PUBLIC WIFE: THE LIFE OF JESSIE BENTON FRÉMONT

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DEDICATION

For Maddie and Heidi

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the life of Jessie Benton Frémont (1824-1902) and the ways in which she performed the role of a "public wife" through her marriage to John C. Frémont (1813-1890). This re-examination of a woman immensely popular in the nineteenth century offers a new way of thinking about the wives of famous men and the steps they took to both participate in, and direct the narrative of, American history.

Jessie Benton was the daughter of Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton. At sixteen, Jessie met a young man from the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers who came to meet with her father regarding explorations in the trans-Mississippi west. Jessie, at age seventeen, eloped with that man, John C. Frémont, who would come to play a significant role in the western expansion endorsed by her father.

John Frémont's expeditions across the west in the 1840s and his role in the Conquest of California in 1846-1847 earned him national recognition. Jessie popularized John's accomplishments through her work on his expedition reports, securing the fame which led him to the office of U.S. senator and a presidential nomination. As she created John's fame, Jessie also created a reputation of her own, that of the spirited mate, and thus became an integral component in her husband's public career. Without Jessie's lionizing of her husband and her efforts to shape a positive public image of both Frémonts, John C. Frémont would not, could not, have been as widely recognized and admired as he was during the nineteenth century.

As an essential component of her role as a "public wife," it was Jessie, not John, who shaped his experiences into the heroic narrative that lingers today. Jessie's idealization of her wifely duties let her develop her own narrative of the Frémonts' history so that her version of the tale secured John's reputation and the couple's social standing while overwhelming any voices raised in opposition. Well into the twenty-first century, Jessie's account of her husband and his exploits continued the heroic and romantic narrative of John C. and Jessie Benton Fremont.

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INTRODUCTION

"Being so fathered and so husbanded, should I not be stronger than my sex?"

Jessie Benton Frémont often used this line, based on William Shakespeare's Portia in *Julius Caesar*, to define herself. The daughter of the great Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton and the wife of the "Pathfinder" John C. Frémont, Jessie played a unique role in American efforts in the nineteenth century to expand across the continent, from "sea to shining sea." From her childhood, Jessie adored her father, who oversaw her classical education and imbued her with a love of history, a healthy ego, the heart of a patriot, and a force of will that made her nearly indomitable. While she admired her father, who was dedicated in his public life to pushing west the boundaries of the United States, it was to her husband that Jessie pledged true allegiance. In both her public and private papers, she consistently identified John as bold, brave, passionate, and faithful, the sort of qualities Americans looked for in their heroes. She also never missed an opportunity to praise Thomas Hart Benton, perhaps as a recompense for always siding with her husband when the two men were at odds, especially when it came to John's 1856 candidacy for the presidency. Jessie helped create the image of her husband as successful and gallant, the "conqueror of California," while at the same time ensuring that her father also received praise for his efforts on behalf of western expansion. She even managed to ensure that her own contributions to United States history did not go unnoticed, earning a public reputation as the "spirited" daughter of one great man and the "intelligent and gifted" wife of another.

Through her literary skills, Jessie contributed as much to the expansion of the United States across the west as did her well-known husband and father. Her hand is visible in the official reports of John's first two explorations in 1842 and 1843-1844, turning the scientific data

into a readable narrative that sparked the imagination of Americans on the move and provided a guide to settlers seeking the broad new opportunities across the Rockies. Her 1878 book, *A Year of American Travel*, brought her own experiences into the narrative of western expansion, as she described her trip across Panama to California in 1849. She also used this book to portray, with a bit of exaggeration, the efforts of herself and her husband to ensure California's admission to the United States as a free state in 1850. Through her book *Far West Sketches* in 1890, she entertained readers with exciting tales of her life in the Golden State during the late 1850s. Finally, after her husband's death in July 1890, Jessie engaged with the learned men then writing California's history, challenging their interpretation of her husband as a reckless, glory-seeking filibuster. Jessie's John C. Frémont was the hero of the Conquest of California, a man who acted to both save the future state from European aggression and to bring it into American hands. That she was successful in these efforts speaks to the expert use of her pen, her reputation, and the perception of her as the "public wife" of the great Pathfinder.

In 1980, historian Joanna B. Gillespie, then at the Center for Research on Women at Stanford University, coined the term "public wife." Gillespie opines that the "wife has long been a crucial, if unacknowledged, sociological component of a leader's 'political self-representation.'" A wife standing beside her husband on a political stage serves to confirm the man's morality and stability as well as his capacity to maintain the social order and thus prove himself worthy of consideration as a possible leader.[1] In 1856, Jessie proved herself to be just as potent a political symbol when her husband ran for the presidency on behalf of the new

[1] Joanna B. Gillespie, "The Phenomenon of the Public Wife: An Exercise in Goffman's Impression Management," *Symbolic Interaction* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1980), 110-111.

Republican party. Through romantic stories of the John's whisking her off to a runaway marriage, Jessie served as an example of John's manly bravery in standing up to her disapproving father. Through the literary skills she utilized on behalf of John's expedition reports, she furthered that narrative of courage. Her anti-slavery beliefs, despite her coming from a slaveholding family, enhanced John's own abolitionist leanings in the public eye. Finally, with youth and beauty, with three small children, and with an intelligence and wit remarked upon throughout her life, Jessie offered proof of just how much of a hero John had to be to win the undying dedication of such a woman.

Examining the life of Jessie Benton Frémont allows for an understanding of how Jessie's behavior expands Gillespie's idea of the "public wife" from a passive role to one of action. Jessie considered herself a traditional wife and mother, yet she did not limit her marital role to domestic matters within the four walls of the family home. It was Jessie's expertise as a writer, paired with the political savvy she learned from her father, that created "John C. Frémont" as a public legend and national hero. Jessie played such a pivotal role in her husband's 1856 presidential campaign that much of the ephemera features her name and likeness over that of the Republican vice-presidential candidate. Finally, it was Jessie who, when her husband proved himself to be a disastrous businessman, earned the family income. Jessie was the politician, the breadwinner, and the engine that kept her family afloat, but she took on these very public roles under the title "wife."

Perhaps the most telling and long-lasting example of her active role as a "public wife" can be found in the debate in the early 1890s over John's role in the Conquest of California. College-educated men like Hubert Howe Bancroft, Henry Oak, and Josiah Royce publicly

challenged, through books and magazine articles, the Frémont contention that John acted under instructions from the United States government when he began to instigate hostilities with Mexican authorities in California in 1846. Royce, particularly, used documentary evidence to disprove the Frémont story that John received both oral instructions from Washington and "coded" directions contained in a letter from Thomas Hart Benton before becoming involved in efforts to take California. Yet, both Jessie and John stuck to their story that John had acted on behalf of the United States, with the full knowledge and approval of the president and authorities in Washington, D.C. After John's death, Jessie continued the dispute with Bancroft, Oak, and Royce as it played out across the pages of national magazines like *The Atlantic* and *Century*. That the Frémont narrative won out in the end, coloring the image of John C. Frémont through most of the twentieth century, offers an important insight into just how effective Jessie Frémont was as a "public wife."

Jessie has been the object of interest of two main biographers, Catherine Coffin Phillips and Pamela Herr. Phillips wrote the first major biography of Jessie, publishing *Jessie Benton Frémont: A Woman Who Made History* in 1935. Relying mainly on Jessie's unpublished memoir, John's memoir, the expedition reports, and her own childhood memories of Jessie, Phillips penned her book for a popular audience. As she did not cite her sources, it remains difficult for historians today to trace back many of her conclusions to primary materials. Reviewing the book in 1935 for the *American Historical Review*, Charles Reagan Wilson noted the reliance of Phillips on the Frémonts' own interpretations of their lives. Wilson wrote that John C. Frémont "appears as an unappreciated, misunderstood hero whom his wife pathetically endeavored to shield from the blasts of official ingratitude." In the end, Wilson found that the

work did not offer anything worthwhile to historians. While Wilson's words appear as a harsh critique, Phillips' work did provide the first detailed examination of the life of Jessie Frémont and took her out of the shadows of her more famous husband.

Despite its shortcomings, Phillips' work remained the only major biography of Jessie until Pamela Herr published *Jessie Benton Frémont* in 1988. Herr, unlike Phillips, accessed the voluminous correspondence of Jessie Benton Frémont to provide a more intimate and comprehensive view of her subject. Herr argues that Jessie struggled between her own ambitions and the restrictions placed upon her by the gender conventions of the time. Jessie would never have seen herself in this way. Always reminding her audience that she was an exceptional woman due to being "so husbanded" and "so fathered," Jessie maintained an attachment for traditional gender roles throughout her life. Even upon entering the reforming efforts of the Progressive Era, she did so in the conventional fields reserved for women, especially those of educating children and preserving "American values." Reviewers of Herr's *Jessie Benton Frémont* generally found Herr's prose very readable and the book a welcome offering for popular audiences. Several reviewers found Herr's monograph to be an "old-fashioned life and times" biography, but the work fed a public interest in the captivating wife of John C. Frémont that had, by that time, been stirred by novels and television dramas.

Jessie also appears in various biographies of John and in two more recent dual biographies of the couple: Sally Denton's 2007 *Passion and Principle: John and Jessie Frémont, the Couple Whose Power, Politics, and Love Shaped Nineteenth-Century America*, and Steve Inskeep's 2020 *Imperfect Union: How Jessie and John Frémont Mapped the West, Invented Celebrity, and Helped Cause the Civil War.* Books that focus on the Frémonts together

lean toward the idea that John and Jessie worked in partnership. This viewpoint obscures Jessie's guiding hand in the history, and in the public memory, of her husband. John, often holding himself aloof from his wife (and many other people), engineered his own failures. Jessie reacted to each setback by developing a narrative of John as misunderstood or ill-treated while always showing him in the best possible light.

While Jessie stands side by side with her husband in these recent offerings, early biographies of John alone left her relegated to the sidelines. In the first major biography of John C. Frémont, Allen Nevins' *Frémont: Pathmarker of the West*, initially published in 1926, then revised in 1939 and again in 1954, the author tells the mythic tale of an exceptional Frémont, a man over whose "cradle hung as dark clouds as have surrounded the infancy of any notable American." Despite his humble beginnings, Nevins' Frémont rises to become a great, if generally misunderstood, man. While admitting that John was "impetuous" and "often his own worst enemy," Nevins also believes John's life was marred by a series of unsupported criticisms from those around him. He notes the "cruel dilemma" of John having to choose in 1846 whether to leave California or stay and fight, a decision that damned John either way. Nevins blames the jealousy of "West Pointers" and the "selfish demands of the Blair clan" for John's failures during the Civil War. As to John's subsequent business failures, Nevins also casts blame on others for besmirching John's good character, calling him "honest" in his dealings with the Memphis & El Paso Railroad. He passes over without comment John's poor performance as Territorial Governor of Arizona. Each of these excuses for John's shortcomings can be traced back to Jessie's vigorous pen. In the "great men, great events" style of the time in which he was writing,

Nevins identifies Jessie as nothing more than a helpmeet to her husband, while John, misunderstood and unjustly treated, rode alone to greatness.

Tom Chaffin's more recent and nuanced *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire* (2002) focuses predominantly on what John was best at—his explorations across the west. Chaffin credits Jessie with playing a key part in her husband's rise to fame, but his chapters on John's life after the expeditions ended in 1854 are not comprehensive enough for a true accounting of Jessie's role in crafting her husband's story. For Chaffin, though to a smaller degree than for Nevins, Jessie remains more of a traditional wife, her efforts to maintain John's heroic status merely the work of an amanuensis. While he credits her work as a published author and acknowledges her role in keeping the family finances afloat, Chaffin's focus on John's glory days as a western explorer leaves little room for Jessie.

Happily for the historian seeking to recapture the life of such a remarkable woman, Jessie left behind a voluminous correspondence, various autobiographical magazine stories and essays, several books, and her own unpublished memoir. While this can sometimes be an "embarrassment of riches," it does provide opportunities to distinguish between the face that Jessie showed to the public and the inner life she shared with friends and family. Not quite comfortable with other women, including her own sisters, Jessie's extant correspondence shows only a few close female friendships. One of those friends was Elizabeth "Lizzie" Blair Lee, the daughter of the prominent Washington editor and political leader Francis Preston Blair, Sr. (known as Preston), and sister to Frank Blair and Montgomery Blair. Letters to Lizzie reveal Jessie as a wife and mother in ways that her published works conceal. To Lizzie alone did she offer even the slightest criticism of John, lamenting on one occasion his lack of warmth toward

their children. Yet, when the men of the Blair family challenged John's actions in St. Louis during the Civil War, Jessie broke her ties with Lizzie, her closest friend since childhood. Time and again, Jessie chose John, and nowhere is this clearer than in the private written materials she left behind.

If Jessie did have more complaints about John, if she knew about his infidelity with other women, the evidence is elusive. Part of this is due to the efforts of Jessie's daughter, Elizabeth "Lily" Benton Frémont, after Jessie's death. In a letter to her cousin, Sallie Preston, in 1907, Lily wrote that it "is not a cheerful task that of going over and destroying old letters and papers but it is better than having their get into wrong hands and be used in the garbled way so common to the usual 'literary executor.'"[2] John and Jessie Frémont spent a large portion of their married life miles apart from each other, and it is reasonable to presume that they communicated through the mail. Yet only a handful of these letters remain today. In her own way, Lily was as dedicated as her mother to maintaining the mythic narrative of her parents. Perhaps for this reason, she destroyed any correspondence that might put one, or both, in a bad light. The letters between the two that do survive show Jessie expressing her wholehearted love and support for her husband, while John's letters often read as only slightly warmer than business correspondence. Still, understanding the truth of their relationship has been obscured by Lily's action, and the interested observer can only draw such conclusions as the existing evidence provides.

[2] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to Sallie Preston, August 7, 1907, Preston-Johnston Family Papers, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

One of the challenges in examining a nineteenth-century life like that of Jessie Benton Frémont stems from the changes in language usage over the past nearly two hundred years. Words that were common in past centuries are no longer tolerated today. Such is the case with a vulgarism used often during the heat of the 1856 presidential election. Deciding on whether to use the word as it was written at the time or replacing it with today's "n-word" proved difficult, with many opinions offered on each side of the question. In *They Were Her Property* (2019), historian Stephanie Jones-Rogers decided to include the offensive word as it was used by former enslaved people being interviewed by the Works Project Administration in the 1930s. She made this decision so as to not change the way that the interviewees told their own stories, to not take away from them the ability to speak in the language in which they understood themselves. While this is not the case here, the same logic applies. The "n-word" was ugly in 1856 and it is today. It was meant to shock, to condemn, and to disparage those who supported the goals of abolition. To tame that language in any way is to diminish the cruelty of the times, the evidence of the inability of a large section of the American population to recognize some people as being a part of the human family. For this reason, the newspaper articles published during the 1856 election appear here as they appeared at the time.

This reexamination of the life of Jessie Benton Frémont offers larger opportunities for historians interested in the role of the "public wife" and an understanding of just how women influenced both the course and the narrative of history during the nineteenth century. There were other wives who sought, as Jessie did, to manipulate the way in which their husbands would be remembered. Elizabeth "Libby" Custer, wife of Colonel George A. Custer of Little Big Horn fame, spent her widowhood seeking to redeem her husband's reputation. Through her efforts,

Libby turned what many found to be George's foolhardiness into a tragic tale of doomed bravery. Similarly, LaSalle "Sallie" Pickett attempted to recast the narrative of the Battle of Gettysburg to remove from her husband, Confederate general George Pickett, the blame for Lee's loss of the battle. Neither of these wives, though, did as much as Jessie to develop a historical narrative that favored their husbands. And neither was ultimately as successful as Jessie Frémont in creating their own hero.

While John C. Frémont did not suffer as dramatic a fall from grace as did George A. Custer or George Pickett, his failures were many and significant. He failed as a politician, both in 1851 and 1856, and he failed as a military leader during the Civil War. He failed as a businessman, losing the immense wealth of the Las Mariposas land grant and ruining himself and his family through speculative financial ventures. He resigned as Arizona Territorial Governor before he could be removed from office. Finally, he failed as a husband, proving himself unfaithful to his wife on numerous occasions as well as leaving it to Jessie to be the financial support of the family. Yet, through the efforts of his supporters, and most effectively through the efforts of Jessie Benton Frémont, he remained an admired figure well into the twentieth century. Jessie not only deftly rewrote her husband's failures into the mythic tale of a hero, but she also helped the United States reach its potential along Pacific shores by joining her voice to others calling for westward expansion and by using her literary skills to portray the west, formerly the Great American Desert, as a place of adventure and potential.

Using her pen, her wit, her experiences, her reputation, and the strength of will she inherited from her father, Jessie Benton Frémont turned John C. Frémont from a failure to a man

for whom cities, parks, and streets were named. Jessie, the “public wife,” now deserves her own time in the spotlight.

CHAPTER 1
CHILDHOOD
1824-1841

In 1828, three-year-old Jessie Benton and her five-year-old sister, Eliza, sporting new purple pelisses with chinchilla fur, entered their father's library to pass inspection in their finery. The room empty, the little girls grew bored waiting for their father—until they noticed red and blue pencils and a pile of foolscap on the desk. The temptation proved too great. As children will do, the two took to "writing" over the top of the inked words already on the pages.

Without warning, Thomas Hart Benton, United States Senator from Missouri, entered his library, interrupting his daughters who, by this time, had papers scattered across the floor and whose mouths were smeared from wetting the pencils.

"Who did this?" inquired the frustrated parent and politician.

His three-year-old answered, a cheeky grin on her small face. "It's a little girl that cries 'HURRAH FOR JACKSON.'"[3]

What could a father, a senator, and a supporter of Andrew Jackson do but hold his daughter close and try to keep from smiling?

Many decades later, Jessie Benton Frémont remembered this moment from her childhood and committed it to the pages of the unpublished memoir she wrote near the end of her life. Whether apocryphal or true, this story tells more about Jessie's childhood than even she meant to expose. Thinking back on her youth, the elderly Jessie reflected on the great love and admiration she carried for her father, a connection she challenged as an adult but nevertheless clung to

[3] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," n.p., in Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 3-4.

throughout her life. By comparison, her mother, Elizabeth McDowell Benton, a stern-faced, deeply religious woman, often appeared in Jessie's childhood tales as a rival for her father's affections, a foil used to illustrate Thomas Hart Benton's inherent greatness. The pattern of celebrating her admiration for her father while exposing the ambivalence she felt toward her mother shaded many of Jessie's memories of her childhood.

In this story, Jessie also revealed important clues about the way she saw herself. As she clung to her father for approval, she quickly developed a keen interest in United States politics, as Thomas Benton would have expected from a son. Despite having both younger and older siblings, including two brothers, Jessie took the spotlight for herself, becoming a politically savvy woman largely as a means of connecting herself to her father in ways that none of her siblings could. Her need for paternal affection and approval colored many of Jessie's youthful decisions. She kept her father high up on a pedestal—right until a handsome young man in a dashing uniform knocked him off. Defying the man she most admired to marry the man she loved, Jessie spent the rest of her life trying to regain her father's regard while leaving a legacy of her husband as worthy of this first grand act of defiance.

* * * *

What is known about the childhood of Jessie Benton Frémont comes from Jessie herself. In stories for the children's magazine *Wide Awake* and in her unpublished memoir, Jessie spun tales of her life in the 1820s and 1830s, from sitting on the knee of Andrew Jackson as a child to her rebellious teen years when she cut off her hair in the hopes of not having to attend a girls' academy. Through published works and unpublished memoir, Jessie offered an autobiography that contained, as all good autobiographies do, elements of both truth and fiction. As with the

story "Hurrah for Jackson," Jessie's words reflected her lived reality but also served to further the image crafted to maintain her public persona, that of a woman strong and clever enough to be the daughter of Thomas Hart Benton and the wife of John C. Frémont.[4]

Thomas Hart Benton, forty-two years old when Jessie was born, had led quite an eventful life. Raised by his mother after the early death of his father, Benton had been expelled from the University of North Carolina (although, as he reached a certain level of fame later in life, the school relented and granted him a degree). He taught himself and then practiced the law, joined the War of 1812 as a soldier serving under Andrew Jackson, and published the *St. Louis Enquirer* from 1818 to 1820. In 1815, Benton met Elizabeth Preston McDowell, the daughter of James McDowell and Elizabeth Preston. Elizabeth's family had strong ties to the Revolutionary generation as well as kinship relations with several prominent Virginia families. The McDowell plantation at Cherry Grove outside Lexington served as the home base for the family, and several McDowell family members went on to have distinguished careers in Virginia politics, including one son, James McDowell, Jr., who served as governor in the 1840s.[5]

While Thomas fell in love with her nearly at first sight, Elizabeth, according to family lore, declared that she would never marry a red-headed man, nor a Democrat, nor a Westerner.[6] After a six-year courtship during which Thomas pursued her assiduously, Elizabeth withdrew her objections to these disreputable characteristics and decided to marry the young man with the

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[4] In this dissertation, Jessie's autobiographical accounts have not been taken at face value but have been studied critically, with an eye toward Jessie's motive in telling her story. When possible, these memoirs have been checked against other contemporary sources as well as secondary source material to put them into a firm contextual setting. One of her father's biographers, William Nisbet Chambers, tells the story of Thomas Hart Benton's early life in this same manner. Chambers, William Nisbet. *Old Bullion Benton, Senator from the New West: Thomas Hart Benton, 1782-1858* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 11.
[5] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 58.
[6] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 5.

promising future, even if that future took her to the wild west city of St. Louis. The couple wed at Cherry Grove on May 20, 1821. Just a few months later, Thomas was sworn in as a United States senator from the new state of Missouri, a seat he would hold for the next thirty years. As he built his political career over the next decades, Thomas also built his family.

On February 12, 1822, the Bentons welcomed their first child, named Elizabeth (called Eliza to avoid confusion) after her mother and her McDowell grandmother. By May 1824, Elizabeth was expecting again. So certain was Thomas Benton that his second child would be a boy that he had already determined to name the baby after his father and brother, Jesse. When that second child turned out to be a girl, he and Elizabeth simply added an "i" and boy Jesse became girl Jessie. She was given the middle name Ann to honor Benton's mother, Ann Gooch Benton.

Four more children were born to the Bentons. A third daughter, Sarah McDowell Benton, arrived in 1827. With what must have been a sigh of relief, Thomas and Elizabeth finally welcomed their first son, John Randolph Benton, in 1830 and named him after Thomas' close friend John Randolph of Roanoke. In 1831, a second son joined the growing family, James McDowell Benton. Little Mac, as he was called, bore the name of both his maternal grandfather and maternal uncle. The Bentons' last child, born in 1835 and yet another daughter, was named Susan Virginia Benton, Susan being a name common in both the McDowell and Benton families.

Looking back decades later, after her siblings had passed away, Jessie reflected on them in her memoir. Her sister Eliza, Jessie described as "an ailing, delicate child." Sarah Benton was pronounced "much too young" (although she was all of three years younger than Jessie). Her youngest sister, Susan, who would go on to become an accomplished pianist who played for

such nineteenth-century luminaries as the composer Gioachino Rossini, Jessie defined as "singularly unsympathetic" and referred to her musical studies as "a desiccating pursuit." Little Mac received Jessie's most sympathetic attention of all her siblings, due to his short, frail life. Her brother Randolph, although he was to be associated with one of her future husband's expeditions, received little to no attention from his older sister in her writings. In contrast to her brothers and sisters, Jessie described herself as "a perfectly healthy child," with "a keen delight in life, and that *besoin d'aimer* that made loving and being loved necessary."[7] That "need to love" did not manifest in Jessie for her siblings or her mother—that belonged all to her father.

Jessie's feelings about her mother vacillated between admiration and disdain. According to Jessie, her mother, while having a certain sweetness, "could not wholly escape from the grim Scotch puritan atmosphere that dominated her home." Jessie found this grimness especially frustrating, as she compared it with the jovial disposition of her father. She described her mother as "intolerant as only rigid Presbyterians then were."[8] At the same time, though, she credited her mother's religious background with fostering "a gracious spirit of broad resistance to any form of intolerance and of active sympathy with the oppressed." Elizabeth McDowell Benton freed the enslaved people she inherited upon the death of her father, became "active in the colonization movement," and even "held a Sunday school and taught all the slaves who cared to learn, to read and write."[9] In spite of these finer qualities, Jessie saved nearly all her praise and affection for her father.

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[7] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir", 5.
[8] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 4.
[9] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 16. This is one of the few times Jessie used the word "slave" in her writing. Through most of her writings, Jessie referred to "servants" rather than "slaves." Writing in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, after the Civil War had brought the abolition of slavery, she contributed to the Lost Cause idea of slavery as a benevolent institution by substituting gentler language in place of the word "slave," which brought

To understand Jessie, one must understand Thomas Hart Benton. In a biography written nearly a century after Thomas' passing, historian William Nisbet Chambers used a variety of sources to create a composite description of Benton. At once of "commanding talent, untiring application . . . and energy unmatched," Thomas was also described by his contemporaries as a man weighing two hundred pounds who would "thunder [his speeches] in a roaring voice—with uplifted arm—and a terrible dash of newspapers and documents on his table."[10] Terms like "great sledge hammer, heavy, weighty, crushing, iron-wrought" were mixed with the finding that his "facts [were] generally impregnable." His loyalty, once acquired, stood firm against all attempts to dislodge it. According to United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, speaking of Benton's steadfast belief in hard money (also denoted by his nickname of "Old Bullion"), Benton was second only to Andrew Jackson himself as "an object of abuse in 'anonymous publicity,' spawned by the B.U.S., 'containing the grossest and coarsest libels.'"[11] Benton stuck to both Andrew Jackson and the idea of hard money, never bowing to pressure to reconsider.[12] Following her father's example of steadfast loyalty, Jessie herself never wavered in her outward devotion to both her father and her husband.

Similar to the reputation acquired by Jackson as a duelist, Benton also engaged in the practice of addressing wrongs, both real and perceived, through the use of firearms. Notorious as

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with it unpleasant associations. Why she chose to use "slaves" here is unknown. See Chapter 8 for more on this topic.

[10] One historian, perhaps feeling that Chambers did not go quite far enough in describing Benton, wrote that "he always sounded the same—like an angry god in love with the sound of his own voice." Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 42.

[11] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 194. The quote originated in Roger Taney's "Bank War Manuscript," edited by Carl Brent Swisher for the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, vol. III, issue 53 (Sep 1958), 215-237. B.U.S. refers to the Second Bank of the United States; in 1832 the Bank sought rechartering to which Benton was vehemently opposed, as was Andrew Jackson who vetoed a recharter bill that came before him.

[12] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 193-194.

a dueler already from an 1813 squabble between he and his brother and Andrew Jackson, Benton's first duel in St. Louis occurred in 1817.[13] Benton, in his role as an attorney, engaged in a contentious legal battle with Charles Lucas, then United States Attorney for the Territory of Missouri. According to a report of the dispute written in 1870, the two "used harsh and reproachful language to each other" during the court proceedings. Benton, believing himself insulted, challenged Lucas, who initially declined. The insults continued, and finally it was Lucas who challenged Benton. The two met twice on "Bloody Island," the local dueling ground, before the matter was settled on September 27 when Benton killed the twenty-five year old Lucas.[14] In an autobiographical sketch included in the 1858 edition of his memoir, *Thirty Years' View*, Benton wrote that he never spoke of this duel again, except to intimate friends, because the pain of seeing "the young man fall" was simply too much to bear. For that reason, he "had all the papers burnt which relate" to the duel so that no "future curiosity or industry should bring to light what he wishes had never happened."[15] Thomas Hart Benton never dueled again.

Jessie herself never picked up a gun in anger. While she behaved with the expected propriety of her gender, Jessie found an outlet for her grievances against others by using her pen.

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[13] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 50-52. The tussle between the Benton brothers, Thomas and Jesse, and Andrew Jackson and John Coffee, well-known at its time and even decades later, gave rise to some Frémont family lore. According to Jessie, writing a biography of her husband's early years for his 1856 presidential campaign, Charles Fremon, his wife, Anne Beverley Fremon, and their infant son, John Charles, stayed at Talbot's tavern on the day during which the Bentons and Jackson and Coffee exchanged gunfire there. Reportedly, a stray bullet passed through the wall and into their very room, narrowly missing the Fremons. See John Bigelow, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of John Charles Frémont* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), 22.

[14] Elihu H. Shepard, *The Early History of St. Louis And Missouri* (St. Louis: Southwestern Book and Publishing Company, 1870), 58-59.

[15] Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View: Or, a History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850.*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1858), v. According to Ken S. Mueller, enough other people saved the correspondence surrounding the duel that piecing the events together did not prove difficult for Benton biographers. Ken S. Mueller, *Senator Benton and the People: Master Race Democracy on the Early American Frontiers* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 271 n38. Some documents, including letters between the duelists and the "articles" laying out the specific arrangements, are among the Papers of Thomas Hart Benton in the collections of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.

Any slight against herself, her father, or her husband was rejoined with biting disdain and a ferocious defense, often in public ways that only served to bring censure against Jessie herself. If it had been within her ability to do so, Jessie certainly would have challenged the Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce to a duel in the later decades of the nineteenth century, just as her father might have done in earlier times.

A willful man, accustomed to always having his own way, Thomas Benton was also naturally "vain and satisfied of his own superiority."[16] From portraits painted during his lifetime and a handful of extant early photographs, it becomes easy to imagine how Jessie saw this great six-foot colossus as someone to admire and emulate. A barrel chest, large head with a thatch of silver hair, deep-set eyes under forbidding brows, and a large, straight nose fitted Jessie's vision of her father as a true Roman solon. Fittingly, after his death, Benton was depicted in a larger-than-life statue wearing a Roman toga and gazing westward as though he could see into the future.[17]

No politician serving during the thirty years of Benton's time in the U.S. Senate (1821-1851) could fail to become involved in the great debate that defined the young republic's early decades—the contest over slavery. Here Benton's view, too, would influence Jessie's own beliefs. For Benton, his entry into the fray began with the discussions of Missouri statehood in the years just prior to 1820. Coming from a slaveholding family, Benton began his political life defending the peculiar institution of the South. As the editor of the *St. Louis Enquirer*, Benton attached himself to the cause of Missouri statehood with full-throated support when Henry Clay

[16] Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 194.
[17] The Benton statue, created by Harriet Goodhue Hosmer and dedicated in 1868, stands in Lafayette Park in St. Louis, Missouri.

of Kentucky, then Speaker of the House of Representatives, offered a bill for the admission of the territory. When an anti-slavery amendment was introduced by James Talmadge of New York, Benton spoke out forcefully. At a community meeting in St. Louis on May 15, 1818, Benton told his audience that the right of the Missouri territory to be admitted into the union did not depend on Congress but upon the authority of its own people in forming a state constitution. He addressed the slavery amendment by noting that "a second determination on the part of Congress to refuse them admittance upon an equal footing with the original states, will make it expedient to exercise that right."[18] If the original thirteen states were allowed to enter the union of their own accord and draft their constitutions to protect the institution of slavery, then so should Missouri.

Benton's early pro-slavery inclinations, however, began to fade during the late 1830s as he started to look anew at the machinations of both North and South over the issue. Reflecting back on the slavery debates as he neared the end of his life, Benton noted that from "the beginning of the Missouri controversy up to the year 1835," he had taken the view that the North was responsible for the conflict, pointing to that region as agitating the question through abolitionist activities, including the sending of dozens of anti-slavery petitions to the Senate. After 1835, however, he "began to look to the South for that danger…." He described himself as having been "opposed to it [agitation] in either quarter," and equally "he has opposed it in

[18] Talmadge's amendment contained two clauses: first that "the further introduction of slavery or involuntary servitude be prohibited," and second that "all children of slaves born within the said state, after the admission thereof into the Union, shall be free at the age of twenty-five years." *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, Fifteenth Congress, Second Session, November 16, 1818, to March 3, 1819* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1855), 1170.

both."[19] Coming to this realization that the Union was threatened by the issue, he became "increasingly resistant to slavery and Southern demands."[20] Jessie noted this opposition and made it her own, seeking to emulate her father whenever possible even as she made every attempt to stand in the good graces of her southern family members.[21]

From infancy, Jessie Ann Benton, as the daughter of Thomas Hart Benton, lived in three different locales and each allowed her to identify with divergent regions of the country. Born at Cherry Grove in Virginia, Jessie saw herself as a southerner through her mother's family. She, her parents, and her siblings split their time between the McDowell plantation and rental homes in Washington, D.C., as her father pursued his political career. From the capitol city, although still very southern itself, Jessie identified with the same national goals her father espoused in the halls of Congress. Thomas Benton's political base, St. Louis, offered a third locale for Jessie, this one leading her to identify as both a westerner and, thanks to the city's diverse population, a cosmopolitan.

In April 1825, Jessie, then not quite eleven months old, made her first journey from her birthplace at Cherry Grove to St. Louis, the family traveling overland from Virginia to the Ohio River where they boarded a steamboat for the trip down the Ohio and up the Mississippi.[22] The 67-year-old Marquis de Lafayette, the French hero of the American Revolution, was visiting the city. The aging Lafayette, invited by President James Monroe to celebrate the young republic's

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[19] Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View,* 622-623. Benton points to an argument in the Senate over the acceptance of petitions advocating the abolition of slavery, specifically a resolution proposed by Henry L. Pinckney of South California that "Congress ought not to interfere, in any way, with slavery…as it would be a violation of the public faith, unwise, impolitic, and dangerous to the Union." Talk of disunion both roused Benton's ire and caused him to reconsider his convictions regarding slavery.
[20] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 214.
[21] Jessie would find her regional loyalties, as well as family relationships, challenged by the Civil War.
[22] William Nesbit Chambers*, Old Bullion Benton*, 132.

fiftieth anniversary in 1826, eventually traveled to all twenty-four states then in the Union. He arrived in New York City on August 15, 1824, and began his tour by surveying the original thirteen British colonies. He ventured westward, visiting New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Natchez through the spring of 1825 before heading up the Mississippi toward St. Louis. Stopped by darkness on April 28, less than seven miles from the city, he spent an evening at Carondelet, allowing an eager Thomas Benton, along with former Governor William Clark of Missouri and Governor Edward Coles of Illinois, to meet him there and escort him into St. Louis the next day.[23]

As the steamer *Plough Boy* drew up to the St. Louis docks, the "nation's guest was saluted by three cheers, which made the forests of the Missouri resound with *Welcome Lafayette*" in a cacophony of languages that delighted the Marquis with its evidence of the cosmopolitan nature of the city. More than half of St. Louis' five thousand citizens gathered as the famous Frenchman received a welcome from Dr. William Carr Lane, the mayor, and toured the city, finding "fantastical" architecture and "smiling" gardens. Along the paved and curbed roads that marked one of Dr. Lane's first municipal improvements, Lafayette observed homes described by his secretary as "whimsical" in their design. St. Louis had flourished in its first few years as an incorporated city and was "already the grand store-house of the countries west of the Mississippi."[24] Business boomed, bringing growth and importance to the trading post initially formed in the eighteenth century. This was the St. Louis Jessie knew as a young girl.

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[23] August Levasseur, *Lafayette in America 1824-1825; Or, a Journal of a Voyage to the United States*, vol. II (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1829), 121-122. Also, Elihu H. Shepard, *The Early History of St. Louis And Missouri* (St. Louis: Southwestern Book and Publishing Company, 1870), 79.
[24] August Levasseur, *Lafayette in America 1824-1825*, 122, 127.

This bustling hive of western life that so warmly welcomed the Marquis de Lafayette offered a wide range of experiences for young Jessie Benton. Jessie remembered the St. Louis of her youth for the "caravans of merchandise going through to Santa Fe," and for the Jefferson Barracks, just south of the city and a "large and important military post." She remembered seeing the end of the wars with the nearby Indians when she caught a glimpse of the famous Black Hawk, "a real Indian and a real old warrior, captive but not subdued."[25] Her St. Louis was peopled with a wide variety of men and women, often coming to the house to visit her father. Army officers, Spanish gentlemen, French priests, Indian chiefs, traders, trappers, and even Washington Irving made their way to the Benton home on Laurel Street. Houses, according to Jessie, were not "whimsical" but built in "the Creole way," with courtyards, gardens, and orchards, all sloping down to the Mississippi, the lifeline of the city. She especially loved the "honey-scent of the locust" tree, of which her father was also fond, and equated it with the light, joyous spirit of St. Louis' French citizens.[26]

Jessie delighted in the very Frenchness of St. Louis, another aspect of the city that so charmed Lafayette. She preferred her St. Louis playmates to those she had at Cherry Grove and in Washington D.C., noting that the "[l]anguage, customs, prejudices, cookery—all was as French here as the other was English."[27] She would later boast that the French-speaking citizenry of St. Louis referred to her father as "*l'ami des Français*" and it was this quality of his nature that allowed him to enjoy "personal relations with his many clients in both New Orleans and St. Louis."[28] The family's French neighbors visited often, bringing "some fine fruit or

[25] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1887), 136.
[26] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*, 142-143.
[27] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*, 135.
[28] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*, 139.

flower" for Mrs. Benton, who reciprocated by donating a "basket of useful things and many a solid piece of money" to Sister Elizabeth for the local hospital.

Thomas Benton, feeling strongly that the acquisition of language skills was a vital necessity, studied Spanish with a local gentleman, Colonel Garnier, and insisted that his older daughters be taught the language as well. According to Jessie, he "thought we ought to know the language of our near neighbor, Mexico," anticipating that "closer relations" with the country would soon be required.[29] In addition, Thomas sent both Eliza and Jessie to a local school to learn French. This decision had the desired result, with additional instruction in the language from servants and playmates in St. Louis. Yet Jessie remembered her time in school with a smile, noting that the young pupils had "not the first idea of studies, of punctuality, or discipline attached to it as I knew it. The going there each morning was as good as playing truant."[30] Both Jessie and Eliza learned their lessons elsewhere.

Jessie credited her Benton grandmother for some of her early life lessons in St. Louis. Ann Gooch Benton had lost much of her family to consumption, and she resided with the Bentons when they were in St. Louis and with her niece Sarah Benton Brant and her family when they were not. Jessie found that her grandmother had "a singularly large unprejudiced view of things, and had outlived every personal interest except in my father and a few of her grandchildren." Losing her husband early and raising the children alone, Ann Benton did not have the educational opportunities that her young grandchildren would have, yet books offered a certain solace, especially in her last years when a poorly set broken leg led to rheumatism, pain,

[29] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: Saint Louis," *Wide Awake Magazine*, November 1885: p. 150.
[30] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: Saint Louis," 151.

and lack of mobility. Jessie remembered her grandmother's bedroom in the Benton house on Laurel Street, how her "low couch at right angles to the fire and sunlit windows beyond….was always heaped with books."[31] As Jessie grew older, her own favorite rooms also contained "heaps" of books.

Jessie read to her grandmother, noting that "[b]iographies and books of travel were her favorites and my father kept her supplied with the best English publications." Sometimes, Jessie replaced her grandmother's maid and brushed the long, thick plait of "tarnished silver" hair. Jessie's later dislike of sewing for her family came from this Benton grandmother, who warned her to "[n]ever do for yourself what an uneducated person can do better for you." Jessie apparently took these words to heart as, for the rest of her life and even in the depths of poverty, she was well-attended by servants, doing for her what she, as an educated woman, did not choose to do for herself.

Instead of sewing, the elderly woman and the young girl, both sharing a love for knowledge as well as for Thomas Hart Benton, spoke of faraway places, "India or Persia—maybe into some sweet English woman's diary of troubled times in England." Decades later, Jessie wrote, "She made on me, even as a young child, the effect of being above other people. And though she died when I was but thirteen I have kept the realization of a lofty and great soul."[32] Jessie adored her grandmother, and the feeling was fully reciprocated.[33]

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[31] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 14.
[32] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: Saint Louis," 151.
[33] When Jessie was a small child, her Benton grandmother owned at least one enslaved person, likely more. Perhaps it was her youth at the time or her love for this grandmother that led Jessie to erase any mention of this slaveholding in her later writings. Letters exchanged between Ann's man of business and her son Samuel reveal Ann sending "her boy, Island," to her son, warning that she found it "impossible to keep him on account of his indolence and drunkenness" and his "insatiable propensity for vice of every description." She warned that he was likely to run away during his trip from St. Louis to her son's home in Tennessee and asked to be notified at once if he did not

Despite her age and infirmity, Ann Benton survived the cholera epidemic that swept through St. Louis in the summer of 1832. Other residents were not so fortunate. According to one account, about four percent of St. Louis' population succumbed to the disease during its five-month duration.[34] For Jessie, this meant, at first, that she and Eliza could not attend school. Visits from playmates were subsequently curtailed, and Jessie recalled that the friends of her father who came to the house appeared "quick and busy in coming and going, and all looked grave." From their perch on Laurel Street, the Bentons witnessed the passing of many funerals, then "drays with several coffins piled on jolted fast along the rough street, or a wagon-load of empty coffins."[35] Everyone became fearful and quiet as the city suspended much of its business.

Thomas Benton took charge and ordered some changes to the family's household routine. Jessie referred to one of these changes as turning the house into a "diet-kitchen," which produced "good soups, preparations of rice, and well-filtered and purified water." Although it was not yet known to scientists and physicians that cholera operated as a water-borne disease, the Benton household went to great lengths to ensure the purity of its water supply. Water brought from the river was poured into red earthenware jugs, "some of them five feet high." Clarified by alum and blanched almonds and then filtered, water preparation involved the entire household, including the children. Meanwhile, the family subsisted on "only rice and mutton and such simple things." While some later accounts found it "worthy of remark that those who pursued their usual avocations and made no change in clothing or diet were least affected, and seldom failed of recovery if attacked," Thomas Benton's actions in altering his family's diet and routine

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arrive on time. Charles Keemle to Samuel Benton, April 25, April 26, May 1, May 9, 1828, Benton Family Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.

[34] Elihu H. Shepard, *The Early History of St. Louis And Missouri*, 108.

[35] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: Saint Louis," 152.

served to hold the illness at bay—until the end of summer.[36] While one of the servants had been taken ill with cholera in the household, the real blow arrived when Elizabeth Benton became stricken. Jessie wrote little of what happened, simply noting, "The sad summer ended as all things must end, bad or good. *Tout passe*. When all seemed safe, suddenly my mother was taken down with cholera…. It was a bad illness, but with that one brush of the dark angel's wing our home stood as before."[37] Elizabeth recovered, and the family continued its practice of moving from one location to another.

While St. Louis served as Thomas Benton's political home, the family spent far more time at the McDowell's Cherry Grove plantation outside of Lexington, in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Jessie described it as "the home." According to her, this was "real country….far as the eye could see all was ours and there we had been born."[38] Cherry Grove provided the locale where Jessie developed many of the characteristics that would frame her adult life.

While a "modest" house from the outside, the interior that Jessie loved bespoke a certain amount of prosperity. Two parlors stood on either side of an entrance hall, each including brick fireplaces, painted wainscoting on the walls and brown moldings around the ceiling. On the whole, the home "possessed a quiet, elegant, but modest charm." From the windows, vistas stretched in all directions, with the "grounds, fields, and orchards" merging "with the sharply rolling country which ran to the Blue Ridge to the north and east, and the Alleghenies to the west."[39] According to a granddaughter of James McDowell, Jr., Jessie's uncle, Cherry Grove included "great flocks and herds and droves of domestic animals." Plantation "trades and

[36] Elihu H. Shepard, *The Early History of St. Louis And Missouri*, 108
[37] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: Saint Louis," 153.
[38] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 15.
[39] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 104.

tradesman met all the varied needs" not only of the plantation itself but enough to sell across both Virginia and Kentucky.[40]

Here under the eyes of her McDowell grandparents and various aunts, uncles, and cousins, Jessie grew to understand the responsibilities of being a plantation wife by sticking close by the side of her grandmother. Unlike her grandmother Benton, whose life had been difficult enough to lend her a certain stoicism, Jessie described her grandmother McDowell as "of the sweetest disposition . . . [g]entle, easy and light hearted, feeling her yoke, but bearing it as inevitable."[41] The lessons learned from this grandmother and her time at Cherry Grove proved different than those of St. Louis and grandmother Benton. From following Elizabeth Preston McDowell as she conducted the daily business of her home, Jessie learned the various directives outlining the relationships between White children and the enslaved people serving the plantation.

Looking back, Jessie referred to Cherry Grove as the "family Mecca."[42] She described the "large working force under well-drilled servants," managed under a system that had existed for centuries.[43] Here "nice children," like herself and her siblings, referred to the oldest among these "well-drilled servants" as "aunt" and "uncle" and "mammy." Lessons learned by Jessie and her siblings included the edict that a White child might never call an elderly enslaved man or

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[40] Sally Campbell Preston McDowell Miller, *Memoir of James McDowell, Governor of Virginia: Contributed to the Historical Series of Washington And Lee University* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1895), 18.
[41] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 16.
[42] Through the course of her life, whether writing for publication or within letters to friends and family, Jessie took pains to demonstrate the breadth of her knowledge. She scattered terms like "Mecca" as well as phrases in various languages and references to scores of books throughout her writing, presenting herself to all readers as someone well-read, sophisticated, and culturally superior.
[43] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: A Virginia Wedding," *Wide Awake Magazine*, November 1884: 30. This quote offers an example of Jessie's attempt to soften the image of her grandparents as slaveholders by obliquely referring to the plantation's enslaved population as "servants."

woman by just their name; there had to be a "handle to it." This piece of plantation etiquette taught small White children the important lesson of understanding their enslaved elders as part of the "family," giving meaning to a term often used to convey a familial connection between masters and those they subjugated: "our people." It also reenforced for the enslaved people themselves the cruel irony of the titles—any one of the White children behaving so politely might grow up to own their "aunts and uncles." Bestowing family titles upon an enslaved person, however, did not carry the respect due to a White person with the same honorific. Jessie recounted gleefully that she taunted Cherry Grove's head chambermaid, Aunt Judy, when said aunt was tasked with combing out Jessie's unruly curls. At the least tangle, Jessie would "howl" and "talk French at her too—which was sure to make her mad," as Aunt Judy felt certain Jessie could not be saved when speaking the "Pope's own language."[44] While Jessie acted this way as any wealthy, White child might, it spoke to a larger manner of viewing the enslaved people on her grandparents' plantation as equals to the children rather than respected elders.

Familial honorifics also served as clues to the appropriate level of contact White children might have with those enslaved on their family's plantation. "Aunt" or "uncle" before a name, such as Aunt Judy or Aunt Sarah the maid, Aunt Beck the weaver, or Uncle Sam the blacksmith, offered White children information concerning the level of safety with which these men and women might be approached. White children interacted with these enslaved people at will; there were no strictures against listening to, or even learning from, the elder men and women. Jessie

[44] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Crazy Sally," *Wide Awake Magazine*, May 1885, 357.

understood that the "older [slaves] had fixed characters and could be trusted to give us no wrong ideas."[45]

Young enslaved women, on the other hand, were quite different. White parents warned their children against contact with these "Jezebels," even when the women performed their tasks within the intimate spaces of the main house. Concern that the children might become "familiar with the indelicate, vulgar, and lascivious manners and conversation" of these women led to strict boundaries between young White girls and their Black contemporaries.[46] Jessie herself was warned away from these girls, who, at Cherry Grove, were "trained" in the spinning rooms. And she suffered the consequences when she failed to heed the warnings. Finding herself among the "spinning-girls" one day, Jessie saw Crazy Sally, an unstable White woman familiar to those on the plantation, headed toward the outbuildings. Generally harmless, Crazy Sally lived far back off the plantation and often ventured to the manor house, where Jessie's mother furnished the woman with sundry cast-off luxuries to wear. Jessie and her siblings "were never told any more than that she was a poor troubled crazy woman and we must keep out of her way." The "spinning-girls," though, persuaded Jessie to place some flowers upon Sally's head and, while doing so, whisper the words "Mr. Gould is not coming." Sally, whose very nickname of "Crazy" might have offered a hint to Jessie as to the nature of the woman's mind, knocked Jessie on the head with a long walking staff.

From the blow to the head and the accompanying headache, Jessie took the lesson that the spinning-girls "*were* young, and while meaning no harm could bring on evil as they had this

[45] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Crazy Sally," 360.
[46] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Revised Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 44. Also, Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 49.

time."[47] Wearing the privilege of her race, age, and class, Jessie did not comment in her later written work about any other reasons causing her White elders to warn her away from these young Black women, referring only to a certain mischievousness. For plantation owners and their families during this period, though, the sexual implications of these young Black women, viewed as lascivious and wanton, or the sexless nature ascribed to the various "aunts" and "mammies," informed the parameters concerning who was available to their children.[48] The various tensions between Black and White underlying life at Cherry Grove remained unspoken by Jessie as she remembered her childhood through the rosy haze of nostalgia.

Jessie's focus as a girl remained fixed on acquiring her father's affection and approval, remembering "I was always a good child with my father. So to displease him! No words could so hurt me as to see him turn away his head, lower his eyelids and not look up from his book while I stood by him."[49] One story related by Jessie offered an example of the ways in which she understood both her parents and their feelings toward her. In "The English Bull," Jessie wrote of playing with her siblings, under the watchful eyes of their White governess in the large, enclosed yard in front of Aunt Beck's weaving room. The wood chips scattered around led the children to experiment with a small axe left in the yard. Jessie sat on a doorstep, holding her brother, Little Mac, in her lap. Her brother Randolph and sister Sarah struggled over who would wield the axe, with the result that it tore from their hands, the iron head of the tool coming loose, rebounding

[47] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Crazy Sally," 360.
[48] No direct evidence exists of sexual relations between the slaveowners and enslaved women on Cherry Grove plantation. Whether the "spinning girls" were behaving in sexualized ways or were just mischievous, they were definitely exposed to sexual situations and acquired knowledge about sex at a much earlier age than a sheltered White child would have. Close living in the slave quarters severely limited privacy, and the "spinning girls" would have known from their elders what sexual risk they faced from White men.
[49] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Crazy Sally," 359.

off a fence rail, and striking Little Mac on the forehead. The governess promptly fell into a faint. With the child crying and calling for his mother, Jessie took it upon herself to cut across the very pasture that was home to the plantation's English bull.

In her first telling of the story in *Wide Awake* magazine, Jessie compared herself to the biblical Daniel coming through the fiery furnace. She managed to sneak herself and the sobbing Little Mac across the bull's field and into the house, running to her mother's bedroom to lay the bleeding child before her. Jessie heard "the voice of a relation I never liked" say "[s]he has killed her little brother!" Her mother, like the governess, fell into a faint, and, to Jessie, all seemed to concur that she was responsible for the child's injury. Retreating to her own bedroom, Jessie fell into a sleep only awakened by her father offering a comforting presence. Later, her mother "kept [her] close by" with a "tender touch" through the evening as all celebrated Little Mac's quick recovery.[50] But Jessie felt that somehow a piece of her childhood had passed, noting that the 'bitterness of injustice had come to me." No amount of praise or tender pats after that could change the knowledge that "undeserved blame" destroyed "even the effort to do right."[51] These perceptions of persecution by "unjust" forces would remain a consistent theme through her life. In this particular story, Jessie acted the role of champion. The lack of sufficient praise from her elders made her peevish. This need for people to view her as she viewed herself, as the brave heroine, also remained a fixture of her character for decades to come.

[50] Little Mac, never a strong child and suffering one final lingering illness, passed away in St. Louis on August 3, 1835, just two months after his fourth birthday; his grandfather, James McDowell, Sr., died three weeks later. Thomas H. Benton, Jr. to Samuel Benton, October 19, 1835, Thomas Hart Benton Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; and Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 209.
[51] Jessie Benton Frémont, "The Big English Bull," *Wide Awake Magazine*, July 1885, 105-106.

This rather bitter realization at the end of a story written for children seems almost uplifting when compared to the way in which Jessie told the same tale in her unpublished memoir. In this telling, Jessie brought the bleeding child to her mother, upon which she heard her mother respond to the cry that Jessie had "killed" her brother by saying to Jessie "Oh! go away." Jessie's beloved McDowell grandmother awakened her after the event, calling her a "brave child," a sentiment echoed by her stern McDowell grandfather, a rare kindness from the elderly gentleman who "did not like my sudden, noisy ways." Thomas Benton, then away in Washington, "said nothing to me, but sent me the *Last Days of Pompeii*."[52] Conspicuous by its absence is any mention of praise, concern, or attention for Jessie from her mother. The ambivalence, even antipathy, Jessie felt toward her mother did not make it into the magazine story for children but was not disguised in a memoir written for wide-spread publication. And, in this version of the tale, she received the approbation and approval lacking in the *Wide Awake* story. No bitterness needed—Jessie was the heroine and recognized as such.

The fact that Jessie's father soothed her hurt feelings with a book again speaks to the importance of reading in Jessie's life, a habit learned from both her grandmothers as well as her father. At Cherry Grove there were "*novels*" (Jessie's emphasis). While she remembered that it "used to be thought very wrong to read novels 'because they were not true,'" Jessie "ferreted" around the main house until at last she came across *Ivanhoe*. As she put it years later, the Walter Scott tale "was my first and remained my favorite novel." Among Jessie's happiest memories of life in Virginia, a garret-room which the servants refused to visit (believing it haunted) became a

[52] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 21-23.

place where her imagination could take flight.[53] Throughout her memories of her childhood, Jessie scattered the names of books read and admired, including Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* and Mrs. Sherwood's *The Lady of the Manor*. Her father expanded Jessie's imaginative universe by including classic words such as Plutarch's *Lives*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Arabian Nights*.[54] This early grounding in both fiction and non-fiction set Jessie on a course that would make her a life-long voracious reader. The books she read also shaped the way in which she told her autobiographical stories, with a strong emphasis on herself as the plucky heroine, her husband as the dashing hero, and her father looking on approvingly.

While at Cherry Grove, Thomas Hart Benton acted as his children's main source of education, despite the availability of governesses and tutors. Jessie, ever seeking her father's praise, trotted along behind him as he hunted quail on the plantation's expansive grounds. She later recalled that these sessions "tried my young feet, but I trudged on, proud to carry the game ba[g], and presently when my father shot a quail, I had the honor of carrying the limp, warm things, until he had enough." Once the hunting was done, the learning began. With the sustenance of biscuits and apples, Jessie leaned against her father as the pair shared the shade of an apple tree "while he read aloud to me a French edition of Homer, or from the *Arabian Nights*, which I translated – sometimes falling asleep as he read."[55] Jessie added Southey's *Life of Nelson* to the long list of books espoused by her father which she read and heartily enjoyed during her youth. For Thomas, expansive readings in both classical and contemporary nonfiction paired well with outdoor physical exercise, activities that he encouraged in all his children.

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[53] Jessie Benton Frémont, "William Rufus," *Wide Awake Magazine*, August 1885, 164.
[54] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Crazy Sally," 359.
[55] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 20.

So much time outdoors threatened to tan the fair skin of Thomas Hart Benton's daughters, much to their mother's chagrin. In 1839, Jessie wrote to her aunt, Susanna Smith McDowell, to warn that the family was about to descend *en masse* on Lexington to visit the Alum Springs just seventeen miles away. According to Jessie, her mother wanted "to remove the tan from our skins, for we can scarcely be distinguished from our Pottowatamee [sic] & Pawnee friends in the West."[56] Raising four daughters, Elizabeth Benton likely turned towards various manuals for suggestions on how to keep her children both well and attractive, perhaps Mrs. John Farrar's *The Young Lady's Friend*, first published in 1837. For antebellum women like Elizabeth and her daughters, whiteness of skin signaled both class privilege and moral superiority. It allowed them to separate themselves from women with darker skin, including the indigenous women mentioned by Jessie. Gender did not bind women together; race and class provided an inviolable dividing line.[57] As she had when she warned Jessie away from the "spinning girls," Elizabeth McDowell determined to ensure that her daughters did not engage with immoral influences nor be mistaken for anything other than they were. Her husband took charge of the children's education, while Elizabeth saw to a morality identifiable by the color of their skin.

Thomas' focus on his children's education was not limited to St. Louis and Cherry Grove. The third locale that came to define his daughter Jessie's identity, Washington D.C., served as a most unique training ground for a young woman who would one day become famous within her nation. Jessie recalled that, when she was quite young, her "supreme delight" was

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[56] Jessie Benton Frémont to Susanna Smith McDowell, August 9, 1839, published in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, eds., *Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont,* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 11-12.
[57] Mary Cathryn Cain, "The Art and Politics of Looking White: Beauty Practice Among White Women in Antebellum America." *Winterthur* portfolio 42, no. 1 (March 2008): 27–50.

when her father would bring her to the nation's capital and deposit her in the Congressional Library. Thomas Benton, on his way to his senatorial duties, brought Jessie to the Library at ten in the morning, a nurse picking her up again at noon. Young as she was at the time, reading much was out of the question. But picture books, "Audubon's birds—the Louvre gallery….[and] French engravings" delighted her young soul. She remembered that the folios of *British State Trials*, perhaps a little dry for reading, "had large pictures fascinating to me." Under the amiable eye of Congressional Librarian John Silva Meehan, Jessie spent hours among the large tomes that made up the Library, delighting a little in the fact that her older sister, Eliza, did not enjoy the same literary treasures.[58] As ever, when Jessie looked back on her childhood, her siblings did not possess the characteristics that made her their father's ultimate favorite.

Eliza, being of "delicate health," could not engage in "the hunting walks [nor] the long, patient waitings in the Congressional Library." With her other siblings still too young for this type of attention from their father, Jessie reveled in finding his approval in the very activities unavailable to others. For Eliza, Thomas worried that she had inherited his family's "consumptive trait." She walked with a stoop from a very young age, which he sought to correct by making the child "carry a weight on her head—a large book—and gradually acquired the ease and erect freedom of an Egyptian water bearer."[59] The vigorous outdoor life, simple food, and plenty of both sleep and play that Thomas Hart Benton insisted upon for his daughters would find an echo only a few years later in Catharine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1841).

[58] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 24.
[59] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 25.

Perhaps the most unique means of education provided by Thomas Benton to his offspring resulted from the very nature of living in the nation's capital. Throughout the 1830s, the family's time in Washington was generally spent in rented rooms in the city's boarding houses, including those at Dawson's No. 1 on North A Street, Capitol Hill, just opposite the Capitol grounds.[60] While most members of Congress lived a bachelor existence while in the capitol for each term's two Congressional sessions, Benton delighted in having his family with him. His generous hospitality and the genial nature of his table brought many of the nation's luminaries to Dawson's No. 1, where not only the adults but the older children as well enjoyed meals together. Here, Jessie absorbed the intricacies of politics. She recalled years later the ways in which some of the older political figures dressed, including Chief Justice John Marshall and John Randolph of Roanoke, both of whom continued the costume of "old-fashioned knee breeches and silk stockings." Francis Scott Key frequented the Benton house, being a close neighbor and friend. A young Salmon P. Chase appeared at the dinner table, as did Charles Sumner, "eminently a favorite in society" before the slavery issue produced an impassable chasm between even the oldest of friends. Daniel Webster growled about the Washington weather, going so far as to compare it with the temperatures at Bunker Hill in 1775. Future presidents Van Buren, Buchanan, and Pierce, then all up-and-coming members of Congress, also dined with the Bentons.[61] Buchanan, who went on to the presidency after defeating John C. Frémont in 1856, served as a frequent society escort for the young Jessie.

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[60] Nathan Sargent, *Public Men And Events From the Commencement of Mr. Monroe's Administration, In 1817, to the Close of Mr. Fillmore's Administration, In 1853* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1875), 23.
[61] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known I: Washington Society--Chief-Justice Marshall--Chief Justice Taney--Frank Key--Frank Pierce--Mr. Van Buren--Sumner--Chase, and Others," *The New York Ledger*, January 2, 1875.

One such occasion that brought Jessie together with James Buchanan happened while Jessie was a student at a young ladies' academy in Georgetown. Feeling that his daughters needed additional training in pursuits outside of his skills as an instructor, in the spring of 1838 Thomas Benton enrolled his two older daughters at a school which offered both education and the type of "finishing" young ladies of society required. Under the auspices of the principal, Miss English, the school consisted of twenty-five teachers and "hundreds" of scholars. According to Jessie, the school served as "a favorite place for the daughters of Senators and members of Congress and army and navy people." The mingling together of these young women led to "no end to the conceit, the assumption, the class distinction there." She, accustomed to "wholesome, large ideas, without any understanding of such false notions," was "miserably lost." While Eliza "being older and more malleable" fit in well with the student body, Jessie "rashly made friends with girls I liked, regardless of their parents' social standing."[62] In Jessie's comprehension, this imitated the way in which her father welcomed all manner of visitors to the family's St. Louis home.

One new friend Jessie found at school in Georgetown was Harriet Williams. The daughter of a minor government clerk, Harriet had captured the attention of the flamboyant Minister from Russia, Alexander Bodisco. Despite a substantial age gap, sixteen-year-old Harriet married sixty-one-year-old Bodisco in April of 1840 in a ceremony long remembered by Washingtonians in general and by Jessie in particular.

For Jessie, not quite fifteen, the honor of being a bridesmaid proved enchanting. Bodisco "planned our toilettes as well as every other detail of the performances." Jessie's dress of satin,

[62] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 30.

with "blonde lace about the neck and sleeves" paired with a "wreath of soft white roses, a fan of ivory and white, and a great bouquet of white camelias," emphasized the youth and innocence of both bride and bridesmaids.[63] To mirror the May-December aspect of the bridal couple, each young bridesmaid was paired with a groomsman of greater age and of a certain political prestige. For Jessie, this meant attending the wedding on the arm of James Buchanan, by that time a former U.S. Minister to Russia and a sitting U.S. senator. President Martin Van Buren attended the ceremony, and Henry Clay of Kentucky escorted the bride. Descriptions of the wedding in both local and distant newspapers made much of the extravagant celebration, and Jessie later recalled that the marriage between Harriet and her Russian husband proved to be a happy one.[64]

While not official, the Bodisco wedding marked Jessie's "coming out" into society. Only fourteen years old, her parents had already received three inquiries from young men about possible courtship. Jessie's youthful beauty, with long chestnut curls, an appealing oval face, and sparkling brown eyes, combined with her reputation for a lively wit and a sophisticated intellect to bring suitors to the house, a troubling fact for her parents and one that was not resolved through her attendance at Miss English's Georgetown academy.[65] While flattered by the attention, Jessie actually fancied that she would be a latter-day Madame Germaine de Staël. Jessie imagined that she, like the famous Frenchwoman, would study and act as "friend and companion" to her father, the way that Madame de Staël had for her father, Jacques Necker.[66]

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[63] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: The Bodisco Wedding," 6-11.
[64] "Opening of the Fashionable Season," *New York Daily Herald*, April 13, 1840.
[65] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 32.
[66] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 31. Described by Robert Casillo as a "spellbinding conversationalist, political and social commentator, novelist, and free spirit," Germaine de Staël (1766-1817) was the daughter of Jacques Necker, the Swiss-born banker who won acclaim in his efforts to repair the finances of France before and during the French Revolution. De Staël herself became a well-knowns salon hostess, author, and political commentator,

Jessie could not see herself as divorced from life with her father—not, that is, until Thomas Benton met John Charles Frémont and brought him into the Benton family circle.

A young man born in Savannah, Georgia, and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, John Frémont originally trained as a mathematician before turning his scientific talents toward the exploration of unexamined lands. He joined the newly formed Corps of Topographical Engineers as a second lieutenant in 1838 through the auspices of Joel Poinsett, a mentor from his college days then serving as Secretary of War under President Martin Van Buren. Poinsett not only arranged Frémont's commission but also included the young explorer as a part of expeditions being formed to examine first the region between the upper Mississippi and upper Missouri rivers and then to stretch further west into what would become the Dakota Territory. Frémont worked under the leader of the expeditions, Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, a distinguished French scientist who soon came to be, like Poinsett, another mentor in Frémont's life. Returning to Washington in 1840, Frémont, along with Poinsett, Coast Survey director Ferdinand Hassler, and John James Abert, the chief of the Topographical Corps, set to work documenting the expedition findings.[67] Through this cadre of explorers and scientists, the young Frémont became acquainted with the leading political figures of the time who supported U.S. westward expansion, including Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri.

Frémont became a fixture at the Benton dinner table, along with expansionist politicians such as Henry Dodge of Wisconsin Territory and Lewis Linn, the second senator from Missouri.

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beginning during the French Revolution and continuing throughout her life. Robert Casillo, *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the Idea of Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[67] For detailed information on John C. Frémont's early expedition, see Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), chapters three and four.

With his older daughters still at Miss English's academy, Thomas allowed Frémont to squire Eliza to a concert at the school. As Frémont would later write of meeting Jessie:

> I went with the eldest of the sisters to a school concert in Georgetown, where I saw her. She was then just in the bloom of her girlish beauty, and perfect health effervesced in bright talk which the pleasure of seeing her sister drew out. Naturally I was attracted. She made the effect that a rose of rare color or beautiful picture would have done.[68]

As 27-year-old John began to court 16-year-old Jessie, Thomas and Elizabeth looked upon the situation with considerable alarm. This is not what they wanted for their daughter, not this second lieutenant with a questionable past whose future prospects appeared far from certain. Thomas went so far as to take the family to a spot on the Chesapeake Bay for the summer of 1840 to separate the enamored couple before things became too serious.[69] Yet, as Jessie would later describe it, her grandmother McDowell proved to be the "unconscious Fate" that truly brought Jessie and John together.[70]

Elizabeth Preston McDowell had been living with the Benton family since the death of her husband in 1835. According to Jessie, the elderly woman took "great interest in the large questions of the day" and the Bentons "omitted nothing that could please and interest her." The death of the unfortunate William Henry Harrison on April 4, 1841, just weeks after his inauguration as president, offered an opportunity for a grand funeral parade that grandmother McDowell simply could not pass up.[71] His workroom's windows looking out over the procession gave John Frémont the opportunity to host both Jessie and her grandmother as

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[68] John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life* (New York: Belford, Clarke and Company, 1886), 66.
[69] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 241.
[70] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 32.
[71] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 32-33.

Thomas and Elizabeth Benton attended the funeral service. Ostensibly in grandmother McDowell's honor, John transformed his workroom into a veritable bower of azaleas, geraniums, and laurustinus and offered a tempting array of delicate "ices, bonbons and cakes." As Mrs. McDowell enjoyed the pageantry both inside and out, Jessie and John took the opportunity to speak privately, proclaiming their love for each other. The die cast, few options remained left to Thomas and Elizabeth to alter their headstrong daughter's course.

This is not to say they did not go to considerable effort to stifle the relationship between John and Jessie. As Jessie later related, her mother's friendship with Mary Pringle Poinsett, wife of John's mentor Joel Poinsett, became the catalyst for the most sustained effort to separate the young couple. Jessie accused Mrs. Poinsett of encouraging Mr. Poinsett to arrange for John to be sent on an expedition to survey the Des Moines River in Iowa. Joel Poinsett also enlisted John Abert of the Topographical Engineers into the plot. Against the wishes of John's immediate superior, Joseph Nicollet, Abert ordered Frémont to head west for the survey. To further remove John from Jessie's impressionable young mind, the Bentons sent her to Virginia to attend a family wedding.[72] While each of the lovers acquiesced to the wishes of superiors and parents, everyone involved in the "plot" underestimated the attraction between John and Jessie—as well as their stubborn reluctance to leave their romance unfinished.

Jessie and John cooked up a plot of their own when each returned to the nation's capital in the fall of 1841. With the assistance of the wife of Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden, the couple sought a Protestant minister in Washington to marry them. When none wanted to engage the possible ire of Thomas Hart Benton, John and Jessie turned to a Catholic priest, who, on

[72] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 34.

October 19, 1841, united the couple in matrimony.[73] Afterwards, Jessie returned to her parents' house on C Street and John went back to his rented room. Neither was ready to face the consequences of their marriage in front of Jessie's parents.

It was not until mid-November, after warnings from friends that news of the marriage could leak out, that John and Jessie confronted Thomas and Elizabeth Benton. As described by Jessie later in life, the clash between her parents and the newlyweds contained as much romance as the actual elopement. John "stammering, embarrassed, but determined" and Jessie "dramatic and defiant" faced off against a wrathful Thomas, who commanded that Frémont "never cross my door again" while instructing Jessie to "stay here." For the first time, Jessie openly defied her father on a serious matter. She quoted the Book of Ruth to explain to her parents that her future lay with John: "whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."[74]

This dramatic rendering of the meeting between the newlyweds and the bride's disapproving parents is likely apocryphal. Certainly, Jessie's runaway marriage offered plenty of romance simply by its very nature. But that would not have been enough for the elderly Jessie, seeking to paint herself and her husband as the most passionate of sweethearts. Jessie was, as William Nisbet Chambers noted, "an incorrigible romance-writer in her old age."[75] After her death, the family continued to press this narrative of the Frémonts. The tale illustrates an aspect

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[73] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 91.
[74] Allan Nevins, *Frémont, the West's Greatest Adventurer; Being a Biography from Certain Hitherto Unpublished Sources of General John C. Frémont, Together with His Wife, Jessie Benton Frémont* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 71. According to Nevins, this tale of the clash between the newlyweds and the Bentons passed down in the Frémont family, with Nevins receiving the information from one of the Frémont granddaughters, Juliet Frémont Hull. This version of events has since been included by other Frémont scholars, including Tom Chaffin and Pamela Herr.
[75] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 255.

of Jessie's character that emerged as she turned her pen toward autobiographical pursuits later in life—she crafted the legend of herself and her husband as characters from a romantic novel, perhaps something right out of *Ivanhoe* itself.

Jessie's runaway marriage marked a distinctive turning point in her relationship with her father. Jessie adored Thomas Benton, and more than once as a child had regretted disappointing him. Yet in 1841, she not only disappointed him, she defied him openly and upon one of the most important decisions of her life. As she spoke and wrote lovingly and with warm admiration of Thomas Hart Benton in the years to come, Jessie remained focused on proving to him that her choice of husband had been the correct one. Jessie's married life led her to publicly protect the reputation of her husband; at the same time, she attempted to make it up to Thomas by lionizing him at all opportunities. In a choice between her husband and her father, Jessie did her best to please both, even while always coming down on the side of her husband. During the first years of her marriage, though, Jessie relied more on her father, as her husband began his explorations across the Rocky Mountains and into the Mexican territory of Alta California.

CHAPTER 2
THE EXPLORER'S WIFE
1841-1848

Thomas Benton's anger did not abate quickly when it came to his daughter's elopement. Even as he asked the young couple to move into the Benton home on C Street in Washington, D.C., rather than live in John's boardinghouse rooms, resentment smoldered. Sending a message to his good friend Preston Blair, then editor of the Washington *Globe*, Thomas requested a small notice be placed announcing the Frémont marriage:

> At Washington, on the 19th ult., by the Rev. Mr. Van Horseigh,
> Miss Jessie Ann Benton, second daughter of Col. Benton, to Mr.
> J.C. Frémont, of the U.S. Army.[76]

Traditionally, marriage notices of the time referred to the groom wedding the bride, not the reverse as in Thomas' notice. Questioned about the unusual wording, Benton reportedly snapped hotly, "Damn it, sir! It will go in that way or not at all! John C. Frémont did not marry my daughter; she married him."[77] Thomas viewed Jessie as the instigator in the marriage between herself and John Frémont. Clearly, though, Frémont was every bit as captivated by Thomas' beloved daughter as Thomas was himself.

For her part, Jessie leapt into her marriage with all the girlish enthusiasm expected from a 17-year-old bride. The man she married was her *beau ideal*, and she knew with a certainty that her father would soon come to recognize the fine qualities of her new husband. During the first eight years of her marriage, Jessie established the kind of spouse she would be for the rest of her life. Her understanding of her role as a wife did not limit her to a helpmeet status, although she

[76] "Married," *The Baltimore Sun*, November 30, 1841.
[77] Charles Amadon Moody, "Here Was a Woman," *Out West*, February 1903, p. 171.

was certainly that.[78] Nor did she play the part of *éminence grise*; too traditional for that, she did not challenge her husband for the decision-making responsibility in their marriage.[79] Jessie never *proactively* spoke or acted on her husband's behalf. Rather, she *reacted* to situations in which she believed John was being threatened or criticized. On those occasions, Jessie transitioned from a demure wife into the fierce defender and protector of John C. Frémont, going so far as to step into the public spotlight if it meant addressing real or perceived wrongs. In the meantime, she managed to capture for herself some of the popular acclaim that fell upon her famous husband.

These formative years found Jessie not only passionately devoted to John and his good name but also placing herself within public scrutiny as the spirited mate of a famous adventurer. And, as always, she took every opportunity to win her father's approval, for both herself and John, as she continued to live under the Benton roof while John conducted the first three of what would eventually be five exploring expeditions across the west.

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The man Jessie married did indeed have a questionable background, especially in the light of nineteenth-century mores and morals. His mother, Anne Beverley Whiting, was born in 1779, the daughter of Colonel Thomas Whiting, a wealthy landowner in Gloucester County, Virginia, and a member of the House of Burgesses.[80] Losing her father before her first birthday, little Anne then lost her inheritance at the hands of her mother's second husband. Fortunately,

[78] The word "helpmeet" is defined as "one who is a companion and helper."
[79] The term "*éminence grise"* translates from French as "grey eminence," the person making the decisions in private for a public figure.
[80] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, Vol. 1., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), xxiii.

Mrs. Catherine Whiting Lowry, Anne's older sister, took her in and raised the young girl to her teen years. Without a dowry to attract a suitor, Anne's sister arranged a marriage for her with Major John Christopher Pryor of Richmond in 1796. The sixty-two-year-old Pryor, as Jessie would later write, "lacked refinement and sensibility, and was in every respect repulsive to the young creature, who was sacrificed to him."[81] Jessie's sympathies lay squarely with her mother-in-law, a bit of irony considering Jessie's feelings about her own mother.

Pryor's seventeen-year-old bride soon looked outside the family walls for attention and affection. These she found in the arms of a young French dancing teacher, Charles Fremon.[82] Abandoning Pryor, Anne took up residence with Fremon, waiting for her husband to sue her for divorce so she could marry her lover.[83] The legal status of Anne's marriage to Fremon remains unclear to this day; while Jessie insisted that the two eventually married, and Pryor remarried another woman, historians have been unable to find such records. Whatever their marital standing, however, the Fremons presented themselves as husband and wife in 1811 when they fled Virginia for a new start.

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[81] John Bigelow, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of John Charles Frémont* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), 12-29. For this campaign biography, Jessie personally interviewed her mother-in-law and subsequently wrote the first chapter, covering John's early years and education. Jessie took great pains to find connections between the Whiting family and that of George Washington. Jessie's familial ties with several of Virginia's most prominent families seemed to compel her to provide that same level of Revolutionary era lineage to her husband.
[82] In Bigelow's *Memoir*, Jessie and Bigelow agree that the family name was always "Frémont," with both the accented "e" and the ending "t." Allen Nevins argues, however, that these were added by John Charles Frémont sometime after his father, known to spell his last name "Fremon," had died. Allan Nevins, *Frémont: Pathmarker of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 5-6. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence note that John included the "t" and the accented "e" when he began working with the French-born explorer Joseph N. Nicollet. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, Vol. 1., xxii.
[83] Allen Nevins, *Frémont,* 8. According to Allen Nevins, Major Pryor's petition for divorce before the Virginia legislature was denied, leaving any marriage between Anne Beverley Whiting Prior and Charles Fremon bigamous and their three children illegitimate.

Living something of a nomadic existence, Charles Fremon and Anne Whiting welcomed their first child, John Charles, on January 21, 1813, when the couple lived in Savannah, Georgia. Their daughter, Elizabeth, arrived in 1815 while the family was in Tennessee, and a second son, Horation Francis, appeared in 1817 in Norfolk, Virginia. Not long after the birth of his second son, Charles Fremon died, leaving Anne alone to raise her children. Faced with yet another new start, she remained in Norfolk for only a few years before moving her little family to Charleston, South Carolina.[84] Arriving in Charleston by his tenth birthday, John Charles Frémont considered it home and later used it to establish his credentials as a southerner by both birth and breeding. Charleston itself would look askance at this association when, decades later, this favorite son became a general in the Union Army.

Here, Anne Fremon's children received their initial education, and John began to acquire a series of mentors who shaped his life and early career. The first of these, Charleston attorney John W. Mitchell, recognized something in John that led him to bring the young man into his law firm as a clerk in 1826, when John was just thirteen years old.[85] After a year, Mitchell realized that young John had intellectual abilities best suited to a college education. Mitchell introduced John to John Roberton, a local scholar who prepared young men for entry into the College of

[84] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder: John Charles Frémont and the Course of American Empire* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 22-23.

[85] Prior to the later decades of the nineteenth century and the advent of law schools, it was common practice for a young man to "read the law" with an attorney to pass the bar. Several American statesmen entered the legal profession in this way. Among the youngest were Francis Scott Key (age 17), Millard Fillmore (age 19), and Martin Van Buren (age 20). Van Buren, like Frémont, was only a child when he started his apprenticeship in a legal office, just fourteen years old. Ted Widmer, *Martin Van Buren* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 27.

Charleston. Mitchell, according to one Frémont biographer, even paid for Roberton's services to John.[86]

Roberton later remembered his first encounter with John. He wrote in the preface to his 1850 work *The First And Second Books of Xenophon's Anabasis* that he "immediately perceived he [John] was no common youth, as intelligence beamed in his dark eye, and shone brightly on his countenance, indicating great ability, and an assurance of his future progress." Under Roberton's tutelage, the span of young John's intellect became clear. The boy devoured the classics, reading from Caesar, Horace, Virgil, Livy, and Homer, to name but a few. While Roberton hoped that John, with this classical foundation, might be suited for an Episcopal ministry, he soon came to understand that John's "bold, fearless disposition, his powerful inventive genius, his admiration of warlike exploits, and his love of heroic and adventurous deeds" did not incline toward the pulpit.[87] With the help of this mentor, John Charles Frémont entered the College of Charleston as a junior in the spring of 1829.[88]

John did not complete his college education. Characteristics such as a willful reluctance to bow to authority and a nature that favored outdoor adventure over study, combined with an infatuation with a young Creole woman, led to his expulsion from the College of Charleston in February of 1831, just three months before his expected graduation.[89] Just as the University of North Carolina had done for his future father-in-law Thomas Hart Benton, the College of

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[86] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont,* vol. I, xxiv. Also see Nevins, *Frémont: Pathmarker*, 11.
[87] Xenophon, *The First and Second Books of Xenophon's Anabasis*, ed. John Roberton (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Company, 1850), 4.
[88] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 24; Jackson and Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol I, xxv.
[89] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 24-25. For more on the young woman who turned Frémont's head, see John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life* (New York: Belford, Clarke and Company, 1886), 20-21.

Charleston later granted John a Bachelor of Arts degree, this in 1836.[90] By that time, the young man had met his third mentor, statesman Joel Poinsett.

Poinsett enjoyed a storied career prior to his meeting John Frémont in 1830. Widely traveled in Europe and across Russia, Poinsett also served diplomatic missions in Chile and Argentina and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1820. From 1822 to 1823, he acted as a special envoy from the U.S. to Mexico, bringing back to the U.S. the plant given his name, the poinsettia. When John met him in Charleston, Poinsett had been sent by his friend, President Andrew Jackson, to pull together Unionist forces to combat South Carolina's attempt at nullification.[91] John Frémont's later biographers would credit Poinsett with informing John's beliefs regarding slavery, westward expansion, and the preservation of the Union.[92]

Poinsett set young John C. Frémont's feet on the road to becoming an explorer and surveyor. In 1837, then Secretary of War, Poinsett arranged for John to join a railroad survey to identify a possible route between Charleston and Cincinnati. Under the auspices of Captain William G. Williams of the U.S. Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers, John participated in the railroad survey as well as an expedition conducted in the winter of 1837-1838 along a strip of

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[90] Allen Nevins, *Pathmarker*, 17. J.H. Easterby, *A History of the College of Charleston* (United States: The Scribner Press, 1935), 82.

[91] The nullification crisis sprang from a tariff signed into law in 1828, nicknamed by southerners the "Tariff of Abominations." Seen in the South as favoring northern manufactures over southern agriculture, the tariff was unpopular across the cotton-producing South, especially in South Carolina. When president Andrew Jackson did not eliminate the tariff after his 1828 election, South Carolina's fiery champion, John C. Calhoun, began to theorize on the ability of states to "nullify" what they found as the "despotic" laws enacted by the federal government. An 1832 tariff plan, one that offered a more balanced impact between North and South, also fell short of Calhoun's demands (although it had southern support overall) and South Carolinians continued to press for nullification. The crisis was finally thwarted by Andrew Jackson's Force Bill and Henry Clary's Compromise Tariff of 1833.

[92] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 26. For a lengthier examination of Poinsett's exceptional life, see J. Fred Rippy, *Joel R. Poinsett, Versatile American* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1935). While traveling in Switzerland as a young man, Poinsett had been a welcome guest at the home of Jacques Necker and his daughter, Jessie's idol Madame de Staël.

land crossing Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia then occupied by Cherokee Indians. This survey served the purpose of laying the foundation for the removal of the Indians living within that region by the federal government.[93] Through these first two opportunities to engage in exploration, John C. Frémont built the skills needed to move into larger expeditions, including the five he would conduct himself in the 1840s and 1850s. In addition, he placed himself within the narrative of U.S. western expansion, via technological advances in railroad building and scientific study of the natural world—as well as ongoing efforts to eliminate the indigenous people blocking the pathway to the Pacific.

As still another consequence of these two early expeditions, Poinsett was able to encourage the noted French scientist Joseph N. Nicollet to include John as second in command for his next mission.[94] On April 16, 1838, John J. Abert, the chief of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, formally employed John as a civil engineer for the expedition and ordered him to report to Nicollet in St. Louis without delay.[95] Through this order, John acquired the fourth significant mentor of his early life.

Joseph N. Nicollet arrived in the United States at the age of forty-six, having already established himself as a noted astronomer and cartographer in his native France. Thinking to put his skills to good use with studies of the Mississippi River valley, he quickly found support for this idea from U.S. government officials, including Poinsett. When Nicollet met John in 1838, he had been chosen to conduct the first of two government-sponsored expeditions into the lands

[93] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 31-33.
[94] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 35-36.
[95] J.J. Abert to John C. Frémont, 16 Apr 1838, in Jackson and Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol I, 3. The Corps of Topographical Engineers, a division of the U.S. Army, was formed in July 1838, charged with exploring and mapping the west. John received an appointment as a second lieutenant in the Corps that same year. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol I, 9.

between the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. John served as assistant as Nicollet conducted his missions, accompanying the Frenchman into the upper regions of present-day Minnesota and into the Dakotas. These two expeditions allowed John to build on the skills he had acquired on his prior assignments, as well as to observe the way Nicollet used knowledge gathered from the various Dakota tribes to advance his own geographical information.[96] This lesson on how to take advantage of Indian knowledge came to influence the ways in which John led his own explorations after Nicollet became too ill to continue.

Each of the mentors that shaped Frémont's youth saw something in him, something charismatic and enhanced by his love of the outdoors, his boundless energy, and his dedication to bringing the latest scientific advances to the work of exploring and mapping the western half of the United States, just as his idol Baron Alexander Von Humboldt did in Central and South America. John's final mentor, Thomas Hart Benton, recognized in the young man a tool to be used in the ultimate goal of "manifest destiny" and in extending trade between North America and the far East via transport across the plains to the Pacific. Benton's dedication to westward expansion came at the expense of his daughter's ability to spend time with her new husband, but this was a sacrifice that all agreed, Thomas, John, and Jessie herself, would be well worth the effort.

"Manifest Destiny" was on the minds of Americans as the 1840s began. While the phrase itself did not materialize until 1845, the idea that the United States should spread its way west from the Mississippi to the Pacific Coast was as old as the Louisiana Purchase. In his time,

[96] Edmund C. Bray and Bray, Martha Coleman, eds., *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plans and Prairies: The Expeditions of 1838-39 with Journals, Letters, and Notes on the Dakota Indians* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1976), 1-17.

Thomas Jefferson sought to establish an "empire for liberty" that would eventually expand to include Canada and Cuba. In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson favored western expansion, although his method of encouraging White migration by the removal of native peoples drew condemnation, both then and now. President John Tyler sought, and obtained, the independent Texas Republic for the United States, even as he served the waning days of his one-term presidency. Although American trappers, mountain men, traders, and adventurers had roamed the west since the days of Lewis and Clark, settler colonists did not begin their migration until the 1830s. As the first wagon trains headed toward the Rockies and beyond, the issue of slavery, already permeating nearly every aspect of governance, raised its head in debates over migration westward. One of the loudest voices raised in support of western expansion, slavery or no, came from Thomas Hart Benton, father of the newly wedded Jessie Frémont.

Within seven months of her marriage, Jessie found herself without her husband, living with her parents and playing the role of daughter as she always had. On April 25, 1842, John received orders from the Corps of Topographical Engineers to survey the "Platte or Nebraska river, up to the head of the Sweetwater."[97] As Nicollet was no longer physically healthy enough to lead an expedition himself, John was the natural choice as replacement. Provided with an initial requisition of $4,000, John left Washington D.C. and his pregnant wife on May 2, headed for St. Louis where he would stay with members of Jessie's extended family as he gathered men and equipment for the expedition. He would not return to Washington until October 29, 1842, just over two weeks before the birth of his daughter.[98]

[97] John James Abert to John C. Frémont, April 25, 1842, in Jackson and Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 121-122.
[98] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 136.

More than before, Jessie played Germain deStael to her father's Jacques Lecker. She later claimed that her father knew "idleness was bad for me in my lonesome condition" and thus set her to translating sections from *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico by Captain Bernal Diaz del Castillo, One of the Conquerors*. Originally written in 1568, the book had been translated into English by 1800. Whether Thomas did not have access to the translation or simply meant to occupy Jessie's mind during her husband's absence, Jessie spent mornings with her father, perfecting her Spanish language skills with each line of translation and feeling useful. She imagined that she, too, was helping in Thomas Benton's goal of conquering the west, just as her husband was. Participating in a great effort undertaken by both the men in her young life, Jessie mitigated the sense of loneliness and futility that arose from both her husband's absence and from her inability to receive any news of his adventures. She happily lost herself in the Diaz stories of an earlier western conquest.

The quiet mornings with her father ended abruptly in the early fall of 1842. Elizabeth McDowell Benton complained of debilitating headaches and sought help from the family physician. As treatment, she requested to be bled, then still a common practice in American medicine for all manner of diseases and discomforts. According to Jessie, writing in the late nineteenth century, her mother's insistence on bloodletting led directly to a paralysis of the throat "preventing the swallowing of food, and all articulation." It is likely that the ailing Mrs. Benton suffered a stroke, or a series of small strokes, that left her paralyzed. For three days, Mrs. Benton lay in a coma, rousing to wakefulness only in consideration of her husband's "despair" and the impending grief of her children. Jessie later recalled being told by her father that

Elizabeth Benton had been bled as many as thirty-three times.[99] A similar bloodletting in 1796 left America's first president, a stricken George Washington, dead in its aftermath. Yet American physicians still found the custom of bleeding useful and effective, and the practice continued throughout much of the nineteenth century.[100]

Writing about this in the wake of sixty years of medical advancements, Jessie blamed her mother for the stroke and paralysis that nearly killed her in 1842. While she reserved some of the fault for her mother's physician at the time, the contrast between the ways in which Jessie described her mother's actions and her father's ideas on the matter offered yet another example of the strained feelings Jessie had for her mother. While describing her mother's insistence on being bled, Jessie added that her father's "larger knowledge revolted at this taking away of life from the already weakened." Only the "pleading eyes" of her mother convinced her father to allow the bleeding.[101] From Jessie's exalted opinion of her father came the idea that Thomas Hart Benton was a man ahead of his time, knowing in 1842 the dangers of bloodletting when American health experts overall still favored the practice and continued its use for decades to come.

Only the illness of the family physician and the arrival of a "new, enlightened and comprehending" young doctor to treat Elizabeth saved the Benton family matriarch from death, in Jessie's opinion. This physician gave his instructions to Jessie: "There must be only cheerful faces around your mother. You will gain skill, but first must be the atmosphere of hope, of self forgetfulness and you . . . must supply that. Go off to cry when you must, but always come to

[99] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 39-41.
[100] Ralph G. DePalma M.D., Virginia W. Hayes M.S., and Leo R. Zacharski M.D., "Bloodletting: Past and Present," *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* 205, no. 1 (July 2007): 132–44.
[101] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 40.

her smiling." Jessie described her father as doing just that, putting on a cheerful face before his wife while weeping inconsolably when she could not see him. Jessie added happy touches to her mother's meals, with small bouquets of flowers or "some little jesting story to make my mother forget, and laugh as she ate." Jessie also read aloud to ease her mother's recovery, from the Psalms first, then her favorite poets, and then "books of light travel." Jessie noted that over time "most things returned to" Elizabeth Benton, yet "death's arrow had penetrated too deep to be withdrawn."[102] In all, Jessie behaved as the dutiful daughter; yet, sixty years later, she still blamed her mother for the illness that made her an invalid in that fall of 1842.

Writing of herself, Jessie noted that her "splendid health never failed," and she greeted John on his return to Washington D.C. on October 29 with profound relief and a girlish excitement at odds with her heavily pregnant body. Jessie remembered his return with a good bit of romantic drama, claiming in later life that he spread "over me a wind-whipt flag," saying, "'This flag was raised on the summit peak of the highest point of the Rocky Mountains. I brought it to you.'" As Frémont's trip into the west had taken him to some high peaks of the Rockies, there is little doubt that he made such a gesture to his wife. Jessie recalled " I have it now—1842 to 1902—a long story it tells me."[103] Just over two weeks after John's arrival back in Washington D.C., on November 15, 1842, Jessie gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Elizabeth Benton Frémont, after Jessie's mother. To avoid confusion among all the Elizabeths, Jessie gave her daughter the nickname Lily.

[102] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 40-41.
[103] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 41.

Even a new baby could not drag Jessie's attention from her husband. With his return, John began the task of writing up the findings he had made on his mission. The importance of this written record, the knowledge of how its reception could shape his future assignments, and the tedious nature of this "indoor work" led the gallant explorer to suffer nose bleeds and a "series of hemorrhages . . . from the head."[104] As he had during his last few months at the College of Charleston, John could not see the project through. Jessie decided that she could not only be a new mother but also provide "secretarial" assistance to her beleaguered husband.[105] Again, Jessie jumped at the opportunity to participate in her father's, and now also her husband's, dream of westward expansion.

Jessie later described this joint effort of herself and John as "my most happy life work." With baby Lily cared for by nurses, as well as doting grandparents and Jessie's excited sisters, Jessie devoted herself to working with her husband. Calling her labors "no holiday work," she later described the way in which John, restless and pacing the floor, dictated from the notes he had taken in the field. For her part, Jessie remained as motionless as possible while doing the handwriting, as any movement from her distracted her restive partner.[106] By March 1, 1843, the report was complete, titled *A Report of an Exploration of the Country Lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains on the Line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers*. John submitted it to his immediate superior at the Corps of Topographical Engineers, Colonel John J. Abert, who turned the report over to John C. Spencer, the Secretary of War. From there

[104] It remains unclear just how these "hemorrhages" actually presented; it is quite possible that Jessie felt the need to make her husband's distress more serious than mere "nosebleeds" to justify her participation in the report preparation.
[105] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 41.
[106] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 41-42.

it passed to the hands of Congress, which ordered a first printing of one thousand copies for use by congressmen, senators, and employees of the Topographical Engineers.[107] John not suited to the work, Jessie completed the tedious task of proofreading the report for the printers, learning "all the queer little signs that must be accurate." Then, as she put it, "behold! Mr. Frémont's first book was finished!"[108]

No sooner was the report complete than John received orders for his next expedition.[109] As he left for first New York and then St. Louis in April 1843, Jessie again turned her attention to the role of dutiful daughter to a mother whose fragile recovery from the earlier stroke left her leaning on her family for support. Taking care not to tax the slim strength of the family matriarch, John, Jessie, Lily, and Mrs. Benton, along with a few members of John's expedition crew, traveled by private carriage from Washington, D.C., along the National Road to Wheeling (now West Virginia).[110] From there, the family traveled by steamboat down the Ohio River to Cairo, Illinois, then up the Mississippi to St. Louis. While the family moved at a "creep-mouse rate of travel," they finally arrived in St. Louis and moved in with Jessie's cousin (the daughter of Thomas Hart Benton's brother), Sarah Brant. Thomas had also come west to begin a tour of

[107] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol 1, 168.
[108] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 42.
[109] Thomas Hart Benton himself determined the parameters of this second expedition, in consultation with John. John J. Abert merely ratified what Benton had already decided. In this instance, John's orders instructed him to survey the heads of first the Kansas and then the Arkansas rivers, traveling south along the western base of the Rockies to the point where the Colorado river enters the Gulf of California. From there, John was to return north to the Columbia river, where he would continue work begun by Charles Wilkes who had been surveying the Pacific northwest and the Oregon territory. John was instructed to then head home via the Oregon road, with a slight divergence to explore the Wind River chain. No mention was made in John's orders that he was to enter California. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 160-161.
[110] The National Road, begun in 1806 and lengthened over the next several decades, crossed the Allegheny mountains to connect the east with the Ohio River, offering a primary roadway for early westward migration toward the Mississippi. It is ironic that the road's greatest champion in Congress was Henry Clay, a senator from Kentucky and one of Thomas Hart Benton's chief adversaries in that body.

the state of Missouri to visit his constituents. Since Jessie had established herself as a valuable asset to her husband in the drafting of the first expedition report, she and John agreed that she would be responsible for any official correspondence addressed to John that might arrive in St. Louis once he left. Jessie soon had an opportunity to protect her husband and his work, a pattern that, once established, she carried through until her death.

On May 8, 1843, John submitted a request to Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, then commanding the Jefferson Barracks outside St. Louis. Explaining the mission and his concern regarding hostile Indian activity, John sought a "twelve-pound mountain howitzer with 500 pounds of ammunition and 200 fuses." Kearny, believing that there was not time enough to seek permission from his superiors in Washington before the expedition was due to leave, approved the request and the howitzer joined the Frémont expedition.[111] Word of this new addition did reach Washington, though, before Frémont left his rendezvous point in Kansas. On May 22, John J. Abert penned a letter to John expressing his shock and disapproval that John would request such a weapon for a "peaceable expedition, similar to the one of last year, an expedition to gather scientific knowledge." Abert ordered John to report to Washington.[112]

In St. Louis, Abert's letter to John was delivered to Jessie, who read it and quickly decided that this order to return to Washington meant a devastating delay for the expedition and a crushing blow to the plans for westward expansion her father had so diligently pursued. As she wrote several decades after the event, "I had grown up to and into my father's large purpose; and now that my husband could be of such aid to him in its accomplishment, I had no hesitation in

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[111] Donald Jackson, "The Myth of the Frémont Howitzer," *The Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 23 (1967 1966): 205.
[112] John J. Abert to John C. Frémont, 22 May 1843, in Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 345.

risking for him all consequences."[113] Youth, gender, and the status of her father provided Jessie with the protection she required to confidently leap into the fray on her husband's behalf.

Jessie feared the damage Abert's order could do to John's career, so she sprang into action. Knowing of an expedition member still in St. Louis, she sent the man and his brother over the four hundred miles to John's rendezvous point at Kaw Landing (now Kansas City) in Kansas. She warned John that, although she could not give a reason, he must leave immediately on the expedition. "Only trust me and Go," she would write decades later, remembering this event that occurred when she was eighteen years old, "an age when one takes risks, willingly." According to her narrative, John replied with "I trust and go." And he, his men, and the howitzer moved westward across the prairie.[114]

Once she knew John was safely away, Jessie wrote to Abert to advise him that John had left before he received Abert's order. Abert responded on June 23, reiterating the scientific and peaceful nature of the expedition and explaining the concern over the howitzer. He graciously ended his letter with the hope that "this second expedition will add to the reputation already acquired by Lt. Frémont in his first."[115] When Thomas Benton, who had been meeting with constituents around Missouri, returned to St. Louis in late June, Jessie explained to him what had happened. Benton angrily wrote to Abert to assure him that he approved of his daughter's

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[113] Jessie Benton Frémont, "A Biographical Sketch of Senator Benton in Connection with Western Expansion," in John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life* (New York: Belford, Clarke and Company, 1886), 16.
[114] Jessie told this story twice, first in an article written for *Century Magazine*, then again in her unpublished memoir. While the names of the men who carried her message to John at Kaw's Landing changed, the rest of the story remains consistent. Jessie Benton Frémont, "Origin of the Frémont Explorations," *Century Magazine*, Vol. 41, Issue 5, March 1891, 768-769. Also, Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 43-44. Thomas Hart Benton told a similar story in his, *Thirty Years' View*, Vol. II, 579-580.
[115] John J. Abert to Jessie Benton Frémont, 23 Jun 1843, in Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 349.

actions and condemned the War Department for what he saw as a censure of his son-in-law's judgment. He also included vague insinuations that the upset over the howitzer had to do with appeasing the British, who did not appreciate American interference across the border only recently defined in the August 1842 Webster-Ashburton treaty.[116] Both Frémonts and Benton crafted Abert as the villain in their story of the events that began the second expedition. This habit of creating defenses to any and all possible censures of John's decisions lasted well past his death.

While her father covered her actions with his approval, Jessie's quick thinking made it possible for her husband to plausibly ignore Abert's orders and commence the expedition. Assuming the decision-making role in the matter, in reaction to Abert's command, she demonstrated her willingness to take upon herself any air of impropriety that might attach to her husband, knowing she could seek refuge in her gender, youth, and perceived naivety. For Jessie, this was a wife's role. She did not learn this idea of wifely behavior from her mother nor either of her grandmothers. Her upbringing, being raised nearly like a son by her doting father, informed her ideas of what a wife might be. As she wrote about herself decades later, it was clear that she saw herself more as a character from the Waverly novels she delighted in as a girl, a bold and fearless Ivanhoe, righting wrongs and protecting loved ones. John, she would write,

[116] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 350-352. Benton included his version of events, not straying far from Jessie's, in his memoir, *Thirty Years' View*. Benton went further to condemn Secretary of War, James M. Porter, as well as Abert. He also criticized the "West Point officers, to whose pursuit of easy service Frémont's adventurous expeditions was a reproach." Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, Vol. II, 579-580. For more on the evolving Benton-Frémont recollections of this event, see Donald Jackson, "The Myth of the Frémont Howitzer," 205-214. For Jackson, the "myth" of the howitzer was actually the several retellings of the incident by the Frémonts and Benton.

was an ambitious young explorer, a "young Lochinvar," with a reputation to make.[117] She would write, "We would count on each other—my father, Mr. Frémont and I, as one. I was too identified with the whole plan to let it fail now." She wondered whether Abert had been "struck dumb by [her] audacity" or if there were another reason, but the matter was dropped, and Jessie assumed her next role as a "business member" of the expedition.[118]

Jessie also adopted the task of spreading news about the expedition, thus bringing to herself the first glimmer of public fame she would enjoy from that time on. A letter she wrote her father in December of 1843 illustrated her husband's "righteous" action in requesting the howitzer. Jessie told her father that the expedition force, the "little party," had been threatened by a "large band of Sioux," who only dispersed when they saw the gleam of the "brass piece." Awed and impressed by the weapon, the Sioux merely made a "peaceful salutation" and left the explorers to their business.[119] Jessie added to the tale, this time featuring the British. She conveyed to her father a story concerning the outrageous prices the British commander at Fort Hall (present-day southeastern Idaho) commanded for provisions, even as the men of the Frémont expedition were nearly down to eating their pack animals. Thomas Benton forwarded his daughter's letter to his friend Preston Blair at the Washington *Globe*, who printed the letter as part of a longer article about the Frémont expedition. The aphorism that a woman's name should only appear in the paper three times (when she was born, married, and died) did not preclude

[117] The Waverly Novels are a long series of fictional works by Sir Walter Scott, written between 1814 and 1831, including Jessie's favorite, *Ivanhoe*. Jessie's choice of the character Lochinvar is also an homage to Scott, from his 1808 poem "Marmion." In it, Lochinvar has "come out of the west," and was "faithful in love, and so dauntless in war."
[118] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 44-45.
[119] Jessie's justification for the howitzer falls a bit short here—if all that was needed was a show of force, why the need for "500 pounds of ammunition and 200 fuses?"

Jessie's name from being mentioned in the article, although it remains unknown whether it was her idea or that of her father to make this inclusion.[120] For the first time, Jessie became a public figure associated with her husband and with westward expansion.

Jessie also took it upon herself to share news with Adelaide Talbot, whose son, Theodore, served as John's aide on the expedition. In this exchange of letters, Jessie assumed the role of comforting correspondent to an older woman who had not before experienced the anxieties of her loved one being away on a dangerous mission. Letters dated September 16 and December 3, 1843, maintained a positive tone, acknowledging Mrs. Talbot's likely unease and alleviating it by sharing news that the men remained healthy and "had perfect success in all their undertakings." Jessie shared with Mrs. Talbot that she expected the men to be home to ring in the New Year of 1844.[121]

The comforting tone of Jessie's letters to Mrs. Talbot disappeared when the men did not return home as planned. In her February 1, 1844, letter to Mrs. Talbot, Jessie apologized for not answering an earlier letter, complaining of being "prostrated by sick headaches occasioned as you will at once conceive by 'the sickness of the heart.'" She wrote of the "excited & unhappy" feelings experienced each day as she waited for John. She downplayed Mrs. Talbot's concerns for her son, remarking that Mrs. Talbot at least had another child while Jessie's mother-in-law, waiting in South Carolina for word of her son, had no more living.[122]

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[120] "News from Oregon," *Washington Globe*, December 14, 1843. Whether the idea that a woman's name should not appear in a newspaper stems from actual social norms of the time or is, in fact, a legend, is unclear. Certainly, the editor of the Globe did not subscribe to the aphorism, nor did Jessie and her father.
[121] Jessie Benton Frémont to Adelaide Talbot, September 16 and December 5, 1843, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont,* 13-15.
[122] Jessie Benton Frémont to Adelaide Talbot, 1 Feb 1844, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 16-17.

By March 3, 1844, Jessie's tone turned harsh, and she vented her frustrations to Mrs. Talbot. She blamed the delay in John's return on insufficient funding for the mission, again casting Abert as the villain. She also reminded Mrs. Talbot of the attempt to censure John for the howitzer incident. "It makes me sick to think of its effect upon Mr. Frémont for the bitterest lesson in life is to meet with such miserable behavior from those who professed friendship," she wrote, including Abert as well as the secretary of war in her criticism. Jessie's limited expression of concern for Theodore or for Mrs. Talbot's nervous waiting, so similar to Jessie's own, consisted of a simple statement that, if there had been "any sickness of your son's," surely John would have written about it.[123] Jessie, again struggling with the care of her fragile mother and her own fear for John's safe return, reached out to Mrs. Talbot for comfort and empathy, even as she had begun the entire correspondence by trying to bestow those two same emotions on the older woman.

Elizabeth Benton, healthy enough to travel, left St. Louis for Washington, D.C., in mid-March, possibly motivated by her husband's brush with death aboard the *USS Princeton* when that ship was badly damaged by an exploding cannon.[124] Jessie remained in St. Louis, determined to await John's arrival. She continued her correspondence with Mrs. Talbot, writing wistfully of the day when John, along with Theodore Talbot, would reach home safely. As men arrived from travels west where they saw John and his men, they stopped at St. Louis to reassure Jessie, who dutifully forwarded the information to Mrs. Talbot. These returning voyagers

[123] Jessie Benton Frémont to Adelaide Talbot, 3 Mar 1844, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 18-19.
[124] Thomas Hart Benton was a passenger on the *USS Princeton* when that ship sailed down the Potomac on an excursion voyage, February 28, 1844. A demonstration was made of a new cannon, which misfired and exploded, killing Secretary of the Navy Thomas Gilmer and Secretary of State Abel Upshur, and injuring dozens of others.

brought some cheer to Jessie, who confided to Mrs. Talbot that, while she had no words of comfort for the woman, she urged "patience patience."[125] When John finally arrived in St. Louis by steamboat on August 4, 1844, he found Jessie waiting for him.[126] Although she did not write of this homecoming in her later memoir, the months of waiting had exhausted her, and she clung to her husband for the next several months as they set about writing the second expedition report.

John and Jessie joined Jessie's parents and siblings in the Benton House on C Street in Washington, D.C. The couple followed the same routine with this report as they had with the first, with only a few changes. As she had after the first expedition, Jessie referred to the time as "so delightful in itself, so useful, so undiluted by any drawbacks, that it stands in my memory as 'the happy winter.'" John again paced as he dictated from his notes, while Jessie served as his amanuensis. Jessie later remembered that her mother's health at this time had improved to the point that the older woman no longer needed her daughter's attention, even though, looking back years later, Jessie realized this was just "hopeful ignorance."[127] At the time, though, she used her belief in her mother's recovery as an excuse to focus her attention exclusively on her husband, knowing that it would not be long before he left on yet another expedition.

Each day the couple worked together from nine to one o'clock, when the Benton's nursemaid brought Lily, now a toddler of almost two, to the small house near the Benton home on C Street that John rented specifically for the purpose of compiling the report. The Frémont family enjoyed a light lunch before the mammy returned with Lily to the Benton home and John and Jessie went for a walk. Afterwards, Jessie also returned to the Benton house, while John

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[125] Jessie Benton Frémont to Adelaide Talbot, March 24 and April 21, 1844, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 20-22.
[126] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 239.
[127] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 46.

spent the remaining hours of the afternoon going over his notes for the next day's work. In addition, John met and corresponded with the myriad people anxious to know more about the glamorous task of exploring the Rockies and the possible treasures of Mexican-held California.[128]

John and Jessie put the finishing touches on the second expedition report in the first months of 1845. On March 1, John submitted *A Report of the Exploring Expedition to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44* to Abert. Abert forwarded the report, three times the length of the first expedition report, to the Secretary of War, William Marcy, himself recently appointed by new president James K. Polk. Another new Polk appointee, Secretary of State James Buchanan, serving his last few days as a senator from Pennsylvania, pushed a motion through Congress for the printing of the second expedition report. Knowing that the public was especially eager to learn more about Frémont's adventures, the Senate called for five thousand copies of the report, while newspapers across the country obtained and published extracts.[129] While Jessie had referred to the first expedition report as "Mr. Frémont's first book," she wrote later that the second expedition report was "my(!) second publication while I was still under twenty" (emphasis Jessie's).[130] Somehow she had transitioned from "secretary" and "business associate" to co-author.

Historians debate just what role Jessie played in producing the highly popular expedition reports, which were issued together in a book format entitled *Narrative of the exploring expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842, and to Oregon and North California, in the*

[128] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 46.
[129] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 242-243.
[130] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 49.

years 1843-44. In her introduction to a 2012 edition of the combined expedition reports, Anne F. Hyde credits Jessie with the "drama and literary qualities" while also noting that both Frémonts collaborated on wording and narrative structure.[131] Jessie's biographer, Pamela Herr, concurs with Hyde, writing that "Jessie's hand can be seen in the graceful style, the skillful pacing, and the vivid scenes and vignettes that make it so readable."[132] John's biographer, Tom Chaffin, disagrees, finding little evidence to bolster beliefs about Jessie's authorship, even as he acknowledges that she was both an "active editor" and presumably "provided the reports' occasional Victorian rhetorical filigrees." In the end, "the expedition writings are driven by a specificity of detail that would be tough sledding for a secondhand author to manage." Chaffin focuses heavily on the data and less on the narrative in his analysis. Writing with an eye toward the expeditions as the most compelling feature of his Frémont biography, Chaffin devalues the narrative panache of the reports in favor of the scientific elements, and thus is able to credit John with the majority of the writing. He does acknowledge, however, the collaborative style of the Frémonts, finding that both "possessed a pitch-perfect sense of their audience and their day's American mind."[133]

In the most exhaustive examination of the Frémont expeditions, *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont,* a three-volume set with two appended volumes, historians Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence find that the flow of the narrative and the fanciful flourishes read as well as they do thanks to Jessie's influence. They make specific mention of John's pursuit, during the

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[131] Anne Farrar Hyde, ed., *Frémont's First Impressions: The Original Report of His Exploring Expeditions of 1842-1844* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), xvi.
[132] Pamela Herr, *Jessie Benton Frémont* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 82.
[133] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 143-145. Chaffin's overall approving tone of John C. Frémont in his biography may affect his analysis of the expedition reports and Jessie's role in writing them.

second expedition, of the mythical Buenaventura River, believed to run from the Rockies across the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada mountains and into San Francisco Bay. Although Thomas Benton insisted that his son-in-law believed in the existence of the fabled river, it did not appear on the latest maps of the time. According to Jackson and Spence, both John's search and his finding that the river did not exist seemed designed to "add continuity and suspense to the *Report*," a narrative aspect that evokes "Jessie Benton Frémont's flair for the dramatic."[134]

The occasional vignettes that spring up almost unexpectedly, some even whimsical in nature, stand out as different from the more scientific data and day-to-day geographical and astronomical observations. For example, during the first expedition, as John and several of his men topped one of the higher peaks in the Rockies, they "unfurled the national flag to wave in the breeze where never flag waved before."[135] On this same peak "a solitary bee…came winging his flight from the eastern valley, and lit on the knee of one of the men." This bee, "a lover of warm sunshine and flowers," the men speculated, might have been "the first of his species to cross the mountain barrier, a solitary pioneer to foretell the advance of civilization." This amazing explorer from the insect world was then summarily slapped between the pages of a large book.[136] Whether or not any of this actually happened, the inclusion of the tale served to both entertain the reader and to focus attention on the real mission of western exploration—

[134] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 574.
[135] This is the flag which John presented to Jessie upon his return to Washington after the first expedition, weeks before the birth of his daughter.
[136] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 270. The bee as a harbinger of civilization had a long literary history before John and/or Jessie wrote this vignette. In 1832, William Cullen Bryant used the symbol of the bee in much the same way the Frémonts do, pointing to the little insect as a "more adventurous colonist than man" who brings the "domestic hum" to the west. William Cullen Bryant, "The Prairies," in *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*, ed. Richard Henry Stoddard and Henry C. Sturges (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), 130-133.

bringing civilization to regions believed to be devoid of such. The story of the bee fit neatly into Thomas Hart Benton's vision of a White, Protestant man's west, pushing aside the indigenous peoples across the land as well as the Mexican Catholics of California and the Southwest. Benton's west featured a land of small family farms in the Jeffersonian model, alleviating class conflict in the east and expanding "the imperial domain of the United States."[137] The nature of this "vignette of the bee" offers clear evidence of a light hand at writing narrative, something Jessie demonstrated in her later work as a published author, as well as the beliefs of Thomas Hart Benton, beliefs Jessie had taken to heart years before.

Even today, the reports are eminently readable, no matter who wrote them. The narrative style (or what Chaffin calls "Victorian rhetorical filigrees") makes the work accessible to the general public, although the heavy detail of flora, fauna, geography, weather, and astronomical data may seem dull to modern audiences (although captivating to geographers, astronomers, botanists, zoologists, etc.). The tales of hardship and triumph, of scrambling for provisions one day and enjoying the view of a valley that "is glowing and bright, and all the mountain peaks are gleaming like silver" the next, made the reports irresistible to American readers in the 1840s.[138]

The book turned out to be a best-seller, and John's fame skyrocketed. In Concord, Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau enjoyed the expedition report, following along carefully as the Frémonts detailed John's adventures. Anne Baker argues, in *Heartless Immensity*, that Thoreau drew inspiration for his *Walden* (1854) from the report, finding similarities in the "emphasis on precision and exactness, a deliberately scientific sensibility, juxtaposed with

[137] Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 46-47.
[138] Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. 1, 255.

moments of lyrical appreciation of nature."[139] Similarly, Longfellow biographer Newton Arvin posits that the Frémonts' work informed the poet's *Evangeline* (1847), in which Longfellow wrote of the prairies as "billowy bays of grass ever rolling in shadow and sunshine, bright with luxuriant clusters of roses and purple amorphas."[140] While his peers praised the Frémont reports, Ralph Waldo Emerson found a certain "passion for seeming" in John, remarking on the instances in which phrases like "the group" or "the picture . . . which we make" appeared. For Emerson, this focus on "*how we must look*" (emphasis Emerson's) seemed to compete for John's attention with such exciting adventures as famine, thirst, Indian attacks, and the "new and vast features of unknown country."[141]

Translated versions of the combined expedition book intrigued European readers with romantic images of the North American west, while, at home, men and women seeking to better their fortunes hurried west with copies of the book to guide them along.[142] John's careful scientific detail offered relatively precise instructions on how best to cross the plains, while Jessie's prose fed the imagination of many a nineteenth-century emigrant.

Before the success of the combined expedition report could be fully ascertained, John received orders for his third mission to the west. On February 12, 1845, John J. Abert forwarded to John the order to lead a third expedition, with a focus on the region around Bent's Fort and the

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[139] Anne Baker, *Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 48-51.
[140] Newton Arvin, *Longfellow: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 106-107.
[141] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, vol. VII (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), 206.
[142] Historian John D. Unruh, Jr., argues that Frémont's "importance came through publicity," while the maps included in the joint expeditions report, prepared by Charles Preuss, the expeditions' cartographer, offered the practical information needed for overland travel. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 232-233.

rivers and streams running east from the Rockies.[143] No mention was made of travel to California, yet John would venture there during this third expedition.[144] For Jessie, this expedition resulted in another lengthy absence from her husband, this time for well over two years. When John departed St. Louis in May of 1845, his daughter Lily was a two-year-old toddler; when he returned in August of 1847, she was a precocious little girl going on five.

John's initial assignment to survey rivers and streams east of the Rockies did not meet the designs of Thomas Hart Benton, who looked at expansion into Mexican California as the last necessary piece in his goal of linking trade between the U.S. and Asia.[145] As tensions grew between the U.S. and Mexico over border disputes along the Red and Rio Grande rivers in Texas, both John Frémont and his father-in-law pursued a larger vision, that of gaining all of Alta California.[146] American emigrants seemed to feel the same way. The first wagon train carrying settlers into Alta California, that of the Bidwell-Bartleson party, arrived at the ranch of Dr. John Marsh, nestled against the foot of Mount Diablo, in 1841. Further emigrants followed in their wagon tracks throughout the early 1840s. According to the U.S. consul in Monterey (Mexican capital of Alta California) Thomas Larkin, by 1846 nearly three quarters of the foreigners living in what is now the U.S. state of California were American.[147] Various attempts

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[143] John J. Abert to John C. Frémont, 12 Feb 1845 in Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions* Vol 1., 395-396.

[144] Under what authority John extended his third expedition to include California is unclear. Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson surmise that John "was either recalling oral instructions or justifying a fait accompli . . . the former seems more likely." Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont: The Bear Flag Revolt and the Court-Martial*, vol. II, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), xxiii.

[145] In his memoir, Thomas Hart Benton wrote strongly about the need for a "a commercial communication with Asia through the heart of our own continent," noting it was Jefferson's own idea when completing the Louisiana Purchase. Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, Vol I, 14.

[146] The term "Alta California" referred to the region known today as the U.S. state of California and stems from the Spanish word "alta," meaning high. The lower portion of Mexican-held California went under the name of "Baja California," from Spanish for low.

[147] Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions*, Vol. II, xxi.

at rallying these Americans to the cause of taking California from Mexico led to events that would, in time, come to be called the Conquest of California.[148]

Jessie remained at home, anxiously awaiting letters and other news of her husband. Long-distance marriage, such as she experienced, plagued most military couples during the nineteenth century (and continues to require similar sacrifices today). Rumors of infidelity began to surface during John's time in California. Years later, Edward Ord, an Army officer assigned to the west coast in the late 1840s and familiar with John, recalled rumors arising during this period. Specifically, Ord remembered gossip that "Frémont's a low fellow, sought low associates in Los Angeles & patronized common prostitutes in public."[149] John's unfaithfulness would continue through the course of the Frémont marriage.

Nothing in her extant correspondence indicates that Jessie knew of her husband's betrayal in these early years of her marriage. Reading the remaining letters between the couple from this time, however, shows their different methods of communicating within the confines of that marriage. On January 24, 1846, John wrote to his wife from the California port city of Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) with news of events since the expedition left Kansas in May 1845. While giving a summary of the exploration and the findings of his band, only at the end did he offer anything resembling a private communication. Writing that "many months of hardships, close trials, and anxieties have tried me severely, and my hair is turning gray before its time," he closed his letter with "*et le bon temps viendra* [and good times will soon be here]." So

[148] For a detailed examination of John C. Frémont's actions during the Conquest, see Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions*, Vol. II.
[149] Edward O.C. Ord, *The City of the Angels and the City of the Saints*, ed. Neal Harlow (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1978), 24.

unemotional was John's letter that his father-in-law saw that it was published in *Niles' National Register*, a nationwide magazine published in Baltimore.[150]

While it is possible that John wrote such an unromantic letter to Jessie just so it could be published, his next letter, dated April 1, 1846, written from the banks of the Sacramento River, likewise seemed designed for publication rather than emotional support for those back home. In this missive, John promised to start for home in May 1846, having been subject to "somewhat rude and inhospitable" behavior by the Mexican government in California. "For my own part," John wrote defensively, having been asked to vacate the Mexican state, "I have become disgusted with everything belonging to the Mexicans."[151] Again, it was Benton who passed this letter, written by his son-in-law to his daughter, to the publisher at *Niles' National Register*.

While John's letters were written for public consumption, Jessie's responses offered her husband emotional support, a little flirtatious teasing, and the full-throated adoration of a 22-year-old wife. Not knowing that John was quickly becoming involved in efforts to overthrow the Mexican government in California, Jessie still expected her husband to be home soon. "I hope that as I write you are rapidly nearing home, and that early in September there will be an end to our anxieties," she wrote in June 1846. She congratulated John on his promotion to lieutenant colonel, calling it "entirely a free will offering of the President's, neither father nor I nor anyone for us having asked or said we would like it."[152] Had John expressed concern over the efforts of

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[150] John C. Frémont to Jessie Benton Frémont, January 24, 1846, in Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions*, Vol II, 47-48. "Captain Freemont's [Sic] Expedition," *Niles' National Register*, May 16, 1846.
[151] John C. Frémont to Jessie Benton Frémont, April 1, 1846, in Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions*, Vol. II, 129-130. Thomas Hart Benton, "Operations of Captain Frémont in Upper California," *Niles' National Register*, November 14, 1846.
[152] Jessie Benton Frémont to John C. Frémont, June 16, 1846, in Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions*, Vol. 11, 147-150. Polk himself confirmed this is the pages of his diary, noting that Frémont "is an

his wife and father-in-law to hasten his career advancement? It seems unlikely; Jessie simply wished to acknowledge her husband's accomplishments by assuring him that they were his and his alone.

After nearly five years of marriage, Jessie inquired about her husband's age, writing playfully "How old are you? You might tell me now I am a colonel's wife—won't you, old papa?" She regaled her husband with news of the great success of the second expedition report, the popularity of which "astonished even me, your most confirmed and oldest worshipper." She reported that they "say that as *Robinson Crusoe* is the most natural and interesting fiction of travel, so Frémont's report is the most romantically truthful." Jessie closed her letter with the wish that in "a few months we shall not know what sorrow means."[153] Jessie did not know that it would be another year before her husband arrived back in St. Louis, under arrest and subject to a court martial.

Even before Jessie wrote her letter hoping for John's quick return east, the United States had become embroiled in a dispute with Mexico over the annexation of Texas by the U.S. and the border changes that required. While president James K. Polk believed the border to lie at the Rio Grande, Mexico thought differently and sent troops to protect its territory. Polk also sent troops to the border region, under the command of General Zachary Taylor. As diplomatic efforts at a resolution stalled and eventually failed, in April 1846, Polk sought a declaration of war from Congress as well as appropriations for funding both ground troops and naval vessels. Both requests passed on May 12, and on May 13, 1846, Polk proclaimed that the U.S. and

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officer of high merit and peculiarly fitted to this Regiment…." James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845 to 1849*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife, vol. II (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 412-413.

[153] Jessie Benton Frémont to John C. Frémont, June 16, 1846, in Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions* Vol. II, 147-151.

Mexico were in a state of war. Ostensibly, Polk claimed that the war was not over the acquisition of additional territory. To his diary he confessed that he had told his Secretary of State, James Buchanan, though, that "in making peace we would if practicable obtain California and such other portion of the Mexican territory" as would compensate the U.S. for Mexican aggressions.[154] The United States was at war with Mexico, and John C. Frémont and his expedition were in Mexican California.

Under whose authority John took his next actions is a matter still shrouded in some mystery. Near the Klamath River in southern Oregon in May 1846, without any word that war had been declared in Washington, John and his men prepared to head east toward home. It was at this point that John received oral instructions from U.S. Marine Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie and written instructions, in some coded language, from Thomas Hart Benton. John interpreted both messages as instructing him to return to California and begin challenging Mexican authorities with an eye toward provoking action that would justify a military takeover. As he moved south down the Sacramento Valley, John met with more and more disgruntled settlers, who claimed various outrages perpetrated by Mexican authorities, including charges of inciting Indians to violence against Americans. At first, John took no action in leading these unhappy Americans, although he did encourage them in activities like stealing horses from Mexican officials. When the men of his exploring party began to voice their eagerness to join the American settlers in challenging Mexican authority, John feared that, if he took no action, he would be left a leader without any followers. He then disbanded the exploring party and

[154] James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife, vol. I (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 397.

accepted the leadership position of a new group, a filibustering force ready to actively engage California's Mexican authorities.[155]

As with so much of this period, the truth of John's participation in what came to be called the Bear Flag Revolt remains hazy. Although he still retained his own men, now filibusters rather than explorers, John did not immediately seek to lead the American settlers. While he may have urged on the Americans in their assault on the town and garrison of Sonoma, he steered clear of a leadership role, even when some of the Americans arrived at his camp with four prisoners from the Sonoma takeover, including commanding general in northern California, Mariano Vallejo. The leaders of the Americans celebrated their victory at Sonoma with a "Declaration of Independence" proclaimed on June 15, 1846, and the creation of the "bear flag," the likeness of which remains California's state flag. It was not until June 25 that John and his men arrived in Sonoma, and John assumed leadership of the American settlers and their rebellion. While John initially refused to replace the bear flag with the "stars and stripes," on July 9 he received word that Commodore Sloat of the U.S. Navy had taken the Mexican capital of Alta California at Monterey.[156] The war with Mexico over California had begun.

After the Bear Flag Revolt, John promoted the takeover of California for the Americans by forming the California Battalion and hurrying to Southern California to participate in what was soon a full-blown military effort to take the territory.[157] After minor skirmishes with

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[155] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 303-320.
[156] John A. Hawgood, "John C. Frémont and the Bear Flag Revolution: A Reappraisal," *Southern California Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 1962), 76-82.
[157] The Bear Flag Revolt was an attempt by a group of Americans in and around the town of Sonoma, northeast of Yerba Buena, to wrest control from the local Mexican officials and establish a free "California Republic." The name refers to the flag designed for the new republic, which features a grizzly bear and is nearly identical to California's current state flag. At just what point John became involved has been a matter of dispute. According to John himself, in his *Memoirs*, he played little to no part in the revolt, insisting that the leaders of the revolt

Mexican forces, John accepted the formal surrender of California's Mexican government at Cahuenga Pass (near modern-day Los Angeles) in January 1847. Naval commander John F. Stockton then installed John as provisional governor. The arrival of General Stephen Watts Kearny, the officer who had secured the mountain howitzer for John at the beginning of the second expedition, left John in a quandary. Kearny ordered John to relinquish the role of governor, exercising his position as John's superior in the Army. Stockton, however, insisted that John remain in the governor's seat, claiming that Kearny's late arrival in the state (after the Mexican government had capitulated) meant that he, Stockton, retained control of the newly acquired domain. What should have been a clear decision for John, that of following the orders of a superior officer within his own branch of military service, clashed with John's own sense of what he believed due him. He had no intention of giving up the governorship. He sided with Stockton and was subsequently arrested by Kearny and sent back east to stand trial for mutiny.

In the later decades of her life, the narrative of the Conquest of California and her husband's role in it absorbed much of Jessie's attention. Strangely, though, she wrote nothing in her memoir of what transpired in her life at home during this extended third expedition. She never mentioned that two of her sisters married during the years that John was gone.[158] On January 17, 1847, Sarah Benton married Richard Taylor Jacob at the Benton home on C Street in Washington, D.C. Just three months later, on March 18, 1847, Eliza Benton married William Cary Jones with President and Mrs. James K. Polk in attendance.[159] Jessie did reach out to a few

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themselves instigated hostile actions with the Mexican authorities by first taking possession of several horses believed at the time to belong to the Mexican General Castro.

[158] Jessie's dismissal of her sisters (see Chapter 1) continued through most of her life. At best, these women were side notes in Jessie's understanding of herself and of her family.

[159] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 316, 324.

correspondents at the time to share her own woes. Writing on March 21, 1847, to botanist John Torrey, who worked with John on identifying and classifying various forms of flora collected during the expeditions, Jessie shared her disappointment that the war "has interfered badly with his original intentions" and delayed her husband's return east. She even voiced the hope that "the dragoon force under Genl. Kearny…will procure his release for as you may perceive I have no sympathy for the war, nor has Mr. Frémont. Fighting is not his aim & though he threw all his energy into the affair last July & August [the Bear Flag Revolt] yet it was as if revenging a private insult for he knew nothing of the war." John did know about the war with Mexico, having been advised of such on July 9, 1846, and his participation in the Conquest belies Jessie's words to Torrey.[160]

Jessie also penned letters to the woman who was her closest friend at this time, one of the only truly close female friends Jessie had over the course of her life. Elizabeth Blair Lee was the daughter of Preston Blair, the good friend of Thomas Benton and publisher of the Washington *Globe*. To "Lizzie," married to Samuel Philips Lee, a naval officer then assigned to duty off the coast of California, Jessie confided her heartbreak over John's prolonged absence. Writing on April 15, 1847, from her father's home in Washington, she described her heartache at not having her husband near her, although she praised her own good health and the idea that this separation from John acted as "a sort of penance to wipe out the past." She failed to elaborate on what bad behavior required such atonement. She claimed that Lizzie, whose husband was also away on military duty, was due "more sympathy & fellow feeling" due to her "delicate" health and lack

[160] Jessie Benton Frémont to John Torrey, March 21, 1847, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 30-32.

of need for penance of any kind.[161] This ham-handed attempt at conjuring sympathy for herself while acknowledging her friend's own suffering offers a look into the way in which Jessie was beginning to view herself: as a victim of a lack of understanding and sympathy on the part of others. This idea of victimhood, however mild in early 1847, grew in intensity as she learned of her husband's arrest and court martial. As ever the good wife, she plunged in to thwart this new attack on John C. Frémont.

Jessie's first effort on her husband's behalf arose when Kit Carson, the famous western scout, key member of the expeditions, and close friend to both John and Jessie, arrived in Washington on June 6, 1847, bearing dispatches from the west. By this time, Jessie knew of the contretemps between her husband and General Kearny, so she accompanied Carson to the White House to obtain the president's support for her husband's actions. According to President Polk, "Mrs. Frémont seemed anxious to elicit from me some expression of approbation of her husband's conduct." The president, having already heard the news coming from California, had made up his mind, acknowledging in the pages of his diary that "Col. Frémont was greatly in the wrong when he refused to obey the orders issued by Gen'l Kearney." He wrote further that it "was unnecessary, however, that I should say so to Col. Frémont's wife."[162] Jessie's first foray into seeking presidential sympathy for her husband fell flat. Learning nothing from this incident, she would try a similar tactic over a decade later in 1861.

Even as Polk declined to become involved in the Frémont-Kearny affair, Jessie began to receive positive attention in newspapers around the country. Her determination to travel to St.

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[161] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 15, 1847, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont,* 32-34.
[162] James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife, vol. III (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 52-53.

Louis to await her husband's return from California found favor with newspaper writers, who noted that she bravely undertook her journey with the famous Carson as her protector. According to the *Weekly Wisconsin* and the *North Carolina Star,* her journey made her "worthy of the young hero-explorer of the Rockies."[163] The *North-Carolinian* went further, finding Jessie "made of the right stuff for an American wife."[164] These early mentions in the newspapers marked Jessie's coming-out party to the public; her life from then forward would be catalogued and judged in the pages of American, and even European, newspapers. She was the "public wife."

Jessie tried again with President Polk on September 21, 1847. She forwarded to the president a clipping from a St. Louis newspaper, the *Missouri Republican*, indicating that people there believed those who brought the court martial charges, like Kearny, should be investigated themselves for their wrongdoing against her husband. The article questioned why some of the men serving with John, and critical of his actions in California, had been sent out on western missions that rendered them unavailable for cross-examination during the court martial. Jessie asked the president to let these men stand trial right alongside John, writing, "Do you suppose Sir, that I lightly interfere in a matter properly belonging to men, but in the absence of Mr. Frémont I attend to his affairs at his request."[165] Jessie defended her decision to "interfere" in this men's matter by claiming to have her husband's approval to act on his behalf, just as she had with the incident over the howitzer. Jessie used traditional gendered language, staying out of a "matter properly belonging to men," even as she sought to align the president with her husband.

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[163] "Mrs. Frémont," *The Weekly Wisconsin*, July 21, 1847; "Mrs. Frémont," *The North-Carolina Star*, July 21, 1847.
[164] "Untitled," *The North-Carolinian*, July 31, 1847.
[165] Jessie Benton Frémont to James K. Polk, September 21, 1847, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 35-36.

She used her role as a "wife" to justify her interference. Jessie's pleas to the president again fell on deaf ears, as did similar attempts by her father.[166]

In August of 1847, Jessie traveled to Westport, Kansas, to greet her returning husband. The couple hurried to Washington, where John, Thomas Benton, and Jessie's new brother-in-law, attorney William Carey Jones, began work on John's defense. On November 2, 1847, the hearing began at the Washington Arsenal before a jury of thirteen officers, including one brevet brigadier general, two colonels, one brevet colonel, two brevet lieutenant colonels, two lieutenant colonels, and five majors. Captain J.F. Lee served as judge advocate. Kearny had originally proffered one charge against John, that of mutiny, but two more charges were added: disobeying a lawful command from a superior officer and conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline.[167]

According to Jessie, writing decades later, the court martial "was a Dreyfus case" to her and "affected" her seriously.[168] She claimed the affair marked "a new and painful epoch in my life," bringing "unlooked for and intense interest." That interest, she admitted, actually took the form of "sympathy with us of so many that it amounted to a rebuke to the government."[169] Later

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[166] James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During His Presidency, 1845-1849*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife, vol. III (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 120-125, 197-199. Polk wrote of one of his meetings with Benton, "Mr. Benton became excited & exhibited much deep feeling on the subject. He spoke of the bad treatment of Col. Frémont, and said that his (Col. B.'s) deepest concern in this life was to see justice done to Col. Frémont in this matter. I was careful to say as little as possible, but listened attentively to all Mr. Benton said. I finally said to him that I would act justly in the matter . . . He left in a good humour towards me, as far as he expressed himself in relation to any action of mine in the matter."

[167] "Case of Lieutenant Colonel Frémont," *The Washington Union*, February 21, 1848.

[168] Jessie refers to the French criminal trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French artillery officer of Jewish descent. Dreyfus was convicted in 1894 of communicating French military secrets to Germany; after nearly five years in prison, Dreyfuss was exonerated when it came to light that another man was to blame and that the military had forged documents to ensure a conviction against Dreyfus. Jessie uses the term "Dreyfus case" to mean that the charges against her husband were based on fraud and deceit.

[169] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 53.

historians claimed that the Frémont court martial served as "the most dramatic Army hearing since the court-martial of Gen. James Wilkinson nearly forty years before."[170] Jessie faithfully attended the hearings, watching with the nausea and fatigue of the first trimester of her second pregnancy, as John acted as his own defense attorney, assisted by Thomas Benton and William Carey Jones. The Frémont defense consisted of two objectives. The first claimed that the orders received by Kearny from the secretary of war to take command in California were not applicable, as they related to an unconquered territory and California had been conquered before Kearny's arrival. The second objective was to discredit Kearny's testimony by impugning his motives, claiming Kearny had a vindictive temper and a defective memory.[171]

Despite these efforts, on January 31, 1848, the officers sitting in judgment rendered a verdict of guilty on all three charges. While the official recommendation was for dismissal from the service, seven members recommended John be shown clemency by the president. And Polk did so, affirming the verdict but remitting the sentence. He ordered John to take up his sword once again as a member of the United States Army. John instead resigned his commission, noting that he was seeking justice, not clemency. Jessie blamed President Polk, writing later that there was "no doubt what the in-coming President, Zachary Taylor, would have decided—but President Polk did not have a military bone in his body."[172] Jessie reserved her most scathing

[170] Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, eds., *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont*, vol. II (supplement) (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), vii. James Wilkinson was a Revolutionary War veteran of some dubious reputation. Later in his life, he conspired with Aaron Burr to separate the western states from the Union to create a new nation. Wilkinson served as a witness against Burr in Burr's trial for treason, but one of highly suspect credibility who sought mainly to cover up his own malfeasance. His court martial in 1811 ended in acquittal.
[171] Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, *Expeditions*, Vol II (supplement), ix-xii.
[172] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 53-54.

attack, though, on the man she held personally responsible for the entire debacle—Stephen Watts Kearny.

With the trial complete and his military career ended, John commenced work on a third expedition report. Yet his heart was not in it, and he called the truncated, dry report the "cursed memoir."[173] He had lost his co-writer, as Jessie's pregnancy left her feeling poorly almost from the beginning. The nervous energy spent during the court martial took its toll on the young mother. When she gave birth to her second child, a son named Benton after her father, the baby was sickly and frail, a condition for which Jessie blamed Kearny.

In July 1848, while Thomas Hart Benton railed on the floor of the Senate against a bill to promote Kearny to brevet major general, John prepared for a fourth expedition, this time without government sanction and funding.[174] By October, Jessie, along with her daughter Lily and infant son Benton, returned to St. Louis, staying with Jessie's cousin Sarah Benton Brant and her husband as John prepared to leave for the west. Jessie worried over the poor health of her son. She later claimed that the doctors knew that her baby could not live long, but they did not want to burden her with this knowledge.[175] Thus it came as a surprise when, on October 6, 1848, little Benton Frémont passed away, not yet three months old. The tiny coffin went into the ground at St. Louis' Bellefontaine Cemetery, and Jessie struggled with an overwhelming sense of grief, a depth of feeling that took in not only the death of her baby but all that had occurred in the past year. In her memoir of fifty years later, Jessie wrote of this period in her life:

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[173] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 60.
[174] William Nesbit Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 329. In the end, Benton's efforts fell short of the goal of denying the promotion to Kearny. Kearny, however, did not have time to enjoy the new title. Having contracted yellow fever while serving in Vera Cruz, Kearny died in St. Louis on October 31, 1848. He rests not far from the Benton family plot in Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis, Missouri.
[175] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 59.

> All that weary time of waiting on the Court Martial, the illness that followed its fore-gone decision had struck me to the heart. Then the upsetting—uprooting—of all my life not alone in my faith in men, but the resulting change of home, all were more than human—and woman nature could bear. And I was then only twenty-four.[176]

As Jessie grieved the loss of her son, another person lay dying in St. Louis during that fall of 1848—Stephen Watts Kearny. According to Jessie, she and Kearny shared a family physician, Dr. William Beaumont, a former U.S. Army surgeon. Jessie claimed later that Beaumont approached her with a request from Kearny to meet her and seek her forgiveness for the troubles of the court martial. In dramatic fashion, Jessie wrote that she replied to Beaumont, "There was a little grave between us I could not cross."[177] Whether this story made for a theatrical vignette in Jessie's memoir or was true, the depth of the Benton and Frémont bitterness over the court martial remained for decades.

Jessie's refusal to reconcile with General Kearny demonstrated to all who knew her that criticism of John, especially the sort of criticism generated by an official proceeding, came at the price of her regard. And no limits existed on what she would do to further her husband's career and to craft his life story into a heroic tale of American greatness. She allowed his letters to her to be published, with her name included, thus making known to anyone who cared to read that she was part and parcel of his missions, first with the howitzer and then with his actions in California. She felt no reluctance to approach even the President of the United States if she felt that august figure might aid in her goals. Beginning in the 1840s and continuing to the end of

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[176] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 59.

[177] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir" 59. Stories of the Frémont-Kearny feud vary on just what happened regarding the request for, and denial of, forgiveness. According to the *Niles' National Register*, while the request for forgiveness came to Jessie, it was John who offered pardon to the dying general. "Untitled," *Niles' National Register*, November 29, 1848.

her life, Jessie moved quickly and sometimes harshly, defiantly, to defend her husband. While she was an affectionate mother to young Lily and always sought her father's approval, John came first. That he did not repay this sentiment in kind seemed obvious to others as time went by, yet Jessie almost never offered words of criticism directed at her husband.

While John headed west across the plains on his fourth expedition in the fall of 1848, Jessie planned an expedition of her own. She and Lily, with only a lady's maid for company, soon struck out for California. The golden state that John had done so much to win for the United States became the family's haven whenever things spiraled out of their control. In 1849, Jessie proved herself just as adventurous as her exploring husband, crossing the Isthmus of Panama and setting up housekeeping on her own for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER 3
FORTY-NINER
1849-1855

On the morning of March 15, 1849, 24-year-old Jessie Benton Frémont woke in a room in New York City's Astor House hotel. Anxiously, she prepared for her first sea voyage, a cruise aboard the *Crescent City* from New York to Chagres on the Atlantic coast of the Isthmus of Panama, the first step on her journey to California.[178] As she recalled, "I had never lived out of my father's house, nor in any way assumed a separate life from the other children of the family—Mr. Frémont's long journeys had taken him from home more than five years out of the eight since we were married."[179] Determined to join her husband, who had left months earlier for an overland expedition to California, Jessie overcame all arguments pressed by worried family and friends. Members of her family traveled to New York to see her off, including her father and her sisters Eliza Jones and Sarah Jacobs. Her brother-in-law, Richard Taylor Jacobs, offered to escort her on the journey, as his doctors had prescribed a sea voyage for his poor health. Her personal servant, a free woman of color named Harriet, had been set to accompany Jessie to California but chose at the last minute to remain in New York. Another woman was found, "a reliable middle-aged New England woman," and the party, which included Jessie's six-year-old daughter, Lily, sailed south.[180]

Lily cried herself to sleep that first night at sea, and Jessie found it difficult to relax as she contemplated leaving kith and kin behind. In the darkness of the cabin, she became aware of the

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[178] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 407.
[179] While Jessie had lived in St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and the McDowell plantation in Virginia, she and John had never had their own home, spending their married life to date in the homes of Jessie's family.
[180] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1878), 22, 25-26.

door opening. She opened her eyes only enough to see her new maid step in. Thinking Jessie asleep, the woman began to rummage through Jessie's trunks. Gathering up "an armful of undergear," the woman left as stealthily as she had entered. Jessie rushed to lock the door. She waited until morning and then told the captain what had occurred. The captain promptly attended to the thieving maid, putting her "into a separate cabin under guard for the journey."[181] Jessie had faced her first travel crisis, and that captain became the first in a long line of men who would chivalrously come to Jessie's aid over the course of her life.

Jessie Frémont never lacked for men to assist her when necessary, and she enjoyed the privileges that came with being a White, female, socially connected traveler. Between 1849 and 1855, Jessie traveled multiple times between Washington, D.C., and California, as well as to Europe where she and John enjoyed the advantages of both John's fame and the new wealth that came from their Las Mariposas estate in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Learning to maneuver through the vicissitudes of travel, as well as the other challenges of life in the era of the Gold Rush, furnished Jessie with a growing maturity and heightened self-confidence. Travels in Europe polished her burgeoning cosmopolitan world view and contributed to her new aplomb. The Frémont fame and fortune garnered during these years combined to bring political, social, and financial successes—at least some. It also set in motion events that made it possible for John and Jessie to set foot on the national political stage in 1856 in a way they never had imagined.

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As Jessie endured the pressures of the court martial in late 1848 and early 1849, along with the physical and emotional stresses of pregnancy, childbirth, and the loss of her son, events

[181] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 26-27.

in California altered the course of the nation as well as the lives of both she and John. On January 24, 1848, just a week before the court martial was to conclude at the Arsenal in Washington, D.C., a New Jersey carpenter, James Marshall, found several flakes of gold in the millrace of a sawmill he was building in Coloma, California. Marshall, working for John A. Sutter at the time, hurried to his employer to share the find.

Swiss by birth, John A. Sutter had arrived in Monterey, California in 1839 after abandoning his wife and son to wander broadly around North America, as well as to Sitka, Alaska, and the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands. He obtained Mexican citizenship, a necessary first step to make him eligible for an Alta California land grant. Sutter had his eye on the fertile Sacramento Valley. The floating land grant finally authorized by the Mexican government consisted of approximately 50,000 acres, part of the property located along the Feather River in the northern part of Mexican California and the other part lying at the confluence of the American and Sacramento rivers in the lower Sacramento Valley.[182] It was this latter part that Sutter named New Helvetia in honor of his homeland. He constructed an adobe fort, manning it with cannons he bought from the Russian-American Company's Fort Ross north of Bodega Bay, California.[183] By January 1848, Sutter's Fort served as the center of commerce for the lower Sacramento Valley including a granary, warehouse, and retail store. Having survived the U.S. conquest of California with his property intact, Sutter next turned his hungry gaze toward the

[182] According to David Vaught, Mexican land grants did not always include enough specificity to determine exactly what property the grant covered. "Floating grants" were even worse, their "size, shape, and boundaries…even more vaguely defined than most." David Vaught, "A Tale of Three Land Grants on the Northern California Borderlands," *Agricultural History* 78, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 142. Sutter used the nebulous boundaries of his holding to establish control over a large part of the lower Sacramento Valley. In the 1850s, John C. Frémont would also manipulate the floating boundaries of his Las Mariposas grant to ensure that his mining and timber operations had access to a river.
[183] Albert L. Hurtado, *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 99-100.

timber-rich Sierra foothills. He hired James Marshall to build the sawmill he needed; nearby, several Mormons under the direction of Sam Brannan set out to build a flour mill for Sutter. The combination of Marshall's find, Sutter's inability to keep a secret, and Brannan's greed set in motion the 1849 California Gold Rush.

Sutter desperately wanted to keep the news of the gold discovery from reaching the wider world. He feared his New Helvetia would be overrun with gold seekers as soon as word got out. He swore Marshall to secrecy, but Sutter himself proved incapable of keeping the news quiet. Just a week after visiting Coloma to see for himself the site of the discovery, Sutter wrote to a friend, gloating about the sawmill first and then mentioning that he had "made a discovery of a gold mine, which so far as we have examined it, is extraordinarily rich."[184] In February he also mentioned the gold discovery to men around the Fort, by which it passed person-to-person until it reached the ears of Sam Brannan. Brannan, who had come to California originally under instructions from Mormon leader Brigham Young to see if the region offered settlement possibilities for the Latter-Day Saints, took the tithes he was collecting on behalf of Young and promptly bought "everything a gold seeker might need" to stock a store he built outside Sutter's Fort. On May 12, he traveled to San Francisco with a bottle containing some gold flakes. Standing at a corner of Portsmouth Square, he shouted "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River." By the end of May, "almost the entire male population of San Francisco had left town for the gold fields," traveling by way of Sutter's Fort where Sam Brannan became an early

[184] John A. Sutter to Mariano Vallejo, February 10, 1848, in Albert L. Hurtado, *John Sutter*, 220.

California millionaire by selling them equipment.[185] The Gold Rush was on, and it fundamentally changed the lives of the Frémonts.

Rumors swirled eastward from California to the centers of power in Washington. The official seal of truth to the rumors came in December 1848, when President James K. Polk shared the news in his annual message to Congress. By that time, plans had already been set in motion for both John and Jessie, the first as part of an overland expedition and the second via Panama, to travel to California.

Thomas Hart Benton had urged his son-in-law westward for this latest expedition. Benton believed that if a transcontinental railroad were to be built, the best route might be along the 38th parallel (which meant it would go through St. Louis). He knew that before he could convince Congress of joining the east and west via rail, he needed to prove that a route across the Rockies would be practical in the harsh winter weather. After the court martial, Congress remained cold to the idea of investing further funds into a Frémont expedition. Benton turned to a coalition of St. Louis businessmen, led by banker and merchant Robert Campbell, to finance his son-in-law's fourth expedition.[186] With funding in place, John set out to explore the proposed route in October of 1848. And Jessie began to prepare for her own journey.

Travelers in 1849 considered three possible routes to California. Travel overland along trails mapped by John C. Frémont and others proved arduous and could be deadly, as it had for the Donner Party in 1846. Sailing around Cape Horn at the southernmost point of South America came with its own set of dangers, including harsh westerly winds, frigid water

[185] Albert L. Hurtado, *John Sutter*, 13-14.
[186] Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 391-392.

temperatures, rocky coastal shoals, and stray icebergs.[187] It took six months' longer than the route via the Isthmus of Panama and added nearly 10,000 miles to a traveler's journey. Jessie, wanting to meet John as soon as possible in San Francisco, chose to take the quickest path to California by crossing the Isthmus. It took her just under three months between March and June, 1849, making her a true "forty-niner."

Just over a week after sailing, the *Crescent City* docked at Chagres on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama. Now the difficult part of the journey began. Jessie and the other passengers embarked on crossing the Isthmus on a small steam-powered tender, traveling up the Chagres River until the shallow depth and narrowness of the river forced them to turn to other means of travel. For Jessie, her family connections with William H. Aspinwall provided accommodations for this leg of the journey not offered to her fellow passengers. Aspinwall, one of the founders of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, the company which provided mail service and passenger travel to ports along the Pacific coast, ensured that Jessie sailed on the company's "whale-boat" guided by the company's own employees. Travelers not so fortunate in their social relations traveled by what Jessie described as " dug-out canoes, with their crews of naked, screaming, barbarous negroes and Indians." Jessie knew that family contacts contributed to making her journey less arduous than that of her fellow travelers, writing later that "Mr. Aspinwall's care secured for me what was, by the contrast to what the other travellers [sic] had to endure, luxury."[188]

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[187] "Cape Horn: A Mariner's Nightmare," NASA Earth Observatory, https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/91472/cape-horn-a-mariners-nightmare.
[188] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 45-46.

In Gorgona, Jessie lost the chaperonage of her brother-in-law, Richard Jacobs. Jacobs, after having been told by doctors to travel to warmer climes for his health, pushed himself too hard in the heat of the Panamanian jungle and suffered sun stroke.[189] While Jacobs survived his illness, hundreds of others traveling across the Isthmus did not share his good fortune. Jessie noticed the suffering around her, commenting on the many Americans and Europeans camping in Gorgona, trying to raise enough money to travel overland to Panama City on the Pacific coast. She wrote, "they were in a hot, unhealthy climate, and the uncertainty of everything was making them ill: loss of hope brings loss of strength: they were living on salt provisions brought from home with them, which were not fit for such a climate, and already many had died." One of the fortunate travelers, Richard Jacobs was sent back toward Chagres.[190] Jessie was now on her own.

Her brother-in-law's illness delayed travel for a few days at Gorgona, and Jessie's celebrity as the "wife of the Pathfinder" won her an invitation to breakfast with the local alcalde. Barely keeping a look of horror from her face, Jessie sat down to a "chief dish, a baked monkey, which looked like a little child that had been burned to death." Included on the menu, "iguana, or large lizard, of which we had seen so many along the river, was also a chief dish."[191] Sadly, Jessie failed to record whether she partook of either of these delicacies.

The next twenty-plus miles of Jessie's journey across the Isthmus took place via mule along a narrow path cut through the lush jungle terrain. Exhausted upon reaching Panama City, Jessie again accepted hospitality based on her family's social and political connections, this time

[189] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 50-51.
[190] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 51
[191] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 52.

via Pedro Alcántara Herrán, minister to the United States from New Granada (roughly modern-day Colombia and Panama).[192] Herrán's widowed aunt, Senora Arcé y Zimena, welcomed Jessie to stay with her in Panama City until such time as the steamer arrived to carry Jessie on the last leg of her journey to California. While staying at the Arcé villa, Jessie later noted that she recognized the truth of the Spanish statement of hospitality, "*La casa y todo que tiene es a su disposicion.*"[193] Senora Arcé made every effort to ensure Jessie's comfort, and Jessie used her time to observe the customs of Panama City. The Arcé home, situated on the main square of the city, offered Jessie a spot from which to scrutinize the nearby cathedral and the Catholic rituals that sprang from it, including a procession headed to the sea to bless the waters, services for Palm Sunday, and the funeral of an Indian child.[194] With plenty of books, letters to write, and the wives of various foreign consuls with whom to socialize, Jessie found that her visit to Panama City "had its very pleasant aspects."[195]

Jessie's presence on the path across the Isthmus attracted the attention of other Americans also traveling to California. Jabez Lewis of Jackson, Mississippi, wrote to Isaac Chrisman of having seen Mrs. Frémont traveling in a canoe on the Chagres River, finding her

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[192] Pedro Alcántara Herrán served as minister to the United States from 1847 to at least the summer of 1848. While in his post, two positions he took may have brought him into the Benton-Frémont circle. First, he advocated a halt to British expansionist goals in the Isthmus of Panama. Second, he encouraged migration from the United States to New Granada, noting that "{o}ur country needs a strong, irresistible impulse, so that the mass of the people take advantage of the elements of prosperity…." "Nuestro país necesita de un impulso fuerte, irresistible, para que la masa del pueblo se aproveche de los elementos de prosperidad…." See Andrés Vélez Posada, "Edición comentada de la memoria Sobre la emigración, de Pedro Alcántara Herrán (1848)", *Co-herencia*, *13*(25) (2016), 19-58. https://dx.doi.org/10.17230/co-herencia.13.25.1. Also, see Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 408.

[193] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 58. Jessie's quotation translates to "The house and everything you have is at your disposal." Her Spanish may have been failing her a bit when she wrote this phrase in the late 1870s. It is likely she meant "La casa y todo lo que tenemos está a tu disposición" or "The house and everything we have is at your disposal."

[194] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 61-65.

[195] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 57.

"delighted with her trip."[196] An unnamed traveler, whose letter was first published in the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, wrote of attending a lecture on Carthage and ancient Rome while in Panama City. He noticed Jessie's attendance, writing that "Mrs. Frémont . . . like myself and some seven hundred others, waits impatiently for the steamer" to take them to San Francisco.[197] A correspondent identified only as H.R.R. wrote from Panama City on April 6, 1849, that "Mrs. Frémont, the accomplished wife of the gallant Col. F. . . . is on her way out to join her husband at San Francisco."[198] These letters reflected Jessie's growing fame as John's wife, and she reveled in it. She recalled that "both [her] names were household words to many" along her journey, and she enjoyed the "additional feeling of kindness" that came from being well-known.[199] But pleasant diversions and courtesies soon gave way to fatigue and sickness as she received a letter from John describing what had occurred during his fourth expedition.

Newspapers began reporting trouble for the Frémont party in the spring of 1849, not long before Jessie sailed from New York. In March 1849, newspapers across the country reprinted an article from the *St. Louis Union* which outlined the progress of the expedition as it reached the eastern slopes of the Rockies. Expressing concern that "the snow was especially deep," many doubted whether John could complete his goal of reaching California.[200] By the end of the month, the *Evening Post* in New York City reported the expedition lost in the snowy Rockies and that John alone had been able to survive and reach Taos in modern-day New Mexico. While the article writer cast doubt on this notion, he also reported that some of the men had turned to

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[196] Jabez Lewis to Isaac Chrisman, April 11, 1849. "News from Our Californians," *The Weekly Mississippian*, May 18, 1849.
[197] "Correspondence of the N.Y. Commercial Advertiser," *Buffalo Courier*, May 18, 1849.
[198] "From the Pacific," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 26, 1849.
[199] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1887), 188.
[200] "Miscellany," *The Brattleboro Eagle*, March 1, 1849.

cannibalism to survive the lack of food.[201] Again, newspapers across the country picked up the original story and ran it in their pages with all the gruesome details.

In Panama City, Jessie awaited a steamer to California—along with hundreds of others, mostly men who had heard the news of the gold discovery and sought to reach the gold fields. While waiting, Jessie began to read the horrible news of John's latest expedition. Letters from her father comforted her wildest imaginings until she received a letter from John, dated January 1849 and written from Kit Carson's home in Taos. The expedition had resulted in the deaths of ten men and had failed to meet its objective of identifying a possible railroad route to California. John spared Jessie very little as he described the circumstances in detail. He placed the blame on his guide, Old Bill Williams, complaining "[t]he error of our journey was committed in engaging this man" who, John felt, had never known or had forgotten all he had ever known about the region through which the expedition traveled. After weeks of exhaustive efforts to move through the snowy passages of the San Juan range, and a failed effort by a team sent to seek rescue, John himself traveled alone, finally arriving in Taos where he wrote Jessie "from the house of our good friend Carson" where that morning "a cup of chocolate was brought to me while yet in bed."[202] John recouped at Taos as a party was sent to rescue his men; even as the emaciated, tattered remains of his expedition party were reaching Taos, John prepared to travel on to California.[203]

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[201] "Frémont's Expedition--Dreadful Suffering," *The Evening Post*, March 27, 1849.
[202] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 67-81.
[203] Mary Lee Spence, *The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont: Travels from 1848 to 1854*, vol. III, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), xxiv-xxxi. John's letter to Jessie was the only full account he wrote of the expedition. Other members of his party wrote of their own experiences, which, combined with John's letter, gave historians a reasonably full account of what transpired. Among the many questions explored in the century and a half since the expedition, historians ask who was to blame for the disaster. "Was it Frémont? Or did Old Bill Williams . . . mislead the party as Frémont charged." Mary Lee Spence speculates that perhaps "both were to

The worry about John, the endless wait for a steamer, and the start of Panama's rainy season combined to cause Jessie to suffer what she later described as a "brain fever" and chest congestion. Senora Arcé suggested a local doctor, whose prescription of "bleeding, and hot water internally and externally" did not appeal to Jessie, perhaps recalling what bleeding had done to harm her mother's health in 1842. A younger American physician suggested "iced drinks, cooling applications to the head, currents of fresh air, and blisters," particularly a blister on her chest made of croton-oil. In an example of the chivalry of American men, Jessie described a young man who "had himself rowed out to an English man-of-war which lay in the bay, and found in their medicine-chest the croton-oil that was needed." To Jessie, "this was no small thing to do."[204] She found these attentions by men to a "damsel in distress" a mark of exceptional American manhood.

More American men came to Jessie's aid when, recovered somewhat from her ailments but still plagued by a persistent, racking cough, she was finally able to board the steamer *Panama* for San Francisco. The ship, built and operated by Aspinwall's Pacific Mail Steamship Company, reached Panama City in mid-May 1849, the first such vessel to reach the port in approximately two months. Jessie and her daughter Lily set sail on May 18—with nearly three hundred gold-seeking "forty-niners" on a ship meant to carry only eighty passengers.[205] Jessie,

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blame." For a fuller account of the fourth expedition, see William E. Brandon, *The Men and the Mountain: Frémont's Fourth Expedition* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975).

[204] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 83-85. A "blister" referred to a paste was spread upon the skin to raise a blister, thought to ease conditions beneath the skin. In Jessie's time, croton-oil was thought to reduce inflammation in the lungs and was widely advertised along with other oils and tinctures. It is now used as a chemical peel to reduce scars and other skin disfigurements. See Lawrence G. Kass and Kathryn S. Kass, "The Lost Art of Chemical Peeling: My Fifteen Year Experience with Croton Oil Peel," *Advances in Ophthalmology and Optometry* 2, no. 1 (August 2017): 391–407.

[205] John Haskell Kemble, "The Genesis of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company," 397, 402. Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 410. While Jessie estimated the number of passengers at 400, and Chaffin used that figure from her, Kemble noted that the entire number of passengers was 290.

with her lingering cough, suffered terribly in her cramped, airless stateroom. The men on the ship resolved to see to her health. She remembered the episode later in life:

> "They made me a room on the quarter-deck with the big flag doubled and thrown over the boom. Everybody contributed something to make me comfortable: one a folding iron camp-bedstead—some, guava jelly—some, tea—while one of my fellow-passengers gave me from his own private stores delicate nourishing things which brought back my strength."[206]

Although she noted often in her stories of this time that she was a woman traveling alone with a small child, Jessie was never really alone. At each step of her journey, a family connection or a kind stranger stepped in to assist her whenever she was discomfited. Decades later, she wrote about the American men she met during her travels:

> "I came upon proof upon proof of this manly kindness and care for women among our American men. To travel alone in Europe is impossible; even travelling with one's children and a maid you do not receive the respect or attention that you have if there is a gentleman in the party. But in our country it is exactly different. The need of attention or assistance draws out that instinctive sense of protection which seems to be innate in our people. To be in mourning, or look ill or sad, or to be encumbered with children, is a sure appeal to the exercise of this instinct."[207]

Other travelers in the United States during the nineteenth century also noticed the chivalric character of American men. Alexandra Gripenberg wrote that "[e]ven the purgatorial fires of matrimony" did not diminish the kindly attention and assistance men gave to women. On a voyage across the Atlantic from her native France, Marie Therese Blanc made note of the "respect shown by American men even to women with whom they were unacquainted." She described her encounter with an "ill-dressed man, who looked like a vagabond" yet still

[206] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 89.
[207] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 184-185.

exhibited that American gallant nature by helping her off a streetcar. Lepel Henry Griffin, "who found little to like in America," concluded "that nothing placed the country 'in a brighter or more honourable light, then the universal respect publicly paid to women by men of all degrees.'"[208] Jessie herself found that same American courtesy in the protective instinct of the captain of the *Crescent City* and the good-natured forty-niners who shared their delicacies with the wife of the "gallant Col. F."

Jessie's memories of her first crossing of the Isthmus remained strong, even into her old age. While she did not keep a journal of this first journey to California, she remarked that "[e]verything burned itself in its own image on my mind." She accounted for the strength of her memories by noting that she rehearsed what she would tell people back home even as she lay in her bed on the deck of the *Panama* and counted the days until she would reach John.[209] This tale of her first voyage to California later contributed, along with many other stories, to the narrative Jessie crafted in the 1880s and 1890s to position John and herself within the larger scope of California and U.S. history.

She would have to wait longer than she expected to be reunited with her husband. On June 4, 1849, the *Panama* steamed through San Francisco's "Golden Gate," the prophetic name of the entrance to the bay bestowed by John himself in his *Geographical Memoir* of the third expedition.[210] An excited Jessie looked for her husband in the throng of people on the dock but

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[208] Kenneth D. Rose, *Unspeakable Awfulness: America Through the Eyes of European Travelers, 1865-1900* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 156-157.
[209] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 95. Jessie wrote that "all settled [in my mind] as part of the endless talks I should have when, returned home, like Sindbad [sic], I should relate my voyages."
[210] John C. Frémont, "Geographical Memoirs Upon Upper California," in *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), 22-23. This 1856 reprint of the first two expedition reports was expanded to include the report ("Geographical Memoirs") from the third expedition and offers John's assessment of the San Francisco

found instead William Howard, a merchant in the city, who advised that John was expected any day.[211] Jessie gratefully accepted Howard's offer of housing, settling herself and Lily in a home previously occupied by William Leidesdorff, a successful businessman who, before his death in 1848, had been one of the early founders of San Francisco. After three months of travel, Jessie marveled at the "[f]ine carpets and fine furniture and a fine Broadwood piano," as well as the "no end of mirrors" and the French furniture in her bedroom. The only thing missing was a fire to ward off the cool, damp air that characterized San Francisco in all seasons.[212]

Other than the weather, the San Francisco Jessie found bore little resemblance to the sleepy village of Yerba Buena John had visited in 1846.[213] What Jessie described decades later as a "bleak and meagre frontispiece to our Book of Fate," the city featured "[a] few low houses, and many tents, such as they were." She observed that "[d]eserted ships of all sorts were swinging with the tide." Only a few "regularly built" houses appeared on the landscape, and Jessie attributed this to the fact that "there was no lumber there for building, and there were not even trees to be cut down; nor would any man have diverted his attention from the mines to go to house-building."[214] People at the time agreed. According to a Captain Forbes, whose description of the city was shared in the *New York Daily Herald*, the lure of the gold fields was

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bay and its surrounding country. In 1846, John named the entrance to the bay after Chrysopylae, the harbor at Byzantium, because of its commercial potential as an entrepot for trade with Asia. He never imagined that his English version of Chrysopylae, Golden Gate, would translate to "gate to the gold fields" by 1849.

[211] Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 410.

[212] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 99.

[213] According to Theodore Hittell, writing in 1885, the first American alcalde in Yerba Buena, Lieutenant Washington A. Bartlett, decided to rename the town after St. Francis when he became concerned that efforts by Mariano Vallejo of nearby Sonoma County might give the new city he was building on the Carquinez Straits the Saint's name and thereby hurt Yerba Buena's chance to become the dominant city in the region. Thus, on January 30, 1847, Bartlett issued an ordinance changing the town's name. See Theodore Henry Hittell, *History of California*, vol. 2, (Oakland: Pacific Press and Publishing Company, 1885), 597.

[214] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 97-98.

such that "there are at San Francisco upwards of fifty vessels, of different nations, deserted by their crews."[215] An anonymous letter writer also published in the *Herald* found the town to be "over-run with people of all nations, but a small part of whom are able to find shelter in a house or shed." He described the "beach and hills…covered with sailors, merchants, Spaniards…camped out in tents, with their goods lying about in the greatest profusion."[216] U.S. Consul at Mazatlán John Parrott reported that fifty women called San Francisco home at the time of his visit to the city in early 1849—of those, twenty were Americans. According to his report, "the arrival of a ship-load of female emigrants would be a cause of public rejoicing." Those emigrant women could expect to receive marriage proposals by simply disembarking, but they would also face a "want of vegetable food" leading to cases of scurvy in the quickly growing city.[217] Within this teeming throng of gold seekers, Jessie, with Lily at her side, awaited the arrival of John in the relative luxury of the Leidesdorff dwelling.

John arrived ten days after Jessie did, having stopped in Monterey where he had expected her ship to dock. Finally reunited, Jessie told him that "[t]he winds of San Francisco had renewed the trouble with [her] lungs." John wasted no time in arranging passage for the family to travel by steamer to Monterey where the weather might prove more healthful. Military governor Bennet Riley provided another possible reason for the change of location. Riley had arrived in California in April 1849, and soon realized that he could not effectively govern a region so large and in the midst of such flux. As Congress back in Washington debated the fate of the newly acquired territory ceded to the United States after the Mexican War, Riley heard the calls in San

[215] "The Golden News," *New York Daily Herald*, June 20, 1849.
[216] "Miscellaneous California Correspondence," *New York Daily Herald*, June 25, 1849.
[217] "Late from San Francisco," *Monmouth Democrat*, June 7, 1849.

Francisco for a civilian government. On June 3, 1849, just a day before Jessie's arrival, he called for the election of delegates to hold a convention to determine California's future. The convention would decide whether to write a state constitution or establish a territorial government. They could also begin the process of appointing local officials to bring order to the chaos than stalking the region as men from around the world surged toward the gold fields.[218] Monterey would serve as the location for California's first constitutional convention.[219]

John and Jessie had a vested interest in the future of California, having become landowners through a mishandled real estate deal with Thomas Larkin, U.S. Consul at Monterey. Back in 1846, John had stopped at Monterey to meet with Larkin, with whom he had been acquainted since John's earlier explorations in California. John left a draft for $3,000 with Larkin, asking the consul to purchase land for him, somewhere near the coast west of San Jose. Larkin instead used the money to purchase for John the Las Mariposas land grant as a favor to cash-poor former Mexican California governor Juan Bautista Alvarado.[220] Las Mariposas at the time of the purchase consisted of seventy square miles of land in the southern Sierra foothills, over one hundred miles from any coastline.[221] At first glance, the land looked uninviting and harsh with little to recommend it; but quickly its true colors arose from beneath its inhospitable exterior.

With the news of the gold discovery in the foothills not far north of his Las Mariposas holdings, John wondered whether gold might be found on his property. As he traveled from

[218] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 69.
[219] A second constitutional convention held in Sacramento in 1878-1879 added to the document drafted at Monterey to become the state's current constitution.
[220] Augusta Fink, *Monterey County: The Story of its Dramatic Past* (Fresno: Valley Publishers, 1972), 93.
[221] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 383.

Taos to California to meet Jessie in the spring of 1849, he met with a party of Sonorans also traveling to California. Experienced miners, the men sought to join the rush toward the gold fields in the Sierras. John offered to "grubstake twenty-eight of the Sonoran men" if they would attempt mining at Las Mariposas. As John was reunited with his wife in June of 1849, the Sonorans at Las Mariposas discovered and began mining gold on the Frémont property. After several months of placer mining, the Sonorans "washed out about a hundred pounds of gold per month."[222] John and Jessie Frémont stood on the verge of becoming wealthy beyond anything they ever dreamed.

As the Sonorans began to build the Frémont wealth at Las Mariposas, John and Jessie arrived in Monterey in June 1849. Jessie later described the city as offering "none of the stir and life here which made San Francisco so remarkable." Monterey "was quite a town, with many good houses. Their adobe walls looked like rough stone, while the red-tiled roofs gave color and picturesqueness."[223] John settled Jessie into part of an adobe dwelling, that of the wife of former Mexican California leader Jose Castro, then in exile in Mexico.[224] Young Modesta Castro quickly became Lily's favorite playmate.[225] The Castro home, in which Jessie and Lily occupied a few rooms, was a "fine old adobe built in the usual fashion, around three sides of a court." Jessie described the Frémonts' rooms as "very pretty, with their French and Chinese fittings." While she appreciated the fine appointments of the adobe, Jessie yearned for the fresh food that

[222] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 383, 405, 411.
[223] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 103, 106.
[224] In a case of "let bygones be bygones," it was Jose Castro who had surrendered the Mexican California forces to John during the Mexican War.
[225] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont*, ed. I.E. Martin (New York, NY: Frederick H. Hitchcock, 1912), 27

had nearly vanished into the eager stomachs of the forty-niners in San Francisco, Sacramento, and the mining camps of the Sierra Nevadas. She wrote about this later, remarking:

> "It was barely a year since the gold had been discovered, but in that time every eatable thing had been eaten off the face of the country, and nothing raised. I suppose there was not a fowl left in the northern part of the state, consequently not an egg; all the beef cattle left had been bought up….; there were no longer vaqueros or herdsmen, and flocks and herds had dispersed. There were no cows, consequently no milk. Housekeeping, deprived of milk, eggs, vegetables, and fresh meat, becomes a puzzle; canned meat, macaroni, rice, and ham become unendurable from repetition."[226]

Despite these shortcomings, Jessie fondly remembered her new life in California. Writing forty years later, Jessie recalled this first visit to what would become the "golden state" through the gauzy haze of nostalgia. The fact that the Frémonts did not choose to remain in the state but instead afterwards chose either Washington, D.C., or New York City as their home belies Jessie's gushing descriptions. Jessie's cosmopolitan views, influenced by her recent travels as well as by the education she received from her father, meant that Jessie was not then suited for a life on the frontier, as much as she later wanted to be remembered for her adventures as a forty-niner.

Certainly, though, there was much for Jessie to enjoy in California. Having a coach built especially for her and shipped around Cape Horn to San Francisco, she and John, with Lily in tow, spent the summer of 1849 traveling the region between Monterey, San Jose, and San Francisco. Jessie wrote that the family stopped "at different ranchos and farms to see and be seen by the people who wished Mr. Frémont to bring me to them. We would turn out of our way to accept the invitation of some of the old Californians to visit them at their ranches." Charmed

[226] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel,* 104.

by her hosts, their neat houses, picturesque attire, and gracious hospitality, Jessie observed that "[b]efore we brought taxes and litigation upon them, the Californians were a wholesome and cheerful people, going about their pleasures not sadly but…making a joyful noise."[227] The appreciation for other cultures that she had first experienced as a girl in St. Louis and then in Panama City widened to include the uniquely Californian culture of the region's Mexican inhabitants.

Spending the summer traveling, camping in the fresh air, and visiting, by September of 1849 Jessie settled in Monterey just as politics became the liveliest topic in the city. Military governor Riley's call for the election of delegates to a constitutional convention having proven successful, men began to arrive in Monterey from around the state. Two of the delegates, the former U.S. consul Thomas Larkin and future general Henry Halleck, then serving as the military government's secretary of state, prepared the second story of Colton Hall. On September 3, enough delegates had arrived to form a quorum, and the convention was gaveled to order.[228] Eventually in attendance were forty-eight elected delegates, including some of the most prominent names in California at the time, such as John Sutter from Sacramento, Mariano Vallejo from Sonoma, Abel Stearns from Los Angeles, and William Hartnell of Monterey, who served as interpreter for those who did not speak English and who would eventually translate the constitution into Spanish.[229]

After having selected as chairman Robert "Long Bob" Semple, formerly a participant in the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846 and now a printer in Monterey, the convention's first order of

[227] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 121, 131-132.
[228] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 72
[229] Augusta Fink, *Monterey County,* 115.

business was to determine what kind of government they wished to adopt, a state or a territory. Persuaded by William Gwin, a former slaveholder from Mississippi with ambitions of becoming a U.S. senator, the delegates decided to draft a state constitution.[230] Later decisions on whether to split the state in two, where to draw the state boundaries, and what restrictions should be put on immigration proved much more contested, although the issue of slavery was resolved with little debate.

Under Mexican law, slavery had been prohibited in California since 1829. With the start of the Gold Rush, southern slaveowners had, like men from all parts of the world, traveled to the gold fields in search of riches. Men like William Gwin, after touring the mines in the summer of 1849, realized that slave labor could be an efficient means of producing gold. Yet, Gwin also learned that the miners furiously objected to the introduction of enslaved people in their midst, fearing the unfair competition from the wealthy slaveholders and their unpaid labor force. As he would write a year after having settled the matter at the convention: "It is from the very fact that labor is respectable that we wish to keep it so by excluding slavery from our state." Gwin himself seconded the motion to include the language: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in the State."[231] The motion passed unanimously.

Just what role the Frémonts played in the drafting of the constitution remains murky, although Jessie later described both herself and John as major players in the matter. John did not serve as a delegate, although his status as the hero of the Conquest of California and the belief

[230] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 37-38, 72.
[231] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War,* 72-73.

that he adopted anti-slavery views gave him an important voice in discussions outside Colton Hall.[232] Jessie wrote that it was her "good fortune to be of service, and come in aid to the serious work being done by men opposed to slavery." She performed this service via a traditional woman's role—that of a hostess. As she put it years later, "my pretty rooms were the headquarters of the antislavery party, and myself the example of happiness and hospitality without servants." A bit disingenuous in this statement, Jessie had two servants, former mission Indians who had been hired by John during the summer of 1849 as well as an Englishwoman hired in Monterey. In addition, the issue of slavery did not create serious conflict during the constitutional convention, so Jessie's contribution would have put her simply in line with the actual convention delegates. Writing with the benefit of hindsight in the 1880s and 1890s, Jessie continually sought to put both herself and John, as well as her father, on the right side of history when it came to slavery.[233] Only when he eventually ran for president in 1856 would John C. Frémont establish his credentials as an opponent of slavery.

California did have one honor to bestow upon John C. Frémont, and that was the office of the first United States senator from the state. Also seeking one of the two senate appointments, Thomas Butler King, a wealthy Southern slaveholder from Georgia, had arrived in California in early June, on board the *Panama* along with Jessie and the third contestant seeking a senate seat, William Gwin. Both King and Gwin actively campaigned during 1849, traveling to the mining

[232] Tom Chaffin to Lorraine Dias Herbon, "Delegates of the California Constitution Convention 1849," February 19, 2021. In his *Pathfinder*, Tom Chaffin notes that John's views of slavery were informed by those of his early mentor, Joel Poinsett, who had a "dim view of slavery." Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 26.
[233] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 144-145. Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events During the Life of Major General John C. Frémont, United States Army, F.R.G.S. Chevalier de l'Ordre Pour Le Merite; etc., and of Jessie Benton Frémont," n.p., Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 121-122.

camps to seek support from the men they expected to be elected to California's first legislature.[234] Neither man, though, could compete with John C. Frémont, who did not campaign in the mining districts. According to historian Leonard Richards, "[h]e didn't have to. No one could match his status as a western hero." One supporter of King questioned John's abilities, asking, "Who that has any interest in California would like to see it represented in the Senate by Col. Benton & Mrs. Frémont?"[235] Rumors of Jessie's status as an *éminence grise* behind her husband had spread. Nevertheless, John won his senate seat on the first ballot, receiving seventy percent of the vote and leaving the other two men to split the remaining thirty percent. Eventually Gwin received enough votes to win the second seat from the would-be state of California.[236] On January 1, 1850, John, Jessie, and Lily boarded a steamer for the trip back across the Isthmus to the United States proper.[237]

Before the Frémonts left for their crossing, the debate over what to do with California's request for statehood began in Congress. Members of the Thirty-first Congress wrangled over what to do with the lands acquired through the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo which had ended the Mexican War. Men like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun, all now aged and facing their final years, led endless hours of debate, focused primarily on the future of the slaveholding system and how it would be applied in the new states and territories accrued from the Mexican cession. Thomas Hart Benton did not engage in the debate until April 1850, at which point John and Jessie had reached Washington. Rejecting attempts by Clay and others to

[234] Until 1913 and the ratification of the 17th Amendment, U.S. senators were chosen by a vote of the state legislature.
[235] Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions,* Vol. III, xxxv.
[236] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 69, 92-93.
[237] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 159.

resolve everything through one omnibus piece of legislation, Benton did not want to delay California's admission as a state by entangling it with the issues surrounding slavery also being discussed.[238] Benton and others who felt likewise got their way when Illinois senator Stephen Douglas pushed through a series of separate measures that resulted in, among other things, the admission of California as a state on September 9, 1850.[239] While the Compromise of 1850 cooled debate temporarily, the troubles over slavery continued to intensify. The matter would, according to Jessie, result in a very short senate tenure for John.

John, Jessie, and Lily arrived in New York City on March 10, 1850, all three having been severely ill during the crossing of Panama. Recovering at the Irving House for two days before traveling to Washington, DC., Jessie later recorded that "we looked as though we had been taken off a wreck, so thin and haggard were we, and in such odd dress."[240] The family settled into the Benton home on C Street in the nation's capital. Jessie wrote with some sentiment years later, "As in the old ballads, I 'Had been gone but a year and a day,' when I was again back in my father's house."[241] Time in the bosom of her family came to be far shorter than expected.

Jessie had less than a year in Washington, and she later blamed the "Slavery party" for the months between March and September that she and John spent waiting for California's admission to the union.[242] Yet Jessie enjoyed her time as a prospective senator's wife. General Zachary Taylor, one of the heroes of the Mexican War, had been elected president in 1848. His

[238] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 358.
[239] For a more detailed examination of the Compromise of 1850, Holman Hamilton's *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), while originally published in 1964, still stands as an enlightening look at the political machinations involved in reaching the final settlements.
[240] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 189. "Untitled," *The Daily Republic*, March 11, 1850.
[241] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 190.
[242] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 138.

wife declined to play the traditional role of White House hostess, so the duty fell to his daughter, Betty Taylor Bliss. Finding Mrs. Bliss an enchanting mistress of the presidential home, Jessie contrasted the daughter of President Taylor with the wife of former President Polk. While Mrs. Polk kept matters "formal and serious," Mrs. Bliss, "young and attractive had the same symplicity [sic] of character [as her father] polished to smoothness and courtesy, and society took kindly to the young mistress of the White House." As for Taylor's unexpected death on July 9, 1850, and the succession to the presidency by his vice president, Millard Fillmore, Jessie later wrote about its effect on California by observing that "General Taylor would have respected the will of the new State as regarded slavery, but Mr. Fillmore was of that Northern contingent on whom the South rely in doubtful issues."[243] For Jessie, looking back over several decades, slavery's interests delayed the admission of the new free state and kept John from realizing his true potential as a senator. As with much of her later writing on the topic of slavery, this view was informed by events that happened later, when the decision of history had been made, and to be either pro-slavery or even non-committal on the topic did not put John on the winning side. At the time, neither she nor John spent much time advocating one side or the other, preferring to focus on John's immediate career and issues such as mining rights and California infrastructure.

On September 10, both John and William Gwin were sworn in as senators. They drew lots to determine who would have the term set to end on March 4, 1851, and who would have the term ending March 4, 1855. John drew the shorter term, leaving him with little time to advocate for his state, although he did work on behalf of issues concerning matters specific to California, including gold-mining, a transcontinental wagon road, and the creation of public universities.

[243] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 152-153.

Both he and his father-in-law, Thomas Benton, took the side of the Free Soil movement in the ongoing clashes between pro- and anti-slavery forces, with John voting in favor of banning the slave trade in the District of Columbia (approved September 20, 1850) and against harsh penalties for those who aided runaway slaves (approved September 18, 1850).[244] It would cost each of them their position in the U.S. Senate.

Writing on January 15, 1851, Salmon P. Chase, senator from Ohio, predicted the outcomes for Jessie's father and her husband, explaining in a letter to Edward S. Hamlin, former congressman from Ohio, "Frémont is to be defeated, however, if possible, on account of his opposition to slavery, and the probability is that his defeat will be achieved." As to Benton, Chase reported that he "accidentally heard today one slaveholding democrat expressing to another, who was supposed to have much influence with the Missouri members, a strong wish that they would vote for the Whig candidate, if sound on the slavery question."[245]

Chase proved himself an apt prognosticator. In January 1851, Benton on behalf of the Democrats was defeated by proslavery Whig Henry S. Geyer in his bid for reelection as senator from Missouri.[246] In February, John, who with Jessie and Lily had returned to San Francisco for California's senatorial election, failed to acquire enough votes in the California legislature to win reelection. After 142 ballots, no one candidate succeeded in winning a majority of votes, and the

[244] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 418. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 115.
[245] Salmon P. Chase to E.S. Hamlin, January 15, 1851, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1902, Vol. II, Sixth Report of the Historical Manuscripts Commission: with Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 228-229.
[246] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 375

state decided to hold off on electing anybody, leaving California with one presence in the senate in the person of proslavery advocate William Gwin.[247]

The Frémonts stayed on in San Francisco, and John began to travel the state on business for Las Mariposas and his other real estate and financial ventures. To Jessie's dismay, the city she left not a year before had changed. While she had felt safe traveling between San Francisco, San Jose, and Monterey in 1849, the more recent group of migrants to California did not appear the same to her. As she later wrote, "The older countries saw in California the outlet for their dangerous classes, and an old country has the advantage over us in its criminals. It takes time to mature the thorough brutalization of what was intended as a human being." Among these "older countries," Jessie singled out France and Australia specifically for sending "such a class [that] had now begun to poison the growth of San Francisco." [248]

Even as things deteriorated outside the Frémont home on Stockton Street, events became pleasant inside. On April 19, 1851, Jessie gave birth to the couple's third child, a healthy baby boy named John Charles Frémont after his father and called "Charley." Their joy in their son became tempered when, just a few weeks after Charley's arrival, a fire swept San Francisco. According to Jessie, the "planked streets were conductors of fire, the sea winds carried it overhead, and on and on through the long night it raged and roared." While the household was

[247] "California State Assembly Journals 1851 Session: Journal of the Senate, Regular Session, Jan. 6, 1851 – May 1, 1851" (State Printer, State of California, 1851), https://clerk.assembly.ca.gov/content/california-state-assembly-journals-1851-session. While California had rejected slavery in its state constitution, proslavery advocates remained in the state—and in the legislature.

[248] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 155-156. The leading men of San Francisco, in response to the disorder and crime threatening the "lives and property of citizens," formed a Committee of Vigilance in June 1851. "Organization of the Vigilance Committee," *Daily Alta California*, June 13, 1851.

packed and ready to evacuate, the Frémont home was spared.[249] Within eleven days of the first fire, a second exploded across the areas of the city not already burnt. Jessie blamed the criminal element, imagining them as saying "and while you [vigilantes] are persecuting our people we will make your wives and families suffer for your acts." This time John was visiting Las Mariposas, leaving Jessie alone with eight-year-old Lily and newborn Charley. As the fire reached the Frémont home, Jessie and the children, with the help of both strangers and neighbors, fled to the residence of a South Carolina woman whose house was unthreatened by the fire. In the meantime, tenants living in cottages on land in the city owned by John came to Jessie's rescue, pulling "mirrors, china and glass, several hundred books, furniture, even kitchen utensils, and all our clothing" from the burning house.[250] Once again, Jessie relied on the kindness of strangers at a time when she was without her husband.

As his wife regrouped after the fires, John remained away from San Francisco for long periods, traveling as far as Los Angeles in his efforts to find funding sufficient to maximize the gold-mining potential of Las Mariposas. Business affairs became tangled, with John entering into short-term lease agreements on small sections of the estate as well as engaging in other speculative ventures. He decided that he and Jessie needed a respite from their struggles. A European vacation would serve as a much-needed break from the events of 1851 as well as offering an opportunity to raise capital for Las Mariposas.[251]

The Frémonts again traveled across the Isthmus, boarding the steamer *Africa* in New York City for the voyage across the Atlantic. Not long after arriving in Liverpool on March 22,

[249] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 155-156.
[250] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 157-160.
[251] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 421.

1852, Jessie received word that her only brother, Randolph, had died on March 17 at just twenty years old.[252] Jessie barely mentioned her brother's passing in her memoir. She did remark that she had taken time often to write her father long happy letters from England, offering him a chance to come along on her adventure if only vicariously. She reflected that it was a "sad revulsion to find my gay letters had been arriving in the house of mourning . . . [s]uffering and death had been with them and such letters must have made me seem aloof from their sorrow." In the end, though, Thomas Benton "assured me they were most welcome, and gave him real pleasure at all times."[253] Other than commenting that her brother perished due to drinking "iced water" and was a "thorough German scholar," Jessie did not record her own feelings about her brother's death.[254]

The Frémonts took rooms at London's Clarendon hotel and quickly embarked on both social and business endeavors. John's quest for capital to improve Las Mariposas hit a snag when his London agent, David Hoffman, learned of an agreement by Thomas Hart Benton, with John's power of attorney, to sell the entire land grant. Confusion reigned when promises of leases on smaller parts of the land clashed with the proposed sale of the whole. Eventually John repudiated his father-in-law's contract for sale, although he had noted to Hoffman as early as October 1851 that he was "certainly disposed to rid myself of the trouble of managing the property."[255] John's decision led to a certain coolness between him and his father-in-law, one

[252] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 389.
[253] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 169-170.
[254] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 71.
[255] Power of Attorney recorded in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, District of Columbia, 22 Jan. 1852, summarized in Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, 265. This document gave Benton authorization to "bargain, sell, and convey or to lease all or a portion of the Mariposa grant." Benton arranged a sale of the entirety of Las Mariposas to one Thomas Sargent. On January 29, 1852, arrangements for the sale were documented, with a clause that permitted John to "renounce and annul the whole contract." See Philip R. Fendall to John C. Frémont, February

that would only deepen as time went by. Word got around London about the confusion over ownership and leasing rights, but business entanglements did not stop John and Jessie from joining the social scene in the city.

During those first few weeks in London, Jessie used family connections and the Frémont name to enter London society at the highest levels. At a party given by the Duke of Northumberland, she met an aging Duke of Wellington. Only months prior to the great man's death, Jessie described him as "failing." Upon the introduction and once he had a moment to gather his thoughts, he told Jessie "I know that name" and shook her hand. While propriety dictated that she not express her feelings over the meeting to the Duke himself, that night she wrote to her father because "he would care most to know that the hand that had proved the hand of fate to Napoleon had touched mine."[256]

An even greater meeting for Jessie took place on April 1, 1852, when she was presented to Queen Victoria. For the event, Jessie dressed in a "petticoat of palest pink satin, with its tremendously long train of the same shade of moire," trimmed with blonde lace and decorated lavishly with "roses in all shades from red to white, as lovely and nearly as natural as those in my bouquet." She admired the 32-year-old Victoria (who was only five years older than Jessie), later describing the queen by observing "there is no beautifier like happiness and the Queen was

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28, 1852, in Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, 331-332. John posted a notice repudiating the sale in April 1852. "Mariposas Estate," *The Morning Chronicle*, April 14, 1852. For John's comments on selling the whole of the estate, see John C. Frémont to David Hoffman, October 1, 1851, in Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, 267. Another reason for concern arose from the fact that John's ownership stemmed from an original Mexican land grant which was disputed. Claims and counter-claims filled commissions and courthouses until John was finally granted the letters patent personally by President Franklin Pierce in 1856. Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, lxiii.

[256] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: A Queen's 'Drawing Room,'" *Wide Awake Magazine*, November 1885, 16.

seeing her best days; her marriage was exceptionally happy and her children were in the sweet baby-time; she had become accustomed to the cares of governing, and England was at peace."[257]

Despite Jessie's social success and the gold being washed out of Las Mariposas, other financial troubles hung over the Frémonts, resulting in John's arrest on April 7, 1852. During his tenure as military governor of California, John had issued U.S. Government vouchers in payment for services and goods. Those debts, being unresolved by Congress and never paid, eventually passed into the hands of British creditors, who had John arrested as he and Jessie were arriving at a dinner. John spent the night in a jail on Chancery Lane, and Jessie sprang into action.

Ever her husband's devoted protector, Jessie immediately sought to borrow money to post his bail.[258] She approached the Las Mariposas leasing agent in London, David Hoffman, arriving at his home at 9:00 p.m. with Gwin H. Heap, another leasing agent for Las Mariposas who had been involved in the attempted sale of the estate by Thomas Benton. According to Hoffman's account, Heap did not say a word; Jessie did all the talking. She first demanded "[d]o you know me?" before relating the news of John's arrest. She told him that she wanted "no words," having no time for that but instead wanted "£4000 and must have it." After protestations from Hoffman that he did not have that much money, a frustrated Jessie prepared to leave. She gave a parting shot to Hoffman, telling him, "You are a great rascal—my father says so." She

[257] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: A Queen's 'Drawing Room," 18.

[258] While the Frémonts spent money lavishly in Europe, the tangled finances of Las Mariposas had not, in fact, made them as rich as they believed themselves to be. According to Allen Nevins, who wrote the first lengthy biography of John, Las Mariposas "proved to be a perfect Pandora's box of complications." Problems with the title, land-jumpers, and a lack of the ready capital to engage in quartz mining once the placer mining deposits had been washed out left the estate producing far less than it might have. See Allen Nevins, Frémont: *Pathmarker of the West* (Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 394. The mountain of debt upon which John built the family's apparent wealth would come crashing down in the volatile years after the Civil War. Mary Lee Spence concluded that, "[e]ven with substantial holdings, Frémont was never wealthy; he often borrowed money and was often sued for debt." See Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, lxxiv.

went on, saying "[y]ou talk too much and write too much. You cannot talk little," blaming Hoffman for the rumors that had spread through London concerning the leases and title to Las Mariposas.[259]

In the end, although Hoffman attempted to help, American investment banker George Peabody paid the bail.[260] So desperate had John begun to feel about his finances that he implored his father-in-law to seek for him an appointment as *chargé* to any nearby European country "to protect me from further arrests & to help pay expenses."[261] Feeling *persona non grata* in England, John and Jessie, with Lily and Charley, decamped to Paris.

In the last decade of her life, Jessie did not write about John's arrest in either her unpublished memoir or in the manuscript "Great Events" that she and one of her sons wrote after John's death. Instead, inexplicably, she blamed the news of her brother's death for the Frémonts' move to Paris, noting in her memoir that she suffered eye strain from writing to her father. In "Great Events," she explained that she suffered a fever because her happy letters were reaching a Benton house in mourning over the loss of Randolph Benton.[262] The idea that her husband was chased by creditors did not fit the narrative that Jessie strove to create for her John after his death.

Safe in France from British creditors, Jessie later referred to her time in Paris as having offered "the ideal repose and charm of living we had dreamed of."[263] The family rented a small *hôtel* on the Champs-Élysées. Jessie and the children remained in the city for fourteen months,

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[259] David Hoffman to John C. Frémont, April 29, 1852, in Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, 354-359.
[260] Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions,* Vol. III, li.
[261] John C. Frémont to Thomas Hart Benton, April 13, 1852 in Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, 351.
[262] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 71, and Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 170.
[263] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 170.

while John traveled back and forth to London for both business and social pursuits.[264] Jessie used family connections to find her footing in Paris society. She later wrote that Mrs. Rives, wife of the American Minister to France William Cabell Rives, "came to see me and claim me as a Virginian and old friends with my mother." Remarking that "[w]ith the long voyage[,] the diplomatic corps was at that time more of a fixture, and I was sincerely welcomed into the family life of various old *faubourg* French families."[265] Through contacts like these, Jessie witnessed events that later became important milestones of French history.

From her balcony on the Champs-Élysées, Jessie watched with both delight and concern as Emperor Napoleon III entered Paris for the first time since abandoning his title of Prince-President and abolishing France's Assembly. While she described it as "one of the splendid pageants which make the illustrations of history," Jessie also "felt the undercurrent of opposition and danger" that stemmed from the crowd of Parisians disgruntled over the change from a republic to an empire.[266] At another event, a "military fete," Jessie also experienced dread of the Paris mob as she and John drove from Les Invalides in a British-made carriage. She later wrote that "my bonnet and bouquet were of violets; to them this Boneparte [sic] emblem meant that we were not of the hated conquerors of Waterloo, and . . . the violet was badge of 'fraternity.'"[267] Although Jessie noted that the Frémonts also received an invitation to the wedding of the

[264] The popularity of the expedition report and the news coverage of John's expeditions captured international attention and resulted in John's being feted in London and across the continent. For example, in October of 1850, John received from Alexander von Humboldt a gold medal ordered by Prussian King Frederic William IV in recognition of John's "courage in distant expeditions," his bravery when faced with "all the dangers of cold and famine," and his services to "all the branches of the natural sciences." Alexander von Humboldt to John C. Frémont, October 7, 1850, in Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol III, 205.
[265] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 76. According to Jessie, the difficulties of travel meant that there were fewer reassignments of members of the diplomatic corps, and many career officials spent several years in their foreign posts.
[266] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 172.
[267] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 'French traits – A Political bouquet.'

emperor in January 1853, she never again "risked myself in a crowd."[268] Perhaps she had another reason to refuse the invitation.

On February 1, 1853, just ten days after the emperor's wedding, Jessie gave birth to her fourth child, a daughter that she and John named Anne Beverley after his mother. For a few weeks, the focus of both Frémonts remained on their new daughter. Jessie later wrote that the time spent in Europe was "a year of absolute rest; the only prolonged interval of intentional rest and enjoyment that ever came into that life of continuous purposeful work." [269] But events in Washington soon called them home.

On March 3, 1853, Congress passed legislation that authorized Secretary of War Jefferson Davis "to employ such portion of the corps of topographical engineers . . . to make such explorations and surveys as he may deem advisable, to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean." Congress left it to Davis to determine just how many possible routes might be explored.[270] Thomas Hart Benton, ever eager to promote the interests of himself, his son-in-law, and the state of Missouri, quickly wrote to John in Paris, urging him to return to the U.S. to seek appointment to lead a survey of the region between the 38th and 39th parallels.[271] As he waited for John to return, Benton also approached Davis to press the case for John. His pleas went unheeded by Davis.[272] Jessie recalled that it "was intended by Congress, but unluckily not specified, that Mr. Frémont should

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[268] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Souvenirs of My Time: Paris," *Wide Awake Magazine*, July 1886, 96.
[269] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 165.
[270] George Minot, ed., *The Statues at Large of the United States of America from December 1, 1851, to March 3, 1855*, vol. X (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1855), 219
[271] Thomas Hart Benton, after losing his place in the Senate, won election to the House of Representatives in August 1852 and took his place in Congress in December. See William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 387.
[272] Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, lii-liii.

have his choice. But Mr. Davis ignored him completely and appointed to the central route a young officer entirely without knowledge of Indian warfare, a Mr. Gunnison, who was promptly killed by Indians."[273]

While Jessie remained in Paris with the children, John completed both business and legal matters in London, securing release from his bail. Rather than return to Jessie to travel back to the United States as a family, he sailed from Liverpool, leaving Jessie, the children, and John's niece Nina to travel on board the *Arago* from Le Havre. How she might have felt about this privately is unknown, but Jessie wrote decades later that it all seemed perfectly reasonable to her, even as she acknowledged that not everyone saw it that way. In her memoir, she recalled one particular "evil tongue" who said, "'So you have become too French even to cross on the same steamer.'" Jessie did not record how she responded to the woman, but she later wrote that "[t]hen, and since I put it down to innate depravity, and let it go as that."[274] Jessie did not travel alone with the children, bringing with her two French servants and again enjoying the privileges of being a well-to-do White woman.

Renting a house in Washington only a few doors down from her father's on C Street, Jessie noticed several changes in the Benton family. She found her mother "sadly altered by my

[273] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 79. Jessie, though acerbic in her assessment, correctly noted that Davis appointed J. W. Gunnison of the Corps of Topographical Engineers to survey a possible railroad route across the Rockies. See Jefferson Davis, "Secretary of War Jefferson Davis' Instructions to the Survey Parties Conducting the 1853 Explorations and Surveys for a Railroad Route to the Pacific," 1853, http://cprr.org/ Museum /PacRRSurvey_ Secty_War_1853.html#Report. Gunnison and several members of the expedition, including two men who had served John on earlier expeditions, Richard Kern and Frederic Creutzfeldt, were killed by Ute warriors. See Frederick W. Bachmann and William Swilling Wallace, eds., *The Land Between: Dr. James Schiel's Account of the Gunnison-Beckwith Expedition into the West, 1853-1854* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1957), 104.
[274] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 76.

brother's death" and her father "looking far from well." Looking back, she reflected that it "was to be a year of changes for us—coming like blows from Fate itself."[275]

The first blow fell during the summer of 1853. Little Anne Beverley had been unwell, and Jessie accepted an offer from her friend Elizabeth Blair Lee to visit the Blair estate in Silver Spring, Maryland, to escape the heat of summer Washington. Ties between the Blairs and the Bentons stretched back for decades, and Lizzie and two of her brothers, Montgomery and Frank, were long-time correspondents with Jessie, exchanging dozens of letters over the course of their friendships.[276] In spite of the Blairs' hospitality and the cooler air of Silver Spring, Anne Beverely passed away on July 11. Thirty years later, Jessie recalled Lizzie's support during this tragic time, writing "you watched with me until the morning came and my little Annie ceased to feel pain. I never never [sic] forget that time and your pitying care for her."[277] As would later happen to many of Jessie's relationships, disagreement over John C. Frémont came to bear on the close connection between Jessie and Lizzie and, indeed, between both Frémonts and the entire Blair family.

Such grief as Jessie's over her daughter's death was not uncommon in the antebellum period, where nearly one in every four babies perished before its first birthday.[278] While she had blamed General Kearney for the loss of her son, Benton, the loss of Anne Beverley offered no such scapegoat. Jessie wrote nothing of her loss in her memoir, leaving her letter to Lizzie Lee

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[275] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 76.
[276] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 422. According to Mary Lee Spence, Jessie "considered Silver Spring a second home and was a frequent correspondent of "Father" Blair. Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, xxxviii.
[277] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, July 29, 1883, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, eds., *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 497-198.
[278] Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes Toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800-1860* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 157.

as the only glimpse into her feelings at the time, though mitigated by the decades between. With a poignancy that underscored the tumultuous nature of her life when she composed the 1883 letter to Lizzie, Jessie observed that she "knew it, dimly, then—I know it surely now that for the death of a baby girl there should be no sorrow for life is hard on women but when one is still young it is hard to give up a baby."[279]

As Jessie grieved, John began to prepare for another expedition. While the Gunnison expedition had crossed the San Juan range, it had done so in summer. John "believed…the San Juans must be crossed when snow covered them." Also, he and his father-in-law wondered whether Gunnison and his team would make an accurate accounting of a possible route. Both men believed Jefferson Davis, slaveholder and plantation master, favored a more southerly route—which Jessie identified as "in the interest of the cotton growing regions."[280] John decided to travel along the 38th parallel that both he and Benton had long believed to be the most practical course for a railroad. In the fall of 1853, without government funding but perhaps with money from his father-in-law, John again set out to cross the Rockies in the winter.[281] This expedition, like the fourth one, largely failed to achieve its objective. John was no longer a Pathfinder. Approximately two-thirds of the miles traveled on the fifth expedition covered the route taken by Gunnison or were across regions already explored by John.[282] With meager results from this final expedition, John's career as a western explorer unceremoniously ended.

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[279] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, July 29, 1883, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 497-198

[280] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 424-425. Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 179.

[281] Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, liii. It remains unclear how John financed this fifth expedition. While it is possible that Benton contributed some funding, observers at the time "noted a coolness between him and the explorer." Historian Mary Spence speculates that this new distance between the two arose from the repudiation of Benton's sale of Las Mariposas.

[282] Mary Lee Spence, *Expeditions*, Vol. III, lxxiv.

While John was gone, Jessie, still not thirty years old, turned her attention to her aging parents. As her mother became ever more fragile and her father fretted over his wife's failing health, Jessie brought her "San Francisco baby," two- year-old Charley, to add some joy to the Benton home on C Street. Elizabeth Benton enjoyed her young grandson, and Jessie recorded later how the precocious little boy attempted to care for his ailing grandmother. Jessie's "other sisters were at home, but my mother seemed to prefer coming to my house which was very near, and where was bright young life."[283] When Jessie's care of her mother gave Thomas Hart Benton a respite in September 1854, he traveled to a mountain resort offering sulphur baths to try "to ease the headaches which sorely distressed him."[284] While he was gone, Elizabeth McDowell Benton died on September 10 in the familiar home on C Street, just months before her sixtieth birthday.[285] John's words of comfort to his wife upon the loss of her mother reflected "how thankful he was that [Jessie] had been spared the pain he always felt, that he had not been with his mother at the last." Jessie found this "reassuring."[286]

Unfortunately, the death of his wife was not the last tragic loss experienced by Thomas Hart Benton. In 1851, after his defeat for reelection to the Senate, Benton had begun writing his memoir. Published in 1854, *Thirty Years' View* offered 739 pages (roughly 665,000 words) on Benton's political career. According to Benton biographer William Nisbett Chambers, the work "was fulsomely quoted—often against its author-legislator" by members of Congress. He began

[283] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 77.
[284] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 78.
[285] Nathan Lewis Rice and Thomas Hart Benton, *A Funeral Discourse, of Mrs. Elizabeth Benton: Wife of the Hon. Thos. H. Benton* (St. Louis: Keith, Woods, 1855).
[286] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 191.

a second volume in 1853 before the first was actually published.[287] The pages of that second volume sat in Benton's study on February 27, 1855, when a fire engulfed the C Street home.

Jessie recalled the event in her memoir. She noted that both houses of Congress adjourned when the news reached them, and friends and neighbors stood by helplessly as the house burned. Her older sister Eliza, described by Jessie as "a constitutionally timid woman, but also constitutionally thoughtful for others," was visiting her father at the time with her children. Eliza ensured that everyone left the house, turned off the gas-meter, then attempted to rescue the pages of volume two of *Thirty Years' View*.[288] According to Jessie, the "smoke [Eliza] inhaled overcame her, but as she fell she was dragged out to an outer room by a young Irish groom." It was too late.[289] The house, with nearly all its contents, was gone.

Six months' pregnant at the time, Jessie took her sister, the children, and her father into her home just down the block. Suffering a "shock" that was "terrible to me," she was alone in her bedroom when President Franklin Pierce arrived. Describing the chief executive as "speechless with emotion," Jessie wrote that Pierce "embraced my father, and then me, calling me Jessie as he had done in my child days." Pierce offered his political rival, Benton, who "was unstinted in his contempt for Pierce's political character," rooms in the White House for as long as he needed them. Benton stayed with Jessie instead, accepting the loss and telling her, "It all makes the less to leave."[290]

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[287] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 393-394, 398.
[288] Eliza was unable to rescue this draft of the second volume of *Thirty Years' View*. Thomas Hart Benton rewrote the volume and saw it published in 1856. Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 414-415.
[289] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 90-92.
[290] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 90-92.

On May 17, 1855, less than three months after the fire, Jessie gave birth to her final child, a son named Francis Preston after her father's great friend, Preston Blair, the father of Lizzie, Montgomery, and Frank Blair, and godfather to the new baby.[291] Yet the pleasure at having a baby to tend did not keep Jessie from feeling the press of sectional division steadily tearing the country apart. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 had done nothing to squelch the fever gripping the nation over the issue of slavery, and Jessie recalled that the disturbing news "invaded even my guarded room." Feeling the "ground swell," Jessie felt she "was no longer in my place—and it was certainly too hard on Mr. Frémont, and so as soon as I could be moved, New York became our city of Refuge."[292] Both Jessie and John, with their southern breeding and perceived anti-slavery sentiments, no longer found Washington, D.C., to be a suitable home, despite or perhaps because of the nearness to family and friends. Slaveholding relatives criticized the Frémonts for John's votes as senator against harsher punishment for people offering aide to runaways and in favor of banning slave trading in the District of Columbia. As in other families across the United States, the slavery issue had begun to cause ruptures between even the most loving of kin.

Jessie sought comfort during these years of loss and uncertainty in letters to and from the Blair family. She delighted in her children. To Lizzie Lee, she wrote that "little Lily has been womanly for four months past," but Jessie was not "uneasy," remembering that she "was even younger." In another letter, written after the birth of young Francis Preston, called Frank, Jessie shared the news that the "baby can see & laugh. He examined one wall yesterday & gave a pretty bright smile." As for Charley, Jessie wrote that Lizzie's husband, naval officer Samuel

[291] Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 73, fn 6.
[292] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 92.

Phillips Lee, would feel "new ties" with his godson "if he were up to see how [Charley] has adopted the style of [Siasconset] which is made up of old sailors and whaling captains."[293] Jessie's embrace of motherhood, with its emphasis on the traditional gender values of the nineteenth century, would soon stand her in good stead when politicians came knocking in 1855.

During the six years since she boarded the *Crescent City* to journey to California, Jessie had experienced exuberant pleasures, including meeting Queen Victoria, soaking up the pleasures of Paris, and giving birth to three more children. At the same time, John's arrest, the death of her little daughter, the death of her mother, and the destruction of the Benton home had been devastating. The Jessie of 1855 was a far cry from the young mother who had been a "forty-niner" and pleased when people recognized her name. Travel had boosted her self-confidence, and she reveled in the chivalric nature of American men. Europe had broadened the cosmopolitan world view fostered since her days of being educated by her father. Grief had matured her, and her love for and joy in her children lent her a traditional womanly air, although she retained her dogged insistence that a wife's role included stepping in to fight for John when she felt it warranted. These qualities shaped Jessie for the next, very public stage onto which she and John would step.

[293] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, spring 1854; Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, aft May 17, 1855; and, Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, August 17, 1855, all in Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Stephen Phillips Lee and Elizabeth Blair Lee served as godparents for Charley while Preston Blair and Eliza Gist Blair served as Frank's godparents, further cementing ties between the two families.

CHAPTER 4
"GIVE 'EM JESSIE!"

On a warm New York evening in late June, 1856, a crowd of a few thousand men marched jubilantly from the Tabernacle up Broadway toward the Ninth Street home of Colonel and Mrs. John C. Frémont. Flushed with success at having just nominated Colonel Frémont to be the first presidential candidate of the new Republican Party, the men cheered and huzzahed their way through the streets, in spite of the lateness of the hour. Arriving in front of the Frémont brownstone, the men called for the candidate to come to the balcony. As they waited, they sang tunes like "Hail to the Chief" and "Brave Mountain Pioneer." Minutes passed and anticipation mounted; the cheers and calls for Frémont began to drown out the music. From inside the house, Frémont and several of his friends and supporters stepped onto the balcony; so many people, in fact, that the structure began to give way and astonished cries rose from the mob as they feared for Frémont's safety. Finally, order restored and safety ensured, the candidate offered a short speech in recognition of the honor bestowed upon him, to which the crowd responded with unbounded enthusiasm. Frémont returned into the house, while the provisional chair of the Philadelphia Republican convention that had nominated him, his long-time friend Judge Robert Emmet, led the mob in a round of nine cheers for Frémont and his vice-presidential candidate, William L. Dayton. Judge Emmet asked the crowd to disperse, but one voice after another lifted in protest, crying "We will disperse when you introduce us to Mrs. Frémont." Jessie Benton Frémont then stepped onto the balcony and bowed while the crowd cheered its

approval. As she retired back into her home, the crowd dispersed and the Frémonts entertained their close friends and supporters until the wee hours of the morning.[294]

When she stepped onto the balcony to acknowledge the cries of the crowd below, Jessie began the journey that would dramatically expand her role as a "public wife," making her available to a much larger audience than even she might have imagined. She also became an indispensable part of her husband's campaign for the presidency, not only through her own actions but through the political opportunities she represented to others. She stood as the first candidate's wife to become overtly involved in a national campaign. More than this, though, she became an object upon which both her husband's supporters and his detractors could act out their political intentions. Jessie was not merely a wife; she offered an image and a narrative useful for political operatives of all stripes.

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The idea of John C. Frémont as a presidential candidate arose in 1855, as both the Democrats and the Republicans sought opportunities to elicit contenders who would appeal to a large swath of the country. The outgoing president, Democrat Franklin Pierce, was unacceptable to northern members of his party over his support of the Kansas-Nebraska bill; and southern Democrats, while admiring Pierce's stance on the issue of slavery and its expansion into Kansas, knew that the chance of a second term was unlikely.[295] John C. Frémont, as a national hero with ties to both the west through his explorations and actions in California and to the south through his birthplace of Savannah and his years in Charleston, offered an attractive substitute.

[294] "The Presidency," *New York Herald*, June 2, 1856.
[295] See below for further information on the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

As Jessie and the children enjoyed the pleasures of Nantucket in the summer of 1855, John remained in New York City. There he was approached by several prominent Democrats to gauge his interest in running for president in 1856. As Jessie later recalled, "They wished me to be seen before he made his decision. As one of them said, 'The Democratic party was sure to win, and no woman could refuse the Presidency.'" Recognizing her appeal as a wife and mother with a fine pedigree in Democratic politics, they saw in her an "efficient and natural ally."[296] The offer, however, came with conditions that neither John nor Jessie found acceptable. Jessie romantically recalled their conversation. According to her account, John came to Nantucket and the couple walked together to a high bluff overlooking the Atlantic. Jessie advised her husband that it would be "the choice between a wreck in dishonor, or a kindly light that will go on its mission of doing good." The dishonor, the president's role in enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, became a dealbreaker. Having made his negative views on slavery known for many years, John refused to accept that condition and declined the Democrats' offer of the nomination.[297] But the Democrats were not the only ones who came calling on the Pathfinder to seek his participation in the 1856 presidential election.

The Republican party was only two years old when it approached John in 1856. Founded in February of 1854 in response to the proposed Kansas-Nebraska bill, the Republican party drew members from several other political movements.[298] Historians Arthur Schlesinger,

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[296] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events During the Life of Major General John C. Frémont, n.p., Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 203.
[297] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 92.
[298] The Kansas-Nebraska Bill explicitly nullified the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had set geographical boundaries on the expansion of slavery, and also ended any feeling of having settled the slavery issue which had arisen from the Compromise of 1850. The bill allowed for settlers in the territories to decide whether or not to allow slavery within their boundaries. See Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in *History of American*

Gil Troy, and Fred Israel identify the newly formed party as consisting of "a strange coalition of moral crusaders, religious fanatics, disgruntled politicians, favor-seeking businessmen, land-hungry farmers, temperance leaders, and other seceders from the ranks of Democrats, Whigs, and Know-Nothings."[299] At its core, the new party opposed the extension of slavery into the western territories, and this formed the foundation of the party's political platform in the 1856 presidential election. This stance put the Republicans in opposition to the Democrats, including Democratic president Franklin Pierce, who signed the Kansas-Nebraska bill in May of 1854. With the passage of the bill, both pro- and anti-slavery forces began to pour into Kansas, and violence ensued as each side fought for control of the territory's slavery status.

Things came to a head in 1856. During that year, Senator Charles Sumner delivered his speech "Crime Against Kansas," flaming the passions of pro-slavery forces, including Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina, who attacked and savagely beat Sumner on the floor of the Senate. In Kansas, as elections produced both pro- and anti-slavery territorial legislatures, the violence reached a peak when abolitionist John Brown attacked pro-slavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek. The tumult in Kansas, and its meaning for the larger future of slavery within the United States, formed the crux of the issues as the presidential campaign season began.

As various political parties held their nominating conventions in the spring and early summer of 1856, it became clear that three major challengers would emerge to contend for the presidency. The American party, formerly the Know-Nothing movement, nominated former

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Presidential Elections, 1789-2008, eds. Gil Troy, Arthur M. Schlesinger, and Fred L. Israel, 4th ed. (New York: Infobase Learning, 2012).

[299] Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-2008*, 447.

president Millard Fillmore. Fillmore steered the Know-Nothings in his party away from the anti-Catholic and anti-immigration rhetoric of its past and toward an anti-sectionalism platform that stressed the need for continued compromise between North and South on the issue of slavery. The Democrats, inarguably the most powerful political party in the nation at that time, chose lifelong civil servant James Buchanan as their presidential candidate. To party leaders, Buchanan seemed the ideal selection to bring together a nation so at odds with itself. Despite decades of public service, he had managed to maintain a neutral position on the great slavery debates of his day, including the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska bill.[300] In opposition to Buchanan's calm, cool detachment, the Republicans chose as their candidate the passionate, colorful John C. Frémont. With Jessie at his side, Republican leaders hoped that the handsome young couple would not only sway male voters but the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of those voters.

Several of the Republican leaders knew Jessie prior to their selection of John as a candidate and viewed her favorably as a potential first lady, just as they viewed her husband as presidential material. In his memoir, Frémont campaign manager John Bigelow recalled that he was one of the first to identify John as a potential nominee by the Republicans. In the spring of 1856, Bigelow confided to Nathaniel P. Banks, Republican congressman from Massachusetts and recently elected Speaker of the House, that he thought Frémont was the ideal candidate. Famous for his role in western exploration and the Conquest of California, John was also known to be anti-slavery but without being such a committed abolitionist that he could be tarred as

[300] Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-2008*, 455-456.

being too radical. Banks responded that he had a casual acquaintance with both John and Jessie; and based on his knowledge of the pair of them, he felt John would be a good candidate.[301] William Seward, another Republican leader, shared Banks' positive image of Jessie, noting as early as 1854 that Jessie was "a noble-spirited woman," with "much character" who is "very outspoken."[302] Jessie's upbringing in a political family, her intelligence, and her ambition for her husband made a favorable impression with the Republican party leaders. However, John's candidacy did not garner the approval of Thomas Hart Benton.

Thomas Benton flatly refused to back his son-in-law or the new Republican party in their quest for the presidency. Despite many of his friends and former Jacksonian Democrats pledging their support to the Frémont candidacy, Thomas worried that the Republican party would appeal to northern voters only, sparking further division between north and south. For the aging Missourian, the continuation of the union held precedence over any other concern, including slavery.[303]

John's decision to move to the new Republican party and Thomas Benton's refusal to support his candidacy once again put Jessie in the position of having to choose between her husband and her father. A coolness had pervaded the relationship between Thomas Hart Benton and John C. Frémont for some years prior to the election, beginning with Benton's attempted sale of Las Mariposas in 1852. Jessie herself acknowledged in 1856 that since "the revoked sale

[301] John Bigelow, *Retrospections of an Active Life*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1909), 141-142. Perhaps Bigelow downplayed Banks' excitement over Frémont. So taken by Frémont was the up-and-coming Banks that he named his second son Joseph Frémont Banks in 1855. See James G. Hollandsworth Jr., *Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 36.
[302] Frederick W. Seward, *Seward at Washington*, vol. 1, (New York: Derby and Miller, 1891), 217.
[303] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 419-420.

of the Mariposas, nearly five years ago, Father has put great constraints on his temper and now he has what he considers a fair occasion for an opposition."[304] According to Jessie, the strain between the Frémonts and the Bentons had intensified, and Jessie in part blamed her brother-in-law William Carey Jones, the husband of her older sister, Eliza—the same attorney who had supported and advised John during his court martial. Jessie confided to Lizzie Lee that Lizzie was "really the only person I ever write to now." Complaining about the lack of correspondence from her sisters, Jessie saw the "traces" of Jones "in many things." She wished "bad luck to him," and warned chillingly that she would "'blow him sky high'—and I know all his vulnerable points." Never close to her sisters, Jessie chose to "stand aloof" from her family and comfort herself with the revelation that she was "quite the fashion" in New York, where "5th Avenue asks itself, 'Have we a Presidentess among us--.'" She wrote to Lizzie that "Mr. Frémont does not think how much I mind [the tension with Benton] and you must not tell him—but if I can help in anyway [sic] I will swallow my wounded pride and go." [305] Jessie continued to write letters to her father throughout 1856, always steering clear of politics and noting to Preston Blair that she wanted to keep John from "the shocks that Father with his different organization is dangerously apt to give."[306]

Just as she had when she eloped, Jessie chose John over her father. When she wrote about the events of 1856 nearly forty years later, she constructed a different narrative than that

[304] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 18, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[305] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, March 8, 1856; Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 18, 1856; and, Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 25, 1856, all in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 97-100.
[306] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, August 27, 1855, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 71.

found in letters written during the election year. In this new version, she wrote that she never discussed John's Republican candidacy with her father. Noting that the minds of herself and her father "were in too intimate comprehension for me to doubt his course, or to let any discordant element come to mar the wonderfully beautiful friendship between us," she justified what she now perceived as Thomas Hart Benton's tacit approval of the campaign by recalling how much her father would enjoy having her close in Washington and serving as the first lady of the United States. She further reflected that her father "had the best knowledge of the tried and proved high qualities Mr. Frémont would bring to its highest office."[307] Seeking to posthumously reconcile her husband and her father, Jessie shed a positive light on relationships that had clearly soured before and during the campaign. While she chose John at the time, she did not let her later narrative reflect that disharmony had ever reigned between the Bentons and the Frémonts.

John's campaign managers and several newspapers realized early in the campaign that Benton opposed his son-in-law's candidacy. Discussions in the spring of 1856 between John Bigelow, newspaper publisher and one of the leaders behind John's campaign, and Nathaniel Banks, the newly installed Republican Speaker of the House, included concerns over whether Thomas Hart Benton would support John's candidacy. Bigelow also turned to Preston Blair and requested that he speak to his good friend Benton about John's campaign. Blair reported back that the Republicans should proceed with Frémont, offering no additional information as to just how Benton had responded to his inquiries. This lack of a response made it clear to Bigelow, Banks, and others just where the old senator stood.[308]

[307] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 204.
[308] John Bigelow, *Retrospections of an Active Life*, vol. 1, 143.

Newspapers were not so circumspect in offering insights into Benton's thoughts. After John's nomination, the *Louisville Daily Courier* published a letter from Benton in which the senator bemoaned the "design . . . on the part of some, to put up an electoral ticket for Frémont." Benton noted that these supporters were such that he, Benton, had "character enough to keep at a distance all that class of persons who, dishonorable themselves, could approach a man with a dishonorable proposition." He warned that the selection of Frémont as a candidate would be "injurious under every aspect—mortifying to Frémont himself from the small vote the ticket would receive—and injurious to the public, by aggravating the sectional feeling which now arrays each half of the Union against the other." He noted that he had been opposed to "the bringing out of Frémont for nearly half a year." Benton reported that he himself was "disinterested and patriotic enough to support Buchanan against a member of my own family."[309] The *Detroit Free Press* approved Benton's behavior, finding in his declaration "that the election of Mr. Buchanan is essential to the re-inauguration of national repose."[310] One person, though, did not agree with Benton's full-throated condemnation of his son-in-law—Benton's daughter. And she jumped wholeheartedly into her husband's campaign.

Women's participation in the political arena had begun long before Jessie appeared on her balcony in 1856. In the 1840s, ladies made the short step from the benevolent associations of the early years of the republic to the more overtly partisan world of campaign politics. During the 1840 presidential campaign, pitting William Henry Harrison, a Whig, against incumbent Democratic president Martin Van Buren, "the Whigs initiated a revolution in campaign tactics by

[309] "Letter from Col. Benton," *The Louisville Daily Courier*, August 16, 1856.
[310] "Benton on Frémont," *Grand River Times* (Grand Haven, MI), August 27, 1856.

encouraging women to attend Whig rallies and other party events."[311] Among the campaign items produced to entice this burgeoning "Whig womanhood" were cream pitchers, cups, sugar bowls, plates, tablespoons, women's hair brushes, and stationery.[312] Women had the option of being either partisans or mediators in this public campaign. As partisans, they could express their allegiance to Harrison and the Whigs. As mediators, their "disinterestedness" allowed them to promote those qualities most associated with women—civil virtue, cooler passions, and an emphasis on the public good.[313]

After their engagement with the 1840 election, women continued to participate in political matters. For many women, working on issues involving their gender presented an opportunity to engage in political work, albeit through a role as influencer rather than outright voter. Women agitated for reforms extending from their traditional roles as wives and mothers, including laws protecting a married woman's property and wage rights, offering poverty relief, and changing practices around divorce and child custody.[314]

More women, however, entered the political realm through efforts to abolish slavery. Some of these women worked as active political partisans, involved with the short-lived Liberty party in the early 1840s, which later merged into the Free Soil party whose adherents were among those who later joined the new Republican party in 1854.[315] Beginning in 1848, the Free Soil party actively recruited women into the public arena, with women often suggesting more

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[311] Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.
[312] Edith P. Mayo, "Campaign Appeals to Women" in *American Material Culture: The Shape of Things Around Us* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984), 131.
[313] Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted*, 3.
[314] Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 92-94.
[315] Michael D. Pierson, *Free Hearts and Free Homes*, 34, 57-69.

radical abolition goals, including a shorter timeline for the end of slavery, than many of their male companions were willing to consider.[316] Like their sisters advocating for legislative reforms on behalf of their gender, abolitionist women also saw themselves as exercising womanly influence in a matter that called for their moral authority. For these women, abolition was a goal unto itself, and they sometimes did not view their actions as overtly political. Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, despite years of participation in anti-slavery activism, was surprised to see herself interested in politics in 1856, writing that "[f]or the first time in my life, I am a *little* infected with *political* excitement."[317]

While these politically minded women mainly sprang from the North, women in the South likewise became involved in political activity, but their role in protecting the patriarchy eclipsed their partisan motivations. They were more restrained than liberated by their participation.[318] Still, through the 1840s and into the 1850s, women across the country stepped slowly out of their traditional social roles and into more public positions as political actors. By 1856 they had one other factor encouraging their political advocacy—a presidential candidate's wife. As Lydia Maria Child wrote, "What a shame that *women* can't vote! We'd carry 'our Jessie' into the White House on our shoulders."[319]

The role of the candidate's wife prior to Jessie's appearance in 1856 often fell into a more traditional realm of women's acceptable behavior. Wives like Dolley Madison, the most high-

[316] Robert J. Dinkin, *Before Equal Suffrage: Women in Partisan Politics from Colonial Times to 1920* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 47-48.
[317] Lydia Maria Child to Lucy Osgood and Mary Osgood, July 20, 1856, 33/932, The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880, Microfiche, Hodges Library, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
[318] Christopher J. Olsen, "Respecting 'the Wise Allotment of Our Sphere': White Women and Politics in Mississippi, 1840-1860," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 104–25.
[319] Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Blake Shaw, August 3, 1856, The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child.

profile presidential wife prior to Jessie Frémont, served their husbands best from the position of hostess for social gatherings. According to her biographer, Catherine Allgor, Dolley "possessed considerable political capital, which, under the veil of her culturally appointed roles of wife and hostess, she used to further her own and her family's political aims."[320] In much the same way, women like Elizabeth Monroe and Louisa Catherine Adams assisted their husbands in achieving political goals. By the 1840s, first lady Sarah Polk established her own way of aiding her husband as president over and above acting as hostess. Mrs. Polk, while maintaining an outward appearance of deference to the traditions of male and female separate spheres, served as a valuable political partner for her husband by controlling his access to news and directing his correspondence.[321] For all that they served the interests of their husbands, none of these women became a component of political campaigning although most, like Mrs. Polk, were popular figures in the public mind.

From the moment Jessie stepped onto that New York balcony, she became a potent symbol of the campaign. Being the wife of the hero of California and having plied her pen as the co-author of her husband's popular expedition reports, Jessie had already garnered national recognition. Known also for her scandalous elopement, she figured as a key component in developing the image of her husband as masculine, determined, and passionate, an attractive combination of qualities that his supporters capitalized upon during the campaign. She also served to combat accusations of her husband's Catholicism, acted as a symbol for the anti-slavery position of the Republican party through her refusal to own slaves, and stood as the

[320] Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 6.
[321] Amy Greenberg, *Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), xvi.

model of a woman who, while preserving her traditional gender roles as wife and mother, still acted as a fierce political partisan.

Jessie began her service to the Republican endeavor by putting her pen to work. Along with John Bigelow, she co-authored one of the two extended campaign biographies of her husband's life. This effort, entitled *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of John Charles Frémont*, proved extremely popular among Frémont supporters, who purchased huge quantities at the rather princely sum of one dollar apiece.[322] As with her help in writing her husband's best-selling expedition reports, Jessie's contribution went unacknowledged in the publication, but her role was well known to intimates in the Frémont circle. In fact, Jessie confided in letters to her friend Lizzie Lee that she traveled to Virginia specifically to seek information on John's ancestry, his membership in the Episcopalian church, and on his parents' scandalous marriage.[323]

In addition to these endeavors, Jessie took for herself the role of managing the voluminous correspondence that her husband received during the campaign. According to Jessie, John Bigelow remarked that Jessie could "'look into the political cauldron when it was boiling without losing [her] head,'" and she took this as a great compliment. Accustomed as she was to the "slanders and coarse attacks" addressed toward her father, Jessie felt that she and a few select friends could protect John and allow him to meet with the "more or less friendly crowds" who came to see him with no strain on his natural dignity and courtesy. This attention also allowed the candidate to keep "up his splendid condition of health by fencing every morning early, and tremendous walks after dark." Jessie took on herself "all the pain intended" by the

[322] Allan Nevins, *Frémont*, 498. John Bigelow, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of John Charles Frémont.*
[323] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, July 2, 1856, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 112-113.

less-than-flattering materials flowing into the Frémont home.[324] Reticent and aloof, John Frémont relied on his wife to not only relate the story of his life for the public but to also protect him from any negative correspondence that might reach his desk.

Jessie as an object for political rhetoric proved even more valuable to her husband's campaign than did her writing and correspondence management. Jessie's very name quickly became synonymous with the campaign as supporters took up the cry "We'll Give 'Em Jessie," a take-off on the phrase "We'll Give 'Em Hell."[325] According to one newspaper account, an impromptu meeting of "Frémonters" in New York City resulted in the creation of the catchphrase "Give 'Em Jessie." When discussing the merits of their candidate over his opponent, one boisterous member of the crowd, remembering the name of Frémont's wife, shouted out the slogan. The newspaper writer noted that this "felicitous double *entendre* only need to be published to become the watch word of the campaign."[326] And the watch word it became. Campaign banners, poems, and music soon prominently featured the motto. Jessie's name quickly became so connected with that of her husband in his campaign efforts that his later biographer, Allan Nevins, would note, "Jessie played only a slighter part in the campaign than her husband, and 'Frémont and Jessie' seemed to constitute the Republican ticket rather than Frémont and Dayton."[327] The romantic nature of John and Jessie's relationship and their strong ties to each other and their children boosted Frémont's presidential chances.

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[324] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 205.
[325] Edith P. Mayo, "Campaign Appeals to Women" in *American Material Culture*, 132.
[326] "Give 'Em Jessie," *Western Reserve*, July 2, 1856. The phrase "give 'em hell" had been a part of the American vernacular for decades before "give 'em Jessie" became a part of the Frémont campaign. During the 1836 Battle of the Alamo in Texas, William Travis, upon being warned of the pending attack of the Mexican army, was remembered as saying, "Come on, boys, the Mexicans are upon us and we'll give them Hell!" Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 139.
[327] Allan Nevins, *Frémont*, 498.

The 1841 elopement of John and Jessie gave rise to attempts to popularize the Republican candidate as a possessor of several admirable traits, including those of bravery and cleverness. Here again, the slogan "Give 'Em Jessie" arose as part of the rhetoric. The Republican-leaning *Vermont Phoenix* included a lengthy article on the romantic past of John Frémont and his wife, noting that when John timidly asked Jessie's father for her hand in marriage, awed because of his admiration for the great Missouri senator, "Tom [Benton] refused 'to give him Jessie.'" The newspaper writer then took up another familiar catchphrase of the Republican campaign when he wrote that, when Jessie was having a last-minute bout of uncertainty about her elopement, her bridegroom encouraged her with the expression "Go it Jessie." This, like "Give 'Em Jessie," quickly became a piece of campaign rhetoric. The writer depicted Jessie's mother as saying to her husband, distraught over the loss of his daughter, "'You had better give him Jessie.'"[328] As an example of the bravery and cleverness of the Republican presidential candidate in standing up to his powerful father-in-law, the story of the elopement served its purpose nearly as well as stories of John's courage in exploring the west.

The romantic nature of the relationship between John and Jessie served another Republican purpose—to sharply contrast the manliness and passion of their candidate with the stodgy bachelorhood of his opponent, James Buchanan. The *Sangamo Journal* offered one such contrast. The newspaper recounted for its readers a story of a star-crossed love affair for the young James Buchanan, in which the "young lady, driven to despair by the despotic course of a hard hearted mother, took laudanum and died." The author compared Buchanan's lack of courage and determination in protecting his beloved with Frémont's acting as a "cavalier" who

[328] "Go it Jessie," *Vermont Phoenix*, August 2, 1856.

whisked his lover off to a runaway marriage, and "he had 'Old Tom Benton' to battle with, a more terrible enemy than a legion of old women."[329] Implied in this tale, the notion that Buchanan sought only a woman as weak-willed as himself reinforced the idea that he had neither the bravery, audacity, nor fervor to lead the nation. Not only was John depicted as a man's man, passionate and courageous enough to marry Jessie Benton over her father's protests, but Jessie herself served as the ideal of a spirited, determined woman, who did not meekly accept her father's demands nor take her own life. This version of Jessie decided for herself on the man she wanted.

Accusations that the Republicans were a "fusion party" also allowed for rhetoric on Buchanan's lack of a wife.[330] At a Frémont rally in Cincinnati, Superior Court Judge George Hoadley gave a rousing speech, in which he addressed the issue of fusion as follows: "We are called a fusion party. Well we are in favor of the right kind of fusion, fusion of one man with one woman, of John C. Frémont with Jessie Benton . . . , and not of the fusion of Old Buck with Mormonism and polygamy." The speaker went on to make a further play on Buchanan's "Old Buck" nickname and his marital status by noting that a "buck that lifts up his head and his fawns about him is a fine animal; but when all the fawning he does is to Slavery, I don't relish him."[331] In praising Frémont and his "fawn," Republicans encouraged their followers not to accept the

[329] "Bachelor's Hall." *Sangamo Journal*, 11 Aug 1856.
[330] The term "fusion" as used by Republican opponents referred to the idea that the Republican party was made up of men discontented with the other political parties and without any real ideology to bind them together.
[331] "Frémont at Cincinnati," *Hartford Courant*, July 4, 1856. During the 1856 campaign Democrats championed the idea of popularity sovereignty, under which western territories could decide for themselves whether to allow slavery within their borders. Republicans extended the theory to suggest that Democratic candidate James Buchanan meant to allow territories to make additional decisions, especially on whether to allow polygamous marriage as was the case in the Utah Territory. That the bachelor Buchanan should be tied not just to marriage but to polygamous marriage was perhaps an unintended piece of irony.

weak and passionless Buchanan as their next president. An objectified Jessie went from being a spirited woman defying her father to a "fawn."

The commentary on Buchanan's bachelorhood did not stop with the recounting of Jessie and John's elopement or comments on fusion. At a rally for Frémont supporters at Haverhill, New Hampshire, one John L. Smith of Boston countered criticisms of John as rash and headstrong with the comment that he certainly had these qualities, "so had Columbus and Humboldt." Responding to Democratic rhetoric that Buchanan had not taken a wife because he "had been married to his country for fifty years," Smith joked that Frémont would soon be "guilty of a greater indiscretion even than that of running away with Jessie Benton." Frémont "would go so far as to carry away the wife of Buchanan."[332] Clever commentary appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune*, which published the lyrics to a song meant to be sung to the tune of "Old Dan Tucker:"

"Old Buchanan has no wife,
He's lived a bachelor all his life,
And hopes to be the White House lessee
Instead of Frémont's charming Jessie.
Get off the track, Old Buchanan:
We shall put our Jessie's man in."[333]

Buchanan supporters did not take this rhetoric meekly and managed to neatly turn the Republican rhetoric of "Give 'Em Jessie" to their own uses. The decision by Thomas Hart Benton to support Buchanan over his son-in-law gave the Democratic press a way to twist "Jessie" against the Republican candidate. The *Tiffin Tribune* reported gleefully on Benton's decision "to assail" John as a presidential candidate, noting that the former senator intended "to

[332] "Untitled," *Sacramento Daily Union*, August 16, 1856.
[333] "Anti-Buchanan Song," *New York Daily Tribune*, July 29, 1856.

do what he wouldn't do formerly—give him Jessie."[334] The use of Jessie's name, and by association her reputation, as a component of partisan political rhetoric acted as a double-edged sword that both the Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns wielded to their benefit.

Frémont and Buchanan were not alone on the campaign trail. Millard Fillmore stood at the midpoint between John's passionate marriage to Jessie and Buchanan's more stolid "marriage" to his career. Fillmore's wife Abigail had been a devoted wife and mother as well as a sounding board and adviser on the political issues of the day. During his presidency, however, Abigail Fillmore withdrew from the social whirl of the White House, leaving such matters in the hands of her capable daughter.[335] Her death in 1853 left Fillmore a widower. As the American Party candidate in 1856, Fillmore, already a reserved man, sought to persuade voters by logic and reason, his goal not so much to attain the presidency again as to act on behalf of preserving the Union.[336] With none of the excitement of a John C. Frémont or the strong backing of an established political machine like James Buchanan, Fillmore's campaign appeared nearly as lackluster as the man himself.

Unlike the bachelor Buchanan and the widowed Fillmore, the Republican party machine had access to Jessie in her most traditional gender role—that of a mother. To counter any possible accusations that Jessie behaved in a manner not fitting for her sex and to assuage the fears of more conservative-leaning Republicans, Jessie's motherhood was celebrated and put on display. In July 1856, Jessie and her young son, Frank, paid a visit to an acquaintance in

[334] "Untitled," *Tiffin Tribune*, July 4, 1856.
[335] Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50.
[336] Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-2008*, 455.

Tarrytown, New York, and attended an Independence Day gathering, drawing a crowd of admirers. Removing the modest veil that she wore for the trip, Jessie smiled at her well-wishers and held up her black-eyed, black-haired baby for their admiration. Cheers for Jessie and the baby, "Young America," ensued, and "all the mothers and daughters" became "prepossessed . . . in favor of the father of such a child."[337] Opposition newspapers took the opportunity to mock the use of a young mother and son as campaign propaganda. One wrote, after describing the event, "We feel that Kansas is safe! Three shrieks for Jessie and the baby!"[338] The *M'arthur Democrat* suggested that Republican proponent Horace Greeley "should hire Barnum to get up another Baby-Show and award the premium to young Mariposa."[339] For Republicans, however, focusing on Jessie's motherhood allowed them to appeal to wives and mothers across the country who could then use "womanly" ways of persuading their husbands to Frémont's cause. A focus on Jessie's religious affiliation provided a similar appeal to both men and women.

From the first days of the campaign, questions and concerns about John C. Frémont's religious affiliations filled column inches in newspapers across the country and spurred debate among supporters and detractors alike. Democrats sought to play upon Frémont's possible connections to the Catholic church as a means of scaring away any former Know Nothing voters who had migrated to the Republican party.[340] The American party, flying the standard of their

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[337] "New Mode of Electioneering for the Presidency," *Baltimore Sun*, July 9, 1856.
[338] "Mrs. Frémont and the Baby," *Weekly Portage Sentinel*, July 24, 1856.
[339] In 1855, showman P.T. Barnum held a "National Baby Show." The event drew more than 60,000 visitors and included 143 contestants who were judged on "'the crowning merit of their being genuine original American stock.'" See the Lost Museum Archive of the City University of New York, accessed May 3, 2017, http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/baby/. "Frémont and Dayton—Jessie and the Baby!" *M'arthur Democrat*, October 17, 1856. The use of the term "Mariposa" was designed to remind readers of Frémont's unsuccessful gold mining efforts in California.
[340] Anti-Catholicism emerged in the U.S. in the 1830s. Some American thinkers, including Samuel F.B. Morse (inventor of the telegraph and Morse code), claimed that European nations and the Catholic Church conspired to send Catholic immigrants to the U.S. to take power over the nation and put it under Catholic control. Reverend

candidate Millard Fillmore and composed largely of former Know Nothings, had by 1856 largely dropped their initial anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic rhetoric. Enough members, however, still retained vestiges of these views that they began to widely speculate on Frémont's Catholicism.[341] These speculations mainly centered on the presumption that John's father, as a Frenchman, had been Catholic, as well as the fact that Jessie and John had been married by a Catholic priest when they eloped. The *Daily American Organ*, a Washington, D.C., newspaper backing Fillmore's campaign, sarcastically pointed out the various ways in which John was a "Model Protestant." These included references to an allegation that John received his early education under a Roman Catholic bishop in Charleston, reports from people who saw John in a Catholic church in the nation's capital making the sign of the cross, and various statements attributed to John himself regarding his religious faith. The author went on to provide "advice" to Frémont supporters; their attempts to "try and explain away" their candidate's religious views would inevitably lead them to "confess" themselves "beaten in a bad cause."[342] Into this debate over religion, Jessie stepped in to actively aid her husband's campaign.

In a letter to John's former mentor in Charleston, Dr. John Roberton, Jessie reacted as early as June of 1856 to the allegations of John's Catholicism. John's emotional distance and inactive role in his own campaign meant that his wife needed to intervene to clear up these religious misconceptions. Taking the issue for her own, Jessie acquired an affidavit from the

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Lyman Beecher (father of Henry Ward Beecher, Catharine Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stowe) agreed, denouncing the influence of Catholic schools as part of the conspiracy. By the 1850s, with the surge of immigration from Ireland and other Catholic regions of Europe, the Know-Nothings had adopted anti-Catholicism as a political position. See Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.

[341] Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 224.

[342] "Is Frémont a Catholic—Look at the Record," *The Daily American Organ*, July 21, 1856.

rector of the Parish of the Epiphany in Washington, D.C., that all four of her children with John had been baptized in that church, all having received the Episcopalian "Ministration of Public Baptism of Infants."[343] Jessie acquired evidence that John's mother had also been an Episcopalian and had seen to John's confirmation in that church in June of 1827 when he was fourteen years old.[344] As Jessie passed this information on to the campaign, pro-Frémont pundits quickly took up the challenge, publishing the affidavit of the Epiphany rector in its entirety. The *Meigs County Telegraph* in Pomeroy, Ohio, in addition to including the entire text of the affidavit, reported on John's efforts to secure a Protestant minister during his elopement. The writer noted that applications to several clergymen had been denied before, in desperation, the bridegroom secured the services of a "German priest of liberal views."[345] Other papers argued that the entire matter served little importance and mocked Democratic newspapers for trying to sway voters over the issue of religion. The *Indiana American* argued that "Our Chief Justice is a Catholic, but he is a Democrat," and that "Mr. Frémont is an Episcopalian, and so is Jessie."[346] Jessie's actions in gathering the information necessary to counter the Catholic claims, as well as her affiliation with the Episcopal church herself, served to protect her husband against possible loss of Republican voters who had previously been Know Nothings.

It did not fall to newspapers alone to take up the Frémont cause against claims of Catholicism. Well-known Congregationalist reverend Henry Ward Beecher, an admirer of Jessie and a fervent Frémont supporter, wrote, "If we had been in Colonel Frémont's place we would

[343] Jessie Benton Frémont to Dr. John Roberton, June 30, 1856, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 110.
[344] Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 111.
[345] "Col. Frémont and the Catholic Story," *The Meigs County Telegraph*, August 5, 1856.
[346] "Funny," *Indiana American*, August 8, 1856. Roger Taney, a Catholic, served as Chief Justice of the United States at this time.

have been married if it had required us to walk through a row of priests and bishops as long as from Washington to Rome, ending up with the Pope himself." In another effort to counter negative claims by Democratic newspapers, Beecher wrote a parable titled "The Dog Noble and the Empty Hole." In Beecher's tale, Noble, the family dog, grew obsessed with a hole in a garden wall into which he had once seen a squirrel enter. Nothing swayed Noble from constantly watching, barking, digging at, and otherwise assaulting the hole in the wall, all with the assurance that, if he waited long enough, he could catch the squirrel. Beecher compared Noble's fixation with the hole to the reports on Frémont's religious background published by the pro-Buchanan *New York Express*, writing that "the *Express*, like Noble, has opened on this hole in the wall, and can never be done barking on it."[347] Adding his voice to Jessie's and other Frémont supporters, Beecher did his part to put the issue of John's religion to rest.

Not only Jessie's religious faith served her husband's efforts to gain the presidency. Her dual status as a southerner (she was born in Virginia and raised in Missouri) and as a westerner (she and John had lived in California) offered unique opportunities to capitalize on the anti-slavery components of the Republican platform. John's beliefs concerning slavery were formed by his early association with Joel Poinsett, who took a dim view of the institution but also realized that to eliminate it meant a far greater challenge than his generation could resolve.[348] As for herself, Jessie initially credited her mother with her antislavery views, writing in 1856 that Mrs. Benton had "brought us up to think it a good fortune to be free from owing slaves." It was

[347] William Beecher and Samuel Scoville, *A Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Charles Webster, 1888), 290-291.
[348] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder,* 26. See also J. Fred Rippy*, Joel R. Poinsett,* 220-221. While Poinsett decried the institution of slavery, he himself owned approximately sixty slaves on his rice-growing planation, White House, outside Georgetown, South Carolina.

her mother that charged slavery's "evil influence" as resulting in children becoming "domineering, passionate, and arbitrary." So staunchly did Jessie want to make the point of her anti-slavery views that she wrote, "I would as soon place my children in the midst of small pox, as rear them under the influences of slavery."[349]

Jessie later crafted a narrative of anti-slavery sentiment existing in the Benton family for decades prior to 1856, with Elizabeth Benton freeing slaves she inherited from her father and Thomas Hart Benton rejecting inheritances that included slaves. The truth was far more complicated.[350] Prior to the early 1830s, Thomas Benton had been a firm advocate for slavery, including in his own state of Missouri. His mother, Ann Benton, owned slaves, as did his brothers. After a time, however, it became clear to Benton that the institution was pulling the nation apart, dividing north from south. As Benton was, first and foremost, a proponent of union, he took a more neutral position on slavery, regarding as necessary any and all tactics that would hold the country together, including the admission of California as a free state. It was this commitment to union that drove Benton to reject his son-in-law's candidacy, fearing a further rending of northern from southern states. In a speech given just prior to the election in November 1856, Benton asserted that he, like John, opposed the spread of slavery into the territories. But the threat of disunion offered a more dire outcome, and he told his audience that Buchanan's plans for a more conciliatory approach to the problem offered the best hope for national unity.[351]

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[349] Jessie Benton Frémont to Lydia Maria Child, August 1856, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 121-123.
[350] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1878), 141.
[351] William Nisbet Chambers, Old Bullion Benton, 425-426.

Accusations of slave ownership dogged both Jessie and John during the second half of 1856, as election day drew nearer. Democratic newspapers sought to lure away anti-slavery votes from the Republicans by playing on the southern childhoods of both Frémonts. The *Daily Union* in Washington, D.C., reported on a conversation between two women in Medina, Ohio, one of the women described as a "noisy black republican know-nothing" and the other as a resident of St. Louis. The St. Louis resident, upon being asked by her "noisy" friend what she knew about Frémont, gushed that she knew Frémont well. "'He is a good southerner with us. He owns, or rather Jessie does (for Frémont is insolvent and cannot own anything,) lots of negro slaves, farmed out on shares, near St. Louis, and he is now living on the wages of slave labor.'"[352] Other newspapers picked up on a story that John and Jessie had owned a slave during their sojourn in California. In a letter to the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, Jessie offered her side of this story. Noting that she was considered the "most helpless woman in town" due to her lack of any domestic servants, Jessie conceded that she and John were indeed offered an opportunity to buy an enslaved woman to help out around the house. They refused the offer, with Jessie writing that the woman was eventually purchased for $4000, a price that Jessie felt would "gratify Governor Wise," a jibe at pro-slavery advocate Henry Wise of Virginia.[353]

The use of the term "black republicans" served as a piece of Democratic campaign language designed to use race and slavery as a wedge against their opponents. Here, too, the image of Jessie played a role. Reporting on a Frémont campaign rally in Chicago, the *Nashville Union and American* described the event as a "revolting spectacle" at which the audience heard a

[352] "Untitled," *The Daily Union*, September 6, 1856.
[353] Jessie Benton Frémont to Lydia Maria Child, late July/Aug 1856, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 121-123.

"lecture from Fred Douglass, the celebrated nigger." Especially concerning for the author of the piece was the presence of a multi-racial crowd, including "white men and sooty wenches, and black men and white women," who celebrated the rise of the "mulatto" population. Merchant wives attended the gathering, standing elbow to elbow with Black men, women clapping their gloved hands in approval of the race mixing encouraged by Douglass. The ultimate proclamation from the podium, as described by the author, declared that "fathers and mothers, and little babes, American citizens, fellow countrymen—should be made to dream of death in their sleep, should fear death at their meals, should be met by fire in their beds, and poison in their bread!" The author went on to state that "this terrific invocation, in the name of 'Frémont and Jessie,' elicited enthusiastic applause."[354] The ideas of race mixing and of Black Americans seeking retribution for slavery through the deaths of White Americans tied together the strands of black republicanism that surrounded "Frémont and Jessie." By implication, the presence of women at the rally spoke to Democratic concerns that Jessie acted as a role model for female political activity.

Another article, this time from the *M'arthur Democrat*, brought preacher Henry Ward Beecher once again into the discourse. The accusation that Beecher thought it "as important to convert men to Frémont as to Christ" was followed by a list of beatitudes that blessed "those who hunger and thirst after black Republicanism," those who are "in favor of dissolving this 'accursed Union,'" and "Frémont and Jessie, the heirs of Mariposa."[355] A similar article from the *Southern Enterprise* in South Carolina also spoke to the theme of disunion, noting that one

[354] "A Revolting Spectacle," *Nashville Union and American*, November 26, 1856.
[355] "The Gospel," *M'arthur Democrat*, October 23, 1856.

"kind" of disunionist from the North included "old grannies and romantic young ladies in pantaloons and petticoats, who have the wooly horse for their hobby, and John C. Frémont and Jessie as their candidates for the Presidency."[356] Jessie again is understood to draw women into the presidential campaign, as well as figuring more as her husband's running mate than Republican vice-presidential nominee William L. Dayton.

The idea that the Republican candidates consisted of "Frémont and Jessie" rather than "Frémont and Dayton" captured the imaginations of newspaper writers across the country. In this way, Jessie served not only as a name for wordplay, as in "Give 'em Jessie," but as a potent symbol for political involvement by women. A writer for the *M'arthur Democrat* opined that the "black republicans" were desperately trying to elect Frémont upon the strength of his wife's virtues, abilities, patriotism, and popularity. In this way, the author undermined Frémont's masculinity by implying that it was Jessie, not John, who was "man" enough to win the presidency. In support of this, the author offered a new design idea for the Republican ticket:

FOR PRESIDENT
john c. frémont, husband of
JESSIE BENTON.[357]

[356] "The Two Kinds," *The Southern Enterprise*, October 2, 1856. The term "wooly horse" refers to a "humbug" produced by P.T. Barnum in the late 1840s. After acquiring a horse with thick, wooly hair and no mane or tail, Barnum needed a means of publicizing the wonder in such a way that crowds would clamor to see it. John C. Frémont's 1848-1849 expedition provided just such an opportunity. During the expedition, Frémont and his party remained lost for several days in the snowy Rockies, and the nation waited anxiously for news of the men's safety. When word came that they had emerged and had captured a horse just such as Barnum had purchased earlier, the showman seized the opportunity to exhibit his animal and tie it to Frémont's enormous popularity by stating that his horse was the one captured by Frémont. As Barnum himself put it, "the public appetite was craving something tangible for Col. Frémont. The community was absolutely famishing. They were ravenous. They could have swallowed any thing, and like a good genius, I threw them, not a "bone," but a regular tit-bit, a bon-bon—and they swallowed it in a single gulp!" See P.T. Barnum, *The Life and Adventures of P.J. Barnum, Clerk, Merchant, Editor, and Showman with His Rules for Business and Making a Fortune* (London: Ward and Lock, 1856), 136-137.
[357] "Untitled," *M'arthur Democrat*, July 17, 1856.

Other newspapers also speculated on whether it was John or Jessie actually running for the presidency. A Republican newspaper from Marysville, California, reported on a straw vote taken at a social gathering in which Jessie received eleven of the thirty-four votes cast. The writer speculated that the Jessie votes and the Frémont votes would eventually merge.[358] Another California paper, the *Los Angeles Star*, reported on the various "mysteries" surrounding Colonel Frémont, including whether he was a Protestant, whether Kit Carson was actually responsible for the honors John had gained as an explorer, and "whether he is the real candidate for the Presidency, or whether it is not in fact Jessie."[359] One Tennessee newspaper sniped that "Frémont, Jessie and the Devil it is thought, will carry the free-soilers, the strong minded women, the spiritualists and the hypocrites."[360] The linking of Jessie's name with that of her husband made her a valuable political asset for Republicans, but it also left Democrats with the opportunity to question not only her husband's manliness but also Frémont's competence to run for office without her.

Across the country, "Jessie Circles" and "Jessie Clubs" sprang up for women interested in the presidential race, just as "Frémont Clubs" and "Rocky Mountain Clubs" served to bring male Frémont supporters together. In a Sandusky, Ohio, Frémont procession, over 100 girls in white dresses, traveling in a giant carriage pulled by 40 horses, proclaimed themselves "of the tribe of Jessie."[361] Again, the opposition press did not let this Jessie rhetoric go unchallenged. According to a Richmond, Virginia, paper, a picnic for "Republican ladies" in Boston included women who went for "Frémont, free love, and a free fight." One of these ladies was reported as

[358] "Untitled," *Marysville Daily Herald*, September 5, 1856.
[359] "Untitled," *Los Angeles Star*, August 30, 1856.
[360] "Untitled," *Fayetteville Observer*, October 23, 1856.
[361] "Of the Tribe of Jessie," *Richmond Dispatch*, November 6, 1856.

having entered a boxing ring. She then proceeded to give an offensive male acquaintance her own version of "Jessie." The paper finished up this report with the comment that the "fast women of America are getting to be adept in politics and other manly accomplishments."[362] Southern newspapers especially expressed concern over this new breed of women political activists that sprang up around the name and image of Jessie Frémont.

The *Richmond Dispatch* voiced its concern over the role of women in the 1856 campaign in an article entitled "Female Politicians." It criticized the women of the "Jessie Circles" while at the same time lauding Buchanan and Fillmore women for having better sense than to engage in such unfeminine behaviors. "We are glad to see that this Woman's movement is entirely confined to the abolition females, and that the wives and daughters of the friends of Buchanan and Fillmore have the good taste and good sense to eschew politics." The author of the piece went as far as offering suggestions for the appropriate types of clubs in which women could gather, noting that these "demented females would much better form sewing circles, bread, pudding and knitting circles, spanking-bad-children-and-putting-them-to-bed circles, than to be Jessying around the country, while their husbands starve and their brats hollow [sic] murder at home."[363] *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* echoed this sentiment when calling for a "Home Circle" as a more appropriate social outlet for women.[364] The *Richmond Dispatch* again joined the fray when it later pondered whether Jessie was a candidate for the presidency and whether most Americans "would prefer patriotic petticoat rule to that of abolition breeches." It argued that readers would "rather be under Jessie than her spouse," as Jessie was both a Virginian and

[362] "Frémont Ladies in Council," *Richmond Dispatch*, August 19, 1856.
[363] "Female Politicians," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 25, 1856.
[364] "Female Politicians," *The Times-Picayune*, August 1, 1856.

also understood "the science of government much better than her husband."[365] This last statement underscores the limits applied to campaign rhetoric negatively attacking Jessie Frémont. While derision and sarcasm certainly played a large role in the language of the anti-Frémont forces, no newspaper delivered an actual indictment of Jessie herself as an object of distaste or revulsion. The idea of attacking an individual woman, especially one as widely popular as Jessie, no matter how outrageous her behavior, seemed to be outside the pale. At the same time, focusing on Jessie allowed these anti-Frémont campaigners to offer a critique of both Frémont's fitness for office and his manliness.

While the Democratic press took care not to go too far in casting aspersions upon Jessie's character, Republican praise of their candidate's wife knew no bounds. Among the ways in which the Frémont campaign and its supporters celebrated the idea of Jessie Frémont, poems and song lyrics allowed for the most flowery and effusive prose. The verses employed to present Jessie to the public permitted the Republican campaign to highlight her as both a traditional female and as a strong woman who inspired her husband to greatness.

From the *Hartford Daily Courant*, a poem praised Jessie for her traditional feminine virtues:

> She's wise and she's prudent; she's good as she's bonnie
> For Virtue and Valor she takes a brave stand:
> For the Chieftain's White Mansion she's better than onie,
> So give her "God speed?" there, the flower o' the land.[366]

[365] "The 'Jessie Circles,'" *Richmond Dispatch*, September 22, 1856. While Jessie Frémont did spend time in Virginia at the homes of various family members and friends, she never actually lived in the state.
[366] "Jessie Frémont," *True American*, August 6, 1856.

A song lyric penned by "A Lady" appeared in the *Lewisburg Chronicle*, and focused its attention on Jessie's role as a traditional wife while extolling her husband's bravery as a western explorer. Sung to the tune of "Nellie Bly," the lyrics read:

Brave Charlie! Strong Charlie!
Not a man but he
Plants upon the topmost crag
The Flag of all the Free!

Float, banner! Wave, banner!
O'er the mountain's height,
Freely float in freedom's air
Standard of the right!

Ah, Jessie! Sweet Jessie!
Waiting day by day,
Tidings of the loyal heart
On its Westward way.[367]

A song entitled "Frémont Song" and sung to the tune of "Scots who hae with Wallace bled," managed to see Jessie as simultaneously feminine, defiant, and the inspiration for her husband's anti-slavery views:

Frémont now doth led the van,
And William Johnson close at hand; [368]
With Jessie too, to grace the land,
We'll gain the victory!

Jessie Benton, young and fair,
With a soul to bravely dare
Fled from out "old Bullion's lair"[369]
For love and liberty!

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[367] "A Frémont Song," *Lewisburg Chronicle*, October 3, 1856.
[368] The use of the name "William Johnson" refers to William L. Johnston, initially considered a potential vice-presidential candidate by the Republicans. A Know Nothing, Johnson was the choice of those new Republicans who had migrated from the Know Nothing movement and/or the American party. When Dayton was nominated instead of Johnston, it produced bitter feeling among Know Nothing converts. See Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 229.
[369] The term "Old Bullion" refers to Jessie's father, Thomas Hart Benton, and his position in the 1820 and 1830s in favor of gold and silver currency rather than paper money or bank notes.

T'was Frémont who loved her well,
Yet he dared his tale to tell,
"Slave, I ne'er will buy or sell."
"Frémont loves Liberty!"[370]

Democratic challengers to the Republican message offered a reproach to their opponents who made such free use of a lady's name for political purposes, as well as a subtle warning to the lady herself should her sudden fame render her immodest and unwomanly.

"And Jessie Frémont is a Lady no doubt,
Both modest and beautiful too,
But if she has got a true woman's heart
Her thanks for such songs will be few."[371]

While expressing mild disapproval with Jessie, the Democrats did not hesitate to mock her husband—and to use her name and the tune "Oh, Susannah" in doing so:

Oh, Jessie, dear, my fairest one,
Oh, don't you cry for me,
I fear that House in Washington,
I'll never, never see.

I love the Black Republicans,
And for the darkeys sigh,
But all, I fear, will do no good,
But Jessie, do not cry.

Oh, my dear Jessie,
Don't you cry for me,
I'm going up Salt River,[372]
With a darkey on each knee.[373]

[370] "A Frémont Song," *Hartford Courant*, August 25, 1856.
[371] David Grant, *Political Antislavery Discourse and American Literature of the 1850s*, 157.
[372] To go "up the Salt River" refers to a candidate who was defeated in a hopeless quest for office. See Jennifer Ruth Horner and Mark Brewin, "The Salt River Ticket, Democratic Discourse, and Nineteenth Century American Politics" in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 2007), 2.
[373] "Campaign Song," *The Ottawa Free Trader*, September 20, 1856.

Among the more unusual accolades offered to Jessie during her participation in the 1856 campaign, the naming of a town in her honor offered evidence of the esteem in which she was held. In 1856, an enterprising group of men in Dodge County, Nebraska, anticipating the arrival of a railroad near the site of a ferry crossing the Elkhorn River, laid out a town along a route favored by settlers making the overland crossing to the Mormon enclave in Utah or further on to the west coast. Acknowledging Jessie as the wife of the Republican presidential candidate and the daughter of the famed senator Thomas Hart Benton, the men named their city "Jessie Benton Frémont." While the name was later changed to a simple "Frémont " and dedicated to her husband, this small town in middle America was the first—and last—to bear Jessie's name, even though only for a short while.[374]

Like the newspaper accounts, songs, poems, and even the town, the material memorabilia of the 1856 campaign also featured references to, and images of, Jessie Frémont. One example of the use of Jessie's name on campaign materials appeared on a flag designed to be carried at rallies and displayed in both public and private spaces to promote the candidacy of John Frémont. A replica of an American flag of thirty-two stars, it was emblazoned across the center with a ribbon containing the words "Give 'em Jessie." In slightly smaller letters and contained within the far right side of the flag, the words "Frémont and Dayton" occupy the end of the ribbon.[375] On a commemorative medal issued by Frémont supporters, John Frémont's

[374] William H. Stennett, *A History of the Origin of Place Names Connected with the Chicago & North Western and Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railways* (Chicago, 1908), 74.
[375] Cowan's Auctions, "Frémont & Dayton, Exceptionally Rare *Give 'Em Jessie!* Campaign Flag," described as "coarse, glazed cotton, printed campaign flag with 32 stars arranged in a circular pattern, with the title of the popular campaign song, *Give 'Em Jessie/ Frémont & Dayton* in the field, 27.5 x 20 in., ca 1856," accessed March 11, 2017, https://www.cowanauctions.com/lot/Frémont-dayton-exceptionally-rare-give-em-jessie-campaign-flag-187416.

image adorns one side, with the expression "Jessie's Choice" written underneath. On the flip side of the medal, an American eagle holding olive branches and arrows is bracketed by the words "Frémont and Dayton" and "The People's Choice."[376] In both instances, Jessie and the use of her name as content for popular campaign slogans loom larger than her husband's running mate.

In addition to the use of her name, Jessie's image, sometimes with John and sometimes without, became an important part of the campaign materials. For the first time, the face of a candidate's wife adorned stationary, envelopes, signs, and campaign ribbons. One envelope of the time features an oval portrait of John and Jessie in the upper left corner. Jessie's gaze looks out and past the viewer, perhaps peering into some bright future for herself and her family. At the same time, John's gaze from his position slightly behind and to the right of his wife remains fixed on Jessie with a poignant stare at the woman he clearly adores and admires. It is to Jessie that the viewer's eye is drawn, while the Republican presidential candidate can only gaze soulfully at his beloved with his deep-set eyes. In another example, Jessie appears alone in an oval frame on the upper left corner of an envelope. Clearly copied from an oil painting made near to the time and identical to that used in the shared portrait of the other envelope, Jessie this time stares directly into the viewer's eyes. Her expression denotes both modesty and courage. Under the portrait, the words "Our Jessie" offer the only identification of the woman in the oval

[376] "John C. Frémont for President, 1856," Santa Clarita Valley History, accessed May 3, 2017, http://www.scvhistory.com/scvhistory/lw2696.htm

frame.[377] Purchasers of such stationary, and those to whom they sent their correspondence, would already have been familiar with the features of the Republican candidate's wife.

One of the reasons for this familiarity with Jessie's image in the days before the wide-spread use of photography stems from the sale of woodcuts, lithographs, and engravings featuring Jessie and John, both separately and together. One enterprising businessman, W. Schaus, offered "lithographic Portraits of Mrs. Frémont, drawn in the highest style of art," at a cost of one dollar.[378] Publisher Frank Leslie used the Frémont campaign and Jessie specifically to encourage consumers to purchase his illustrated newspaper. In one advertisement, under the headline "Jessie," every "Frémont man, and all the world besides" were encouraged to purchase the most recent issue of *Leslie's Newspaper* because it came with an engraving of Jessie Frémont described as "the best portrait and the only correct one yet published."[379] While her name acted as a component of campaign rhetoric, the sale of Jessie Frémont's attractive features also added to Republican presidential efforts.

In addition to portraits of the candidate's wife used to garner profits for businessmen as well as to promote her husband's candidacy, Jessie's name and face were featured prominently on more overtly political forms of material propaganda. On a campaign ribbon, the same images of John and Jessie that had been combined to form the portrait used on envelopes are shown separately, with John on the top of the ribbon and Jessie on the bottom. Again, John gazes off to

[377] "Electing First Ladies: Presidential Candidate Spouses As Campaign Symbols, Part 1, 1856-1872," National First Ladies' Library, accessed March 11, 2017, http://www.firstladies.org/blog/electing-first-ladies-presidential-candidate-spouses-as-campaign-symbols-part-1/
[378] "Portrait of Jessie Frémont," *New York Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1856.
[379] "Jessie," *Hartford Courant*, October 17, 1856.

the right, while Jessie's eyes meet the viewer's directly.[380] The use of Jessie on the ribbon demonstrates yet again that the idea of "Jessie" played just as much of a role, if not more, in the campaign rhetoric than her husband's vice-presidential running mate.

Despite the widespread use of Jessie Benton Frémont as a component of the campaign, her husband and his party suffered a defeat when the presidential election was held on November 4, 1856. Out of a total poll of roughly four million voters, James Buchanan defeated John C. Frémont by half a million votes. In the Electoral College, Buchanan received 174 votes, Frémont 114, and Millard Fillmore only 8. Historians Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, analyzing the election results, contend that if the "Republicans could have captured Pennsylvania and 9 more votes, they would have won the presidency, even though their candidate had not received a single vote in 12 of the states, all in the South."[381] While the Republicans proved strong in New England, New York, and the Midwest, the Democrats demonstrated their ability to draw from a far wider geographical area, winning in the South, the Far West, Pennsylvania, and the Ohio River regions of the Midwest. They alone commanded victories in all the major regions of the country with the exception of New England.

Democratic newspapers celebrated their victory in gleeful prose, often using the Republican campaign's "Jessie" rhetoric back against their defeated opponents. Under the title of "Conundrum," the *Carolina Spartan* asked, "In what aspect is James Buchanan unlike Colonel Benton? Do you give up? Because he gave Frémont *Jessie*."[382] The *North Carolina*

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[380] "Electing First Ladies: Presidential Candidate Spouses As Campaign Symbols, Part 1, 1856-1872," National First Ladies' Library.
[381] Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-2008*, 460.
[382] "Conundrum," *The Carolina Spartan*, November 27, 1856.

Standard advertised passage on the Salt River on the "fast running vessel, Dis-Union," captained by John C. Frémont. Listed among the crew were such Republican luminaries as Frémont's vice-presidential running mate William L. Dayton, Charles Sumner, Horace Greeley, "Fred" Douglass, and, as the chambermaid aboard the vessel, the suffragist Lucy Stone. The "upper deck rooms were engaged by 'Jessie' for herself and the 'Jessie Clubs.'"[383] A similar reference to a journey on the Salt River offered free tickets to "Saline Spring for all 'Wooley Heads,' 'Nigger Thieves,' 'Underground R.R. Directors,' and 'Black Republicans.'" This time, the ship's name was "Wooley Horse," and Jessie served as the first mate under John's captaincy.[384] William L. Dayton did not apparently serve aboard this vessel, although Douglass, Greeley, William Lloyd Garrison, and Lucretia Mott did. Just as Jessie had acted as an important component in the positive Republican messages about her husband's candidacy, she also provided fodder for the gloating of Democrats in their moment of victory.

According to John and Jessie's daughter, it was she, thirteen-year-old Lily, who suffered most from the loss. Writing in her memoirs, Lily recalled being devastated by the realization that she would not live in the White House. She recorded her father as having taken the loss "calmly, cheerfully bowing to the will of the majority." While some considered her father's defeat a "moral victory" which "astounded" the south, this assessment offered little in the way of comfort to the heartbroken teen.[385] As for her mother, Lily credits Jessie with teaching the

[383] "For Salt River," *Weekly North Carolina Standard*, November 12, 1856.
[384] Jennifer Ruth Horner and Mark Brewin, "The Salt River Ticket, Democratic Discourse, and Nineteenth Century American Politics," in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, No. 1 (March 2007), 1.
[385] Edward L. Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894), 513-514.

lesson of courage in the face of "the defeats of life, a heart-to-heart talk," which served Lily well in the years to follow.[386]

In spite of the brave front she put on for her daughter, Jessie was devastated by the loss of the White House. Yet she recovered from her husband's defeat by making plans for the future of her family. In a November 18, 1856, letter to Lizzie Lee, Jessie confessed that she and John were "subsiding into former habits, not without some of the giddy feeling one has after having been a long while on ship board." John returned to his efforts at managing his holdings at Las Mariposas, while Jessie expressed both a yearning to remain in New York City and to begin to study German in anticipation of a future trip abroad.[387] Just as she had endured her husband's prior setbacks, such as the court martial, Jessie maintained her aplomb and good spirits in the face of the presidential disappointment and looked eagerly into the future.

John Bigelow, having stood with John through the entire campaign, looked back on 1856 when he wrote his *Retrospections on an Active Life* in 1909. He reflected that "much as the country was to be congratulated for his [Frémont's] nomination, it was equally to be congratulated upon his defeat." He went on to note that John "lived long enough…to satisfy every one that he might have proved a disastrous failure as a President." While Frémont "was in no proper sense a statesman," the votes he did garner in the election were due "largely to his wife, a remarkably capable and accomplished woman."[388] Through her own efforts and by allowing her husband's campaign to capitalize on her name, image, and reputation, Jessie sought

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[386] Frémont, Elizabeth Benton. *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont* (New York: Frederick H. Hitchcock, 1912), 79-81.
[387] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 18, 1856, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 143-144.
[388] John Bigelow, *Retrospections of an Active Life*, vol. 1, 144-145.

to create a version of John C. Frémont suitable for the White House. Yet, her efforts did not fool those closest to her husband, then or later.

With the exception of beautiful and young Frances Folsom Cleveland, women did not feature as prominently as Jessie Benton Frémont in their husbands' campaigns until the 1920s.[389] Jessie stands alone as the antebellum example of the importance of a candidate's spouse in a presidential campaign. That she played such a large role in the 1856 election speaks to larger cultural discourses of the time. The role of women in the political sphere expanded greatly between the days of Dolley Madison and those of Jessie Benton Frémont. Jessie, in her traditional gendered roles as wife, mother, and devoted helpmeet, assuaged concerns among more conservative voters about the new visibility of women on the public political stage. At the same time, perceptions of Jessie as bold, brave, and intensely partisan permitted other women of the time to become even more actively involved in politics, whether by attending actual campaign rallies, using stationary with Jessie's image, or through the formation of "Jessie Clubs" and "Jessie Circles." According to Lucy Stone, president of the Seventh National Woman's Rights Convention, speaking in late November 1856, the "enthusiasm which everywhere greeted the name of Jessie was so far a recognition of woman's right to participate in politics."[390] As many of her detractors and supporters alike wrote during that 1856 campaign, it was Jessie, not John, who would have made a good president.

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[389] For more on the ways in which the image of Frances Folsom Cleveland appeared in campaign materials during the presidential election of 1888, see Edith P. Mayo, "Campaign Appeals to Women," in *American Material Culture*, 133-135.

[390] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, 3 vols. (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1889), 633.

But, for now, it was time for the Frémonts to move toward other pursuits. As they pondered their post-election future, Jessie and John each took a different path toward recovery from the presidential defeat and from rifts within their marriage, only coming together after difficult months spent apart. When they rejoined again, they turned to California as the solution to the failure of 1856. For a time, Jessie would step off the public stage and embrace her life as a private wife and mother.

CHAPTER 5
PRIVATE WIFE

At the small white cottage on the sprawling Las Mariposas rancho during the sweltering summer of 1858, Jessie Benton Frémont received a message from a group of disgruntled miners who had forcibly taken possession of a mine on the Frémont property. The miners were determined to exercise what they saw as their property right in the mine and would use whatever methods available to them, including attempting to force John C. Frémont to leave the besieged mine to take care of his family. The "order" compelled her "to leave my house within twenty four hours; that I might take my children 'and your clothes' and that if this was not done in the time named, they would burn the house and 'you must take the consequences.'"[391] She understood that the note was an attempt to draw her husband into an ambush. She told the Frémont hired man, Isaac, that she would send an answer.

Describing herself as having the "half mad feeling of an officer who dresses in full uniform to go into battle," she replaced the mourning dress and black straw hat she wore to honor her recently deceased father with a white muslin gown trimmed with lilac ribbons and a violet velvet bonnet. She ordered the "best open wagon" hitched behind the carriage horses, who themselves were bedecked with blue rosettes on their harness. Opening a white parasol and thus ready for battle, Jessie asked Isaac to drive her into the tiny village of Bear Valley. She would respond to the "order" in person.

At the Bates tavern in the village, she spoke to the proprietor, "a timid sort of a publican." Returning the threatening note, she told him to report to the miners that "[y]ou may come and

[391] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 102.

kill us—we are but women and children, and it will be easy—but you cannot kill the Law." Warning that help was coming to defend Las Mariposas property, she instructed Isaac to return her to the cottage. "I felt cold quivers running down my back as we turned the large circle in front of these angry men. I fully expected to be shot in the back."[392]

Jessie related this tale just once, in her unpublished memoir. She did not mention it in letters she wrote at the time, nor did she include it in the short story of the same events she wrote for *Wide Awake* magazine. The tale is not mentioned in Jessie's book *Far West Sketches* nor in her unpublished biography of her husband. Her daughter, Lily, included a retelling of the story in her own 1912 memoir, inserting herself into the tale and offering a slightly different version of the dialogue between Jessie and the tavern owner.[393] In all likelihood, the story is an unnecessary embellishment to the telling of already dramatic events taking place in July of 1858, as Frémont employees found themselves besieged by a group of miners determined to secure their own property rights over John C. Frémont's "floating" land grant. For posterity, Jessie created a narrative in which she, once again, acted bravely in defense of her husband and her family.

When the siege took place in the summer of 1858, Jessie was largely out of the public spotlight. While the 1856 election continued to be debated, and her name was frequently invoked in the post-race analysis, life turned more private for both Frémonts beginning in 1857. John turned his attention toward the business interests of Las Mariposas, while Jessie focused her considerable energy on her family. Washington, D.C., felt unfriendly to her after the election,

[392] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 102-103.
[393] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont*, 27-28.

and although New York City offered the cosmopolitan life that Jessie enjoyed, John was too far away from Las Mariposas to manage the property effectively. After the prominent role she played in the 1856 campaign, during which she used the skills in which her father had trained her, the following years found Jessie outside the political world and following the gendered norms that dictated the role of wife and mother. It is small wonder that, when looking back on the events of those first few post-election years, she strove for a narrative that focused on her as once again the defender of her husband, a spirited mate, a woman who used the very trappings of femininity to challenge those who sought to wrong her. From 1857 to 1860, she had little chance to act such a part. These were the years of a private wife.

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In his inaugural address on March 4, 1857, James Buchanan addressed the topic on the minds of most Americans. Hinting that the issue of slavery would soon be decided by the Supreme Court, he expressed confidence that the people in the territories would decide for themselves whether to allow the practice within their borders. Buchanan argued that everyone agreed slavery in the southern states remained outside the purview of the federal government. Once the unnecessary agitation over the slavery question was finished—a matter which had been settled by the Kansas-Nebraska Act and would be further confirmed in the nation's highest court—Americans could focus on other matters "of more pressing and practical importance."[394]

Minutes prior to giving his speech, Buchanan was seen in a short conversation with the man swearing him into office, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney. And, as promised in the inaugural speech, the Supreme Court two days later released an opinion in the case of *Dred Scott vs.*

[394] Kenneth M. Stampp, *American in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 65.

Sandford that did indeed address issues involving slavery and where it might be practiced.[395] The enslaved plaintiff in *Dred Scott* sued for his freedom on the grounds that, with his enslaver, he had lived in Illinois and in the Wisconsin Territory where slavery was forbidden, thereby gaining his freedom by virtue of his residence. Among those serving as counsel for Scott was Montgomery Blair, Jessie's friend and the brother of Lizzie Lee. Technically, the Court could have followed the precedent set by the 1851 *Strader* case, in which the states themselves decided who was free and who was enslaved. Roger Taney and the other justices with pro-slavery tendencies, however, chose to make a far broader decision, one that would address the issue of slavery in total. The majority opinion began by finding that Black people were not entitled to the protections of the Constitution because they were not citizens. Taney strengthened this idea by writing that Black people "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Residence in a free state or territory did not trump a slaveholder's property rights in his enslaved people. Finally, the Taney court opined that both the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the concept of popular sovereignty were unconstitutional; slaveholders had the right to bring their slaves into any territory they pleased.[396]

Rather than settling the matter of slavery, as Buchanan had promised at his inauguration, the *Dred Scott* decision further inflamed sectional divisions. Matters in Kansas also produced

[395] Initially leading Republicans made much of this conversation between Taney and the president-elect and of Buchanan's reference to a court ruling. Yet it remained unclear for decades whether Buchanan attempted to steer the Court toward an opinion that would address the slavery question in a way favorable to slaveholding interests. Only when letters were found in which Buchanan did indeed nudge Justice Robert C. Grier toward joining the majority in its pro-slavery opinion did the depth of Buchanan's interference become clear. See Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 707-708.
[396] Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 711-712. Popular sovereignty proposed that the people of a territory, as represented by their territorial legislature, had the right to choose for themselves whether to allow slavery.

more agitation as the people of that territory voted in favor of two competing state constitutions, one pro- and one anti-slavery. Sessions of Congress became so contentious that Georgia representative (and future vice-president of the Confederacy) Alexander Stephens remarked that, had weapons been present on the floor of the House during the debate over the pro-slavery Kansas constitution, serious bloodshed would have followed.[397] Yet for all the debate, passionate opinions, and actual violence, many Americans, as Buchanan suggested they should, turned their attentions to other matters, including those of a financial nature.

An economic crisis in 1857 caught the attention of businessmen, bankers, labor leaders, industrial managers, and working men across the country. A combination of issues involving European investment in U.S. securities, a reduction in the Russian wheat harvest, and a land speculation bubble in the American West combined to bring the U.S. economy to the tipping point. A decision to stop specie payments at a New York branch of an Ohio bank, arising from suspected embezzlement at the bank, proved to be just what was needed to push the economy into a panic. Bank runs, unemployment, and business failures spread across the U.S. in the fall of 1857.[398]

New York City felt the brunt of the financial downturn. Unemployment rose, and local relief agencies proved incapable of addressing the needs of so many. Laborers of all stripes turned to trade unions for redress of their grievances over longer hours and less pay. The language of "white slavery" developed as a critique of the abolition societies that sought to free Black people from bondage without addressing the needs of low-wage White people in their own

[397] Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 718.
[398] Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 719-720.

cities. While the depression lifted by the end of 1857, the contest over low-skill jobs continued between immigrant workers and free Black men and women.[399]

One innovative solution to the labor crisis in New York City came in the form of a new park project sponsored by Mayor Fernando Wood. After having seen to the purchase of a sizeable chunk of Manhattan, Wood established a citizen committee in 1856 to evaluate and eventually choose a design plan for the park. Led by author Washington Irving and including the historian-statesman George Bancroft, the committee chose a plan proposed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the implementation of which would ensure the employment of hundreds of New York laborers.[400] Work began on clearing the land and putting in the necessary infrastructure to create what would become Central Park. Well-to-do New Yorkers watched the construction, even as they turned to the many amusements available in the city.

At her home near Washington Square, Jessie was several blocks away from the park site. New York was a bustling metropolis, and she found no lack of entertainments to choose from around the city. Venues like the Academy of Music and Mechanics' Hall offered live music, such as the burlesque of Buckley's Serenaders and the blackface antics of Christy's Minstrels. At the various theaters in town, including the National Theatre, the Broadway Theatre, and Burton's New Theatre, audiences enjoyed the latest dramatic or comedic fare. Laura Keene's Theatre offered plays featuring the famed British actress as well as the occasional burlesque show.[401] Even P.T. Barnum's American Museum put forth the occasional dramatization. At

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[399] Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 720-722.
[400]Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 96-97.
[401] Laura Keene was one of the most popular actresses of her time; her theaters in New York and Philadelphia also provided additional financial success. In 1865, she was performing in *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater in

Niblo's, as one magazine writer described it, one might see one night "a circus, another an Italian Opera House; then a dramatic temple , and then a lecture room." The same writer described Wallack's Lyceum, finding that "[g]reat attention is always paid to the production of pieces at this brilliant little house, and the costumes and scenery form an important part of the attraction."[402] Added to these live performances, New York City was also home to various lecturers, singing teachers, and artists who supplemented income from oil paintings by giving lessons.

The cultural enticements of New York City offered Jessie the opportunity to continue the cosmopolitan education begun under her father's tutelage. During the same month that saw her husband's defeat for the presidency, she attended Meyerbeer's *Star of the North*, enthralled by its sentimental telling of a romance between Russian Tsar Peter the Great and a young *cantiniere* (canteen girl).[403] In the months that followed, she attended Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, based on Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of Lammermoor*, and the play *Camille*, based on *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. One reviewer, although raving about the performance of Philadelphia-born Matilda Heron as Dumas' dying courtesan, opined that the "Camilles of Paris" are "blemishes" and "incorrigible."[404] Jessie, by contrast, enjoyed the heartbreakingly tragic nature of the play. After attending the performance, Jessie reported to Lizzie Lee's father,

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Washington, D.C. After the shot fired by John Wilkes Booth, Keene made her way to the presidential box. With the president's bleeding head in her lap, she attempted to comfort a weeping Mary Lincoln.

[402] "Amusements," *New York Times* (New York, NY), January 26, 1857; "Places of Public Amusement," *Putnam's Monthly*, February 1854.

[403] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 18, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; "City Items," *New-York Tribune*, November 17, 1856.

[404] "Wallack's Theater - Debut of Miss Heron," *New-York Tribune*, January 23, 1857; "The Opera--Great Success of Madame de Wilhorst," *New York Daily Herald*, January 30, 1857.

Preston Blair, that she "saw tears in Mr. Frémont's eyelashes & found it hard work to keep my own stormy eyes from overflowing."[405]

When attending performances such as these, Jessie also enjoyed the way her presence drew attention. She remarked to Lizzie that she was "quite a dividing attraction" at the theater. In one outing, she was "amused" to see Isabella Cass, daughter of Michigan Senator Lewis Cass, "watching with her cold venomous eyes, the succession of clever & fashionable men who came to my box." She concluded that "[w]e have upset her throne."[406] When visitors came to the Frémont home, they often joined Jessie at plays at Warrick's or an opera at the Academy of Music. When Preston Blair visited just prior to the November election, Jessie "by way of neutralizing the effect of politics" took him to Niblo's to see the von Flotow opera *Martha*, telling Lizzie that Blair "was really interested and pleased."[407]

Despite these amusements, California was never far from the minds of both Jessie and her husband. But as 1856 passed into 1857, neither John nor Jessie seemed particularly anxious to leave New York—at least not immediately. John turned to Las Mariposas business, according to Jessie, "this time with solid prospects of success." More skeptical than her husband, Jessie quipped that until she saw "actual thousands I shall give small heed to the promised millions."[408] Jessie settled into the life of a New York City matron, noting that "it was not easy to reconcile myself to the isolation and silence that now replaced my former large and pleasant family

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[405] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, January 31, 1857, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 148-151.
[406] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 18, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[407] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 2, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; "Niblo's Garden," *New-York Tribune*, November 1, 1856.
[408] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 18, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

life."[409] But she filled letters to her closest friend, Lizzie, and to Lizzie's father, Preston Blair, with tales of being a wife and a mother.

While Jessie spent her evenings at operas, plays, and musicales, her days focused on her children. In October 1856, Jessie's youngest, Frank, became ill to the point where Jessie spent sleepless nights in the nursery and wrote that she did not "care of the election," even as she expressed her opinion that a victory for her husband was still possible.[410] Five-year-old Charley next came down with scarlet fever and suffered delirium for four days and nights before beginning to recover. For Jessie, the illnesses of her young sons brought back the heart-wrenching sadness she felt at the death of her daughter Anne Beverely in 1853. Once Charley was recovering, she wrote to Lizzie. She had thought of both Lizzie and her husband, Samuel Phillips Lee, who were Charley's godparents, as she watched her boy gasping for breath, recalling that "same struggle" before Anne Beverley's death.[411] As Jessie cared for her ailing boys, the memory of the little daughter who had died in her arms was never far from her thoughts.

Jessie's letters from 1857 expressed her interest and pride in her children. She hired a Mrs. Seiler, an "Englishwoman married to a German political refugee," as a governess to school fourteen-year-old Lily "in everything" and five-year-old Charley "in as much as his age can take." Mrs. Seiler, who spoke French, also helped Charley with his lessons in the language, which he had first picked up as a very little boy during the Frémont's stay in Paris. Frank was

[409] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 207.
[410] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, October 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[411] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, December 6, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

described as an adventurer, and his daring fall down the dining room stairs caused Jessie to jest that she expected "to grow grey rapidly now that there are two of them [Frank and Charley] to make experiments on their bones."[412] Jessie's pride in Lily's accomplishments made it into letters to the Blair family, where she expressed her feeling that Lily was "doing well—her handwriting is getting good & she writes ten good sized sheets of dictation with only as many errors."[413]

If there was a child that Jessie did not praise, it was young Nina Frémont, John's niece. Born in 1838, Nina was the only child of John's brother, Horation Francis Frémont, and his wife, Jane Fisher.[414] When Horation died in 1839, the baby Nina's time was divided between her mother Jane and her paternal grandmother Anne. With Anne's death in 1847, Nina's time came to be split between her mother and the Frémonts. While she was four years older than Jessie's Lily, the two girls were raised nearly as sisters, although Nina never received quite the same opportunities that Lily did. According to Jessie, Nina "studies but without interest," and "has one of those inert natures that yield to depression without one struggle." Nina's frivolous character reminded Jessie of the children who need "new toys" to keep them amused; life at the Frémont house was "too serious for her disposition." Jessie never warmed to the girl, finding her "half dyspeptic & the other half ennuyée [sic]."[415] Nina would remain off and on with the

[412] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, January 31, 1857, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 148-151.
[413] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, March 1, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[414] Ancestry.com. *Kentucky, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1783-1965* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016.
[415] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, March 1, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

Frémonts until she married in 1864.[416] Jessie, who thought of the Blairs as family, often sought their hospitality as a means of entertaining her temperamental niece.

More and more, Preston Blair became a father-figure in Jessie's life, someone to whom she reached out when relations with her own father proved tenuous, as they had during the 1856 election. Jessie had known Blair since her childhood, as he was a good friend of Thomas Hart Benton, and her letters to him were lengthy and often intimate. In many of her missives, she begged the older gentleman to visit her in New York, enticing him with stories of his godson Frank, with descriptions of operas and other cultural happenings, and by sharing details about her life as a busy New York City wife and mother. Also, being her father's daughter, she kept abreast of politics and often shared her views with Blair. In one letter, she wrote of the recent death of Preston Brooks, the South Carolina congressman who had savagely beaten Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner in 1856. Observing that news of Brooks's death "brought up a crowd of political ideas and memories," she reflected that his death would have been seen as a "'*jugement de Dieu*'" (judgment of God) in times past.[417]

She also shared with both Blair and his daughter Lizzie her attempts to restore the close relationship she had with her father prior to the election. No longer holding political office, Thomas Hart Benton undertook a lecture tour through the winter and spring of 1856-1857. The lectures, ostensibly to "pacify the public mind" and restore "fraternal feeling" after the 1856 election, sometimes brought him to New York City, where Jessie was excited to open her doors

[416] In 1864, Nina married Henry Porter in New Orleans, during the Union occupation of the city. She died in April 1903, just four months after Jessie's death.
[417] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, January 31, 1857, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 148-151.

to her father.[418] In March of 1857, she wrote glowingly of a visit from Benton, noting that "[a]t first he was formal and restrained" but that reticence gave way to the "cheerful informality that brings a choking sensation in my throat." She lavished praise on John for doing whatever he could to make Benton feel welcome in the Frémont home. "One might think," she wrote, "Mr. Frémont had tried to defeat Father so much does he do to make him feel everything on the old footing."[419] Later in March, Benton once again visited the Frémont home, this time with Jessie's sisters and their husbands. The family had gathered to see youngest daughter Susan off with her husband, the French diplomat Gauldrée de Boilleau, to his new posting in Calcutta.[420] It was the last time Benton would see all his daughters together, and the last time he would see his youngest daughter, Susan. In September, he would be diagnosed with the cancer that would end his life.

Preston Blair saw through Jessie's sunny observations about reunion with her father. Writing to his son Frank, Blair concluded that Benton "deigned" to spend the night with his daughter and her family in New York, while Jessie was "happy that he is willing to forgive her for desiring her husband's election to the presidency & banishes the thought that he greatly contributed to prevent it."[421] While Jessie happily proclaimed her family to be reunited, she also acknowledged that some bonds had been stretched too far to mend.

Jessie knew she could find comfort and consolation at the Blair Estate in Silver Spring, Maryland. While her father, elder sister Eliza, and Eliza's husband William Carey Jones lived at the rebuilt home on C Street, Jessie found little to recommend a trip to Washington.

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[418] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton,* 428.
[419] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, March 1, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[420] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 430.
[421] Preston Blair to Frank Blair, February 5, 1857, quoted in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, fn 6, 151.

Contemplating a visit in early June 1857, Jessie fretted that her father wanted her to meet "all the men who were so personally malignant last year & with whom nothing can make me associate." Similarly, a proposed trip to Virginia Springs with her father led Jessie to observe that she "had enough of Virginia hospitality last year not to risk it again."[422] The slights and insults of the 1856 election never left Jessie's mind, and she saw spending time at her father's house as bringing back bitter memories.

In January 1857, Jessie shared news with Lizzie that eclipsed thoughts of Thomas Benton and the unsteady relationship between father and daughter. In a letter commenting on the way that the Democratic party "has always shewn itself especially remorseless" in ridding itself of its most loyal members (like Benton), Jessie included a postscript asking Lizzie to engage the services of "our french [sic] friend Matilda." Not having "had a sight of bloody mse [menses]," Jessie confided that she was pregnant. While she hoped her "sick stomach & other familiar symptoms" might be those of "the change of life," Jessie was only thirty-two years old. Lizzie was instructed to pay Matilda, the midwife, a retainer that would make her available from the middle of August to the first of October, meaning Jessie felt she had conceived sometime toward the end of 1856 or beginning of 1857.[423]

Lizzie reciprocated with a letter in April of 1857 announcing her own pregnancy. After fourteen years of marriage and at the age of thirty-eight, Lizzie expected to welcome her first child that summer. From the vantage point of experience, Jessie offered advice to her friend. She recommended "chloroform (you can take that safely) you may go to sleep and wake up from

[422] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, June 2, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[423] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, January 23, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

a dreamless sleep to find my godson awaiting your recognition." As Lizzie and Samuel Phillips Lee served as Charley's godparents, and Preston and Eliza Blair did the same for Frank, Jessie saw no reason why she would not be asked to perform the honor for the future Lee baby. Upon sharing the news of Lizzie's approaching motherhood, Jessie reported John's witticism that "the election did it, that it brought out all your dormant energies."[424] While Lizzie would safely deliver a son, Francis Preston Blair Lee, in August of 1857, Jessie did not bear another child.

The only clue as to what happened to Jessie's pregnancy comes from a reference in a May 4, 1857, letter to Lizzie. Jessie wrote that "one bad feature of childbearing is depression of spirits." She remarked that she, too, suffered occasionally from depression, "without however having your cause—but this continued pain at the heart wears out strength of mind as well as body." Observing that Lizzie's possible depression resulted from pregnancy, Jessie noted that her own melancholy sprang from being "sad unto death." Whether Jessie suffered a miscarriage or had misjudged her earlier symptoms, she now had no claim to pregnancy as an excuse for dismal spirits. She wrote about how she was taking care of herself, walking four to six miles a day, teaching Charley, and helping John, but her doctor advised her that "nothing can help . . . but entire undisturbed equanimity and such a placid brain & heart as I never had & cannot well have unless I were an idiot." Jessie concluded her letter contemplatively, writing that both she and Lizzie "have our horizons bounded but we cannot say how far yet we may travel." She acknowledged Lizzie's concerns over her pregnancy by describing Lizzie as "so self-sacrificing and good" that she need not fear God's power being taken up against her. Jessie concluded that

[424] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 1857, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 154-155.

"Mr. Lee . . . will value his child and if he can, love you more than ever for the pain you endured in giving it to him."[425]

There is another possibility to explain Jessie's low spirits in that spring of 1857. While Jessie had decided that she and the children would summer on Staten Island, as they had done in 1855, something changed her mind; she began to prepare instead for a trip to Paris. While sorrow over the loss of a baby might have driven Jessie to seek respite in "that lovely life we had had in Paris," there remains another possibility.[426] During the 1856 campaign, a rumor arose that John had, according to New York Senator Preston King, "debauched while living in 9th Street New York in 1856 a chambermaid or servant girl."[427] While King suspected that the Blair family was aware of the situation, they refused to speak of the matter.[428] John Bigelow also alluded to John's involvement with the chambermaid, writing in his journal decades later: "As a candidate for President in 1856 [Frémont] did everything pretty much that he could do to bring his party into contempt though it was not only partially [sic] discovered until after the election."[429] Bigelow cut off relations with both John and Jessie; even his wife turned "the cold shoulder *immediately after the loss of the election*" [emphasis Jessie's]. Jessie wrote to Preston Blair about what she saw as the "defection" of the Bigelows, commenting on the hurt she felt,

[425] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, May 4, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[426] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 207.
[427] Preston King to Gideon Welles, April 9, 1860, Papers of Gideon Welles, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[428] Preston King to Gideon Welles, March 3, 1860, Papers of Gideon Welles, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[429] John Bigelow, "Journal," n.p., John Bigelow Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY, quoted in Margaret Clapp, *Forgotten First Citizen: John Bigelow* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1947), 107.

"especially as so silly & untrue ground is given for it." She mentioned that Frank Blair told her that "Mrs. Bigelow had given him many specifications," but Jessie did not want to hear them.[430]

Jessie never directly indicated that she knew of John's infidelity, although her reference to the Bigelows hints that she knew why they had withdrawn from the Frémonts. No matter what caused Jessie to travel to Paris in 1857, she and the children sailed in June of that year. By the end of July, the family was settled into a home in the Parisian suburb of St. Germaine en Laye. John, meanwhile, traveled to California.

Once comfortable in her new location, Jessie escaped into her favorite pastime—reading novels. Since the days when she read *Ivanhoe* in her grandmother McDowell's plantation house, Jessie indulged in novels with romantic themes. Books from Cervantes to Scott to Thackery lined her shelves.[431] Often, she would identify herself or others in the fictional characters, sharing these observations in letters to loved ones and in the pages of her later memoir. She saw her grandmother McDowell in the character of Rachel Esmond in Thackery's *The Virginians*.[432] In John's friend and political ally, Charles James, she saw the character of Warrington in that same author's *Pendennis*.[433] Most often, she saw herself and John within the pages of romantic literature. When John was a young explorer, she compared him to Sir Walter Scott's *Young Lochinvar*. While at home outside Paris during the summer of 1857, she enjoyed Jemima Montgomery von Tautphoeus's *The Initials*, which John had read as well. She saw herself and

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[430] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, January 8, 1858, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 180-182.
[431] Thackery appears to have been a special favorite of Jessie's, and of Lily's; while living at Las Mariposas, the Frémonts purchased a saddle horse for Lily, which Jessie and Lily prompted named "Becky Sharp" from Thackery's *Vanity Fair*. See Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont*, 89.
[432] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 15.
[433] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, January 12, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

John in the romantic couple of Hamilton and Hildegarde, writing that Hildegarde "knew she could make him happy as she did but it was an experiment to make with his disposition."[434] Ever the romantic, Jessie referred to the story of Héloïse and Abelard in a letter to Preston Blair, calling the woman forced into a nunnery for her love of Peter Abelard "my dear old favorite Héloïse."[435] While she enjoyed the romantic sentimentality of Victorian-era novels, Jessie did not limit herself to simply reading about love.

She wrote longingly and passionately to John. Sharing a story about her sister Susan, Jessie both began and ended her letter with expressions of love. "My sweetheart I spoil quantities of my pretty paper writing you things that begin well enough and then degenerate into the most selfish laments at not being with you" began one letter, which ended with "I am proud & happy to be your trusted friend."[436] In a letter written just days later, she reminded him of their upcoming wedding anniversary, reminiscing about the prior year when he "made it a very good day to me and told me very kind things." In this letter, she asked him to love her "in memory of the old times when I was so dear to you," while in yet another missive she wanted "to be still beside you with nothing to think or do but sit and wait for a little kind word from you—Sirius by the dear master." Expecting John to arrive soon in France, Jessie claimed that she was "becoming coquettish in my old age," reminding him that "all look to your coming for the only real happiness we know."[437]

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[434] Jessie Benton Frémont to John C. Frémont, July 25, 1857, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[435] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, August 3, 1857, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 167-171
[436] Jessie Benton Frémont to John C. Frémont, July 25, 1857, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[437] Jessie Benton Frémont to John C. Frémont, July 29 and September 23, 1857, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

John did not arrive in France in October, as Jessie had expected. Instead, the month brought letters from home, advising Jessie that Thomas Hart Benton's health was deteriorating; if she wanted to see her father again, she needed to go to Washington. Taking Charley as her escort and leaving Lily and Nina in the care of friends, Jessie arrived in New York City on November 4, 1857.[438] To her surprise and satisfaction, John had reached the city the day before, after traveling back from California, and was there to greet her and Charley.[439]

While Jessie found "Father shokingly [sic] thin and changed," she nevertheless acquiesced to John's wish for the whole family, including Lily and Nina still in France, to reunite and travel to California and reside at Las Mariposas. According to Jessie, Thomas Benton's physicians assured her that his death was not imminent and that, when she returned in September of 1858, she would find him "as well or even better."[440] Jessie made arrangements for her "girls" (Lily and Nina) to sail back to the United States, and, while she waited, she split her time between New York City, the Blair estate at Silver Spring, and her father's home on C Street in Washington, D.C. It was during this interlude that she once again found herself in the public spotlight—if only for a few weeks.

Two stories featuring Jessie, circulating in early 1858, bore the taint of the 1856 election. The first involved Jessie attending a service at Brooklyn's Plymouth Church. The popularity of the church owed much to its pastor, Henry Ward Beecher, scion of the famous Beecher family

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[438] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, October 13, 1857, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. In defense of taking a six-year-old boy as her "escort," Jessie told Lizzie that "he will be a trouble at sea but in this evil thinking nation a woman cannot travel quite alone unless she be old & ugly & I am only halfway to that state." Just where her youngest son, Frank, was during this time is unclear, as Jessie did not mention him.
[439] "City Items," *New-York Tribune*, November 4, 1857.
[440] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir" (first draft), 114.

whose members included preacher Lyman Beecher and authors Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. According to the reports, Jessie, not having any money when the collection plate passed, dropped in a "heavy gold ring." Beginning as a story highlighting the generous nature of "Our Jessie," the article ended with an indictment of "the contemptible affectation of benevolence, and the ostentatious parade of charity."[441] The reference to "Our Jessie" ties the story to the 1856 campaign. That the incident took place at Plymouth Church also shared echoes of the campaign, as Henry Ward Beecher spent months away from his ministry in 1856 to stump for John. To add insult to injury, another paper reported that Jessie "redeemed" the ring for five dollars—despite an offer of fifty dollars for it having been received by the church. This caused a writer to comment that the incident had "the air of a piece of premeditated stage-play more becoming to a New York theatre . . . than the solemn proceedings of the House of God."[442]

The next story to appear that spring of 1858 shared the same "Our Jessie" theme and connection to the campaign. The author of the article wrote that in a biographical essay in the *New American Cyclopedia* on Thomas Hart Benton, the Senator's second daughter's name was given as "Ann Benton." Charging that the essay was written by Benton himself, the newspaperman drew the conclusion that "Jessie" was merely a nickname and was never her "baptismal" name. This premise led to gleeful efforts to knock down the myth of "Our Jessie." As a wag from the Sandusky, Ohio, *Daily Commercial Register* reported, "So, then, all the romance of 'Our Jessie' is gone, and she is reduced to plain, matter-of-fact Ann Frémont. How

[441] "Jessie's Gold Ring," *Times Union*, March 8, 1858.
[442] "That Gold Ring," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 12, 1858.

would 'Our Ann' sound? Not very romantic, all will have to confess."[443] Jessie's role in the 1856 election continued to draw ridicule long after the events had receded into the past.

Despite this dubious return to the public's notice, Jessie had private matters on her mind as she waited to leave for California. Writing to Lizzie Lee upon returning home from her sojourn in Paris, Jessie again shared advice from her vantage point of several pregnancies. Wondering how Lizzie was feeding her infant son, born in August, she offered to obtain a wet nurse in case Lizzie was "still imaginative enough to suppose yourself one." Upon learning that Lizzie was indeed still nursing her baby, Jessie remonstrated with her to "stop it altogether." She informed her friend that "all the theories about what nursing does for the mother" and child are "fudge & nonsense." She warned that nursing a child will "drain your heart's blood to make bad milk," and, contrary to the old wives' tale, Lizzie would "wake up to a second nurseling [sic] in spite of your pains."[444] It appears that Jessie had previously engaged the services of wet nurses for Lily and Frank as infants, although she did nurse Charley herself. She remarked after the birth of Frank that she thought she loved Charley "better than I ever can Frank, for he is my own nursling and has a hundred faults that come with his Mother's milk."[445]

Planning her trip to Las Mariposas, Jessie worried about the domestic situation in her future home. To Lizzie, she expressed some frustration at the westward move, remarking that "Mr. Frémont thinks of the climate & the sunrise over the fine mountain scenery, the spring flowers & horseback rides" while Jessie herself would be compelled to cook, clean, manage the

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[443] "Jessie or Not," *Daily Commercial Register*, April 15, 1858.
[444] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 4, 1857, and January 11, 1858, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. The old wives' tale that Jessie dismissed postulated that a woman cannot conceive a child while still breast feeding.
[445] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, January 12, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

washing and ironing, and help John with his work.[446] She worried over the entertaining she would have to do, complaining that when she had "done ninety-nine polite things the missing hundredth will wipe them all out as with the Bigelows—my last awful warning of the uselessness of civilities."[447] She confided to Preston Blair that she felt "a stouter woman than myself might fall back dismayed from such an array of work." Not even the prospect of being with John mitigated her concerns as she wrote that she would "see if that comes to more than being in the same state with him—at least a large half of the time."[448]

One last domestic matter awaited Jessie's attention before she left for California. She needed to say goodbye to her father. Thomas Hart Benton, maintaining the facade of recovering health, asked Jessie to leave both Lily and Nina with him in Washington, D.C., as Jessie expected only to stay in California until the fall. John, however, made his wish known to Jessie that he wanted the entire family together at Las Mariposas. For the last time, Jessie faced a choice between her father's wishes and her husband's. As she had each previous time, she chose John. Jessie asked Lizzie to "stand by me when the fight comes on for Father is going to make one. I am very well & shall come away from there all upset again by having to displease him." As she explained her decision, "It is not easy to serve two masters and I would like so much to obey both of mine, but if I must choose it will be for the one that I think needs & wishes me the

[446] At this time, John expected to produce a new volume of his expedition reports, which would include the "Geographical Memoir" of California as well as summaries of the fourth and fifth expeditions. While Jessie mentioned it often in her correspondence, the book was never completed.
[447] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, January 11, 1858, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[448] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, December 25, 1857, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 177-178.

most."[449] The Frémonts, along with business associates attached to Las Mariposas, left New York City on March 20, 1858, headed for the small village of Bear Valley and the Las Mariposas rancho.[450]

Since her first trip to California in 1849, many things had changed about the journey across the Isthmus of Panama. Improvements to steamboat travel made both the Atlantic and Pacific sides of the crossing more pleasant and even somewhat luxurious. The Panama Railroad, providing service across the Isthmus and completed in 1855, offered still more luxury. The Frémont party had the benefit of what one traveler described as a "special train" and "a gorgeous lunch" during their crossing.[451] Jessie reported that she was the only traveler to experience any discomfort, finding that the Atlantic side of the travel was "not the pleasure it used to be" and left her with a bloody nose among other ailments. The calm waters of the Pacific brought back her well-being, and the family arrived in San Francisco on April 12, 1858.[452]

Among those traveling to Bear Valley with the Frémont family, John Raymond Howard, the son of one of John's business associates, offered a description of the little white cottage on the Las Mariposas property. About half a mile up the hill from Bear Valley, the cottage had a sitting room, dining room, office, kitchen, and pantries on the first floor. On the second were several bedrooms. Howard left a description of his hostess, writing:

> Mrs. Frémont was then about thirty-four years of age, already taking on somewhat of the bodily fullness of her father Senator

[449] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, February 1, 1858, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[450] "Untitled," *The Buffalo Commercial,* March 20, 1858.
[451] John R. Howard, *Remembrance of Things Past: A Familiar Chronicle of Kinsfolk and Friends Worth While* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1925), 78
[452] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 24, 1858, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; John R. Howard, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 78; and "John C. Frémont," *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences*, April 16, 1858.

> Benton, but retaining the wavy brown hair, expressive eyebrows, sparkling eyes, and piquant chin to be seen in portraits of her youth. She was incessantly interesting, well read, witty, genial, with a masculine grasp of affairs, feminine intuitions of policy, and a gift of irony that often pointed her observations. She was of affectionate disposition, and overflowing with maternal instinct.[453]

For a woman who had worried over the numerous household obligations she would face at Las Mariposas, Jessie settled into life on the property quickly. Writing to Lizzie just a week after arriving, she described beautifying the grounds "with my energetic planting." Flowers of various kinds took root, while tomatoes and cabbages offered the initial makings of a vegetable garden. Unlike her life in Monterey during the Gold Rush, when fresh food was nearly impossible to find, Las Mariposas offered "quantities of milk, buttermilk & fresh butter & eggs." Jessie's earlier concerns about the housework evaporated with the efforts of Frank's nurse, the maid, Rose, and a "Spanish negrowoman from the West Indies" who took charge of the laundry for three dollars a day. Lily acquired her own horse, and one of John's men, Albert Lea, began teaching Frank and Charley to ride bareback. Jessie noted that all the Frémonts were "well and very contented," with the boys "already browned with red cheeks." She asked Lizzie to keep her apprised of the condition of Thomas Benton, reminding her friend that travel took "only 25 days from here to Washington & do not fail to write and tell if Father wishes to see me. I can always come—there is no trouble about it now."[454]

It was too late for Thomas Hart Benton to summon his second daughter. With daughters Eliza and Sarah at his side, he passed away on April 10, 1858. Susan was still in Europe with

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[453] John R. Howard, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 80-82.
[454] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, April 24, 1858, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

her husband, and Jessie had not yet stepped off the steamship at San Francisco. His funeral at the house on C Street took place on Monday, April 12. In a driving rain, political friends and enemies came to pay their respects, including President James Buchanan, Secretary of State Lewis Cass, other members of the Cabinet, members of Congress, and an array of foreign diplomats. Newspapers across the country carried the news of the old Senator's demise, focusing on his love of country and his tireless efforts to better the nation. But not everyone spoke kindly of Benton. Former president John Tyler noted privately that no one but Benton had "less of the public sympathy in life or was less lamented in death."[455] Politics, the life's blood of Benton since his youth, would have the last say about his accomplishments at his death.

Jessie recalled the day she received word of her father's passing. John's lawyer and his wife rode up on horseback to the cottage, and the lawyer went inside to speak to John. Jessie walked to where the lawyer's wife had remained mounted at the gate, determined to offer a polite greeting although she did not personally like the woman. The woman surprised her "by saying that she was glad to see me in colors, and cheerful again." When Jessie inquired further, the woman answered, "Oh, so soon after your father's death." As the embarrassed lawyer rushed out to hurry his wife away, Jessie turned toward John. She recalled asking for confirmation of the news. John answered by gathering her in his arms. She later wrote, "I saw his tears. He loved him too." Jessie remembered decades later that she had been unwell on board ship on April 10, the day of her father's death, and now, to her, it all made sense.[456]

[455] William Nisbet Chambers, *Old Bullion Benton*, 439-440.
[456] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 97.

At the time of Benton's passing, though, Jessie made no such connection between any illness on board ship and her father's death. To Preston Blair, she observed that she "knew my Father had a mortal disease" but that the doctor let her believe she could still see him alive in September. She mentioned having a last letter from Benton in which he told her that she should leave for California, that "it is not right for a family to be divided." She wrote Blair that she felt "more than justified in being here [California] when I see how much I do to keep Mr. Frémont where his interests require."[457]

Jessie's attempts to regain her father's favor did not end with his death. Through the decades to come, she wrote often and glowingly of him, seeking both to cement his place in the history of the United States and to prove that she had been a devoted daughter all along. Perhaps she had not read the obituary from the *New-York Tribune*, which concluded that "the most repugnant of the matches" made by Benton's four daughters was "the marriage of his daughter Ann to the late Republican candidate for the presidency."[458] Nevertheless, Jessie's later memoir and other writings recalled only the affection between her father and her husband and the ways in which they had worked together to see that the United States came to "own the continent from sea to sea."[459] Never having again to choose between husband and father, Jessie spent the later decades of her life protecting and enhancing the reputation of each.

Jessie mourned for her father, yet she and her family made life pleasant for themselves at Las Mariposas. With the children happy and healthy in the warm, sunny days of late spring, the only call for anxiety in the white cottage came from the legal system. A survey ordered in the

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[457] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, May 1858, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 197-202.
[458] "Untitled," *New-York Tribune*, April 12, 1858.
[459] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir" (first draft), 114.

1854 ruling in *Frémont vs. United States*, an action brought to establish the actual borders of Las Mariposas, had adjusted the "floating" boundaries so that John came into possession of Mt. Ophir and the Josephine and Pine Tree mines then being worked by the Merced Mining Company and by individual miners. John, busy running for president in 1856, took no steps to secure his property nor did he evict these "tenants" working the rich veins of gold. When the election was over and John once again turned toward Las Mariposas business, he instructed his agent to publish an announcement in January 1857 that ordered Merced Mining and the individual miners to vacate the property—and leave behind all their buildings, equipment, infrastructure, and machinery.[460]

Merced Mining sought an injunction against John's order, which was granted by California Chief Justice Peter Burnett. John went ahead anyway with his plans for the operation of mining on Las Mariposas and in April of 1857 leased the mines around Mt. Ophir to one Biddle Boggs.[461] Boggs and John then sued Merced Mining for working the Mt. Ophir mines. The matter reached the California Supreme Court, and in March 1858, Burnett again ruled in favor of Merced Mining, finding that the laws governing the original Mexican land grants retained all mineral rights to the state, and this legal jurisdiction passed from Mexico to the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. To this decision, Justice David Terry

[460] Paul Kens, *Justice Stephen Field: Shaping Liberty from the Gold Rush to the Gilded Age* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 79-80.
[461] Biddle Boggs appears to have been something of a hanger-on at Las Mariposas. Originally from Pennsylvania, he was described as a "jack of all trades" with a "perfectly delightful conceit in his own wisdom and importance." John Raymond Howard, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 81. Why John chose to lease him the mining operations then in dispute is unclear.

added a separate consenting opinion.[462] Seeking a different ruling, John's attorneys requested a new hearing.

According to Jessie, what happened next was the direct result of Terry's one-paragraph consenting opinion, in which the justice wrote that "the title to the gold did not pass by the grant to the lessor or plaintiff."[463] Trouble began on July 9, 1858, when a group of fifty to sixty miners, calling themselves the Hornitas League and led by the president of Merced Mining, laid siege to one of the Frémont mines, trapping miners inside the tunnel and refusing to let them out.[464] John appeared on the scene to try to restore order, and tensions mounted, although no man resorted to violence. According to the newspapers, the trapped men had adequate weapons and supplies to withstand the siege.[465]

Jessie herself explained how the miners came to be well equipped. In a letter to Preston Blair written not long after the siege ended, she told him that the "besieging men attempted to starve out our men & refused to let provisions be passed to them." One woman, whose husband was among the miners trapped inside, took both a revolver and a basket of food to the site of the siege. Refusing to let her husband starve, Mrs. Ketton threatened to shoot any man trying to stop her from delivering her provisions. After being let in that first day, she appeared at the mine twice a day throughout the siege, packing weapons and ammunition under the food in her basket.[466] Jessie later delighted in this story of a woman's heroism, including it in the short story

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[462] "The Important Supreme Court Decision," *Daily Alta California*, March 19, 1858. The antipathy of the Frémonts toward Terry likely stemmed from Terry's passionate stance in favor of slavery.
[463] "The Important Supreme Court Decision," *Daily Alta California*, March 19, 1858. Also Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 100.
[464] Hornitas was the name of a village near the mines.
[465] "Troubles in Mariposa," *Sacramento Daily Union*, July 15, 1858.
[466] Jessie Benton Frémont to Preston Blair, July 16, 1858, in Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 205-208.

"Besieged," which appeared in the children's magazine *Wide Awake* in May 1889. Besides the highly dramatic scene of Mrs. Ketton, Jessie's "Besieged" also told the story of Jessie's experience of the events and of the efforts to keep her and her children safe while John attended to matters at the mine.[467]

Eventually word reached Governor Downey that aid was needed at Las Mariposas, and he sent volunteer troops to restore the peace. John and the men of the Hornitas League agreed to a cease-fire; the besieging men left the mine, and Frémont's miners were released after having been trapped less than a week. An uneasy calm settled over the area, even as John and his men stockpiled weapons, ammunition, and other provisions near the white cottage. Jessie found her "long French trunks and boxes of delicate clothing…were just stacked under trees; the arms and ammunition were the precious things now, and had the best accommodation, while their guard bivouacked around."[468] As both Merced and Frémont miners continued to work the quartz veins, the request was granted for a re-hearing on the case of *Biddle Boggs vs. The Merced Mining Company*.

Judges changed frequently on California's three-person Supreme Court in the state's turbulent first decade. By the fall of 1859, both Burnett and Terry had left the bench. Stephen Field became the Chief Justice, and Associate Justices Joseph Baldwin and W.W. Cope completed the trio. Field granted the motion of Boggs and Frémont for a new hearing. Baldwin, having formerly served as one of John's attorneys, did not offer an opinion on the matter. Field

[467] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Besieged," *Wide Awake Magazine*, May 1889. Even in this dramatic, and perhaps slightly fictionalized, account, Jessie does not mention riding into Bear Valley to respond to the demand that she and her children abandon Las Mariposas. This strengthens the finding that the incident described in her unpublished memoir did not, in fact, happen.
[468] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Besieged," *Wide Awake Magazine*, May 1889.

wrote a ruling, with Cope concurring, that completely reversed the Burnett ruling, finally granting John all mineral rights for the property he owned and setting a judicial precedent for property ownership that would affect the state for decades.[469]

While legal troubles always seemed to simmer below the surface, the main contests had been concluded. As Jessie expected, she began to entertain visitors to the rancho. Among these was Horace Greeley, the independent-minded founder and editor of the *New-York Tribune*. Touring the west in the spring and summer of 1859, Greeley arrived at Bear Valley and "found friends and grateful rest" with the Frémonts.[470] Jessie recalled that the newspaperman seemed surprised to find "'the order of a New England village'" in Bear Valley where chaos had reigned the year prior. After touring the mining operations, he came to Jessie's table, where he peppered his hostess with questions about how she had carved out her "beautifully comfortable way of living." Jessie happily boasted about the ways in which Bear Valley was a more cultured environment than he might imagine. She told him about the Viennese baker, the Italian man who ran a restaurant and wine shop, and the French family whose wife and daughter took care of the delicate muslins Jessie and the girls wore. Seeing him on his way to Yosemite, Jessie would later note, with some disgust, that he found the region's namesake waterfall a "humbug."[471]

Another visitor was Richard Henry Dana, author of the successful *Two Years Before the Mast*. Jessie noted that Dana was a "charming" guest and that he, in turn, was "charmed" by his hostess. Dana described Jessie as a "heroine equal to either fortune, the salons of Paris and the

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[469] Fields' ruling, as had Burnett's earlier, appeared in the *Daily Alta California*. See "The Frémont Decision," *Daily Alta California*, November 18, 1859.
[470] Horace Greeley, *An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco in 1859* (New York: C. M. Saxton, Barker & Company, 1860), 298.
[471] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 214-215.

drawing-rooms of New York and Washington, or the roughest life of the remote and wild mining regions of the Mariposa."[472]

Not everyone agreed with Dana's positive evaluation of Jessie. Visiting the white cottage, Edward Bosqui described Jessie as " . . . a highly accomplished woman of fine intellect, with a towering ambition, and courage equal to her husband's. The acquisition of power and love of display and leadership were her ruling passions, and caused much of her husband's trouble and disappointment."[473] As would often be the case, men who favored John C. Frémont often found their explanation for his failures in the person of his wife.

No matter their assessments, Jessie complained that visitors "did not come often," and the extreme heat of a summer in Bear Valley proved intolerable.[474] Several times in their nearly three-year stay at Las Mariposas, some combination of John, Jessie, and the children retreated to San Francisco to escape the warm temperatures, often well over 100 degrees. Summer in Bear Valley could hardly be called pleasant, as the lack of rainfall turned the scenery into dismal shades of yellow and brown, and the air remained still and oppressive. The family established "Camp Jessie" on the top of the mountain named for her father's sobriquet, Mount Bullion; and while Jessie and the children spent several weeks there in the summer of 1859, the site brought little relief.[475]

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[472] Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883), 453.
[473] Henry R. Wagner, "Edward Bosqui, Printer and Man of Affairs," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (December 1942): 326. In his obituary, Edward Bosqui was described as both an artist himself and a patron of the arts in San Francisco. He was associated with the investment firm Palmer, Cook and Company in the 1850s, thus becoming acquainted with the Frémonts and later working as John's agent and secretary. See "Edward Bosqui Dies," *Sausalito News*, December 15, 1917.
[474] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 98.
[475] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 98.

The year 1859 proved politically intemperate as well. The contest between pro- and anti-slavery forces offered an uneasy preview of a future then unimaginable. On the personal level, John announced in November that he would not consider a run for the presidency in the 1860 election, purportedly writing that he "would not again encounter the vexation, mortification and annoyance" that shaped his 1856 campaign.[476] In California, the contest over slavery played out in a fatal duel between former U.S. Senator David Broderick and former California Supreme Court justice David Terry. While this battle was between Democrats, John and Jessie sided with Broderick over Terry, who they still blamed for the troubles with the Hornitas League. Within six weeks of Broderick's death at Terry's hand in September 1859, John pledged $500 to the building of a monument in Broderick's memory.[477] Finally, on the national stage, word reached California of an October raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The perpetrator was a fiery opponent of slavery named John Brown, already well known for his role in the massacre of pro-slavery Kansas settlers at Pottawatomie in 1856.[478] In spite of the agitation, no one could foresee what would happen in 1860. The Frémonts continued life as usual at Las Mariposas.

The heat at the little white cottage began to negatively affect Jessie's health. She complained to Lizzie Lee that the "heat & the effects of high mountain climate" caused her to

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[476] "A Letter from Frémont," *Daily Alta California*, November 1, 1859.

[477] "Subscription," *Daily Alta California*, October 27, 1859. The state's Democratic party, like its national organization, was split between Lecompton (pro-slavery) and anti-Lecompton (free soil) Democrats, based on their support for or opposition to the pro-slavery state constitution of Kansas. The relationship between Terry, a Lecompton Democrat, and Broderick, a free soil advocate, became especially heated when Broderick read a Sacramento newspaper article that included harsh words spoken against him by Terry. Broderick offered harsh words of his own, which were repeated to Terry. Terry sought a retraction; Broderick refused. At their duel on September 12, 1958, both men fired their pistols, but only Terry struck his intended target. Terry resigned from the state Supreme Court, although he remained active in California politics until his death. See Russell Buchanan, *David S. Terry of California: Dueling Judge* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1956), 83-110.

[478] While John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry occurred on October 17, word did not reach the San Francisco papers until nearly a month later. See "General Dispatch," *Daily Alta California*, November 11, 1859.

suffer "headaches giddiness & actual fainting."[479] John arranged to purchase land on the outskirts of San Francisco, on a point of land jutting into the San Francisco Bay. Called by the locals Black Point for the dark laurels that grew there, Jessie, John, and the children moved to a Gothic Revival house on thirteen acres that stretched across the point on three sides. With views of the Golden Gate and the rocky heights of Alcatraz Island, Jessie described her new home as a place of "beauty and repose" whose "thirteen acres were more dear and congenial to me than the many miles and mines of the Mariposas."[480]

As she had done with the little white cottage, Jessie worked to enhance the house and grounds. She had a veranda built around three sides of the house, enlarged the parlor, and had both a summerhouse and stable added to the outbuildings. She oversaw the construction of various walkways around the property and the planting of numerous flowers, including roses and fuchsias. She and the children quickly became acquainted with the neighbors. Lily recalled that each cottage on Black Point had "groups of children, so our boys had plenty of playmates."[481] The family of Leonidas Haskell, who had been among the first to establish a home on the Point, included a daughter roughly Lily's age.[482] Nellie Haskell remained a friend and confidante of the entire Frémont family well into the twentieth century.

More than gracious living, Jessie wanted her home to be a place where John would, at long last, grow into the father she wished him to be. With the years of exploring and political office-seeking over, Jessie expected that John might take a more affectionate and engaged

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[479] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, June 2, 1860, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[480] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," unnumbered page between 215 and 216.
[481] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont*, 118-119. The land which the Frémonts owned is now part of the U.S. Army's Fort Mason.
[482] Lois Rather, *Jessie Frémont at Black Point* (Oakland: The Rather Press, 1974), 24.

posture with his three children. Never one to complain much about John, it was on this issue only that she criticized him to Lizzie Lee. In April 1857, Jessie bemoaned the fact that the gift of "parental instinct" had been "denied to Mr. Frémont."[483] At Las Mariposas, she detected a change in John's fatherly manner, giving credit to young Frank for developing a "paternal foolish fondness in Mr. Frémont at last."[484] By June 1860, settling into the home on Black Point, Jessie decided that John had finally come around. There was no longer the air of "wild-turkey" in him, that wanderlust that had beguiled him for most of his adult life; no longer was it "to him the palms; to us the shade." Now Jessie felt hers was "a complete & compact family," "share & share," and "he far happier for it."[485]

While John continued to travel often to Las Mariposas, Jessie found it not so burdensome when she had the whole of San Francisco for entertainment and enlightenment. The city had flourished since Jessie's time there in 1851. According to an article in the city's *Daily Evening Bulletin*, San Francisco now counted over ten thousand buildings within its borders, over forty of which had four stories, while another three had five stories.[486] Its streets offered a kaleidoscope of goods and services from stationers, booksellers, wine merchants, jewelers, hat makers, hotels, theaters, nurseries, and purveyors of both dry and fancy goods. Amusement could be found at the Metropolitan Theatre, Platt's Music Hall, and Maguire's Opera House, among others. One

[483] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, late April 1857, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 154-155.
[484] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 15, 1859, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[485] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, June 2, 1860, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[486] *Daily Evening Bulletin*, July 21, 1860, summarized in Lois Rather, *Jessie Benton at Black Point*, 24.

enthusiastic newcomer to the city compared it to "Aladdin's lamp," the business center being an "illustration of the magic of Yankee enterprise."[487]

Situated between San Francisco's city center and the U.S. Army's post at the Presidio, with sand dunes behind the headland that would one day form the city's suburbs, Black Point gave Jessie an opportunity to enjoy the quiet of her rural retreat, with "cows, horses & dogs—in fact thorough country comfort with a city at our door & San Francisco is a true city in its sources."[488] Jessie took special delight in participating in San Francisco's literary life. Among the erudite visitors to her "salon," a forty-year-old Herman Melville came seeking a respite from his literary endeavors, which included *Omoo*, *Typee*, and the yet-unappreciated *Moby Dick*.[489] A struggling author by the name of Bret Harte found his way to Jessie's table, dining with the Frémonts every Sunday and bringing his manuscripts for her critique. Through the Frémonts, Harte also found financially gainful employment while honing his craft.[490] After he reached fame as a writer, known for his short stories on Gold Rush California, Jessie recalled what Harte once wrote to her: "If I were shipwrecked on a desert island I should expect to see a savage coming forward with a three cornered note from you to say, I had been appointed Governor at a salary of twenty four hundred dollars."[491]

Jessie was still Thomas Hart Benton's daughter, and her attention often turned to the world of politics, including the 1860 presidential election. San Francisco men took to the polls

[487] Thomas Starr King to Thomas B. Fox, May 11, 1860, in Charles W. Wendte, *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1921), 88-89.
[488] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, June 14, 1860, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[489] "City Items," *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco, CA), October 18, 1860.
[490] Lois Rather, *Jessie Frémont at Black Point*, 51.
[491] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," unnumbered page between 215 and 216.

on November 6, 1860, casting over 14,000 votes and showing their support for Abraham Lincoln.[492] Californians overall also chose Lincoln, but only by roughly 600 votes. On November 7, word reached the city that Lincoln had won enough states to secure the election.[493]

The secession crisis that followed eventually led to seven southern states withdrawing from the Union through the winter of 1860-1861. By February 1861, these states formed the Confederate States of America and chose Mississippian Jefferson Davis as their president. Another four states joined them in the spring of 1861. Secession talk was not, however, limited to the south. In California, southern-leaning politicians and pundits recognized that the state would not join the new Confederate States of America. A plan was floated, however, for the creation of a Pacific republic. As early as November 18, just weeks after Lincoln's election, the *San Francisco Herald* offered the idea, which was endorsed by both of California's congressmen.[494] While the scheme did not go much further, the state's future in the Union remained in jeopardy for at least a few months.

As Californians sent their congressional contingent to Washington, D.C., all of whom held southern sympathies, one man arose as a powerful orator speaking on behalf of the Union. The Reverend Thomas Starr King (Starr to his friends) arrived in San Francisco in April of 1860 to take charge of the First Unitarian Church. From the start, he and Jessie formed a bond based on a common love of learning, of sharing knowledge, and of witty and enlightening conversation. The cultured young man, just six months her junior, became a regular guest at Jessie's home, as she was at the home he shared with his wife and young daughter. In letters to

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[492] "Returns at Midnight," *Daily Alta California*, November 7, 1860. Also "The Fall Election of 1860," *Daily Alta California*, November 7, 1860.
[493] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 228.
[494] Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*, 228-229

friends back in Boston, where he had previously held a ministerial position, King offered nothing but praise for the gracious Mrs. Frémont, in one letter referring to her as a "superb woman."[495] Physically frail, the young minister recalled going to Jessie's home after an illness. He remarked that sitting "in her lovely cottage, and hearing her talk, & enjoying it" aided his recovery.[496]

Jessie reciprocated the warm feelings. Calling him "charming & clever" in conversation, Jessie saw King as both a friend and a "minister of grace."[497] She took a pew at his church, and once teased him about being a "negligent pastor" for not having visited as much as she wished.[498] So much did she enjoy his company that she asked him "when you can make the time 'any reasonable length,' that you will bring my mind some fresh air."[499] In October of 1860, the two attended a speech by Oregon Senator Edward D. Baker, stumping then not only for his friend Abraham Lincoln but for the concept of continuing the union of the states. King excitedly reported to friends that he and Jessie had taken a private car to watch the eloquent Baker, before returning to the Frémont home for dinner with him. So much did Jessie admire the young Unitarian minister that she wished King had lived longer in California and might have run for federal office on behalf of the state.[500]

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[495] Thomas Starr King to Randolph Ryer, October 19, 1860, Thomas Starr King Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[496] Thomas Starr King to Randolph Ryer, September 10, 1860, Thomas Starr King Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[497] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, June 14, 1860, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; and Jessie Benton Frémont to Thomas Starr King, early 1861, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 232-233.
[498] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, June 14, 1860, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[499] Jessie Benton Frémont to Thomas Starr King, early 1861, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 232-233.
[500] Thomas Starr King to Randolph Ryer, October 29, 1860, Thomas Starr King Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Jessie and Starr remained close friends and correspondents until his untimely death at age thirty-nine in 1864. According to King's biographer, Jessie telegraphed to San Francisco: "Put violets for me on our dear friend who rests." Wendt, *Thomas Starr King*, 217. Californians long remembered King for the series of speeches he gave on the necessity of keeping California for the Union. So important was the New York-born

Starr King was at the dock to wish John a goodbye as he left San Francisco for New York City and then Europe. As ever, Las Mariposas remained under-capitalized; this trip, like the trip in 1852, was meant to raise funds. On January 1, 1861, John left for the east coast, accompanied by his attorney, Frederick Billings. Billings later wrote that John wished him to take a separate ship for the transatlantic crossing. He speculated that this was due to a passenger whose fare John had paid—a Mrs. Corbett, "the same woman . . . he brought from San Francisco." Billings felt that John was rightly embarrassed to be seen traveling with his mistress.[501] If Jessie knew of this arrangement, she never acknowledged it.

While waiting for John to return home, Jessie took up her pen in the public arena. She wrote to the editor of the *Daily Alta California*, addressing the upcoming execution of Albert Lea, convicted of killing his wife. Lea's mother had been a free Black woman employed with the Benton family, and Lea had gone with John on the fifth expedition of 1853-1854. He had remained in the Frémont employ and had taught Charley and Frank to ride bareback at Las Mariposas. Jessie wrote of a change in Lea in 1859 that led him to leave the rancho, a circumstance she blamed on Lea's mother-in-law's interference in the Lea marriage. Remarking that the wife's mother "tried to make moves with two human beings full of passions, as though they were figures on a chess-board," Jessie insinuated that Lea had been driven mad by the time he shot his wife.[502]

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minister to the people of California that, in 1931, they chose him and Father Junipero Serra to represent the state in the nation's Statuary Hall. He was replaced in 2009 by a statue of Illinois-born Ronald Reagan.

[501] Frederick Billings to Trenor Park, July 22, 1861, Park-McCullough Collection, Special Collections, University of Vermont, Burlington. For more on this subject see Mary Lee Spence, "George W. Wright: Politician, Lobbyist, Entrepreneur," *Pacific Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (August 1989): 345–59.

[502] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Further About Albert Lea," *Daily Alta California*, February 27, 1861.

In addition to her defense of Lea, Jessie took issue with another article in the *Daily Alta California*. In an overview of the Lea case, the writer called Lea the former "body servant" of Colonel John C. Frémont. Jessie felt that this needed clarification, and she dedicated a paragraph of her letter to correcting this misconception. "It was not in Col. Frémont's early circumstances," she wrote, "and, certainly, not fostered by the habits of his later life, to require the attendance of a '*valet*.'"[503] Jessie's emphasis on the word "valet" might have left readers wondering just what was so bad about being wealthy enough to afford a "valet."

Jessie's letter to the editor raised a rebuke from the offended mother-in-law. As unusual as it was for Jessie's letter to be published, it was more so for a letter from Mrs. Maria A. Pallier, a free Black woman. Introduced to readers as "the mother of the unfortunate victim of Lea's passion," the paper printed her letter taking issue with Jessie's characterization of the "pieces on a chessboard," asking "who is this person who brings the charge of mercenary motives against [me]?" Mrs. Pallier noted that she had just wanted a good husband for her daughter and that she "cared not for his being the favorite and pampered servant of Col. Frémont."[504] Calvin Park wrote to his cousin, San Francisco attorney and partial Las Mariposas owner Trenor Park, "You probably saw the controversy between Mrs. Frémont and Mr. Lea's wife's mother in the papers. It may lead to something serious,--as they are both fighting cusses."[505] It did not lead to anything serious between the "fighting cusses," but Albert Lea was hanged on schedule.

More exciting, and history-making, news reached the San Francisco papers on April 25, 1861. The *Daily Alta California* proclaimed in large headlines: "Attack on Fort Sumter!

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[503] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Further About Albert Lea," *Daily Alta California*, February 27, 1861.
[504] Maria A. Pallier, "Execution To-Day," *Daily Alta California*, March 1, 1860.
[505] Calvin Park to Trenor Park, March 2, 1861, Park-McCullough Collection, Special Collections, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.

Surrender of Maj. Anderson! CIVIL WAR COMMENCED."[506] In London, John heard the news and realized that European investment would vanish in the face of unrest in the United States. He turned his attention to purchasing arms for the Union army. Receiving the news that he would be offered a field command, he wrote to Jessie, telling her that "he thought the war would last *years*, and he would be in it to the end." He asked her to join him in New York, from which he would leave for his assignment.[507]

Jessie's time at Black Point ended with John's letter. Looking back at the years since 1856, her time in New York City and Paris had brought some relief from the grief and pain surrounding the election loss, John's infidelity, and the probable miscarriage. But California had offered more. The state that John had fought to secure for the United States in 1847 had provided a place to recover, and it allowed Jessie the opportunity to focus on the private side of being a wife and mother. At three years and two months, it was also the longest period John and Jessie lived together in the state with which their names would be forever associated. In 1861, it was time for Jessie to turn her gaze eastward and once again perform her role as a public wife.

[506] "Arrival of the Pony," *Daily Alta California*, April 25, 1861.
[507] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 217.

CHAPTER 6
GENERAL JESSIE

Jessie left San Francisco for New York City eight days after receiving John's invitation. With splints on one arm and one foot as the result of a carriage accident, she claimed later that "only my head was useful." Jessie, the three children, and one nurse joined a ship full of soldiers and, more importantly, somewhere between $1,200,000 and $3,000,000 in California gold headed for Union coffers. Upon reaching the Isthmus, the party began to take extra precautions. Where Jessie's previous five crossings had been fraught with the danger of disease, this final trip via the Panama Railroad carried the worry that Confederate raiders would seek to capture both the soldiers and the gold. No such attack happened, and the party reached Aspinwall on the Atlantic coast safely and boarded the *North Star* for the trip to New York City.[508]

Once on the Atlantic, the *North Star* proved irresistible to the Confederacy's famous privateer ship, the *Jeff Davis*. Originally built in Baltimore in the 1840s, designed to carry enslaved people and christened the *Echo*, the *Jeff Davis* was a full-rigged brig with four guns in the middle and one pivot gun. The ship captured several prizes from New England merchants as part of an early effort by the new Confederate States of America to disrupt Union maritime commerce.[509] Jessie recalled "the vigilant protection needed in old piratical days" as the captain shared with her his concern that the Confederate blockade runner/commerce cruiser *Sumter*, with Raphael Semmes at the helm, lurked behind protective islands along the coast.[510] But the captain

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[508] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 218

[509] "Confederate Privateer Jefferson Davis," https://americancivilwar.com/tcwn/civil_war/Navy_Ships/Privateer_Jefferson_Davis.html, *American Civil War* (website), n.d., accessed July 11, 2021. Also, "Jeff. Davis' Privateers," *New York Times*, July 13, 1861.

[510] Raphael Semmes served in the U.S. Navy for over thirty years, until 1861. He was asked by his home state of Alabama, after that state's secession from the Union, to serve in the Confederate Navy. In February 1861, he resigned his U.S.N. commission and took up commerce raiding. His success at harassing and capturing merchant

soon realized, and told Jessie, it was the *Jeff Davis* that set her sights on the *North Star* as she passed Cape Hatteras off the North Carolina shore. On a "sparkling cold and windy day," Jessie felt "the out-of-date sensations described in pirate stories" as the ships raced up the Atlantic coast, the *Jeff Davis* eventually veering off in search of other prey. Not until she saw the lights of Sandy Hook, New York, did Jessie draw an easy breath.[511]

The *North Star* reached New York on July 13, 1861, with its California gold, soldiers, and passengers intact.[512] While the New York newspapers did not make a note of Jessie's arrival, preferring instead to focus on the millions being added to the U.S. Treasury, Jessie included her tale of being chased by the *Jeff Davis* in the unpublished biography of John that she and her son Frank wrote in the 1890s. This biography, written to augment and continue John's autobiography published in 1886 as *Memoirs of My Life*, included as many tales of Jessie's exploits as it did of John's. Her narrative of the spring of 1861 placed her in immediate peril during the first months of the Civil War and demonstrated her willingness to confront the entire Confederate States of America to reach her beloved husband as he began his Civil War career.

The image Jessie painted of herself in the unpublished biography mirrors some of the public rhetoric surrounding her in 1861. During John's short tenure as a soldier for the Union, Jessie once again played the role of a public wife; her perceived "spirit" and "sacrifice" (of her comfortable life for camp life) repackaged the image created of her for the 1856 election to suit this new time of national crisis. Even the language of "Our Jessie" returned to the national consciousness, along with a new derogatory nickname—"General Jessie." This new sobriquet

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ships in the Atlantic and in the Caribbean made him the most feared sight a captain might spy while sailing near U.S. Atlantic ports.

[511] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 218.

[512] "Untitled," *Buffalo Courier*, July 15, 1861.

mocked Jessie's non-traditional (and thus unfeminine) role as her husband's "aide de camp" during the war, even as it criticized her husband's inability (unmasculine) to function without his wife's superior mind. Through her efforts on John's behalf, Jessie stood apart from the other wives of men in his position, understanding her role as over and above that of a helpmeet spouse, a comforting spouse, or a spouse who waited at home for the war to end. Jessie was both active and involved in her husband's military endeavors as no other woman in her position was.

When John's service ended, Jessie once again turned her attentions toward her family. She stepped away from the political and the military into a private period reminiscent of her life in the late 1850s. For all the Frémonts, the early years of the Gilded Age found them enjoying exactly the type of glitter and glamour described in Mark Twain's book of the same name. Just as in Twain's telling, however, the life that Jessie carved out for her family in the gently rolling hills along the Hudson was a sham, a thin patina of gold over a rotten, decaying foundation. The years of the Gilded Age proved pleasant enough for the matron of the Frémont family—but they would not last long.

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In the months between the attack on Fort Sumter and Jessie's arrival in New York City, hostilities escalated quickly between the United States and the newly branded Confederate States of America. On April 15, 1861, two days after the fall of Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteer soldiers from the states of the Union. With the Confederate victory in Charleston harbor, the states of the upper south seceded from the Union and joined their slaveholding brethren. Virginia seceded on April 17, 1861, just four days after the fall of Sumter, with Arkansas and North Carolina seceding in May, and Tennessee in June.

Four states teetered in the balance between remaining loyal to the Union or seceding to join the Confederacy. Both Maryland and Delaware included slaveholders among their citizenry, and the loss of those states to secession would have left Washington, D.C., vulnerable to attack. Maryland secessionists went so far as to protest and attack Union troops from Massachusetts as they passed through Baltimore on their way to Washington in that spring of 1861. Kentucky, Lincoln's birthplace (also the birthplace of Confederate president Jefferson Davis), also numbered slaveholders among its population. The loss of the state would have pained Lincoln personally as well as strategically as it controlled access to over five hundred miles of the Ohio River, as well as portions of two tributaries of the Ohio, the Tennessee and Cumberland, which stretched into Tennessee and even as far as northern Alabama. Except for the Mississippi, the Ohio served as the most effective method of transporting troops and supplies to Union forces.

Control of the Mississippi figured also in Lincoln's determination to maintain Missouri within the Union. Scuffles broke out between unionists and secessionists across the state not long after Lincoln's election in November 1860. In his inaugural speech in January of 1861, Missouri governor Claiborne Fox Jackson proclaimed that Missouri's "honor, her interests and her sympathies point alike in one direction, and determine her to stand by the South."[513] Opposing Jackson, Frank Blair gathered together the unionists of Missouri. Frank, the son of Preston Blair and brother to Jessie's friend and confidante Lizzie Lee, recognized, as did Governor Jackson, that securing the arsenal just south of St. Louis was vital to both union and secessionist efforts to win the state.[514] As Jackson called for the state militia to form in

[513] Louis S. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 79.
[514] By mid-January 1861, arsenals in Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana had fallen to Confederate forces. On April 18, soldiers guarding the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, set fire to both arsenal and armory to keep munitions and machinery out of Confederate hands. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis*, 80.

opposition to the unionists, Frank used his family connections in Washington to have Captain Nathaniel Lyon appointed commander of the arsenal. An uncompromising unionist who had seen service in the Seminole and Mexican Wars, Lyon arrived in St. Louis on February 6. Skirmishes, political, military, and personal, flared across the state. But the arsenal remained in the hands of the unionists. Frank Blair, in consultation with his father and siblings, determined that the time was right to appoint a new general in command of Missouri and other western states.[515]

As the fall of Sumter and Lincoln's call for volunteers occurred while he was in London on Las Mariposas business, John C. Frémont took the opportunity, without official instructions from Washington, to order weapons and ammunition from British manufacturers before he headed back to the United States. While the Blair family proved influential in John's eventual appointment as a major general, John himself impressed Lincoln at a June 1861 meeting between the two. The president met over the course of several days with John and Montgomery Blair, the older son of Preston Blair and brother to Frank Blair and Lizzie Lee, another close friend of Jessie's and Lincoln's Postmaster General. According to Jessie, John was considered for several eastern commands, but he pushed for a western post, and Missouri, the one-time home of Blairs and Bentons, seemed the perfect match for the famous western explorer and hero of the Conquest of California.[516] The Department of the West was created on July 3, 1861, and included Missouri, Illinois, and the states lying west to the Rocky Mountains and also New Mexico. In

[515] Frank Blair served as a colonel in one of the four Missouri Volunteer regiments established in April 1861. On August 21, 1861, Abraham Lincoln commissioned the Missouri officers himself as there was no state structure in place to do so. At this same time, Frank served in Congress on behalf of Missouri, taking office in March 1861. See Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 458. Also, Abraham Lincoln to Frank Blair, August 21, 1861, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 4 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 495.
[516] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 220-221.

August 1861, western Kentucky, about which Lincoln worried so much, was added. With the Department of the West established, Lincoln appointed Major General John C. Frémont to command.

That both Montgomery and Frank Blair supported John's appointment came as no surprise to Jessie. The Bentons and the Blairs had been close for nearly all her life, with the patriarchs of both families, Thomas Hart Benton and Preston Blair, being strong friends and political allies. It was Blair who sat with the Frémonts as the 1856 election results arrived.[517] Jessie's letters to "Father Blair" often had the flavor of a father-daughter correspondence, and her admiration and affection for the older man did not waver through the 1850s, especially after she lost her own father. Both Frémonts also relied on their friendship with Montgomery, nicknamed "the Judge" (for his service as both lawyer and on the bench). When Jessie wanted to shop and the Frémont bank account did not contain the requisite cash, Montgomery Blair offered loans. Montgomery acted as Jessie's probate attorney and settled the debts of her father's estate in 1858. Jessie reciprocated by watching over and even outfitting his daughter Betty while she attended boarding school in New York. While Jessie never experienced the closeness with Frank that she did with Montgomery, her relationship with their sister, Lizzie Lee, provided Jessie one of the few friendships she ever knew with another woman. The Blairs and the Frémonts exchanged gifts at Christmas, served as godparents to each other's children, and the Blair homes at Silver Spring, Maryland, and in Washington, D.C., were always open to the Frémonts.[518]

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[517] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, November 2, 1856, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[518] William Ernest Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, vol. 2, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1933), 54.

While John received his appointment on July 3, he waited in New York City for Jessie and the children. Even after their arrival, neither he nor Jessie seemed in any hurry to travel to St. Louis where John would take command. They heard the news of the bitter Union defeat at Bull Run while on the train to Missouri. Jessie recalled that John participated in the "council of war" with Lincoln and his generals prior to the battle, although she noted that he offered no opinion on how the fighting should be commenced.[519] As John spent most of his time in New York City prior to leaving for St. Louis, this tale offers perhaps an apocryphal effort to place John within the elite group of generals in the eastern theater on the eve of the first true military contest of the war. At the same time, Jessie's way of emphasizing his decision not to offer advice protected him from any disgrace connected to the Union defeat. In later years, she repeated stories such as this one in her decades-long effort to protect John's reputation.

While John prepared for his command, Jessie readied the children and staff to make the move to St. Louis. John conveyed to her, after meeting with Lincoln, that he was given "*carte blanche*" in his new command, which John interpreted as having responsibilities over and above the usual military duties of a major general. He was also charged with raising, organizing, and equipping his army, arranging for transportation, and buying "everything from its shoes to its arms." Jessie, looking back later at those weeks in New York City, emphasized that John engaged in these tasks before traveling to St. Louis.[520] John also found the time to have his photograph taken, showing him in the full regalia of a major general. While this was not unusual, and other generals did the same, none of the other generals delayed accepting their posts

[519] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 221.
[520] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 221-222.

to accomplish it.[521] When the Frémonts finally did arrive in St. Louis, on July 25, grumbling had already begun over John's delayed appearance.

John's service in St. Louis was doomed almost from the start—by his own character. St. Louis by the beginning of August 1861 was relatively peaceful. The political efforts of Frank Blair met and bested those of the secession-leaning Governor Jackson. In the southwest corner of the state, Captain Lyon had taken the city of Springfield from former governor Sterling Price and his pro-Confederate state militia.[522] Yet on July 31, Jessie wrote to Montgomery Blair that her husband found everything to be in a "disorderly condition" and that the city and state were positively "insurrectionary." She also added warnings that soon became a familiar theme from the Frémonts—with no money and no arms, Frémont perceived himself to be weak. Even as she begged for more money, more men, and more munitions, Jessie ended her letter to Blair by adding a quote from John: "This is no complaint. I am doing all I can but I wish you to see the ground on which I am working."[523] This became an ongoing lament, used for the most part to counter complaints of John's incompetency.

John did more than complain. Upon assuming command, he hired several Hungarians and other foreign-born men to his staff, bypassing the usual appointment of West Point officers to such posts. His long-held belief that it was the regular Army officers that had pursued his court martial in 1848 left him distrustful and suspicious, and he accordingly surrounded himself with a core of European men and men he had known from his days in California.[524] Setting up a

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[521] Jessie Benton Frémont to Thomas Starr King, July 20, 1861, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 253-254.
[522] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 458-459.
[523] Jessie Benton Frémont to Montgomery Blair, July 31, 1861, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 257-260.
[524] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 460.

guard at the entrance to his headquarters, John remained isolated from all but a very few trusted associates. Merchants, officers, soldiers, the city's pro-Union citizens, and others having business with the Department of the West often found themselves frustrated by John's lack of availability, even as the general set himself a grueling eighteen-hour schedule each day.[525] Further fostering the view of John as arrogant and inaccessible, the one-hundred-fifty-man "Body Guard" established by Frémont included all the European flamboyance and pomposity that Americans traditionally abhorred. Led by yet another Hungarian, Alexander Asboth Zagonyi, the members of the Body Guard rode matching chestnut horses, bore German sidearms, and wore plumed hats.[526] Observing these conditions, one army wife commented later that, while John "had been a girlish idol" of hers from his Pathfinder years, she saw clearly that he had been "weighed in the balance and found wanting." According to this observer, the "pomp and panoply of war" appealed to John far more than the needs of his men in the field.[527] Others came to agree with her assessment.

What further alienated John from possible supporters in St. Louis was the perception that he was indecisive. Two military blunders in the first weeks of his command lent this perception considerable weight. A battle over a federal arsenal in Lexington, Missouri, ended in the defeat of Union forces. Worse still, a battle at Wilson's Creek brought not only defeat but the death of newly promoted General Nathaniel Lyon, one of the two men who had acted most effectively to

[525] Louis S. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis*, 142; Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 459.
[526] Louis S. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis*, 146.
[527] Sarah Jane Full Hill, *Mrs. Hill's Journal: Civil War Reminiscences*, ed. Mark M. Krug (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1980), 44.

maintain Missouri within the union. In both instances, the observation that Frémont did not send support troops until too late led many to conclude that he was indecisive.[528]

The death of Lyon, a hero in the eyes of unionist St. Louis residents, and the defeat at Lexington looked even more damning when viewed against the major general's refusal to meet visitors and his protection by the ostentatious Body Guard. Yet while grumbling continued about John, Jessie put herself again onto the public stage as the devoted wife, winning some good press for the Frémonts despite her husband's failures. An article published in *Harper's Weekly* on August 31, 1861, offered a view of the Frémont headquarters in St. Louis and Jessie's exceptional devotion to her husband.

In an edition that featured a lithograph of the deceased Nathaniel Lyon on its cover, the article "Frémont at St. Louis" provided an image of the Frémont headquarters, a three-story home of brick and wood with an imposing pillared front porch belonging to Jessie's widowed cousin, Sarah Benton Brant. Surrounded by a combination of brick and wrought-iron fence, the house stood on busy Chouteau Avenue. The article referred to John as "the gallant General," who is "assisted by his wife, the famous Jessie."[529] What the article did not mention was the $6,000-per-month rent the army paid for this building. While historians disagree on whether that sum was appropriate, St. Louis residents at the time, already harboring doubts about John, found the cost to be excessive—especially as it was being paid to a family member.[530] Whether unaware of the cost or uninterested because it did not fit the larger narrative, the newspapers persisted in their praise of Jessie.

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[528] Louis S. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis*, 144-145. Lyon's refusal to follow John's order to retreat from his position to the safer location of Rolla can also serve as an explanation for the defeat at Wilson's Creek and Lyon's death.
[529] "Frémont at St. Louis," *Harper's Weekly*, August 31, 1861.
[530] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 460; Louis S. Gerteis, *Civil War St. Louis*, 142.

An article in the *Saturday Evening Post* resurrected the language of the 1856 political campaign in its glowing tribute to Jessie. Referring to her as "the 'Jessie' whose name was so familiar six years ago," the writer exuberantly pointed out that Jessie had inherited "her father's talent and many salient points of his character." The author found that Mrs. Frémont "impresses all who come in contact with her by her great intellectual power." The article then went on to invoke a quote from Jessie herself. When asked back in 1849 about her upcoming journey to California, Jessie purportedly answered "Do you suppose that the daughter of Col. Benton and the wife of Captain Frémont is *afraid*?"[531] Whether Jessie uttered these words in 1849 or not, the spirit behind the quote offered an image of a brave Jessie standing forthrightly with her husband. It also allowed for a glimpse into the way in which Jessie understood herself—as a wife and daughter spurred to greatness by the two significant figures in her life.

Jessie's positive image received further enhancement from a reporter for the *Cincinnati Gazette*, whose description of a visit to the Frémont headquarters spread widely as newspapers near and far chose to publish it. Arriving at "Camp Lily," he never imagined that Jessie Frémont would be there rather than cozily ensconced in the Brant home.[532] He found the "inevitable 'Jessie,'" sitting with her husband "in earnest conversation over the affairs of the 'Western Department.'" The reporter watched as Jessie then visited some of the soldiers and chatted with an artist making sketches for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. The *Gazette* reporter continued his description by offering his own "word sketch" of Jessie. While finding her face "plain" when in repose, that depiction disappeared when she became engaged in conversation.

[531] "Mrs. Frémont," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1861.
[532] "Camp Lily" was the army encampment outside St. Louis named in honor of the Frémonts' daughter.

An expression at once "gentle, benevolent and pleasing" lit her "ruddy" face, and the reporter found himself especially taken with Jessie's brown eyes, writing that "[e]yes so expressive of every emotion . . . lend a warmth and fervor to, and adorn and illustrate whatever she says." The reporter further praised his subject's intelligence and her acumen in political matters. He estimated her to be "about 40 years of age, and her years sit very lightly upon her, at least with her bonnet on."[533] While Jessie did not bear the beauty of her youth, she still managed to cut a fine figure, especially for this smitten *Gazette* reporter.

Perhaps Jessie's most zealous public support came from the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. In a letter addressed to "Our Jessie" and printed in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* out of Boston, Mrs. Child allowed her approval of Jessie to flow passionately from her pen. She recorded her admiration of Jessie as:

> "forsaking elegant drawing-rooms for the fatigue and privations of a camp; zealously devoting your rare talents and accomplishments to the service of your imperilled [sic] country; doubling the indomitable energy and unwearied industry of your noble husband, by adding to them your own; sympathizing with his large and liberal feelings; and by your full appreciation and cordial approbation confirming him in all high principles of freedom, justice, and humanity."

Mrs. Child went further with her appreciation by noting that, even though she had not referred to Jessie in the popular way in 1856, she now "affectionately greets" her heroine as 'our Jessie,' the hem of whose garment I would stoop to kiss." Mrs. Child acknowledged Jessie's

[533] "Jessie," *Cleveland Daily Leader*, October 14, 1861. The reference to the bonnet is likely due to Jessie's then snow-white hair. Jessie herself writes about losing her chestnut locks to gray in her unpublished memoir, noting that the seeming overnight transformation was only brought to her attention by her cousin, Mrs. Brant, who wondered one evening why Jessie's hair appeared "dusty." For Jessie, this transition from chestnut to gray recalled the way in which her grandmother Benton's hair had aged suddenly after her grandfather Benton's death. See Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 233.

behavior as appropriate to a wife, finding that Jessie "cooperates with her husband in all his best endeavors and loftiest aims."[534] With public praise such as this, it was no surprise that one additional component of the 1856 campaign should make a Civil War appearance—that of the images of John and Jessie on stationery.

Just as had been the case in 1856, stationers and printers quickly put images of the Frémonts into public circulation. One envelope used images similar to those of the campaign, with Jessie on one side of the envelope and John on the other. Between them, a pair of crossed American flags appeared above the words "We stand by the Union."[535] A second envelope used just the image of Jessie in the upper left; on the right side was an image of a shield bearing on top white stars on a blue background and on the bottom red-and-white stripes. The shield rested on the front of a sheaf of shells, from behind which ribbons reading "North" and "South" flowed forth. Wrapped around the sheaf was a second ribbon, this one reading "in Union there is strength," a clever play on words that referenced both the Frémonts' image as romantic spouses and the need for the nation to remain bound together. Thrust into the sheaf of shells were three implements of war—a sword, a scabbard, and a battle axe.[536] The message to both senders and recipients of this envelope illustrated the ways in which women could be perceived as active participants in the military conflict, even as their actual service was confined to nursing, fundraising, charitable works, and, in Jessie's case, as her husband's very public colleague.

Jessie identified her role as John's secretary as stemming from "Mr. Frémont's long habit of referring all manner of work and duties to me as acting principal in his absence."[537] To assist

[534] Lydia Maria Child, "A Letter from Mrs. Child," *The Liberator*, October 11, 1861.
[535] American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series 1, no. 26481, New York Public Library, New York, New York.
[536] American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series 1, no. 26480, New York Public Library, New York, New York.
[537] Jessie Benton Frémont, *The Story of the Guard: A Chronicle of the War* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 89.

her busy husband, Jessie often composed letters on his behalf. Written in Jessie's hand, these often combined a mix of thoughts and ideas from both Frémonts. Two themes dominated: a continuous plea for more men and munitions and ongoing expressions of concern over pro-secession forces in Missouri. In a letter to Montgomery Blair dated almost immediately upon the arrival of the Frémonts in St. Louis, Jessie admitted to writing "it from [John's] telling—not absolutely from dictation." She went on to describe her husband "doing the best he can without money without arms without moral aid." While asking for "anything in the shape of arms," Jessie complained about the "neglect" from Washington and looked to Montgomery Blair and the president "to see that it has not a fatal effect." Such letters, including one to Abraham Lincoln complaining about Missouri's "disorganized condition," flowed from Jessie's pen and expressed her thoughts as well as those of her husband.[538]

The solution to the problem of Confederate partisans in Missouri troubled both John and Jessie, and together they came up with a plan to squelch such sentiments. On August 30, 1861, John issued a proclamation, first declaring martial law for the state of Missouri and then going further to order that the slaves of anyone "directly proven to have taken active part with their enemies in the field . . . are hereby declared free." The proclamation promised stiff penalties for anyone bearing arms within the "army of occupation" then marked from "Leavenworth by way of the posts of Jefferson City, Rolla, and Ironton, to Cape Giradeau." Those caught with arms "shall be tried by court-martial, and, if found guilty, will be shot."[539] In the presence of only

[538] Jessie Benton Frémont to Montgomery Blair, July 28, July 31, and August 5, 1861; Jessie Benton Frémont (on behalf of John C. Frémont) to Abraham Lincoln, August 5, 1861, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 256-261, 262.
[539] Robert N. Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series III, vol. X, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880), 465-466, https://ehistory.osu.edu/books/official-records.

Jessie and possibly one aide, a Quaker abolitionist from Pennsylvania, Edward M. Davis, John signed the proclamation.[540] How much of a role Jessie played in formulating this strategy cannot be known, as she did not attribute to herself any credit for the ideas or the document. That she was present for the final writing and signing of the proclamation, and her past efforts of writing on her husband's behalf, suggest that Jessie was practicing some unusual modesty in her refusal to take any credit. She soon came to play a much larger role in the matter as reactions to the proclamation emerged.

Responses to the proclamation depended on geographical location and political leanings. From Nashville, Tennessee, John's act was considered a piece of despotism that "OUT LINCOLNS LINCOLN."[541] The *Rock Island Argus* in Illinois, conversely, wrote that the proclamation was "the way the rebellion must be treated everywhere."[542] Lydia Maria Child rejoiced with the news out of St. Louis, writing to one acquaintance that if Frémont "has resorted to a measure at once so bold and so wise, he has vaulted into the saddle, from which no human power can unhorse him."[543] While Frémont would be "unhorsed" by his later actions during the war, for now Mrs. Child and those like her sang his praises.

From Washington, Abraham Lincoln responded to the proclamation, sending John a missive via a special messenger that arrived on September 8. Advising that the proclamation gave him "some anxiety," the president took exception to John's order that anyone found armed

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[540] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 463-464. Jessie gifted the original manuscript of John's proclamation to Edward M. Davis, who prominently displayed it on the wall of his library in Philadelphia. "A Rationalist's Room," *The Times*, April 21, 1875.
[541] "Frémont's Proclamation," *Nashville Union and American*, September 1, 1861.
[542] "Lively Work in Missouri," *The Rock Island Argus*, September 1, 1861.
[543] Lydia Maria Child to George William Curtis, September 1, 1861, 49/1329, The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child.

within the occupation zone should be court-martialed and shot. Lincoln worried that such a harsh measure would draw an identical penalty from the Confederates upon Union sympathizers in their midst. He ordered John not to take any such action without prior presidential approval. His second concern regarded the emancipation of slaves under the proclamation. The president's ongoing concern for slaveholding Unionists in border states, especially Kentucky, and their possible reaction to John's directive led him to plead with John to, of his own volition, amend the order to bring it into accordance with the First Confiscation Act passed on August 6.[544]

John responded immediately to his Commander in Chief. He mentioned the six days it took Lincoln's letter to reach St. Louis, a hint of conspiracy that would come to color Jessie's later accusations of mistreatment at the hands of Lincoln. Added to this, John's assurance that he, and he alone, had determined the content and form of the proclamation suggests John's concern that he could be seen as influenced by others in his decision. Finally, John refused to rescind the emancipation component of his proclamation unless Lincoln openly ordered him to do so. John expressed more concern that others would assume that he "had acted without the reflection which the gravity of the point demanded" than any indication of censure from the president.[545] To ensure that this letter made it promptly and safely into the president's hands, Jessie took on the delivery task herself, boarding a train for Washington on September 9.

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[544]Abraham Lincoln to John C. Frémont, September 2, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1833-1916, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. This letter is also found in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 4, 507. Also, see Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 259. The First Confiscation Act of 1861 allowed for the seizure of any rebel property, including slaves, being used in support of the Confederacy. A second act passed in 1862 would expand upon this by freeing enslaved people in conquered areas and refusing to return fugitive slaves. This second act, the Confiscation Act of 1862, also began the process of recruiting African American men into the Union army.

[545] John C. Fremont to Abraham Lincoln, September 8, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1833-1916, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Jessie later described the events of her journey to the nation's capital in quite some detail. According to her, she arrived in Washington after three days' train travel, dusty, tired, and anxious. Taking a room at the Willard Hotel, she contacted a friend from New York, Judge Edward Coles, and sent a message to Lincoln asking to see him. When the president returned a card, it read simply "A. Lincoln. Now." While Coles counseled her to wait until the morning, Jessie, still in her traveling clothes, set out for the White House with Coles as her escort.[546]

As Jessie later recorded, "All my life I had been at home in the President's House—as well received there as in the family circle, and with the old confidence of the past I went forward now." Although it was after 9:00 p.m., Jessie and Coles were sent into the "red parlor" to await the president, who did not appear until some time later. She gave Lincoln John's letter, and told the president that she would wait while he read it in case he had any questions. It never occurred to Jessie that Lincoln might not feel that a discussion of military matters was appropriate with the wife of one of his generals. After all, no other wife of a Union general had so confronted Lincoln, and Jessie's brash behavior irritated the president.

Jessie recalled that Lincoln gave her a smile that "was not agreeable." While Jessie noted that she looked "as tired as I felt," Lincoln did not offer her a seat. For her, the president's "unusual manner was a reversal of the old order of things," so she drew forward a chair and sat down. When Lincoln finished the letter, he advised Jessie that he had already made his wishes known to John. She countered with concern that the president might be listening to the voices of those opposing her husband.[547]

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[546] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 270.
[547] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 271.

When asked by Lincoln just who those opposing John might be, Jessie ignored the direct question and took it upon herself to inform him about the possibility of foreign recognition of the Confederate government and how emancipation might make that more unlikely. To this, Lincoln responded, "You are quite a female politician." Jessie recalled that she "felt the sneering tone and saw there was a foregone decision against all listening." The president vented his anger that John did not listen to Frank Blair regarding matters in Missouri. Further, Lincoln "went on almost angrily" to complain that "the General should never have dragged the negro into the war. It is a war for a great national object and the negro has nothing to do with it."[548] Jessie had clearly misjudged the president, and her stubborn determination to justify John's actions only further raised Lincoln's ire.[549]

Lincoln's secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, recorded the president's observations of his meeting with Mrs. Frémont. According to Lincoln, Jessie "taxed me so violently with many things that I had to exercise all the awkward tact I have to avoid quarreling with her." To the furious president, Jessie "intimated that if General Frémont should decide to try conclusions with me, he could set up for himself."[550] Knowing Jessie's temper and her ill-considered belief

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[548] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 271.

[549] While Lincoln found Jessie to be too brash in the way she confronted him, as well as stubbornly persistent in her defense of her husband, she was not the only wife of a Union general to visit him. In early 1862, after news spread that General William T. Sherman was "insane," Ellen Sherman, her father, and other members of her family visited Lincoln to plead Sherman's case. Ellen's approach could not have been more different than Jessie's. She and her family came to the president as supplicants, with a pre-scheduled meeting instead of a last-minute demand for the president's attention. Ellen Sherman behaved in a way that Lincoln saw as appropriate; she did not demand, she requested, and she and her family reminded Lincoln that they had been his supporters since 1860. The president responded positively to the traditionally feminine way in which Ellen spoke to him, as he was wont to do with deferential females. Candice Shy Hooper, *Lincoln's Generals' Wives: Four Women Who Influenced the Civil War-for Better and for Worse* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2016), 191. For more information on Lincoln's relationships with women, see "The Women," The Lehrman Institute Web Sites, Mr. Lincoln & Friends, accessed October 18, 2021, http://www.mrlincolnandfriends.org/the-women/.

[550] John Hay and John G. Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History Abraham Lincoln: A History*, vol. 4 (New York, NY: The Century Company, 1914), 415.

in her husband's infallibility, Lincoln did not appear to be stretching the truth in his assessment of her words—at least not very much. According to Nicolay's daughter Helen, going through her father's papers after he died, the young secretary had written notes from a conversation he had with the president, sealing them into an envelope on which he wrote "A private paper, Conversation with the President, October 2, 1861." Among other notations, Nicolay recorded that the president found "Frémont ready to rebel."[551] While it cannot be known for certain that it was Jessie who planted this idea in the president's consciousness, it fits within the context of their conversation and the flashing tempers on both sides.

Jessie waited at the Willard Hotel the next day for Lincoln to provide her with a response she could take back to St. Louis. Then, Preston Blair appeared at her door. The close relationships between the Bentons, the Blairs, and the Frémonts went back over decades, and Jessie recalled that the elder Blair "had always been fond of me, I had been like a child in their family." This time, "Father Blair" was angry. The efforts of his sons, Montgomery and Frank, to guide John through his leadership of the Western Department had been blatantly rebuffed, and now he accused Jessie of having "made the President [John's] enemy." Blair scolded Jessie for not having stayed in Washington when John was sent to St. Louis, reminding her that "it is not fit for a woman to go with an army." While first amused by Blair's admonitions, Jessie's own temper began to rise as the visit extended to two hours. She grew enraged when Blair told her that Lincoln had sent Montgomery Blair and Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs to St. Louis to visit John and, as Jessie recalled, "bring him to his senses." According to Jessie, Preston Blair also advised her that Frank Blair had written to his brother, Montgomery, on

[551] Helen Nicolay, *Personal Traits of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Century Co., 1913), 177-178.

September 1 with his assessment of conditions in Missouri, and that Montgomery had shared that letter with the president.[552] When Blair left, Jessie dashed off a furious missive to the president, demanding, "on behalf of, and as representing General Frémont," to be furnished with a copy of that September 1 letter. She further insisted that the president provide her with his response to John's September 8 letter.[553] If Jessie had been intentionally seeking to further enflame the discord between John and the president, she could not have done a finer job.

Lincoln responded to her demands by telling her that he had already sent a letter to John and that he did "not feel authorized to furnish you with copies of letters in my possession without the consent of the writers."[554] Frustrated with the president's refusal to engage with her on John's behalf, Jessie boarded a train back to St. Louis. Despite Lincoln's assurance that no "impression has been made on me against the honor or integrity of General Frémont," Jessie, using coded language for fear of both postal and telegraph employees reading her messages, advised John that she was on her way back and not to trust any friendly overtures from Montgomery Blair.[555]

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[552] Evidence suggests that this was not the first time Frank provided information to Lincoln using his brother as an intermediary. On August 21, Frank had dispatched a telegram to Montgomery, saying "It is necessary for the president to commission our officers as . . . the law of this state . . . make[s] it impossible to act under it . . . at present no officer in the Missouri service has a commission. . . . " That same day, Lincoln responded with his promise to commission the officers as requested. Abraham Lincoln to Frank Blair, August 21, 1861, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 495.

[553] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 272-273.

[554] Abraham Lincoln to John C. Frémont, September 11, 1861, Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 518. In this letter, the president accedes to John's request that he not be made to voluntarily change the proclamation. Lincoln's direct language left little room for doubt: "Your answer, just received, expresses the preference on your part, that I should make an open order for the modification, which I very cheerfully do— It is therefore ordered that the said clause of said proclamation mentioned be so modified, held, and construed, as to conform to, and not to transcend, the provisions on the same subject contained in the Act of Congress entitled 'An Act to confiscate property used for insurrectionary purposes' Approved, August 6. 1861 and that said act be published at length with this order."

[555] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 273-275.

That Jessie's concerns received no serious attention by officials in Washington comes as no surprise. Firstly, John's impertinence in issuing the proclamation and then in not complying with the president's request to retract it deserved a rebuke. It is unlikely that any personal appeal on John's behalf would have soothed the president's indignation. Secondly, though, Jessie's forthright manner, her air of righteous indignation, and her enormous self-assurance led her to approach politics in the same way as had her father. Unfortunately, the brash force with which Thomas Hart Benton plied his craft so successfully proved futile to his daughter. As the elder Blair told her, her place was in the home.

The war between the Frémonts and the Blairs escalated upon Jessie's return. John arranged to have Frank Blair arrested for insubordination and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman based on Frank's September 1 letter—which letter John had yet to see.[556] Montgomery then sent John a copy of Frank's letter, advising him that said letter "is not unfriendly."[557] Montgomery was not entirely correct. A copy of the letter, obtained by the press and published in several newspapers, illustrated both Frank's concern for conditions in Missouri and a willingness to be informed of alternate information that would show John in a better light. Frank did blame John's inaction and poor judgment for the death of General Nathaniel Lyon at the battle of Wilson's Creek. Yet he admired John's emancipation proclamation, though he expressed his wish that John had ordered it earlier in his tenure in St. Louis, "when he had the power to enforce it, and the enemy no power to retaliate." Frank also voiced the familiar

[556] By General Orders 15 (not to be confused with Sherman's Special Field Orders 15), May 4, 1861, volunteer forces (in which Frank Blair served) were "subject to the laws and regulations governing the Army of the United States." *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, vol. 1, 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 151-154.
[557] William Ernest Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, 77.

complaint about John others had already made—his unwillingness to meet with those bringing him vital information and to act accordingly.[558]

For Montgomery Blair, who saw his brother's letter as fairly harmless to John, much of the blame for John's troubles with both Lincoln and the Blair family lay with Jessie. Coining a new nickname for his long-time family friend, Montgomery blamed "'Genl' Jessie" as the actual force behind the arrest of Frank. He expressed anger at Jessie's treatment of his father, Preston Blair, during her visit to Washington and noted that "spies are set upon Frank by Jessie to see if she can get hold of some talk to eke out the prosecution."[559] While Frank set his focus on John, his sister and parents also placed at least part of the blame for the deteriorating state of affairs between the families on Jessie. In a letter to her husband, Samuel Phillips Lee, Lizzie Lee wrote of being "bitterly angry" at Jessie's actions. While she reported her parents as "getting over the feeling provoked by Jessie Frémonts ingratitude," Lizzie had harsher words for her now former friend. She compared Jessie to Thomas Hart Benton and the "natural secretiveness Benton cunning," writing that Jessie "has proved to be to us what Old Benton proved to be at the close of his life when his inveterate ambition mastered all his faculties." Lizzie continued by accusing John and Jessie of both fearing and hating Frank who they believed stood "between them & imperial power which is they think to be clutched as easily as martial law by proclamation."[560] Yet Lizzie also expressed some sympathy for Jessie in "her efforts to elevate him [John] & excite his ambition . . . to win him from his grovelling [sic] nature." Lizzie blamed John for Jessie's

[558] "Highly Important Document: Charges and Specifications Against Col. Blair," *National Republican*, October 8, 1861.
[559] William Ernest Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, vol. 2, 81-82.
[560] Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee, September 17, 1861, in Virginia Jeans Lass, *Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 78-81.

"countenancing & cowering his sins" and for Jessie's actions in which she had "shared & been degraded by them."[561] The relationship between Jessie Frémont and Lizzie Lee, one that had sustained Jessie for decades, had essentially ended.

While the Blair family raged, not everyone reacted in such a manner to either John's emancipation proclamation or Jessie's interview with President Lincoln. Poet John Greenleaf Whittier, long a Frémont supporter, responded to John's proclamation and Lincoln's response with a poem published first in the *Boston Transcript* and repeated in other papers. Whittier praised John for "taking counsel but of common sense" and opined that John's only error was "[t]o act a plain man's part, without the statesman's tact."[562] Toward the end of September, Whittier received a letter from his friend and fellow abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. Mrs. Child, too, approved of John's emancipation order, writing that Lincoln's September 11 letter ordering that John withdraw his proclamation meant that John "should be sustained by every friend of freedom" and that "[f]or <u>his</u> [Frémont's] sake and for the <u>slave's</u> sake, we ought to rally round him."[563]

For Jessie, Mrs. Child penned an even more positive assessment. In an open letter published originally in New York's *Evening Post*, she admitted, as she had in a prior letter, that she had not before accepted the term "Our Jessie." Now she gladly embraced both the expression and the woman. She admired Jessie's forgoing the "elegant drawing-rooms for the fatigue and

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[561] Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee, October 14, 1861, Virginia Jeans Lass, *Wartime Washington*, 84-86.
[562] John Greenleaf Whittier, "To John C Frémont," *Burlington Daily Times*, October 1, 1861. Word of John's proclamation spread quickly across the country, appearing in eastern papers by September 2 and far western papers by October 2. By September 17, the news had arrived in Europe. "The Proclamation of General Frémont," *Buffalo Courier*, September 2, 1861; "Frémont's Proclamation," *Sacramento Bee*, October 2, 1861; "America," *Daily News* (London), September 17, 1861.
[563] Lydia Maria Child to John Greenleaf Whittier, September 22, 1861, 49/1337, The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child.

privations of a camp." Remarking on Jessie's hard work on behalf of her husband, she claimed that her "heart spontaneously repeats the old popular phrase, and affectionately greets you as "*our* Jessie." For Mrs. Child, Jessie's service to John, "confirming him in all principles of freedom, justice and humanity," was a perfect expression of wifely duty, and she thanked Jessie "in the name of the womanhood which she adorns."[564] Abolitionist leaders supported John's emancipation action and yearned for a similar attitude from national leaders.

Like Mrs. Child, newspaper writers also commented on Jessie's performance of her wifely duties, especially when it came to her battle with the Blair family. While it is unclear how the private conversation between Jessie and "Father Blair" became known outside their circle, one pundit offered a purported piece of dialogue between the two. Preston Blair was reported as telling Jessie to focus on maintaining her husband's household in St. Louis rather than involving herself in "affairs of State." He subtly threatened John by saying, "I wish you to understand that here is where we make men and unmake them." Jessie was credited by a Maryland newspaper with a clever retort: "Mr. Blair, permit me to say to you that I have seen *some* men of your making, and if they are the best you can do, I advise you to quit the business."[565] A southern newspaper in Natchez, Mississippi, also appreciated, with tongue in cheek, Jessie's defense of her husband, commenting that "Frémont, unaided, would soon go under, but 'Jessie' is at his back and will fight till the last. We shudder for the Blairs when she gets her hands on them."[566] While sarcastically praising Jessie, this writer simultaneously questioned the masculinity of

[564] Lydia Maria Child, "A Letter from Mrs. Child to 'Our Jessie,'" Open Letter Published in the New York *Evening Post*, October 1, 1861, The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child. Mrs. Childs' letter was also published in *The Liberator* on October 11 and in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on October 19.
[565] "Jessie and the Elder Blair," *Civilian and Telegraph*, October 17, 1861.
[566] "Untitled," *Natchez Daily Courier*, October 19, 1861.

John, the Blairs, and even the Union. Yet another writer in a Confederate city took up Montgomery Blair's observation that "Gen'l Jessie" appeared in charge of matters in St. Louis by reporting gleefully that "Mrs. General Jessie Benton Frémont is now in command of the United States troops in Missouri, with her husband, John C., attached."[567] As in the 1856 presidential campaign, writers representing differing points of view used Jessie to comment on matters involving her husband.

Jessie felt keenly the possible cost to John's pride and reputation resulting from the dispute with the Lincoln administration and the possible loss of his St. Louis command. She wrote one acquaintance, complaining of the lack of gratitude from the Lincoln administration for John's actions, describing the "rebels in front of him, slandering & spies all around him & a malignant stealthy cabinet using every engine at its disposal to destroy him."[568] To Dorothea Dix, head of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, Jessie wondered what might have happened "if the President had had one interview with Mr. Frémont." Within such a meeting, "two honest men can quickly understand each other." It was, however, Lincoln's "good brain and bad heart" that made the president "so unjust and deaf" to her pleas on John's behalf.[569] Not willing to complain openly to Dix about Lincoln, Jessie instead placed blame on those members of the cabinet who

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[567] "Good Hit," *Louisville Daily Courier*, October 17, 1861.
[568] Jessie Benton Frémont to Frederick Billings, October 12, 1861, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 273-276.
[569] Jessie Benton Frémont to Dorothea Dix, October 1861, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Jessie later recalled a visit from Mrs. Dix to the Western Department to examine medical conditions as Jessie worked with St. Louis locals to establish their own Western Sanitary Commission in connection with Dix's U.S. Sanitary Commission. At the time of her visit to St. Louis in the summer of 1861, John refused to see Dix, asking Jessie to tell Mrs. Dix that "I know I can agree to anything her experience suggests, but make her see it is impossible for me to sit listening to details." Jessie was certain that had Mrs. Dix known what "the President required from Mr. Frémont she would have been entirely with him." As the "full truth" could not be made known to Mrs. Dix at the time, it was only later that Dix knew what had happened and gave "back all her trust and esteem." Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 268.

played upon Lincoln's "bad heart" to destroy John. In the end, though, Jessie's efforts proved futile. The Frémonts' time in St. Louis was drawing to a disastrous close.

Lincoln came to the end of his patience with the tempestuous couple and the Missouri situation. In early November 1861, John received the order relieving him of command. He and Jessie moved to New York, then to Washington, D.C., as John prepared to answer questions from Congress's Committee on the Conduct of the War. While in the capital that February of 1862, Jessie received an invitation to a White House party given by Mrs. Lincoln.[570] Jessie initially sent her regrets, writing later that she did so because of the loss of a "near member of our family" as well of several more distant relations fighting for the Confederacy.[571] When the president sent an aide to encourage the Frémonts' attendance, the couple complied.

According to Jessie, the atmosphere at the party remained grim throughout the evening, and much of the discussion around the rooms centered on criticism that the Lincoln administration did not act as Frémont had. To Jessie, this approval of her husband over the president became "embarrassing."[572] In the future, she relied on this incident to convince herself that Lincoln was, in fact, jealous of her husband. But a generous Lincoln gave John one more chance.

In March of 1862, John received another command, this time over the newly created Mountain Department.[573] Jessie and the children joined him in Wheeling, Virginia (soon to be in

[570] This gathering later became part of Lincoln lore as the Lincoln son Willie lay dying upstairs while guests mingled downstairs. As Jessie wrote, the "Marine band at the foot of the steps filled the house with music while the boy lay dying above." Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 328.
[571] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 327.
[572] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 328-329.
[573] The Mountain Department, created in March 1861, included the western and southwestern parts of Virginia (which area would soon become West Virginia) and a part of eastern Kentucky.

West Virginia), as he attempted to put a stop to raiding in the Shenandoah Valley by the Confederacy's Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. John was no match for Jackson's military cunning. Jessie recalled years later that General John Pope, who had served under John in the Western Department, was to blame for John's failure to stop Jackson, remarking that John had referred to Pope as "an insubordinate officer."[574] The commander in chief did not see it that way. Frustrated again at Frémont's failure to achieve the goals for which he was appointed, by June Lincoln reorganized the Mountain Department, putting Pope in charge. A furious Frémont refused to serve under a general who had once served under his own command and asked the president to accept his resignation. Although Jessie wrote later of the President's admiration for John's military prowess and promises of another command, John C. Frémont had effectively "quit" the Civil War.[575]

Jessie no doubt felt the pain of yet another ignominious failure by John. This time, though, she took up her pen. While in New York and Washington between John's assignments in Missouri and in the Shenandoah Valley, Jessie crafted her first book, to be entitled *The Story of the Guard: A Chronicle of the War*. Initially finished in the spring of 1862, she asked her publisher, Ticknor and Fields of Boston, to hold off preparing the manuscript for publication when John received his appointment to the Mountain Department. Writing her book as a defense of John's actions in Missouri, Jessie wanted to end the work with a tale of his redemption in the Shenandoah. After his failure and his resignation from command, Jessie moved forward with publication. This first book under her name appeared in print by the end of 1862.

[574] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 379.
[575] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 378-379.

Ostensibly, *The Story of the Guard* told the tale of John's St. Louis Body Guard and its successful military action at Springfield, Missouri, in October 1861. Ordered to push Confederate forces out of the town, the Guard of one hundred fifty men beat back two thousand rebels while suffering less than twenty casualties. Not only would Jessie tell the story of the "truly soldierly young men" who made up the Guard, but she also planned to use the book to establish a means of financial support for the families of those who lost their lives at Springfield.[576] In reality, however, Jessie devoted most of the book to her own experiences and to a defense of John's actions during his command of the Western Department. She used excerpts from John's letters to her to promote John's justification for his actions and how he did not have the men and supplies necessary to drive the rebels from Missouri. This would not be the only time that she published a letter from John in an effort to tell his side of those events which had reflected poorly on him. Nor would this be the only time that Jessie wrote seemingly about John while carving out a place for herself in the narrative.

Jessie explained her own role in John's command: "Knowing I was always at the house [St. Louis headquarters], and that anything requiring attention would be sure to receive it, night or day, the General wrote to me for what was needed."[577] Jessie served as much more than a supportive spouse—she was an integral part of her husband's Western Department. In a letter of October 20, 1861, John instructed her to send "forward all the regiments possible," further giving orders to "[a]rm them with the Austrian muskets." Still later, he offered a testament to his confidence in her, writing on November 2 that "I trust in you to do all that can be done."[578] For

[576] Jessie Benton Frémont, *The Story of the Guard*, vii-viii.
[577] Jessie Benton Frémont, *The Story of the Guard*, 86-87.
[578] Jessie Benton Frémont, *The Story of the Guard*, 108-110, 194-198.

Jessie, her wifely duty led her to take on tasks more appropriately assigned to members of John's command, but she did not see the distinction. For her, being a wife meant being of assistance wherever she was needed. Something within her, perhaps a streak of her father's pride and forthright arrogance, drove her to be a part of events happening around her, always at the ready, always deciding for herself just what was appropriate for a wife.

Other wives of military leaders on both the Confederate and Union sides felt as much as Jessie the need to help their husbands. While some wives proved more helpful than others, the women left to care for home and family formed a brave lot, willing to offer support and even consolation when necessary. Historians examining the life of Julia Dent Grant, wife of General Ulysses Grant, credit her with helping her husband maintain his equilibrium during the difficult days of the siege of Vicksburg and the final taking of the Confederate capital at Richmond, Virginia.[579] Ellen Ewing Sherman's marriage to General William Tecumseh Sherman was rocky almost from the start, and the war only exacerbated the tense relationship. Still, when Sherman was accused of mental instability in the press, Ellen and other members of the Ewing family rallied to "Cump's" defense, even going so far as to approach President Lincoln. Unlike Jessie, however, Ellen's interaction with Lincoln so reassured her that she was able to reassure her husband in turn.[580] The wife of General George Custer, likewise, pursued her husband's interests in Washington, but, again unlike Jessie, she used her social skills and more than a little flirtation to aid her husband's cause.[581] Each of these women helped her husband without

[579] Carol K. Rothrock Bleser and Lesley J. Gordon, eds., *Intimate Strategies of the Civil War: Military Commanders and Their Wives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129, 133.
[580] Carol K. Rothrock Bleser and Lesley J. Gordon, ed., *Intimate Strategies of the Civil War*, 148.
[581] Carol K. Rothrock Bleser and Lesley J. Gordon, ed., *Intimate Strategies of the Civil War*, 185-186.

overstepping the bounds of femininity, which accounts for their success, while Jessie's intransigence and her confrontational approach only added to John's troubles.

What separated Jessie the most from the other notable Civil War wives was her insistence on being something of an aide-de-camp to her husband. With her admission in *The Story of the Guard* that she played a role in marshaling men and arms while John was in the field, Jessie stepped far away from her fellow wives. Similarly, the publication of *The Story of the Guard* also put Jessie in the role of defending her husband's shaky reputation. Several other Civil War wives sought to refurbish the reputations of their husbands, including Varina Howell Davis, wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who took up her pen after Davis' death to place both her husband and herself into the Lost Cause narrative that became the established southern interpretation of the war in the late nineteenth century.[582] Yet these wives, including LaSalle Corbell Pickett, wife of the hapless George Pickett whose charge at Gettysburg was blamed for the Confederate loss of that battle, and Mary Anna Morrison Jackson, wife to beloved Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, waited until their husbands had died to step in to the literary fray over their reputations.[583] For men with the pride of Davis, Pickett, and Jackson, any female attempt to defend them during their lifetimes would have been construed as robbing them of their masculinity. Post-death attention to their husbands' reputations, though, was deemed an appropriate action for a widow. Regardless of the possible impact to her

[582] Carol K. Rothrock Bleser and Lesley J. Gordon, ed., *Intimate Strategies of the Civil War*, 29. The Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War developed initially as a means of assuaging the shame of southern men after losing the war. The narrative included such components as blaming a lack of men and arms for the Confederate defeat, a focus on the gallantry of Confederate soldiers, and a mythical recasting of slavery as a benign institution in which slaveholders and enslaved people lived in harmony on pleasant plantations. No work of fiction captured the Lost Cause as well as Margaret Mitchell's 1936 bestseller, *Gone with the Wind*.
[583] Carol K. Rothrock Bleser and Lesley J. Gordon, ed., *Intimate Strategies of the Civil War*, 84-85, 62-64.

husband's dignity and manliness, Jessie felt the need to defend him at once, perhaps because she thought he might soon need that reputation to take on a still greater role. If John resented any of Jessie's actions on his behalf, he left no record of it.

While John waited, perhaps unrealistically, for yet another command appointment from the president, Radical Republicans in Congress, newspaper editors, and abolitionists focused on the upcoming 1864 presidential election.[584] The Radicals, who actively disdained Lincoln for what they viewed as his hesitancy in addressing slavery, sought a candidate with strong credentials in anti-slavery activism. John brought to the table his experience running for the nation's highest office, a positive reputation amongst abolitionists, and a history of emancipating slaves in open defiance of the sitting president. While a convention of Radicals nominated John in the spring of 1864, his campaign never got far. Radical Republicans, eyeing the growing popularity of General George McClellan, the Democratic nominee for president, realized that they would need to come together with Lincoln Republicans to win the election.[585] John was asked to withdraw his candidacy.

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[584] Radical Republicans represented a faction within the Republican party that saw in Abraham Lincoln someone too cautious, too moderate in his views, and too willing to compromise. Radicals, by contrast, sought not only the complete end to slavery but also harsh measures of retribution against the Confederate states, their leaders, and their supporters. Radicals included Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, Senators Charles Sumner and Zachariah Chandler, and newspaper editor William Cullen Bryant of the *New York Evening Post*, among others.

[585] On May 29, 1864, a group of Radical Republicans held a convention in Cleveland, Ohio, to nominate a presidential candidate for their new party, the Radical Democracy Party. They chose John C. Frémont for president and John Cochrane, a former congressman and current attorney general of New York, for vice president. Their platform included planks demanding the preservation of the Union, obedience to the Constitution, suppression of the rebellion, and an amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. On September 21, 1864, John withdrew his candidacy. In his withdrawal letter, he made it clear that this was an unwilling acceptance of a cold political reality, holding fast to his belief that Lincoln's administration "has been politically, militarily and financially, a failure, and that its necessary continuance is a cause of regret for the country." Harold Hyman, "Election of 1864," in *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-2008*, ed. Gil Troy, Arthur M. Schlesinger, and Fred L. Israel, Fourth Edition (New York: Infobase Learning, 2012), 492–517. For more information on the convention, see John C. Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1997), 176-181.

It was Zachariah Chandler, U.S. Senator from Michigan, who approached John with the request that he withdraw. Chandler dangled the prospect of another command appointment, but John rejected this offer. According to Jessie, the "worst his enemies could do, had been done, and any affiliation with the Administration, which had through personal motives attempted to ruin his career and reputation, was an impossibility."[586] Jessie herself defined the "personal motives" in a few of her writings. She blamed the Blairs for John's early failures in Missouri, claiming that never "could the rebels have had such successes had not our own political chiefs helped them." She credited "northern treason" as having taken "heart & profited by the crime of the Blairs."[587] Jessie also attributed "personal motives" to Abraham Lincoln. She referred to the president as having "a sly slimy nature."[588] She believed wholeheartedly that Abraham Lincoln was jealous of John's popularity, writing of her "embarrassment" at the February 1862 party when she believed the positive approval of the partygoers for John eclipsed the president. Jessie never wavered from her belief that John had been a victim of personal animus during the Civil War.[589]

In the 1890s, when she was writing a biography (to be left unpublished) of her husband, Jessie recast the events of 1861 through 1864 to highlight her husband's actions in a way that showed him as both a hero and a victim. She happily credited him with bravery and

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[586] Jessie Benton Frémont and Francis Preston Frémont, "Great Events," 390.
[587] Jessie Benton Frémont to George Julian, March 3, 1863, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 348-349.
[588] Jessie Benton Frémont to Thomas Starr King, October 16, 1863, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 355-356. While Jessie never voiced these thoughts in her published works, she undoubtedly felt safe in expressing her disgust at Lincoln to her good friend Starr King.
[589] While Jessie does not mention it, another action taken by the Lincoln administration might have mollified her anger at the "treason" and the jealousy. As a sop to the Radicals in September 1864, Lincoln accepted the resignation of one of the moderate members of his cabinet—Postmaster General Montgomery Blair. Given the antagonism between the Frémonts and Blairs, this must have been welcome news.

resourcefulness, despite insurmountable obstacles. She continued the tradition of blaming others for John's failures. She shifted the narrative so that the military victories expected of John were sabotaged by a lack of men and equipment, by southern sympathizers in Missouri, and by the insubordination of his generals in the Mountain Department. She did not repeat her views on Abraham Lincoln for public consumption, certainly understanding the wave of love for the president after his assassination. Still, it remained important for Jessie that her prideful husband not be hurt by his detractors, even as the Frémonts left the world of politics, war, and public service behind.

For historians of U.S. history, the end of the Civil War marked the beginning of the period of Reconstruction, roughly construed as between 1865 and 1877. For the Frémonts, however, Reconstructions seems to have played little to no role in their lives after the war. For them, although they had been firm abolitionists, the plight of the freedpeople did not garner their attention. Their world revolved around the White people of New York society, and they skipped Reconstruction altogether. Rather, they turned to private concerns. Never again would either John or Jessie appear on the national political stage in a major way. The nation was changing, and the Frémonts moved on.

Coined by Mark Twain in his 1873 book *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, the term "gilded age" has been used since to describe the period from 1865 through 1900. Known for the meteoric rise in U.S. industrial might, the period was also known for technological advancements meant both to speed the course of progress and to allow for increased productivity. Men like Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie, derisively called "robber barons," made money in heretofore incomprehensible amounts through control of major

industries such as transportation, oil, and steel production. They used their riches to build lavish homes, to give extravagant parties, and to leave an inheritance for heirs that would lead to a class of non-working men and women whose only ambitions focused on amusement. Into this arena of ostentatious wealth, the Frémonts became a part of society, their glittering wealth obscuring the precarious nature of their underlying financial condition.

The Frémonts stepped into a new phase of life, coming back to a standard of living like that Jessie had enjoyed in San Francisco before the war. The first step was John's purchase of what the couple would name Pocaho, a 190-acre estate on the Hudson River north of Tarrytown, New York. From the three-story stone mansion, the family and their visitors enjoyed panoramic views of the Hudson, Haverstraw Bay, and the Catskill mountains. With trails for walking, riding, or driving and a dock from which the children could launch boats, Pocaho offered the same sort of amenities that Jessie had enjoyed at Black Point.[590] A short train ride from New York City provided Jessie with the social outings she enjoyed, while the large estate, surrounded as it was by other large estates, offered a peaceful rural setting. As she had during the years at Las Mariposas and San Francisco, Jessie turned her focus toward her family—in this way she retained much of the drive of "General Jessie." She enjoyed being a hostess at Pocaho and traveling into the city for parties, plays, and musical entertainments; yet she also found time to attend to the needs of her husband and children. And she basked in luxury again after the difficult war years.

[590] John P. Ritter, "The Richest Colony in the World," *The Peterson Magazine*, June 1897, 565; Frémont, Elizabeth Benton, *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont*, 129; Answers to Questions from Allen Nevins by Francis Blair Frémont, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Jessie enjoyed the outdoor life at Pocaho as well as the indoor life within the confines of the stone mansion. She planned new pathways through the property, and she chose her bedroom on the side of the house "where the pine & hemlock groves come up close to my windows." Life on the Hudson offered plenty of social interactions as well. Jessie described her "visiting list for the summer" as being "twenty-five miles long for the Hudson is a great street & people dine and visit by rail when they are past driving limits."[591] One young houseguest, Sara Upton, described a visit to Pocaho in a letter to her sister. Sara depicted the interior of the stone house in glowing detail, praising the "wide hall, broad staircase and spacious airy rooms."[592] A Steinway grand piano graced one room. Paintings from the second generation of the Hudson River Valley School hung from the walls, including works by David Johnson, J.F. Cropsey, William Lewis Sonntag, and Samuel Coleman. Ebony and gold card tables offered elegant gaming activities, while guests at Pocaho feasted off Minton, Sevres, Copenhagen, and Bohemian china.[593]

John added to Jessie's lavish décor by purchasing Albert Bierstadt's *The Golden Gate, California* from the artist himself, who lived nearby, for the sum of $4,000.[594] In addition, John acquired a portion of the library of his idol, Alexander von Humboldt, after the famed explorer's death in 1859. Working through a Vermont bookseller transplanted to London, Henry Stevens, John purchased numerous volumes from the Humboldt collection to grace his shelves as well as several of the honorary degrees bestowed on the great German scientist. Books like these and

[591] Jessie Benton Frémont to Samuel Phillips Lee, October 25, 1865, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 393-395.
[592] Sara Upton Edwards to Louise Upton Finley, May 20, 1872, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[593] "Sales at Auction," *New York Daily Herald*, October 10, 1877.
[594] Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum in association with Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 181.

others filled Pocaho's large library, a room twenty feet by thirty and "lined with books from floor to ceiling."[595] The love of reading shared by John and Jessie reached its peak in their Hudson Valley home.

While Sara Upton pronounced Jessie "fascinating," Lily Frémont, nearly thirty years old, was described as "short, stout, and not stylish" yet "charming in conversation." Lily, a lover of nature, especially horses and dogs, reigned over stables, barns, and gardens, riding and driving all over the property and the surrounding region. She later recalled her days at Pocaho as being filled with riding, most of the time with her father, he mounted on his Irish hunter and she on her thoroughbred Kentucky mare.[596] In many of the letters Lily shared with her friend from Black Point days, Nellie Haskell Browne, she described the various responsibilities that fell upon her at Pocaho, although she made no mention of these in her memoir.[597] Taking care of her family in nearly all matters, with parents who were often away from home or who were sick and needed attention, Lily never wrote of any sadness or bitterness at her unmarried status; in fact, she enjoyed the occasions where she served as a bridesmaid for friends.

Jessie's sons tended toward military service. Both received basic education from tutors, then attended the Peekskill Military Academy before being admitted into the U.S. military academies.[598] Charley, who had always admired his godfather, naval officer Samuel Phillips

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[595] Questions from Allen Nevins by Francis Blair Frémont, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 3. Also, letterpress copy of the account of John C. Frémont with Henry Stevens, Henry Stevens Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan; Wyman W. Parker, *Henry Stevens of Vermont: American Rare Book Dealer in London, 1845-1886* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1963), 235.
[596] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *Recollections*, 128.
[597] In 1912, after the death of her parents and her brother Charley, Lily published *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont* with the help of editor I.E. Martin.
[598] Questions from Allen Nevins by Francis Blair Frémont, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 3.

Lee, and who had loved the sea from early in his life, won acceptance to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, graduating in 1872.[599] Frank, with a character given to mischievousness and a large measure of the impetuosity of his father, studied at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point before being appointed a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army in 1879.[600]

In later years, Frank Frémont remembered his mother as sharing John's "enthusiasm for" nature, cherishing "flowers, trees and landscape as made and left by Nature." But Jessie was "eminently a 'social woman,'" while John preferred the company of a few intimate friends and a nine o'clock retirement each night.[601] Gilded Age life for Jessie meant pleasant social encounters, gowns and jewels to her heart's content, and all the trimmings of the life of a minor American aristocrat. During the warm summers of New York, the family closed Pocaho for the season and headed to their Desert Island property near Bar Harbor, Maine. Here amidst the "rock shore, woods & high hills," guests streamed in and out of the Frémont house. Lily, Charley, and Frank enjoyed the seaside and surrounding country while Jessie felt rejuvenated, as she always did, by the nearness of ocean breezes. As Lily wrote at the time, both John and Jessie needed this reprieve to cool, fresh air in a place where "business can't get here easily."[602] Visits to Sarasota Springs and Newport rounded out summer for the Frémonts, who were happy to return to Pocaho when the weather turned cooler. Jessie created for herself and her family a typical society existence, with parties, outings, houseguests, and visits.

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[599] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, May 16, 1872, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[600] Questions from Allen Nevins by Francis Blair Frémont, 3; "Local Brevities," *San Francisco Examiner*, September 30, 1879.
[601] Questions from Allen Nevins by Francis Blair Frémont, 7-8.
[602] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, August 27, 1870, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

To sit for an oil painting was *de rigueur* for men and women of a certain social status during the Frémonts' years at Pocaho. In 1867, Jessie engaged portrait artist Giuseppe Fagnani, then working toward the end of his career in New York, to create separate images of her and John in oil.[603] Fagnani, who had emigrated to the United States in the early 1840s, had a distinguished career behind him by the time he met the Frémonts. Included in his works were portraits of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Samuel F.B. Morse, as well as paintings of many of the socially connected in New York. His painting of Jessie shows her aging gracefully, despite comments in the newspapers describing her as "a large, fat blonde, with a sharp, up-pointed nose."[604] In an off-the-shoulder gown trimmed in lace, wearing a cameo, and two thick sausage curls tumbling over her shoulders, Jessie gazed out of her portrait with dark eyes conveying a certain contentment.[605] Here is the society matron at her finest. Fagnani's painting of John, in contrast to the bust-length portrait of Jessie, featured a full-length rendering. The aging general wore a military coat and held a saber in his right hand while leaning against an oak table with his left elbow. On the table, volumes of Henry Schoolcraft's *American Indians, their History, Condition, and Prospects* (1850) occupied the shelves, while on the tabletop stood a statue of a male figure resembling a Roman slave with ribs showing through his carved flesh. Despite an attempt to create a youthful appearance, noticeable in close-cropped curls with just a dusting of

[603] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, June 8, 1867, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[604] "The Frémonts," *Chicago Tribune*, January 28, 1870.
[605] Frederick Samuel Dellenbauch, *Frémont And '49* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914). The image of Jessie used in Dellenbauch's book may not have been the Fagnani portrait, as that painting passed into private hands before Jessie's death. It does, however, resemble a Jessie at roughly the age of 40, with white hair, the Benton nose, and a somewhat mannish face.

white, John looked weary. His deep-set eyes no longer hinted at a Byronic handsomeness but rather a man worn down by a lifetime of action.[606]

Travel in Europe was nearly as imperative for upper-class families as sitting for oil paintings, and John, Jessie, their three children, and a maid left for Europe on June 12, 1869.[607] Traveling to Denmark, the Frémonts were not only guests at a feast celebrating the marriage of the young king and queen, they also had the opportunity to visit author Hans Christian Anderson, who read to them from his latest manuscript.[608] Travel in Germany, Austria, and even into Prague, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, enchanted Jessie and her family. The Frémonts also found time for a visit to Paris, which Jessie had long adored. This time, however, a new element was added to the traditional art and culture of the French capital.

During the Civil War and his time in the Shenandoah valley, John had met with a young girl seeking a pass across the lines to search for her brother. She was Vinnie Ream, and, while he denied her pass, John did not forget his one meeting with her. When they met again in Paris in 1869, John and Vinnie reminisced about their first meeting. It was not long before John was besotted with the twenty-one-year-old, who had scored artistic success as the sculptor chosen by Congress to craft a full-length statue of Abraham Lincoln destined for the Capitol Rotunda. The journal Vinnie Ream kept during her European trip shows "General F" calling on her almost

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[606] Catalog of American Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_1909.1.1?destination=edansearch/catalog_of_america%3Fedan_q%3DFrémont%26edan_local%3D1%26edan_fq%255B0%255D%3Dset_name%253A%2522Catalog%2520of%2520American%2520Portraits%2522%2520OR%2520set_name%253A%2522National%2520Portrait%2520Gallery%2520Collection%2522%26incCAP%3Dtrue%26op%3DSearch; accessed 20 Sep 2021. Jessie Benton Frémont to Emma Hill Hadley Ballard, February 10, 1902, Benton Family Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.

[607] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Brown, Jun 3, 1869, in Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; "Passengers Sailed," *New York Times*, June 13, 1869.

[608] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Hans Andersen at Home," *Wide Awake Magazine*, November 1887, 342.

daily and the two of them taking in the sights of Paris together.[609] She saved some of his letters, one of which showed John's concern for Vinnie's hectic schedule when he wrote, "Poor little thing I said to myself, how tired she must have been. But you know what Richard said to Queen Anne, 'Twas your beauty made me do it.'" Jessie also met Vinnie during this time, as the artist created busts of both her and John as well as a casting of Jessie's hands.[610] While there is no direct confirmation of sexual intimacy between John and Vinnie Ream, such a situation appears quite plausible, especially from a husband with a habit of philandering and a young woman whose attraction to the aging generals of the Civil War was established fact.[611] No record has passed down that indicates Jessie had anything to say about the matter.

While divorce for women during the latter half of the nineteenth century was an option, it is highly unlikely that Jessie ever considered it. When she made the decision to elope with John over her father's objection, Jessie started down a pathway from which she never veered. At each opportunity to make a choice supporting John or acknowledging his flaws, Jessie chose her husband—over her father, her close relations with the Blair family, her sisters, and even over her government. Whether this devotion sprang from a genuine love or from an unwillingness to acknowledge any mistake on her part can be debated. After all, Jessie was fully invested in the project of making her husband an American hero, come what may. Both her former friend,

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[609] Vinnie Ream, "Journal of her Trip Abroad," Vinnie Ream and R.L. Hoxie Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[610] Edward S. Cooper, *Vinnie Ream: An American Sculptor* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2004), 103-110.

[611] Vinnie Ream was known in Washington D.C., for her ability to use feminine wiles to win over various male supporters for her artistic projects, as well as a flirtation said to be employed to influence congressman Edmund G. Ross to cast one of the deciding votes for acquittal in the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson. Documentary evidence shows passionate love affairs with both Confederate General Albert Pike and Union General William T. Sherman prior to her marriage. See Edward S. Cooper, *Vinnie Ream*, 68, 78, 192; Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York: Random House, 1995), 355-356.

Lizzie Lee, and her older sister, Eliza, commented on John's faithlessness and Jessie's acquiescence. Eliza defined her sister's feelings for John as "Jessie's insanity," while Lizzie acknowledged Jessie as belonging "to him body & soul," and thus "he does with [her] as he pleases as much as does with his own right hand."[612] Affair or not, Jessie remained committed to her husband and, at least in 1869, to continuing her European tour.

In addition to his family's sightseeing and his relationship with Vinnie Ream, John had another reason to be busy in Paris—selling stock in railroad ventures. When he had resigned his commission and effectively ended his Civil War service, John had taken up the popular interest in railroad speculation. Early tycoons across the country seemed to make money easily from railroads, including the "Four Associates" in California who had established the Central Pacific and Thomas Durant who ran operations for the Union Pacific.[613] When the two railroads met at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869, they created the first transcontinental railroad in the United States. A national passion for rail lines created tracks from sea to sea. During the war, John had lost control of Las Mariposas and had been forced to sell his interest in the property to which he had given so much of himself and from which he had accrued a fortune that might have lasted him and Jessie until the ends of their lives. Railroad speculation and extravagant spending by the Frémonts all too soon tore away the gilt-covered superstructure of their fortune and revealed the decaying foundation upon which John and Jessie had built their own society life.

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[612] Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee and F. P. Blair Lee, July 21, 1883, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

[613] The "Four Associates" were a group of Sacramento merchants who founded the Central Pacific, later Southern Pacific, Railroad in California. They included Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington, Leland Stanford, and Mark Hopkins. Each accrued fortunes through their railroad venture, enabling them to build on the West Coast the same kind of elaborate mansions that the East Coast "robber barons" built in New York City.

Thinking he could accomplish something like that of the "Four Associates," Durant, and others, John's speculative railroad ventures involved several lines, including the Atlantic and Pacific, the Leavenworth, Pawnee, and Western, and the Memphis, El Paso, and Pacific (ME&P). All of these ended in failure, none more spectacularly than the ME&P. In October 1866, when John C. Frémont began his involvement with the ME&P, a project initially founded in 1856, construction had reached a standstill with the advent of the Civil War in 1861. While the developers of the railroad foresaw it as a southern version of the transcontinental railroad, running all the way to San Diego, California, not much had been accomplished. Although the line received land grant concessions from the state of Texas, only sixty-five miles had been graded and no track laid when John became involved. Assigned the task of raising capital, John, as he had done with Las Mariposas, looked to foreign investors. Working with his brother-in-law, Baron Gauldŕee de Boilleau, Jessie's sister Susan's husband, John oversaw the accumulation of close to five million dollars of new capital from French investors.[614]

Had everything been in accordance with honest business practices and French law, these funds might have offered the railroad a chance to fulfill its founders' expectations and could have maintained the Frémont fortune. By the spring of 1869, however, it became clear that company agents had grossly exaggerated the status of the MP&E, with even Baron Boilleau telling French investors that the land necessary to take the line to San Diego had been acquired and that the U.S. government had guaranteed a fixed rate of return. More irregularities,

[614] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 481.

including forged stock certificates from the New York Stock Exchange, compounded the shady nature of the business.[615]

In March of 1871, French authorities brought criminal charges against those involved with the sale of the French securities, including John and Boilleau. While John refused to return to Paris for trial, his brother-in-law was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. John was found guilty in absentia and sentenced to five years. The MP&E collapsed.[616] Jay Cooke, whose own speculative ventures would be a factor in causing the Panic of 1873, ridiculed the Pathfinder, remarking that "Frémont is entirely unreliable in money matters . . . and it injures any one to have any connection with him."[617] While Jessie played no public role in her husband's legal troubles, rumors arose that she was going to Paris to offer a compromise to save her husband.[618] This never happened; perhaps Jessie had learned her lesson with Abraham Lincoln.

Before the French scandal, Jessie rode high in public esteem and was considered a "Queen of American Society" in an 1867 book with the same name. The author complimented the famous Mrs. Frémont for her decision to wear her "blanched locks" as the "sacred scars of a veteran" and praised her "very handsome face" and "intellectual expression." Mostly, the author

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[615] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 483-484.
[616] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 483.
[617] Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 136-138. Before 1929, the Panic of 1873 was widely known as the "Great Depression." In New York City, the trouble began with the failure of Jay Cooke & Company, a banking institution with heavy railroad investments. Other banks failed in its wake. Jay Cooke's bank was reconstituted and eventually paid all its debts, allowing Cooke himself to recover and end his life with reclaimed wealth. Others were not so fortunate, and the economic downturn lasted for approximately four years. See Nicholas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (September 2011): 403–23. While the Panic of 1873 meant that any chance of financial recovery would be far more difficult, the losses accrued from the failure of the MP&E and other business mismanagement accounted for the Frémonts' economic woes in the years following.
[618] "Untitled," *Express and Standard*, February 18, 1873.

focused on Jessie's lively conversational skills and her ability to charm all listeners.[619] These positive qualities, however, did not come to "Our Jessie's" rescue when she had attempted to fulfil her role as a public wife during the Civil War. The "lively wit and picturesque illustration" failed to win over President Abraham Lincoln, and her stubborn insistence on finding her husband right in all matters led to the destruction of her long-standing relationships with the Blair family. While John's miserable business skills brought the family to the brink of financial disaster, Jessie's spending on her lavish lifestyle contributed to the economic uncertainty that soon came to haunt her. While in the United States the Gilded Age continued until nearly the turn of the twentieth century, for Jessie Frémont it ended in 1874. She would need all her skills and abilities to maintain her family as their homes, their social contacts, and their very lives grew smaller as the next years ticked by.

[619] E.F. Ellet, *The Queens of American Society* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1867), 447-448.

CHAPTER 7
BREADWINNER, BUSINESSWOMAN, AND AUTHOR
1874-1884

When examining Jessie's extant correspondence, the reader finds a visible reflection of the woman's character. Jessie wrote with a large hand, bold and confident, often going from one word to another without a break. She generously added exclamation points, dashes, and underscoring to give emphasis to words already emphatic. Mostly, Jessie's penmanship reveals a person whose hand never quite caught up with her quickly moving mind. Jessie's was the handwriting of haste, even at her leisure.

In an undated note scrawled in 1874, the panic with which she wrote is palpable. She penned a quick missive to George Browne, a family friend:

> The Tax collector is here—says he can levy on anything moveable, no matter who it belongs to, even if to one of the servants…the collector is at the stable now looking at horses, carriages, etc. with a view to moving them into the village, advertising them for six days &, if not redeemed, selling them . . . . Disagreeable to have to write you but I can't help it.[620]

Whether it was John's poor management of the family's assets or the couple's lavish spending, or likely a combination of the two, it all came crashing down on that Monday afternoon in 1874. With the arrival of the tax collector, the long, painful process began through which the Frémonts came to lose their most precious possessions. Emma Ballard, the wife of a St. Louis businessman, acquired John's 1867 portrait by Giuseppe Fagnani. A family friend purchased the Fagnani portrait of Jessie, afterwards gifting it to Frank Frémont.[621] The portion

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[620] Jessie Benton Frémont to George Browne, Monday afternoon 1874, Frémont Family Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

[621] Jessie Benton Frémont to Emma Ballard, February 19, 1902, Benton Family Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri. In her letter to Mrs. Ballard, Jessie wrote that the Fagnani portrait of herself was sold at auction for $100, while the portrait of John was purchased for $120, even though she had paid Fagnani $1500 for the portrait

of the Alexander Von Humboldt library, the Bierstadt painting of the "Golden Gate," the horses and carriages, the Steinway grand piano, the ebony and gold card tables, and finally the property itself were sold off to repay debts incurred by the Frémonts, including those resulting from the failure of the Memphis, El Paso, and Pacific Railroad. The process of eliminating the Frémont fortune lasted for several years, a slow, painful transition that saw John in disgrace, leveraging former friendships to win government employment. Jessie moved from the splendor of Pocaho to a series of smaller and smaller houses and apartments. The glory days seemed over.

Jessie wasted little time in mourning these losses. She focused on making money—and on redeeming her husband's damaged reputation. She lobbied Washington politicians on John's behalf. She arranged the sale of some Frémont possessions, and she wrote fiery letters to those she felt had wronged her and her husband. Finally, she took over the role of breadwinner, generating income of her own through her pen. With a feel for the public nostalgia animating the 1870s and 1880s, Jessie wrote dozens of magazine short stories, published two books, and contributed to a few edited volumes. Responding to postbellum feelings of sentimental longing for the past, her writing drew upon the times when the young United States was finding its footing among the nations of the world and expanding across the continent with the aid of great men, like her father and her husband.

Jessie used tales of her lifetime, of her childhood, her travels, and her California adventures to bring money into the Frémont coffers. No matter what she wrote, her goals

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of John alone. The original purchaser of John's portrait, a Mr. Moore, offered at the time of his purchase that Jessie might buy the painting back for the initial sum expended. Jessie complained to Mrs. Ballard that Mr. Moore later altered the price of repurchase, seeking $400 plus interest. For Jessie, knowing that the painting finally rested with Mrs. Ballard offered some comfort, and she asked Mrs. Ballard if some photographs might be taken of the piece and sent to her so she could see "the dear face and the home accessories."

remained the same: to burnish her father's already positive reputation; to redeem her husband's heroic status after his failures in politics, business, and the military; and, finally, to create for herself a narrative of her life in which she featured prominently in the history of the nation. During the two decades after the loss of Pocaho, Jessie began the process of ensuring that both she and the two men she loved the most would be remembered in the annals of United States history.

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With the downturn in her family's financial fortunes, Jessie jumped at the chance to help. She wrote letters to old friends, like Judge Jeremiah Black, seeking help in collecting a debt owed to John from Pennsylvania Railroad president Tom Scott. She warned Black the foreclosure on Pocaho would become official on January 1, 1875, and payment of Scott's debt could possibly stave off the inevitable.[622] She wrote to George W. Childs, the publisher of the *Pennsylvania Ledger*, who had years before been interested in publishing a recollection of John's expeditions. She sought his service as a possible broker to sell John's collection of Alexander von Humboldt's works. She explained to Childs why it was she and not John seeking his help, noting that the "General has been so tired and hurt by the undeserved grief of these two hard years that, to spare him, I have to do many things I hardly understand."[623] In both letters, Jessie

[622] Jeremiah Black, an attorney, jurist, and former member of James Buchanan's cabinet, had served as John's attorney since prior to the Civil War, representing him in litigation arising from John's railroad speculations and western land interests. Ultimately, all efforts to collect from Scott failed. William Norwood Brigance, *Jeremiah Sullivan Black: A Defender of the Constitution and the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), 228. Also, Jessie Benton Frémont to Jeremiah S. Black, June 18, 1874; October 29, 1874; and December 25, 1874, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 417-418, 421-425.

[623] Jessie Benton Frémont to George W. Childs, January 24, 1875, Ferdinand J. Dreer Autograph Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

sought to solicit financial assistance and, at the same time, to explain the ways in which John was being misunderstood in light of the railroad scandal. Her coy remark about "things I barely understand" served as Jessie's excuse for stepping into the masculine world of finance on behalf of her husband while still maintaining her femininity. Jessie, as would come to be seen in later economic undertakings, was far more of a businesswoman than she ever admitted.

As Jessie strove to accrue money for her family, she left setting up household in a new location to her daughter, Lily. By the end of 1875, the family had vacated Pocaho, and Lily created a home at 924 Madison Avenue in New York City, a residence Jessie referred to as her "poverty-flat."[624] This apartment building, located several blocks away from where newly minted millionaires like Gould, Vanderbilt, and Morgan were building lavish mansions, served as a first stop as the Frémont family tried to find their footing. They were not the only people struggling with nearly incomprehensible change in the 1870s. The Frémonts, and many other Americans, looked wherever they could for comfort, for stability after the chaotic impact of the past decade.

The uneasy peace constructed at Appomattox and the violent politics of Reconstruction threatened to keep the nation split in two forever, with no hope of a true reconciliation. A focus on the shared past of the Founding generation, the early days of the republic, and the years of western exploration offered a comfortable expanse where Americans of all regions might come back together as unified. Whether she knew it instinctively, whether it served to address her own need for order out of chaos, or whether it was simply fiscally prudent to do so, Jessie Benton

[624] "Goulding´s New York City Directory for 1876-77," Ancestry.com. U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Jessie Benton Frémont to William J. Morton, April 18, 1877, William J. Morton Papers, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Frémont found a way of appealing to this national nostalgia.[625] In late 1874, she entered an arrangement with Robert Bonner, publisher of the *New York Ledger* newspaper, to write a series of articles about the famous men and women she had known when she was young. As she later told a friend, Bonner had been asking her to write something for his newspaper for some time, but she had always demurred. Now, with the family's financial resources slowly draining away, she took advantage of Bonner's offer, remarking that "[I]f there is something I can say better than another could say it, and if it is wanted that it should be said that makes a reason for writing. Another reason is that which drives the wolf down from the mountain."[626] For his part, Bonner advertised her coming series in late 1874, calling her "the handsome and accomplished wife of General Frémont and a daughter of Thomas Benton."[627]

Jessie's exuberant embrace of this, her first assignment, knew no bounds. In her initial article for the "Distinguished Persons I Have Known" series, she focused not on a single person but on several "distinguished persons." She began, though, by highlighting her family life and the role of her father in bringing together the illustrious political and cultural figures of the young United States in the 1830s and 1840s. She played at a certain bashfulness about putting herself "much forward" because she "cannot, without stiffness, disconnect the personal relations." Jessie looked back from the vantage of nearly fifty years and saw a Washington society that was

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[625] In *The Unfinished Exhibition: Visualizing Myth, Memory, and the Shadow of the Civil War in Centennial America*, Susanna W. Gold explores the 1876 Centennial Exhibition as an example of this national nostalgia, noting specifically that the "Centennial offered the nation the opportunity to reinvent its identity in an effort to restore stability to its population." History served the needs of the present, in this case for a reconciliation and a restored national narrative that encouraged a spirit of reunification. Susanna W. Gold, *The Unfinished Exhibition: Visualizing Myth, Memory, and the Shadow of the Civil War in Centennial America* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 38.

[626] Jessie Benton Frémont to Alexander K. McClure, June 25, 1877, Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

[627] "Personal and Political Gossip and Fact," *Buffalo Morning Express and Illustrated Buffalo Express*, December 30, 1874.

"stable," thanks to the difficulties of travel and the unchanging "representation of the States." She remembered that there "was but the one society—not large enough to be broken into cliques, and political differences were kept in the background." The hostilities of the slavery debates of the time did not make it to the Benton dinner table in Jessie's tranquil description. In this first article, Jessie removed the sting from the nation's shared memory of the antebellum period, appealing to a nostalgic sense of history—with the evil and the awkward removed.[628]

When Jessie began to describe the "distinguished persons" in her article, her tone became that of a gossipy friend sharing the social news. She wrote of men like Chief Justice John Marshall, Frank (Francis Scott) Key, President Franklin Pierce, President Martin Van Buren, and more. She described her interactions with these men and the respect they all had for her father. She remembered Senator Daniel Webster telling stories about the heat of that April day at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. Charles Sumner had been a welcome visitor at the Benton home, where he enjoyed gatherings that also included Jessie's cousin William Preston and Kentucky senator and future Vice President John Breckinridge. Jessie wrote that the names of these three "now look strangely" together, a reference to the opposite sides these men had taken in the Civil War. She closed the article with the melancholy remembrance of how 1856 had proved to be "when the political feeling of that time separated me from it all, and closed that volume of my life." Here Jessie dredged up the break with her father over her husband's presidential candidacy. She wrote of the fire that destroyed her father's house in 1855, noting that "with it seemed to go the old life which had been so fully [sic] and complete and

[628] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited*, Kindle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chap 1, Kindle.

delightful."[629] Even as Jessie mournfully reminisced over her father, she might as easily have been writing about the loss of Pocaho and, with it, the happy life lived under its roof. An article that began as a pleasant sharing of gossip ended with a somber grieving for relationships that could never be rebuilt.

While this first article ended on a doleful note, the others she wrote in the series featured more upbeat remembrances. She recalled John Randolph of Roanoke as an "honorable, generous Virginia gentleman," while Andrew Jackson was likened to a crusading knight, the "thick white locks made the helmet, and the once iron hand was all gentleness."[630] In an article ostensibly about James Monroe and the Monroe Doctrine, Jessie let a certain sauciness creep into her storytelling as she told of a visit to the Benton home by a descendant of Amerigo Vespucci. Jessie described the woman, referred to only as "Vespucci," as dressing "with no indecision about the display of ample shoulders and arms" with a "jacket open everywhere it needed to be shut." Upon learning that she would receive no recompense from the United States Congress for her ancestor's contribution to the nation, the woman let out with a "shriek and cry . . . like a bad child."[631] Jessie's description of this incident showed the sharpness of wit so many enjoyed when engaging with the lively Mrs. Frémont. This characteristic, writing as though her reader sat next to her at a smart Washington salon, came to be a hallmark of Jessie's prose, one that would be complimented again and again throughout her life.

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[629] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known I: Washington Society--Chief-Justice Marshall--Chief Justice Taney--Frank Key--Frank Pierce--Mr. Van Buren--Sumner--Chase, and Others," *The New York Ledger*, January 2, 1875.
[630] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known II: John Randolph of Roanoke," *The New York Ledger*, January 9, 1875. Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known III: Andrew Jackson," *The New York Ledger*, January 16, 1875.
[631] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known IV: Vespucci--James Monroe, the Monroe Doctrine, Etc.," *The New York Ledger*, January 23, 1875.

In a few of her articles for the "Distinguished Persons" series, Jessie chose men who had endured hardships like the ones she believed had befallen her husband. Writing about Commodore David Porter, father of the Civil War hero by the same name, Jessie wrote first about his great victories in the War of 1812 and against British whalers in the Pacific.[632] Like John, though, the Commodore's "really great services had been met by a cold technical inquiry, resulting in censure by court-martial."[633] Similarly, an article about Preston King, congressman of New York, initially focused on how King aided one of John's men from the second expedition in securing a pension for permanent injuries suffered. This positive remembrance, though, ended with Jessie opining on the lack of adequate supplies provided for explorations such as the ones that Senator Benton's son-in-law had been "able and most ready" to make.[634] Writing about men who had been brave and gallant in their service only to be disrespected in some way by their countrymen gave Jessie an opportunity to draw less-than-subtle parallels with John's experiences.

Jessie saved her most poignant observations for the last two articles in the series. These featured two men she had known when they were young and vibrant, and her genuine affection for each glistened through her words. She began her article on Kit Carson with a remembrance of her father's home in St. Louis and the trappers, hunters, traders, and mountain men who stopped by as they passed through. Jessie wrote that Carson's "instinct was true and delicate, and led him to act as correctly courteous as the most thorough training could do" despite the

[632] According to Jessie, Porter was a part of the "burning of over eighty English whale-ships in the Pacific," and "'dimmed all the lights of London for a year.'"
[633] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known V: Commodore Porter," *The New York Ledger*, January 30, 1875.
[634] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known VI: Preston King," *Reading Times*, February 3, 1875.

roughness of his background. She concluded the article with a few paragraphs about Carson's death in 1868, which she romanticized for her readers by focusing on Kit's dying wish to be home with his wife, whom Jessie revealed to be a lady of a fine New Mexican family.[635]

Her last article focused on Thomas Starr King, the Unitarian minister she met while living in San Francisco during the build-up to the Civil War. To King, Jessie attributed "the bright, delightful atmosphere he seemed to carry with him." She compared him with Carson, noting that neither had "the advantage of height, or what could be called 'manly beauty.'" Jessie took special care to highlight the work that King did toward keeping California within the Union in opposition to the "elements of secession vigorously at work there which threatened the loss of that state." She credited herself with encouraging him to speak out, but observed that, in the end, it was too much for him. She concluded her touching tribute with some of King's final missives to her, illustrating the high spirits and commitment that drove him even as he neared his final days.[636] In her tributes to Carson and King, Jessie offered tender reminiscences designed to help solidify the positive legacies of the rugged western mountain man and the shy Boston minister who saved California for the Union.

While not a part of the "Distinguished Persons" series, Jessie penned one more article in the same vein, published in April of 1875, this one focused on Dolley Madison and Eliza Hamilton. Dolley was described as "always gracious and sweet-mannered." Jessie acknowledged her husband's former political rival, James Buchanan, with pushing through the sale of the papers of James Madison to the federal government, providing the impoverished

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[635] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known: Kit Carson," *The New York Ledger*, February 20, 1875.
[636] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Distinguished Persons I Have Known: Starr King," *The New York Ledger*, March 6, 1875.

woman with much-needed income. Writing that she "never heard her called the 'widow of Madison,'" Jessie contrasted the "handsome Mrs. Madison" with Eliza Hamilton, a woman who wore her widow's weeds long after the death of her husband, Alexander. While describing Mrs. Hamilton as "amiable and of charming manners," Jessie observed that "she turned from the world forever" after the death of her husband at the hand of Aaron Burr.[637] Jessie's admiration for these women, representing the days of the young republic, offered a lovely tribute to those of her own sex, who, without Jessie's unique brashness, played traditionally gendered roles in service of the nation.

Jessie's articles brought both positive and negative reactions from the press. One report began encouragingly enough, noting that "Jessie Benton Frémont is making quite a reputation with her pen." The author than challenged the gendered behavior of both Jessie and John, observing that Jessie's "style betrays the masculine strength of character which has been the prop and pride of the gallant Colonel, her husband, in many a trying hour, and taught him to regard that woman as among the noblest of her sex, who can tame the savage nature of man and make him coo as gently as a sucking dove."[638] With Jessie taking on the masculine role in her family and John being tame as a "dove," the author emphasized the way in which Jessie acted as breadwinner while her husband relinquished his masculinity to her. Another reaction played upon Jessie's behavior during the Civil War, especially what was seen as her attempt to influence political matters with Abraham Lincoln. Acknowledging her work for the *Ledger*, this author

[637] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Reminiscences of Mrs. Madison and Mrs. Hamilton," *Doniphan County Republican*, April 30, 1875.
[638] "Untitled," *The Tiffin Tribune*, February 11, 1875.

quipped that Jessie "is in Thurlow Weed's line of business."[639] As women authors in the 1870s were nothing new, the criticism that Jessie drew with her articles did not reflect on her ability as a woman writer. Newspapermen and others drew upon her past involvement in the political world to label her as Lincoln had—"quite a female politician."

A more positive comment about gender appropriateness came from an article entitled "A Lost Method of Expression." In this piece, originally published in *Scribner's Monthly*, the author praised the canning and cooking abilities of women in the not-too-distant past, comparing those admirable matrons with modern-day counterparts who bought processed and pre-made foods. But not all women were meant for such work, and the author argued that "[n]obody wants a George Eliot, or Florence Nightingale, or Jessie Frémont, to give her time to compounding piccalillis or preserves." Still another author approved of *Ledger* publisher Robert Bonner's decision to drop the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher from his list of authors, replacing him with Jessie. According to this writer, "Mrs. Frémont would grace anything, from a newspaper to a White House."[640] Mr. Beecher had been involved in an adulterous scandal just a few years before, and Jessie, for all the negative comments about her, provided a more agreeable *Ledger* correspondent.

Jessie deserved the comment of being in "Thurlow Weed's business." In early 1877, Jessie again visited Washington, D.C., to use her political power toward a new goal, to advance her suit to recover her property at Black Point in San Francisco, which had been seized by the

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[639] "Personal," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, January 7, 1875. Thurlow Weed, an early founder of the Republican party, had labored in the political world for decades, both behind the scenes and in public view. He had been one of John's supporters in the 1856 presidential campaign but was better known as the mentor of William Seward.
[640] "Untitled," *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 1875.

Army during the Civil War.[641] On one of these trips, in early 1877, she complained to a friend that the politicians who might help her in her quest, including U.S. Senator from New York Roscoe Conkling, Massachusetts Representative (and former Civil War general) Nathaniel Banks, and other friends, "are as helping as possible but all say there is no attention to any thing until this Presidential question is settled."[642] Indeed, the "Presidential question" instigated a constitutional crisis never before experienced.

On November 7, 1876, citizens of the United States went to the polls to elect a new president. Former Union general Rutherford B. Hayes carried the flag for the Republicans and New York governor Samuel J. Tilden did the same for the Democrats. Initial results after election day showed Tilden winning both the popular and electoral vote. Four states, however, all from the former Confederacy, presented contested results, Republicans for Hayes and Democrats for Tilden. After months of haggling, bargaining, court involvement, and relentless argument, a compromise was reached. Hayes won the electors from the four contested states. In return, he promised to remove the Federal troops remaining in the south. Reconstruction was over. The result of the Compromise of 1877 was not that the federal government was rendered impotent in all matters related to the southern states, but it lost its ability to keep these states

[641] Black Point had been confiscated by the U.S. Army in 1863 as part of an effort to secure California, and its gold, from possible Confederate attack. Backing up Army fortifications on Alcatraz Island and Fort Point at the "Golden Gate" entrance to San Francisco Bay, Jessie's former home was replaced with two batteries, armed with 10-inch Rodman guns. In 1866, with the war over and the Frémonts established at Pocaho, Jessie filed a petition with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton seeking recovery of the property and damages for what had been destroyed. She received no response to this application. Subsequently, she turned her attention to Congress for relief, beginning in 1869. Efforts to recover Black Point continued even after Jessie's death. "Black Point Battery Trail," *Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy*, accessed November 15, 2021, https://www.parksconservancy. org/trails/black-point-battery-trail. Also, "Summary of Mrs. Frémont's Claims to Black Point" (n.p., ca 1900), Frémont Family Papers; "Original Petition, Jessie Benton Frémont vs. United States," 1893; and Charles Silent to Thomas Bard, January 25, 1904, Frémont Family Papers, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

[642] Jessie Benton Frémont to William J. Morton, January 1877, William J. Morton Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

from enacting laws that severely crippled the financial and social prospects of the newly freed Black men and women remaining in the south.[643] Those freed from slavery in 1865 once again found themselves at the mercy of White southerners as a new age of Jim Crow restricted their movements, demanded their labor, and limited most of them to lives of oppression and poverty.

Poverty struck more than just the Black population of the United States as financial hard times brought on by the Panic of 1873 persisted. Even as everyday Americans struggled with unemployment, limited income, and growing frustration, industrialists like Carnegie and Rockefeller, as well as financiers like J.P. Morgan, began reaping enormous profits and establishing the monopolies that would soon control vital national interests, like oil, steel, and transportation lines. Into this changing world more factories sprang up, drawing hundreds of thousands of young men away from family farms and into the big cities for the security of steady (although low) wages. Drought conditions and thunderous herds of locusts also took a heavy toll on American farmers. The gap between the wealthy and the poor widened during the 1870s and would continue along this trajectory for decades to come.

Social stratification also intensified as new immigrants arrived in eastern ports and created teeming populations in big cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, eventually spreading west to Chicago and Cincinnati. On the west coast, San Francisco and Seattle received their share of immigrants from Asia. So nervous were Californians about the Chinese immigrants in their midst, initially encouraged to come to the United States by the labor-starved builders of the Central Pacific Railroad, that congressman Horace F. Page introduced an act in Congress to ban all Asian females from entering the country for fear that these women would act

[643] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 583.

as prostitutes for the existing Chinese laborers.[644] Foreigners from eastern and southern Europe and from Asia, with their myriad languages, cultural practices, separate histories, and "radical" political views, unnerved many Americans. The unrest (such as that caused by the rise of labor unions and a national labor strike in 1877) seemed to prove them right in their suspicions of the newcomers. Looking into this future often proved frightening, or at least frustrating, and many Americans sought an opportunity to look back in time, to the "good old days" when the United States was a White man's empire.

Building upon her success with the "Distinguished Persons" series, Jessie was ready to write more articles that harkened to a sanitized past so longed for by White Americans. In November 1877, she published the first of a three-piece serial in *Harper's* magazine. This serial was then published as a book, *A Year of American Travel*, part of Harper's Half-Hour Series.[645] In this, her second book, Jessie told the story of her initial voyage to California in the spring of 1849 and the events of the year that followed, beginning with the preparations for her departure and finishing with her arrival back at her father's home in Washington, D.C., in 1850.

Jessie began *A Year of American Travel* with a quote from one of her favorite authors, Michel de Montaigne, writing "*Je, divague fort, mais j'y retourne*" (I wander strongly, but I return). This particular quote corresponds with the pages following it in two ways. First, Jessie did indeed "wander strongly" to California, with her dangerous journey across the Isthmus of Panama and the many trips she took within the state as well. Second, Jessie's writing included a

[644] George Anthony Peffer, "Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women under the Page Law, 1875-1882," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no. 1 (1986), 28.
[645] Other authors included in the Half-Hour Series included Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, and Edward Everett Hale. Jessie's *A Year of American Travel* joined other works on subjects of travel, history, and biographies of famous people, as well as pieces of fiction. With a pocket size of 5 x 3.5 inches and a green cover featuring red lettering, Jessie's book sold for $.25.

habit of wandering off the main point of her work, with digressions and flashbacks continually interrupting the rather straightforward tale she told. She "wandered strongly" in her writing as well as in her travels. Overall, though, Jessie created an exciting narrative that included a fascinating first-hand account of crossing the Isthmus and arriving in San Francisco at the height of California's Gold Rush. In doing so, she also managed to glorify her father, redeem her husband, and even enhance her own fame a bit.

Although Thomas Hart Benton had died with his reputation intact, Jessie sought in *A Year of American Travel* to further strengthen her father's standing as an ideal public servant. When Jessie had originally proposed the idea in 1848 that she should travel to California to meet John upon the conclusion of his fourth expedition, Thomas Hart Benton decided to accompany her. According to Jessie, his interactions with French and Spanish "clients" in Missouri rendered him useful to the newly conquered Californios as they adapted to U.S. rule. In addition, Jessie noted that Thomas wanted to see the newly acquired territory, writing that "[s]hould it remain a Territory, he, as Senator from Missouri, had the neighbor's right to look out for its interests." Jessie ascribed to her father another justifying quote: keeping an eye on California was "my privilege, my prerogative, and my right."[646] As California, prior to its admission to the Union, was governed by the U.S. Army, Jessie also praised her father's long-standing role as chairman of the Senate Military Committee, observing that he understood "army interests, and having his friendships with officers, he was its intelligent and useful friend."[647] For Jessie, these reasons, in California's best interests, justified her father's desire to visit the newly conquered territory.

[646] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 13-14.
[647] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 105.

While Thomas never actually made it further west than Missouri, being unable at nearly the last minute to accompany his daughter, Jessie determined to show her father as a great friend to western interests.[648]

Jessie's most earnest work in *A Year of American Travel* delved into the topic of her father's relationship with slavery. In this, she sought to turn her father's ambivalence over the practice into a firmer commitment to the abolition of the "peculiar institution." In his lifetime, Benton had made it clear that he was no abolitionist. While he never owned slaves, he came from, and married into, a slaveholding family. His attention to the issue, especially later in his life, sprang from a determination to keep the nation from splitting into two. Still Jessie made clear in *A Year of American Travel* that he had refused "two large inheritances because he would have had to take the slaves with the lands." This antislavery feeling was portrayed not "merely as a domestic, but a political question" when raised under the Benton family roof, even though its discussion had been wiped clean from Jessie's earlier "Distinguished Persons" articles for the *Ledger*. Jessie claimed that this family abhorrence of slavery was why she and John refused to purchase an enslaved woman as a maid when offered such in Monterey. She "merely followed in the home ideas and example."[649]

Having established her father's views, Jessie addressed John's as well, noting that "[w]ith Mr. Frémont it was the abstract idea of justice and equal rights, but with me only the following a habit of mind in which I had been nurtured."[650] With the background established, Jessie then

[648] Thomas Hart Benton's service to western expansion was already established fact by the time Jessie was writing *Year of American Travel*. Here, she merely "gilds the lily."
[649] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 141.
[650] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 147.

launched into a tale, likely false, which has had a long life among historians and writers—the role of the Frémonts in the framing of the California Constitution and its antislavery plank.

Jessie wrote a lengthy description of the way in which she turned "my pretty rooms [into] the headquarters of the antislavery party, and myself the example of happiness and hospitality without servants."[651] Certainly Jessie would have acted as hostess during the convention, opening up the Frémonts' rooms at the Castro adobe and serving as lavish a meal as could be had—if she had been in Monterey at the time. Elisha Crosby, one of the delegates from Sacramento who was writing his memoirs at roughly the same time Jessie published *A Year of American Travel*, argued that Jessie was not even in Monterey at the time of the convention. The editor of Crosby's memoir, Charles A. Barker, performed his own research, finding no indication of Jessie's presence in Monterey during the six weeks of the convention; indeed, Barker presented compelling evidence that Jessie was living in San Francisco at the time.[652]

Jessie went further in *A Year of American Travel* to establish her own and her husband's early antislavery credentials, writing, "What we had done in Monterey when the State Constitution was being framed there had enrolled us on the antislavery side." In Jessie's telling

[651] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 145. Augusta Fink used Jessie's story in her *Monterey County: The Dramatic Story of Its Past* (1972), elaborating that the "scintillating Jessie know how to create an atmosphere in which [John's] ideas could be manipulated to a favorable conclusion." Fink further remarked that the Frémonts hosted "many informal star-chamber meetings of delegates."[651] This language was subsequently picked up by David Alan Johnson in *Founding the Far West: California, Oregon, and Nevada, 1840-1890* (1992). Tom Chaffin in *Pathfinder* related a similar telling, although he added a disclaimer regarding the possible conflict over the telling of the events of 1849.

[652] Elisha Oscar Crosby, *Memoirs of Elisha Oscar Crosby: Reminiscences of California And Guatemala From 1849 to 1864*, ed. Charles A. Barker (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1945), 35-36. In addition to setting out his own memories of the convention, Crosby also gave his assessment of the Frémonts: "Frémont was a very nice little gentleman, but I thought as many others did, that Jesse Benton Frémont was the better man of the two, far more intelligent and more comprehensive." Crosby's statements about Jessie's whereabouts during the convention and Barker's own research conflict with that of authors like Fink, Johnson, and Chaffin, all of whom use some version of Jessie's own memories.

of events, her husband's strong stand on the issue led to the position that "Mr. Frémont could have been either Governor or first Senator from the state."[653] As the issue of prohibiting slavery in California did not generate much debate in the convention itself and with a unanimous vote to include an antislavery clause, it appears more likely that it was John's fame as an explorer as well as the hero of the Conquest of California that sealed for him the role of the first U.S. senator from California. With regard to his choice between the two political positions offered to him, Jessie observed that he gave way to her wishes, senator, as that meant that "we should have to return to Washington, and our old home life be restored."[654] The fact that she gave herself credit for deciding John's political future might have been interpreted as outside her role as a wife, but for Jessie it never would occur that John should not take her desires into consideration, even in such a significant decision.

Why did Jessie include such an exaggeration of the Frémonts influence in the drafting of the California state constitution? In 1877, she did not need to boost the antislavery position she and John had long since taken, having established their views in various ways prior to the writing of *A Year of American Travel*, including during John's presidential campaign of 1856 and his emancipation proclamation of 1861. They had come out on the winning side of the issue, and slavery as an institution was over a decade gone. Was she simply doing what she thought would strengthen the connections between California and herself and John in the public mind? Such an exciting moment in California, and even U.S., history needed the Frémonts, and Jessie made sure

[653] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 150-151.
[654] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 151.

they were there. Yet there was one other historical narrative regarding her husband that Jessie felt bound to recast.

Jessie took the opportunity as she was writing about the events in California to reclaim her husband's heroic status as a western explorer. The fourth expedition, in 1849, coming on the heels of the court martial, had been a disaster, claiming the lives of ten men in a futile attempt to find a possible railroad route through the southern Rockies. Jessie let John tell his own story in a twelve-page section of *A Year of American Travel* in which she copied into the text John's January 27, 1849, letter to her. She included this apologia "in full, for it is a necessary 'supplement and complement' of this narrative of personal experience of his impediments to reaching California at that period."[655] In fact, the letter had very little to do with Jessie and everything to do with redirecting blame from John and placing it on others.

By including the letter, Jessie enabled John, in his own words, to excuse the horrible circumstances under which the expedition ended. He explicitly placed the blame on his guide, Old Bill Williams, for his men becoming enveloped in the snows of the San Juan mountains. After leaving his men to seek help, John wrote that he was "anxiously waiting to hear from my party . . . [m]y presence kept them together and quiet, my absence may have had a bad effect." Despite this acknowledgement of his men's need for him, John did in fact leave them behind as he traveled to the welcome of Kit Carson at the mountain man's home in Taos. John seemed incapable of admitting his own failure, writing that he wished to shut out the events of the expedition as they "astonish me with a persistence of misfortune, which no precaution has

[655] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 69-81.

been adequate on my part to avert."[656] In *A Year of American Travel*, Jessie gave her husband the opportunity to deflect blame for the failure of the expedition, painting himself as the victim rather than the culprit.

A Year of American Travel served Jessie's needs in two ways. She earned $500 from Harper's for the series and book, plus an additional $100 for relinquishing the copyright, a sum of money necessary to the financial health of the Frémont family.[657] In addition, she provided narratives that uplifted both her husband and her father in the public's collective memory. This time, she did not have to choose between the two but could use her pen to illuminate each of them in the best possible light. One reviewer praised Jessie's inclusion of her "distinguished hero-husband['s]" letter, remarking that John's misadventures were "stranger and often more tragic" than anything fiction might produce.[658] A writer for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* praised the book (published by his own employer), noting that Jessie's journey across Panama "required all the courage of a true daughter of Thomas H. Benton."[659] The reviewers, as Jessie intended for all her readers, understood that both her father and her husband modeled the heroic behavior needed for those heady days of westward expansion.

As *A Year of American Travel* was garnering public attention, other efforts to aid the Frémonts found expression in Washington. On June 8, 1878, long-standing efforts to gain John a paying position with the federal government were realized by President Rutherford B. Hayes, a

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[656] Jessie Benton Frémont, *A Year of American Travel*, 69-81.
[657] Jessie Benton Frémont to Henry M. Alden, March 4, 1878, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 434-435.
[658] "Literature," *The Advance*, August 15, 1878.
[659] "Editor's Literary Record," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1878. As both the Harper's magazine and its book imprint came from the same corporate structure, praising a book it had published appears as particularly self-serving.

Republican who was persuaded that the Pathfinder, down on his luck, deserved another opportunity to serve his country. For John, the appointment as territorial governor of Arizona came as a double blessing. He would earn $2,600 a year, which, although not a great sum, gave the family some sense of financial stability. More importantly, Arizona was awash with opportunities to become involved with mining the region's natural resources. Appealing to John's affinity for speculative ventures, Arizona mining could be exploited by someone willing and able to connect the mine owners with the capital and technical expertise needed to extract the most a mine might offer.[660] John believed that the time was ripe to earn back his millions through Arizona's mineral treasures.

On September 2, 1878, John, Jessie, son Frank and daughter Lily, with a maid and Thor, the family's staghound, left New York City for Arizona, leaving Charley, then serving in the U.S. Navy, and his young wife, the former Sally Anderson, behind.[661] Frank had left the Army to recover from incipient consumption, a disease which had run through the Benton family back to Thomas Hart Benton's father and sisters.[662] While he sought a reinstatement, he accompanied his family to Arizona to serve as his father's aide de camp.

This trip across the continent proved far easier than Jessie's earlier journeys westward via Panama. From the start, the Frémonts traveled in style. In Chicago, a lavish suite of rooms in the Palmer House hotel (rebuilt after the 1871 fire that destroyed much of the city and now known as the "World's First Fireproof Hotel") served as a base camp for a few days of sightseeing in the city and meeting with admirers. According to Lily, her father "was most

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[660] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona Diary of Lily Frémont, 1878-1881*, ed. Mary Lee Spence (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 10.
[661] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona Diary of Lily Frémont*, 24.
[662] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona Diary of Lily Frémont*, 3.

enthusiastically welcomed" by "a large and influential gathering of capitalists and railroad men."[663] At smaller towns and cities along the railroad's tracks, crowds gathered to see "John C. & Jessie." In one small Iowa station along the route west, a man pushed through the crowd gathered to see the Frémonts, saying "I have the right to shake hands boys, for Mrs. Frémont served in company C of the Body Guard & I belong to you & Zagnoyi always."[664]

Arriving in San Francisco by mid-September, the Frémonts again found accommodations provided for them at a luxury hotel, this one the Palace, opened just three years before and described as the biggest hotel in the west. John was feted by the Society of California Pioneers, while Jessie and Lily received an invitation to visit Black Point. The irony of coming back to Black Point was obvious to Lily; she and her mother were "invited and favored guests, where we should be host; & into a house which stands where our own stood." [665] In Los Angeles, the party stayed at the St. Charles Hotel, described by its manager at the time as the "largest, most elegant and completely organized Hotel in Southern California."[666] On September 25, a crowd gathered at the hotel to "serenade" the man credited with the Conquest of California. In a moment that brought back memories of 1856 and the gathering of men beneath the Frémont's balcony, the crowd "called vociferously for Mrs. Frémont." When Jessie, "now a gray haired matron—made her appearance, some enthusiastic individual in the audience called out, 'three cheers for the

[663] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to William J. Morton, September 12, 1878, William J. Morton Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[664] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to William J. Morton, September 12, 1878, William J. Morton Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[665] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to William J. Morton, September 12, 1878, William J. Morton Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. As Lily wrote at the time, the "hotel cars" they traveled in on the train and the hotel accommodations they enjoyed in Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles were offered as the just due of the Pathfinder and his family.
[666] "St. Charles Hotel," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, September 13, 1878.

daughter of the great Senator,'" which cheers were "given with a will."[667] Whether due to Jessie's authorial efforts or not, the way in which she was received and the good will expressed for her father must have acted as a balm for the hurts associated with the scandal and financial distress of the past several years.

The Frémonts arrived in Arizona, stopping first at Yuma before continuing to Prescott. Arizonians at first had a difficult time in determining just where their capital would reside. Upon its initial territorial status, Tucson became the capital in 1867. By 1877, the more Republican-leaning Prescott claimed the honor. The capital remained there until 1889, when Arizonians settled on Phoenix for a permanent location. When the Frémonts reached Prescott in the fall of 1878, they found a prosperous small town, with a bank and two newspapers, hotels and boardinghouses, sawmills and brickyards, breweries, saloons, and lawyers. Fraternal organizations like the Masons, Oddfellows, Knights of Pythias, and the Daughters of Rebekah offered social connections, while a dramatic association put on theatrical productions featuring local talent.[668] Frank Frémont joined in the local dramatic and musical offerings, while Lily Frémont became involved with the Daughters of Rebekah. For Jessie, the Prescott Free Academy offered an outlet for a need she had previously filled with her writing—to tell the history she knew so well.

In 1878, with students ranging from six to twenty-one years old, Jessie began a Friday afternoon ritual of teaching her own version of a history course. She first visited the "homely, square-set brick" schoolhouse in the fall of 1878 and was introduced to the students by her

[667] "Serenade to Gen. Frémont," *Los Angeles Herald*, September 26, 1878.
[668] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona Diary of Lily Frémont*, 8.

husband who claimed she was the "authority" on the study of history.[669] Finding the students not very interested in "those old husks and dry bones of dates and battles," Jessie's short career as a teacher began when she learned that the students considered all queens to be "cruel," making no differentiation between Catherine de Medici (instigator of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre), Mary Tudor ("Bloody Mary"), and Marie Antoinette ("let them eat cake"). Jessie's first lesson to her young scholars was to tell a compassionate rendering of the latter queen's difficult, short life.[670]

After correcting her students' idea that the United States was disconnected from all that had happened in Europe before its founding, Jessie settled into a program of visiting the school every Friday afternoon (except when illness prevented her attendance) until the end of the term in June 1879. She furthered the children's' knowledge of European history, even going so far as to use souvenirs from her own European travels to provide the children in this western outpost town with images of objects they had never seen.[671] Jessie summed up her pedagogical approach to history as linking together "one event and one personality after another until history became not a dry mass of names and dates and isolated events, but a connected and yet broadening stream of human effort."[672] Jessie was the epitome of the self-taught historian, and she generously shared her interpretations of the past with her students.

Jessie's enjoyment of her students and her role as a teacher became obvious to the wider nation through several newspaper articles which offered mainly positive assessments of her work. One journalist praised Jessie's efforts, calling her a "charming writer as well as

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[669] Jessie Benton Frémont, "My Arizona Class," *Wide Awake Magazine*, November 1883, 340-341.
[670] Jessie Benton Frémont, "My Arizona Class," 342-343.
[671] Jessie Benton Frémont, "My Arizona Class," 344.
[672] "A Good Work," *Oakland Tribune*, October 9, 1879.

conversationalist." While mentioning that Jessie was no longer "handsome," the author recalled the sculpture of Jessie's hands made a decade before in Paris by Vinnie Ream. A thimble on the middle finger of her right hand, said the author, represented "industry."[673] In a time when married women did not work as teachers, the mention of the thimble reminded readers that Jessie was still the epitome of feminine virtue. Another author, while praising Jessie's work, admonished other women for not doing the same, writing that the "thousands of educated women who have nothing to do" ought to follow Jessie's example. After all, this writer reasoned, the children of "comfortable and prosperous people" need education just as much as the children of the poor.[674]

Perhaps one of the reasons Jessie became so involved with the Prescott Free Academy was to assuage the longing she had for her husband whenever he was away. After just four months in Arizona, John left the state in February 1879, headed east to seek investors and technical advisors for the mining interests in which he, along with territorial judge Charles Silent, had already become involved.[675] After six months, he returned to Prescott, apparently successful in his efforts.[676] Now that the mines could be assessed for their earning potential, John and Judge Silent made numerous trips across the territory to shore up their holdings. While

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[673] "A Noble Woman," *Albany Democrat*, April 18, 1879. The Ream sculpture of Jessie's hands was then being displayed at Vinnie Ream's studio in Washington, D.C.
[674] "A Good Work," *Oakland Tribune*, October 9, 1879.
[675] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona Diary of Lily Frémont*, 62. Judge Charles Silent was appointed to the Arizona Territorial Supreme Court in February of 1878, just months before John became territorial governor. In April 1880, the congressional representative from the territory, John Campbell, preferred charges against Silent, alleging a tangle of business ties and litigation (also involving John) that made him unfit to hold his judicial position. The charges were eventually found to be without merit. "Serious Charges Preferred Against Judge Silent of Prescott," *Arizona Daily Star*, April 6, 1880, and "Decision in Judge Silent's Case," *The Weekly Arizona Miner*, July 2, 1880.
[676] "Domestic Doings," *Weekly Republican*, August 20, 1879, and "Gov. Frémont's Mining Capital," *Arizona Weekly Citizen*, August 22, 1879.

Jessie had remained mostly aloof from business affairs in the past, this time she offered herself as a valuable asset. Despite John's lengthy visit east earlier in the year, he and Judge Silent realized that they needed a permanent presence there to encourage investors and to lobby Washington for laws favorable to Arizona mining interests. Jessie eagerly took the job.

On October 20, 1879, just a year after moving to Prescott, Jessie began her return journey to New York. While she claimed in later writings that the altitude and climate of Arizona led to health problems, it was clear at the time that she returned east to participate in the mining interests of her husband. Lily recorded in her diary that the "business part will be tiresome for her," yet Jessie's short layover in San Francisco found her already at work acquiring investors, selling a one-fourth share in one particular mine "for all the money needed for ownership and working it." She acquired for herself an interest in this same mine. In a letter to President Hayes' private secretary, William K. Rogers, she enthusiastically compared this mine to the Comstock in her estimation of possible profits.[677] The detail she included in her letter, including opinions as to where the richest ore was found and specific information on tunnel formation, offers strong evidence of Jessie's immersion in the mining business.[678] Even as Jessie learned

[677] William King Rogers had a long-standing friendship with Rutherford B. Hayes, going back to Rogers' college graduation and the Corwine, Hayes and Rogers law firm. When Hayes became president in 1877, he hired Rogers as his private secretary. Both the Frémonts corresponded regularly with Rogers as a means of securing his support in their endeavors and garnering the positive attention of the president. "Gilded Age Collections: Rogers, William King," Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Museum at Spiegel Grove, accessed September 23, 2019, https://www.rbhayes.org/collection-items/gilded-age-collections/rogers-william-king/.

[678] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona of Lily Frémont*, 118, and Jessie Benton Frémont to William K. Rogers, November 19, 1879, William King Rogers Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The Comstock Lode, discovered in the late 1850s, created a silver rush in Nevada that rivaled the gold rush in California. The Comstock made millions for some of its savvy investors, including George Hearst whose son William Randolph used his father's fortune to bankroll his publishing empire. The success of the mines at Comstock also gave Nevada its state nickname, "The Silver State."

quickly and made herself useful in pursuing her husband's financial goals, she soon veered into more familiar territory—protecting John's reputation.

Accusations of malfeasance dogged John after his first few months in the governor's office. Concerns were raised as to his absences from the territory, which, in the end, amounted to over two-thirds of his appointed time as governor. When he was in the territory, he was often away from his office in Prescott, traveling in pursuit of mines with which to bolster his financial status. In the beginning, the newspaper editors in the territory supported these excursions. Even Tucson's Democratic-leaning *Weekly Arizona Citizen* offered tentative praise for the "introduction of considerable capital into Arizona."[679] But, as time went by, and as John, along with Lily, moved to Tucson from the territorial capital in Prescott to be closer to his business interests, criticism rose.[680] When it became clear that John was seeking to be appointed minister to Mexico, even the Republican *Weekly Arizona Miner* turned on him.[681] By July 1881, this same paper accused John of being a governor in name only, using the position as a "stepping stone" to advance his "mercenary schemes and private gain."[682] Calls began for John's resignation or removal from office.

Jessie's lobbying on her husband's behalf began early in John's governorship of Arizona Territory. She kept up a lively correspondence with William K. Rogers, defending John from each attack. No sooner had she returned to New York from Arizona then she began to agitate for the necessity of John being in New York also. In a December 1879 letter reflecting the real

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[679] "Gov. Frémont's Mining Capital," *Arizona Weekly Citizen*, August 22, 1879.
[680] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 486.
[681] "The Governorship," *The Weekly Arizona Miner*, May 20, 1881; "Frémont--What Has He Done?," *The Weekly Arizona Miner*, July 24, 1881.
[682] "Entire Unanimity," *The Weekly Arizona Miner*, July 1, 1881.

Frémont understanding of the Arizona appointment, Jessie advised Rogers that it "would best suit [John's} interests to be quite footloose," but to "resign now would give the power next winter when the Legislature meets again, to unknown people and interests." By remaining in office, John would be able to "prevent and veto any vexatious legislation regarding mines and railroads."[683] Just a few days later, a letter from Jessie to Rogers defended John against allegations that he overstayed his leave of absence from the territory by reminding Rogers that John had returned to duty within six months of his departure. Apparently the "interdict" that followed this supposed transgression ended with the Treasury Department stopping John's pay, and Jessie was very interested in ensuring that his earnings continued to swell the Frémont accounts.[684] In May 1880, John again overstayed his leave time in New York, but Jessie, while acknowledging John's lapse, asked Rogers if "we may look to you to see that it is made all right."[685]

By August 21, 1880, when cries began to remove John from office for his numerous absences, Jessie wrote again to Rogers. She asked him to pass on to President Hayes just why John needed to remain in the governor's position. Chief among the reasons was that John's absence would have left "uncompleted the large mining consolidation" then in progress. According to Jessie, in "Prescott, the best people are more than satisfied with his being [there]

[683] Jessie Benton Frémont to William K. Rogers, December 2, 1879, William King Rogers Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[684] Jessie Benton Frémont to William K. Rogers, December 7, 1879, William King Rogers Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, and John C. Frémont to William K. Rogers, December 9, 1879, William King Rogers Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. John had indeed returned to Prescott by August 23, 1880, as evidenced by Lily's diary entry for the day. Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *The Arizona Diary of Lily Frémont*, 101.
[685] Jessie Benton Frémont to William K. Rogers, May 3, 1880, William King Rogers Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

for it is sending a stream of ready money through there and giving value to all mining properties."[686] After James Garfield was elected to the presidency in November 1880, Jessie wrote nervously to Rogers expressing her concern that he would no longer be available to intercede on John's behalf. Jessie made one last effort to justify John's actions to Rogers, writing that she knew he kept "the General in mind and realize the years of impatience in which his enforced absence from here [New York] kept him," and "if there is anything that can be said or done you will do it and let me notify him." Jessie expected, and received, Rogers' support whenever she asked for it, but there was nothing more Rogers could do once Garfield was inaugurated and the demands for John's removal intensified.

When John left Arizona in the spring of 1881, he never returned. He resigned, while in New York, in October 1881. The mining ventures never reached fruition, and the efforts to redeem both his reputation and fortune came to naught, despite Jessie's work on his behalf. As she moved to smaller houses and apartments in less desirable neighborhoods, Jessie did not give up hope in her husband. From a house in Suffren, New York, just twenty miles from Tarrytown and thus close to Pocaho, Jessie reported that she, John, and Lily were "near enough again to fortune to feel its strength and warmth."[687] She wrote to a friend that John had a project soon to be successful and the "winter of our discontent" would soon be over.[688] Jessie maintained an optimistic façade among both the public and her friends, but the good face she put on the Frémont situation hid the ugly reality.

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[686] Jessie Benton Frémont to William K. Rogers, August 21, 1880, William King Rogers Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[687] Jessie Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, March 19, 1883, Frémont Family Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[688] Jessie Benton Frémont to George Browne, March 24, 1883, Frémont Family Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

By the summer of 1883, the Frémonts were living on New York City's West 58th Street. Jessie described the furnished apartment as having great views of the Park, a "fine big bathroom," and drawers full of novels. While Jessie painted a bright picture, a friend of both Jessie's and her former friend Lizzie Lee visited Jessie there and reported back to Lizzie that Jessie looked "hungry." The soft-hearted Lizzie, still concerned over her long-ago friend, vented her indignation that Jessie allowed John to gamble away their money, and their children's money, when "she had the power to keep it."[689] Lizzie believed that John's speculative financial ventures continued to deplete what money his family required for living expenses. Jessie, as she had done before, became the breadwinner. She saw the relative prosperity of the 1880s and knew she needed to find a way for her family to become a part of it.

In the mid-1880s, the nation remained stable under a series of respectable, but dull, presidents like Chester A. Arthur and Grover Cleveland. An economic contraction that began in 1882 was waning. The working classes still suffered under the rigorous demands of industrialization. The robber barons of the Gilded Age continued to expand their financial empires, forming an elite class that built fantastical homes along New York City's Fifth Avenue and enormous "cottages" at seaside resorts like Newport, Rhode Island. Across the South, Black men and women staggered under "redemption," the reinstatement of White rule that came on the heels of the Compromise of 1877. Sharecropping and Jim Crow laws kept Black Americans pinned into poverty, while working class immigrants in northern cities continued to unionize and agitate for labor reforms. Large corporations formed to address the need for structure in the

[689] Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel Phillips Lee and F. P. Blair Lee, July 21, 1883, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

business world, creating a new "managerial class" of workers. These white-collar men (and some women who performed office work) created a new middle class, one which was affluent enough to afford leisure activities. Prosperity meant there was no need to send their sons and daughters to work. Middle-class families began expanding on a concept of a "childhood" for their offspring, an idea that had begun in the 1830s with the work of writers like Catharine Beecher and others on the proper care and raising of children. Children were seen as special little people who could be indulged and pampered until adulthood.

Through this new emphasis on childhood, Jessie found an opportunity to both earn money and, also, to put forth her own narrative of her life. Just as she had accurately read the desire of postbellum Americans for the nostalgia of the antebellum past, a desire she spoke to with her "Distinguished Persons" series, Jessie latched on to writing for children's' magazines just as that genre was taking form.

In 1883, Jessie began writing stories for the children's magazine *Wide Awake*, founded by publisher Daniel Lothrop. Lothrop believed in the independence and innate integrity of children and established *Wide Awake* to offer a guide for becoming good adults.[690] In his first issue in 1875, Lothrop and his editor, children's author Ella Farman Pratt, promoted the magazine as an alternative to less high-minded children's literature, writing that "[m]agazines like the *Wide Awake* are good for young folk, and contain nothing of the 'run-away-to-sea' style for boys, or the 'elope-and-be-happy' incentive for girls, which are greatly cried against by

[690] R. Gordon Kelly, *Children's Periodicals of the United States: Historical Guides to the World's Periodicals and Newspapers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984),454. Lothrop produced several other magazines targeted towards children, including *Babyland*, *Our Little Men and Women*, and *The Pansy*.

parents now-a-days."[691] Jessie's positive, autobiographical, and instructive stories fit neatly into the framework established by Lothrop.

Jessie's first submission to *Wide Awake* in the fall of 1883 featured an overview of her most recent public success—her history-teaching efforts in Arizona. Newspapers across the country had praised Jessie's teaching work, so her experience was known to at least some parents of *Wide Awake* readers. By publishing "My Arizona Class," Jessie played upon the already positive image she had in the public eye from her time in the territory. In her story, Jessie offered a vivid description of the remoteness of Arizona, the difficulty of travel, and the growth of Prescott and its Free Academy. She wrote in detail how she came to give her classes, then shared the same stories from history that she had told to her students. She closed with a description of the souvenir album she had been given at the end of the term but did not mention that this was the only term she taught. The story included lively illustrations, as did nearly all *Wide Awake* articles, including sketches of a wagon camping in the desert, a few sketches of Marie-Antoinette, a drawing of the students lining up for roll call outside the schoolhouse, and, of course, sketches of both her and John.

After the publication of "My Arizona Class," Ella Farman Pratt encouraged Jessie to write more autobiographical stories for *Wide Awake*. Another year passed before a story by "Mrs. Jessie Benton Frémont" appeared in *Wide Awake*, but, once she began, Jessie became a prolific contributor to the magazine. While *Wide Awake's* early issues focused primarily on New

[691] R. Gordon Kelley, *Children's Periodicals of the United States*, 455. Daniel Lothrop (1831-1892) began publishing children's books, aiming for sales to schools and libraries. According to his biographer, Lothrop set two guiding principles for his line of books: never to publish a book solely for its sensational content, no matter the profits available, and provide literature that would encourage "right living." R. Gordon Kelley, *Children's Periodicals of the United States*, 455.

England, including Margaret Sydney's "Five Little Peppers" stories, the inclusion of Jessie and other authors with different backgrounds brought the magazine into a more national focus. Mary Catherwood from Ohio submitted stories based on early French settlers, Sarah Orne Jewett told tales of life in early Maine, and Mary Murfree offered portrayals of Tennessee mountain folk.[692] Jessie's early contributions covered not only her St. Louis upbringing but her grandparents' Virginia plantation and her girlhood in Washington, D.C., as well.

Beginning in 1884, Jessie submitted a series of stories under the general heading of "Souvenirs of My Time" that described her own childhood as well as stories of her trips to Europe in the 1850s and 1860s. She began with "The Bodisco Wedding" in which she told of a young friend's marriage to the aging Russian ambassador and her own experience as a bridesmaid. The stories that followed this one focused on both Jessie herself and on growing up in a family that had homes in three different places.

Jessie's stories about St. Louis generally pointed to the cosmopolitan nature of the city on the fringes of westward expansion. The melding of cultures and her father's heroics featured prominently, and tales included both Jessie's happy memories of time with her family and also frightening tales of travel that included overturned carriages and the death of her baby brother, Mac. Stories of her girlhood at her McDowell grandparents' plantation in Virginia offered still further evidence of Jessie's innate bravery, her schooling by her indulgent father, and the beginnings of her love of reading. Jessie was the heroine of these stories, the precocious girl living in a bygone society. She reflected, as she had in her "Distinguished Persons" articles and

[692] R. Gordon Kelley, *Children's Periodicals of the United States*, 457.

in *A Year of American Travel*, on the men and women she had known in Washington, D.C., who had led the nation through the years of the young republic.[693]

Jessie's childhood tales recast her history in a haze of nostalgia appropriate for her audience of young readers, but in a way that would also appeal to their parents and the reunification spirit of the nation just twenty years removed from Appomattox. The men and women owned by her grandparents, on both the Benton and McDowell sides, were seldom referred to as "slaves," being called "servants" instead. The idealistic plantation setting, the happy and loving enslaved "aunts" and "uncles," and Jessie's apparent naivete about her grandparents' source of wealth contributed more to a sentimental version of the past than an accurate portrayal of her girlhood. Jessie understood the times in which she lived, in which books like *Diddie, Dumps and Tot* (1882) by Louise-Clark Pyrnelle, *Two Little Confederates* (1881) by Thomas Nelson Page, and "Daddy Jake the Runaway" (1889) by Joel Chandler Harris offered softened views of slavery for the consumption of their young readers. These works acknowledged slavery's demise following the Civil War but still promoted a specific vision of slavery in the south that had been benevolent and familial.[694] In the words of Louise Pyrnelle, slavery had been "a jolly time for both white and black."[695] In her use of the word "servant" in place of "slave," Jessie walked the fine line between Pyrnelle's absolute depiction of slavery as a benevolent institution and Jessie's own adult abolitionism. Her obvious desire to offer no

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[693] Stories published in *Wide Awake* involving Jessie's childhood include: "Souvenirs of My Time: The Bodisco Wedding," May 1884; "Souvenirs of My Time: A Virginia Wedding," November 1884; "Souvenirs of My Time: Family Life of the White House," May 1885; "Souvenirs of My Time: Mrs. Madison and Mrs. Hamilton," May 1885; "Souvenirs of My Time: Saint Louis," November 1885; "Souvenirs of My Time: The Talent in the Napkin," November 1885.

[694] Paula T. Connolly, *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790-2010* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 103-104.

[695] Louise-Clark Pyrnelle, *Diddie, Dumps and Tot* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), 10.

offense to her southern readers (or the southern members of her own family) blended with her portrayal of her father as an antislavery man and clashed with other works of the time in which slavery was more harshly, and more realistically, covered, such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

The tales Jessie wove about her European adventures provided a more neutral experience for readers, one separate and apart from the problems of America's past. These stories mainly focused on the famous people Jessie met during her travels, including Queen Victoria of Great Britain and King Christian IX and Queen Louise of Denmark. Descriptions of royalty went hand in hand with lavish accounts of court etiquette and the elaborate courtesies visited upon the Frémonts wherever they happened to travel. For the first time, Jessie's children figured in her stories, which included one about Charley and his Naval Academy classmates visiting at the tomb of Napoleon in Paris. Touring Elsinore and being read to by Hans Christian Anderson in Denmark and attending a parade honoring the marriage of Napoleon III and Queen Eugenie in Paris joined descriptions of Salzburg and Prague in painting compelling pictures of the glamour the Frémonts enjoyed when they still had money for such luxurious travel. At some points, Jessie confused the three trips she made to Europe, jumping from 1852/53 to 1857 to 1869 and back again in the same story. She even described the changes in Paris wrought by the Baron George-Eugène Haussmann after the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, although she did not visit Paris again after 1869 and never saw these improvements for herself.[696] But accuracy was not the

[696] Jessie's "foreign" articles in *Wide Awake* included: "Souvenirs of My Time: Queen Marie-Amelie," November 1885; "Souvenirs of My Time: The Little Princess Thyra," June 1886 "Souvenirs of My Time: A Morning Visit to the Queen of Denmark," July 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: A Military Fete Day in Paris," July 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: A Nobleman of the Old Regime," July 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: American Midshipmen at the Tomb of Napoleon," July 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: Men, Women, and Things," July 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: Paris," July 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: The Queen and the Peasant," July 1886 "Souvenirs of My Time:

point. Jessie was illustrating the fame of the Frémont family, adding color to the narrative of herself and her husband along the way.

In all, Jessie wrote twenty-six stories published in *Wide Awake* between 1884 and 1886. D. Lothrop and Company compiled twenty-five of these into a book given the title of the series, *Souvenirs of My Time*, published in 1887.[697] Reviews of the book came from all areas of the country. According to the reviewer for the magazine *Public Opinion*, Jessie's stories were "thoughtfully bright and entertaining and give a series of very accurate pictures of the past, which are of real historical value."[698] A reviewer for *The Dial* included a gendered comment often associated with Jessie, referring to her "courage and independence which are characteristic of the masculine mind." While praising her work as a "remarkable story," the reviewer also suggested that an "autobiography of the author, prepared with care and a little more attention to the requirements of a literary production than is customary with her, would be a valuable legacy to her country men."[699] However Jessie received this suggestion, the description of her as "hardly less famous than her distinguished husband" by the reviewer in the *Advance* could only have pleased her.[700] In an article entitled "A Wide Awake Contributor," one reviewer recalled the doubts expressed that Jessie's "political, historic and social subject-matter" might be "rather above the children's heads." Seeking the opinions of their readers, the editors of *Wide Awake*

Prague: A Midsummer Night with Shakespeare," August 1886; "Souvenirs of My Time: Salzburg," September 1886.

[697] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time*. Some stories Jessie wrote for *Wide Awake* during this time were not considered part of the *Souvenirs* series and thus were not included in the book. Likewise, there were stories included in *Souvenirs* that did not appear *in Wide Awake*.

[698] "Books of the Week," *Public Opinion*, January 29, 1887.

[699] "Briefs on New Books," *The Dial*, April 24, 1887. This was the third iteration of *The Dial*, which was originally founded as a transcendentalist journal in 1840 and included Margaret Fuller as editor and featured such authors as Bronson Alcott, H.D. Thoreau, and R.W. Emerson. *The Dial* of 1887 was published in Chicago under the auspices of editor Francis Fisher Browne.

[700] "Literature," *The Advance*, March 17, 1887.

surveyed their audience. It was discovered that "[c]hildren clamored and parents begged for more articles from Mrs. Frémont." Accordingly, the verdict of the readership was that Jessie provided "[d]elightful and instructive family reading for old and young."[701]

Jessie had achieved a means of adding money to her family's accounts, while also creating a narrative of her life that put her in the most flattering public light. She had managed, through stories of her own childhood, to also burnish the reputation of her beloved father, an act of atonement for always choosing her husband whenever the two men disagreed. During this same time, she also turned her attention to that husband, to see that he was given his due for service in the Civil War.

In 1884, Jessie undertook a letter-writing campaign on John's behalf, once again involving herself in the world of politics as she sought to see John's name included on the retired list of Civil War generals, thus ensuring him a monthly pension. Writing to senator John Sherman of Ohio in April of 1884, Jessie pressed him for his support, wondering "when it would best suit you to introduce it [legislation to give John a pension] in the Senate?"[702] In June, she wrote to former Secretary of War Simon Cameron, reminding him of how he had spoken "of Mr. Frémont's services to the whole country—his later political-pioneer work, and the then recent war-record." She appealed to Cameron to speak to his son, James Cameron, then a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania and a member of the Military Committee. She advised Cameron that she was "certain of a large majority" and Democrats "as well as our own side have given—offered, me

[701] "A Wide Awake Contributor," *Vermont Phoenix*, December 3, 1886.
[702] Jessie Benton Frémont to John Sherman, April 14, 1884, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 499.

the most hearty manly American support."[703] That Jessie saw the support as being given to her, rather than John, spoke to the difficulties of getting the legislation through based on John's reputation alone. The situation called for Jessie to use her own contacts, her political capital, and the goodwill attached to her name.

It soon became widely known that Jessie was actively lobbying on her husband's behalf. In April, as she was pressuring John Sherman to introduce the bill, the *Boston Globe* noted Jessie's presence in the nation's capital and that she was there "in the interest of the bill to restore General Frémont to his rank in the army and place him on the retired list."[704] A writer for the *St. Paul Globe* also noticed Jessie's presence. This newspaperman referenced the death of a man in Washington, D.C., who had served in both the Mexican and Civil Wars, reporting that the man had recently died of hunger due to extreme poverty.[705] The *Globe* article used the man's death as a way of supporting John's pension, but it also offered a comment on how well it was known that the Frémonts remained in financial distress.

Jessie's initial efforts proved unsuccessful. It would not be until 1890 that John would be included on the retired list. But Jessie remained undaunted in her efforts to secure needed income for her family. Even as she turned out dozens of stories for *Wide Awake* and worked toward securing John's pension, she also turned her pen toward other opportunities. In 1886, upon the death of former Civil War general and U.S. president Ulysses S. Grant, D. Lothrop and Company published *Words of Our Hero, Ulysses S. Grant*. The book included excerpts from various messages, reports, speeches, and correspondences by the late president, edited by

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[703] Jessie Benton Frémont to Simon Cameron, June 11, 1884, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 499-500.
[704] "Mrs. Frémont Working for Her Husband," *The Boston Globe*, April 16, 1884.
[705] "Current Comment," *The Saint Paul Globe*, April 22, 1884.

Jeremiah Chaplin, famous for his biographies of Charles Sumner and Benjamin Franklin. When looking for an author to write a few personal paragraphs on Grant, Chaplin turned to fellow Lothrop contributor, Jessie Benton Frémont. Jessie offered dramatic quotations from Alfred Lord Tennyson and Napoleon, with references to the nature of Greek tragedies, in addition to a few of her own thoughts. She noted that Grant was given his first command by her husband in 1861. While referring to herself as someone who "refused to be a channel of requests" and remarking that "it is a luxury to a man in power to know persons who do not wish to make use of him," she nevertheless related a tale of approaching Grant for the reassignment of "a midshipman" (her son Charley) who had been given a less than desirable billet. After meeting with Jessie, Grant immediately sought the requested reassignment.[706] While Jessie's intention was to show Grant's generosity, she also portrayed herself as someone with enough political clout to get presidential attention for a military matter involving her own family.

Jessie accomplished much during the years after losing Pocaho and the Frémont fortune. She involved herself in business, in politics, and in literature, all with an eye toward earning money when it became clear that her husband could not. As she made her contributions to the family finances, she also managed to insert herself into the history of the early republic, both writing the historical narrative and placing herself, along with her father and John, within it. Her effort to identify herself and these two men with the winning side of history played out in tales of antislavery beliefs and actions, even to the point of exaggerating and misstating the truth. Yet, with all her efforts, the family fortunes continued to decline. To add to this, a dispute would

[706] Ulysses S. Grant, Jeremiah Chaplin, and Jessie Benton Frémont, *Words of Our Hero, Ulysses S. Grant* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1886), 63-76.

soon arise over just what role John had played during the Conquest of California, one that would pit John, and even more so Jessie, against college-educated men who seemed determined to reveal the famous Pathfinder as nothing more than a filibuster. Once again, Jessie would step into the public view in defense of her husband, working to ensure that John's heroic reputation, built over so many decades, would not be tarnished.

CHAPTER 8
WIFE OF THE PATHFINDER
1885-1902

With just a week to wait before Christmas morning 1887, Jessie's three grandchildren, Jack, Jessie, and little Juliet, cheerfully greeted their grandparents as John and Jessie came to their Washington, D.C., home to say goodbye. The children of Jessie's older son, Charley, and his wife, Sally, the youngsters understood that their grandparents were moving to California, and each reacted in their own way. Ten-year-old Jack patiently explained to four-year-old Juliet how long they would have to wait until Christmas, although that precocious child insisted on adding the word "yesterday" to each of her conceptions of time ("'Christmas soon, next Sunday, yes-ter-day,'" Jessie quoted her youngest grandchild). Jessie's namesake, seven-year-old Jessie, while not wanting to miss the family Christmas tree, decided that she would accompany her grandparents to their new home in the west. Over her nurse's objection, she began packing the "eight dresses" she felt necessary for her trip. She explained to her grandfather, "[a]s soon as I wake after the Tree I will go to the engine house and tell the driver to hurry and catch up — oh ! — please tell your driver to drive slow, because I am coming as soon as the Tree is over, and when we catch up with you I will say thank you, and get on your train and go on with you." The elder Jessie felt "all the wrenching and uprooting" of this farewell, although she knew it was imperative, due to John's failing health, that the couple head west, where there "'are no rough breezes blowing in that fair land where we are going'—where neither summer heat nor winter cold could harm, and for us it was gilded by the morning splendor of young memories."[707]

[707] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Far-West Sketches* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1890), 14-16.

Jessie published this sentimental vignette of goodbye in her 1890 book *Far-West Sketches*. The story, "Christmas in Lotus-Land," opens the book, which follows with some of the "young memories" of life in the early days in California when the family lived together at Las Mariposas in the 1850s. In deciding to share her experiences of early California, Jessie took advantage of a new focus on the history of the golden state that had been developing throughout the 1880s. She added her voice to those of writers like Helen Hunt Jackson, historians like Hubert Howe Bancroft, and the numerous early pioneers of California who developed clubs and associations to celebrate the colorful history of the state they loved. Jessie entered her own views into the narrative of California history being developed, using her pen to defend her husband and challenge the "professional" writers of history with her own well-chosen words and the strength of her reputation. It would mark her last defense of John's heroic national status and the lasting impression many people would have of his role in California history.

Jessie's own star shone brightly after John's death in 1890, and she became a beloved institution in her new California home. Referred to as the "Wife of the Pathfinder," Jessie joined into philanthropic and reform projects prompted by progressive impulses then sweeping the nation. She continued to write, penning both her own memoir and a second volume to John's, even as she also became involved in commemorative, heritage, and historical preservation organizations. She enjoyed an active social life in southern California, appearing at various events as a treasured member of Los Angeles "society." By the time of her passing in December 1902, Jessie had finished her work as a "public wife," helping to secure for her husband the place in history she had always thought his due. As the wife of the Pathfinder and the daughter of

Senator Benton, Jessie had done everything to prove that she was that special woman, "so fathered and so husbanded."

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Beginning in the 1880s, Californians took a few moments from their hurried development of the state—from the Conquest through the Gold Rush to the railroad boom—to focus on the past. Just as Americans in the east had created narratives of shared history as a means of reunification after the Civil War, Californians developed a romantic view of their Mexican and Gold Rush pasts, designed to recapture some of the "golden" glow that was quickly fading before the graft and greed of the Southern Pacific Railroad, industrialized agriculture, and a never-adequate supply of water. Novelists like Gertrude Atherton harkened back to a romanticized Mexican period in California, penning a series of novels and short stories that featured dashing caballeros and ravishing "women in silken, fluttering gowns, bright flowers holding the mantilla…[whose] great eyes, strong with their own fires, never faltered."[708] Helen Hunt Jackson began her writing career as a novelist and poet before turning her considerable energies toward the fate of the Mission Indians in California who had been swept aside by the secularization of the Spanish missions and then the U.S. acquisition.[709] In 1885 Jackson published her report on the Mission Indians as an appendix to her widely disseminated treatise on American Indians around the country, *A Century of Dishonor*. To dramatize the plight of the indigenous people of California, her novel *Ramona* (1884) told a sentimental love story of a

[708] Gertrude Atherton, *Before the Gringo Came* (New York: J. Selwin Tait & Sons, 1894), 2.
[709] The missions founded by Franciscan friars from Spain in the late eighteenth century were taken over by Mexican civil authorities beginning in 1833. Originally, the lands under mission ownership were to be divided, with Mexico to receive one half and the mission Indians the other. This plan was never fully realized, and, with the incoming American administration in California in 1847, it was abandoned altogether.

mixed-race young woman and her Indian lover as they struggled for happiness in Mexican California. Not only did Jackson's work call attention to the plight of the indigenous peoples, but it created a flurry of tourism in Southern California by people who wanted to see where the events depicted in the novel happened.[710]

In addition to works of fiction, many of California's first Anglo inhabitants found time in the 1880s and 1890s to add their own memoirs to the growing literature focused on California's past. C.W. Haskins, styling himself with the moniker "A Pioneer," published *The Argonauts of California* in 1890 and asked that "the remnant of that band of sturdy Argonauts who laid the foundation of a great state" bear witness to his telling.[711] In 1891, John Carr published *Pioneer Days in California*, noting that he did so to "rescue and preserve some of the doings of the common people that founded and built up this great State."[712] Jessie's *Far West Sketches* (1890), tales of her life at Las Mariposas in the 1850s, added her personal experiences of life in the early days of California statehood to those being told by the other "forty-niners."

Even as novelists sentimentalized California's time under Mexican rule and others reminisced about their halcyon days during and after the Gold Rush, serious scholars began the work of creating a fact-based narrative of the victory of the Americans over the Mexicans in 1846-1847. When it came to writing the account of the Conquest of California, three men emerged to engage the topic, each with a different background and different motivating factors.

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[710] An 1898 edition of the book featured an addition that described for visitors the real-life settings of the book. See Edwards Roberts, "Ramona's Home: A Visit to the Camulos Ranch, and to Scenes Described by 'H.H.,'" in Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona: A Story* (Boston: Roberts Bros. and Co., 1898), 1–7.
[711] Charles Warren Haskins, *The Argonauts of California: Being the Reminiscences of Scenes And Incidents That Occurred In California In Early Mining Days* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1890), 3.
[712] John Carr, *Pioneer Days In California: Historical and Personal Sketches* (Eureka, CA: Times Publishing Company, 1891), 24.

Hubert Howe Bancroft worked with the huge collection of California documents he had acquired over several years, the bulk of which would later fill the shelves of the library bearing his name at the University of California. Harvard professor Josiah Royce, with the clean logic of a philosopher, offered arguably the most compelling version of events, also using the Bancroft holdings as well as materials from the Library of Congress and U.S. government offices. The last man to enter the fray was John C. Frémont himself, with the aid of his wife. The result of these multiple narratives was a lively debate over what instructions John received from Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie during the heady days of May 1846 that led him to become involved in the Bear Flag Revolt and subsequent takeover of California from the Mexican authorities.[713]

Hubert Howe Bancroft had already published several volumes of what would be known as his *Works*, in which he provided histories of much of the West and the Pacific Coast. Although Bancroft's name appeared on all these volumes, he made liberal use of assistants to do the actual researching and writing. One such assistant, Henry Lebbeus Oak, wrote Volume XXII of Bancroft's *Works*, the fifth volume in the History of California series, and the volume in which the author described the actions taken by John during the Conquest of California.[714]

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[713] See Chapter 2 for more information on John's actions in California in 1846.

[714] Hubert Howe Bancroft grew up in Ohio. He migrated to California in 1852 as a bookseller and quickly became a prosperous publisher and collector of materials relating to western North America, especially California. With a massive collection of books, papers, maps, newspapers, and ephemera, he set at least thirteen assistants to producing, in whole or in part, the volumes that would eventually make up his *Works*. Henry Oak was born in Maine in 1844 and migrated to California in 1869. He began work for Bancroft as the editor of a small newspaper published through Bancroft's company, transitioning to become the librarian of Bancroft's collection and one of his most valued assistants in the researching and writing of the *Works*. John Walton Caughey, *Hubert Howe Bancroft: Historian of the West*, 1-3, 13, 18, 67-85, 103-105, 262-263.

Oak went no further than page two before condemning John's actions during the Conquest as "foolish." He noted that an "impression had been prevalent that Frémont engaged in the [Bear Flag] revolt by reason of secret instructions . . . conveyed to him by Gillespie . . . or indirectly through private letters from Senator Benton."[715] As to the nature of those instructions, Oak made the case that the original directions issued from Washington and conveyed by Gillespie to both John and to the American consul at Monterey, Thomas Larkin, made no mention of engaging in hostile action against the Mexican authorities. Rather, the instructions held true to Polk's stated war aim of acquiring California in the event of a war with Mexico, but by conciliating "by every possible means the good-will of the natives, with a view that the occupation in case of war might be without opposition, or . . . that the people might voluntarily seek annexation a little later."[716] With John's participation in the Bear Flag revolt and his subsequent formation of the California Battalion, Oak found that John clearly took action in opposition to the conciliatory plans laid out by officials in Washington. He also identified a reason behind John's behavior.

Oak wrote that "Frémont's strongest incentive was personal ambition," and that "he believed that by commencing hostilities he might gain for himself a large share of credit for the conquest." Oak added that the "result probably surpassed [Frémont's] most sanguine expectations" and resulted in John becoming a "popular hero" and leading to his future political, business, and military attainments. Oak concluded that John "was essentially a lucky fellow" and labeled him "a filibustero chieftain."[717] As far as both Bancroft and Oak were concerned,

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[715] Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, vol. XXII (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886), 2, 85.
[716] Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, vol. XXII, 88-89.
[717] Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, vol. XXII, 90.

there was nothing admirable about John's actions in California, and he did not warrant the title of "hero."[718] The next man to join the conversation agreed.

Josiah Royce was a philosophy professor at Harvard University when, in the fall of 1883, an editor from Houghton Mifflin & Company approached him to write a volume on the history of California as part of their "American Commonwealth" series.[719] Not the publisher's first choice, Royce replaced W.W. Crane as the proposed author of the work.[720] Royce made much of the fact that he, unlike Crane, was a native Californian. His book would mark the first time "that a native of California undertakes to write an outline of the story of his state." Royce believed that the "native is deeply interested in getting, in the true perspective, a view of the men and of the deeds that had most to do with the exciting times of the Conquest." Furthermore, the "native is also free from the memories and the interests that have colored all the published histories and other accounts of early California." As he began his research, Royce contacted Jessie's nephew, William Carey Jones, Jr., the son of her sister Elizabeth and an acquaintance from Berkeley.

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[718] In November 1893, the Society of California Pioneers rebuked honorary member Hubert Howe Bancroft for "the gross mis-statements in regard to men and events," referring to his *History of California* as "a quasi-history…at variance with historical records," which reflected upon "the honor dignity and integrity of the California Pioneers." Specifically, the Society felt that the "many false and malicious statements made by Bancroft about Frémont" were intentionally spiteful and accused the historian of "a seemingly vengeful malice." After presenting their rebuttals to Bancroft's narrative at a February 1894 meeting, the Society voted unanimously "that Hubert Howe Bancroft was no longer an Honorary Member of this 'Society of California Pioneers.'" *Misrepresentations of Early California History Corrected* (San Francisco: The Society of California Pioneers, 1894).

[719] Josiah Royce was born in Grass Valley, California, a small mining town in the Sierra Nevada mountains. His parents had been forty-niners, and young Josiah grew up among the vicissitudes of mining and the bonanza thinking that was epidemic in Gold Rush California. While his upbringing was hardscrabble, Royce managed to attend the University of California, Berkeley, earning a Bachelor of Arts, before moving to Germany for more study and then on to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to receive his doctorate. After teaching for a few years at his Berkeley alma mater, Royce accepted a position as a philosophy professor at Harvard.

[720] Josiah Royce to Bernard Moses, September 7, 1883, William Carey Jones Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. W.W. Crane immigrated to California in the 1850s, going on to have a successful political career and serving in the state senate. Known for both his poetry and prose, he authored *Politics: An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Constitutional Law*, published posthumously in 1884. J.M. Guinn, *History of the State of California and Biographical Record of Oakland and Environs*, vol. I (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1907), 323.

Royce provided Jones with a set of questions he wished to ask "General and Mrs. Frémont," acknowledging that he had been "taught from childhood, like many other natives of California, to respect and admire the career of General Frémont as the explorer and conqueror."[721] John and Jessie agreed to meet Royce at their home on Staten Island in December 1884.

Jessie initially welcomed the idea of Royce's work. She wrote to her nephew in October, before Royce's visit, that "with a short hand man to record & with questions clearly submitted, the General could answer enough in an hour to make a book—and all true and with proof existing."[722] After the meeting, Jessie would not be so positive.

Royce summed up his visit with the Frémonts in a letter to Henry Oak. Royce had been using the Bancroft collection as part of his research and had thus worked closely with Oak. Royce wrote that the "General is well-preserved, a pleasing old gentleman" but not "too communicative." Jessie, on the other hand, was "none the better for old age" and "garrulous, naively boastful, grandly elevated above the level of the historical in most that she either remembers or tells of the past." According to Royce, Jessie insisted on talking about the "great policy of my Father," finding Royce's questions regarding John's motives and the Gillespie dispatches "worthy only of the attention of a very small-minded historian." When he persisted with this topic, Royce claimed that John asserted that he "acted because he 'desired to serve the country'" and that he believed the government knew the personal risk he was taking and "wanted him to take [it]." What John did not know, according to Royce, was that the same message

[721] Josiah Royce to William Carey Jones, September 28, 1884, William Carey Jones Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[722] Jessie Benton Frémont to William Carey Jones Jr., October 14, 1884, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 502-504.

Gillespie delivered to him was also delivered to American consul Thomas Larkin, urging conciliation and persuasion to deliver California to the U.S.[723]

While John seemed surprised and disbelieving of this information about Larkin, Jessie "could not restrain her indignation" at the very notion. According to Royce, she claimed that Larkin "was an ignorant and utterly tactless man," "never could keep a secret," "was deaf," and, because of the deafness "talked . . . incessantly, being unable to listen." Royce gleefully reported to Oak that it was "one of the keenest delights of my life" to speak with the Frémonts with the actual Larkin message in his pocket and listen to the "vain and garrulous" Jessie deny Larkin's participation.[724]

After the interview, Royce sent John and Jessie his notes for review and correction. While he waited for their annotations, he wrote to Oak that Jessie was "trying to give me further evidence about the Larkin matter," including sending her own version of the events of the Mexican War. Royce forwarded her manuscript to Oak, believing "that the document must amuse you" as it would "instruct [Oak] as to the true feminine way of writing history."[725] Jessie gave Royce good reason to be amused. In her document, entitled "Mrs. J.C. Frémont's Statement concerning Secret Affairs relating to the Mexican War," Jessie used then Secretary of State James Buchanan's lack of Spanish language skills to explain that she, her sister, and her father acted as Buchanan's interpreters for news that came to Washington through sources in Mexico. Buchanan could not use the "Librarian and translator at the State Dept Mr.

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[723] Josiah Royce to Henry Lebbeus Oak, December 9, 1884, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[724] Josiah Royce to Henry Lebbeus Oak, December 9, 1884, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[725] Josiah Royce to Henry Lebbeus Oak, January 1, 1885, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Greenhough," although that gentleman knew Spanish, as his wife, according to Jessie, "was in the pay of the English Legation as a spy." Jessie recounted the further adventures of "Mrs. Greenhough" during the Civil War, reporting that she was "known to be a spy for the South."[726] After describing the death of "Mrs. Greenhough" during the War (drowned while on "a blockade run" by the gold she refused to relinquish—according to Jessie), Jessie turned again to her father, claiming that the "Brussels stair carpet leading to the library had to be remended twice" as so many military men walked upon it in their visits to the "real war dept" in the Benton house.[727] This last bit of flooring-related information led Royce to snidely chide Oak: "You have probably never considered what grand evidence an old carpet can furnish.—Talk of the dusty tomes of history!!"[728] Almost as an aside, Jessie had written, "And this idea of a secret message given to Mr. Larkin has simply never been heard of by me before. And it is an absurd idea that it would have availed against well known English intentions and Californian preferences."[729] Jessie, along with John, stuck to the story that no one would have given secret instructions to the American Consul as war loomed. As she had so often before, Jessie put all her energies into glorifying her father and defending her husband.

On April 14, 1885, Royce gave the Frémonts one more chance to change their story by writing Jessie, not John, a 24-page letter outlining the evidence he had collected that disproved John's claim that he had acted on instructions from Washington when he instigated hostilities in

[726] "Mrs. Greenhough" was the Rose Greenhow who did indeed serve as a spy for the Confederacy.
[727] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Statement Concerning Secret Affairs Relating to the Mexican War," December 1884, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[728] Josiah Royce to Henry Lebbeus Oak, January 1, 1885, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[729] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Statement Concerning Secret Affairs Relating to the Mexican War," December 1884, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

California in 1846. Presenting himself as a non-biased truthteller, Royce told Jessie that he offered her his evidence as "an act of common justice to you [rather] than an effort to help on my own study." He wondered whether the "personal impression" that John (and Jessie) understood from Thomas Benton provided more validation than the government documents he, Royce, had obtained. Royce finished the letter by urging the Frémonts "to "serve your own interests" by making available any documentary proof, as the government had, of their "almost wholly unsupported view" of the matter.[730] This offer to accept evidence from the Frémonts in support of their understanding of events would not be repeated.

On August 8, 1885, Royce sent Henry Oak a draft of the second chapter of his book, entitled "The American as Conqueror: The Secret Mission and the Bear Flag."[731] Having received no reply to his April 14 letter, Royce had, when near New York, asked to call on the Frémonts at their home. Claiming that he "still cherished, foolishly enough…, a hope that, now all [John's] official secrets were out…, he might have some revelation to make," Royce was willing to provide the Frémonts one more opportunity to either change their story or submit verifiable evidence to support it. After the visit, while describing John as "cordial" and Jessie as "calm and sunny and benevolent," Royce believed that John had "lied, lied unmistakably, unmitigatedly, hopelessly." While still claiming to have acted under instructions from Washington and with no knowledge of any information to which Larkin might have been made privy, John added a new villain to his story—his foe from the 1856 election, James Buchanan. According to Royce, John claimed that "Buchanan's dark and deceitful way . . . must have been

[730] Josiah Royce to Jessie Benton Frémont, April 14, 1885, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[731] John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 170.

to blame." Royce included a quote from Jessie that added to the ill will now expressed by the Frémonts toward the Polk administration: "Polk and Buchanan were simply nonexistent for my Father when he has his own plan to carry out."[732] While Royce may have wished that the Frémonts had relented in view of the evidence he had gathered, John and Jessie remained stubbornly devoted to their version of events.

Sides had now been fully established in the argument about those May 1846 instructions. Royce published his book, *California, A Study of American Character, from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco*, in the late fall of 1886. Combining the evidence he had collected through government offices in Washington, D.C., with materials acquired from the Bancroft collection, Royce also used the words of Thomas Hart Benton himself, in the second volume of Benton's *Thirty Years' View,* to expose the "Frémont lie." Royce repeated Benton's narrative of the events in that late spring of 1846 as relating to three circumstances menacing the Americans in California. First, there was concern at the time that the Mexican authorities (through the actions of Indians stirred to resentment against the American settlers) would "massacre" the settlers and destroy their settlements. Second, there was concern that the British would "subjugate" California. Related to that idea, the third concern was that lands in the "public domain" would be given to British subjects. Royce finished with a quote from Benton about John's reaction to these threats: "He determined to put himself at the head of the people and save the country."[733]

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[732] Josiah Royce to Henry Lebbeus Oak, August 8, 1885, Henry Lebbeus Oak Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

[733] Josiah Royce, *California*, 72-73. In the second volume of Benton's *Thirty Years' View*, Benton wrote of John's oral instructions from Gillespie as "Mr. Frémont should watch and counteract any foreign scheme on California, and conciliate the good will of the inhabitants towards the United States." Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View*, 689.

With the deductive powers of a trained philosopher, Royce countered each Frémont explanation with evidence to the contrary. To the claim that Mexican authorities were menacing both John's men and American settlers, Royce pointed out that no such order had been given and, furthermore, General Jose Castro, the commander of Mexican forces in Alta California, was in Monterey and Santa Clara during the days in which he was supposed to be leading an army against John in the upper Sacramento Valley.[734] To John's claim that he had received important information through the letters from his family also delivered by Gillespie—in a "family cipher"—Royce replied that such information "cannot be viewed as committing our administration to any policy that it did not actually authorize that distinguished statesman [Benton] to convey to his son-in-law."[735] To the claim that the British had designs on California, Royce observed that "the irregular revolution instigated by Captain Frémont was the best possible means that could have been chosen to frighten and to plague the Californians into the arms of England at once."[736]

Throughout Royce's book, his sardonic writing style was heavily venomous when it came to both Frémonts. Obsequiously referring to Jessie as "kindly" and John as "gallant," Royce let the words of both Frémonts speak to the absurdity of their interpretation of the instructions given by Gillespie. He quoted Jessie as claiming to have had personal knowledge of discussions between her father and James Buchanan, saying that since "England intends to take California, we must see that she does not."[737] Polk was brought into the mix, with Royce observing the Frémont belief that the letters from home "were much stronger and fuller than the

[734] Josiah Royce, *California*, 70-71.
[735] Josiah Royce, *California*, 97.
[736] Josiah Royce, *California*, 64.
[737] Josiah Royce, *California*, 90.

dispatch [from Gillespie]" and that it "was the desire of the President that Captain Frémont should not let the English get possession of California, but should use any means in his power, on any occasion that offered, to prevent such a thing."[738]

A strange line at the end of Royce's first chapter might have been his cryptic wish for future action, or inaction, by the Frémonts. Writing of the original combined expedition report as a "monument of literary skill in its kind," Royce also "fancied" that the report "will be, in future generations, General Frémont's only title, and a very good one, to lasting and genuine fame."[739] Willing to concede John's expeditions as hero-making, Royce clearly wanted none of John's other actions to be considered a reason for distinction, nor did he want the Frémonts to publish anything further that might challenge the interpretation of the Conquest as Royce had written it.

John and Jessie had other ideas. Taking the opportunity to solve two problems at once, their continuing lack of money and the need to redeem John's reputation, in 1885 John and Jessie began writing John's own version of events, a version that presented him as Jessie had always seen him—as the national hero. As she had with John's expedition reports, Jessie considered John's *Memoirs of My Life* "our book." She, John, and Lily settled in Washington, D.C., while writing, wanting access to government records. Lily Frémont also referred to the work as "ours," as she initially transcribed the pages dictated by John and written by Jessie. Eventually, Lily taught herself to use a "type-writer," and John found it much easier to make revisions with this new method. John and Jessie worked in a similar process to that which produced the first two

[738] Josiah Royce, *California*, 92.
[739] Josiah Royce, *California*, 34-35.

expedition reports—breakfast, then work, lunch and a rest, then more work until early evening. Lily ran the household, much as she had done in Pocaho and Arizona, while also finding time to handle research errands to the Capitol libraries and manage the correspondence for her parents. The ever-social Jessie had enough energy after her workday to see visitors in the evening.[740]

In *Memoirs*, John stated his purpose in the "Scope of the Work" introduction: "The principal subjects of which the book will consist, and which, with me, make its raison d'etre, are three: the geographical explorations, made in the interest of Western expansion; the presidential campaign of 1856, made in the interest of an undivided country; and the civil war made in the same interest."[741] While he may have honestly intended to write a full memoir, the finished work went only so far as January of 1847, with the capitulation of the Mexican forces in California. He explained his choice by writing that "my path of life led out from among the grand and lovely features of nature, and its pure and wholesome air, into the poisoned atmosphere and jarring circumstances of conflict among men, made subtle and malignant by clashing interests."[742] John saw the heroic reputation he had acquired, with Jessie's help, from his days as a western explorer as having ended in California. Forces working against him had tainted the rest of his life.

John's portion of the memoir, including detailed geographical, botanical, and meteorological findings and illustrations, ended at 655 pages. Given pride of place at the beginning of the volume were Jessie's acknowledged contributions, beginning with "Some

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[740] Elizabeth Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, October 7, 1885, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[741] John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life* (New York: Belford, Clarke and Company, 1887), iii. *Memoirs* includes the description "Vol. I" on its cover page, although there would be no further volumes.
[742] John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, 602.

Account of the Plates." In this five-page essay, Jessie related the background of some of the illustrations used in *Memoirs*, including the daguerreotypes taken by Solomon Nunes Carvalho during the fifth expedition, rendered into photographs at the studio of Matthew Brady in New York City. She told of the fire at her father's house in 1855, and the valiant effort by Barton Key, son of Francis Scott Key, in rescuing the portrait of Thomas Hart Benton. The only illustration contained within Jessie's essay, however, was a photograph of a bust of Napoleon. While she explained the way in which she had come to own the bust itself, neither the bust nor its subject were a component of John's memoir.[743]

Jessie's essay "Biographical Sketch of Senator Benton in Connection with Western Expansion" credited her father with molding said expansion through two epiphanies he had during his War of 1812 service. The first of these was the observation that "it lay within the power of his own will to regain health and live; the second was that until then his mind had been one-sided, and that there was a West as well as an East to our country."[744] Jessie gave several pages over to her father's youth, his military service, a history of St. Louis, and an explanation of Thomas Jefferson's efforts to encourage western exploration. While much of the essay covered the life of Thomas Benton, Jessie could not resist inserting her own contribution to expansionist goals—her refusal to forward the letter ordering John back to Washington and relieving him of command of the second expedition. Jessie concluded her essay with several paragraphs about the conquest of California and the need for the United States to control the harbor at San Francisco. About this, she wrote:

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[743] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Some Account of the Plates," in John C. Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, xv-xix.
[744] The mention of using "his own will to regain health" refers to young Benton's consumptive health and his belief that it was the days in the saddle with Colonel Andrew Jackson that helped him stave off the disease that had killed his father and several siblings.

> Two men were in position to use deciding influence, and both understood the crisis and each other, my father in Washington with his established power in the Senate; Mr. Frémont on the ground where the decisive blow must be given.[745]

In Jessie's telling, the two men in her life, her father and her husband, had been largely responsible for the U.S. acquisition of California.

In his recollection of the days before the official proclamation of the Mexican War, John wrote how he came to be involved in the process of ending Mexican rule in California. In May of 1846, as John and his men trekked north up the Sacramento Valley to the Oregon border (having been ordered out of California by Mexican authorities), he was approached by Marine Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie with dispatches, both oral and written, from Washington. John was "absolved" from his duty as an explorer and was to take up his role as an officer in the United States Army, with the "authoritative knowledge that the Government intended to take California." Gillespie also delivered a letter from Thomas Hart Benton, which John described:

> The letter from Senator Benton, while apparently of friendship and family details, contained passages and suggestions which, read by the light of many conversations and discussions with himself and others at Washington, clearly indicated to me that I was required by the Government to find out any foreign schemes in relation to California and, so far as might be in my power, to counteract them.[746]

Although both Frémonts believed, having put forth John's side of the dispute, they were finished with Bancroft, Oak, and Royce, time would prove different—Royce was not done with

[745] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Biographical Sketch of Senator Benton in Connection with Western Expansion," in John C. Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, 1–17.
[746] John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, 488-489.

them. In the meantime, life matters intervened to draw their attention away from the Conquest and its disputed narrative.

While the hope had been that John's memoir would provide much needed family income, as Ulysses Grant's memoir had for his family, such was not the case. Published just a few months after Royce's *California*, John's *Memoirs*, while laying out the Frémont case, suffered poor sales (by subscription) and failed to ease John and Jessie's financial distress.[747] Added to this, John's health in 1887 began to fail. After a doctor advised moving to a milder climate, Jessie ventured into New York City to call on railroad magnate Collis Huntington, whom she labeled her "long-time friend." Explaining the precarious nature of John's health, she wrote later that Huntington at once suggested California as the solution. According to Jessie, the transportation baron provided the Frémonts, along with Lily and a maid, with letters to railroad officials along the line, "the tickets, and a generous sum of money for expenses on the road."[748] After their quick December visit to Charley, Sally, and their children in Washington, John and Jessie set out on Jessie's last continental crossing.

Jessie wrote later of coming into southern California, meeting the "fresh soft air of the Pacific ocean" and a "region of rich valleys and gentle hills with pastures and orchards and pretty farmhouses." This pastoral peace gave way to " a glare of gas and electric lights, the noise, the crowd, the crush of a busy city—a stunning change" as they emerged into Los Angeles on a sunny Christmas Eve. She compared the Los Angeles she found that day with the one she had passed through on her way to Arizona only eight years before. She wrote that the "low hills and

[747] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder,* 487.
[748] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," unnumbered pages.

flowery plains browsed over by countless sheep had become a spreading city with outlying villages and farmsteads and market gardens, and everywhere the once open view was broken by long avenues."[749]

Indeed, the city of Los Angeles had grown spectacularly over the 1880s, from a population of just under 12,000 at the beginning of the decade to over 50,000 by its end. Men like Jessie's friend Collis Huntington contributed to this growth. Huntington's Southern Pacific Railroad connected the city with the rest of California in 1876. In 1885, the Santa Fe Railroad, under the direction of William Barstow Strong, also entered Los Angeles, beginning a competition between the two lines that resulted in a rate war. With tickets as low as one dollar for a trip from St. Louis or Kansas City to Los Angeles, suddenly a vacation to the sunny climes of California became a possibility for thousands of midwestern Americans who sought relief from hot, humid summers and snowy winters. Various boosters spread pamphlets, books, and articles about the golden state's healthy climate and fertile land. The popularity of Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* and well-publicized efforts by boosters like Charles F. Lummis offered tourists other reasons to visit.[750] As the city grew, small suburbs sprang out of housing development efforts. One such suburb, Inglewood, became the Frémonts' first home in southern California—at a price they could not refuse.

Financial straits continued to plague the Frémonts even in Los Angeles. Without funds to purchase a house, John accepted the gift of one in the developing suburb of Inglewood. In

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[749] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Far-West Sketches*, 20-23.
[750] "Early Statehood: 1850 – 1880s: The Rise of Los Angeles," Oakland Museum of California, Picture This: California Perspectives on American History, accessed January 31, 2022, http://picturethis.museumca.org/timeline/early-statehood-1850-1880s/rise-los-angeles/info#:~:text=The%20growth%20of%20Los%20Angeles,Fe%20railroad%20entered%20southern%20California.&text=Los%20Angeles%20now%20became%20a,and%20newspapers%20were%20all%20established.

exchange for the use of the Frémont name in promotional efforts, John promised to "make there my permanent home." He added that, since his first visit to the area more than forty years before, he "resolved then to make here my home, but until now I have failed to carry out my intention." Now, however, he had "definitely placed my stakes and will remain and take my part in the development of Southern California."[751]

Labeled in its sales literature as "the most beautiful suburban area," Inglewood was developed on the site of the former Centinela Rancho, a large Mexican land grant originally owned by Ignacio Machado in 1844.[752] Encircled by Redondo and Centinela Avenues, the original development was intersected by main thoroughfares Grevillea Avenue and Morado Street. The Inglewood community featured a train station that connected it with both Los Angeles proper and the town of Redondo Beach. In addition, it was the home of the Freeman College of Applied Sciences, a lavish building with enough cupolas to give it the appearance of a European castle.[753] An enthusiastic newspaper reporter described a stop at the Inglewood station during an excursion of local dignitaries, including John, Jessie, and Lily, traveling from Los Angeles to Redondo Beach. The reporter described the "fine hotel," the "new-laid sidewalks," "pretty little plazas," and the "three-arched avenues." The reporter specifically mentioned the future "pretty home of Gen. and Mrs. Frémont, in the midst of an orange grove, and under the shade of olive and of palm." In one last burst of fervor, the reporter opined that this new home

[751] "General Frémont to Stay in California," *New-York Tribune*, January 3, 1888.
[752] Mildred Brooke Hoover et al., *Historic Spots in California*, Third (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1966), 163. Rancho Aguaje de Centinela was originally granted to Ignacio Machado in the waning days of Mexican California. After passing through several hands, it became the property of David Freeman in 1885, who then led the development of Inglewood.
[753] *Promotional Map of Inglewood, California*, 1885, Alamy.Com, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-map-of-inglewood-1885.

was "in keeping with the romances of [John's] life, and it is fitting that his peaceful evening should be passed under the summer skies of the State where his own hand first unfurled the Stars and Stripes."[754] As John and Jessie waited for the completion of their home, they quickly became a part of the Los Angeles social life.

Los Angeles mayor William H. Workman welcomed the Pathfinder and his wife to the city with a lavish reception at Armory Hall in January 1888. Among the luminaries present were officers of the U.S. Army, both current and former, led by General Nelson A. Miles.[755] Representing the local political and social elite was Reginaldo F. del Valle, a Los Angeles native and successful politician, attorney, and civic leader.[756] In his remarks, del Valle, after a recitation of John's storied lifetime, mentioned that "the wisdom of the selection of a wife, a life partner, is the success of a man's career. Woman verily marks out destiny and a noble one has marked yours." After "[l]ong and continued applause," del Valle noted that all of John's "hopes, your ambitions, your trials, your tribulations, your victories, and your glories she has shared with you and has kept your spirit strong and your purpose firm." After reading greetings for the Frémonts from around the state, Mayor Workman urged those veterans in the crowd to meet John.[757] While this first reception in their new city focused primarily on John, Jessie soon found herself involved in various organizations, clubs, and business and philanthropic endeavors.

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[754] "The Round Beach," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1888.
[755] Nelson A. Miles won military success in the Civil War but was better known for his actions during the Indian Wars in the 1870s and 1880s. He played important roles in the capture of both Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and Geronimo of the Chiricahua Apache.
[756] Reginaldo del Valle served in both houses of the California state legislature as well as taking a role in several Democratic state and national conventions. With Charles Lummis, del Valle would found the Landmarks Club in the mid-1890s, a civic effort to preserve the California Missions (with which Jessie would also become involved).
[757] "General Frémont," *Los Angeles Herald*, January 22, 1888.

One of the first businesses with which Jessie became involved was the Inglewood and Los Angeles Floral Company, a commercial enterprise begun and operated solely by women.[758] This business, filing its articles of incorporation on February 6, 1888, was capitalized at $50,000, divided into 10,000 shares worth $5.00 apiece. With the intention of planting and cultivating trees, shrubs, flowering plants and flowers, and ornamental trees, the new business was gifted with eighty acres of Nethermead Park by the Centinella-Inglewood Land Company. Located adjacent to the Inglewood railroad depot, it was expected that the flora would be marketed in Los Angeles with the hope "that the winter's demand may be met with a full line of floral goods."[759] As the gardens grew during the first year of the new business, they became a welcome tourist attraction. In September 1888, for the price of a fifty-cent round-trip ticket, excursionists could take the short train ride from the Los Angeles depot to Inglewood and see such worthy sights as the Continuous Brick Kiln, the gardens of the Inglewood Floral Company, the Centinela Artesian Springs—and the future home of General John C. Frémont.[760]

Just what role Jessie played in the management of the business remains unclear. While she had been heavily involved in the speculative mining ventures of her husband during his time as territorial governor of Arizona, she had, since then, shored up the family finances through her pen, not her entrepreneurial expertise. She did lend her name, reputation, and her person to the floral business on occasion. When the business became involved with the fourth annual Ladies' Flower Festival Society show, Jessie presided at the company's booth, surrounded by "roses and

[758] Jessie's partners included: Katharine Putnam Hooker, Eva Clark Mitchell, Francis H. Farrell, and Elizabeth S. Bates.
[759] "Floral Company," *Los Angeles Herald*, February 10, 1888; "New Enterprises," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 8, 1888.
[760] "Excursion of Inglewood," *Los Angeles Herald*, September 22, 1888.

ferns" with a "loving cup of La France roses, almost three feet tall and two feet in diameter."[761] After 1888, the business did not appear in newspapers and city directories, and records with the California Secretary of State's office show that the charter for the Inglewood Floral Company was forfeited.[762]

The floral company offered Jessie an opportunity to become involved with Los Angeles society. In an article from the "Women's Department" of the *Los Angeles Herald*, the author acknowledged that Los Angeles was a young community, and the citizens thereof were "restless." Yet, a society had formed, and "foremost among these luminaries is Mrs. Jessie Frémont." The reporter met with Jessie at the Marlborough House, where she and John lived while awaiting the construction of the Inglewood home. Writing "I imagine the impression she produced upon me was similar to that which Martha Washington could have produced if times and circumstances could have been reversed," the reporter praised Jessie's not only having received "but improved all of the advantages of this advanced age." From one writer to another, Jessie reminded her interviewer "never to tell all I knew, but rather to hide the information I acquired for future use." Jessie went on to enthuse over her future home in Inglewood, saying it "'will make a beautiful suburb to Los Angeles, especially as in every respect it is solid and well laid out.'" She told the reporter that Inglewood looked "'like an old French town, fashioned after the Versaillies [sic] pattern.'"[763] As far as Los Angeles was concerned, these comments crowned Jessie as one of the queens of the city's society.

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[761] "A Bower of Beauty," *The San Francisco Examiner*, April 18, 1888; "The Flower Festival," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1888.
[762] California Secretary of State, *Certified Copy of Compiled Statement of Domestic Corporations Whose Charters Have Been Forfeited* (Sacramento: Office of State Printing, 1905).
[763] "Woman's Department," *Los Angeles Herald*, May 13, 1888.

Even as Jessie settled into her new life, John grew restless. The move to California had been necessitated by his health, and Jessie had happily reported to Collis P. Huntington, after just three months in Los Angeles, "how health has returned to the General—thanks to your instant comprehension and friendly aid to me."[764] Healthy though he may have been, John was ready to engage in speculative schemes once again. To do so, he would need to be in New York.

John had never stopped trying to find his way to a bonanza with various dicey ventures. Since leaving the governorship of Arizona, he had been busy with one proposal after another, including plans for a canal from the Colorado River to the Pacific Ocean and the development of a colony of Belgians in Irvine, California.[765] He had involved himself with politics, stumping for James G. Blaine in 1884.[766] He sought to interest English investors in the purchase of property in California, from which he would earn a substantial commission.[767] He continued to push for a placement on the retired general's list so that he might receive a government pension. Finally, he was approached by the editors of *Century* magazine to write an article on his participation in the Conquest of California.

John had written for *Century* before, penning an article explaining his actions in St. Louis in 1861 as part of the magazine's "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" series.[768] Now, he had another opportunity to explain his actions, this time in response to Royce's specific allegations in *California*. Having left to attend to business in August 1888, John returned for a few months to

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[764] Jessie Benton Frémont to Collis P. Huntington, March 30, 1888, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 527.
[765] "Untitled," *The Saline County Journal*, May 10, 1883; "Frémont's Island Sea," *The Butte Weekly Miner*, July 21, 1883; John C. Frémont to Col. Arnaud, March 10, 1888, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[766] "Blaine's Peregrinations," *Detroit Free Press*, October 18, 1884.
[767] Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 496.
[768] John C. Frémont, "In Command in Missouri," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, vol. I (New York: The Century Co., 1883), 278–88.

Jessie and their home in California in the spring and early summer of 1889, finding enough time to have his portrait painted by a young Gutzon Borglum.[769] By the end of July, though, he was once again on his way east, to shuttle between New York City and Washington, D.C., as he worked on his land scheme, his *Century* article, and his efforts to gain a pension.

Attempts to secure John's position on the retired list and thus ensure him a pension had been in the works since the early 1880s. Jessie had promoted her husband's pension claim while in Washington in the spring of 1884, and she continued for years after.[770] Still several congressmen and senators felt uneasy about providing a pension to a man who had "quit" the Civil War. They were not alone. An angry writer for the *Detroit Free Press* in July 1888 recited John's long list of contributions to the nation, including his expeditions, his service as a senator from California, and his 1856 candidacy for president. However, warned the reporter, John's actions during his governorship of Arizona left much to be desired as "he was absent so much and for such long periods from his post . . . that general complaint was made." It was his Civil War record that conclusively damned John. Calling out John's "insubordination, his vanity and his arrogance," the reporter also called John "one of the thorns in the flesh of that great and gentle man, Abraham Lincoln." In Lincoln's opinion, wrote the reporter, John "lacked that military skill which should characterize the commanding officer." In one final biting comment, the reporter wrote that any surplus in the national treasury should "help the poor man by

[769] "The Pathfinder," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1889. Borglum would go on to be the major creator of the presidential monument at Mount Rushmore.
[770] "Mrs. Frémont Working for Her Husband," *The Boston Globe*, April 16, 1884; "Frémont and Jessie," *The Morning Democrat*, April 27, 1884.

reducing the taxes" rather than be given "to such men as General Frémont, who have fed at the public crib the greater part of their lives."[771]

Despite such negative assessments, support mounted for John's pension as the 1880s waned. On April 30, 1890, John's name was finally added to the retirement list as a major general, and he was awarded a pension of $6,000 per year.[772] The relief accompanying that good news was enormous, for Jessie as well as John. For the first time since John resigned from the position of territorial governor in Arizona, the family had a steady income, one that did not require Jessie to act as breadwinner. But the relief was short-lived.

In Los Angeles, Jessie eagerly awaited John's return from New York, confiding to a friend in early July 1890 that she expected him home as soon as he finished some business dealings and the writing of the *Century* article.[773] She wrote to John on July 7, 1890, expressing her yearning for his return and reminding her husband that "it makes such a happy difference to see you."[774] Signing herself "Your JBF," Jessie expressed her love and affection without restraint and offered no recriminations for his lengthy absence. John's last letter to Jessie, written on July 11, contained information regarding a business deal he had been working on with the family's former physician, Dr. William Morton. Signing it "with love to home, Frémont,"

[771] "Pensioning General Frémont," *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1888.
[772] "Gen. Frémont Retired," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1890; Allen Nevins, Frémont: Pathmarker of the West (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 608.
[773] Jessie Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, July 5, 1890, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[774] Jessie Benton Frémont to John C. Frémont, July 7, 1890, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

John included no words of special affection for his wife, nor did he express any particular longing to return to California.[775]

On July 12, 1890, instead of her husband's return, Jessie received a telegram from her son Charley, then in New York: "Father is seriously ill." As Charley wrote later, he sent this first telegram to prepare his mother and sister for the blow he knew was coming. By the time this first telegram was delivered and Lily had gone to the telegraph office to see if there was more news, a second telegram arrived at the Frémont home, again from Charley: "Father is dead."[776] After it happened, Charley could not bring himself to write a letter to his mother with the details of John's death. He wrote to Lily instead, giving her a description of their father's last hours, pointing out that, even as the doctors knew death was imminent, the news was kept from John. So peaceful did his father appear at the end that Charley "questioned whether I was not heartless, for I could find no sorrow or pity for him at all." John's troubles were over, but Charley worried about the effect on his mother, writing to Lily that their parents "lived in each other so that I don't think there is any life for the one left."[777]

Jessie remembered the events of those July days in her later memoir. She described feeling struck by a "bolt from a clear sky" and claimed it would be the last telegram she would ever open, as it seemed "to fairly shrivel my arm." She described a letter from William Morton, the family friend and physician attending John at the end, as recounting for her John's last lucid moment. According to Jessie, Dr. Morton was watching John closely when the patient said, "If I

[775] John C. Frémont to Jessie Benton Frémont, July 11, 1890, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[776] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," unnumbered page.
[777] John Charles Frémont Jr. to Elizabeth Benton Frémont, July 13, 1890, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

keep this free of pain, I can go home next week." Morton queried, "what do you call home?" John answered, "Why, California, of course." When Morton heard a fall, it was Jessie's "athlete . . . healthy Charley, who had fainted away." According to Jessie, that last utterance of the word "California" "renders it for always my heart's home."[778] Whether this description, written by Jessie and attributed to Morton, was real or imagined, Jessie used it to justify her decision to remain in Los Angeles rather than to accept Charley's offer of a home with his family.

It fell to Charley to arrange his father's funeral and interment. Jessie sent the miniature portrait of herself that John carried in his early expeditions, and Charley ensured that it and a telegram from Jessie were placed on his father's chest before the coffin lid was closed for the final time.[779] Services were held at St. Ignatius church on July 16, without Jessie, Lily, or Frank in attendance.[780] Frank was stationed with the U.S. Army at Fort Douglas, Wisconsin, and Jessie and Lily did not have funds sufficient to purchase train tickets for travel to New York.

Discussions concerning John's burial included a possible plan by the Native Sons of the Golden West to secure a plot in one of San Francisco's Lone Mountain cemeteries (overlooking the Golden Gate) as well as an offer of a plot in the Rockland cemetery in Sparkill, New York, not far from the Hudson River and Pocaho.[781] Before a decision was made, John's remains were

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[778] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," unnumbered page. While this account of John's final moments made for a romantic ending to the life of the Pathfinder, especially considering the ongoing battle over John's role in the Conquest of California, there is no evidence other than Jessie's memoir that attributes these last words to John.
[779] John Charles Frémont Jr. to Jessie Benton Frémont, July 17, 1890, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[780] "Funeral of Gen. Frémont," *New-York Tribune*, July 17, 1890.
[781] In the early 1850s San Franciscans purchased land in the Lone Mountain-Laurel Heights area for burial purposes. Four cemeteries were eventually built in that location, and early California luminaries like Thomas O. Larkin, U.S. Consul to Mexican California, and the anti-slavery U.S. senator David Broderick, who was killed by Judge David Terry in their infamous 1859 duel, found their (almost) final rest there. By the 1880s, calls began for removing the cemeteries as San Franciscans found themselves running out of space for city expansion. The plan by the Native Sons to bury John on Lone Mountain would have raised serious concerns, as the city had ordered that no further interments be made in the four cemeteries. Between the 1900s and the 1930s, the inhabitants of these four

interred in a receiving vault in Trinity Cemetery in New York City. President Benjamin Harrison issued an order for flags to fly at half-mast. He also sent a telegram to Jessie: "The death of General Frémont has revived the memory of his great and unique public services, and will excite regret that the nation did not give an earlier and more constant expression of its grateful appreciation of them."[782] The president's words were a balm to Jessie's aching heart.

Not all words written about John after his passing were as generous as those of President Harrison. Even as laudatory obituaries appeared in newspapers across the country, Josiah Royce continued to publish his own pieces on John C. Frémont. In the September 1890 issue of *Century* magazine, Royce published "Light on the Seizure of California." Royce restated his conclusion that John, "who had his own personal interests to consider . . . now unfortunately decided upon a course of action directly contrary to the instructions, trusting apparently to the nearness of the Mexican war itself to shield him against all the consequences of his disobedience." According to Royce, John's trust was "well placed" as "he has ever since been popularly regarded as the chief servant of his country in the winning of California."[783] In the October 1890 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Royce engaged in a psychological analysis of John and his reputation. Referring to John's "accounts of himself," Royce claimed that John had "frequently been hopelessly unhistorical as to what he revealed, and profoundly mysterious as to the nature of what he found it needful to keep to himself." Royce castigated John for both the lucky happenstances that came his way and for the reputation "whose only foundation was a

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cemeteries were transferred to a multi-cemetery complex in Colma. The land on which John C. Frémont might have been buried is now a part of the University of San Francisco. See Deanna L. Kastler, "Cemeteries," Encyclopedia of San Francisco, undated, accessed 31 Jan 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20100722233945/ http://www.sfhistoryencyclopedia.com/articles/c/cemeteries.html.

[782] "His Profound Sympathy," *Boston Daily Globe*, July 15, 1890.

[783] Josiah Royce, "Light on the Seizure of California," *Century Magazine*, September 1890: 792-794.

culpable blunder and a perversion of history." Royce justified writing this article partly because "General Frémont's death brings it [the Conquest of California] afresh to mind, and partly because, in his Memoirs, the general himself, some time after my own book was published, sought in vain to give the ancient affair its old romantic coloring." In his concluding sentence, Royce wrote that the "real man behind that public life it is that I find so curious and baffling an enigma, as all others have found him."[784]

Not everyone found John so "baffling." Certainly Jessie did not. John was gone, but her work as his wife continued. By late August 1890, the manuscript started by John was finished by Jessie, and "The Conquest of California" was sent to *Century's* associate editor, Robert Underwood Johnson.[785] In addition, Jessie penned her own article for the magazine, "Origin of the Frémont Explorations." Johnson published "Origin" in the March 1891 issue, with "Conquest" following in April. In both, Jessie fought back against the narrative put forth by the Bancroft shop and, especially, by Royce, that John had acted without official sanction during the Conquest. As she often did, she took the opportunity to praise both her father and her husband.

In "Origin," Jessie began the article by remembering her youth and the ways in which her father stirred her imagination with descriptions of "India and Oriental life, and of European power." Recalling the days of meeting men like William Clark, the explorer "who had first explored the Columbia to the Pacific," Jessie stressed the role Thomas Hart Benton played in western expansion. Jessie informed her readers that she herself practiced that "self-renunciation" that allowed her to be useful to her father while her husband ventured across the Rockies during

[784] Josiah Royce, "Frémont," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1890: 584-557
[785] Jessie Benton Frémont to Robert Underwood Johnson, August 28, 1890, John Charles Frémont and Jessie Benton Frémont Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

his first two expeditions. She recounted the story of the mountain howitzer, and her role in preventing John being recalled to Washington at the start of the second expedition. She included part of a letter written in July 1886 from George Bancroft, a historian, politician, and President Polk's Secretary of the Navy.[786] Bancroft, a longstanding friend of the Frémonts, wrote his recollection that Thomas Benton had sought U.S. western expansion, that Polk had stated his desire to take California in 1846, and that he, Bancroft, saw the "acquisition of California by ourselves as the decisive point in the perfect establishment of the Union on a foundation that cannot be moved."[787]

Jessie concluded the article with words that reflected her firm belief in the importance of her husband and her father in the historical narrative of western expansion:

> Rarely does life offer such opportunities; more seldom still do men, each specially fitted to his part, combine to carry out such noble, enduring work—work which time has proved good. And . . . people feel the truth, "Though the pathfinders die, the paths remain open."[788]

Even as she praised both men, it was to the memory of John, the Pathfinder, that she attributed the true opening of the west.

In "Conquest of California," John had written the first section, consisting of a basic overview of the west as it was understood prior to his first expedition. He wrote of meeting early mentors Joel Poinsett and Joseph Nicollet and of becoming "a member of Senator Benton's family."[789] Coming to 1842 and the first two expeditions, John had written an outline that Jessie

[786] No relation to Hubert Howe Bancroft, the California historian.
[787] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Origin of the Frémont Explorations," *Century Magazine*, March 1891: 766-771.
[788] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Origin of the Frémont Explorations," 771.
[789] John C. Frémont, "The Conquest of California," *Century Magazine*, April 1891, 917-919.

then followed.[790] Addressing the issue of the instructions received from Gillespie, the gist of the argument between the professional historians and the Frémonts, John (or Jessie) reiterated what John had included in his *Memoirs*: namely, that he received instructions to "watch the interests of the United States in California." Of the letter from Thomas Benton also delivered by Gillespie, John wrote that he "learned nothing but it was intelligibly explained to me by my previous knowledge, by the letter from Senator Benton, and by communications from Lieutenant Gillespie." John (or Jessie) went further, noting that Benton's letter "was a trumpet giving no uncertain note." The coded family language gave John the authority necessary to stir up aggressions in California. To this restating of his original justification, John (or Jessie) added a new twist—following the instructions that were given to U.S. Consul Thomas Larkin was "no longer practicable, as actual war was inevitable and immediate; moreover, it was in conflict with our own instructions."[791] No longer did the Frémonts argue that Larkin had not received his own instructions from Washington; rather, those instructions did not apply.

The views of George Bancroft were also captured in this article, including the understanding that Polk wanted to take California. In a copy of a letter of September 2, 1886, and included in the article, Bancroft cleared John of any wrongdoing, writing that John had been "absolved from any orders as an explorer, and became an officer of the American army, warned

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[790] Jessie Benton Frémont to Robert Underwood Johnson, August 28, 1890, John Charles Frémont and Jessie Benton Frémont Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[791] John C. Frémont, "The Conquest of California," *Century Magazine*, April 1891: 917-928. The end of the article contains the notation "The foregoing article has been edited by Mrs. Jessie Benton Frémont from the manuscript and notes of John Charles Frémont." It is unclear just which parts were written by just which Frémont. As Frémont biographer Tom Chaffin write: "[W]hen using John Frémont's published writings, I developed an axiom: Trust him on the details, take his conclusions concerning controversies with a grain of salt…, [b]ut when he addresses matters of controversy involving him, John tended to write with one eye on the defense of some already enunciated public position, the other on his reputation for posterity." Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 504-505. To this can be added that Jessie also focused on John's reputation and how he would be remembered. Because of this, it is difficult to ascertain which words and ideas were John's and which were Jessie's in this co-written article.

by your government of your new danger, against which you were bound to defend yourself . . . [i]f I had been in your place, I should have considered myself bound to do what I saw I could to promote the purpose of the President."[792]

The article closed with an attack on the work of Hubert Howe Bancroft—or rather on a review of Bancroft's work in the *New York Sun* from August 29, 1886. That review had included a summary of H.H. Bancroft's interpretation of the Conquest, including the notation that "Mr. Bancroft thinks there is conclusive evidence that Frémont did not act in pursuance of instructions, secret or inferential, from the United States Government, and the Pathfinder is accordingly set down as a mere filibuster."[793] In response, John (or Jessie) included a statement from George Bancroft, also from 1886, in which that historian wondered how "can a man commit such blunders as are found in the New York 'Sun' of Sunday, August 29?"[794] The fact that John and Jessie felt that a response was needed to a review of H.H. Bancroft's work, four years after it appeared, spoke to just how determined the Frémonts were to maintain John's heroic status.

Josiah Royce was still not finished with the Frémonts. Beginning in March 1891, Royce published more articles on the Conquest and Frémont's role in it. These included "Montgomery and Frémont: New Documents on the Bear Flag Affair" in *Century* magazine in March 1891, and "The Frémont Legend," published in *The Nation* in May 1891. Each article, both those before and after John's "Conquest of California" in *Century* in April 1891, shared a familiar theme: John was not the hero he was supposed to be but rather a self-aggrandizing filibuster.

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[792] John C. Frémont, "The Conquest of California," 923-924.
[793] "Some New Books," *The Sun*, August 29, 1886.
[794] John C. Frémont, "The Conquest of California," 924.

Eventually, however, Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of *Century* magazine, refused to accept any further manuscripts on the topic. According to Royce, Johnson, while acknowledging that another article from Royce was warranted "for the sake of the truth of history," said that *Century's* readership was "restive," and Johnson could not countenance yet another column inch dedicated to California.[795]

After the publication of "Conquest of California," Jessie returned to writing under her own name. In 1890, she had collected her "Far West Sketches" for *Wide Awake* magazine into a book.[796] Another collection of *Wide Awake* stories was published as *The Will and the Way Stories* in late summer 1891.[797] Over the next few years, her work appeared in national publications such as the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Youth's Companion* as well as in the California magazine *Overland Monthly*.[798]

Perhaps her greatest writing endeavor involved an unpublished second volume to John's *Memoirs*, entitled "Great Events During the Lives of Major General John C. Frémont, United States Army, F.R.G.S. Chevalier de l'Ordre Pour Le Merite; et., and of Jessie Benton Frémont." Jessie, along with her son Frank, began work on this volume in 1891. The manuscript began

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[795] Josiah Royce to Horace Elisha Scudder, April 7, 1891, in Josiah Royce, *The Letters of Josiah Royce*, ed. John Clendenning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 267-269. Ronald A. Wells, the editor of a 2002 edition of Royce's *California*, pondered just why Royce focused so intensely, and with such hostility, on the Frémonts. Wells commented that "Royce was nothing if not thorough, but he seems not to have mastered the difference between the thoroughness and overstatement." Yet Wells felt sympathy for Royce, who, "even if he wrote too much on the Frémont legend, perhaps that was because the legend, as he lamented, would not go down." Royce's frustration offers an example of just how firmly Jessie, John, and their supporters had developed their narrative of John's place in U.S. history. Josiah Royce, *California,* ed. Ronald A. Wells, xii.

[796] Jessie Benton Frémont, *Far-West Sketches* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1890).

[797] Jessie Benton Frémont, *The Will and the Way Stories* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1891).

[798] Jessie Benton Frémont, "What Makes Literary Success?," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, February 1892: 18; Jessie Benton Frémont, "Three Scouts," *Youth's Companion*, August 16, 1894; Jessie Benton Frémont, "Faithfulness of a Dog," *Youth's Companion*, October 24, 1895; and Jessie Benton Frémont, "Influence of Spanish-Californian Woman," *Overland Monthly*, March 1894: 332-323.

with the later stages of the Conquest, including the events which eventually led to John's court martial. From beginning to end, "Great Events" alternated between defending John from criticism and relating tales of Jessie's life. Frank focused on military matters, gathering numerous letters and dispatches as he prepared the pages relating to John's court martial and to accusations of incompetence during the Civil War. Jessie's part of the work, like so many of her short stories for *Wide Awake*, focused on herself as brave heroine and dedicated wife. She recounted the story of her meeting with Abraham Lincoln in September 1861, wrote of her hair turning white during the troubled times of the Civil War, and ended with her desperately seeking assistance from Collis Huntington to ensure that John was safely moved to California. Through it all, Jessie told the story of her heroic yet victimized husband and her own plucky self.

Jessie might have understood herself as "plucky," but the public expressed concern for her after John's death. Reports that she and Lily were living in poverty appeared in newspapers around the country. From Rochester, New York, on September 18, 1890, a local paper reported that the Native Sons of the Golden West, the same organization then seeking to bring John's body to San Francisco for burial, had been notified that "the family of the late Major General John C. Frémont is absolutely destitute."[799] An article in the *New York Times* from that same month went into further detail. A "friend" of the Frémonts from New York indicated that knowledge of the Frémonts' poor financial condition remained unknown when they lived in the city, and that John had somehow been defrauded in his dealings with the Centinella-Inglewood Land Company. While Jessie retained ownership of the home in Inglewood, she had little

[799] "Frémont's Family," *Democrat and Chronicle*, September 18, 1890.

else.[800] From the *Rocky Mountain Sun* in Aspen, Colorado, came a call for action couched in the opinion that the "American people are too patriotic to see the widow and family of such a distinguished patriot suffer the wants of life."[801]

The writer from the *Sun* was correct. Within just days of John's death, reports of a government pension for Jessie began to appear in the newspapers. From the *Morning Review* in Decatur, Illinois, a report from Washington, D.C., announced that legislation to grant Jessie a pension passed out of committee. According to this reporter, when John had received his pension, "a good many members were moved by the fact that they were doing something for the daughter of Thomas H. Benton as much as rewarding Gen. Frémont's services to his country." As far as these congressmen were concerned, the benefits of John's pension were also meant to care for Jessie and Lily.[802] The *Los Angeles Times* also advocated a pension for Jessie; yet, it went further, calling for a "a national subscription" that would allow "North and South, white citizens and black" to "unite in contributions to lift from want the family of the Pathfinder."[803] The House of Representatives wasted no time in acting on the matter—by the end of September, 1890, Jessie was awarded a pension of $2,000 per year.[804]

The pension was not the end of assistance provided to Jessie by a nation grateful to her husband, her father, and herself. As calls went out to rescue Jessie from poverty, groups of women around California gathered to raise funds to purchase a home for Jessie and Lily.[805] In

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[800] "Mrs. Frémont's Poverty," *New York Times*, September 18, 1890.
[801] "Untitled," *Rocky Mountain Sun*, September 27, 1890.
[802] "The Pension for Mrs. Frémont," *Morning Review*, July 20, 1890.
[803] "Mrs. Frémont," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1890.
[804] "Aid at Last," *The San Francisco Call*, September 27, 1890.
[805] Not long after the Frémonts acquired the Inglewood property in 1888, the Los Angeles real estate boom collapsed. The bust led to such financial troubles for the developers of the suburb that they even tried to recover the house from the Frémonts. The brand-new Hotel Inglewood, a description of which was a component of marketing

October 1890, a group of San Francisco's society women met at the Palace Hotel to organize their efforts. Under the leadership of Mrs. George J. Bucknall, famous as the first White child born in San Francisco, the ladies included Phoebe Apperson Hearst, the wife of former U.S. senator and mining millionaire George Hearst, and Louise Humphrey Smith, a teacher at the California Conservatory of Music.[806] Groups also formed in other California cities, with the Los Angeles contingent led by Caroline M. Severance, a social activist transplanted from Boston to Southern California. Fundraising went well during late 1890 and into 1891, with generous contributions pouring in from Arabella Huntington, Phoebe Hearst, the Native Sons of the Golden West, and William B. Farrell's Citizens' Committee in San Francisco.[807] By July 1891, Jessie and Lily moved into their new home at 1107 W. 28th Street in Los Angeles.

Little expense was spared in the construction of the Frémont house. Architect Sumner P. Hunt, then in the early days of what would be an auspicious career, described the house as "in the Eastern suburban style." The first floor included an entrance hall, reception room, dining room, kitchen ("with all the modern conveniences"), and servant's room. Four bedrooms and a writing/sewing room made up the second floor. With screened porches both front and back, Jessie and her family had good views of the nearby orange orchards.[808] Jessie furnished the parlor with her "old Nantucket desk," over which she hung Gutzon Borglum's portrait of John.

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materials, was listed for sale in early 1890 before it had ever opened. In the end the Frémonts did not like living so far from the city center and moved to a smaller home in the city, keeping the Inglewood property as a rental. By the time Jessie received her new house from the women of California, she was living in a small, rented cottage. It is unclear whether the Inglewood house was sold or if was returned to the development company. Tom Chaffin, *Pathfinder*, 495. "For Sale—or Lease or Exchange," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 1890.

[806] Mrs. Hearst was also the mother of publishing tycoon and politician William Randolph Hearst.

[807] "The Frémont Relief Fund," *The San Francisco Examiner*, October 12, 1890; "A Lovely, Happy Home," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, July 8, 1891.

[808] "A Lovely, Happy Home," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, July 8, 1891.

Another Borglum painting hung along the same wall, while a Buchanan Read portrait of Jessie, painted in 1856, graced another wall. The room featured a "large beautiful fire place, dignified—of oiled redwood with maroon brown freize [sic] tiles, brass fender and irons." A bookcase held "much china, bronze &c—wreckage from our old days as are the books there."[809] Pepper trees lined the streets of the new neighborhood, and Jessie waxed enthusiastic over the access to "water piped in" and the fact that the home stood just outside the Los Angeles city limits—"skip city taxes that way." Breezes from the sea, just eight miles away, the fragrance from the nearby orange trees, and the temperate climate made for a home that was comfortable inside and out.[810]

Just as John's name had been used for commercial purposes in the Inglewood development, so now was Jessie's used to promote home sales in her new neighborhood. Developers Miller and Herriott advertised a lot available "along by Mrs. Frémont's new house."[811] G. Wharton James, in his *Tourists' Guide to South California*, advised visitors to the city to take the electric (trolley) car along Hoover Street and to ask the conductor to "point out 'the little red house' on the corner of Twenty-eighth street, where resides Mrs. Jessie Benton Frémont."[812]

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[809] Jessie Benton Frémont to John Gutzon Borglum, January 17, 1892, Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, *The Letters of Jessie Benton Frémont*, 545-546.
[810] Jessie Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, January 27, 1891, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[811] "For Sale--Country Property," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 1891.
[812] G. Wharton James, *Tourists' Guide to South California* (Los Angeles: B. R. Baumgardt & Company, 1894), 177-178. This guidebook included a history of the area, including the Conquest. The author chose the narrative put forward by both Jessie and John during their battles with Josiah Royce to explain the start of hostilities in 1846. James quotes from John's *Memoir*: "Having carefully examined my position, and foreseeing, I think, clearly, all the consequences which may eventuate to me from such a step, I determined to take such active and anticipatory measures as should seem to me most expedient to protect my party and justify my own character." G. Wharton James, *Tourists' Guide*, 49.

That Jessie's name should be a part of boosterism for Los Angeles is no surprise. Since moving to southern California in late 1887, she had become a visible member of the area's elite society. Her social status was confirmed in the *The Blue Book: The Standard Society of Southern California*, where her name and address were listed in the "fashionable Private Address Directory of the Pacific Coast."[813] Jessie's involvement in women's clubs and reform efforts gave her the opportunity to participate in a wider movement sweeping the country in the 1890s—progressivism.

The Progressive Era lasted from roughly 1890 to 1920 and was marked by a significant emphasis on righting society's wrongs. In many ways, it was a reaction to the tumultuous growth and change occurring in the United States after the Civil War, rising from both industrialization and the wave of new immigration to the country. Middle-class White Protestants especially felt the need for change as they viewed with alarm the excesses of the wealthy classes on the social ladder above them and the unfamiliar (and thereby dangerous) cultural, religious, and political beliefs of the immigrant working classes below. The merchants, shopkeepers, and professionals who made up the middle class saw both rich and poor as a threat to "traditional American values." To address the matter, these new Progressives formed organizations, political parties, foundations, and clubs with an eye toward alleviating the threat and securing an appropriate American future for themselves and their children.

Women played an important role in the Progressive Era, organizing themselves into a variety of clubs and associations that would allow direct participation in the societal change they deemed necessary. Since the early days of the republic, women had taken part in building

[813] *The Blue Book: The Standard Society of Southern California* (Los Angeles: Mrs. A. A. Thompson, 1899), 29.

community institutions to alleviate suffering, including founding orphan asylums, establishing assistance for women who had fallen into hard times and even harder occupations (prostitution), fighting to end slavery, and building homes for aging spinsters and widows. Now their efforts expanded into even more public spheres.

By the 1880s, college-educated, middle-class White women of comfortable financial means, looking for ways to make themselves useful in a changing world, intensified their reform efforts.[814] Jane Addams, the daughter of a prosperous family and educated at a female academy, saw the poverty and hardship of immigrants in Chicago and created Hull House. Founded in 1889, Hull House began with educated women, like Addams herself, sharing knowledge and skills with the working poor. It eventually expanded to include day-care facilities, language lessons, a kindergarten, and job training and placement. Like Addams, Frances Willard was born into a prosperous middle-class family and educated at an exclusively female college. In 1879, she became the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), an organization dedicated to the prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Under Willard's guidance, the organization would join its efforts to those of the woman suffrage movement, arguing for a "Home Protection" ballot for women as a means of guarding "their homes from the devastation caused by the legalized traffic in strong drink."[815] This argument on behalf of women's moral

[814] Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 2-3. Middle- and upper-class Black women also formed organizations and clubs dedicated to self-education, especially in cultural areas such as art and music. At the core of many of these efforts was a commitment to changing the way their White sisters viewed and understood them. In 1896, Black women's clubs formed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, just as White women formed the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies*, 126-127. Even where the interests of both White and Black women intersected, such as on the topic of suffrage, racial boundaries remained in place, diminishing what could have been a more powerful united effort.

[815] Frances E. Willard, *Home Protection Manual: Containing an Argument for the Temperance Ballot for Woman* (New York: "The Independent" Office, 1879), 5.

authority and the need for it in the public sphere also informed many of the reform movements in Jessie's California.

California women came together as "organized womanhood" in the 1880s. In San Francisco and Los Angeles during this period, women's clubs often focused on the plight of working women, looking to protect both a woman's right to paid labor and her body and reputation from public danger.[816] By 1892, there were approximately thirty women's clubs and societies in Los Angeles, focused on various topics such as health (Ladies' Athletic Club), art (Ruskin Art), music (Treble Clef), literary endeavors (the Friday Morning Club), children's education (Free Kindergarten), and philanthropy (News and Working Boys' Home, Orphan Asylum, Home for Old Ladies and Working Girls).[817] In addition, national reform organizations, like Frances Willard's WCTU, took hold.[818] Organized womanhood in California took the form of a stated commitment to moral domesticity, seeking to benefit the public through activities that arose from women's traditional gender role as keeper of the home.[819]

Movements focused on traditional female responsibilities, such as raising and educating children, appealed to Jessie, who expressed ambivalent feelings about more radical change—such as woman suffrage.[820] In an 1855 letter, she had made clear her disapproval of women

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[816] Gayle Gullett, *Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California Women's Movement, 1880-1911* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 12.
[817] M. Burton Williamson, *Ladies' Clubs and Societies in Los Angeles in 1892* (Los Angeles: N.A. Kovach, 1945), 6, 9.
[818] Gayle Gullett, *Becoming Citizens*, 18.
[819] Gayle Gullett, *Becoming Citizens*, 5.
[820] Jessie's conflicting views also saw her distance herself from temperance efforts. In her biographical story, "The Deck Hand," she shared the impact of her father's guidance on a young man slowly ruining himself through drink. The young man recovered to become a teacher and never forgot the lesson in abstinence from strong drink taught him by Thomas Hart Benton. Yet, as Jessie often recounted, both her husband and her father enjoyed wines and brandies and neither could be considered a temperance supporter. Jessie Benton Frémont, "The Will and the Way Stories: The Deck Hand," *Wide Awake Magazine*, January 1890: 137-141.

involved in the early suffrage movement, calling activist Lucretia Mott a "strong-minded speech making" woman, the kind of woman of whom Jessie "always thought [the] worse."[821] In 1866, when approached to sign a suffrage petition by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Jessie reportedly told Mrs. Stanton, "I do not believe in suffrage for women. I think women in their present position manage men better."[822] At the same time, though, Jessie donated fifty dollars to the American Equal Rights Association whose stated mission was "to secure Equal Rights to all American citizens, especially the Right of Suffrage, irrespective of race, color or sex."[823] When Jessie noticed a group of suffrage leaders at a restaurant in 1871, she gave them a typically gendered compliment. Calling one of the women over to her, Jessie remarked, "Have you been playing a regular ruse on Washington, have you been all over the entire nation and picked out a score of the handsomest women you could find in your ranks and brought them here to sit at your long table?"[824] While Jessie did not offer a comment on the women's efforts to secure the vote, she was generous with her compliments on their appearance.

Despite her misgivings about suffrage for women, Jessie joined the Friday Morning Club when it formed in 1891, an organization that would play a large role in the efforts of southern California women to win the vote. Upon moving to Los Angeles in the waning days of 1887, Jessie had made the acquaintance of the club's founder, Caroline Severance, who became a close

[821] Jessie Benton Frémont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, August 17, 1855, Blair and Lee Family Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
[822] Theodore Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary, and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1922), 112.
[823] *Proceedings of the First Anniversary of the American Equal Rights Association, Held at the Church of the Puritans, New York, May 9 and 10, 1867* (New York: Robert J. Johnston, Printer, 1867), 79.
[824] Harriet Taylor Upton, ed., "Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Convention of the National-American Woman Suffrage Association, February 1894," in *The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association*, vol. 26, (Washington, DC: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1898), 54.

friend, one of the few female friendships Jessie had cultivated since she had broken her ties with Lizzie Lee during the Civil War. In Boston, Severance had been involved in women's cultural clubs before moving to Los Angeles in 1875.[825] After two aborted attempts to establish a woman's club in Los Angeles, she finally succeeded in 1891 with the Friday Morning Club. At its founding, Severance stated her intention for the club to "form a center of united thought and action; to give all persons and all topics of vital interest a hearing at its bar; to give sympathy and help when possible, but to be merged as a club into no special cause."[826] Through the Friday Morning Club, Jessie found not only a good friend in Severance but also opportunities to engage in the sort of cultural activities that she had so enjoyed in New York City, including lectures on art, literature, and music.

Jessie's involvement in women's clubs and reform efforts focused on topics of particular interest to her—the preservation of history and the education of children. With her famous name and romantic reputation, Jessie proved invaluable as both a symbolic and an active participant in the various movements that sprang up around southern California. Having been a beneficiary of women's organizing to purchase her new home, Jessie now enjoyed a chance to help others. With John's death, while her writing efforts did not decline, she found additional time and energy to devote to various groups. Through these efforts, she solidified her status as a true California treasure.

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[825] Born in 1820 in New York, Caroline Severance moved with her husband to Los Angeles in 1875 for much the same reason as Jessie moved with hers in 1888—for the health of her spouse. Already active in abolition and suffrage work in the east, Severance continued her efforts in California, establishing the Friday Morning Club and serving on innumerable councils, clubs, boards, and charitable and reform endeavors.

[826] Caroline M. Severance and Ella Giles Ruddy, *The Mother of Clubs: Caroline M. Seymour Severance: An Estimate and an Appreciation* (Los Angeles: Baumgardt Publishing Company, 1906), 44.

Not long after her arrival in Los Angeles, and again through her friendship with Caroline Severance, Jessie became involved in the city's push for kindergartens. The Free Kindergarten Association of Los Angeles was founded by Severance in June 1885; by 1888 two kindergartens had opened in the city, which were then integrated into the public school system.[827] Since the days of her impromptu history class in Prescott, Arizona, Jessie had enjoyed teaching children. In a letter written just days before John's death in 1890, Jessie described her interest in the "small arabs" of her new hometown. She explained that, in contrast to the impoverished children in the east, the "street children" in Los Angeles sat with "bare sunburned legs and feet—clean—round full fed." These children, with their childlike "gayety and brightness in eyes and plump faces," could rise, in contrast to the New York City urchins with their "depressed surly want." For Jessie, early training in obedience and in cleanliness, as well as in their "three R's," gave these youngsters a "fair start in a working life."[828] By October 1892, Jessie was acting as one of the vice presidents of the Free Kindergarten Association. Her support for children's education stretched further to include both the Lafayette Industrial School and the Marlborough School for Girls.[829] Through these activities, associated with women's traditional role as mother, Jessie engaged with reform efforts in line with her conservative gender values.

Among the other organizations Jessie joined in Los Angeles was the Woman's Relief Corp (WRC), an auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). This organization, founded in 1883, served both civic and patriotic needs, raising funds for societal improvements

[827] "Field Notes," *Kindergarten Magazine*, September 1893, 71-73.
[828] Jessie Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, July 5, 1890, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[829] "The Social Spheres," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1893; "The Marlborough School," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1893.

while also maintaining the memory of the men who served the Union cause.[830] As a Civil War widow and a woman of national reputation, she helped raise the profile of California's WRC. In 1892, when a Massachusetts chapter of the WRC sought to collect hand-stitched aprons from every state, Jessie volunteered to produce the item for her chapter. This served as a point of pride when a newspaper reported that "California . . . will be represented by this illustrious woman."[831]

Patriotism appealed to Jessie in another form—the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Proud of her family's history dating back to the early days of independence, Jessie accepted the position as first president of the Eschscholtzia Chapter in 1894.[832] Established nationally in 1890, the DAR was just one of several lineal organizations (White) to form during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Jessie drew her membership from her great-grandfather, William Preston, who served in North Carolina and Virginia during the Revolutionary War.[833] Much like the WRC, the DAR did not threaten women's traditional gender roles. Rather, it formed an outlet for many middle-class White women, like Jessie, too conservative to join radical reform movements, to alleviate anxiety about the masses of

[830] Today, the WRC remains active. Its "primary goal is to provide perpetually curation and preservation of research, documents and records that pertain to the GAR as well as the WRC." In addition, it "strives to perpetuate the memory of those who sacrificed much and sometimes all in the Great War of the Rebellion." "Women's Relief Corps.Org," Women's Relief Corps.Org, accessed January 31, 2022, https://womansreliefcorps.org/.
[831] "Mrs. Frémont's Handiwork," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1892.
[832] "Those Loyal Descendants," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, June 19, 1894. "Eschscholtzia" refers to the California golden poppy. Upon Jessie's death in late 1902, the Los Angeles club changed its name to the Jessie Benton Frémont Chapter.
[833] Elizabeth Bryant Johnston, *Lineage Book, National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution*, vol. VI (Harrisburg, PA: Harrisburg Publishing Company, 1898), 29.

foreigners pressing into America's ports and threatening the values associated with the American Revolution.[834]

Jessie continued her efforts at historic preservation through several causes, including serving as an advisory board member of the Landmarks Club, an organization formed in 1896 by California booster Charles Lummis and dedicated to the preservation of the original Spanish missions that stretched along southern California from San Diego to Santa Barbara.[835] It was due to her friendship with Lummis that Jessie wrote her last two published works, both appearing in Lummis' *Land of Sunshine* magazine.

In the December 1895 issue of *Land of Sunshine*, Jessie's "California and Frémont" essay had pride of place on the first page, under the masthead. In the November issue, Lummis promoted the coming of Jessie's piece, calling her "the Isabella of our overland Columbus" and extravagantly praising her as "at 71 a woman of extraordinary intellectual power and charm."[836] In "California and Frémont," Jessie once again presented the Frémont narrative of events in California in May 1846. There were slight changes. No longer did she scoff at the idea of Thomas Larkin being given secret instructions from the government in Washington. Indeed, she did not mention Larkin at all. She reiterated the claim that it was England who threatened California and the U.S. designs on it, not Mexico. Harkening back to the "Statement concerning

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[834] Carolyn Strange, "Sisterhood of Blood: The Will to Descend and the Formation of the Daughters of the American Revolution," *Journal of Women's History* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2014), 105-107.
[835] "The Landmarks Club: Efforts to Save Southern California's Old Missions," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1896. In 1885, Charles Lummis, born in Massachusetts, arrived in Los Angeles in an unusual way—he walked. From September 1884 to February 1885, Lummis traveled by foot from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Los Angeles, California, submitting weekly reports on his "tramp across the continent" to various newspapers. Coming to the attention of *Los Angeles Times* owner Harrison Gray Otis, Lummis joined the newspaper and served as its city editor from 1885-1888. Fascinated with the Spanish and Native American cultures he found on his westward journey and through various trips across the Southwest, Lummis founded *Land of Sunshine* in 1894 to showcase all forms of western culture.
[836] "In the Lion's Den," *Land of Sunshine*, November 1895, 283-285.

Secret Affairs relating to the Mexican War" which she had offered to Josiah Royce in 1884, she claimed again that "a woman in society, who was employed by the English Legation" was serving as an English spy and thus Secretary of State James Buchanan had come to the Benton house for the translation of Spanish language documents. Playing her part as one of the translators, Jessie was privy to the behind-the-scenes machinations that led Frémont to act as he had to instigate hostilities in California. These "councils" held prior to the third expedition were "where with sure, light touch, past, present and future events were gone over." These "councils," in time, served as the means by which John interpreted the instructions he received from Gillespie.[837]

Jessie framed this retelling of the Conquest story with lavish descriptions of the Frémonts' move to California, the meeting with old friends, and the glorious landscapes that brought back exciting memories. She closed with the story she had likely created for herself of John's dying words when asked where "home" was—"California, of course." While Jessie would follow up with a published article on Kit Carson and a sentimental poem, "Dolores," her essay once again defending her husband served as one last chance to establish the historical narrative as she wished it to be remembered. It was the final act of a public wife.

Jessie began to slowly withdraw from society as her health failed in the late 1890s. She confessed that writing had "become a drudgery and a thing I avoid."[838] Both her sons served in the Spanish-American War of 1898, Charley with the U.S. Navy in the Philippines and Frank with the U.S. Army in Puerto Rico. Lily remained at home with her mother, managing the

[837] Jessie Benton Frémont, "California and Frémont," *Land of Sunshine*, December 1895: 3-14.
[838] Jessie Benton Frémont to Nellie Haskell Browne, August 15, 1899, Frémont Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

household and caring for her aging parent. In June 1900, a fall left 76-year-old Jessie with a broken leg and a spine which had "too serious a wrench and I could not see." During her lengthy recovery, she "thought, naturally, of the most pleasant things in my long life, and always two figures came out and 'Stood by me like my glorious youth.'" With the inspiration of the "two figures," Jessie set out to write her memoir, her own historical narrative in which she not only continued her lifelong praise of father and husband but also turned the spotlight on herself. She admitted that the "record follows no received lines, but to me the large life they enfold, though given in outline and no more, is full of my life's history." She dedicated her memoir to her youngest grandson, Frank's boy, "who reproduces in a singular way the governing characteristics of his grandfather." The boy represented in his name, "the two names that have made my life most beautiful, BENTON FRÉMONT."[839]

In the last decade of her life, Jessie continued her work as a public wife, defending John's reputation and developing the historical narrative of his actions. Her very public battles over the Conquest of California pitted her against professional historians such as Hubert Howe Bancroft, his assistant Henry Oak, and the Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce. Jessie held her own against these educated men, and John's reputation as the hero of California was secured. After John's death, while acutely grieving the man she had loved for fifty years, she flourished in her widowhood. No longer struggling under constant financial anxiety, with a home of her own and a pension income which she could supplement with her writing, Jessie became an active member of Los Angeles society, putting her considerable energies toward Progressive Era efforts to educate children and to protect what she and others understood as traditional American values.

[839] Jessie Benton Frémont, "Memoir," 1-2.

As she approached her final days, she once again took up her pen, this time to craft her own story—the story of a woman "so fathered and so husbanded." That memoir, never published, became the basis for much of what was written of Jessie after her death. In the end, it was her narrative that carried the day.

CONCLUSION

On Christmas Day 1902, Jessie awoke feeling poorly. She had never quite recovered from the fall and fractured leg of 1900, and she spent the holiday with Lily and a trained nurse at the home on W. 28th Street in Los Angeles. Her condition deteriorated, and, on the evening of December 27, Jessie Benton Frémont drew her final breath. Newspapers from Helena, Montana, to Atlanta, Georgia, to Santa Rosa, California, reported the news in their columns within a day. Obituaries followed, often including the romantic tale of the dashing lieutenant from the Corps of Topographical Engineers winning the hand of the beautiful daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton. They mentioned John's role in securing California for the United States, his presidential campaign of 1856, and Jessie's life as an author. Some remembered her crossing the Isthmus of Panama in 1849, while others praised her intelligence and wit. Jessie's efforts as a public wife had succeeded—memorials to her included her husband and the hero status Jessie had worked so hard to secure for him.

As she had requested, Jessie's remains were sent to Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles for cremation so they could be transported to Sparkill, New York, to be buried beside John in the Rockland Cemetery overlooking the Hudson River. An Episcopalian funeral service was held at Christ Church in Los Angeles on December 30, 1902. Special seating was arranged for Jessie's fellow DAR members, and friends from her various charitable and reform endeavors filled the pews. Among the pallbearers who carried the casket into the nave were the sons of close friends Caroline Severance and Judge Charles Silent. Atop a gray casket, violets tied with purple ribbons provided a floral tribute. Other flowers filled the church—a red-white-and-blue flag made of blossoms from the DAR, a wreath from her WRC chapter, and a multitude of roses from

the widow of the late President James A. Garfield. Of her family, only Lily and Charley's son Jack (then an ensign in the U.S. Navy) attended the service.[840]

After the ceremony, a group of "relic seekers" began to tear apart the floral arrangements, each seeking a souvenir of the Wife of the Pathfinder. According to the disapproving reporter from the *Los Angeles Express*, many "probably never had known Mrs. Frémont in life" and had attended the funeral "to gratify an unwholesome craving for relics which led them to actions wholly out of keeping with the delicacy of the occasion."[841] Jessie's fame, started in the 1840s and sustained for decades, even affected her funeral.[842]

At her spot on a hill overlooking the Hudson, Jessie lies next to John. No longer does a continent divide them, as it had for a great portion of their married life. A large monument commemorates him, and both Jessie's sons lie nearby. Charley served in the U.S. Navy from 1868 to his death in 1911, dying while a rear admiral and commandant of the Boston Navy Yard.[843] Frank, like his father before him, suffered difficulties during his military service in the United States Army. Three times during his years of service Frank was brought before a court martial, first for "financial irregularities," second for striking an enlisted man, and finally for making disparaging remarks about a fellow officer. This last, in January 1909, was final, and Frank was discharged from the service. He went into business and died in Cuba in 1931.

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[840] "Wept for Departed," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, December 30, 1902.
[841] "Wept for Departed," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, December 30, 1902.
[842] On a strange note, a gravemarker at the Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles bears the name and life dates of Jessie Benton Frémont. Newspapers at the time of her death, as well as the records of the Rockland Cemetery in New York, reflect that Jessie was indeed cremated and her cremains buried near those of John. Requests for information on the marker at Angelus-Rosedale went unanswered in 2020.
[843] "Real Admiral Frémont Dead," New York Times, 8 Mar 1911.

Lily rests 3,000 miles away from her family. In a crypt in a dark corner of the mausoleum of the Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles, the "daughter of the Pathfinder" has no marker and lies surrounded by strangers. Before her death in 1919 at age 76, Lily wrote a volume of her own, *Recollections of Elizabeth Benton Frémont*, edited by I.E. Martin and published in 1912 by Frederick H. Hitchcock. More than any of the Frémont children, Lily worked to continue the mythic story of her parents, including, in 1907, destroying any correspondence that threatened their romantic tale. She reflected upon the loss of her mother by writing that "[d]ear and true friends…did everything possible to soften the loneliness of my life and help me to still be useful." She claimed to feel no loneliness, though "far from my own people." She knew that she was "surrounded by the same affectionate atmosphere which my mother felt always encompassed her."[844]

Through Jessie's grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the Frémont name continued to be associated with military service during the twentieth century. Charley's son, Jack, served in the Spanish American War while still an Annapolis cadet and later also served during the Philippine Insurrection. Like his father, he achieved distinction in the U.S. Navy, commanding a flotilla of destroyers in World War I and acting as supervisor of the Third Naval District, New York, in World War II.[845] Charley's grandson, Henry Frémont Hull, saw action as a pilot in the Army Air Corps in World War II., as did Henry's brother, Shelley Frémont Hull.[846] Frank's grandson, John Charles Frémont IV, served in the U.S. Air Force in Korea.[847]

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[844] Elizabeth Benton Frémont, *Recollections*, 102.
[845] "Capt. Frémont, Grandson of the Pathfinder, Dies," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1958.
[846] "Henry Frémont Hull," American Air Museum in Britain, May 20, 2020, https://www.americanairmuseum.com /person/91500.
[847] "Frémont Namesake Buried," *The Argus*, December 29, 1971.

While the Frémont legacy of military service offers an impressive record, Jessie's impact on the twentieth century stretched further than the actions of her descendants. Through the first half of the twentieth century, California schoolchildren learned the history of their state and of John C. Frémont. Just as children of Josiah Royce's day were "taught from childhood…to respect and admire the career of General Frémont as the explorer and conqueror," so too were California children of the early twentieth century.[848] Different textbooks covered the Frémont story in different ways, yet nearly all conceded that he was, indeed, a hero in the Conquest of California. In *California the Golden* (1911), Rockwell Dennis Hunt identified John as "the central figure in the actual conquest of California." While acknowledging that "there has been much dispute" concerning the instructions John received from Lieutenant Gillespie, Hunt believed that John had been told to "hold himself in readiness" in preparation for the coming of war.[849] In *California: The Story of Our State* (1916), Percy Friars Valentine likewise mentioned the dispute over the Gillespie instructions, but they "made Frémont turn back into California." The men gathering for the Bear Flag revolt, according to Valentine, "felt sure that there must really be war now between Mexico and the United States," and they "knew that Frémont would be a leader in that war; they knew he would try to win California from Mexico, and they wanted to fight by his side."[850]

A more sentimental version of California history was offered by Harr Wagner. In *Pacific History Stories* (1918), a chapter dedicated to John also included Jessie, described as "one of the

[848] Josiah Royce to William Carey Jones, September 28, 1884, William Carey Jones Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
[849] Rockwell Dennis Hunt, *California the Golden* (New York: Silver, Burdett, 1911), 169, 173.
[850] Percy Friars Valentine, *California: The Story of Our State* (Sacramento: California State Printing Department, 1916), 25.

most beautiful and brilliant young women in all the world." Actual events in California were not included in the Frémont chapter, although Jessie's husband was described as "from first to last . . . the hero of heroes, and the ideal of the young, and pure, and good, from one end of the land to the other."[851] If Jessie had written the chapter herself, it could not have more perfectly encapsulated the memory of her husband that she wished the public to retain.

Even as late as the 1950s, California schoolchildren learned from their history textbooks of the great deeds of John C. Frémont. *A Child's History of California* by Enola Flower (1949) includes a chapter entitled "John Frémont, the Pathfinder." Readers were offered a rather confusing collapse of John's first three expeditions into two, but the role of John in the Conquest was presented clearly. Regarding the meeting of Gillespie and John in 1846, the author reproduced the interpretations of earlier authors by writing: "We do not know just what the messenger told Frémont. But whatever it was, it made Frémont decide to stay in California." While this later textbook did not offer an interpretation of the Gillespie instructions to Frémont, neither did it follow the narrative of Bancroft, Oak, and Royce that Frémont acted against orders. In the chapter, John is a hero, noted for his bravery and commended for his service to the state "he thought of . . . as his home." [852]

The lingering romance of John and Jessie that Jessie did so much to inspire and encourage continued through later twentieth-century biographies, both scholarly and popular, of both Frémonts. Novelists, too, played their part in keeping the Frémont narrative alive in the public imagination. In 1944, Irving Stone published *Immortal Wife*, drawn in large part from

[851] Harr Wagner and Alice Rose Power, *Pacific History Stories: Arranged And Retold for Use In the Public Schools* (San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1918), 134-141.
[852] Enola Flower, *A Child's History of California* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1949), 121-129.

Jessie's unpublished memoir as well as other sources, including records from John's 1847 court martial. Irving's interpretation of Jessie and her life found public acceptance, holding its own among other bestsellers of the time, including John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, Somerset Maugham's *Razor's Edge*, and Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber*.

Another fictionalized Jessie appeared in the novel *Dream West* by David Nevin. Published in 1983, *Dream West* exposed a whole new generation of Americans to the dashing western explorer and his wife. It furthered the narrative so carefully developed by both John and Jessie, particularly that John was sent to California on the third expedition precisely to prevent British incursion into the future state and that his military successes in both California and during the Civil War caused resentment from the West Point establishment. So much did Nevin believe in John's ultimate victimization that he was quoted in an interview as saying about the 1847 Court Martial: "I figure the prosecution knew he had verbal orders from President Polk." Nevin went further to wonder how, if Frémont was such a "popinjay," and "dandified dilettante as claimed," he could ever have won over "the beautiful, smart, strong daughter of Sen. Thomas Hart Benton."[853]

In 1986, a television miniseries adapted Nevin's *Dream West* for the small screen. Richard Chamberlain, a heartthrob for American women since his days in the television drama *Dr. Kildare*, played a dashing John, while Alice Krige, a relative newcomer to the entertainment business, took up the role of Jessie. With swaying hoop skirts more suitable to an 1861 Scarlett O'Hara than an 1841 Jessie Benton, Krige played a romantic, determined, and saucy Jessie

[853] Michael Kernan, "Research Reaps Rewards for 'Dream West' Author," *Hartford Courant*, April 4, 1984; Rod Steier, "Portrait of a Perennial Outsider," *Hartford Courant*, April 4, 1984.

whose lovestruck awe of her husband was evident in her every scene. With the romantic story of the Frémonts and the sweeping landscapes featured in the scenes of John's expeditions, television viewers responded positively.

Jessie's legacy, and the overall Frémont narrative she helped develop, did not only inspire romantic novels and their subsequent television adaptations. Across the country, cities and towns adopted the Frémont name. As late as 1956, the townships of Mission San Jose, Centerville, Niles, Irvington, and Warm Springs in the East Bay area of northern California joined together to form the city of Frémont—named in honor of John. Across California and much of the west, cities and towns feature Frémont parks, streets, boulevards, golf courses, shopping centers, and more. In Las Vegas, Frémont Street is home to the Las Vegas strip, a length of casinos, hotels, restaurants, entertainment venues, and shops—including the Frémont Casino. Each fall, football teams from the rival University of Nevada, Reno, and University of Nevada, Las Vegas, play each other in a game for whom the winner receives the coveted "Frémont cannon," a replica of the mountain howitzer John took on his second expedition.

In 2013, it was Jessie's turn for recognition. In March of that year, Representative Tom McClintock, a Republican congressman from the 4th Congressional District (encompassing six foothill counties in northern California and portions of two more, plus parts of Fresno County) introduced a bill that would rename Mammoth Peak in Yosemite National Park after Jessie.[854] One analysis of the proposal argued that Jessie "was one of the earliest and most influential advocates for establishing Yosemite National Park." The analysis provided further explanation,

[854] Tom McClintock, "To Redesignate Mammoth Peak in Yosemite National Park as 'Mount Jessie Benton Frémont,'" Pub. L. No. 1192 (2013), https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/1192?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22HR1192%22%2C%22HR1192%22%5D%7D&r=5&s=2.

noting that other peaks in the park had been named for men such as Horace Greeley, Carlton Watkins, Thomas Starr King, and U.S. Senators John Conness and Edward Baker, each of whom had far less influence on the establishment of the park.[855] Critics wondered just how much lobbying Jessie actually did for Yosemite, and it is difficult to find records of her active participation. Yet, as the late Congressman from Maryland, Elijah Cummings, noted in a speech on the floor of the House of Representatives: "Not only did [Jessie Frémont] work to permanently protect the Yosemite Valley, many Americans of her time became familiar with the vast unexplored west from her recounting of her husband's earlier explorations."[856] Another analysis for the online forum *Roll Call* dismissed Thomas Hart Benton as a "blustery . . . supporter of westward expansion" and John C. Frémont as "an ambitious, over-compensating bastard son," yet praised Jessie and supported the legislation. The author credited Jessie's work on the expedition reports as well as her own writings as presenting the west as something more than the "Great American Desert." As the author put it:

> Jessie Benton Frémont's contributions to Yosemite and to the West writ large go far beyond fundraising and advocacy, although she did those too. They go to the heart of how we understand and appreciate the natural world. That's worth a mountain.[857]

While this legislation died on the House floor, memories of the Frémonts continued further into the twenty-first century. The museum beneath St. Louis' iconic Gateway Arch underwent renovations and opened again to the public in 2018. In the exhibit "Manifest

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[855] "Legislation to Name Peak in Yosemite in Honor of Jessie Benton Frémont Approved by House Committee," *States News Service*, March 13, 2014.
[856] *Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-MD) on Jessie Benton Frémont and Her Role in Lobbying to Establish the Yosemite National Park* (C-SPAN, 2014), https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4552317/jessie-benton-fremont.
[857] John Bicknell, "The Mountainous Question of Jessie Benton Frémont and Renaming Yosemite's Mammoth Peak," *Roll Call*, March 10, 2014, https://www.rollcall.com/news/the_mountainous_question_of_jessie_benton_fremont_and_renaming_yosemites-231355-1.html.

Destiny," visitors find themselves looking up at a larger-than-life carboard cutout of a buckskin-clad John C. Frémont, American flag planted triumphantly beside him as an eagle flies overhead. This is John as Jessie would have him remembered. The interpretive text describes Jessie as the "ghostwriter" of her husband's best-selling books, claiming that, through her work, she "provided a glimpse of the West to many easterners who supported expansion, and inspired others to pull up stakes and make new lives in the West."[858] Beneath the towering figure of John, the pages of a comic book/graphic novel (printed on wood for use by children) tell the story of Jessie. From her birth in 1824 and her meeting Andrew Jackson as a little girl, the panels follow Jessie as she meets and marries John, over her father's objections, and illustrates how "Frémont's report, secretly written by Jessie, soon became a bestseller." A panel featuring John in California proclaims that "[u]nder secret orders from Sen. Benton, Frémont helped organize a rebellion against Mexico by American settlers." John's troubles in St. Louis during his Civil War tenure are dismissed as the work of "political enemies" (although the book does mention John's "poor generalship"). The financial losses of the late 1860s are labeled "misfortunes," and Jessie is shown as coming to her family's rescue with her writing. The final pages feature Jessie writing to "restore [John's] good reputation in public opinion." Underneath Jessie, a young boy reads from a book and remarks, "What a Hero!"

As evidenced by these examples, the continuing portrayal of John C. Frémont as a national hero and Jessie Benton Frémont as a woman whose contributions to the national

[858] Photos of the interpretative text, the Frémont cutout, and the wooden book taken by the author on a visit to the museum in 2019.

historical narrative still resonate today. It is clear that the "public wife" did her job—and did it well.

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