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### Research Proposal Final - New York Penny Press and Women's Issues:

During the Antebellum period in America, which is typically described as the years after the War of 1812 and leading up to the Civil War, the growth of non-partisan newspapers and magazines in urban areas of America was exemplified in the rise of "penny press" newspapers in New York City. "Penny press" newspapers were cheaper, arguably more objective alternatives to partisan papers that controlled the industry of journalism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Was the representation of women in the popular press positive or negative generally? How did the popular press interact with women's rights, like suffrage or a right to abortion? How did the sensationalism of the popular press affect how Antebellum women were represented/discussed?

I am studying the relationship between women and the New York "penny press" papers because I want to learn about the effects of the commercial and non-partisan characteristics of the New York popular press on the representation of American women during the Antebellum period in order to help my readers understand the social significance of the popular press in the history of American journalism.

### Research and Contribution

The way in which the American public interacts with and consumes news and journalism is a significant historical topic that concerns multiple social, political, and cultural aspects of American history as a whole. New York penny press papers are the predecessors of today's non-partisan daily newspapers, which have been recently under scrutiny as sources of reliable information. Through researching the topic of the relationship between these New York papers and American Antebellum women, the points presented in this project will allow scholars to examine the complicated and varied aspects of this relationship and the historical significance of this relationship has been somewhat ignored. This project will also allow general audiences to connect with the medium of non-partisan newspapers as a historical predecessor to the current period of news and information consumption.

In order to research the answers to the questions introduced above, it is important to introduce New York penny press papers as a medium of historical significance and therefore the different historical interpretations of this significance. Most historians agree that the penny press, or popular press, was influential in its non-partisan, commercialized methods of journalism. William Huntzicker gives a general understanding of the history and importance of the popular press in his book, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865*, and in doing so, how these papers transformed American journalism during the Antebellum period to appeal to a mass audience, including American women, and consequently made the news more accessible, sensational, and less partisan.<sup>1</sup>

In researching the editor of the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, I examined multiple examples of articles written by him, and in these primary sources have found that Bennett expresses his moralistic beliefs in many issues. His moralistic beliefs about women are evident in an article in which he argues with the editors of competing papers, and talks about

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865*, (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), 162.

how women in society should marry and have children to be happy, but through this article we see that he is more concerned with being morally superior to his competitors than actually supporting women's rights and talking about women's issues.<sup>2</sup>

When examining how American Antebellum women are represented in non-partisan newspapers, specifically in this project, New York papers and therefore primarily New York Antebellum women, there are multiple main subtopics, each with their own fields of historical interpretation. To examine the research question of the nature of the relationship between women's issues/status and New York "penny press" papers in the early to mid-nineteenth century, various resources were gathered. The main arguments covered by these resources refer to the significance of the mutual relationship between the popular press in New York and issues involving women, such as abortion, women's suffrage, and sexual encounters/prostitution.

Most scholarship on the topic of the New York popular press and the representation of women focuses on whether the representation of women in newspapers was negative or positive. Historians that relate the popular press to women's issues during the Antebellum tend to focus less on how these characteristics shaped and influenced the representation of women. The historians that cover this topic generally focus on an individual issue that relates to the Antebellum woman. Sylvia Hoffert mainly covers the representation of the women's rights movement in several New York papers and asserts that these papers were an important source of communication for the movement and gave the movement greater visibility due to this coverage. Other historians, like Linda Hudson, focus more on the opportunity that the penny press papers offered female writers and journalists, such as Jane Cazneau. As abortion and therefore the morality of abortion was becoming an important issue in Antebellum New York, historians like Nicole Livengood focuses on the representation of abortion in the New York penny press, and especially argues that the negative abortion seductive narrative that was common in these papers appealed to white, middle-class men and upheld the gender stereotypes of the period.

Through this project, I seek to address the connection between the commercial intent and sensationalism of the New York popular press papers and the representation of women in these papers. The characteristic of commercialism that gives the American popular press of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century its historical significance inevitably led to the commercialization of the representation of the American Antebellum woman in popular press papers. Nowhere is the commercialization of the New York Antebellum woman more evident than in the advertisements in these papers.

The representation of the Antebellum New York woman was also affected by the characteristics of sensationalism and moral competition that the popular press was famous for. As the representation of women in the New York popular press was generally shaped by these characteristics, it is therefore arguably true that the New York popular press changed the representation of American women in journalism and was a source of greater visibility for women and women's issues.

## **Methods and Work Plan**

The first chapter of the anticipated book project would cover the background of the popular press in New York, to give the reader a better sense of how influential the penny press paper was in the history of American journalism. The second chapter will focus on the coverage of women's health issues and abortion in the popular press and how this coverage had a negative effect on early abortion in New York. The third chapter will examine how advertisements in the

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Herald*, 28 February 1837.

New York popular press gave New York women more freedom in social and sexual encounters, as well as address how prostitution was covered in these papers. The fourth chapter will focus on representation of women's rights and the suffrage movement, as well as other social movements that women supported like the abolition movement, and will explain how these movements were affected by this coverage. The fifth and final chapter will explain a bit on how female journalists became more frequent with the popular press papers.

### **Competencies, Skills, and Access**

While currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in History at George Mason University, I have taken multiple courses examining this period in American history as well as a historical methods course that focuses on conducting research on this general period. I have also taken coursework on the topic of journalism. This previous experience encouraged me to develop an interest in journalism in American history, which led me to develop this research project. The research for this project will mostly consist of both digital research through online databases and physical research through libraries, such as George Mason University's online database and campus library, which is a good starting point for collecting secondary sources. The other major source pool for my research would be the Library of Congress' collection of digitized penny press newspapers from the mid-Nineteenth century. If necessary, there are numerous physical and microfilm collections at various institutions like the New York State Historical Association or New York University.

### **Final Product and Dissemination**

As the research I have gathered is of more of a general examination of the topic of the relationship between New York penny press newspapers and women during the Antebellum period of American history, the final product of my research would best be presented as a book. The intended audience of the final book, and therefore the project in general would be largely other scholars of American scholars, but could also be a more general audience without prior knowledge. Therefore, the information in the book will be distributed in the chapters mentioned previously, along with any appropriate images or examples for each sub-topic, to more efficiently and easily communicate the main points of my research.

### **Bibliography**

#### Primary Sources:

##### *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*

This online database contains many American newspapers from the 19th century, including a few penny press papers. The database includes an archive of the New York Herald of nonconsecutive years spanning from 1830 to 1863. This archive will be useful in looking at individual issues and stories that were popular during this time period.

##### *Library of Congress Archives*

Secondary Sources:

Hoffert, Sylvia D. "NEW YORK CITY'S PENNY PRESS AND THE ISSUE OF WOMAN'S RIGHTS, 1848-1860." *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (September 1993): 656-665. *America: History & Life*.

This journal article examines mentions of the women's rights movement in three New York penny press papers: the *New York Daily Herald*, the *New York Daily Tribune*, and the *New York Daily Times*. The author argues that these papers were actually an important source of communication for the women's rights movement and gave the movement greater visibility due to this coverage. This article will be useful in learning more about how this coverage of the women's rights movement appealed to the middle class audience, or how these papers framed this coverage to better appeal to their audience.

Hudson, Linda S. *Mistress of Manifest Destiny: A Biography of Jane McManus Storm Cazneau, 1807-1878*. Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Assoc., 2001.

This book is a biography detailing the life of Jane McManus, who wrote for papers like *The Democratic Review* and other penny press papers under the pseudonym of Cora Montgomery. It especially covers McManus' reporting during the U.S.-Mexican War, which was published in the *New York Sun*, and her interest in territorial expansion and land speculation. This book is also interesting because it presents the argument that the real author of the "Annexation" article, which is historically accredited to John L. O'Sullivan, was actually written by Jane Storm. I will use this book to discover more about what a writer like McManus was most concerned with when writing for these papers as well as the rhetoric she uses in her writing to appeal to her audience.

Huntzicker, William E. *The Popular Press, 1833-1865*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press. 1999.

Livengood, Nicole C. "Thus Did Restell Seal This Unfortunate Lady's Lips with a Lie": George Washington Dixon's *Polyanthos* and the Seductive Abortion Narrative." *American Journalism* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 289-316. *America: History & Life*.

This journal article concerns the abortion narrative of George Washington Dixon published in his New York based paper, *The Polyanthos*, which was used in the conviction of the New York abortionist, Madame Restell. The author argues that Dixon's abortion narrative, which primarily named Restell responsible for young women's "reproductive choices," appealed to white, middle-class men and upheld the gender stereotypes of the period. The author therefore also argues that the *Polyanthos* paper was more significant in American journalism history than previously thought.