



Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage

Peg A. Lamphier

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The marriage of Kate Chase to William Sprague inaugurated the most publicized union and divorce of the Civil War era. Katherine “Kate” Chase was the daughter of Salmon P. Chase, a leading antislavery politician and member of Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet. Motherless from an early age, she became her father’s official hostess during the Civil War and Reconstruction years as well as his unofficial campaign manager. At the opening of the Civil War, her husband, William Sprague, was a wealthy industrialist, the “boy governor” of Rhode Island, a dashing military figure, and an alcoholic.

After looking at the lives of Chase and Sprague before they met, Peg A. Lamphier analyzes their courtship, their marriage, Chase's role as her father’s campaign manager, Sprague’s marital infidelities, Chase’s affair with Roscoe Conkling, Sprague’s abusiveness, and Chase and Sprague’s divorce and the issues of child custody it evoked. Pushing the boundaries of power and gender, Chase showed her ability to play politics in both public and private forums and to regain her independence as a woman in an arena dominated by men. Kate Chase and William Sprague delves into the social history of a nineteenth-century marriage and provides important insight into the role of gender in the political history of the time.

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