Tina Stewart Brakebill

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To the memory of Celestia Rice Colby
and strong-minded women everywhere who endeavor
to “elevate and redeem woman.”

Contents

Acknowledgments

Celestia Rice Colby lived a life surrounded by people, yet she often felt isolated and unsupported. Luckily, my experience has been quite the opposite. Since the autumn of 2000, I have spent countless hours in archives, at libraries, and at my computer preparing this book, and much of that work was solitary; nevertheless, I never felt unsupported. The idea that a project of this nature could be accomplished alone is—of course—far from being truthful. From the moment an archivist said, "I think I have something you might be interested in" through this very moment I have been supported, encouraged, and informed by teachers, colleagues, friends, and family. Without them, this project never could have seen completion.

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Introduction

"Circumstances are destiny."[1] This terse statement was the entire entry made for October 24, 1857, in the private journal of northeastern Ohio native Celestia Rice Colby. Her entries were normally much more loquacious, but this brief observation represents both her fears and hopes for her future in one succinct statement. Colby's life in many aspects was entirely ordinary. She was a native-born, aspiring middle-class, literate, white, rural mother and housewife. She never achieved fame or fortune. She was one of the supposedly inconsequential people of history who receive attention as part of a statistic or type, but commonly garner no individual consideration. Colby's life gains notice over a century after her death by virtue of her somewhat extraordinary effort to find time to write extensively, not only as a means of self-reflection, but also for publication. These words demonstrate that in the autumn of 1857, on the cusp of her thirtieth birthday, Colby began in earnest a struggle to establish a sense of personal identity that went beyond her immediate situation of housewife and mother.

The most intense span of Colby's effort to change her circumstances, and thus her destiny, occurred in the decade leading up to and into the Civil War, and the largest part of this book is devoted to this time period. However, a broad view of her entire life is necessary to truly understand her struggle. To that end, her life story is presented in three stages. The first part lays out her formative years from childhood through the first decade of her marriage. These chapters serve as foundation to illustrate what she likely expected from her future and why. My goal is to set the stage, so that the reader understands the influences at play in constructing Colby's expectations as well as those influences that had a hand in her growing desire to deconstruct those expectations. The centerpiece of the study, Part II, begins in the autumn of 1857 at the time in which Colby's attempt to change those expectations accelerated. Her most obvious efforts to alter the course of her future continued until about midway through the Civil War. During this time, Colby wrote extensively in her private journals as well as producing many essays, stories, and letters for publication—all of which help to illustrate her ongoing efforts to alter the expected path of her life. Each chapter uses these works to move her journey forward in time and highlight the ebb and

flow effects of her evolving private and public attitudes on a myriad of issues. Midway through the Civil War, Colby's struggle to change the course of her life seems to have stalled. This point marks the beginning of Part III, in which her increasingly infrequent journal entries and published writings supplement the examination of the remainder of her life in an effort to determine whether she resolved her struggle or merely accepted defeat.

Colby hoped to alter her conditions in order to elevate her future. However, over the years, the intensity of her struggle varied as her belief in her ability to change her circumstances, and thus her destiny, often wavered. "My destiny is to act, to do life's humblest duties, in a narrow, unknown sphere, to crush back the upspringing aspirations that rise in my soul, and to strive for the mastery over my own spirit. Shall I ever attain this victory? Ah no!"[2] Colby was well aware that her "uprising aspirations" put her at odds with accepted societal thoughts about women's roles. The "narrow, unknown sphere" of which she spoke is the notion of separate spheres—men in the public realm and women in the private one—an ideal that gained wide popular acceptance in the nineteenth century. Simplistically stated, as the nineteenth century progressed, trends such as industrialization, urbanization, and the rising market economy increasingly meant that men's labor was performed at a location separate from their homes. This physical division between workspace and home contributed to an increased emphasis on the importance of the differences between public and private, which in turn fed into a wider societal acceptance of the separate-spheres ideology. This notion of separate public and private spheres was in reality primarily a prescription for a cultural ideal rather than an actual description of real life; nonetheless, it was a powerful ideal, which has endured, in only a somewhat modified form, into the present. Its mid-nineteenth-century meaning implied not mere separation, but more importantly, the so-called naturalness of this division based on innate male and female character traits, which meant that behavior that fell beyond those limits was unnatural, and thus wrong.

An important component of this gender separation was the differentiation between the perceived nature of men's and women's responsibilities: men "worked" in the public realm while women "tended" the private home. This distinction between working and tending was more than merely semantics. Among other real consequences, it began the validation of the idea, which lingers into the present, that tasks done by men outside the home, particularly for a wage, were properly thought of as work, and tasks done by women inside their homes were the result of the natural nurturing instinct and therefore not work and not of any monetary—or real—value.[3] Thus Colby charged that her destiny as a woman involved "life's humblest tasks" and her fear that any greater aspiration

would then necessarily be "crushed." Mainstream societal norms maintained that this "destiny" was a natural one—for all True Women.

As the 1850s unfolded, however, Colby's views about her own life as well as her gender's natural role increasingly were affected by a small but growing antebellum movement that countered some of the core tenets of separate-sphere ideology. These "strong-minded" women—and men—spoke out against gender inequality. They maintained that nature had little to do with the creation of the woman's sphere; society had created the boundaries on women's roles. They declared that all humanity, including women, had the innate—natural—right to equality. This idea was not without some precedence, but by the 1850s it was so antithetical to the emerging popular consensus regarding women's roles that mainstream society considered it quite radical. During the mid-century years these two rival views—true woman versus strong-minded woman—could be heard most definitively in New England, New York, and northeastern Ohio, because the underlying cultural and economic changes that helped to spawn these views emerged initially and quite forcefully in the urbanizing northeastern United States. Despite the undeniable presence of both views, those voices that prescribed the so-called proper behavior for true womanhood had a powerful advantage. Economic, legal, and social parameters strongly supported the notion of separated gender spheres; consequently, this idealized picture of womanhood gained status as the model for all women. In this model, ordinary—that is, normal—women gladly tended the private sphere, and thus the "housewife" was born.

Colby battled both internal and external forces in her effort to reconcile her personal hopes and ambitions with society's expectations and obligations. This evidence of her struggle challenges as well as corroborates some conventional thoughts about how ordinary, white, mid-nineteenth-century women reacted to conflicting role messages. In the nearly two centuries since the term "separate spheres" gained popular acceptance, its meaning, its use, and its varied implications for the past as well as historical interpretation have devolved, evolved, and sedimented in many ways. As knowledge about the actual lives of women has increased, ideas about the historical reality of the ideal of separate spheres, as well as its validity as a labeling term, have changed. Earlier women's history scholarship emphasizes the notion of gender-separated spheres as both a historical situation and a tool for interpretation. Since that time, other factors such as class, race, region, and family have been layered into interpretations. Scholarship that focused on women's endeavors as factory workers, farmers, pioneers, reformers, writers, students, teachers, friends, citizens, and mothers—to name just a few—demonstrated that separate spheres and the concomitant labels of public and private

must be considered within a wider framework. The labels' function as scholarly descriptors has gone through many stages, particularly in the last several decades. Many years of scholarship have produced an evolution and maturity in women's and gender history that has flourished and branched out in unforeseen ways with the addition of depth and detail. Because this study looks at one woman's life from both a broad contextual perspective and a narrower individual focus, this abundance of scholarship informs this study in a myriad of ways.[4]

Although scholarship centered on subjects ranging from dairy techniques to female higher education enhances our understanding of Colby's life, the concept of separate spheres is a vital consideration in any interpretation of her experience. Some current scholarship questions whether separate spheres ever represented more than a metaphorical concept, but regardless of whether history defines the concept as figurative or literal, Colby felt real effects. In reality, Colby's life was not separated physically into strict divisions of male/female or public/private; however, this fact did not mean that the idea of a proper woman's sphere was an academic or a metaphorical concept. In Colby's world, it was a set of real ideological constructs that affected how she viewed herself and what she believed was possible as well as how society viewed her actions. Colby's publications and private journals provide a window enabling us to see how she perceived her role as a woman. This view reveals juxtaposition between her self-described ideal "inner life" and her actual day-to-day actions, or self-described "outward world." We will see that Colby saw her life as irreparably divided, not necessarily between public and private, but between her ideals and her reality, or her inner life and the outward world, both of which in reality involved intertwined public/private and male/female spheres. External and internal forces—pushes and pulls—operated in and on Colby's life and helped to form a conceptual framework that affected how and why she made the decisions that she did. With the benefit of time, we can see more clearly how this framework was constructed. The shifting cultural context that defined much of the antebellum United States as it attempted to grow from infancy and to establish a uniquely American identity provides the broad beams that this framework rested on. These broad societal forces and their differing views of what represented the natural state of humanity fueled much of the despair, tensions, and conflict evident in Colby's rhetoric.

Publicly, Colby wrote eloquently and forcefully about the natural equality of all humankind and directly confronted subjects such as slavery, temperance, education, and women's rights. Privately, however, her actions were not always as bold. Her public views regarding women's place in society, when compared to her private unpublished thoughts about the reality of her own life, offer

poignant examples of her conflict. Publicly, she lamented women's continued subjugation: "To elevate and redeem woman—those who have been crushed and bruised, trampled underfoot by the world, by society, too often less pure than those whom it makes outcasts, and of whose very name it makes a by-word of scorn, loathing and contempt, is an effort worthy of the loftiest powers of woman's genius, and ennobles it, and makes it sacred and holy—and yet it is an effort that requires a noble and fearless daring, for it is not always a safe thing to say 'yes,' when the world says 'no.'" Beyond platitudes, however, she had very pragmatic demands based on her thoughts regarding innate human rights: "But the most zealous advocates of woman's rights ask for nothing more than simple justice, and will never be willing to submit to anything short of it." Ironically, her impassioned pleas for equality, which were written during the late 1850s and early 1860s, coincided with journal entries that reflect a sense of deep doubt about her own worth and the value of her existence: "Another day has passed in the same monotonous way in which all my days are passing. I've done nothing worth recording." Her private words of hopelessness, contrary to her words in the public sphere, revealed that her passionate belief in the possibilities of change frequently did not play a major part in her everyday life. As she put it bluntly: "Circumstances are destiny."[5]

As her story unfolds, we witness her evolving sense of social justice and the budding rise of personal goals while simultaneously exploring the apparent inconsistencies within her life. Her powerful published words would seem to show that she had been an early crusader of sorts, brandishing the sword of equality, consequences be damned. Her diaries, however, provide evidence of her frustrations and hopes, a picture of perhaps a victim—a potential shining star dimmed by overlaying clouds. The truthful answer is a somewhat more complicated and multifaceted picture, complete with contradictions, accomplishments, frustrations, joys, and sorrows. Each facet of her written legacy offers different perspectives that often beg more questions than they answer about what it meant to be a woman in nineteenth-century America. The final portrait is of a woman not easily definable, but infinitely real and—like many women today—conflicted about her place in the world. This examination of Colby's efforts to establish an identity for herself serves as more than just an interesting look at one woman's past amid the changing goals and expectations of nineteenth-century America. Celestia Rice Colby's documentation of her own struggle provides us with the opportunity to view details of how an ideal can operate to shape the beliefs and behaviors of one woman. In many ways the nature, and even some of the particulars, of her struggle are familiar to women of the present who still receive conflicting societal messages regarding their roles. The nineteenth-century

ideal of gender-separated spheres is embedded in those modern messages. An examination of the complex ways that those roles assigned to women in the past actually were incorporated into their lives provides a foundation on which to better understand the continuing struggle of modern women and adds valuable depth to our broad perspectives regarding women and their perceived roles. In order to accomplish this in-depth investigation, we must continue to add detail harvested from the lives of individual women—women whose experiences spun the threads of life that make up the intricate fabric of the past.

Before continuing with our examination, a few clarifying notes may be helpful. first, for the sake of simplicity, I refer to Celestia Rice Colby as "Colby" throughout the book, even when writing about her childhood and pre-marriage years. I introduce other family members and friends with their full names and then refer to them by their first names. For example, Colby's husband, Lewis Colby, is called "Lewis" throughout. Second, because Colby's writings are the foundation for this book, some explanatory context may be helpful to the reader. The Colby Collection actually encompasses material from several members of her family. Her youngest daughter, J. Rose Colby, was a professor at Illinois State Normal University, and it was upon her death in 1941 that the collection of personal and family papers came to the Illinois State University Archives, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. The largest part of the collection focuses on Rose's professional career, but it also contains various remnants of other members of her immediate family's past, especially her mother's writings. The material directly traced to Colby includes personal journals, scrapbooks of published writings, and many other pieces of miscellaneous writings.

Colby's personal writings, which I refer to interchangeably as journals and diaries, consist of more than 680 pages of handwritten, bound material from the mid-1840s to 1865. Unlike many farmwomen's diaries, these journals are not merely a litany of tasks and weather reports, but rather are an intimate exploration of her inner feelings about her life. This self-reflection makes them of special importance, but this value does not eliminate the challenges common to the use of personal writings. Any interpretation that relies on handwritten documents intended as personal reflection must contend with a myriad of concerns, including worries concerning the "completeness" of the available documents due to the lack of a clear beginning or ending; illegible, faded writing; unfamiliar language and writing style; the veracity of entries; the ambiguity as to motives; and uncertainty about the context in which they were written.[6]

The issue of completeness is of special importance because a change in writing habits can be as vital a piece of evidence as the writing itself. In Colby's case,

informed interpretation lends itself to the conclusion that the collection contains the whole of the diaries. The extant journals span the mid-1840s through 1865. Entries often appear daily in the years from 1849 to 1850 and from 1857 to 1860 and frequently range from half a page to several pages or more. The rest of the time, entry frequency varies from weekly to monthly or less, and the entry length is inconsistent as well. Despite the inconsistency in frequency and length, the journals are for the most part coherent and chronological with the possible exception of entries made in the early and mid-1840s. Colby's first diary begins with material—most of which is poetry, often undated—that apparently was written during this early time span. In addition, some of this writing may have been recopied from loose sheets, so exact composition dates are not always verifiable. It is also impossible to know definitively whether a journal ever existed for the years between 1854 and 1857. She ended one journal in 1854, and then in October of 1857, she commenced writing in another one with no notable fanfare, although the book itself seems to represent a new purchase. It is a smaller lined book designed for writing, instead of an oversized ledger, as is the previous journal. Contextual information, primarily the fact that during those three years she had three children under the age of five, supports the idea that she simply lacked the time or energy to write. When the entries do eventually stop in 1865, well over half of the book remains empty, so it is possible to conclude that her journal writing ended as well.

As for the actual reading challenges, I was lucky. Although much of the ink is very faded, I became accustomed—after numerous readings—relatively easily to her prose style. Colby's writing style and techniques indicate a certain level of sophistication. She used proper grammar and syntax, and the actual script itself usually is clear and well formed. In addition, the sprinkling of foreign phrases, quotes, and references to literature, history, geography, and philosophy allude to education. Because Colby's apparent motive was to explore her innermost feelings, she wrote relatively infrequently about more mundane topics. Consequently for my purposes, her choice to share these feelings represents both a challenge and an advantage. For example, as I read the journals, I was immediately aware of her personal feelings, but it took considerable research with other sources to reconstruct the basic framework of her everyday life. So although Colby's journals do not provide a clear contextual outline of her life, they do provide abundant anecdotal evidence and tantalizing clues that inspire further research as well as a gripping emotional framework.

In addition, unlike many ordinary women who write journals, Colby's private voice is not the only one available, as she also wrote frequently for publication. These works also represent a distinct set of challenges. The sheer number

and variety of antebellum newspapers, as well as the difficulty in obtaining extant copies today, make the task of tracking one individual's contributions extremely time consuming and difficult. Luckily, Colby's habit of clipping her own publications and saving them provides invaluable access to her public writings today. However, perhaps to an even greater extent than with her private writings, it is impossible to know whether those published pieces that survive today represent the whole or only a part. Between 1853 and approximately 1870, Colby kept scrapbooks that contain over 275 pieces that were published in a number of publications. She wrote both fiction and nonfiction and covered a diverse scope of topics that included not only reform movements such as abolition, temperance, and women's rights, but also themes like child-rearing, education, cheese production, reading, and nature.

I located a number of these pieces in their original publications, and the scrapbook clippings apparently represent the greatest part of the whole in these cases. In addition, if Colby noted in her journal that she had sent something to a newspaper, then a corresponding clipping usually can be located in a scrapbook. Until the mid-1860s the clippings also appear, for the most part, in chronological order. Occasionally, a clipping will appear out of order, perhaps indicating that it took her longer to obtain a copy. finally, like her personal journals, her habit of clipping and pasting her writing ended in 1865, which left a good portion of the scrapbook empty. She inserted several articles that originated in the late 1860s and early 1870s into the book, but unlike the others, these items are not pasted in. This fact indicates that she had access to the book. All of this evidence lends credence to a conclusion that her scrapbooks represent the greater part, if not all, of the whole for the years between 1853 and 1870.

Even with this conclusion, the use of this material presents other challenges, chiefly the inability to always ascertain the exact date or publication in which the material originally appeared because her clippings often eliminated newspaper names and dates. This fact, along with the inability to locate extant copies of some of the newspapers, resulted in a failure to read all the pieces in their original published form and context. Fortunately, prior research that focused on antebellum newspapers helps to provide contextual information regarding the different publications' standard subject, content, and tenor. As for the undated material, frequently the subject matter provides a good indicator of the timing. Regardless of these occasional obstacles, the existence of these original essays, articles, and editorial letters provides a vital window from which to view her public sentiments on many issues, especially when her diary entries are few or nonexistent.

The collection also contains a great number of unbound pieces of writing produced mainly in the 1880s and 1890s that fall generally into the categories

of miscellaneous manuscripts and miscellaneous correspondence. Frequently, archives receive material that an individual or family has stored away for years—forgotten and unorganized—and as such it is impossible to know the extent to which they represent the whole. Much of these miscellaneous papers fall into that grouping and consequently present even greater challenges regarding dating, placing into context, and at times even definitively identifying authorship. Fortunately, some of this material is dated and its purpose clear; for example, manuscript drafts of essays written for hopeful publication and letters received from family and friends that include dates and names. Other items, such as drafts of letters and bits of prose and poetry that Colby wrote, cannot always be completely verified as to date or ultimate purpose, but often can be categorized partially through contextual references. This uncertainty does not render these materials always unusable, however. Ambiguity as to whether letters or manuscripts were mailed or published does not alter their authenticity as a powerful guide to help understand Colby's state of mind when they were written. Although often challenging because of the lack of clarity, this portion of the collection serves as vital anecdotal evidence for interpretations of Colby's postwar life.

Colby produced over 680 pages of diary entries and 275 newspaper and periodical publications as well as a myriad of miscellaneous manuscripts and correspondence. Although space precludes including even a fraction of that total, I frequently provide long quotations. Several reasons are behind this need for extended quotes. first, her private words are not published, thus by and large are unavailable to the general reader; second, her public words, although published, appeared in newspapers and periodicals that currently, at best, are available in a limited fashion; third, Colby's own words are vital in order to attempt an interpretation of her perceptions about her own situation. So, in order for the reader to gain a fair representation of Colby's views, which are this book's primary focus, it is frequently necessary to include the full extent of those words. Consequently, I have done minimal editing of Colby's writing. Any emphases within the entries, such as underlining in the diaries and italics in published works, are Colby's or appear in the original published sources in that style. Punctuation, grammar, spelling, and style are unchanged, so occasionally a word or phrase may seem quaint in its usage or misspelled because of changes in writing style and standardized word spelling. Common differences include: "staid" for "stayed," "vail" for "veil," "to day" for "today," and "woman's rights" instead of "women's rights." However, because Colby's writing is highly readable in its original style, these occasional aberrations are *not* indicated with the usual notation of [*sic*]. Brackets are employed *only* if I felt that the addition of a word or phrase is necessary for readability or clarification. finally, perhaps the

most important justification for not only the extensive use of quotes, but also the book itself, is the hope that the reader will gain sufficient understanding of Colby's perceptions about her life to realize the importance those thoughts can have in our ongoing efforts to interpret women's history. Although she was not famous or important in a traditional historical sense, her life provides a vivid illustration of an essential link in the ongoing historical process that shapes women's present lives and future possibilities, and as such serves as a valuable connection between the past and the present.

Part I

An Expected Life

CHAPTER ONE

1827–1848

"The impress of the Connecticut character"

In February 1865, after several sleepless nights following the decision to sell their home and move the family from Ohio to Illinois, Celestia Rice Colby noted in her journal that her angst was "not because I regret the sale or wish to stay in Cherry Valley. But every tie of my life has been formed in this humble town."[1] As we examine her life with the perspective of time, Colby's observation proves astute. Her location in this small, rural, northeastern Ohio community played a large part in her formation of self-identity. Her sense of self was so strongly imbedded within the context of family, community, and country that even when some of those ingrained patterns were at odds with her personal hopes, she often seemed resistant to break completely from the established norms in her life. Ironically, this past not only acted as a limiting force, but it also helped lay the groundwork for the strong views that eventually broadened her desires for the future.

Understanding the foundations beneath Colby's outlook on her life's expectations is important if her later struggles are to be placed in any greater context. Unfortunately, attempts to reconstruct the early years of any ordinary person's life from the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly a woman's life, present difficulties, and Colby is no exception. The nineteenth century produced very little in the way of official documentary evidence of women's lives. Fortunately, however, Colby's recorded memories provide a starting place for interpretation. Sometime after having children of her own, Colby wrote an essay—of which only an incomplete version survives—describing her early childhood. She nostalgically recalled "my father who lived in the 'new settlement' in

northern Ohio. Indeed I believe he was one of "*the first*, who came into the unbroken wilderness in the town of A. [Andover] and the humble location in which I was born." Her mother she described as "the gentle wife, who with her woman's love had left home and kindred in the old Bay State, to create by her presence a new home in this wilderness. Here were born unto them four little girls who did not even imagine that their humble home was not a palace."[2]

Her depiction of her home as "one of love and peace," represents a truthful, albeit idealized, account of her early family life. She was the last of four daughters born in rural Andover, Ohio, to Joel Rice and Flavia Rice, née Bradley. Three girls preceded her birth: Celestia Resign, Cordelia, and Cirlissa, born in April 1822, September 1823, and July 1825, respectively. Only two of the girls survived until Colby's birth. Celestia Resign—the first Celestia—died in July of 1825, just two weeks before Cirlissa's birth. Two years later, on December 19, 1827, Colby—she was christened Celestia M.—arrived and inherited her deceased sister's name. Eighteen months later, in July of 1829, Flavia gave birth to a boy named John Bradley Rice. Colby failed to mention this fifth and final child born to Joel and Flavia; perhaps he was left out of the story because only two months after his birth, Flavia Rice passed away. Her mother died when Colby was only eighteen months old; consequently, she could have no real memory of her. Despite this fact, her writings consistently demonstrate how profoundly her mother's early death affected her. Colby's draft of her nostalgic rendition of her childhood reveals that she tried several alternate beginnings that incorporated her mother's death. Ultimately, she chose to discard those versions and continued the essay with an uplifting story of a happy home with an intact mother. Failure to completely come to terms with this loss may have contributed to her inability to incorporate her death into a story for her own children, preferring instead to garner an idealized account of her childhood based on her wishful assumptions.[3]

Colby continued her childhood reflections with descriptions of their "of course few and scattering" neighbors who, like her family, were working to build a life in this sparsely settled landscape in northeastern Ohio. The majority of settlers in this section of the new nation had started life in New England and eventually moved west to look for new opportunities, and Colby's parents were no exception. Her father was born in 1796 in Granby, Connecticut, and her mother spent her childhood less than ten miles away in Southwick, Massachusetts. In December of 1819, Joel Rice and Flavia Bradley married at Feeding Hills, just outside of Springfield, Massachusetts, at "the home of Elder Shepherd." According to family history, Flavia Bradley was descended from an "Irish gentlewoman of property" who had refused to take her husband's name. The

veracity of this defiant step is unknown, and although the tradition did not live on in the New World, several generations later the genealogical notes made by her great-granddaughter proudly related this bit of family history. Sometime after their marriage, Joel and Flavia Rice, like many people looking for land in the early nineteenth century, moved west to Ohio. By 1830, the couple was settled in Andover, a pioneer community in southeastern Ashtabula County, Ohio, which borders Pennsylvania on the east and Lake Erie to the north. The young couple was one of very few families. In 1830, only about twenty-five other families lived in this newly settled portion of the county.[4]

Ashtabula County was part of the Western Reserve and, as such, had strong cultural and social ties with New England. The Western Reserve, a small section of the larger Northwest Territory, consisted of land that Connecticut had claimed as its own. The preexisting inhabitants of the area—the American Indians—had contested this claim. Several years of fierce competition for dominance meant many deaths on both sides before the native tribes of the area acquiesced to the greater firepower and white influx. The 1795 Treaty of Greenville, among other concessions, led to the removal of the tribes from the area. Connecticut ceded the territory that is now northeast Ohio to Congress in 1800. Congress then officially opened the land to settlement. A few pioneers had set out even before this time, but between 1795 and 1800, the total number of white adult men resident in the whole of the Northwest Territory was likely only five thousand. The first permanent settlers arrived at what would be Ashtabula County from Connecticut in 1798. The total number of residents of the Western Reserve in those two years before 1800 was probably not over 125, so these twenty-five Connecticut transplants to Ashtabula made up about a fifth of the Reserve total—a significant addition.[5]

The Connecticut foundation's effect cannot be underestimated. An 1878 history of Ashtabula County claims proudly that "Ashtabula County may well be considered the legitimate offspring of Connecticut. At least two-thirds of the pioneer settlers of the different townships were born within the boundaries of that State. Full one-half of her population to day [*sic*] can trace their lineage to the enlightened people . . . of the Connecticut. . . . It was but natural that the new colony should bear the impress of the Connecticut character."[6] What this "Connecticut character" meant was that unlike some sections of Ohio whose strong economic and family links to the Southern states lent them a more rustic feel, New England transplants considered themselves more urbane. They had brought their culture with them, which included orderly communities with schools, libraries, and churches connected by a strong sense of Puritan pride and work ethic.

The settlers would need that work ethic. Colby's essay describes the "unbroken wilderness" and the "humble log cabin" in which her family lived. The "surroundings demanded sturdy toil to fell the giant trees, and make the farm—that *was* to be when its crop of oak, chestnut, maple, beech and elm trees were removed—productive." Her words capture the essence of the struggle that these early settlers faced as they attempted to claim farmland from the "gently undulating," abundantly forested, and predominantly clay soil. Although farmers eventually grew wheat, corn, and oats, these products never would be sufficient to sustain a family. The area's future lay in its cows. Once the land was cleared, Ashtabula County primarily, and very successfully, produced and sold butter and cheese.[7]

Despite the challenges of the environment, occasional deadly skirmishes with the last remnants of American Indians, the fear linked to Tecumseh's attempts at forming an American Indian federation, and the few battles fought in nearby Lake Erie during the War of 1812, New England settlers continued their trek into northeast Ohio. By 1804, the Western Reserve population grew to between 400 and 500 people, and by 1812 this number surged to 1,500. Ashtabula organized as a county in 1811, and in the years after the war its population grew steadily. In 1820, approximately 7,400 people called it home, and by 1830, it boasted approximately 15,000 residents. In 1860, this number had doubled to 31,805 people. These new arrivals were a very homogeneous group—white, native-born, Protestant, farm families. The census information for the county at large from 1820 through 1870 lists no slaves and only a handful of immigrants and "free blacks." As Ashtabula County grew, new communities were born. In 1827, the village of Cherry Valley, initially an offshoot of Andover, officially broke away and elected its own local governing body. By 1829, the year Colby's brother John Bradley Rice was born and Flavia Rice died, it even boasted its own postmaster. The Rice family still lived in Andover when Flavia Rice died, but just over a year later in November of 1830, Joel Rice remarried, and sometime between 1830 and 1832, Joel Rice and his new wife Evelina Rice, née Johnson, moved the entire family several miles west to this new community—Cherry Valley, Ohio.[8]

Cherry Valley was fairly representative of what was considered the northwest at this time, in which transplanted New Englanders strove to recreate ordered communities within their still predominantly rural environments. True to this end, the first settlers to the Cherry Valley Township established an organized society in which they constructed their homes and businesses along several intersecting roads. The area's first road, Hayes Road—named after the man instrumental in its construction, Col. Richard Hayes—was built in 1812. The first frame barn was built in 1818, the first frame house in 1825, followed by a sawmill in 1829. By the time the Rices arrived from Andover in the early 1830s, Cherry

Valley was not merely a town legitimized by the act of a petition to separate, but an already viable community.[9]

Today, Cherry Valley consists of a few houses surrounded by woods and grape arbors identified by a sign at the intersection of Routes 90 and 11, but in the early and middle nineteenth century it was a thriving rural community. Initially, Cherry Valley was typical of many frontier settlements, as many people came and went during its first decade of existence. It eventually coalesced, as those residents who could afford to purchase and improve land stayed and those who could not moved on. In 1840, the year that Colby turned thirteen, Cherry Valley's population was 690 people—approximately a third each of men, women, and children. Throughout Colby's residency, this population remained fairly steady before starting to drop in the decade after the Civil War. By 1920 it had plummeted to only 256 people, and today it lacks a separate census figure or a post office of its own.[10]

Families like the Rices, who arrived in the 1830s and 1840s and settled, kept the population relatively stable. When the children and grandchildren of these families became adults, however, many of them either migrated to more urban areas or moved west. Although mobility typified the late nineteenth century, an additional factor contributed to Cherry Valley's lack of growth and eventual decline as compared to Ashtabula County as a whole: no railroad lines entered the community. Other parts of the county were connected by rail to each other and eventually to the rest of the country, but a rail line did not enter into the southeastern section of the county until 1873. In an age of transportation revolution centered on train travel, Cherry Valley's fate was sealed when the rail line passed to the east through Andover.[11]

Joel Rice, somewhat of an entrepreneur, worked at times as a peddler, a merchant, a farmer, and a speculator. He owned dairy-farm real estate and participated in the rising market economy by opening in 1832 the "second store" at the corner of Hayes and Center roads in Cherry Valley. Census reports show the family's assets to be among the highest in the community. The Rice family also continued to grow after their arrival in Cherry Valley. Three more children, Napoleon, Flavia E., and Jay Joel, were born in December 1831, November 1840, and March 1842, respectively. They also housed an occasional hired hand or young male relative who helped with the farm. During Colby's preteen years the household fairly consistently included two adult men who worked primarily on the farm, one adult woman who worked in the house and the farm, five children in school, and several under five years old. Young families dominated the community, so although the Rice household was typical, all indications also point to a certain level of prosperity.[12]

In basic character, Colby's family was much like those of her neighbors—typical northeastern pioneers who valued religion, education, and family. As will be discussed at length, her adult writings show quite a high level of discontentment with this typical life. These writings also indicate that, at least in Colby's view, other members of her family and community apparently did not experience this same sort of unhappiness. Why? Although discerning the inner workings of their minds is, unfortunately, not possible, we are privy to some of Colby's thoughts. Colby's self-reflective words provide evidence that those very factors so important in her community underpinned much of her later discontent. Ironically, those values assessed to be core to the "Connecticut character" of which Ohio was so proud contributed to her eventual struggles. An entire chapter of the previously noted 1878 Ashtabula County history describes the many laudable character qualities inherent in its "parent state." "Education was cherished. . . . Religious knowledge was carried to the highest degree of refinement and applied to moral duties. . . . There was mutual trust. . . . The widest latitude was given to forms of belief. . . . Connecticut from the first possessed unmixed popular liberty . . . kept active by the constant exercise of elective franchise. There was nothing morose in the Connecticut character. Life was not somber. . . . Religion itself sometimes wore the garb of gaiety."[13] The manner in which those themes of education, religious freedom, and personal liberty as a citizen manifested themselves throughout Colby's life affected many of her life goals as well as her level of happiness. Their initial embodiment occurred in her childhood.

Despite the cheery tenor of Colby's essay on her childhood, other evidence disputes this interpretation. Happiness was not a constant. In Colby's own estimation, her mother's early death serves as a turning point. Her father's second wife—he eventually would marry again and outlive his three wives—inadequately filled the void left by her mother's absence. Colby's extensive writings never mention Evelina Rice, who entered Colby's life in the role of stepmother in 1830 when Colby was only three years old, and remained in it until her death in December of 1863. Colby's descriptions and references to her father neglected to mention a spouse. This omission is especially ironic; prior to the marriage Evelina was already a part of the family. She was Flavia Rice's half-sister, thus Colby's aunt. Colby's daughter, J. Rose Colby, who as an adult wrote about her mother's early life, did describe Evelina Rice: "A strange form had taken the lost mother's place. Unloving eyes looked upon the child, harsh words filled her ear."[14] Apparently, Colby did not refer to Evelina Rice in a loving "motherly" way. Rose's own memories of the woman, which would have ended in 1863 when Rose was only aged six, must not have been positive enough to counteract those negative impressions.

Colby's early religious experiences did not foster happiness either. Colby's memories of her childhood church experiences could not even remotely be described as wearing a "garb of gaiety." Colby's father, Joel Rice, his successive wives, and various members of the extended Rice family are buried in the Congregational cemetery in Andover, which was where the Rices apparently attended worship services. Joel Rice was originally from Connecticut where the Congregational Church was the official state religion until 1818 and still dominated until well into the 1840s, so the family's membership in what could be a rather conservative denomination was not surprising. Congregationalism, when supported by a strong Puritan strain of Calvinism, with its emphasis then on the total depravity of humanity and the unconditional salvation of the elect, could have been a depressing force on a young girl unsure of her place. Colby's daughter validated this interpretation with her assertion that Colby's childhood religious experiences were indeed unhappy ones: "A stern religion beset her. John Calvin's gloomy soul inspired all about her, his dark fancies lowered over their lives. Terror and wonder and ignorant faith dwelt together in her mind." In her later life, Colby disavowed many aspects of this style of orthodox religion by repudiating the notion that God's presence was captured in the "gloomy" aspect of John Calvin. Her adult view that God's love was better seen and felt in a flower, however, came after a hard-fought battle against her Calvinistic religious influences. Looking back over his life, radical abolitionist Parker Pillsbury blamed the "drapery of gloom," which was his Calvinistic Congregationalist upbringing, for his poor self-confidence as an adult.[15] Colby also struggled with lifelong self-esteem issues, so perhaps like Pillsbury she never really threw off its effects.

Calvinism strongly influenced Colby's childhood home life, and Congregationalism was the area's first religious denomination; nevertheless, Methodists and Baptists soon predominated in Andover and Cherry Valley. Methodists met in people's homes in Cherry Valley as early as 1825, and a Baptist church was established in 1830. So although the Rices apparently remained practicing Congregationalists, Colby was exposed to other religious forces. Additionally, since Baptists and Methodists dominated the area, their influence played a significant role in the local culture as well as in the formation of societal norms of acceptable behavior. Colby and the Rice family must have felt this presence, even if they attended the Congregational church, as many of their closest neighbors—the Colbys, Cornells, Giddings, Greens, Higbees, McDaniels, and Sweets—were members of the Regular Baptist Church of Cherry Valley. David Colby, Colby's future father-in-law, was a leading member of the church and frequently took a major role in the decision-making debates of the Baptist church.[16]

The Regular Baptist Church's minutes validate the church's involvement in many aspects of people's daily lives beyond their spirituality. In June of 1837, a church committee deliberated on what to do about two members involved in a civil lawsuit. After one party to the suit claimed that "all that what I have done I view to be wrong" and asked for forgiveness, the church accepted his apology and allowed him to retain membership. Members were also regularly removed for infractions such as dancing, hunting on the Sabbath, and neglecting the church as well as more specific wrongs such as an "attempt to injure the character of Henry Andrew's wife," and "repeatedly getting intoxicated." Several members of the Regular Baptist Church were removed from church membership because they "violated their covenant obligations" by attending service at another church that appeared in Cherry Valley in the later 1830s: the Freewill Baptist Church.[17]

The existence of the Freewill Baptist denomination illustrates that even the dominating presence of established churches could not stop other religious influences from entering the community. The formation in 1839 of the Freewill Baptist Church, as the result of a theological difference with the Regular Baptist Church, represented the influence of a societal force that swept through the northeast United States in the first decades of the nineteenth century: the Second Great Awakening. The initial Great Awakening, one hundred years prior, gave birth to the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. The second incarnation, with its emphasis on a more individualistic and evangelistic form of worship, was given fire by the "father of modern revivalism," Charles Finney. Evangelical churches added the spirit of reform and perfectionism to church worship. Finney's arrival and presence as president at nearby Oberlin College in 1835 brought this spirit even closer to northeastern Ohio.[18]

The Second Great Awakening attracted far more women than men, and women dominated the benevolent efforts of the churches. Ideas about how to solve complicated social problems sometimes collided with patriarchal religious tradition and complicated spiritual choices. Antislavery reform efforts provide a prime example. Slavery became an important issue in the Western Reserve area of Ohio in the 1830s, and women formed numerous antislavery societies including the first female Ashtabula County Anti-Slavery Society in 1832. During this decade, many reformers experienced growing dissatisfaction regarding the methods proposed for ending slavery as well as the attitudes of the more conservative element that insisted on increasingly secondary roles for women. In particular, the Congregationalists experienced a certain degree of lost moral authority with their precept that women should not take an active or public role in the fight against slavery. For women involved in benevolent

antislavery societies, this attitude made evangelical churches that more attractive. As the nineteenth century continued to unfold, social issues increasingly intertwined with religions practice and altered people's expectations regarding their church's role and their role within the church.[19]

Evolving personal and community ideas about religion and social issues played an important role in Colby's future struggles, but education proved one of the most important keys to both her satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Like religion, education was an early priority in Cherry Valley. Unlike her early church experiences, school brought happiness and a sense of well being to Colby's childhood. The first postmaster's wife taught the first school out of her home in the winter of 1829–30. Between that time and 1877, six separate "district" or common schools came into being. According to census records, most of the county's children between the ages of five and about sixteen years attended school. Like the majority, Colby likely received her initial schooling at one of these common schools, but unlike many of her cohorts, she also received further education during the early 1840s at a private seminary school, the Grand River Institute (GRI), located about twenty miles northwest in Austinburg, Ohio. This highly regarded institute opened its doors to female students in 1840.[20]

GRI apparently admitted women "on equal conditions with young men." The available course catalogs show no distinction between male and female curricula. Students had to be at least fourteen years old and furnish "satisfactory testimonials that they possess a good moral character; and that they are sufficiently acquainted with the elements of Orthography, Reading, Writing, English, Grammar, and Arithmetic" to complete a four-year curriculum in either the English or the Classical Department. Both departments required algebra and geometry. The English Department added courses such as rhetoric, chemistry, botany, universal history, political economy, logic, moral philosophy, and natural philosophy. The Classical Department concentrated on subjects such as Latin and Greek grammar, exercises, and translation before moving on to reading and analyzing selections from Cicero, Virgil, Homer, and others in the later years. Today's high school students likely would have found the curriculum quite challenging.[21]

The addition of females to the school was quite successful, especially in the 1840s when few other educational options for girls would have been available. As the decade unwound, the number of female students grew. The official 1850 roster of students lists fifty-four "Gentlemen" and forty-eight "Ladies" in attendance. Students hailed from various locales besides Ashtabula County, or even greater Ohio. Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan were well represented as well as the occasional student from Canada. These students could not have been

attracted by the luxury or the ease of life at the school. The catalogs describe the men's rooms as furnished with only stoves and bedsteads. The ladies received the addition of tables, chairs, and washstands, and at times the "Ladies' Hall was so full that trundle beds were made to run under the old fashioned high post beds . . . so the capacity of the rooms might be increased." The students were also expected to work off part of their room and board. The catalogs note that "From one-half to three-fourths of this expense is ordinarily paid from the avails of two to three hours daily labor." Since over twenty miles separated Austinburg and Cherry Valley, the best land route to the school was described as an ox-cart trail; travel was still horse drawn at its best, and Colby likely boarded there at least during the week.[22]

Colby's time in Austinburg at Grand River must have affected her in ways beyond mere formal education. GRI may have helped establish the foundation for her future progressive leanings. Austinburg was a community in which the "abolition sentiment" was always quite strong, and it served as a well-known station for the Underground Railroad. Today, Betsy Mix Cowles—an early GRI teacher, administrator, and pioneer in women's higher education—is remembered as much for her antislavery work and devotion to the cause of women's rights as her role in education. In addition, American Anti-Slavery Society speakers, including Abby Kelley, spent the summer of 1845 in the Western Reserve promoting their progressive brand of reform. Their radical stances included a call for "disunion" with the slave-holding states, abolition of Ohio's Black Laws, disseverment from all involvement with politics, and a complete break from religious organizations that did not openly condemn slavery by ending ties with Southern branches. In 1857 Colby noted the fact that she had seen Abby Kelley speak earlier in life, which most likely occurred during this visit.[23]

A broad movement encouraging children's education existed in nineteenth-century, northeastern, dairy-farm families. Families with below average-sized farms or with numerous daughters saw further education as a means to provide a plan for the gap between girlhood and marriage by training young women to teach school. In addition to its role as a stopgap, teaching could bring in extra money for the family. Nevertheless, whether any of Colby's siblings attended Grand River Institute is not known. Their names do not appear in any available student rosters, and contextual evidence lends itself to a conclusion that they did not attend GRI. Sons and daughters were crucial to dairy farming, which was very much a cooperative effort that needed both male and female help. Colby's brothers, John Bradley and Napoleon, turned fourteen in 1843 and 1845, respectively, and as the only boys, their labor would have been essential. In addition, Evelina Rice, who turned forty in 1842, bore a child in both 1840 and 1842. Cordelia and

Cirlissa would have been seventeen and fifteen years old, respectively, when the school opened its doors to women in 1840. However, with two new additions to the family, extra responsibilities beyond the usual tasks associated with their dairy work likely fell to the teenage girls, which may have made leaving home less likely. Cordelia remained in the Rice household until her marriage in May of 1848. Cirlissa remained for another fifteen years until her marriage in October of 1862. The continued presence of both Colby's older sisters may have allowed for Colby's absence. If that is the case, then her place as the third daughter and fourth woman in the family hierarchy was an important factor in her opportunity.[24]

The community's "Connecticut character" as well as the family's history may have been an impetus to provide continued education for the children when possible. According to family lore, great-grandfather Peter Rice—the original Rice immigrant—had been a lawyer. Evidence also indicates that Joel Rice had more than a common school education. An extant math notebook from his childhood demonstrates his knowledge of advanced algebra. Whatever the final reason, Colby's attendance was a high point in her young adulthood. Ironically, it also served as a foundation for later dissatisfaction with her life. Many dairy farmers wrestled with the decision of providing further education for their children precisely because of this fear that their children, especially their daughters, would develop a future dissatisfaction with farm life and view it as "drudgery." Education did complicate the perceptions of available roles, particularly for women, in the mid-nineteenth century. In this rural area, in particular, the pride in their New England character sometimes clashed with their need for the whole family to labor on the farm, as education conflicted with farm needs.[25]

Regardless of the potential clash, some farmers did send their sons and daughters away to school, and the Grand River Institute served this increasing need. Biographies of several former students clearly show they viewed their attendance with pride. One student, who went on to serve as an Ohio senator, referred to the school's curriculum as "college prep." Another former student noted that he took classes on alternate terms while teaching at a district school. The institute obviously allowed for those students whose plans did not include direct entrance into college. This group included female students, who had almost no avenues to pursue any higher education, but likely a significant number of males as well. Through the end of the 1840s, Ohio had only eleven colleges, and up until the 1870s, only about 1 percent of college-aged Americans—men or women—attended college.[26]

By 1840, female common school education was rapidly becoming the norm, particularly in the urban northeast, but Colby's further education at this institution must be placed in broader context. As 1840 opened, Ohio had only

two female seminaries and five normal schools, or academies, including Grand River Institute. GRI was roughly equivalent to the high schools of today, but as the school's own history described, "It will be remembered that at this time [1840] the higher education of women in America had scarcely reached its experimental stage and there was not a co-educational school in existence of any importance. Mary Lyon had just founded Mt. Holyoke." This statement was not completely factual, but only a handful of avenues for women's higher education existed. Even the most famous example, Oberlin College, which by 1840 admitted women, expected those early female students to follow "ladies [*sic*] courses" and receive special degrees. Those two institutions, however, were vital to GRI's inclusion of female students; the first two preceptresses of the school's "Ladies [*sic*] Department" were Mount Holyoke graduate Katherine Snow and Oberlin graduate Betsy Mix Cowles. As Colby attended school sometime between 1841 and 1847, her time may have coincided with one or both of these women's tenures. Cowles held the post from 1843 to 1848, so Colby likely spent at least a year under her tutelage.[27]

Pinpointing Colby's duration at Grand River proved difficult, but likely was limited to the early 1840s. She turned fourteen years old—the minimum age for attendance—in December of 1841. She is not included in the available GRI rosters of students for the school years ending in July of 1846 or June of 1848. Although Colby made her first decisive reference to school in an August 1847 poem, "On the death of C.A. Weeks," in which she wrote sadly on the death of a school friend, her earliest extant writing, much of it poetry, appears in a journal dating back to 1844. As students were required to read and analyze poetry, perhaps this experience was the catalyst for her own writing. These poems are not intermingled with schoolwork, so possibly she began keeping her writing journal after finishing school or during breaks. Unfortunately, most of these early poems were sentimental works that provide no direct clues about school attendance. Typical examples of this early work include an undated poem most likely written around 1844 entitled, "My Sister's Grave," which romanticizes the positive aspects of a death in childhood:

Where not grief can reach thee sister
For thine's a happy lot.
Sweet Sister would that *I* like thee
In infancy had died,
From sin and sorrow I should be free
If sleeping by thy side.

Numerous other poems are somewhat sentimental or romantic portraits dedicated to friends and family, but other maudlin pieces similar in style to the above included this acrostic devoted to her mother:

> Mother ever dear, thy name dwells with me here
> Oh! May thy fond spirit linger near;
> To comfort and console and cheer my lonely way
> Here oft at the calm sunset hour
> Each evening come. I'll own thy power,
> Return to thy native skies with sun's last ray.

This is one of the earliest of many poems that clearly demonstrates the lingering loss Colby felt for years after her mother's death.[28]

True to society's intended purpose for further female education, Colby also taught school for an undetermined span during the 1840s. During her tenure, she attended in October 1847 a ten-day Ashtabula County Teachers' Institute course as a Cherry Valley common-school instructor. Although Colby attended only one session between 1846 and 1851, this fact does not necessarily lead to a conclusion that she taught only for one year. In 1846, Ashtabula County sponsored its first Teachers' Institute, and although sessions were held annually from that point, attendance varied. Repeat attendance was not uncommon, but often not in succeeding years. Two other Cherry Valley teachers, Henry Green and Jesse Higbee, attended only in 1846 and 1848, and 1847 and 1850, respectively. Regardless of the exact timing of her teaching tenure, Colby rode the leading edge of the rise in female teachers. In 1847, Ohio employed less than 2,000 female teachers, but over the next decade women swelled the ranks and pulled almost even with male teachers. In 1854, over 6,400 women taught at the common school level and sixty-three women at the high school level as compared to just under 7,500 men in the common schools and seventy-one at the high school level. By 1866, Ohio's public schools certified over 11,000 women and just over 7,600 men.[29]

If the Teachers' Institute's attendance rosters provide an accurate indication of the evolving Ashtabula County male-female ratio, then the county was also on the leading edge of the rise in female teachers. In 1846, 75 "gentlemen" and 60 "ladies" attended the Institute. In 1847, the balance shifted to 70 men and 84 women, and in 1850, this imbalance became even more pronounced with 125 women in attendance compared to only 69 men. This ratio may help explain why the following resolution appeared in the 1850 Teachers' Institute's minutes, but

not in the 1840s: "Resolved, that we deem the qualifications of Female Teachers underrated by the small compensation allowed them for teaching; and in our opinion the same amount of labor performed with equal ability should be equally rewarded, whether performed by male or female." Ashtabula County female teachers' longevity may have been different than the rest of the states in the Northeast in general. Contrary to the norm, evidence shows several of Ashtabula County's female teachers may have taught for at least a six-year stretch from 1847 through 1851. Most young women's teaching careers fell far short of that mark, and Colby likely fell into that norm.[30] By the summer of 1847, her days as a teacher were over, as her life continued to head down the expected path.

In April of 1848, Colby wrote a poem-styled letter to a school friend, titled, "Ever dear Nette." This letter obliquely addressed this coming change, as well as the subject of GRI. She spoke fondly of their days there.

> With "kind regards" my love to you I send.
> My loved, my cherished school day friend.
> Memory oft winds her [illegible] to those days that are past
> Too bright and joyous were they to last.

She continued with an implicit reference to her reason for no longer attending classes:

> For school days are passed, and never again shall I
> Mingle with student, a student of "G.R.I"
> The "obvious reason" that you mention
> I think must be your own intention
> But such reasons do not work in every rule.[31]

This letter apparently alluded to the next major event in Colby's life. In August of 1847, she had become engaged to Lewis Colby. They were both nineteen, and their families were longtime neighbors. In honor of their engagement, Colby described her hopes for the future in an acrostic.

> Lewis for thee I wish much joy
> Ever happy be, without alloy.
> Wealth, I ask not; for I know full well,
> In contentment superior pleasure dwell.
> Sweet content be thine, and joys no longer can tell.

Her engagement and pending marriage would seem to be the "obvious reason" for not attending further classes or teaching. Interestingly, if that is the case, Colby seems to caution Nette not to leap into marriage herself. The above letter also makes clear that by the spring of 1848, Colby had attended her last class. She also wrote numerous poems between her engagement in 1847 and her marriage in the summer of 1848, indicating that she may have spent the winter months in Cherry Valley, not teaching or matriculating.[32]

Colby's life to this point dovetails neatly with what has been characterized as the "domestic life cycle" of a proper, northeastern, native-born, white woman. This domestic life cycle had its beginnings in childhood, where games, toys, children's literature, and education were gender specific and designed to instill proper norms and cultural beliefs. After the completion of a girl's available educational opportunities, which at mid-century terminated at no higher than the secondary level, a proper young woman's next steps were quite limited. She frequently stayed home and apprenticed at her mother's side until her early twenties or in some cases, particularly in the New England area, she taught school for a short period of time. The ultimate goal for a true woman, however, was to marry and move to the next stage of the cycle. This phase of a woman's life—marriage with the roles of wife, mother, and household manager—was even more directly set by law and societal norms than was childhood. Married women's legal rights were strictly limited. Prescriptive literature that spelled out proper guidelines for behavior saturated nineteenth-century material culture, and societal pressure to conform was intense.[33]

This domestic life cycle was purported to be the expected course for all women. This supposed ideal for all women, the "True Woman," served as the linchpin that kept the quickly emerging and changing modern world from becoming unmanageable; all women were to aspire to this status. Only a small percentage of real women—primarily from the northeast, urban, white middle-class—would have realistically had the resources to maintain the type of lifestyle recommended by the prescriptive literature. For the most part, the reality of working women, rural farming women, and the poor was ignored. The message was a powerful one, however, and it affected even those women who were not its primary targets. The urban middle class did not enclose the only literate women in the nation, and this supposed ideal of womanhood reached women whose real lives did not have the capacity to embrace it, even if they desired. As a working member of a rural farm family, Colby would not have been a prime target of the message. Nevertheless, she was educated, intelligent, and well read, and over the years she felt its pull and reacted to it, regardless of its intended audience.

Research shows that rural women indeed reacted to the social construction of the feminine ideal, but they experienced the ideal in a different way because their day-to-day lives diverged in significant ways from their urban sisters. Despite the present-day acknowledgment that the idealized separate woman's sphere was not an actual physical reality for rural or urban women, it had real effects on all of society's—and the individual's—definition of womanhood, not just those in the urban northeast. In July of 1848, Celestia Rice started down the path to the next stage of womanhood, as envisioned by society, when she married Lewis Colby. As one historian notes, most nineteenth-century women possessed the expectation that marriage was the first step toward fulfilling their "destinies," and all indications were that Colby was happy to continue along this expected domestic path.[34] Her marriage marked the end of an old life. She had been a young working woman whose life had been dominated for the last several years by learning and teaching. She now began her new life as a wife, a live-in daughter-in-law, and a soon-to-be mother. During the next few years, her experiences in the outward world and her slowly evolving personal goals began to diverge and challenge her ability to achieve happiness in that socially defined role.

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