

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 2

April 2018

Zerelda G. Wallace and May Wright Sewall: A Study

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When I submitted my paper proposal, my intention was to examine the suffrage work of both Zerelda G. Wallace and May Wright Sewall, compare and contrast their work, and then evaluate the effectiveness of each approach. As I got into my research, I realized that I was not going to have enough time to look into the careers of both women deeply enough to do this last bit. While I will be comparing and contrasting the two women a bit along the way, I will be focusing on the conservative work of Zerelda Wallace in this paper as May Wright Sewall has been quite extensively covered by scholars.

When first looking deeper into the life of Zerelda Wallace, I wondered why there was so little scholarly work conducted about her life. In fact, most of the references I could find of her were in relation to the men in her life – her husband David Wallace, 7th Governor of Indiana, and her stepson General Lew Wallace, author of the incredibly popular novel *Ben-Hur*. Perhaps her relation to such high profile men has continued to overshadow her story, even all these years later.

But I think it is more than that. When comparing Wallace with May Wright Sewall, I think we get a better idea of why Wallace has been largely neglected. First and foremost, Sewall's papers are easily accessible at the Indianapolis Public Library, and there are plenty of them. Although Zerelda Wallace was by many accounts a prolific letter writer herself, I have not been able to locate more than a few scattered letters in different collections. Also, though she was, by all accounts a very gifted orator, she was not one to write out her remarks, so the only surviving transcripts I could locate were in newspapers and as you all know those can be questionable at times.

Continuing with the comparison between Wallace and Sewall, another difference emerges. One that I think may be a factor in her being under-covered relative to Sewall. Wallace was a conservative suffragist. Sometimes, while reading some of her speeches, it's easy to allow modern views and prejudices to color how we see her work. For instance, in an 1880 speech to the committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, Wallace said, "We realize that we owe great obligations to the men of this nation for what they have done. We realize that to their strength we owe the subjugation of all the material forces of the universe which give us comfort and luxury in our homes. We realize that to their brains we own the machinery that gives us leisure for intellectual culture and achievement." She goes even further, thanking men for providing women with all of the wonderful things of the world and for allowing women to live in comfort. That's far from modern feminist ideas. And if you're looking for modern feminist ideals in the work of Zerelda Wallace, or any conservative suffragist of the late 19th and early 20th century for that matter, you will be disappointed. As with all of history, you have to let go of your modern notions and think of historic figures as a product of their time. I think that's widely known. But I find that this gets harder to do when studying something you are passionate about. But once you do, you see a woman who used the limited tools available to her and worked within a patriarchal system to affect change in the hearts and minds of Hoosiers – both men and women.

To understand how Wallace came to be the conservative reformer she was, we need to start at her beginnings. Born Zerelda Grey Sanders on August 6, 1817 in Millersburg, Kentucky, Zerelda was raised in an environment that fostered intelligence and a deep commitment to faith. She attended boarding school in nearby Versailles, Kentucky, before the family moved to the newly established city of Indianapolis in 1830. Her father, John Sanders, was a physician, a profession in high demand in Indiana as the young state would not have its own medical college for over a decade. Dr. Sanders took his eldest daughter along on some of his more serious cases to act as his nurse, and soon Zerelda found herself acquainted with prominent citizens of the city who encouraged her to study works by great thinkers, such as philosopher John Locke and writer Harriet Martineau.

The most important book in the household, though, was always the Bible. The early 19th century was a time of religious revival in the United States. Often referred to as the Second Great Awakening, this religious resurgence reflected the sentiments of romanticism – it emphasized emotion and feeling over logic and reasoning. One popular tenet of the Second Great Awakening was the pursuit of Christian perfection. Zerelda grew up right in the midst of this movement – both in time and place. Stretching from around 1790 to the early 20th century, it had several hot spots, one of which was just 10

miles from Zerelda's hometown, in Cane Ridge Kentucky. The names of the entirety of the Sanders family can be found among the charter members of the Indianapolis Church of Christ, founded in 1933. And religion would continue to play a huge role throughout her life – Lew Wallace recalled that she never missed Sunday service and expected the same commitment of her whole family.

In December 1836, at just 19 years old, Zerelda Sanders married Lieutenant Governor of Indiana David Wallace, a widower fifteen years her senior with three children. Her stepson, General Lew Wallace, wrote of the first time the three boys met their new step-mother:

I was inclined . . . to have nothing to do with this mother which our father was giving us. We were not given time enough to wash our hands and to put on clean clothing, which probably had something to do with our ruffled feelings. Our stepmother was then very young, but she seemed to know exactly what to do under the circumstances and just how to talk to us. She showed us infinite gentleness and tact and made us feel that she was interested in us for our own sakes.

The next year, David Wallace became Governor of Indiana. He later served a term in the U.S. House of Representatives and as a judge in the Marion County Court of Common Pleas. While not much has been written about this time in Zerelda Wallace's life, it is reported that she advised her husband on political issues and reviewed and critiqued his speeches and writings, something which almost certainly helped to hone her rhetoric. Pair that experience with the fact that she glimpsed the inner workings of government at the state and national level during these years and there is little doubt that this time in her life facilitated her later political activism.

In 1859, 42-year-old Zerelda Wallace was widowed. She was left with few financial assets. Even with young children to care for, she declined her family's offer of financial help and relied instead upon her own initiative and resources by taking in boarders to make ends meet. You may notice that we have gotten through forty-two years of her life without mentioning her activism. That is because she fulfilled what was seen as her duty to be a wife and mother before moving on to advocate for social change, something which garnered a lot of respect in the eyes of other conservatives, especially men, when she did finally take up the cause. She had a rather circuitous route to suffrage work, though.

She started in the church – not much of a surprise. Wallace's adherence to the ideals of her faith – in particular the aspiration to Christian perfection – made the church the ideal place to make her first forays into social reform. In her mind, and in the mind of many reformers, a root of many societal ills was intemperance, making it the perfect problem for her to tackle. On March 3, 1874, Wallace and other reformers organized the Indiana branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in Indianapolis. Wallace served as the first president of the Indiana chapter and held the position for seven

years. The constitution of the association stated their goals: to provide support for victims of intemperance and to educate the public about the “evils” of alcohol sales, distribution, and especially consumption. In pursuit of these objectives, they declared that they would “religiously employ all the means which God has placed within our reach, and constantly invoke His aid and guidance.” In conclusion, they called “upon all good men to join hands with us in our work, and with each other in the endeavor to secure temperance laws thoroughly enforced.”

In comparison to more radical figures like Carrie Nation, the members of the Indiana WCTU were fairly reserved. While Nation would gain national fame through her rather violent tactics, such as using rocks, bricks, and (most famously) hatchets, to destroy the liquor supplies in saloons and thus put an end to drinking, Indiana’s WCTU used literature, missionary outreach, and petitions to achieve that goal.

It was during this time of growing activism in Wallace’s life that, at the age of fifty-seven, she delivered her first public address. One source claims that “her first attempt to speak in public . . . was a fiasco when she managed only to choke and then sit down, overcome.” While this may have been true, she very quickly found her courage; after one of her earliest forays into lecturing, she said, “the moment I began to speak all terror left me, and the devotion I felt for my theme gave me an almost superhuman confidence.” Almost at once, Wallace became widely known as a powerful and eloquent public speaker. One Washington, D.C. newspaper described her during a speech given at the National Suffrage Convention of 1887:

As she stood upon the platform, holding her hearers as in her hand, she looked a veritable queen in Israel in the personification of womanly dignity and lofty bearing. The line of her argument was irresistible, and her eloquence and pathos perfectly bewildering. Round after round of applause greeted her as she poured out her words with telling effect upon the great congregation before her.

Wallace did not live to see the Prohibition Era. However, through her temperance work, she became the catalyst of a similar outcome, on a much smaller scale, within her own church. Years into her temperance crusade, Zerelda Wallace stood up in her Disciples of Christ church service and announced that she found it inconsistent with the congregation’s beliefs to use wine for communion and that she would no longer take communion unless unfermented grape juice was substituted. The church council, which Wallace was a member of, met and it was decided that the Indianapolis church would no longer use fermented wine for communion. In short order, all Disciples of Christ churches in America followed suit.

When first reading about Zerelda Wallace, one thing that really stuck in my mind—and I think most people who know of her have heard this story—was her dramatic transformation from temperance worker to suffragist. This “conversion story,” as it is called in some sources, depicts the one moment when she shifted from a temperance leader to a suffrage leader. In doing more research on her life, I found that it was not so much a conversion; that word implies that she left one cause behind when she took up the next. In reality, her suffrage work developed out of her temperance work, just as her temperance work developed out of her faith. Nevertheless, suffragists discussed this watershed moment in Wallace’s political involvement even years after her death.

It took place in 1875 in the Indiana State House. Wallace and other Indiana WCTU leaders presented a petition signed by 10,000 women from around the state. Wallace took the floor and delivered what was by many accounts a very persuasive and moving argument for temperance. She was met with open contempt and derision from the senators; one senator rose and declared that her petition “might as well have been signed by ten thousand mice.” He went on, saying that the lawmakers were there “not to represent their consciences, but to represent their constituents.” Wallace walked away from the experience changed. She later described it as a light breaking over her. Why wasn’t she a constituent? She was an adult citizen of Indiana. She was affected by the laws these men were making. So why did she not have the right to influence those laws? She later summed up these thoughts beautifully, “If we women are citizens, if we are governed, if we are a part of the people, according to the plain declarations of the fundamental principles which underlie this nation, we are as much entitled to vote as you [men], and you [men] cannot make an argument against us that would not disfranchise yourselves.”

So, she added suffrage to her agenda, recognizing that temperance would never be achieved if women did not have the vote. Before leaving the State House, she found the offending senator and thanked him for making her a suffragist.

Wallace’s suffrage work, much like her temperance advocacy, was very moderate and her views may best be understood through the lens of republican motherhood.

Republican Motherhood is a term used by historians to describe ideas that go back to 18th-century philosophers, including John Locke, whose work, as previously mentioned, Wallace was familiar with. Simply put, Republican Motherhood turned women’s domestic and moral roles into an argument for political power. The thinking went like this: women raise boys into men and so presumably have a hand in shaping their political and moral identities. Surely, then, women who are able to participate in

the political system not only raise more politically savvy men, but also introduce into politics that same morality that they instill into their children. It was a way for women to gain more political power without threatening the existing patriarchal system. Wallace's background fit perfectly into this school of thought; it was only after she fulfilled her duties as wife and mother that she began devoting her time to social reform. She did not shirk her domestic responsibilities to take up politics. And it was only for moral betterment that she took up the cause at all. In short, she was a perfect picture of Republican Motherhood.

We can see many of these ideas reflected clearly in speech she delivered in 1890:

. . . pre-eminently woman is the teacher of the race; in virtue of her motherhood she is the character builder; she forms the soul life; she rears the generations. It is not part of woman's work to contend with man for supremacy over the material forces. It was never told to woman that she should earn her bread by the sweat of her brow.

With these sentiments, Wallace attempted to steer Indiana and the nation towards greater equality. In May 1875, just months after she had stood in front of the Indiana Senate with her temperance petition, Wallace began to incorporate suffrage sentiments into her temperance speeches. She presented a resolution at the second temperance convention in Cincinnati calling for a national vote of men and women on the issue of prohibition, subtly calling for universal suffrage. Due in large part to her astute manner of speaking on the issue, the measure passed, and even gained support from anti-suffragists. From there, Wallace began traveling the country stumping for the cause of universal suffrage. These activities both increased her prominence within the movement and provided her with a much needed income.

Wallace was by no means a pioneer in the fight for suffrage equality in Indiana. As far back as 1851, there was enough interest in the cause to warrant the formation of the Indiana Woman's Rights Association. Unfortunately, though, the movement stagnated due to the Civil War. In March 1878, May Wright Sewall discreetly circulated a summons to Hoosiers with "advanced ideas" about women's rights to a meeting where a new organization would be formed. Ten people, including Zerelda Wallace attended that first, rather secretive meeting. The only matter decided, though, was the name; The Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Association, a name which the group agonized over, debating whether to state their goal openly in the name or to mask their intentions. Obviously, they decided on the first option and set another meeting for April, in Wallace's living room.

That second meeting was much more fruitful; the twenty-six attendees drafted a constitution and elected Zerelda Wallace president. Unsurprisingly, this new organization shunned the more radical

approaches taken by other entities, such as open protest and rabble-rousing speeches. Rather, they worked within the established system, one which Wallace knew well through her late husband. The Association turned to lobbying, organized letter-writing campaigns, well-reasoned speeches, and projected an overall reserved version of the suffrage movement in order to achieve their goals.

In 1881, their calm determination paid off; The Indiana General Assembly voted in favor of woman's suffrage. However, Indiana's constitution requires any amendment to the constitution to pass in two consecutive General Assembly sessions and by 1883, the close connection between suffrage and temperance swayed enough assembly members away from the cause that the measure failed to pass. With that great disappointment behind her, Wallace kept at her work on both the state and national level.

In the late 1880s, the national suffrage movement was split over ideology. On one side, there was the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which sought a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. The NWSA also campaigned for other issues, not directly related to suffrage. On the other side was the American Woman's Suffrage Association (AWSA), which fought solely for suffrage on a state to state basis. Until this point, Wallace and the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Association had stayed apart from any other suffrage group but, perhaps due to the continued failure of the group, despite monumental effort, to get suffrage passed in Indiana, it was decided that the Association would join the NWSA in the fight for a constitutional amendment in 1887. Soon after, Wallace was elected the vice-president of the NWSA. In a speech at the National Suffrage Convention of 1887, Wallace made quite the impression, saying, "It took a hundred years and a Civil War to evolve the principle in our nation that all men were created free and equal. Will it require another century and another Civil War before there is secured to humanity the God-given inalienable right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?'" and "Men say women are not fit to govern because they cannot fight. When men live upon a very low plane so there is only one way to manage them and that is to knock them on the head, that is true. It probably was true of government in the beginning, but we are able to grow up out of this low state." She asserted "I have nothing but pity for that woman who can fold her hands and say she has all the rights she wants."

Wallace continued to travel the U.S. speaking in favor of universal suffrage until she was forced to retire to her daughter's home near Cloverdale, in Putnam County after collapsing on stage in 1888.

Unfortunately, Wallace did not live long enough to see the actualization of the two causes she had dedicated her life to as she died on March 19, 1901. On January 1, 1920, the United States of

America went dry after the passage of the 18th Amendment. Less than a year later, on November 2, 1920, the first presidential election in which all Americans, regardless of gender, could legally vote, was held.

Wallace's Republican Motherhood-adjacent take on suffrage may not fit well into today's views about women's roles in politics, but her measured, thoughtful, and principled approach to the subject is what made her such an effective advocate. She could, and did, go into a room full of anti-suffragists and give a speech appealing to their hearts, to their minds, and, most importantly, to their morality and leave some changed opinions in her wake. Someone more radical, who pushed more boundaries, may not have had such success.

After Wallace's 1901 death, a "meeting of women" was organized to pay tribute to the respected reformer. One speaker explained how she was able to accomplish so much: "This woman, with her wonderful clearness of vision, was able to see the end from the beginning. She organized, encouraged, and inspired her comrades. She infused loyalty into the ranks by her own loyalty – loyalty to husband, children, loyalty to the thing she believed...loyalty in Christ."

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