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Such a Woman: The Life of Octavia Walton LeVert

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their city being burned, finding identity in destruction” (Foreword).

The audience reaction was troubling to Rubin given the excellent research provided by Marion B. Lucas in *Sherman and the Burning of Columbia* (2021). Documenting and illuminating his research, Lucas shared official reports, newspapers, and eyewitness accounts, maps of Columbia, black and white photographs of buildings, churches, and public places. According to the author, upon reading and examining historical documents, it seemed clear that fear, confusion, disorder, fires, and disorganized military strategies contributed to the eventual destruction of the city of Columbia. Also relying on old newspapers such as the Columbia Tri-Weekly South Carolinian (January 21, 22, 1864), Lucas writes, in attempting to analyze the cause of the fire, “the fire is supposed by many to be the work of an incendiary, but it is equally probable that it may have originated from the cinders of a passing locomotive, and been smoldering for hours before it was discovered.” The assessment continued, “It is a well-known fact, however, that cotton is the most difficult of all substances to control when once attacked by the insidious element, and a week or two may elapse before this will be subdued” (p. 22).

Lucas continues to note that there “were the errors, miscalculations, mistakes, and misapprehensions of the Southerners and Northerners in Columbia. But there were, in the midst of all the horrors, some redeeming factors which tend to place the entire episode in a new perspective. Many accounts of Columbians told of Union soldiers who acted in a civil manner, of humane treatment in the streets during the fire, a general nonviolent behavior, and of actual aid in saving goods from houses which were on fire. . . . There were few accounts of actual attacks on citizens, no reported rapes, and no confirmed murders of any citizens. The only deaths authenticated were those of the two Union soldiers killed when the riot was suppressed. In short, Sherman did not conduct war against civilians in the sense of killing women, children, or non-combatants in general” (p. 166).

A fascinating book that is recommended for academic, public, and school libraries as well as historical societies and state libraries.

Carol Walker Jordan, Ph.D., MLIS

Such a Woman: The Life of Octavia Walton LeVert

Paula Lenor Webb
Intellect Publishing, 2021
ISBN: 9781954693098
395 p. \$14.95 (Pbk)



In *Such a Woman*, Paula Lenor Webb chronicles the life of Octavia Walton LeVert, an educated and influential Southern woman of means. “Socialite” does not do Octavia’s lived life justice; she was a master of social relationships. A descendant of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence (George Walton), she benefited from being born to prestige and politics. However, birthright is only part of the story. Webb describes the intersections of Octavia’s education, personality, geographical and temporal location, creating a full and layered picture of this 19th century woman. Using excerpts from letters, journals, diaries, and newspapers, the author constructs Octavia’s biography in the context of her time and from the perspective of her peers, colleagues, and family.

Octavia Walton LeVert was born in Augusta, Georgia on August 11, 1810. She passed away on March 12, 1877, in Augusta. During the intervening years, Octavia lived in frontier Florida (Pensacola), and Mobile, Alabama; she traveled to New Orleans, Washington, D.C., New York, London, Florence, and Paris, establishing a diverse network of friends and allies along the way. Her relationships culminated in the Salon that she maintained in Mobile, until 1865. Octavia, “Madame LeVert,” brought together thinkers and doers, men and women from all regions of the United States and other parts of the world. She believed in the value of civil discourse, and the Salon modeled her belief in the promise of meaningful human connections.

Octavia’s education not only prepared her for the opportunities of her time, but also generated opportunities as well. By the age of twelve, Octavia could speak English, French, and Spanish, and assisted with translation of professional communications. Her mother and grandmother guided her early education, exemplifying women as educators and experts. Her grandmother high-

lighted women's roles in history as part of her education, and Webb notes, this environment may have nurtured Octavia's sense of self as an active participant.

Education and personality combined to make Octavia a memorable force. One of the running themes that Webb emphasizes is her curiosity and genuine interest in the people and events around her. Accounts by her social peers describe her as captivating, of strong intellect, and a "kind heart" (p. 90). Octavia's openness led to strong and lasting friendships with key figures of the time, such as Henry Clay, Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe, and Swedish author and feminist, Frederika Bremer. Inspired by the writers in her circle, Octavia developed her own writing. She journaled, maintained regular correspondence, submitted letters to newspapers, and wrote *Souvenirs of Travel* (1857), a published work describing her travels in Europe.

As Webb examines Octavia's life in the context and experiences of her time and the development of the South, the issue of slavery, the acceptable roles for women in the United States and Europe, the impact of disease, and the challenges and joys of being a mother, wife, daughter, the reader comes to better understand not only Madame LeVert, but the society of her time. In addition, the reader can gain a deeper appreciation for critical cultural changes that came to be part of modern-day society, such as equal rights for all races and genders and universal education.

Webb captures and conveys Octavia's strong, honest personality throughout *Such a Woman: The Life of Madame Octavia Walton LeVert*. This biography is well-researched, drawing from a variety of period primary resources and illustrated with copies of portraits and location photographs. Readers interested in the development of the Antebellum South, especially Alabama and Florida, the issues and impacts of the Civil War on Mobile, discourse about slavery, and the early roots of feminism in the United States will appreciate *Such a Woman*. Those who read biographies more generally will enjoy Octavia's rich story, one that is relevant to the present time, as well.

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