

2005

Motherhood in Antebellum Kentucky

Nancy Disher Baird

Western Kentucky University, nancy.baird@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/lib_pres



Part of the [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baird, Nancy Disher, "Motherhood in Antebellum Kentucky" (2005). *Library Presentations, Lectures, Research Guides*. Paper 7.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/lib_pres/7

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Presentations, Lectures, Research Guides by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

MOTHERHOOD IN ANTEBELLUM KENTUCKY

Presentation given at LIBERTY HALL in Frankfort, 2005.

What was it like to be a woman in antebellum Kentucky--to experience the pleasures and pain of bearing children -- to know the joys and heartbreak of raising little ones? In many ways, of course, what was commonplace to our ancestors is similar to what most of us have experienced birthing and raising our own children. And in other ways the experience was VERY different. The greatest and most obvious differences concern mortality. Prior to about 1900 childbirth was probably the number one cause of death among women of childbearing age. Also, until about 1900, about half of all children who survived birth, died before their fifth birthday. The cause of the high mortality rate among mothers is attributed to the lack of pre and post-natal care; the inability to stop hemorrhaging and prevent and cure infection; and general poor health caused by too many and too frequent pregnancies. The high death rate among young children resulted from poor sanitation and poor nutrition, and diseases, many of which today are prevented with inoculations and cured with modern medicines. Aren't you glad you and your little ones live in the days of pampers, pablum, and penicillin?

Several years ago a colleague and I – each of us the mother of two-- decided to collect information concerning motherhood during the antebellum era. We wanted to know how women of that era dealt with the joys and frustrations of motherhood as well as its dangers and heartbreaks. We combed the commonwealth's major repositories looking for collections of letters and diaries written by women to their parents, spouses, siblings and other intimate. We found only a few collections, and all of them written in

the late antebellum era and authored by well-educated women. Nevertheless, while the writers may not have been typical of the state's female population, they probably shared experiences with their less fortunate contemporaries and undoubtedly recorded many of the feelings they shared with that silent majority. With that in mind, let's explore what we discovered about "motherhood in antebellum Kentucky."

Like other 19th century Americans, Kentuckians believed that childbearing and childrearing were central to a woman's existence. But not all achieved and fulfilled that goal. Elizabeth Underwood of Bowling Green and the mother of 4 active children, suggested that the yard and garden of her a childless neighbor were better attended than hers, but asked her husband, "Don't you reckon there is a void in the household and that the merry tones of prattling urchins like ours would be worth all the rest?" Susan Grigsby of Catlettsburg and the mother of five commented with pride that while the preserves and jellies made by her childless friends might win prizes at the Boyd County fair, she would "take the premium on the greatest number of babies under four years old."

The hardships of pregnancy and childbirth, and the persistent fear of death for one's self and for the child, often clouded any joyful anticipation of the arrival of a new son or daughter. Elizabeth Underwood labeled childbirth "the event most dreaded and terrible to the inexperienced young wife." Ellen Green of Henderson feared that she would die in childbirth and told her spouse that should that happen, she wanted him to educate their son for the ministry and to give her jewelry to her daughter. Susan Grigsby, living at Travelers Rest, hoped she survived the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth because "surely there are few mothers more indispensable to their little helpless children" than she. A relative of Mary Collins of Maysville also wrote of her fear of pregnancy,

which she labeled her “precarious situation” and wondered if she would ever again be of any service to her family.

To many, pregnancy represented an interminable illness—and referred to it as such. Elizabeth Underwood wrote details about her step-daughter’s “illness” but failed to mention her own pregnancy until after she miscarried. During her pregnancies Susan Grigsby spent most of her days in bed and complained about her swollen legs that “were really frightful about ten in the morning, which is an hour after I begin to sit up.” Oldham County’s Sarah Jacobs, a veteran of several miscarriages, took to her bed anytime she experienced what she described as the first sign of “trouble” and tried to retain a horizontal position until she believed all danger had passed.

Frequent childbearing marked the lives of most married women and undoubtedly caused the deaths of many. Yet, both men and women seemed relatively ignorant of birth control techniques, unreliable as they were, and apparently if they knew any means to prevent conception, they were reluctant to employ them—or perhaps just didn’t mention such topics in their letters. Even era medical books do not mention “safe periods,” or nursing through the second summer or other means that might prevent conception. In some families, however, the children seemed to be spaced every two years. Unfortunately, neither family correspondence nor era advice books hint at whether such scheduling was planned or happenstance.

Certainly not everyone welcomed the frequent pregnancies. When her husband suggested that baby Edith needed a little sister, Elizabeth Underwood answered, “I think our present number makes quite a snug little family, & am liberal enough to wish my

neighbors all the rest.” Two years and a miscarriage later, she again reiterated her satisfaction with their family’s size:

Quantum efficient is my cry! I am much obliged to you for the verses, and the gifts too, provided you add the ways and means to fill the little open mouths and cover the little naked limbs But as to any more of the same, I beg to be excused. I am quite content to make a pet of our new little grandson.”

Such comments, however, are exceptional. Most women did not write about such things, not even to their husbands or other intimates!

Family members or midwives usually delivered the babies. Only if difficulties occurred was a doctor called. Ether, chloroform and nitrous oxide, developed in the 1840s, found use in amputations and teeth extractions but were seldom used to lessen the pain of childbirth. Women were supposed to suffer “for the sins of eve!”

Many women failed to mention their pregnancies in correspondence and when they did, they frequently imparted information in veiled tones about “coming events.” Some noted that the family would soon have “another companion,” or “partner of affections” or a “little stranger.” The letters of Harriet Means never informed her parents (her father was a doctor!) of any of her seven pregnancies until after the babies’ births. For her first delivery, she took chloroform—her letters do not hint at the reason—so she was quite surprised at the pain involved in delivering the second child. She asked for chloroform for the third, but the doctor refused. Following the birth of her seventh baby, Harriet suggested that she endured terrible pain, probably because the 9 ½ pound child came early. [One wonders what problems she might have experienced had she gone to term!] In recovering from the ordeal, she did not sit up until the 10th day and then remained in bed for two more weeks.

The birth of a healthy child usually brought congratulations—and lots of advice—to the new mother. A cousin warned Ellen Green that those who got up too early from their confinement were apt to suffer for it. Harriet Means' mother, however, took a more positive attitude and predicted that Harriet's new twins would be a "source of enjoyment." A relative wrote to Mary Collins suggesting that "with new joys we have new responsibilities," and enumerated both.

Childcare filled the days of antebellum mothers. Susan Grigsby enjoyed her children so much that she resented all other duties. Sarah Jacobs admitted that her children were her weak spot and that they occupied her whole time, interest, and thoughts. She devoted her mornings to overseeing their lessons, she sewed for them in the afternoons, and supervised their lessons again after tea. Once they were all in bed, Sarah and her husband sat cozily by the fire and discussed such topics as "the right to secession and fattening hogs."

With her senator-husband 800 miles away, Elizabeth Underwood's life also revolved around her 4 children and to them she credited her own usually contented state. On seeing her three boys come in from play "mired to the knees," she admitted that children could be both the plague and the joy of ones life. Some children, of course, also plagued adults other than their parents and era correspondence abounds with horror stories about other people's unruly children. Susan Sillman of Louisville visited a young widow whose two year old insisted on pulling lighted sticks from the fire. "I predict if he lives he will cause her trouble," she wrote in her diary. Harriet Means told of a neighbor's child who had a great propensity for biting and pulling hair. "He bit Hildreth every

chance he could get . . . & the poor twins like to have reached home bald, as he pulled their hair out in great handfuls, and bit them.”

Corporal punishment tended to be a favorite recourse for unruly kids. Harriet Means told that “Bub got sent away three times from dinner”. . . and that later her husband went after the child “with a switch. . . but I cannot see as Bub’s temper improves under such parental discipline.” Elizabeth Underwood’s oldest son also ignored her attempts to curb his activities and on one occasion John told a friend, “no matter boys, I will steal away from Mother,” to which his little brother declared he would do likewise. Confronting the lad, Elizabeth gave him what she termed a severe lashing with the riding whip. Recounting the event in a letter to her husband, she admitted that the whipping pained her more than it did John—but she intended that her boys grow up to be great men, not hoodlums. [“Big Bad John” eventually became Lt. Gov of KY—so maybe it worked!]

In addition to exemplary behavior, some antebellum mothers emphasized the importance of education. Unfortunately, most schools were private affairs, often taught by those barely more learned than their students, and who saw teaching as their only option for earning a living or as a temporary measure until something better came along. Consequently, most of Kentucky’s youngsters were “home schooled.” Susan Yandell of Louisville believed a mothers’ principal duty was the formation and proper regulation of a child’s mind. When her oldest son seemed to be learning little from his schoolmaster, Susan began home schooling by teaching math with hickory nuts. She was determined that he “learn his books and not be a dunce.” By his seventh birthday, she bragged, the

boy could write a respectable letter and read the Bible. The next important skill, she decided, was that he learn to think.

Elizabeth Underwood also found her son's teacher lacking—but admitted that she wondered how one teacher could manage three-to-four dozen unruly boys. In addition to academic training, Elizabeth wanted her boys to have fine social graces and indicated that she planned to enroll “our clumsy John” in a Saturday afternoon dancing school. Unfortunately, the child objected, wishing instead to hunt rabbits with his friends. Although Elizabeth admitted that John would profit from the outdoor exercise, she also claimed that he needed the dance lessons even more. She “really wished to have his manners improved.”

In the days before readily accessible and relatively inexpensive ready-to-wear, mothers generally made their children's clothing. On learning that one of her friends could not sew a stitch, Susan Sillman wondered how the woman managed to bring up a family of 12 children without this knowledge. [I wonder how she thought this mother of 12 could find time to sew!]. Susan Yandell spent much of her time making and cutting summer clothes for the children and for her servants, and Sarah Jacobs likewise made most of her children's apparel, “which is no slight job” she assured a friend.

The availability of the home sewing machine in the 1850s proved a godsend to those who could afford it and were willing to try the new gadget. Before her husband went to New York in 1853, Mary Collins asked him to purchase a machine she saw advertised for \$25. Six years later she bought a second machine so that her maid could help her “stitch the piles laid up to be lengthened and altered as well as new britches and dresses” for her children. When Elizabeth Underwood's five- year-old began to climb

the trees, she complained that his “bird-like” activities took a sad toll on his clothes and thus kept her fingers busy patching. “It is strange how love can lighten and diversify the routine of daily toil encountered by a mother,” she reflected.

Accidents also took a toll on children and on their mothers’ emotional systems. Susan Grigsby “nearly died” when she saw a pony kick her daughter. Although the child’s shoulder appeared to be merely bruised, Susan nevertheless sent for the doctor, who confirmed her diagnosis. Likewise, Harriet Means was “scared half to death” when her daughter broke her arm. The doctor set the limb but the pain continued and the girl cried constantly. Eventually, Means removed the splint and discovered that her arm was “so crooked and stiff that I thought it was ruined forever. I have cried myself sick over it,” she informed her parents.

Falling from the corncrib’s rafters, five-year-old Rogers (called Deedles) Underwood struck his chin on the edge of a barrel and by the time his mother reached him, blood covered him. The injury was not as bad as his mother feared, nor apparently as frightening as his accident a few weeks earlier when he was scalded on the neck and face when Deedles ran into a servant carrying a teapot. On that occasion, Elizabeth treated his burns with starch and camphor; two weeks later all traces of the accident had disappeared. “He is delighted. . .and thinks his mother is better than all the doctors in the world,” she wrote to her absent husband.

Hot fireplaces and iron stoves threatened the safety of lots of little ones. One of Harriet Means’ twins fell against the hot grate, badly burning her leg. Treated with a poultice and then with a salve of questionable merit concocted by a local doctor, the burn eventually healed. Undoubtedly many children were not as lucky as the Means and

Underwood children. The nation's first mortality figures indicate that at least several hundred Kentucky children under five years of age met undefined accidental deaths in 1850.

"Health is the greatest of all blessings," wrote Elizabeth Underwood.

Contemporary experts advised that good health depended on diet and clothing, and improving health and preventing illness was a mother's major duty. In their quest to secure health, some parents undoubtedly endangered it. During a visit to Harrodsburg Springs, Susan Yandell sought the advice of others on how to improve the health of her delicate toddler. "We had a general consultation and agreed that if I put flannel pantalets with booties and sleeves on him, he would recover," she noted hopefully. Harriet Means also dressed her wee one in flannel during the summer months. Although prickly heat covered the constantly squalling child, Means insisted that she continue to wear flannel underwear. But lest she become too warm, Means allowed the child to go shoeless. When the temperature stood at 102, Means wrote, "I have sometimes taken off the flannel skirt, though I still make the babies wear flannel shirts!"

In addition to warm clothing, Elizabeth Underwood advocated cold baths, exercise and a simple diet. During the summer months she and her four children started their day with cold baths at dawn; as long as they remained well, Underwood believed their good health was proof of the merit of the chilly baths. Underwood also supervised her children's diets, limiting their evening meals to "cold bread with no butter & no pork. I give them tea, milk, molasses, rice and such things as I think are most easily digested. I also give them a tonic and use the salt bath."

Mothers dispensed medications, potions and treatments to prevent illnesses as well as to treat them. Seldom did they call a physician (and if such expertise had been consulted it is doubtful that the results would have been different). When she believed her little Alfred seemed on the verge of a “spell,” Susan Grigsby gave him a strong emetic that induced vomiting and thus “cleane” out his system. Learning that smallpox had been diagnosed in Louisville, Susan Sillman vaccinated her children and their nurse—herself! When Harriet Means heard the disease was in the Ashland area, she breathed a sigh of relief that her baby had been vaccinated, despite objections from her physician brother—and reported that the vaccination “took” in all three places. Elizabeth Underwood professed that she hated the sight of the medical profession and shunned their poisonous drugs. She placed her faith instead, in nature. When her toddler appeared delicate and “as white as a lily,” Elizabeth massaged her, bathed her feet and gave her a little sweet oil and sugar. Elizabeth happily reported that her efforts proved effective, for the child’s health improved!

Despite their mothers’ efforts to preserve good health and prevent illness, children sickened. Respiratory infections were particularly wearisome. The children of one of Susan Grigsby’s friends were so continually troubled with colds that Susan feared they were developing whooping cough. Susan’s own daughter suffered with bad colds throughout the winter of 1855 and by spring the child’s palate and one tonsil “seemed to have grown together.” Harriet Means likewise complained of her children’s continual coughing. “I get up every night about midnight,” she wrote to her parents, “hunt up my goose grease bottle and give them a good greasing. They cough so I can’t get much sleep, until I get them settled with the goose grease.”

Harriet Mean felt like she operated a hospital one winter, for all five children were stricken with what one doctor called “typhoid pneumonia or something like that” and another diagnosed it as “something like diphtheria.” The doctor prescribed castor oil, molasses, Godfrey’s cordial (an over-the-counter tonic heavily laced with alcohol and a narcotic) and “slippery elm water.” However, Harriet decided that Cherry Pectoral and hoar-hound candy seemed to help more than any of the medicines the doctor ordered.

Bowel complaints also bothered children, and anything less than “normal” (one good bowel movement per day) required purges and emetics to cleanse the system. Era literature is filled with information about bowel disease, typhoid and other “summer complaints,” undoubtedly caused by poor sanitation. But epidemic Asiatic cholera (also a sanitation disease) was perhaps the mid 19th century’s the most dreaded illnesses. Like most Kentuckians, Elizabeth Underwood worried more than she admitted when cholera ravaged Kentucky and killed thousands each summer between 1849 and 1853. She relied on cold saltwater baths, a simple diet and used lime in the privy to keep her family safe. Believing that green fruits could cause the disease, Elizabeth also kept watch to prevent the children “killing themselves on green apples and blackberries.”

Diphtheria was frequently present as well as frequently fatal. When diphtheria struck central Kentucky in 1862, all six of Susan Grigsby’s children became ill with the disease. Her husband (an officer in the Confederate army) had left for Tennessee a few days earlier, and her friends and neighbors were either busy caring their own children or were afraid of carrying the disease to their broods. Consequently, Grigsby nursed her children virtually unaided; four of the six died. To add insult to injury, on learning of her husband’s absence a couple of local merchants bombarded her with terse notes

demanding that she settle his debts. Others sent well-meaning condolences suggesting that her four little “songsters” had been added to the “Heavenly choir.” No one, however, provided the physical help and moral support she needed during the children’s illnesses or burials.

Most antebellum mothers lost at least one child and saying such as, “lent for a season” and “taken back to Him for whence the child came” were common terms during the 19th century. Sometimes mothers tried not to become too attached to a child until it celebrated its first birthday, least it die and break her heart. But could one truly divorce her emotions from her wee one? Concerning the death of a neighbor’s child, Elizabeth Underwood remarked, “Oh it is hard to give up what is so closely entwined in our hearts.” And she knew. A few years earlier she had buried a set of twins—and a few years later would bury two more children before their 9th birthdays. Likewise, the Yandells committed the remains of their “darling little Wilson” (a victim of diphtheria) to rest at the side of a sister and three infant brothers. Two years later the Yandells buried 3-year-old Johnny next to his four siblings. Susan never ceased to grieve for these lost children. “The misfortunes of others does not make me think mine any the less,” she wrote. “My wounded heart is not at all healed.” Nor would it—or those of her contemporaries—ever heal completely.

The next time you stroll through an old section of the cemetery, look at the abundance of tiny little graves, so many and so little, one historian has noted, that they “hardly indent the landscape.” Look also at the abundance of headstones for young women, dead before they had much more than begun to live. These afford ample evidence of the hazards of pregnancy, childbirth and infancy. Then, check the obit page

in next Sunday's *Courier Journal*. Of the listing of 45 deaths in last week's paper, there was only one child listed—a 6 year old who apparently died of cancer. None of the women were under fifty. The 21st century may present dangers that did not plague our ancestors but certainly the likelihood has increased for a babe to grow to maturity and its mother live to see it grown!

Custodial responsibilities of Kentucky mothers would witness few changes during the post Civil War years. However, according to figures gathered by the United States census, the mortality rate of children very gradually declined during the century's last three decades. Most of the change resulted from better sanitation and an improved water supply. In the post civil war years several towns began to pipe river water to area homes. Some individuals constructed concrete-lined cisterns to collect rain water and thus provide their families with a more dependable supply. Water from these sources was usually less likely to be contaminated by sewage than was water found in streams that fed area wells or shallow wells that received surface washings during heavy rainfall. At mid century about half of all deaths occurred in children under five. By the end of the century, less than one-third were among children. The figures continued to drop in the early 20th century. Many factors helped bring about the changes, but improving sanitation measures account for much of our increased life span.

Motherhood has always been a long-term commitment. For women of the late antebellum era, the responsibilities encompassed both joy and sorrow. Children were "Gifts of God," according to Harriet Means, yet uncertainties menaced pregnancy and birth, and the fragility of life haunted the early years of childhood. Relying heavily on their own common sense and a modicum of questionable medical advice, mothers trained

and disciplined their children, fed and clothed them, supervised their daily well being, cared for them in sickness and grieved for the many who died. Although the women in this study enjoyed the advantages of domestic help, they often lacked the physical support of a spouse. Those fathers who remained nearby apparently had little involvement in the day-to-day rearing of their children. Elizabeth Underwood expressed the attitude of the era when she explained that “a mother is the proper one to look after her children.” Motherhood, she proclaimed was “a true woman’s sphere.”

[a longer, published version of this presentation, coauthored with WKU history professor Carol Crowe Carraco, appeared in the *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, July, 1992].

Collections used for this presentation:

Collins Family Papers (Special Collections, University of Kentucky)

The mother of four little ones and wife of historian-journalist-jurist Richard Collins, Mary Cox Collins, received letters from her female relatives (living elsewhere in Kentucky) relating to their pregnancies as well as referring to her own.

Green Family Papers (The Filson Historical Society, FHS)

Ellen Green, a New Englander, married Henderson resident John Green and a few years after his death wed his brother, Hector. She corresponded with her family near Boston, a cousin in Louisville and with Hector during his business trips. The Greens had five children; their youngest child is remembered as Civil War soldier Johnny Green of the Orphan Brigade.

Grigsby Family Papers (FHS)

Susan Hart Grigsby, the daughter of Virginia Preston and Nathaniel Hart, married John W. Grigsby in 1850 and the couple settled at Travelers Rest, the home of Susan’s grandfather, Isaac Shelby. Her frequent but usually undated letters to her husband and mother (Mrs. Robert J. Breckinridge of Lexington) reveal her efforts to care for the couple’s six children despite serious financial needs.

Jacob-Jackson Collection (FHS)

The daughter of Missouri politician Thomas Hart Benton, Sarah Hart Benton married Oldham County native Richard T. Jacob in 1848. Her letters to her sister-in-law indicate that her three children were her “weak spot.”

Means Family Collection (UK)

Harriet Hildreth Means, the mother of six, lived in Catlettsburg, then Ashland with her banker-husband John and wrote frequently to her mother and physician-father in Marietta, Ohio.

Sillman Family Papers (FHS)

Susan and Dr. Benjamin Sillman and their three children lived in Louisville from 1849-1854, while he taught at the medical department of the University of Louisville. Writing every week or so to her family in New York, Susan recorded her observations about Louisville society and told of her daily activities. Perhaps in jest, she complained that her infant son had already acquired a “bad Kentucky habit--- spitting.”

Underwood Collection (Kentucky Library, WKU)

A native of Georgetown in the District of Columbia, Elizabeth Cox Underwood came to Kentucky in 1838 as the bride of US Congressman (later US Senator), Joseph Rogers Underwood, a widower and the father of four teen-age children. Between 1839 and 1858 Elizabeth gave birth to eight children, four of whom died before the age of eight. During her husband’s last three years in the Senate, Elizabeth and their four children remained in Bowling Green; her 200 letters informed her absent spouse about her daily activities and those of their progeny. Her oldest son, John, graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, served as an engineer in the Confederate army and was elected mayor of Bowling Green and Lt. Governor of Kentucky (1875-79).

Yandell Family Papers (FHS)

A Middle-Tennessee native, Susan Wendel Yandell lived in Lexington (1826-27) and Louisville (1827-59), where her physician-husband, Lunsford, taught and practiced medicine. She raised four children to maturity, buried at least six others who died as infants, and suffered numerous miscarriages and stillbirths. Her letters were written to her family in Murfreesboro and to her husband during his and her occasional travels. The collection also contains a brief but revealing diary kept by Susan’s eight-year-old son, Willie, who was frequently late for school, was sometimes mean to his little sister and enjoyed far more freedom than do modern Louisville children.

1860 US Mortality Census for Kentucky:

These early mortality figures are undoubtedly incomplete. Era diagnostic skills were faulty and prior to 1911 Kentucky did not collect statistical information on causes of death. Nevertheless, information collected by the census takers in 1860 provides a hint about the terrible mortality rate among small children.

c.10, 000 deaths in Kentucky in 1860; 45% among children ages one to five (still births and deaths during the first year were not included in the census statistics!).

The causes of the children’s deaths included:

--603 cholera [There was no Asiatic cholera in Kentucky, 1855-1860. The term “cholera” was often used to describe severe diarrhea and vomiting]

--160 cholera infantum

--108 consumption

--89 convulsions

--565 croup
--400 diarrhea
--422 dysentery
--259 unspecified fever
--147 scarlet fever
--187 hives
--74 measles
--15 thrush
--251 whooping cough
--63 inflammation of the bowels
--249 inflammation of the brain
--138 pneumonia
--29 smallpox
--85 worms
--80 diphtheria