

Written for the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County,
Santa Clara County Historical Essay Contest, 1993.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE
LIFE OF SARAH KNOX-GOODRICH,
19th CENTURY ADVOCATE FOR
THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Erik Takulan
746 Emory Ave.
Campbell, CA 95008
(408) 378-6701

PREFACE

When I consider the changes that have taken place in U.S. society since my own birth in the early 1950s, perhaps none is more evident than the relationship between men and women. For so long the latter just naturally assumed that their lot in life would forever be in a supporting role, not a leading one. Yet there was one woman who, were she alive, could easily and comfortably step into contemporary society. Yet she lived in the 19th Century, faced by obstacles that by comparison dwarf those of women today. In her way, she was a quiet, steady revolutionary, a lady who paved the path for the current thoroughfare of feminism. And it is her story that I shall try to explain, in condensed version, for the readers of the present.

Erik Takulan

CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1.
Background	Page 1.
Sarah comes to California	Page 1.
Sarah's marriage to Dr. William J. Knox	Page 1.
Life in San Jose	Page 2.
Marriage to architect Levi Goodrich	Page 2.
Advocate of Women's Rights	Page 2-3.
Obituary	Page 3.
Bibliography	Page 4.

With the ascension to prominence in recent years by those traditionally regarded as subordinate, society is being reminded--much to the consternation of some--of the contributions of American women. Though virtually unknown in the United States today, much less on an international scale, perhaps the time is overdue to excavate the forgotten contributions of one woman who, now long dead, left her legacy to Santa Clara County.

Born February 14, 1825, in Rappahanock County, Virginia, Sarah Smith Farrow Browning was of a family whose members served with distinction during the Revolutionary War. Her father, William Winston Browning, also served his country in the war of 1812, he being only eighteen years old at the time. He received a bounty warrant for one hundred and sixty acres of land in 1852 for his services. And it would be this event that, in the future, would become so much a part of the life of Sarah Smith Farrow Browning, for her efforts in later years would force authorities to honor the pension rights of veteran's widows.

Growing up on a farm in rural Missouri, Sarah would marry a doctor by the name of Knox and move to California. When her first husband died after a marriage of twenty-two years, she would truly begin, so to speak, to come into her own. In 1869, she assisted strongly to organize the first "Woman Suffrage Association" in San Jose, as well as the "American" and the "National Woman's Suffrage Association."

Though it isn't certain when Sarah's social awareness began, it no doubt was kindled when her first husband, Dr. Knox, became an assemblyman in 1855 and eventually a senator in 1863, during the Civil War. In 1866 the 7th District passed bill # 252 through the legislature, making it possible for the first time for married women to dispose of their property as they chose. Not long there after, in 1874, Sarah was, along with two close friends, perhaps instrumental in getting a bill passed giving women the right to hold educational offices in the state of California.

But to backtrack a bit, Senator Knox would make, before his death in 1867, a fortune constructing the South Yuba Canal for the principal source of the gold mines of Nevada City. Sarah's influence with her husband in regards to civic responsibility, while repellent to a good many men, nevertheless would win for her the reputation as a lady of refinement and intelligence, as well as one of the most distinguished women in the state of California.

Though destined to be a widow for some dozen years, it was during this period that Sarah Knox would push for, and receive, the pension fund for her own mother in 1878. Herself an aging widow since the death of Sarah's father in 1864, her life, like so many women of that era with little or no means of support in a society dominated by men, was one of creeping destitution. When Sarah applied for her mother's pension, it involved, due to government bureaucracy, a long, tiresome, and almost hopeless effort (her father's paper having been lost during the Rebellion), succeeded in procuring sufficient evidence to secure her mother the pension. It was more a matter of principle with Sarah, than the amount of the pension; as she was well able, and had taken care of her mother, who had been with her these past twelve years as an invalid in her eightieth year.

On January 15, 1879, Sarah was again united in marriage to a rising architect by the name of Levi Goodrich, a man who, in his own way, would achieve a distinguished reputation.

Wife or not, Sarah, now known as Sarah Knox-Goodrich, would continue her prominent role in society, serving, for about thirteen years, as one of the Trustees in the Unity Society, organized in San Jose by the Rev. Charles G. Ames. She would become a large real estate owner and a stockholder in the Bank of San Jose, a bank which, in later years, would go on to achieve international respect as The Bank of America. In the meantime, Sarah established a reputation as a lady of advanced ideas, one of The Pioneer Mothers of California, claiming for her motto: Equal rights and Justice to all.

Though now a potent force in her own right, it was, perhaps, Sarah's membership with the Unity Society, later to become the Unitarian Church, a church that to this day, champions the cause of the disenfranchised, that would serve as a springboard to significant social change.

Throughout the church history, the bulk of its membership would draw from the educated, professional strata of the community. Among the subscribers to the early Unity Society were such staunch supporters of the Woman's Suffrage Movement as B.F. Watkins and A.T. Herman. Watkins was a leading agriculturalist and Herman a leading civil engineer in the state who constructed the road to Mt. Hamilton's Lick Observatory. Other supporters were Sarah's husband, Levi Goodrich; bankers, T.E. Bean and J.L. Knox; J.A. Cottle, trustee of the Homestead Association; J.J. Owens, editor of the San Jose Mercury News.

Sarah Knox-Goodrich was not merely an advocate of women purely on the generic scale, for her involvement was often a personal one as well. Not surprisingly, Edmonia Lewis, a black woman and sculptress of international fame, was championed by Sarah Knox-Goodrich; this at a time when to be both female and black was a compounded disadvantage. Mrs. Knox-Goodrich had the San Jose Library Association, at her urging, to show the statuettes of Edmonia Lewis, these being called "Asleep" and "Awake." When Ms. Lewis left San Jose to return to Italy, very little was known of her activities after this period. However, to preserve this fine artist's contribution for posterity, Sarah Knox-Goodrich promoted the drive to purchase the last work of Ms. Lewis, known as the Lincoln Bust. While the Library Association was working on the fundraiser project for the Lincoln statue, wealthy Mrs. Knox-Goodrich purchased the two statuettes, "Asleep" and "Awake."

Sarah would continue to remain prominent in women's issues right up to her death on October 30, 1903. Her passing was mourned by many and was perhaps summed up best by the minister who presided over her funeral at Oak Hill Cemetery. Venturing all the way from the city of San Francisco, not a short trip in those days, Reverend Levitt said of Sarah: "Sarah Knox-Goodrich was a lady of intelligence and refinement, and one of the most distinguished women in the state. Remarkably social in disposition, loving in heart, liberal in sentiment, and courageous in living up to the highest conviction of right and duty." (Mercury Herald, Nov. 1, 1903)

No better words could have bespoke a forerunner of today's women and their quest for equality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

California Women: A guide to their politics 1885-1911
Davis, Reda

History of Santa Clara County, California
Alley, Bowen & Company
1881

History of the State of California
Guinn, J.M.

Obituary
San Francisco Chronicle
10-31-03

Pioneer, The
Biographical Sketch
10-22-1881
9-15-1897
American Women of Achievement
Susan B. Anthony, Women's Suffrage

Mercury Herald. Funeral notice, Nov. 1, 1903
Evening News Oct. 30, 1903
San Jose Public Library History; chronology of branch development
1937-67
Research Paper, S.J. State, Pauline Firth
Garden of the World, Santa Clara County, Calif. 1888