

The Vision Chronicles

Restoring history...one story at a time

VolI No1

Proverbs 29:10

NEW ENGLAND EXODUS SERIES

Women on the American Frontier

ROOTING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH...



with the vision of plundering Satan's domains by raising up the Righteousness of Jesus Christ wherever God sent her,
(c.1819)

No grander army has ever been set in motion since the world began, than the one that moved across the North American continent for two and a half centuries here in America. William Fowler wrote, "This army was adorned by women who were pioneers within it." The spirit of Christianity elevated the woman into a system of ethic where she could move from comfortable circumstance in New England, Philadelphia, or South Carolina, and move her out to the frontier of Upper New York, Florida, Tennessee, or Kentucky. Then later still that same spirit will move her into the territories of Wisconsin and Iowa and finally unto the Pacific, Texas, and yes, even the Santa Fe Trail.

"The woman would be elevated to a position of honor in American history and very often she would move forward as a teacher, displaying a martyr's courage in the presence of pestilence or war. She would endure, despite having to bury her children, and then move on, raising up others. She faced the hardships and the dangers of frontier life, but her sense of responsibility as wife and mother", he said, "ministering to the sick, carrying the gospel to the

heathen, catechizing her children in log cabins or sod cottages, all the way to the Pacific. She became noted for her heroism."

Does this description of America's frontier history sound familiar? Of course not! The typical stories about women on America's frontier revolve around Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, Bell Star, or Big nose Kate (Doc Holiday's companion). Hollywood and the Internet exclusively highlight the women gunslingers, prostitutes, and outlaws. By doing so, they repeatedly smear the image of the woman and distort the truth of her heroic contributions. By emphasizing only one aspect of the frontier, instead of giving credit where credit is due, they rewrite history, ignoring the broader, more honorable roles women played. That's one means of interpretation.

For example, Ann Bush (Virginia's frontier), a pregnant frontier heroine and her husband were captured by Indians, she endured unimaginable horror. Her husband was brutally murdered, yet she managed to escape. For a time, she was able to raise the child alone, but a year later she and that child were

captured again. This time, the Indians struck her down with a Tomahawk, scalping her, and did the same to her child—then impaled his lifeless body on a sharpened branch. Left for dead, she lay unconscious for hours we are told.

Yet, in God's Providence, she survived. She gathered the remains of her precious dead child, bandaged herself with her apron, and began the long, grueling journey back to the settlement. There, in tremendous grief, she buried her child in a simple funeral and began life anew.

Through it all, she did not curse her circumstances, nor did she seek solace in despair. Her strength did not come from bitterness or the psychiatrist's couch but from an unshakable faith in Christ—the same faith that had called her to the frontier. He had "resurrected" her, preserving her from bleeding to death as she lay broken on the earth. When she encountered the Indians again, they were struck with horror—a woman they had left for dead, standing before them as if raised from the grave. But she stood firm, unwavering, placed there by her faith in God to endure and overcome.

Ann Bush carefully weighed the cost of leaving the safety of the colonies before venturing into the untamed frontier. She knew hardships would come—harsh conditions, relentless dangers, and trials beyond imagining. Yet she pressed forward, prepared to face whatever lay ahead.

Alex d'Tocqueville wrote, "These young ladies, before they were married, were mature and experienced, already prepared by the time they entered into marriage." He said, "In my country (France) a woman doesn't mature until she's married and often it is an evil kind of maturation. We have an aristocratic marriage, whereas what the Americans have a free and yet firmly grounded marriage...fixed in its (Biblical) principles."

The kind of women that adorn America, d'Tocqueville wrote, was an amazement. He marveled at her strength, education, and unwavering Christian character, declaring her unrivaled among the women of the world. While he acknowledged that immoral women existed everywhere, he saw in American women—like those of the Dutch Reformation—the epitome of charity, integrity, and resilience. Those who understand adversity and grow through its trials are less likely to be embittered by its hardships. According to d'Tocqueville's observations, "the American woman knew that as she travelled to the frontier".

The famous 19th Century painting (right) depicts Peter Cartwright, a circuit rider of that era, standing at the crest of a hill, gazing down at an isolated log cabin. Yet, beyond the cabin, in the distance, a vision unfolds—a future society filled with churches, institutions, and homes yet to be built.

Peter Cartwright, like many circuit riders, understood that their calling extended beyond simply preaching the gospel. It was a battle to plunder Satan's domain and establish Christ's Kingdom—one soul, one settlement, one church at a time.

What do you find in the diaries of women crossings America? A deeply rooted conviction—a calling to plunder Satan's domain and establish the righteousness of Jesus Christ wherever God sent them. They understood this was their true Christian mission.

But how did they wage this battle and plunder Satan's realm? By establishing catechism training, raising children for the Kingdom of God, and building a Christian legacy—one that would, in turn, give rise to a new and distinct civilization. In fact, it was the women, more than any other, who laid the foundation for this new civilization. She was prepared to face whatever savagery lay ahead, knowing that through faith it was entirely by God's providence.

There is "institutional evangelism", exemplified by figures like Peter Cartwright, and then there is what came to be known as "the Yankee Exodus". This great migration saw New Englanders (especially) push into the frontier—Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Illinois and even down into Florida.

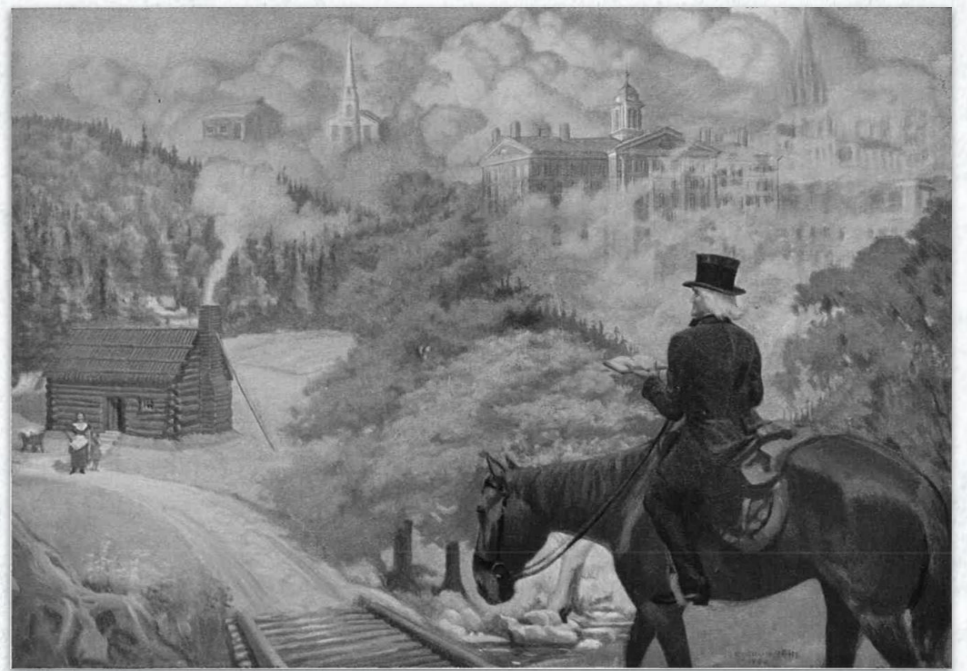
Yet, modern accounts of the Yankee Exodus (in books and online) strip the Christian emphasis. They will omit the fact that evangelism was not merely about personal conversion but about raising up an entire institutional culture in Christ's name—establishing churches, strengthening marriages and families, founding schools, building businesses, upholding rules of evidence, and law and order. It was about shaping a society where, as the Apostle Paul wrote, believers offer "...prayers... that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all Godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior" (I Timothy 2:1, 2, 3).

To truly understand this history, one must return to the original sources—back to d'Tocqueville, Wakefield, the Prince of Naples, and others. It requires reading historians like B.F. Morris (1864), who wrote during the era, reflecting on the Yankee Exodus that shaped much of the early 19th Century.

Alex d'Tocqueville observed that among those who ventured westward were wealthy New Englanders who willingly left behind lives of comfort to endure the hardships of the frontier. Their motive, he wrote, was not merely expansion but the establishment of Christianity's foundations—on the banks of Missouri, across the prairies of Illinois and throughout the untamed lands of America.

d'Tocqueville then highlights the true driving force behind the Yankee Exodus—its women. They were the ones who made this movement the success that it was. You see, a defining feature of the Yankee Exodus was that these pioneers brought their families with them (featured picture). They did not move to the frontier to exploit the land but to settle it, to cultivate it, and to establish lasting communities. They were not missionaries on a temporary journey overseas; they were builders of a new civilization. In the end, the real movement that "won the west"—was the steady, unwavering influence of Christianity and the churches, carried forward by those who built homes, catechised their children, and laid the foundation for a new society.

What distinguished the settling of a country? Women. Why? Because they rooted the heritage of the Reformed Christian faith in the Territories. These women understood the dangers and hardships that lay ahead. In the Old West, it was rare for a family not to suffer the loss of a child. So what could possibly compel a young mother to leave security and venture into the hardships of the prairie? It was a vision—an eschatology that saw beyond the present trials. They were not simply seeking a new home; they were building a new society, institutionalizing the faith, and planting Christ's banner in the wilds of the frontier.



And if you lost a child? Yes, you grieve—deeply and painfully. Grief was not a sign of weakness; it was the mark of a Christian heart. But she did not let sorrow consume her. She trusted the Lord to strengthen her, to carry her forward in the calling He had given her—to raise up the surviving children in faith and to pass that faith down through the generations. These women did not just raise children; they raised many of them—for the Kingdom.

But having large families was only the beginning. What do the above-cited author's unanimously tell us? These pioneer women did more than bear children—they catechized them, raising both sons AND daughters in the knowledge and admonition of God.

Contrary to modern historians, these pioneering families were deeply committed to educating of their young women. According to these same sources, pioneer girls matured well before marriage, not just in age but in character. They were instilled with a strong work ethic and a deep sense of responsibility.

Children on the frontier did not grow up idle. They worked—hard. By the time they went to bed, they were just as exhausted as their parents. And bedtime often came early, around 7:00 p.m. when the sun set, only to rise again at 3:30 or 4a.m. They endured long days with scant provisions, yet they prevailed. These women were more than pioneers—they were true heroines.

Not surprisingly, even the Indians respected these frontier women. They often kidnapped, believing they could break their spirit and, in doing so, obtain women of greater strength and resilience than their own squaws. Yet, as historical accounts reveal, many of these captive women endured years in Indian camps, suffering mistreatment but never losing her courage. When the opportunity arose, she escaped—resettling herself and giving thanks to the Lord for carrying her through such trials. The author notes that letters from the era are replete with accounts of these extraordinary ordeals.

Yes, there were those that were broken by it—of course there were. That is only human. Not every story became a triumphant tale of heroism and victory.

The family ethic was essential in teaching young women how to love their husbands. Then, as now, women had to learn to love their husbands (Titus 2:4). They were taught the necessity of building the husband's headship—not through dominance, but through service, as Christ's servant. In other words, they had a different view of headship, passed down from their forefathers. It was this: a woman has the power to make or break her husband's headship. She then, as now, is the key to his success or the reason for his failure. The right kind of woman pioneered right next to her husband, all across America!

Alex d'Tocqueville observed, "There's a solidarity between all the American Republics (that is, the states) wherein they believed that if they were to fall into frontier anarchy or licentiousness, they could be mastered by a despot. In such a case, the republican institutions in the East would also be endangered." Thus, there was a vested interest in ensuring that the new states were religious—which, in d'Tocqueville's view, meant explicitly "Christian". They believed that only through such faithfulness could they preserve freedom. It was this deep conviction that set the Pioneer women of the Republic apart.

Citations:

Alex d'Tocqueville, "Democracy in America", J.P. Mayer edition, vol I, pp. 291-293, vol II, Chap 10 & 11, pp. 592-597

William W. Fowler, "An Authentic History of the Courage and Trials of the Pioneer heroines of our American Frontier"

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