

Preface

Tracing Juliette

Wau-Bun: The “Early Day” in the North-West has been in print since 1856, far longer than any other book on Chicago history. Author Juliette Augusta Magill Kinzie related her own experiences and those of her extended family when the Chicago region was still part of Indian country; indeed, *wau-bun* is a Ho-Chunk word for dawn or early day.¹ In my previous project on Chicago’s early history, I worked closely with *Wau-Bun*. While some historians have dismissed the work as romantic fiction, my research showed that much of it could be confirmed in historical records: Juliette was a credible source. After finishing my *Rising Up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago*, I decided to learn more about this Chicago historian.

I found that Juliette Kinzie led an interesting life going far beyond what she shared in *Wau-Bun*. Born in 1806 in Middletown, Connecticut, Juliette received an unusually strong education. In 1840 she married John H. Kinzie, a US Indian agent in Wisconsin; Juliette was part of a small but critical cohort of Yankees who migrated into the former Northwest Territory. Settling at Chicago in

1834, the couple raised a family as the city grew from a few hundred residents to over half a million. In the last decade of their lives, they endured the Civil War that split their family between North and South. I was intrigued by the idea of looking at early Chicago through the eyes of someone who witnessed Chicago's spectacular rise.²

I looked for more on Juliette and found a trove of correspondence, mostly between Juliette and her daughter Eleanor (Nellie) Kinzie Gordon, who lived in Savannah, Georgia, after her 1857 marriage. We have the letters because her daughter saved them, and also because her granddaughter, Juliette Gordon Low, founded the Girl Scouts of America. This serendipity meant that hundreds of these letters landed in archives rather than being destroyed or lost to mold in a musty basement or attic. So large a cache of nineteenth-century correspondence is rare. Few people had the interest and skill to craft such letters, and even then it is extraordinary that they have been saved.

It is particularly important that collections of letters by women survive, since their lives in nineteenth-century America remain largely undocumented. Kinzie's letters could provide insight into life in Chicago before the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and perhaps serve as a western complement to the diaries of Juliette's contemporary, Southerner Mary Boykin Chesnut. Through Chesnut, we see Southern society during the Civil War as she offers striking personal reflections on the major political, social, and economic events of the day. Could Juliette Kinzie offer a counterpoint to Chesnut's world, exploring the experience of a Yankee migrant to the Old Northwest during this same period? Would she express herself differently in private letters than she did in *Wau-Bun* and other published writings?³

The first collection of correspondence I read was at the Chicago History Museum. The archive there holds microfilm copies of nearly five hundred letters written by Juliette Kinzie, most to her daughter Nellie. Beginning in spring 2013, I read the letters on two large reels of microfilm. The missives range from four to six-

teen pages. Kinzie wrote with a strong and clear hand, filling the pages with humorous anecdotes about family members, servants, pets, and friends. Although she was loyal to those she cared about, Kinzie held strong opinions on current events and issues, and she was often sharply critical of leading figures of the day.

To me, Juliette Kinzie soon became just Juliette, someone with whom I was spending time snatched from work and family responsibilities. I was quickly drawn into her world and found myself retelling Juliette stories to my (usually) forgiving family, friends, colleagues, and students. I shared the way Juliette disparaged the handiwork of future Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who as a junior army officer had built the furniture she used as a young bride in Wisconsin. I related that she was not greatly impressed with a young prince of Wales when he visited Chicago, though she did find admirers of *Wau-Bun* among his entourage. Talking with Abraham Lincoln shortly after he was elected president, Juliette teasingly referred to him as the “father of the country,” showing her ease in his company.

I began to look for more archival material on Juliette. In February 2015 I found another collection of her letters at the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah, as well as writings by Nellie. In the University of North Carolina archives, I viewed the originals of the microfilm letters along with more from Juliette and other family members that rounded out several story lines. Additional materials at the Middlesex Historical Society in Middletown, Connecticut, augmented letters in the Wolcott and Kinzie Collections at the Chicago History Museum. I also visited places associated with Juliette, including the Magill family’s brick mansion in Middletown, Connecticut; the Indian Agency House in Portage, Wisconsin, built by Juliette and her husband early in their marriage; her daughter’s house in Savannah, now maintained by the Girl Scouts; and her grave at Graceland Cemetery in Chicago.

As I read these additional letters and visited these sites, I began to reconstruct Juliette’s life and world. She drew me into her family, household, and community. Though she was born 150 years before

me, I saw that we shared experiences and qualities. We were both historians of Chicago and were fiercely chauvinistic about the city and its North Side. We both struggled to find time to write amid the demands of everyday life. I shared her strong sense of the “family claim” that kept her focus within her household. As I watched Juliette age past what she called the “meridian of life,” I saw her thoughts and sentiments mirror my own.⁴

Perhaps because of these parallels, I was lulled into thinking her world was much like my own. But it was very different; she did not live in a modern world. During most of Juliette’s lifetime, most Americans were not afforded unfettered freedom or equal rights. Only white men had full political rights and could control their own property and labor. In households across the country, those men also claimed the labor and property of their dependents, who included most women and more than four million enslaved people. Women, married and single, could not vote or hold office. Married women could not buy or sell property, and their husbands controlled any wealth they had.

Juliette lived on the cusp of modernity in a traditional world where inequality was the rule and households were the central unit of social, political, and economic organization. Every person in a household had a prescribed role determined by gender, race, and class. Juliette was not concerned much with individual rights; she focused on the responsibilities each person carried.⁵ She did not rail against inequalities and restrictions but accepted them, as did her teacher, Emma Willard, who opined that “submission and obedience belong to every being in the universe.”⁶

When her newlywed daughter complained, Juliette wrote forcefully that wives belonged to their husbands. She bluntly told her daughter that “as an individual you have ceased to exist.”⁷ But Juliette did not believe her daughter’s spouse could act with impunity; he had to consider the needs of all those in his household. Indeed, Juliette believed that husbands should make decisions not as individuals but as heads of households. In her eyes, husbands did not have individual rights; they served as representatives of

their households in the broader body politic. In the end, individual rights were not as critical as were family, religious, and civic obligations—the family claim.⁸

Today Juliette's perspectives appear misogynist as well as racist; in many ways they were and are. But it is unwise to dismiss her simply by the standards of our time. Before the Civil War, there was an emerging sense that individual rights extended beyond the propertied white men that Thomas Jefferson and the signers of the Declaration of Independence had in mind; but women and nonwhite men were still outside this expansion. Juliette accepted a subordinate (but privileged) role in American society, as she did for her daughter and most others around her.

This book is my quest to understand Juliette in her own time and place. She provides an opportunity to examine early Chicago through the life of one woman and her household, offering a counterpoint to the prevailing male perspective on these years. Juliette helped to create Chicago's earliest civic culture by following rules and conventions she had imbibed during a New England childhood. She did not lightly infringe societal norms. Despite what twenty-first-century readers might wish of a sympathetic and articulate woman of the nineteenth century, Juliette was not an advocate of women's rights; she was neither a vocal proponent of slavery nor an abolitionist. That she hewed to traditional notions and accepted the claim of family did not diminish her, nor does it negate the need to recognize and acknowledge her experiences. This book is an effort to understand the structural constraints she faced and to recognize how these factors determined her ability to feel, to act, and to imagine in a world so very unlike our own.

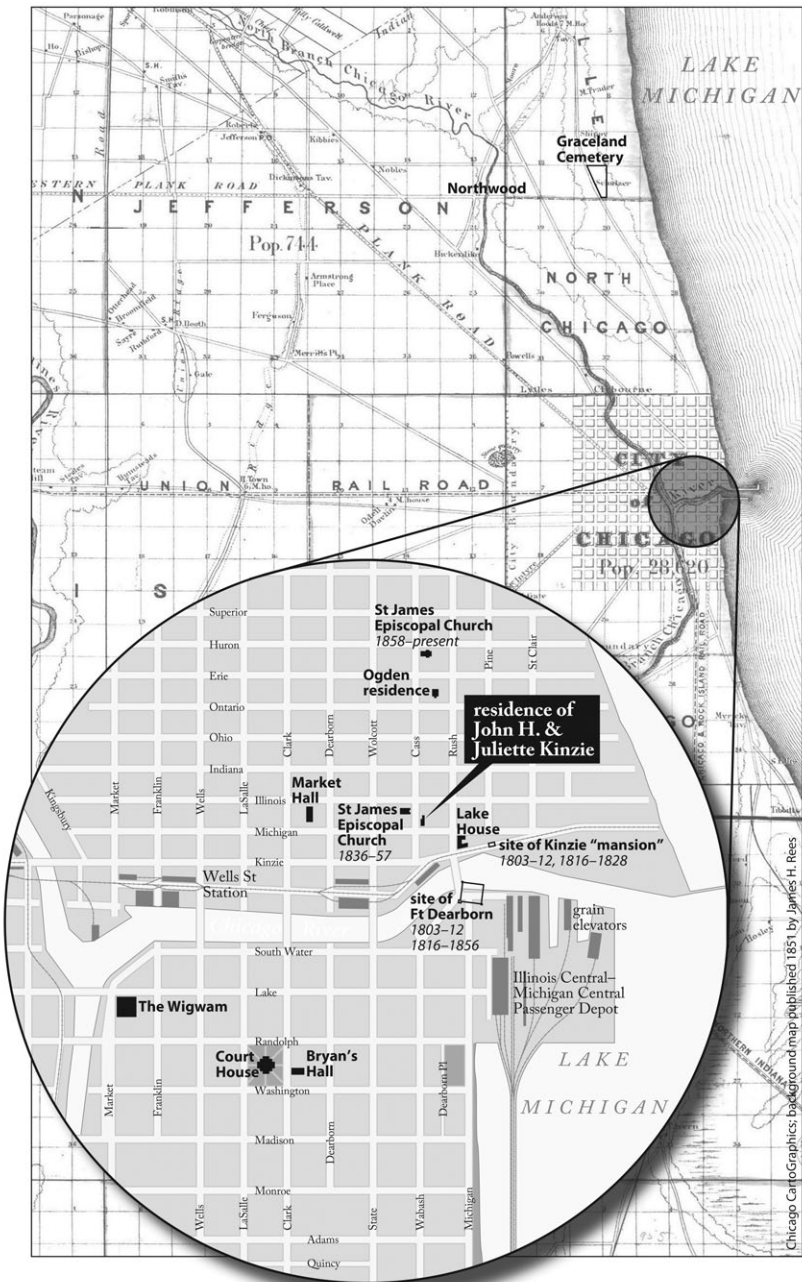


Fig. 1 Juliette Kinzie's Chicago, 1803-70. Dennis McClendon, Chicago Cartographics.