience*. By Timothy D. Johnson. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018. Pp. x, 302. $39.95, ISBN 978-1-62190-438-0.)

Along with the War of 1812 and the Korean War, the U.S.-Mexican War is often dubbed, as Timothy D. Johnson notes, "one of the forgotten conflicts in American history" (p. 2). All these wars were preceded or followed by conflicts that produced larger mobilizations, higher casualty figures, or a greater hold on national memory. The Civil War casts an especially long shadow over both scholarship and popular memory. The state and regimental histories that abound in Civil War literature are few and far between in U.S.-Mexican War historiography. Hoping to rectify this imbalance, Johnson has authored a well-researched and accessible history of Tennessee's volunteer infantry regiments during the U.S.-Mexican War.

Aside from providing a narrative of Tennessee's military contributions to the war, Johnson is primarily concerned with analyzing individual and governmental motivations. Ultimately, he writes, "Tennesseans were less motivated by slavery and policy decisions in Washington and more concerned with community expectations and personal responsibility, that is to say, honor" (p. 4). Individuals felt duty bound to defend both their country and their state, while Tennessee felt special pressure to demonstrate its commitment again to the nation. Tennessee soldiers, officers, and statesmen were all desperate to show that their home deserved the "volunteer state" moniker (p. 6).