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# The Lady on Angel Hill: Mary Jane Folsom and Movement in the Nineteenth Century St. Croix River Valley

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**The Lady on Angel Hill:**

**Mary Jane Folsom and Movement in the Nineteenth Century St. Croix River Valley**

**Taylor Yetter**

**An Honors Thesis  
submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with honors in History  
from Hamline University**

**April 30, 2015**

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## Abstract

The Lady on Angel Hill: Mary Jane Folsom and Movement in the Nineteenth Century St. Croix River Valley

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Mary Jane Folsom's life in the St. Croix River Valley demonstrates some previously uninvestigated complexities of life on the nineteenth-century American Frontier. Previous scholars of the Frontier have all assumed a traditional East to West model of movement, but this model fails to recognize the many directions people took to reach their final destinations or the influences they brought with them. Before further research is conducted on the American Frontier, scholars must answer the question of how people, objects, and ideas actually travelled through the Frontier. This paper uses Mary Jane's correspondence with her family to investigate this question. Her letters show that although there was a larger East to West wave, movement actually occurred in all directions, and although she lived far from her family in the East and in the far West, Mary Jane was able to influence and be influenced by her family, complicating how scholars study and interpret influences on the American Frontier.

## Introduction

“We shall move in to our house in a few weeks,” Mary Jane Folsom wrote to her brother Edward (Ed) Wyman in a letter on June 19, 1855, “it is all finished now but painting + hanging the doors[.] [W]e shall have plenty of room then for as many as will come.” The new house did have plenty of room for visitors; it consisted of two stories (plus an attic) and sixteen rooms, five of which were bedrooms for family or close friends. Shortly after writing this letter, Mary Jane and her family moved into their new home on Angel Hill in Taylors Falls, Minnesota. By 1855 the Folsoms had moved many times, but this new home marked a new era in her life. The house—which still stands today—is large and solidly built. It is meant to announce its occupants’ status to the world, and represented the culmination of the Folsom’s success on the American Frontier. But while Mary Jane’s husband William Henry Carman Folsom probably valued the house first and foremost for the high status it proclaimed, for Mary Jane, the new home’s most important feature was that it had room for her family members—who were spread across the country, from Maine to California—to come and stay with her. This move marked the first time in years that Mary Jane had a home of her own to keep, with plenty of room for guests to visit.

As soon as the Folsoms moved in, Mary Jane began extending frequent invitations to her family to visit her. She mourned the distances that separated the members of her childhood family. In the June 19, 1855 letter Mary Jane wrote with feeling about her brother Sam’s departure from their family home in Maine to go to California:

I am sorry he has left Father...our father['s family [is] all broken up[,] scatter[ed] up + down the earth...it seems as though it is a little too much [to have] all the rest of you gone + then to have Sam start up + go.<sup>1</sup>

This letter demonstrates Mary Jane's sadness that her father's family was separated by such a large distance. With her father in the East, Mary Jane in the Midwest, and some of her brothers in the far West, Mary Jane was physically far from her family connections, and this caused her emotional strain.

Although Mary Jane was upset by her father's dissolving household, she was also coming to appreciate her life in the Midwest. In the same letter she assures Ed:

I am strong in the faith that you will one day come back again even to Minnesota + will think better of us then[sic.] you did when you were here before you...we are improving.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Mary Jane did not like living in the Midwest when she first arrived, but by 1855 when she was finally able to move into a home of her own, she had become at least content with her life. More people flooded into the expanding Frontier, helping to change Mary Jane's surroundings and Frontier experience.

The world Mary Jane lived in was one of transition in both Minnesotan and American history. White Americans from the East were moving into areas that had previously been inaccessible to them, and Minnesota and other Midwestern states were taking on new legal statuses as organized territories and eventually states. Thanks to the Gold Rush, settlers flooded into California, searching for riches. In the East, Americans had established gendered cultural ideals, and men were expected to work outside of the home while women stayed at home to

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<sup>1</sup> William Henry Carman Folsom and Mary Jane Folsom to Unknown. June 19, 1855. W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers. 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

<sup>2</sup> Folsom, William Henry Carman and Mary Jane Folsom, June 19, 1855, 2.

provide a comfortable space for her family, creating the idea of separate spheres. The West was quickly filling with white settlers who brought their Eastern cultures with them.

During this liminal era, the terms used to describe various geographic regions—East, West, Midwest, and Frontier—were fluid and relative. For this paper the East consists of the states that were admitted into the Union in the eighteenth century and Maine and West Virginia (which are in the same geographical area but did not become states until later). Southern states are those that seceded from the Union during the American Civil War. Frontier and West, however, are more complicated terms. The Frontier included all areas that were directly affected by Westward expansion, and these areas changed quickly. The term ‘Frontier’ implied groundbreaking and the establishment of new communities, but while some settlers travelling to the Frontier were the first white people to settle in those areas, others were joining a recently-established community. The term ‘Frontier’ meant different things to different people. To those living in Eastern states, the Frontier included Wisconsin and Minnesota as well as California. To people living in the Midwest, however, the Frontier lay to their West. Mary Jane, in the Midwest, would not have included Minnesota in the West, but would have seen California and the Pacific Coast as part of the West.

The object of this paper is to investigate and track some of the many intertwining connections between the East and the various American “Frontiers” through Mary Jane Folsom’s letters and material objects. It is astounding that this collection of letters this large (twenty-three of which were used for this project) survived locked in the attic of the house on Angel Hill since Mary Jane’s time. Not surprisingly, these letters were browned with age, and some were weathered, obscuring some of the valuable information. However, most of the letters were legible, though transcribing had its own challenges. Handwriting customs, vocabulary, and

meaning have all changed since Mary Jane wrote her letters, so accurate representation required careful analysis and in some cases luck. Because of this work, it is possible to better understand Mary Jane and how she fit into the Frontier web of movement.

Previous research assumes that because people on the Frontier were physically far away from the cultural centers of the East, their connection was simple: they brought Eastern culture to the West, and when they were met with challenges, they altered their culture to fit their new lifestyle. Furthermore, previous scholars have understood Westward expansion as a unidirectional wave that moved from East to West, failing to understand the complexities of cultural movement.

Scholars of women on the Frontier have also inadequately studied the diversity of women there. While there is scholarly work on Frontier women, none of it addresses Mary Jane Folsom or women like her. Scholars have focused on women from agricultural areas, but Mary Jane lived in a lumber-dominated region of the Midwest that has been overlooked. She was not an independent or exceptional woman; her husband W.H.C. Folsom was the famous spouse—to contemporaries a prominent lumberman, businessman, and politician, and today known as the first historian of the St. Croix River Valley because of his 1888 memoir *Fifty Years in the Northwest*. Mary Jane herself did not have much influence outside of her community and her family. However, with her upper middle-class lifestyle, she was also far from the average Frontier woman who often had to work outside of the female sphere of domesticity in order to support her family. Therefore, a study of Mary Jane Folsom's life fills a gap in the existing research and can offer us a new perspective on the Frontier.

This project has some limitations that must be considered. Most importantly, this paper explores one aspect of one family. Only the letters between Mary Jane and her family are used,



because they are all that are left of Mary Jane's personal papers. Although there are many letters that still remain, it is impossible to know how many of the letters have been destroyed.

Therefore, we cannot tell the entire story. Also, there is very little supporting evidence about Mary Jane's life. Her husband W.H.C. Folsom's book *Fifty Years in the Northwest* provides some insight into his life, but Mary Jane is mentioned only briefly. Newspapers and other sources are unavailable, which prevents researchers from having a well-rounded understanding of Mary Jane's life. Because this is a case study of only one woman, it difficult to extrapolate any conclusions onto a wider group. However, although Mary Jane's life is only one example, it serves as a starting point for further research.

Thankfully, many of the letters between Mary Jane Folsom and her family still exist, and this project investigates her life using twenty-three of these letters. These letters reveal an important aspect of Frontier life that has been generally ignored: how objects and ideas spread through the United States both to the East and the West. Investigating these movements is important because it allows researchers to better understand the nuances of Frontier life. As Mary Jane Folsom's letters show, people, objects, and ideas travelled back and forth, across and around the country, deepening and complicating the relationship between East and West.

### Narrative and Context

Mary Jane Folsom was born in May 1818 to Abraham and Betsey Wyman in Bloomfield, Maine (now Skowhegan). She was the fifth of fourteen children and was especially close to her younger brother Edward (Ed), born in 1829. As children the two played music together; Ed

played the violin and Mary Jane accompanied him on the piano.<sup>3</sup> The family was almost certainly Protestant and may have been Baptist (Mary Jane's future husband, William Henry Carman Folsom, was raised attending a Free Will Baptist Church).<sup>4</sup> Mary Jane was small, reaching an adult weight of only 100 pounds, and had dark hair and eyes.<sup>5</sup>

Mary Jane's future husband, William Henry Carman Folsom (W.H.C. Folsom) spent part of his childhood in Bloomfield, and his family settled there when he was an adult. He and Mary Jane might have met each other when he briefly attended school there. He left Maine in 1836 when he was 19 to work in Wisconsin in a variety of capacities, especially farming. He returned to visit his family in Maine in 1840, and while he was there he reconnected with Mary Jane (now 22 years old) and courted her.<sup>6</sup> In an 1840 letter to her brother Theodore, Mary Jane reflected on two of her suitors, W.H.C. Folsom and a Mr. H Smith of Old Town. Theodore wrote back on October 18, 1840, writing that he had not seen W.H.C., "for five or six years, I would say that that period of time often affects a great change in the appearance of character of...a man his age, and in one who has travelled as much as he has, that change is often for the worse..."<sup>7</sup> In the letter he warns Mary Jane that W.H.C. might not be the most suitable husband, fearing that the Frontier had changed his cultural ideals from those accepted by Eastern society.

Despite Theodore's warnings, Mary Jane married W.H.C. on January 1, 1841 in Bloomfield. They spent their honeymoon touring the East Coast, accompanied by his brother

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<sup>3</sup> Geri Nelson, "In Search of Mary Jane," *Life & Times in Taylors Falls* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Chad Thurman,, Interviews by author, Taylors Falls.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson, "In Search," 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, October 18, 1840, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 2.

Levi, before making their way to Wisconsin territory, where they planned to settle. They travelled through Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri, and finally arrived in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin on March 31, 1841. At the time, Fort Crawford was located just outside Prairie du Chien, so a large part of the population was soldiers. The town was also home to over a hundred people of French origin, remnants of previous French governance. French influence was also visible in the style of many houses in the town, but the town was home to other East Coast transplants as well, including W.H.C.'s brother John.<sup>8</sup>

The Folsom family was fairly typical of white settlers in Minnesota. The state was originally populated by Indian groups, mainly the Ojibwe and the Dakota; the first major wave of white settlers arrived in Minnesota in the 1850s and 1860s, a decade after the Folsoms arrived in the Midwest. These white settlers were primarily Yankees, that is, American citizens who came from New England, as well as Yorkers from New York. As settlers in Minnesota, the Yankees were highly influential in creating and developing the area's institutions and infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Although their percentage of Minnesota's population shrunk as new groups—including Britons, Germans, and Scandinavians—came to the area, the Yankees and Yorkers retained their influence over politics and policies in Minnesota. Yankees and Yorkers often imposed their British-based, Americanized, East Coast culture on those living around them.<sup>10</sup>

As Minnesota approached statehood, its population grew rapidly. Between 1855 and 1857 alone, the population of Minnesota exploded from 40,000 people to 150,000 people. Among these newcomers were Mary Jane's brother Ed and sister Cad. This was not unusual; a

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson, "In Search," 3.

<sup>9</sup> June Drenning Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1981), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 55 and 59.

major draw for immigrants to Minnesota was family connections. The railways and other institutions did attempt to recruit people from outside the United States to work for them in the Midwest, and some had success. However, family connections were the most successful argument in convincing immigrants to come. Immigrants to Minnesota wrote home describing their lives, and this encouraged their friends and family back home to make the move to Minnesota. Immigrants also created connections between the Midwest and the East Coast; if family and friends did not join them on the Frontier, they still wrote letters and provided news from back home. Immigrants also brought traditional celebrations, including Thanksgiving, to the Midwest.<sup>11</sup>

The Folsoms were in many ways typical of New Englanders who migrated to the Midwest. The typical New Englander who moved to Minnesota was, like the Folsoms, middle-class and well educated. Typical settlers were members of a Protestant church committed to Calvinist and Puritan principles, as the Folsoms were. The five most common denominations among Yankees in the Midwest were the Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist churches; the Folsoms converted to Methodism in Prairie du Chien. Yankee Protestantism came to be an important and lasting aspect of Minnesota life. There was some competition among the different denominations to attract members, but they worked together to convert American Indians to Christianity, Catholic European immigrants to Protestantism, and non-observant whites to churchgoing ways. They all relied heavily on financial support from central church institutions back East.<sup>12</sup> Together, they successfully established the upper Midwest as a Protestant-dominated society.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 62-64, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55 and 67.

Once settled in Prairie du Chien, the Folsoms decided to join the Methodist Church. W.H.C. first joined in January 1843 and Mary Jane on March 5 1843. She was baptized by immersion on June 18, 1843. The Folsoms practiced Methodism faithfully; they attended church every Sunday, and W.H.C. led a prayer meeting on Thursday nights.<sup>13</sup> After Lutherans, the Methodists were the largest Christian denomination in Minnesota. They were able to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, and to connect to non-English speaking settlers, better than any of the other denominations, in part because they offered many social events such as excursions, ice cream socials, and picnics.<sup>14</sup>

Life in Prairie du Chien was difficult for Mary Jane. She had arrived in Prairie du Chien in March 1841. By December 1843 she had not only moved halfway across the country but had joined a new church and had given birth—to Wyman X Folsom, born December 2, 1843. She was frequently sick with ague, which gave her fevers and shivers.<sup>15</sup> The family moved to a new home, hoping that a less drafty house would help, but it did not. They then decided on a more drastic move up the Mississippi River and into the St. Croix River Valley. In October 1845, they gave up their house in Prairie du Chien. They boarded with the Pelter family for two weeks in Prairie du Chien, and then took the steamboat Cecilia up the Mississippi and St Croix rivers and landed in Stillwater on November 1, 1845. Mary Jane was so ill that W.H.C. had to carry her off the steamboat in his arms. The following summer, Mary Jane took Wyman and travelled back to Maine, hoping the stay at home would increase her health. They left on June 28, 1846 and did not return to Stillwater until June 26, 1847.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson, “In Search,” 3.

<sup>14</sup> Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, “In Search,” 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Once the Folsoms returned to Stillwater, they lived there for about another year before moving yet again. They journeyed 50 miles up the St. Croix River, to St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, via a steamboat named the Otter. There they lived in a rented house.<sup>17</sup> Mary Jane's mother died in 1850, and in an April 1, 1851 letter to Ed Mary Jane expressed her regret in not visiting her mother one last time. She wrote:

Oh dear when I think of the sad changes that have taken place in our father[']s family since I left home I feel lonesome heartsick, and homesick[.] If I had only gone home last summer + saw mother once more it would have been a great satisfaction to me...<sup>18</sup>

Here Mary Jane demonstrates how important family was to her, in addition to missing her family back East. In April 1851, the Folsom family relocated across the St. Croix River to the much smaller town of Taylors Falls, Minnesota.

Mary Jane's sense of loneliness was increased because W.H.C. was often away in the forest working in logging (his main occupation) or one of his other projects.<sup>19</sup> During the nineteenth century, Minnesota had three major economic industries: agriculture, lumber, and mining, with the latter developing in the northern part of the state only at the tail end of the century. Although there had been rumors of mineral wealth in the area as far back as the French voyageurs, the Soudan Mine near Lake Vermillion had not been discovered or used until 1884. Later, the Mesabi Range was found, and the mining industry encouraged the city of Duluth's growth.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Jane Folsom to Edward P. Wyman, April 1, 1851, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson, "In Search," 5.

<sup>20</sup> William E. Lass, *Minnesota: a History*. 2nd ed., (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 184.

Beyond northern Minnesota and before the mid-1880s, agriculture dominated the state's economy. In 1859 corn was the biggest crop that Minnesota produced. Later wheat surpassed corn, peaking in 1878.<sup>21</sup> Wheat was the best option for many farmers because it needed only minimal care in order to grow successfully, and it could be turned to flour in water-powered mills. In the St. Croix River Valley, the river also allowed wheat farmers to send their produce down the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers to a national market.<sup>22</sup> Minnesota's dependence on wheat did cause some environmental issues. Because it was so easy to grow, it was popular, especially among poorer farmers who did not have time or financial resources to develop other, more difficult crops; widespread wheat cultivation then led to soil exhaustion. Still, wheat sold, so people developed new methods to ensure the survival of the crop. After the Civil War, Minnesota's agriculture boomed, so farmers were able to mechanize some steps of the process, which freed them up to work on more land and more labor-intensive crops; for example, in 1871 Cadwallader Washburn developed a "New Process" for milling flour. In the 1880s and 1890s, after the railways were introduced, agriculture around the St. Croix River Valley slowly shifted from what to dairy. Dairy was a more reliable source income and avoided the mob-crop issue of soil exhaustion. With the help of the railways, farmers could send fresh products to an urban market.<sup>23</sup>

When Mary Jane lived in St. Croix Falls and Taylors Falls, the lumber industry prevailed as the prime economic force in the St. Croix River Valley. During this period, the lumber industry was focused on white pine trees. White pine was the preferred commercial wood; the trees averaged 100 feet in length and 2 ½ to 3 feet in diameter, and the wood was strong and

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<sup>21</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 154-155.

<sup>22</sup> Eileen McMahon and Theodore Karamanski, *North Woods River: The St. Croix River in Upper Midwest History*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 159.

<sup>23</sup> McMahon, *North Woods River*, 161-180.

odorless, easy to manipulate, and floated. (Other less valuable lumber including spruce, balsam fir, tamarack, white cedar, and jack pine were also collected).<sup>24</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, white men from the East Coast flooded into Minnesota in search of these perfect and profitable pines, making lumber the most profitable industry in the territory.<sup>25</sup>

Logging began in the St. Croix River Valley in 1837, after treaties with various Indian groups opened the area to white settlers. Almost immediately men in search of logging fortunes came to the St. Croix River Valley. The relationship between the American Indians and the lumbermen was complicated. Many lumbermen did not have much contact with the American Indian tribes in the area, but in the upper portion of the St. Croix River Valley, lumbermen traded with the Ojibwe for maple sugar, wild rice, cranberries, and venison. However, tensions escalated because lumber dams drowned the Ojibwe crops along the river. In 1864, two Ojibwe shot and killed two lumbermen named Oliver Groveland and Harry Knight. Whites saw this crime as robbery and murder, but Ojibwe leaders emphasized the dam issues that had led to frustration.<sup>26</sup>

Although the St. Croix River Valley was opened to white settlers, government policies prevented them from buying much of the land. As a result lumber entrepreneurs operated on national lands without paying for it,<sup>27</sup> and made profits of hundreds of thousands of dollars by harvesting lumber from government land.<sup>28</sup>

However, many lumbermen purchased the land that they used. One was Frank Steele; he and his partners were the first crew to move into the St Croix River Valley area in September

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<sup>24</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 169.

<sup>25</sup> McMahan, *North Woods River*, 170.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. An investigation was called for, but the U.S. Congress stopped the case before anyone was tried.



1837. His company grew and became the St. Croix Falls Lumber Company, which was so successful it was able to build a \$20,000 sawmill<sup>29</sup> (the first sawmill in the St. Croix River Valley had been built in August 1839 by Joseph Renshaw Brown).<sup>30</sup> In January 1851, logging had become so popular in the St. Croix River Valley, each lumber company had their own brand, which they branded into the logs, and these logs needed to be sorted. The St. Croix Boom Company was charged with sorting these logs; it charged 40 cents per 1,000 feet of logs that passed over St. Croix Falls.<sup>31</sup>

Log output increased rapidly during the 1840s and 1850s. By 1854, at least 82 different lumber crews were operating in the St. Croix River Valley. The size of crews had doubled to between 20 and 30 men per crew, and about 1400 men total were working in the woods. Technological advances throughout the nineteenth century allowed the lumber industry to increase its efficiency. The size of logging camps exploded. What once started as crews of 10 to 15 men grew to as many as 300 per logging camp. They became their own special-purpose settlements to make the entire logging process more efficient. The success of the larger crews allowed the lumbermen to create bigger and better dams, and by 1864, at least \$600,000 had been invested into dam improvement.<sup>32</sup>

The most powerful lumber baron in the St. Croix River Valley was Isaac Staples. He was an overseer stationed in Stillwater; his partner Samuel F. Hersey lived in Maine. Connections between Minnesota and Maine were common in the lumber industry, as is seen in W.H.C. Folsom's life. They used the money made from logging in Maine to finance their logging

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>30</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> McMahan, *North Woods River*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 80-85, 170.

pursuits in Minnesota. Eventually they owned 40,000 continuous acres of land in the Valley, which made them the largest owners of timberland in the St. Croix River Valley.<sup>33</sup>

William H.C. Folsom had a different success story. He did not arrive in the St. Croix River Valley with money to invest in the lumber industry. When he arrived in 1845, at the age of 28, he worked as a hired hand for a small mill. Within a year he became part owner of that mill. Not long after, Folsom filed a preemption claim, which allowed him to purchase a waterpower site above Stillwater at bare minimum price because he was the first person there and convinced three men to provide capital so that he could build a mill. W.H.C. labored for a year to build and establish the mill; then he sold his portion for cash to invest in further ventures, allowing him to become wealthy.<sup>34</sup>

Nineteenth-century lumbering was tied to waterways; the biggest lumber towns—St. Anthony, Stillwater, and Winona—emerged because of their proximity to major waterways.<sup>35</sup> Taylors Falls, though never a large city, was well located on both the St. Croix River and the Point Douglas-Superior military road. Every fall a ferry transported food and other supplies up the river to Taylors Falls, where it was stored until winter, and then taken on sleighs via the military road out to men lumbering in the forest.<sup>36</sup> In spring, cut logs had to be moved, and each log was branded with the crew's stamp. Then, when the water rose high enough, the logs were washed into the stream and towards a major waterway. In the St. Croix River Valley, logs had to move from one of the many tributaries (like the Apple River) into the main St. Croix River. From there they had to move into the Mississippi River and down to a national market. Men known as "river pigs" worked to prevent the rafts of timber from catching on part of the river and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>35</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> McMahon, *North Woods River*, 81.

creating massive log jams. This job was more difficult later in the season, when the water level lowered. It became a race to get the logs down the river as quickly as possible. In order to ease the dangers of the river and prevent logs from jamming, lumbermen attempted to “improve” the rivers. They used explosives to reroute rivers and dug rivers further and deeper in order to make them more navigable. Dams were especially important because they helped the rivers rise enough to pass logs. The implementation of dams was the most obvious change. The increase in number and quality of dams helped make transportation, including logs, easier and less dangerous. Originally dams cost between \$500 and \$2,000, but eventually the average dam would cost at least \$10,000 to build, not including any upkeep expenses. These dams created massive environmental changes including altering the size, power, and route of rivers, which still exist today.<sup>37</sup>

Most people assumed that the forests of Minnesota were an infinite source of white pine, but in fact less than one fifth of the forests were pine. That did not stop the loggers, though. After the American Civil War, the demand for white pine increased because people began moving West at a greater speed and filled the remaining spaces of the closing Frontier. These settlers needed lumber to create buildings, and in response to the demand, lumbermen expanded their industry from cutting 100 million board feet in 1857 to cutting one billion board feet of timber in 1889.<sup>38</sup>

With so many logs flowing down the river, log jams became inevitable. The first major log jam to occur on the St. Croix River was in the Dalles area of the river near St. Croix Falls at an outcropping called Angel Rock, pushing logs back over a mile. This incident was only the first of many annual occurrences. The worst log jam to happen in the St. Croix River Valley

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 91-98.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 173.

occurred in 1886, and in that one incident, 150 million feet of timber was backed up over a mile to the St. Croix Falls dam and then two miles past that. People from all over the country came to see the logs, and Taylors Falls became a tourist attraction. In order to find the key log (the supposed single log that caused the jam) and clear the major blockage, the lumbermen had to use new technologies including steamboats, dynamite, wires, and electric lights<sup>39</sup>

The Minnesota that Mary Jane and W.H.C. settled in was in a state of transition. The French fur traders from trapping days were mostly gone, and the area now belonged to the United States of America. The Indian Land Cession of 1837 in Minnesota made lands previously possessed by American Indians, including the lands around Fort Snelling, available for whites to settle in. New settlements including Pig's Eye, which would become St. Paul, and St. Anthony Falls, started to grow.<sup>40</sup>

As American and European settlers began to populate Minnesota, leaders in the area came together to decide their future. In August 1848 they held a convention in the major lumber town of Stillwater and created a territorial organization, the goal of which would be to lobby for American territory status and ultimately statehood for Minnesota. As part of the process they elected Henry H. Sibley to work as a delegate in Washington D.C. on Minnesota's behalf. After the convention he went to Washington D.C., and by spring 1849, Minnesota had been declared an official territory (the declaration was one of the last actions of President James Polk).<sup>41</sup>

On February 26, 1857 the United States Congress passed the Minnesota Enabling Act, which allowed Minnesota to begin the transition from territory to state. The act called for a constitutional convention that would begin drafting Minnesota's constitution. One of the biggest

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<sup>39</sup> McMahan, *North Woods River*, 149-150.

<sup>40</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 99-100.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-107.

disagreements leading up to the convention was over the issue of slavery. Voters considered this question when electing delegates to the convention—opting to create a free state. Once the constitutional convention began in July 1857, this question and many others caused conflict between Republicans and Democrats. The Republican Party was a new, quickly growing party in Minnesota, especially in the agricultural regions of the state, but the Democrats were strong in commercial and lumber towns such as St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Stillwater. The two parties differed on numerous other topics beyond slavery including the economies and boundaries of the proposed state. Even the location of the capitol was up for debate. The representatives of the two major political parties at the convention could not agree on anything, even where to sit, and had to meet separately for over a month.<sup>42</sup>

After a month, a compromise committee was created to examine two versions of the state constitution, one written by each party. While the convention debated the constitutional drafts, Henry Sibley, a Democrat, challenged the incumbent Alexander Ramsey, a Republican, for the position governor. Sibley defeated Ramsey and promptly presented the Democratic version of the constitution (with some Republican alterations) to the United States Congress. The constitution was accepted, and Minnesota joined the Union on May 11, 1858.<sup>43</sup>

When the Folsom family arrived in Taylors Falls in April 1851, Minnesota was still a territory, and the small town was far from highly populated. The Folsoms moved into the rooms above W.H.C.'s store, which he managed alongside his growing lumber business. They only had one neighbor named W.E. Bush who lived in a log house and a board shanty. Then in 1852, the Folsoms took another trip back East to visit family in Maine. W.H.C. stayed only a short time, returning to Minnesota to oversee his businesses, but Mary Jane stayed. She returned to Taylor

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 121-124.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 125.

Falls in July 1852, and six months later, on December 18, 1852, she gave birth to her second son, Frank William Folsom.<sup>44</sup>

After filing another preemption claim, W.H.C. legally gained ownership of the top of Angel Hill, a hill that stands above the center of Taylors Falls and looks towards the river and St. Croix Falls. On April 5, 1854, the family of four moved into a barn at the top of the hill, where they would live while the family's new, permanent home was being built. This house was designed to look like Mary Jane's childhood home in Maine. Stylistically, Mary Jane's house in Taylors Falls resembles that of her parent's home in Bloomfield; however, this new house was clearly larger and grander because of the Folsoms' wealth and status in the Midwest. During the construction, the Folsoms took another trip to Maine, and by June 1855, they had returned and settled into their new house.<sup>45</sup>

As mistress of her own household, Mary Jane was able to hire women to help with her daily chores. Mary Jane awoke every morning to the sound of the rooster crowing. She then made her way around the house, completing morning chores before breakfast. Everyone ate breakfast in shifts in the kitchen—first the men, then the children, and finally Mary Jane and her hired girls. When the morning meal ended, she gave her children their chores for the day.<sup>46</sup>

Mary Jane and her hired girls were also responsible for the other chores in the house, which they performed on a weekly rotation. Mondays were the most labor-intensive days because they were dedicated to laundry. Early in the day, Mary Jane and her help would start the boilers and the stoves to heat water for washing. Since the stoves were on, they also cooked the week's supply of baked beans. The women scrubbed, squeezed, and rinsed the clothes before

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<sup>44</sup> Nelson, "In Search," 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Nelson, "In Search-Part II," 9-10..

hanging them outside to dry. Then they used the leftover water to wash the floors. Tuesdays were devoted to ironing, and Wednesdays were spent mending and sewing. The house's baking was done on Thursdays, and Fridays were dedicated to completing other assorted chores that needed to be finished.<sup>47</sup> Seasonal chores were added to the list whenever necessary.<sup>48</sup>

Mary Jane and her hired girls also cooked the mid-day meal, which was the largest of the day. It usually consisted of meat, potatoes, seasonal vegetables, and fruit pie. The evening meal was lighter and usually consisted of leftovers from the mid-day meal. Any food that remained after the evening meal was fed to the chickens.<sup>49</sup>

Mary Jane especially loved the new house on Angel Hill because she was able to be mistress of her own house. She no longer rented or boarded from others, so she was able to make her own decisions about how the house should look and how it would be run. She writes in a letter from June 19, 1855, "We shall move in to our house in a few weeks it is all finished now but painting + hanging the doors....," and this suggests her involvement in this aspect of house building.<sup>50</sup>

With the house on Angel Hill complete, Mary Jane had a home large enough and grand enough that she felt comfortable inviting family from Maine for visits. The Folsoms welcomed many of Mary Jane's family members to the house on Angel Hill. In the summer of 1856, Mary Jane's sister Catherine (Cad) Weston came to stay with the Folsoms. Pregnant, Cad came to Taylors Falls allegedly for the health benefits of Minnesota, which included dry air to prevent tuberculosis and escape from malaria,<sup>51</sup> but in reality to escape her abusive husband. Cad gave

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<sup>47</sup> Thurman.

<sup>48</sup> Nelson, "In Search-Part II," 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> William Henry Carman Folsom and Mary Jane Folsom, June 19, 1855, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 68.

birth to her baby in August 1856, but the child died soon after. In September, Cad committed suicide by jumping off the bridge that connected Taylors Falls and St. Croix Falls. Mary Jane and her favorite brother Ed (who was also visiting) had to deal with the entire event themselves because W.H.C. was away on business. Cad's body was not found for a month; once it was recovered, Ed paid \$8 for her coffin.<sup>52</sup>

Ed settled in Taylors Falls as the postmaster. Only a few months after Cad's death, tragedy again struck the Folsom family when Ed also committed suicide. He sent a letter to W.H.C. dated April 28, 1857, in which he wrote:

Circumstances beyond my controll [*sic.*] have prompted me to take a course which the world will condemn. I shall be made the subject of comments harsh unfeeling and ungenerous—I am about to die...May God bless you... For all your kindness as well as for my sister Marys I am not forgetful [*sic.*]. I go but a little while before you.<sup>53</sup>

This letter shows that Ed knew that his decision would not be understood by others in the community and that he was grateful for all that W.H.C. and Mary Jane had given him.

In less than a year, Mary Jane had lost two of her siblings to suicide, but despite these tragedies, life continued for Mary Jane and her family on Angel Hill. Wyman, Mary Jane's older son was now 18 years old, and spent most of his time working for his father. When the Civil War began, only three years after Minnesota gained statehood, Wyman, like many Minnesotans, volunteered and fought in the Union army. During (and as a consequence of) the war, railways came to Minnesota in 1862. St. Paul and Minneapolis were connected, and by the end of the war in 1865, 200 miles of track had been laid in Minnesota. After the war, prospering Minnesota began to expand its railways. St. Paul was connected to Chicago in 1867, and by 1880 Minnesota

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<sup>52</sup> Nelson, "In Search-Part II," 11-12.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



had over 3,000 miles of track.<sup>54</sup> The extensive railway system quickly became the preferred form of transportation for those hoping to settle in the Midwest. Trains were an improvement on boats (including steamboats up the Mississippi), which were the previous mode of transportation to and inside Minnesota.<sup>55</sup>

During the Civil War, Minnesotans experienced sharp conflicts between white settlers and one group of American Indians, the Dakota, in what is now known as the Dakota Conflict. Tensions began to emerge in the early 1850s as the expansionist goals of the American settlers came into conflict with the American Indians' determination to keep their land. The conflict first became a formal issue in 1851 when the first governor of the state of Minnesota Alexander Ramsey began bargaining with the Dakota for their land. Knowing that they had little choice, the Dakota signed the treaty of Traverse des Sioux, which removed the Dakota from their land and placed them on reservations. They were also tricked into signing what was known as the trader's paper, which took tribal funds to repay the Dakota's debts to fur traders. The Dakota were then put on a reservation on the Minnesota River, so they would trade with St. Paul rather than St. Louis.<sup>56</sup> Battles began in 1862 and occurred in the southwest part of the state. Ft. Abercromby, Wood Lake, Birch Coulee, Redwood Ferry, Fort Ridgely, and New Ulm all witnessed violence. Both sides committed gruesome atrocities, and the settlers called for destruction of all of the Dakota. The conflict ended with noncombatant American Indians sent to a camp outside of Fort Snelling, and all warriors sent to Mankato to be hung in America's largest mass execution.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 127 and 139.

<sup>55</sup> Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 5-7.

<sup>56</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 108-113.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Lethert Wingerd, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 301-322.

The Dakota were not the only American Indian group to suffer the consequences of white Minnesota's expansionism. The Ojibwe also signed a treaty with Alexander Ramsey and the Minnesota Territory's government. They lost their land from Lake Superior to the Red River, though they still had access to the northwest and north central parts of their territory. Later, after Minnesota became a state, the Ojibwe lost more land, including the Red River Valley.<sup>58</sup>

Surprisingly, Mary Jane Folsom did not write about the conflicts with American Indians in her letters. She lived far away from the violence in southern and western Minnesota, but she would have known about events which occurred at Fort Snelling. Also, American Indians lived in the St. Croix River Valley, so she and her husband would have interacted with them on some level. Mary Jane might have ignored American Indians in her letters for many intertwining reasons including a lack of direct contact, fear of different people, or belief that her family would be uninterested in them.

When the Dakota Conflict and Civil War were both over, Wyman returned to Taylors Falls to work for his father, but he was a changed person. Because of his experiences in the war, he developed "soldier's heart"--what today is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He began drinking alcohol, which his devout Methodist father condemned (though not so strongly as to disinherit him; on his father's death Wyman inherited the family home and businesses). Mary Jane's younger son Frank was more studious and academic than his brother; he graduated from Hamline University in 1870. However, in 1881 at the age of 28 he died of meningitis. His parents, especially his father, were devastated.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout Mary Jane's life, the Folsoms had successfully navigated many of the economic panics that spread across the country. During the 1893 Panic, they were not so lucky;

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<sup>58</sup> Lass, *Minnesota*, 114.

<sup>59</sup> Thurman.

though they were able to keep their house, they lost almost all of their fortune. Three years later, in 1896, Mary Jane Folsom died quietly in her home on Angel Hill at the age of 78. She had been married to W.H.C. Folsom for 55 years, had lived in the Midwest for 55 years, and had raised 2 children. She was buried in the Kahbakong Cemetery in Taylors Falls.<sup>60</sup>

## Historiography

Mary Jane Folsom's life is situated at a number of historiographically liminal spaces. First, we can see her as a Midwesterner. Her location in the Midwest put her on the border between East and West. Geography plays an important role in defining the boundary of the Frontier, though the exact location of this boundary is unclear. Minnesota and the other Midwestern states were unique because they lay between the East and the far West. The Midwest acted as its own unique Frontier, so some scholars have chosen to study it specifically. Other writers have seen the Midwest as part of the larger general Frontier dialogue and have included it with studies of the far West.

Second, we can focus on Mary Jane's gender. Mary Jane's story of the Frontier falls into a growing discussion of the lives of women on the Frontier. Before the 1960s, the study of expansion into the American West was the study of men. Like many other histories, Frontier history had few references to women. As social revolutions spread, the historical community studying Frontier history began to become more inclusive, and scholars began studying the experiences of women and people of color in the West.<sup>61</sup> Since the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the discussion about women and the Frontier has evolved from an initial emphasis on documenting women's existence and contributions to social and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Bibliographical Essays*, Rev ed., (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1998), 1.

cultural analysis of ordinary women and gender. Later works focused on comparing the roles of women and men and strived to demonstrate the importance of women in the Frontier.

Among the earlier works that focused on documenting and celebrating women on the Frontier was *Women of Minnesota*, edited by Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (1977, revised 1998). The book is a collection of essays about individual women first while Minnesota was a territory then after it achieved statehood. The collection aims to demonstrate the importance of women in Minnesota history and disprove the then-dominant scholarly idea that all women strived to follow the “Cult of True Womanhood.” This idea upholds the home as the women's circle and emphasized “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” but this book instead argues that some women did not follow the “Cult of True Womanhood.” The collection focuses on some of the most notable Minnesota “women achievers” in many fields including education, volunteerism, and journalism.<sup>62</sup> It is an important part of the early scholarship on women in Minnesota. However it does not explore the lives of typical Minnesotan woman. It celebrates women, but does not make an argument about them.

Similarly, Walker Wyman’s 1972 book *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier* celebrates Frontier women. Like *Women of Minnesota*, Wyman’s work is an attempt to redress the lack of attention to women in history by telling one woman’s story in the Midwest Frontier. It uses the letters and journals of Grace Fairchild who arrived in South Dakota in 1898 to reconstruct and narrate her life. Wyman uses his narrative to illustrate that some women were able to use their circumstances in the West to pursue opportunities they did not have in the East.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Stuhler and Kreuter, *Women of Minnesota*, 2-5.

<sup>63</sup> Walker D. Wyman, *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier*, (River Falls: University of Wisconsin-River Falls Press 1972), vi.

These books were important, but they did not spur much immediate further research. It was two decades before more work on Frontier women appeared. In the 1990s and 2000s there was a new wave of publications on Frontier women. These studies are more analytical and less celebratory than the previous works and focused on the experiences of average women instead of exceptional women. Furthermore, these works considered groups rather than individuals, and speak more broadly to the experiences of women and their roles in Frontier society.

In her 1995 book *Riding Astride: The Frontier in Women's History*, Patricia Riley Dunlap critically examines the lives of women across the Frontier. The goal of her book is to disprove some of the ideas that scholars had developed about women on the Frontier—which, she argues, were based on the lives of extraordinary rather than typical nineteenth-century women and on assumptions rather than facts. Dunlap genders Frederick Jackson Turner's famous Frontier thesis, which holds that the availability of land and the primitive nature of pioneer life allowed for the creation of a new form of American democracy and culture. Dunlap argues that while Turner applied his argument only to the experiences of men, that women also had a specifically Frontier experience, in which they were able to reject the stereotypes of the era and to change social norms.<sup>64</sup>

According to Dunlap, Frontier women had far more freedom, power, and agency than their compatriots on the East Coast. Therefore, the Frontier provided better opportunities for women. On the industrialized East Coast of the nineteenth century, men worked outside of the home and had economic power, while women were confined to the home, lacking economic power but designated as guardians of the family. When the West was opened, people quickly discovered that the gender ideals they brought from the East could not last long in the new area.

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<sup>64</sup> Patricia Riley Dunlap, *Riding Astride: The Frontier in Women's History* (Denver: Arden, 1995), xiv.

Even during the journey to the Frontier, women gained and used skills—such as riding—that were inappropriately masculine in the East.<sup>65</sup> Famous female outlaws like Calamity Jane epitomized the Western woman defying female norms, but on a more quotidian level many women were able to work outside of the home without fear of social consequences, running inns, restaurants, hotels, boarding houses, and stores.<sup>66</sup> A few worked in professional settings including medicine, writing, poetry, journalism, or law; some were even able to own their own property. During the Civil War, Frontier women worked jobs that had previously been reserved for men, marking a cultural turning point. Divorce laws were more liberal in the West, and legislation in the West gave women more rights, including the right to vote, long before national suffrage was achieved in 1918.<sup>67</sup>

Like Dunlap, Julie Roy Jeffrey takes a generalized approach when studying women in the Frontier in her 1998 book *Frontier Women: “Civilizing” the West? 1840-1880*. Jeffrey also seeks to overturn stereotypes about white Frontier women and to demonstrate that women, too, built the Frontier. Women were influential because of their roles as the cultural and moral authorities, and middle-class women often tried to force their ideals on other groups that they encountered. Jeffrey argues that on the Frontier, women became not only the guardians of culture but also the creators of culture. In creating domesticity, they asserted influence over their families.<sup>68</sup> Women were expected to bring taming influences, and their homes enforced Eastern standards of behavior.<sup>69</sup> Female associations were instrumental in spreading Eastern ideals beyond the home and into the community. This was especially important because domesticity

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<sup>65</sup> Dunlap, *Riding Astride*, 4-7.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 65-77.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-32, 152-154.

<sup>68</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: “Civilizing” the West? 1840-1880*, Rev ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 5-7, 20, 50.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 134, 159-160.

was a key part of white assault on non-white cultures in the West. White women saw few positives in Indian culture, and thought the Indians had been “replaced by a superior race.”<sup>70</sup>

Both Dunlap and Jeffrey argue that women received more power while in the Frontier, but their reasons for this change are very different. Dunlap argues that Frontier conditions and challenges allowed women to break away from Eastern gender ideals, and this empowered women. Jeffrey argues that women gained power in the Frontier because they were the members of society dedicated to bringing Eastern culture to the Frontier through their role of domesticity.

*Homelands: How Women Made the West* (2010) by Virginia Scharff and Carolyn Brucken is a unique study of women in the West. It is the scholarly companion to a 2010 museum exhibit of the same name by the Autry National Center. This book traces cultural changes over time in three Frontier locations: Rio Arriba in New Mexico, the Front Range in Colorado, and Puget Sound in Washington State. Like Jeffrey, the authors of this book are interested in women’s roles as homemakers across cultures and races. Researching the Frontier with the assumption that the West was created both in tension and in tandem with the making and defending of homes allows scholars to see events differently and to show the importance of women in Western history. They argue that the home is an important, “potent” site of change, and that women expanded the borders of the home. According to the authors, the definition of “home” has been different in many places and times on the Frontier.<sup>71</sup> To pre-contact women in Rio Arriba, agriculture, pottery, and architecture were all part of home. As whites arrived, Native women tried to maintain sustainable communities by manipulating encounters with whites, despite being the subjects of brutality. Even under European rule, Native women tried to keep

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 72, 109-110.

<sup>71</sup> Virginia Scharff and Carolyn Brucken, *Homelands: How Women Made the West*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1-2, 7.

their homes connected to the land through adobe walls and planting.<sup>72</sup> While they eventually realized that the only way they could survive was to adapt to European customs, their art still tied them to the earth. White settler women who moved from the East to the West also needed to care for a home in a changing environment. In their case, they had to establish transient homes. These white settlers expanded their definition of home through volunteer societies in order to bring reforms and relief to the troubled streets.<sup>73</sup> In the Puget Sound, home was tied to water. Native women and men worked together to get water-based food, and once the fur trade came to the area, women played an important role in processing the furs.<sup>74</sup> In the nineteenth century, white women arrived in the area to make a home and began working in canneries, farms, hotels, boarding houses, and as seamstresses, cooks, waitresses, laundresses, and domestic servants. In each situation they needed to use water in some way. Later, women became consumers, and they chose to bring water into their homes in the form of electricity from hydroelectric dams.<sup>75</sup>

There are a smaller number of works that focus on women in the upper Midwest. These works for the most part have arguments and conclusions similar to those in the larger historiography of women in the American West. Glenda Riley's 1981 *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* bridges the gap between the older and new historiographies. According to Riley, most women in nineteenth-century Iowa spent fourteen to sixteen hour workdays in the domestic sphere of their homes. She explains that part of the reason the stories of ordinary women had not been discussed was because women did not have time to write, so the greatest challenge of studying these women is to find sources from them.<sup>76</sup> Riley stresses that the women

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<sup>72</sup> Scharff and Brucken, *Homelands*, 11-15,25-26.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, 60-68.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 95-98.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 103 and 119.

<sup>76</sup> Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience*, (Iowa State University Press, 1981), xii.



who went to the West were a varied and often ambitious group who became laborers, missionaries, teachers and occasionally even landowners to provide a civilizing influence to the otherwise wild Frontier. Riley argues that already married women who moved to the West were not simply acceding to their husband's wishes; their opinions regarding a potential move were more influential than had been previously realized, and they often expressed optimism about the move. When it was time to move to Iowa, both men and women were responsible for equipping the wagon (the most common mode of transportation in Iowa). While the men chose the type of wagon and included the tools that would be necessary for settlement, women created the cloth cover and filled the wagon with food, clothing, and medicine.<sup>77</sup> While on the trail women cared for the children but also did traditionally male tasks including driving the team, herding the stock, and rescuing wagons. When they arrived in Iowa women played the important role of making their new land home. They had to care for their families in unfamiliar and difficult circumstances.<sup>78</sup>

Riley's goal is to nuance and complicate our understanding of the ways that the cult of true womanhood operated during Western expansion. Early scholars held that women in the Frontier were discontented because living the ideal of a "true woman" was impossible in a Frontier environment. Riley argues that the idea of a "true woman" was only an ideal and was never actually practiced, even on the East Coast; therefore, women were not traumatized by their inability to achieve this ideal in the Frontier. Riley stress the need for more varied categories of women in Iowa beyond "saints in a sunbonnet" or "broken" women who lost their drive and zeal for life. These limited roles underestimate women's capabilities and distort the realities that women faced. Riley challenges the widely held belief that women "broke" while on the trail,

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<sup>77</sup> Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 5-6,14-15.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-26.

losing their previous personalities or dying. She argues that most women survived and were even strengthened by the process of successfully navigating the trials of travel, and as a consequence, women were seen as equally strong partners in settlement. Upon settling, men and women had to work together in order to create their new home and livelihood, and women contributed to the household economy through their labor, even though their work was not considered “gainful employment” by state authorities.<sup>79</sup>

Barbara Handy-Marchello agrees with many of Riley’s arguments in her book *Women of the Northern Plains: Gender & Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870-1930* (2005). Handy-Marchello’s study of the settlers in the Dakotas, like Riley’s study of the settlers in Iowa, demonstrates the importance of women and the blurred line between the home and the field. Handy-Marchello’s argument is that settler marriages included partnership as well as patriarchy, and because of this, Eastern understandings of marriage could not work, and women were able to challenge their state of social subordination.<sup>80</sup> On the East Coast, marriages were structured by patriarchy; wives were subordinate to men and were denied leadership positions. Settlers in the Dakotas quickly discovered that these norms were not compatible with a new environment in which women’s labor was necessary and most families depended on the work of both men and women. Within the home, women were providers as well as teachers and guardians of the family. Because the family’s security and wellbeing were so intimately tied to the farm’s productivity, men and women had to work together in order to benefit.<sup>81</sup> This economic equality shaped the territory’s legislation, especially its divorce laws.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 28-30, 51-59.

<sup>80</sup> Barbara Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains: Gender & Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870-1930* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2005), 6.

<sup>81</sup> Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains*, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 46.

Women could still be subject to their husband's demands, and domestic violence was not uncommon. However, when partnerships were economically equal, couples tended to be happier and have respect and affection for each other. Women performed tasks that were necessary for the family to survive including working outside the home, feeding the family, keeping other women in their debt, paying mortgages, selling surplus food, working with animals, producing rugs, and building homes, schools, and churches. Women in the East would have been unable to work in the fields for fear of disgrace, but women in the West shared common hardships, allowing them to bend gendered rules without suffering social stigma. Outside of the home, women were the center of community building. They exchanged labor and equipment with other families and built personal communal relationships including women's organizations.<sup>83</sup>

Histories of women in Minnesota and Wisconsin tend to follow the same patterns as works about the Midwest and the general Frontier. Scholars who study Minnesota and Wisconsin focus on gender roles on the East Coast and the Midwest to demonstrate that some women on the Frontier were able to have opportunities that had previously been unavailable and that women—especially women who were able to own property—were essential to Frontier economies. In her article “Minnesota Women Homesteaders: 1863-1889” (1989), Anna Webb investigates the experiences of women in Minnesota who had agricultural plots of land in their own name. Webb argues that her examples demonstrate that on the Frontier, women were able to achieve status, which had previously been only allowed to men.<sup>84</sup>

Women in Minnesota who owned land acted outside of traditional domestic roles because they appeared on the census, gained economic independence and personal dignity, and developed

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 50-64, 100-108.

<sup>84</sup> Anna B. Webb, “Minnesota Women Homesteaders: 1863-1889,” *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1989), 115, accessed December 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787567>.

the West. Most female landowners were either divorced or widowed and did not inherit their land but instead applied for it directly with their own name. Never-married women also played an important role. This group, which rose from 5.4% of Minnesota's female population in 1860s to 28.6% in the 1880s saw themselves as individuals, not as connected to a man. According to Webb, this changed the status of women and allowed them to have more opportunities. Although the average acreage for female landowners was fairly small at only 24.3 acres, 97.4% of plots owned by women were productive enough to be considered farms, and that productivity increased as women improved their farms and made substantial investments into their farms. Even women who did not have their own land contributed, caring for the family's dairy, poultry, and garden, and occasionally doing heavy labor in the fields. Widowed and divorced women often did better financially than they had done when they were married because of the thrift and industry (as well as a healthy economy) which they developed while helping their husbands on the farm. Farming kept older women safe. They were able to stay out of the poor house and live in their own house instead of staying with relatives. This sense of security was unusual for nineteenth-century women who did not have a man to care for them. The conflict between the ideology of female domesticity and what was necessary to survive resulted in a modification of the ideal of domesticity for women in the Frontier.<sup>85</sup>

Like Webb's article, Joan Jensen's book *Calling this Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925* (2006) focuses on women's economic capabilities. However, unlike Webb, who focused on the small group of women who owned land, Jensen examines average women in Wisconsin—most of whom did not own land—during Wisconsin's economic transition from a lumber to a farming dominated economy. Ambitiously, she looks at both white

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<sup>85</sup> Webb, "Minnesota Women Homesteaders," 115-126.

and Native women. Jensen argues that as Wisconsin's economy transitioned from lumber to dairying and later to tourism, women were key because they preserved their respective cultures while adapting to change.<sup>86</sup>

Although white women did not cut down trees, they were essential to the lumber industry.<sup>87</sup> They grew gardens, prepared food, made clothes, cleaned living areas, laundered clothes, kept boarding houses and shops, and provided sex for lumbermen.<sup>88</sup> Then during the Civil War era the economy switched from lumber to farming, and women worked the farms because almost all of the men were off fighting in the war. After the war, women began processing milk, making butter and cheese, and raising chickens, pigs, and calves (Jensen 9, 140). Young women often had to leave family homes to search for domestic and white-collar jobs in the cities. Despite the distance, many groups, including the Polish community, kept strong ties to family and to traditional cultural practices.<sup>89</sup>

Native women also faced dramatic changes to their traditional lifestyle. When white settlers arrived, Native women in Wisconsin mastered subsistence farming, produced goods to be traded including food surpluses, tended gardens, created alternative food sources, and produced crafts to sell.<sup>90</sup> As the tourism industry in Wisconsin expanded, Native women earned a living by selling beads to collectors of "Indian curios." Because of this Native women were able to keep part of their culture while still attempting to survive in a changing economy. Native religion was also altered because of the introduction of Christianity. Christianity quickly mixed with

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<sup>86</sup> Joan M. Jensen, *Calling this Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2006), x.

<sup>87</sup> Jensen, *Calling this Place Home*, 51.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 437.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-37.

traditional culture, creating new practices.<sup>91</sup> The installation of the American Boarding School program in which Native children were forced to attend American-style boarding schools complicated the ability for Native people to successfully pass on their culture, though they were still able to do so through oral tradition.<sup>92</sup>

Jensen's work is unusual in that it focuses entirely on women, rather than comparing the roles of men and women as so much recent scholarship does. Riley does this by arguing that the work of women was just as important as the labor of men, which contradicts earlier scholars. Dunlap, Handy-Marchello, and Webb compare the work of women to the work of men to show that women would do "men's work," and in so doing broke from the gender stereotypes of the nineteenth century.

As is evident from this survey, recent scholarship has focused on the social and economic history of typical, non-wealthy women. In contrast to the 1977 *Women of Minnesota*, which focuses on female achievers, none of the recent scholarship is on wealthy or exceptional women. Instead, it focuses on average women who often worked to survive. Furthermore, most scholarship, especially that on the Midwest, Wisconsin, and Iowa, focuses on women who worked in agriculture. Jensen looks briefly at women during Wisconsin's lumber era, but she focuses on the decline of the lumber industry and the rise of Wisconsin's dairy agriculture and tourism industries. Finally, all of these works focus on the lives of immigrant women on the American Frontier, rather than on the lives of American-born women (this may be another reaction to previous assumptions that most Frontier settlers had been born in the United States).

These works have set a strong foundation for understanding the lives of average women in the American Frontier, but more work remains to be done. In particular, we have much still to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 73-75, 318.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 277-292.

learn about the racial and socio-economic diversity of women in the West. Riley does mention that black women lived on the Frontier, but Jensen is the only scholar of women in the Midwest to write about both white settler and Native women. The women discussed in these scholarly works have all been from similar socio-economic classes, but more research needs to be done on other groups, like wealthy women. Also, women appeared in all industries in the Frontier, but there has been little research beyond women in agriculture and mining. Although some of these industries like lumber were predominately male, women were involved and need to be studied. Also, it is time to research women beyond their local homes and communities. Women, like male settlers, were part of a massive movement trend. These books did not discuss how people moved, assuming the traditional East to West model. We need to see how women created and maintained social and culture connections between the East and the West.

Mary Jane Folsom's life allows us to address many of these issues. As a wealthy but otherwise unexceptional woman living in the St. Croix River Valley's lumber economy, Mary Jane's letters tell a different narrative of Frontier life. She did not own her own land or have to work in order to survive. She had the means to strive towards the "cult of domesticity" ideal. Mary Jane's correspondence with her family allows us to analyze the patterns of movement, showing that it cannot be explained with a simple model. Her unique location and relative wealth allowed her time to write letters and communicate with her family in both the East and the West, providing insight into her Frontier reality.

### Primary Source Analysis

When previous scholars used sources generated by women, they did so to understand what women were like. This paper uses a different approach. Women are not defined solely by

their gender, and sources about women's lives can tell us about more than gender. This project reads Mary Jane Folsom's letters to understand and analyze the ways that material culture travelled between and linked East and West. Settlers did not simply arrive from the East and settle in the West with their culture, nor did the settlers' cultures remain stagnant. Culture in the West had its roots in Eastern ideals but developed into a new, unique form because of the challenges of settling. Furthermore, this new culture was constantly reconnected to the East via a flow of people, objects, and ideas.

Being so far away from family, friends, and familiar places in the East would have caused emotional strain. Some settlers, including Mary Jane Folsom, suffered from loneliness. In a letter from September 23, 1849, she describes to her brother Ed how her husband would often leave her alone. When he was "down river," she "Had a sudden streak of homesickness come across me." When he returned home, he stayed for only two weeks before heading back into the woods, "Leaving one poor girl alone."<sup>93</sup> Because of her husband's career, Mary Jane spent much of her time alone, far away from her family and friends. She felt lonely in the Frontier, especially when her husband left her alone. Also, early in her life in the Midwest, Mary Jane felt a homesickness that her life in the Frontier could not soothe; she missed her family back in the East. Being away from her family and being away from people in general are two separate issues, but they are both important mental strains that Mary Jane faced on the Frontier.

However, there were more ways to form connections besides physical proximity. The relationship between the East and the West was far more complicated than has previously been understood because people, items, and ideas travelled between the East and the West in many

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<sup>93</sup> William Henry Carman Folsom and Mary Jane Folsom to Edward P. Wyman, September 23, 1849, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 2.



ways. The move was often not in a linear direction from East to West. Instead, movement flowed in all directions, and it often moved back and forth across the continent.

Mary Jane Folsom's letters reveal how the people she knew moved and spread ideas. These letters between Mary Jane and her family were important to the senders and recipients because they kept family members connected, despite the long distances between them. Family members used letters to keep each other informed of events and ideas that they considered to be important. Almost every letter was ended with a request for a letter in return. For example, in her letter to her brother Ed, Mary Jane requested that he, "Write as soon as you get this..." When writing to Mary Jane, on June 22, 1851 Ed wrote that Mary Jane should, "Write very soon."<sup>94</sup> Mary Jane's family was spread all across the country. Letters to and from Wisconsin, Minnesota, California, New York, and Maine demonstrated the dramatic effects of Westward expansion. Mary Jane and her family continued to write each other because this connection was so important.

### *Family and Friends*

As we saw above, Mary Jane herself moved several times in her lifetime; to Prairie du Chien in the early 1840s after her marriage; then into the St. Croix River Valley, first in Stillwater, Minnesota and then in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin; and finally across the St. Croix River to Taylors Falls, Minnesota.

Most of Mary Jane's family remained in Maine: her father; brother Theodore; and sisters Eliza, Clara, and Hellen. Only one of her sisters, Cad, moved away from Maine. She married a man from the American South and moved there to be with him in the mid-1850s. Mary Jane wrote a letter from June 19, 1855 that she "Had a letter from Cad last week she was well is

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<sup>94</sup> Edward P. Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, June 22, 1851, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1-3.

keeping house + is fast feeling into Southern customs + habits.<sup>95</sup> This statement shows that Cad was adjusting to her new culture and to her role as a wife.

Frank, one of Mary Jane's brothers, moved to California during the California Gold Rush. When Ed went to California, he searched for Frank; in his letter from January 23, 1854 from Columbia, California, Ed wrote to Mary Jane that he "could not find sure whereabouts of Frank I think however that I am on the right track to find him. Should I succeed I will inform you be assured."<sup>96</sup> In this letter, Ed tells Mary Jane that he is actively searching for their brother, and he promises to inform Mary Jane when he finds Frank. This is important because it shows that Ed is trying to reconnect locally with one of his family members and continue his long-distance connection with another family member. On May 26, 1854, Ed wrote to inform Mary Jane that he had connected with Frank and had received a letter from him.<sup>97</sup> Finally on October 24, 1854, Ed briefly writes:

After a long time I found where he was located, and he wrote me to come and join him as he had taken up a nice claim for me...after securing the second invitation, I did go, but insisted of from \$8 to \$20 and found that two dollars was the average. The Boy was in debt considerably and it took until the first of Oct[ober] to [ease] up.<sup>98</sup>

Mary Jane's brother Samuel also went to California. Before deciding to go he wrote to Mary Jane on January 25, 1852 to tell her that he was not ready to settle down in Maine and:

I think I had better emigrate to california for a short time at least I think I can almost hear you say foolish fellow... I have not concluded to go without due consideration and reflection I do not expect to get rich without exertion in California or any other part of creation where my lot may chance to cast me, but some places are better than others to

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<sup>95</sup> Folsom, William Henry Carman and Mary Jane Folsom, June 19, 1855, 2.

<sup>96</sup> Edward P. Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, January 23, 1854, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1-2.

<sup>97</sup> Edward P. to Mary Jane Folsom, May 26, 1854, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

<sup>98</sup> Edward P. Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, October, 24, 1854, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1.

acquire property in... If I go to the digging at all I think I shall start somewhere in march...<sup>99</sup>

Samuel's acknowledgement of his sister's concerns and his assurance that he would consider the decision properly before making any decisions indicates that her opinions play an important role in his decision to move to the Californian frontier. In the same letter Samuel also states that, "I mean to see your place [in Minnesota] some time," showing that family can be one force pulling people to visit and experience the Frontier.<sup>100</sup>

Mary Jane's brother Ed was the most mobile of his siblings. His letter from June 22, 1851 indicates that he is living in New York City, paying \$2.75 for his board. He says, "My health never was better and I think I would like a warm climate at least warmer than Maine."<sup>101</sup> In his letter he expresses his fatigue from exploring the city. He also indicates his weariness for his work in New York. He says, "I'm sick of working out and being ground down...to work for nothing for Bosses who make all the project..."<sup>102</sup> Ed chose to leave his job in New York, and by December 4, 1853 was ready to depart for California. By November 7, 1855, the Folsoms were encouraging Ed to return to the East or maybe even come to Taylors Falls where he eventually settled.<sup>103</sup>

As the lives of the Wyman family demonstrate, the settlement patterns of Americans moving into the Frontier was not simply from East to West. Their letters show that Cad moved

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<sup>99</sup> Samuel H. Wyman to William Henry Carman Folsom, Mary Jane Folsom, and Wyman X Folsom, January 25, 1852, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 2-3.

<sup>100</sup> Wyman, Samuel H., January 25, 1852, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Eliza Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, June 2, 1851, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Wyman, Eliza,, June 2, 1851, 1-2.

<sup>103</sup> William Henry Carman Folsom and Mary Jane Folsom to Edward P. Wyman, November 7, 1855, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

from East to the South and then eventually westward into the Midwest. Frank and Samuel moved from the East all the way to the far West. Edward moved from the East to the Far West and then settled in the Midwest. Mary Jane moved from the East to the West and then North to Taylors Falls, and even after she was settled she continued to visit the East. The movements of people varied; even within families individuals chose to take different paths. People moved in many directions because of a multitude of factors, and during the Gold Rush in California, economics was an important driving force for movement. In his letter from January 25, 1852, Samuel writes about the many men from Maine who were leaving to find gold. He writes, “There is a great rush from this state for the gold diggers this winter, I believe about thirty young men have gone from Bloomfield within a year.”<sup>104</sup> Later in the letter he claims that some men from California have also been returning or even leaving again despite difficult passage:

Quite a number have returned from California who went from this vicinity, some have gone back again, the most of them have done better than they could have done here. The climate of California is considered by them very good. They frequently get sick and some die in going or coming in consequence of the steamers being jammed [*sic*] full of passengers and not receiving that attention which they should secure.<sup>105</sup>

The promises of gold lured men away from the East to try their luck at finding gold in California. When men failed to reach their goals, they returned to the East. Then those who still failed to make a successful living in the East returned to California to try again.

Economics was not the only factor that influenced people to move. In the case of the Wyman family, family and friend connections played an important role in their movement and settlement patterns. Upon arriving in California, Ed—according to his January 23, 1854 letter—immediately began searching for his brother Frank.<sup>106</sup> By May 26, 1854 he had heard from

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<sup>104</sup> Wyman, Samuel H., January 25, 1852, 3.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>106</sup> Wyman, Edward P., January 23, 1854, 1..

Frank, who was living thirty miles from Marysville, California, and who asked Ed to join him there.<sup>107</sup> Ed dropped his work and followed Frank. He did not stay long, though. According to his letter from October 24, 1854, when Ed arrived to see Frank's operation was far in debt, paying men only an average of 2 dollars rather than the 8 or 20 that Ed expected. Meanwhile, Ed's previous claim had been successful, but he had sold it before his departure. Ed estimated that his decision to go to Frank might have cost him as much as \$900.<sup>108</sup> In order to avoid economic ruin, Ed decided to return to his land, leaving his brother. Ed might have chosen to join his brother because he knew Frank had been there longer and hopefully was better established. Otherwise, their family connection might have encouraged Ed to join with Frank in order to help each other. Trust might have also been important to them because they could have been able to trust each other more than other people living in California.

Gold and Frank were two forces keeping Ed in California, and Mary Jane was the force pulling him back towards the East. In her letter from January 29, 1855 she tells Ed that when he comes back from California, "I hope it will be with your pockets full but if you do not succeed in filling your pockets in California I trust you have independence enough to come home again + laden our hearts with your own precious self which is prized by your friends far before Gold or Silver."<sup>109</sup> The idea of bringing back gold would have been important to Ed either financially or personally as a way to measure his success, but Mary Jane insisted that that he was important to her and their family, even if he did not succeed in California. He was always welcome to return East or move to find opportunities in Minnesota. Her opinions held power over him, allowing her the potential to influence him to return from California to locations more accessible to the rest of

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<sup>107</sup> Wyman, Edward P., May 26, 1854, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Wyman, Edward P., October, 24, 1854, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Mary Jane Folsom to Edward P. Wyman, January 29, 1855, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1-2.

the family. In a later letter from November 7, 1855 Mary Jane continued her attempts to convince Ed to come to Minnesota by having W.H.C. offer him a job; then she encouraged him to influence their brother Samuel to return as well, writing, “Now mind what I say don’t come + leave Sam in California[.] Try persuade him to come too.”<sup>110</sup> In this case Mary Jane tried to use her influence to gain Ed’s support so they could work together to bring back Samuel.

Mary Jane was not only influential in bringing her brothers back from the far West, she was also interested in having her family who still lived in the East visit her. The lack of a close familial network around her frustrated her, so she often asked her family to make the trip to Minnesota to visit her. Years before he went to California, Mary Jane wrote to Ed on April 1, 1851 to ask him to visit her writing, “Ed I think you + Sam had better come out... William thinks he can’t live anywhere else but here + I am equally as certain that I can’t live much longer without some of my folks” (1). A major cause for Mary Jane’s unhappiness was her longing for her family to join her, so she tried to convince them to come visit. Again she acted as a factor for movement.

Even when family was not always immediately accessible, mutual friends were almost always nearby, and writers of letters usually included an update for the reader. This was important to them because it strengthened connections and support networks. Usually the update was brief. For example Mary Jane wrote to Ed on May 7, 1848 that “Ward Folsom + Seth Lawyer are both well + driving logs on the St. Croix.”<sup>111</sup> In his first letter after his arrival in California dated January 23, 1854, Ed briefly informed Mary Jane that he took the time to visit

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<sup>110</sup> Folsom, William Henry Carman and Mary Jane Folsom, November 7, 1855, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Mary Jane Folsom to Edward P. Wyman, May 7, 1848, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 2.

two married women whom they had known previously.<sup>112</sup> Eliza's letters tended to provide longer updates. In her letter from March 5, 1854, Eliza updated Mary Jane about their father, Clara, Samuel, Hellen, Cad, Ed, Abraham; their family friends Levi, Capt. Weston, George Frank, and the White family; and the ill children in the village.<sup>113</sup>

People moved in many ways and in many directions, not just from East to West. There were a number of factors that influenced them to move including the hope to earn a living and the influence of family either encouraging them into the Frontier or welcoming them back home in the East. Because they could choose where to move, settlers almost always had some friends and family already there, and when settlers visited these acquaintances they reported the update back home, strengthening their social network. People could not always make the long journey in or out of the Frontier, but when people could not physically join their friends and family, they sent objects instead.

### *Objects of Memory*

Objects can have many meanings. To a researcher studying how material culture moves, they are examples. The objects named and discussed in Mary Jane's letters are probably only a small fraction of those that moved between her and her family. They are also only the objects that are important to her, not her husband. This is important to consider because her letters do not discuss the types of technology that might have been brought to Minnesota to help the lumber industry. The objects Mary Jane references were usually those of sentimental rather than economic value; they had meaning only to Mary Jane and her family, but they are representative of how meaningful objects travelled between the East and the West.

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<sup>112</sup> Wyman, Edward P., January 23, 1854, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Eliza Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, March 5, 1854, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1-3.

Objects do not inherently have meaning; instead, we are conditioned as a culture to understand objects from a certain perspective, and stories we attach to objects give them further meaning. According to English scholar Susan Stewart, objects have the capacity “to serve as traces of authentic experiences”; that is, objects are able to remind possessors of previous experiences through the narrative symbolized by the object.<sup>114</sup> Often these narratives are only known to the sender and receiver, but they are still powerful because objects “will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regards to those origins.”<sup>115</sup> Therefore, objects only carry meaning because of the stories associated with them, which the sender and receiver share. Studying objects of the past presents a challenge because often the stories associated with the objects are gone, and only the physical objects remains. However, scholars like Stewart have shown that objects work in tandem with narratives, so we can still interpret objects as meaningful reminders of stories and as methods to remind one another of their experiences and family connections.

Those individuals sending or receiving objects associated many meanings with the objects they sent. Sending objects though the mail was expensive and involved a certain amount of effort, so we can infer that they were important. These items were tidings of home, family heirlooms, memories, and representations of a lifestyle, status symbols, and technology. Some items might have multiple meanings. These objects were a way for the Wymans and Folsoms to support each other, despite the long distance between them. Objects could help ease the emotional hardship of living without important family connections on the Frontier or at home. Because objects could not (despite the developing transportation infrastructure) be easily

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<sup>114</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 135.

<sup>115</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 136.



transported, letters were the most common objects to travel between the East and West. Other objects were especially symbolic because they were relatively difficult to send.

Some of the objects that Mary Jane or her family mentioned were small, and the writers barely gave a line thanking the sender. For example, in her letter to Mary Jane from March 5, 1854 Eliza simply writes, “Many thanks for that present you sent me by Edward.”<sup>116</sup> This unnamed gift was still important because it demonstrates that distance did not always act as a barrier to family connections. Mary Jane still thought about her sister, even though they were far apart, and the gift represents this commitment to remembering each other.

Gifts may have also represented gratitude for kindness. In his last letter before his departure to California on December 4, 1853, Ed sent Mary Jane a letter in which he compares the weather of Minnesota when he left to the weather in Maine when he arrived, revealing that he had just been in Minnesota.<sup>117</sup> Later in the letter he says, “Enclosed please find the key of my Fiddle Box, which you will please give William I wish him to sell the Box and you will please accept the proceeds and invest them as a present from me.”<sup>118</sup> Ed gave the key and fiddle case to W.H.C. as reciprocation for his hospitality when Ed visited Minnesota.

Memory remained important to the Wyman-Folsom family in times of hardship. Mary Jane’s September 26, 1856 letter to her sister Clara described her experience in losing their sister Cad to suicide. She writes, “I did not know what to make of it all + would think she only did it to tease [*sic*] me Clara there is no satisfaction in think [*sic*] or talking about it I feel that did all I

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<sup>116</sup> Wyman, Eliza, March 5, 1854, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Edward P. Wyman to Mary Jane Folsom, December 4, 1853, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 2.

<sup>118</sup> Wyman, Edward P., December 4, 1853, 3.

could to make her happy + to look for better days...”<sup>119</sup> At the end of the letter she writes that she has already sent some of Cad’s clothes to the East.<sup>120</sup> Part of this decision might have been practical—reusing clothing instead of letting it go to waste. Another reason for sending the clothes might have been sentimental. Mary Jane wanted to share the memory of Cad with their other sisters, so she sent her clothes to them.

Celebrations also represented important opportunities to send memories and connect the family. In 1855 Mary Jane attended Cad’s wedding in Maine. Mary Jane was still staying in her family’s home in Bloomfield, Maine when she wrote a letter to Ed (who still was in California) on January 29, 1855. In the letter she asks him if he received the piece of wedding cake that she had sent to him from the ceremony. It would have been impossible for Ed to return to Maine for the wedding, especially since Mary Jane states that the marriage “was quite sudden.”<sup>121</sup> Mary Jane sent the cake to symbolically include Ed in the celebrations, even though he could not physically attend. This was her way of including him in the family event.

In the same letter from January 29, 1855, Mary Jane updated Ed on one of his belongings and how it has been cared for by his family. When he was last in Minnesota, Ed apparently used to carry a piece of bone in his pocket to bring him luck. After he left, she found it in one of his pockets, and she “carried it in mine until I came home (Bloomfield, Maine) + Then Sam took it...”<sup>122</sup> She also states that she doesn’t “believe it does a bit of good unless it is to help him to love his Master for he trains this winter seven times hard[er] than he was wont to train,”<sup>123</sup> meaning the lucky bone would not be very helpful to Sam unless it helps Sam to love his

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<sup>119</sup> Mary Jane Folsom to Clara Wyman, September 26, 1856, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1-2.

<sup>120</sup> Folsom, Mary Jane, September 26, 1856, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Folsom, Mary Jane, January 29, 1855, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

supervisor, even though he forces Sam to work harder than ever before. Although Mary Jane did not believe that the bone was actually lucky, she still kept the bone safe by keeping it in her own pocket until it could be given to a better keeper. She cared for the bone and valued it in the way that Ed would have if he had still possessed it himself. By keeping the bone in her pocket, she was keeping a small memory of her brother, even though he was far away in California. She then transported that bone from Minnesota Eastward to Maine to be safely kept by her brother until Ed could return.

All of these objects maintained important connections between the sender and the receiver. They represented memories of each other, and these objects showed their receivers that the senders still remembered them, even though they were separated by a large distance. Even though the Wyman family could not usually be together physically, they could symbolically connect by sending each other objects, and this strengthened their family connection. Still, letters were the easiest form of communication, and as these letters travelled between the East and the West, they spread cultural ideas outside of their original locality.

### *Ideas of Culture*

When settlers came to the Frontier, they brought their own cultural understandings and standards with them. In many ways they tried to reconstruct their lives in the East from ideas they brought with them. Some of these attempts were highly visible like creating architecture that resembled the American architecture of the East. Fashion was also a visible effort to match the ideas of the East. Other attempts to conform to Eastern ideals were less overt, including having hired girls or following medical practices. These ideas were so ingrained into Eastern culture, settlers did not even think about these concepts when they arrived in the Frontier and used this framework to create the world around them.

Mary Jane and her family brought these ideas to her new home, like other Frontier settlers, especially when she was able to make a home of her own. After living for years in other people's homes or in small spaces, Mary Jane was finally able to keep her own, large home on Angel Hill in Taylors Falls. The home, which was finished in 1855, was reportedly inspired by Mary Jane's family home in Maine.<sup>124</sup> Although the styles of the houses are similar, Mary Jane's new house was significantly grander and clearly more expensive, representing her higher status as the wife of a lumber baron. This decision was directly influenced by the Folsoms' past in the East. The style of the house was deeply influenced by the buildings of the East's history, especially the Wyman family's home, but it was also adapted to the Folsom's new wealthy Midwestern status.

Other aspects of Mary Jane's life are less overt than building a house but still rooted in Eastern ideals. Keeping a large house like the one on Angel Hill properly would have taken a tremendous amount of work, so Mary Jane enlisted the help of hired girls to assist her in this work. She had as many as three hired girls working for her at once.<sup>125</sup> Although some women were happy to perform physical labor and leave Eastern comforts behind in exchange for more social freedom, that was not what Mary Jane wanted in her Frontier experience. The ability to have a maid was a feature of middle-class Eastern femininity. It was connected to the Eastern idea of the "cult of true womanhood." Using hired girls allowed women to fulfill their duties in the domestic sphere without performing manual labor, which was often common and necessary when women came to the West as they established their homestead. Middle-class women who could afford help had the social status symbol of free time, which was unavailable to those of the

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<sup>124</sup> Nelson, "In Search," 6.

<sup>125</sup> Thurman.

lower class.<sup>126</sup> Before the Civil War, having servants was mostly a phenomenon of the Eastern United States. Servants were common only in large urban areas east of the Mississippi River. Eventually the trend of having hired help spread Westward to cities like Chicago, but hiring domestic servants to work in a home that was far from any urban centers was not common. That she did so demonstrates Mary Jane's relative wealth and status, but it also demonstrates her commitment to Eastern ideals.<sup>127</sup>

Settlers brought ideals with them to the Frontier, but those ideas did not stay static upon arrival. Although once she settled in Taylors Falls Mary Jane was far away from major cultural hotspots, she often received the news and ideas of these places through the letters she received from elsewhere. She received the latest updates about fashion and medicine from the East, and she learned the news of her circle of friends and family as well as the national events and ideas.

Living far away from the fashion centers of the East, Mary Jane was still invested in following the trends of the East. While living in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin Mary Jane wrote to brag to her family about all of the nice new clothes that her husband purchased for her. In a letter from September 23, 1849 to her brother Ed she asked him to "Tell the girls that my foolish husband has been buying me lots of fine things this fall a silk dress + shawl + another silk fancy to wear on my shoulders for a cloak green satin run + white feathers..."<sup>128</sup> Clothes and fashions were important to her and she believed that the news of them would be impressive or meaningful to her sisters.

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<sup>126</sup> Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 6-7.

<sup>127</sup> Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 46.

<sup>128</sup> Folsom, William Henry Carman and Mary Jane Folsom, September, 23, 1849, 2.

In a later letter from April 1, 1851, Mary Jane explicitly asks for information about what the women of her family back East in Maine are wearing first by saying, “tell me what the girls wear this summer do they dress in black[?]” Then at the close she reminds Ed, “Don’t forget to tell me what the girls dress will you.”<sup>129</sup> In his next letter from June 22, 1851 Ed responded to her question about fashion and confirmed that women were wearing dark or black colors.<sup>130</sup> This information is not useful in understanding the types of clothing that Mary Jane wore, but it does indicate that cross-country discussions of fashion did occur and that Mary Jane was interested in knowing what the fashion trends of the East were.

Some of Mary Jane’s articles of clothing still exist, including one of her hoop skirts, which can give some insight into her fashion practices. The size and type of a hoop skirt acted as a “barometer” for measuring how fashionable the wearer was. Women who could afford a hoop skirt purchased one, and popular magazines for women including *Godey’s Lady’s Book* even suggested purchasing multiple hoop skirts for different occasions.<sup>131</sup> Mary Jane’s surviving hoop skirt is flat in front and full in the back; this style was popular only for a short time in the mid-1860s. Previously, in the 1850s and early 1860s, full hoop skirts were in style; by the end of the decade, hoop skirts had fallen out of fashion in preference to bustles.<sup>132</sup> That Mary Jane owned a style that was popular only briefly is informative. Because the popularity of this type of hoop skirt was so short, only a few years, Mary Jane would have had to act quickly in order to purchase it before it became unpopular. She must have followed the fashions of the East closely and invested in them.

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<sup>129</sup> Folsom, Mary Jane, April 1, 1851, 2.

<sup>130</sup> Wyman, Edward P., June 22, 1851, 3.

<sup>131</sup> Anita Stamper and Jill Condra, *Clothing through American History: The Civil War through the Gilded Age, 1861-1899*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 110-111.

<sup>132</sup> Priscilla Harris Dalrymple, *American Victorian Costume in Early Photographs* (New York: Dover, 1991).23.

When her sister Cad died, Mary Jane faced the question of mourning and the related question of mourning clothes. In a letter from September 28, 1856 to her sister Clara, she asks:

What do you think about dressing in Mourning[?] I for one don't want too [*sic*] again unless you all think it best[.] If the rest of you do I shall of course but don't like the idea of Black for mourning it don't make anything better does it<sup>133</sup>.

This issue is deeper than just worrying about clothes. Mary Jane was trying to balance the social norms of mourning and fashion and her belief that mourning clothes could not ease the loss of her sister. Mary Jane used her family connections in the East to help her decide the proper way to mourn their sister's loss.

Another piece of culture that was brought to the Midwest via letters was medicine. Because of her distance from any large cities, it would have been complicated for Mary Jane and her family to receive formal care when they were hurt or sick, but Mary Jane had received medical suggestions from the East through letters from her friends and family. On March 5, 1854 Eliza wrote to Mary Jane from Maine and updated her about their family's health. Luckily Mary Jane's family was well, suffering from only a couple of minor colds. However, other children in Eliza's community had become ill over the winter. They had contracted Canker rash, a disease related to scarlet fever. Eliza warned Mary Jane, "If the Canker rash comes into your family do not give any physic (a medicine) until the rash is gone for it is almost sure death if you do."<sup>134</sup> Such a warning would have been helpful for Mary Jane in case the diseases arrived in the Midwest and her family or others in the community contracted the disease. The medical experiences of those in the East could save the lives of those in the West if shared through letters.

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<sup>133</sup> Folsom, Mary Jane, September 26, 1856, 3-4.

<sup>134</sup> Wyman, Eliza, March 5, 1854, 1.

Concerned about Mary Jane's poor health, one of her acquaintances, M.C. Lord, wrote to her to inform her of medical opportunities that would help Mary Jane regain her health. In a January 28, 1861 letter Lord writes that for the past two years he or she had suffered from a bad cough and had an almost constant sore throat. Then Lord's lungs began to hemorrhage, causing them to lose strength. Lord also began to lose his or her appetite and have pains while coughing. Lord requested a drug from New York be sent to his or her residence in Missouri. Within three weeks, Lord began to feel considerably better. Lord states, "And now, dear Mary Jane feeling the confidence that I do in the Medicine I feel very anxious that you should try it. You can send for it—according to the directions either by mail or express."<sup>135</sup> The medicine reached Lord, "in about twelve days it would probably be a little longer in reaching your place..."<sup>136</sup> Still, this letter is more than just medical advice. It shows that other settlers, like Lord who lived in Missouri, utilized the medicine of the East. It outlines a way for Mary Jane to receive medicine directly from the East. Although the process would take longer than if she lived in Maine, Mary Jane still had access to the most modern medicine available. Furthermore, Mary Jane's money could buy her the Eastern experience that she wanted, instead of relying on local options.

In addition to fashion and medicine, letters brought ideas. In the era of expansion, letters played an important role in shaping the ideas and understandings of the West because they brought stories, which came to characterize the West. One of Ed's letters is written on a picture entitled "Sunday in the California diggings," suggesting that this is what Sundays are always like in California. In the picture one group of men is fighting, another group of men on horseback gallops through the town, a man is being attacked for this money while another man watches,

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<sup>135</sup> Lord, M.C. to Mary Jane Folsom, January 28, 1861, W.H.C. Folsom and Family Papers, 123.D.15.2F, Gale Library, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, 1-2.

<sup>136</sup> Lord, M.C., January 28, 1861, 3.



one man is in a hut writing, a group of men are outside reading, and another group of men work on laundry. Ed writes, “There you have it. Explanation is unnecessary[.] All kinds of business is carried on Sunday as the picture represents.”<sup>137</sup> He comments on the picture saying, “That chap shaking his gold at the racers is supposed to be ‘slightly elevated[.]’ The one in the cabin is writing (just look at his lips to his sweetheart...).”<sup>138</sup> Ed is trying to be witty when he writes this part of the letter. He is acknowledging that such events occur in California, but he sees these various scenes (which would have been condemned in the East) as humorous. He even adds his own story about a drunken miner riding an Indian through the town.<sup>139</sup> Ed’s picture and letter simultaneously enforce and poke fun at Eastern perceptions of life in the “Wild West” of California. This letter is one example of the types of images that were spread about California and the Frontier. Men returning from that region would have shared stories like the one Ed described. It was through these stories and images that people in the East would have learned about life in California, and such depictions would have influenced men’s decisions to stay or go to California and enter that culture.

Even though friends and family were scattered across the country, it was still important to hear news of each other. News of family connections was brought across the country through letters. For example, in her letter to Ed from April 1, 1851, Mary Jane informs him that their friend “Seth Lawyer was throne [sic] from a Buggy a week or two since + broke his shoulder bone [but] is doing well I believe...”<sup>140</sup> In another example Mary Jane’s brother Theodore writes on August 25, 1861; he apologizes for his late response to her letter, but shares that “my wife was taken sick about that time and has been very sick which has taken all my time. She is not

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<sup>137</sup> Wyman, Edward P., October, 24, 1854, 2.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>140</sup> Folsom, Mary Jane, April 1, 1851, 2.

quite feeble, but improving...” (1). Without statements like these brought by letters, people would have been unable to keep their social connections strong.

News of family and friends was important to those living far away, but news of national politics was also significant. Because of the Folsom’s religion, social movements such as the temperance movement were especially important to Mary Jane. The temperance movement was a national phenomenon that strived to prohibit alcohol consumption. In 1847 Maine became the first state to prohibit alcohol, and this law was even considered during Minnesota’s founding.<sup>141</sup> In her letter from March 5, 1854 Eliza tells Mary Jane that two of their family members attended a local temperance meeting.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, the temperance movement was important to the Wymans.

Slavery was another issue that was important to Mary Jane’s family. In her letter to Mary Jane from June 2, 1851, Eliza suggests the tensions that already existed between the North and South ten years before the American Civil War. Their brother George was part of a military company that marched out of Bloomfield on May 27, 1851. “The old people of the village say there never was such a scene witnessed in the place before as on the morning the soldiers left,” Eliza reported.<sup>143</sup> She asked Mary Jane, “Oh Dear do you know how you would feel if Wyman was pouncing through the streets day after day,” training to become a “man to shoot his fellow man.”<sup>144</sup> Clearly Eliza does not like the idea of her family being sent to war and possibly dying. She ends her description of the departure ceremony with, “Oh what a curse is slavery may God in his infinite wisdom curse it to pass.”<sup>145</sup> This letter shows that Eliza detested slavery. However,

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<sup>141</sup> Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 65.

<sup>142</sup> Wyman, Eliza, March 5, 1854, 3.

<sup>143</sup> Wyman, Eliza, June 2, 1851, 2.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

she is conflicted between her hate of slavery and her fear of losing her family in fighting. Although Mary Jane was far from the conflict, she still received news of it from her family there. The issue of slavery was not a solely Eastern issue. Slavery was first made local and tangible to people in Minnesota in 1857 during the Dred Scott case, in which an enslaved man, Dred Scott, was brought into Minnesota, a free territory, sued for his freedom, and lost.<sup>146</sup> Soon afterwards Minnesotans had to decide if they wished their state to enter the union as a slave or a free state. In May 1858 Minnesota became a free state, which would go onto support the Union side in the Civil War. But in Mary Jane's letters, we see an evangelical white family concerned about slavery much earlier, in 1851, in part due to its connections to family back in the East.

#### *Summary*

Mary Jane Folsom and her family lived thousands of miles from the rest of her family in the East or in the far West, but Mary Jane was anything but isolated, either from her family, fashion, medical knowledge, or national political issues. Being so far from her home caused her some hardship and loneliness, especially when her husband W.H.C. Folsom was gone. However, she was far more connected to her family and friend circles than her distance would suggest. She and the people in her life moved from place to place, from one side of the country to the other. Many of her siblings left the East to move to the South, the Midwest, or the West. They sent objects to each other to remind each other and to include them in family memory. Also, they transported ideas like fashion, medicine, and news to each other through letters. All these techniques kept Mary Jane connected to her family and friends as well as the ideas and culture of the East.

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<sup>146</sup> Wingerd, *North Country*, 256-257.

## Conclusion

Mary Jane Folsom and her family lived in the Midwest in the important transitional years before the American Civil War. In this era of movement, people, objects, and ideas crossed the continent in every direction. Although there was a Westward trend, the lives of Mary Jane and her family demonstrate that people often moved more than once and leapfrogged back and forth across the country. Even people who were settled in the West, like Mary Jane and her husband, still returned to the East on extended visits. When people could not travel, objects moved instead. Some of these objects barely warranted a mention. Others were highly symbolic and meaningful to both sender and receiver. The most mobile aspect of culture to travel through the country was ideas, brought by people, objects and letters. Through these mediums, people were able to communicate and maintain connections on a national scale.

All of these examples also show that the relationship between East and the variously understood Frontiers and Wests was not a simple one. Mary Jane Folsom was physically far from friends, family, and ideas, which were scattered throughout the country, but she was not isolated. Instead, she was well connected to her entire acquaintance network through the movement and exchange of people, objects and letters. Her communications defied the traditional assumptions of Western expansion because they extended in every direction. Her letters travelled to Ed in California and to Eliza in Maine. She and her family travelled to visit each other throughout her life in both directions, demonstrating the complications of the Westward expansion model.

Future scholars must be aware of these intricacies as they move forward in studying the Frontier(s). Although people were influenced greatly by local events, they were also affected by the events and views from further away. In times of challenge, people on the Frontier sought guidance or support from family and acquaintances back home in the East in order to survive or

act correctly. This greatly impacts how we should understand the decisions and actions of people living in the Frontier. Instead of assuming that Frontier culture originated in the East but then became its own unique culture because of settler experiences in the West, this study suggests that Eastern influences continued to affect settlers long after initial settlement. The culture of the West was more connected to the culture of the East than previous scholars have understood.

The extent of that connection is still not clear, and cannot be established through Mary Jane's letters alone. Her letters and life have laid out what types of culture were moved including people, objects, and ideas; they also demonstrated that these pieces of culture did not move in the Western expansion model as it has been understood in previous scholarship. However, her letters cannot demonstrate the full diversity of objects that moved, because this probably varies among traditions, socio-economic levels, and locations. Also, the existing letters between Mary Jane and her family are chronologically far apart, and the collection is probably missing many of the letters written between these dates. Therefore, there is missing data, so it is impossible to thoroughly track the people, objects, and ideas in her life. Also, because Mary Jane and her family are of a higher socio-economic level than many settlers, this may affect movement in her life compared to the lives of others. The next step in this project would be to expand this project beyond Mary Jane Folsom to include other groups of letters from a similar time range. This would help historians gain a more complete picture of how these pieces of culture move throughout the country from different perspectives.

A different route of further research would be to focus more on Mary Jane's gendered experience in the Midwest. This paper was focused on exploring how culture moved through the Frontier, but this was at the expense of developing a deeper understanding of what Mary Jane's life was like and how it differed from those of other women in other circumstances. Another

study could investigate this topic by comparing her letters to written records from her husband or by comparing her life to the lives of other women through written records. This would still only be a start to understanding the extreme diversity of women living on the Frontier. There are still plenty of opportunities to study women of many colors, cultures, and industries who all helped create the American Frontier.

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