

Introduction

This study examines the life of Jane Minot Sedgwick II (1821-1889), her conversion to Roman Catholicism, and her 36-year experience as an active laywoman.¹ It not only treats how and why an elite Protestant woman like Jane converted, but also the struggles she experienced living a new faith. Despite the importance of priests and women religious in encouraging and sustaining her faith journey, the key to understanding Jane's life as a convert is the unique space created by nineteenth-century women's friendships. These friendships guided her to the Church and, upon her conversion, shepherded her into a network of transnational Catholic elites while helping her retain her privileged place in New England society. Moreover, they sustained her as she tangled with priests and bishops over the direction of her local Catholic community. By studying the various Protestant and Catholic cultures Jane came to know, and the ways she navigated them with the help of other converts, this dissertation provides a fresh assessment of how American converts came to Catholicism and lived out their new faith culture in a rapidly-growing, immigrant-based church.

When one visits Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the town where Jane was born, people will often ask if you've seen "the Pie." By this they mean the Sedgwick burial plot in the town cemetery. This unique circular plot, with Jane's grandparents' obelisks in the center and concentric circles of Sedgwick relations buried around them, stands separated from the rest of the cemetery by thick hedges. Among the graves you will find Jane's parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. You will find markers for Mumbet, the former slave who

¹ Due to common names between generations, this dissertation will use the familiar "Jane" to refer to the woman at the core of the study. In all other cases, nicknames and familial references will be used whenever possible to avoid confusion – Uncle Charles, Bessie, Aunt Robert, etc. – but in the case of Jane Minot Sedgwick I and II, a more unique system will be employed. Jane Minot Sedgwick II often signed her letters "Jane Jr.," but since she is the subject of the project, it seems incorrect to refer to her as though she is a secondary "Jane." As a result, Jane Minot Sedgwick I will be referred to as "Jane Senior" in situations where confusion is likely.

Jane's grandfather supported in her freedom suit against the state of Massachusetts. You will find a marker for Jane's niece and namesake, whose body lies in Naples where she died, but whose place in the family is still marked in Stockbridge. You will even find the grave of Jane's cousin Grace Sedgwick Bristed, who like Jane, was a convert to Catholicism, but still chose to be buried among her Protestant family. You will not, however, find any indication of Jane's membership in the family. Neither will you find her in the Catholic cemetery just outside of the center of town. Instead, she is buried under the eaves of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, which she helped build, on the opposite side of the wall from the pew she regularly occupied. Though she instructed her family to continue the upkeep of the burial plot, she herself chose a different resting place. If you were looking for her grave but did not know anything about her other than the family she belonged to, she would be very difficult to locate.

Even her contemporaries struggled to locate her. The *Pittsfield Sun* printed Jane's obituary on February 21, 1889, which would have been her 68th birthday. In memorializing Jane, the obituary attempted to locate her, physically, culturally, socially, and spiritually. It did so by beginning with a detailed description of her burial under the eaves, "between the pines and the pew." In tracing the trajectory of her life by beginning with the unique situation of her burial, the obituary presented an explanation for why she deviated from the path her distinguished birth had seemingly set for her by joining the Catholic Church, and suggested that in joining the Church, she had moved firmly from one world into another. The physical location of her body signified her social, cultural, and spiritual location.²

Jane was remarkably absent from her own obituary, which, while full of specifics about her relatives and the groups with which she associated, allowed her burial "Under the Droppings of the Eaves" to communicate all that the reader needed to know about Jane herself. Few reading

² *Pittsfield Sun*, February 21, 1889.

it would have found anything in there to contradict their assumptions about elite New England womanhood, Roman Catholicism, and religious conversion. Rather than memorializing her, Jane's obituary attempted to *explain* her, and it did so satisfactorily without the reader really needing to know anything about her.³ This dissertation intends to know Jane, and understand her.

By studying Sedgwick as a participant in several cultural collisions, adaptations, and changes in 19th-century New England, this project illuminates several fields of inquiry in the history of religion, gender, and class. First, it reconfigures important themes in the literature of American Catholicism, as well as that of Unitarianism, religious choice, gender and social change in nineteenth-century America. As part of a larger literature on conversion, scholars have studied Catholic converts as individuals, in the context of religiously-mixed marriages, as members of religious communities, and as participants in transnational intellectual communities, all of which provide a basis for my work. Still, this literature has long depended on the abundant public and published private writings of notable male converts – those who were priests, publishers, and public intellectuals – without fully examining the ways that gender, status, and relationships influenced the conversion experience and shaped post-conversion life. By exploring the gendered dimensions of conversion and analyzing converts in the context of their friendships and faith-based relationships, my work revises and expands the literature on conversion to Catholicism.

One common response to this dissertation topic from scholars has been “Were there many converts to Catholicism then?” followed by “Why would she become Catholic?” These questions also frame much of the work on Catholic converts in the nineteenth century, and conversion in general; historians do, after all, look for causality. Moreover, they are reasonable questions, particularly in Jane's case. She had been raised in such a solid liberal Protestant New

³ *Pittsfield Sun*, February 21, 1889.

England family and her conversion occurred at a time of heightened anti-Catholicism in America; either would be enough to make one wonder about her religious choice. These questions are important starting points for the project, and the frequency with which I've encountered them has told me something about the assumptions and expectations historians make about this subject.

Both questions indicate a belief that there is something incongruous and transgressive about elite converts to Catholicism in antebellum America, factors which must therefore have limited the number of converts. As Lincoln Mullen notes in his recent work on waves of Catholic conversion in this period, records from the nineteenth century indicate tens of thousands of converts to Catholicism in America, drawn from all ranks of society. Immigration alone did not swell the ranks of American Catholics.⁴ The fact that most of the scholarly work on Catholic conversion has looked at the same small set of converts may have helped inadvertently frame it as a fairly small part of the religious activity of the period. Jane and the thousands of Protestant Americans like her who became Catholic in the 19th century cannot be written off as curiosities, however. Instead, this dissertation seeks to make historical sense of Jane Sedgwick and others like her, as a first step towards understanding the larger world of Catholic converts in America.

In doing so, this project asks a series of questions that spring from the initial paradox Jane's life seems to present. Given the pervasiveness of anti-Catholicism in America in the mid-19th century, especially among the elite Unitarian New Englanders who form the core of this study, how did Roman Catholicism become a viable religious option? What did it mean that the converts in this study all had friends who had also converted? How did these women understand their conversion and its personal, familial, and social ramifications? Perhaps most importantly,

⁴ Lincoln A. Mullen, "The Contours of Conversion to Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century" *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 1-3.

From *Jane Minot Sedgwick and the World of American Catholic Converts, 1820-1890*, Erin Bartram, 2015.

how did they adapt to a new faith culture? How did they live *after* their conversions? What happened to the lives and relationships they had before they converted? Given the controversies at the time about the compatibility of American and Catholic life, did these women see or feel any incompatibility? If so, how did they reconcile the issues to their own satisfaction? This dissertation addresses the most basic questions historians ask: what were the changes and continuities, in this case, for one woman who converted to Catholicism?

These questions provide a useful starting point for the study of Jane Sedgwick's life, but the asking of them also forces an examination of certain assumptions that undergird the historical study of religion, especially Roman Catholicism, and women. After those initial expressions of confusion, many scholars have offered "solutions" to the apparent problem of Catholic converts, particularly female converts. The answers offered reveal much about the assumptions historians make about women, religion, and Catholicism specifically. In casual conversation and in published secondary literature, scholars repeat arguments that were being made in the 19th century when these conversions happened. By examining these existing arguments and the assumptions they make about gender, faith, and authority, this dissertation introduces a set of counterarguments that complicate several longstanding arguments.

If scholars know anything about conversion to Catholicism in America in the 19th century, they know one or more of a small set of famous converts: Orestes Brownson, Isaac Hecker, and Mother Elizabeth Seton, now recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Some may know Sophia Ripley because of her role in Brook Farm and therefore her association with Brownson and Hecker. Usually scholars who do not study religion know Orestes Brownson, who was an important public intellectual well before his conversion. Both Brownson and Hecker, his Brook Farm companion and founder of the Paulist Fathers, have been the subjects of extensive

scholarly biographies in the past twenty-five years.⁵ Despite their clearly-exceptional status, Brownson and Hecker are often made to stand in for the totality of convert experience in America. Convert women appear peripherally in these works, particularly in David O'Brien's excellent of Hecker, who was friends with Jane and many of the converts she knew, but the scholarly literature on Seton, despite her stature within the Church, is thin at best, and much of the older work on her life tends towards hagiography.⁶ Despite the thousands of recorded conversions to Roman Catholicism in the 19th century, there is scant literature on those converts outside a handful of prominent people.

Scholars who do not study religion have often responded to my topic by making the argument that women in that period must have been attracted to the aesthetic and ritual elements of Catholicism. This quick assumption suggests that our minds still make tacit connections between women, Catholicism, ritual, emotion, and irrationality. This connection is something that Catholic converts of the period grappled with explicitly. Orestes Brownson, when reviewing *Mora Carmody: or Woman's Influence*, a fictionalized conversion account, cautioned the authors of conversion narratives against making Roman Catholicism's aesthetic beauty a thrust of their narrative. Such a narrative would be an easy target for Protestants, who saw forms rather than piety, sensuality where there should be sober spirituality.⁷ Ellen Gates Starr, an early twentieth

5 Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004); David J. O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). The Paulist Fathers are an American order of missionary priests founded in 1858.

6 Most of the recent writing on Seton's life is of a spiritual nature. In addition to several edited volumes of her writings, two substantive biographies of Seton exist. Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Ann Seton, 1774-1821* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951); Joseph I. Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity*, new canonization edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). Jenny Franchot devotes a chapter to Seton in *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter With Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Most recently, Catherine O'Donnell has used Seton's transatlantic Catholic life to examine the contours of Catholicism in the age of Enlightenment, and is currently writing a biography of Seton. "Elizabeth Seton: Transatlantic Cooperation, Spiritual Struggle, and the Early Republican Church," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1-17.

7 Orestes A. Brownson "1. - Mora Carmody: or Woman's Influence. A Tale," *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, January 1845, 134.

century convert, faced a dubious Paulist priest who thought she might have only been attracted by Catholic aesthetics; she found that an amusing fear, given “the almost uniform ugliness of American Catholic churches.”⁸ Many scholars have examined the pervasive Protestant attraction to Catholic art and forms in this period, but we must be careful not to assume such things *caused* conversion, even if, in some cases, they may have been the entry point into the world of Roman Catholicism.⁹

These scholarly associations between gender, Roman Catholicism, visual culture, emotion, and even sensuality are not new ideas. A survey of the literature on religious choice across the twentieth century demonstrates that strong conceptual links between gender, race, class, civilization, emotion, and dependence were baked into the analytical frameworks of religious studies at the creation of the discipline. As Sean McCloud argues in *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies*, the emergence of the field of religious studies at the end of the 19th century coincided with the emergence of the field of eugenics, and scholars of religion of the period argued that religious choice alternately sprang from and created “degenerate” people. Catholicism was singled out as attracting emotional races and even “in the more advanced countries,” attracting converts “impelled by emotion.”¹⁰ McCloud argues that these explicitly eugenic theories gave way to arguments about social environment at mid-century, followed by ideas of religion born out of “cultural crisis” and deprivation. In all cases, he argues, scholarly analysis of religion “unwittingly functioned to distinguish and classify religions in ways that supported existing racial, class, and regional

8 Patrick Allitt, “American Catholic Converts and Catholic Intellectual Life,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1995):58n.

9 Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome*; Ryan K. Smith, *Gothic Arches, Latin Crosses* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

10 Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 39. These same eugenicists noted that Unitarianism was the most advanced and rational religion.

hierarchies.”¹¹ The language of emotion and reason that has governed the study of religion not only suggests the “divine” hierarchies that McCloud highlights, but also divisions based on gender.

I would argue that while taking gender into account is of utmost importance in studying conversion, and that the lack of attention to gender has been a serious oversight to this point, we must also be wary of making gendered assumptions. Existing gendered assumptions help explain how people made sense of conversions like Jane’s, from Unitarianism to Catholicism. If one understands Unitarianism and Catholicism to be at opposite ends of a spectrum of “rationality,” conversion can be hard to understand. If one understand men and women to be at opposite ends of that same spectrum, however, these conversions can be made to “make sense.” Instead, an analysis of conversion and gender must both attend to the different ways that men and women experienced religion and religious choice in the nineteenth century and carefully analyze the ways in which religions and religious practices were gendered.¹²

Much of the historical and contemporary discussion of women’s conversion to Catholicism also concerns itself with relationships between women and priests. As Tracy Fessenden, Jenny Franchot, and Marie Anne Pagliarini have argued, the confessional was a site of eroticized fear for Protestant Americans, where women faced the danger of hidden interactions with sexually-depraved priests.¹³ Setting aside Protestant sexual concerns, Catholic conversion necessitated interaction with a priest in a way that conversion to other religions in the period did not; as Lincoln Mullen notes, “One could not join by fiat or choice alone: converts

11 McCloud, 54.

12 In this area, I take as my model Susan Juster’s work on the “feminine” Baptist Church in 18th century New England. *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

13 Tracy Fessenden, “The Convent, the Brothel, and the Protestant Woman’s Sphere,” *Signs* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 451-178; Marie Anne Pagliarini, “The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 97-128.

From *Jane Minot Sedgwick and the World of American Catholic Converts, 1820-1890*, Erin Bartram, 2015.

were said to have been “received” into the church, rather than to have joined.”¹⁴ The sacramental nature of Catholicism, combined with the fact that only priests, and therefore only men, could administer them, linked converts with clergy in a unique way.

While scholars have taken men like Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker at their word that conversion was largely a solitary process for them, the existing literature suggests that the relationship with a priest is still presumed to be the most important one in understanding a *female* convert’s decision. For instance, Patrick Allitt’s analysis of female Catholic converts notes that the conversion of Eliza Allen Starr occurred “only under the guidance of Francis Kenrick, Archbishop of Baltimore,” without noting that her cousin Fanny Allen was a convert to Catholicism.¹⁵ The privileging of the convert-priest relationship in the study of women, but not in the study of men like Brownson and Hecker, reifies arguments made at the time and assumes that women had less control over their spiritual choices than men. While this last statement may be true in the broadest sense, beginning with that assumption closes off fruitful paths of scholarly inquiry and erases other women who were important in the conversion process. This project puts forward other relationships as more important for the spiritual lives of female converts, particularly relationships with other elite women who had converted.

When historians of the 19th century talk about “conversion,” they mean two different things, depending on the population in question. The evangelical heart-religion of the 19th century was one of conversion, though that conversion that might be solely contained in one’s soul, testified to in front of a congregation, or written down as a formal narrative.¹⁶ The other use

14 Mullen, 10.

15 Allitt, “American Woman Converts,” 60.

16 In many ways, this form of conversion overlaps with the idea of “second conversion” – bringing lapsed Catholics back into the Church. Christine M. Bochen, *The Journey to Rome: Conversion Literature by Nineteenth-Century American Catholics* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 61-2. See also Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830-1900* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978); Virginia Lieson Brereton,

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of conversion, by which we mean a conscious choice to join a particular denomination, possibly leaving another in the process, often overlaps with the first variety. Orestes Brownson, in one of his many conversions, felt the grace of God and joined the Presbyterian Church as a result. His heart and soul were converted, but that internal change required an external change, a human performance of the work that had been wrought on his soul.¹⁷ Depending on the time, place, and religions concerned, scholars also look for particular markers that indicate formal reception into a denomination if required; baptism is perhaps the most common of these markers, especially for Catholic converts. These markers are useful, but they can distract from the processual nature of conversion by emphasizing the moment on the Road to Damascus, rather than the road itself, and suggesting that without an identifiable moment where the conversion was formalized, the conversion was somehow less real, or at least less know-able by historians.

Even the language of the road is problematic, however; along with the language of journeys and paths, it dominates the titles of 19th century conversion narratives and contemporary scholarly inquiry, particularly about conversion to Catholicism. In deploying these specific spatial and temporal metaphors, scholars reflect and reinforce assumptions about the process of conversion and the duration of that process.¹⁸ Often scholars use the same language that converts used to acknowledge their subjects' understandings of their own lives, an approach we should always take. But roads, paths, and journeys suggest direction and destination, a beginning and an end to the process of conversion. These conceptual frameworks serve to limit our understanding of what constitutes conversion itself, when and how it happens, and as a

From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women's Conversions, 1800 to the Present (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991)

¹⁷ Orestes A. Brownson, *The Convert; or, Leaves From My Experience* (New York: Edward Dunigan & Brother, 1857), Ch. 2.

¹⁸ In the 19th century, such titles as Georgina Pell Curtis' collection of essays by converts entitled *Beyond the Road to Rome* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1914), more recently Franchot's *Road to Rome*, Bochen's *The Journey to Rome*.

result, when and where we should look to understand it. When we ask “Why did she convert?,” we ask for reasons that explain a choice, an event, a journey with a beginning and an end. As a result, many examinations of converts privilege the “moment” of conversion as the object needing explanation and the end of the journey, leaving the rest of a convert’s life relatively unexplored.¹⁹ Moreover, there is no specific marker for the beginning of the road, so scholars often read back from the end of the road, looking for signposts that indicate where and when the road began.

Assumptions about “roads to Rome” and the primacy of male and priestly authority in the lives of American convert women have led scholars to ignore or give short shrift to the relationships that were often some of the most important for *all* American women: their relationships with other women. To understand Jane’s conversion, and indeed to understand her life more broadly, we must look at the “female world,” to use Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s term. Smith-Rosenberg’s forty-year-old argument – that historians know of the existence of “long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women” but do not think about it – has been deeply influential in my study of Jane’s life, because her argument still accurately describes the literature on American Catholic converts. By examining the relationships Jane had with the women in her life, many of which spanned the years before and after her conversion, this project helps explain how Jane came to be interested in Catholicism, how she came to accept it, how her family came to accept it, and how she learned and lived her faith for the thirty-five years following her conversion. It is in Jane’s friendships that the meaning of her conversion lies.

Moreover, the reliance on Brownson and Hecker as the primary examples of Catholic conversion also reflects a reliance on studying converts who published conversion narratives,

¹⁹ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*. Prominent converts like Brownson and Hecker defy this model, because they were “important” after their conversions, as do those who either changed religion again or “reverted,” both indications that the initial conversion was not the end of the journey.

who were public intellectuals, and whose papers are published; in the United States, most of the authors of Catholic conversion narratives were men, though women did write a few brief essays explaining their conversions later in the century.²⁰ Published conversion narratives are valuable sources, of course, but they are intentional and crafted in a particular way. The publication of private writings necessarily indicates some “importance” placed on the subject, further enabling the historiography of a topic remains weighted towards its male participants. This is not to say that private writings contain some objective truth about a subject’s conversion, but they allow us a glimpse of different relationships that were also the sites of conversion. By attending to private writings and the intimate spaces of women’s friendship, this dissertation looks to new voices in new places to expand the conversation on where and how conversion to Catholicism happened, and what it meant for the people involved.

This study uses one convert – a woman from a prominent family, but not a prominent woman herself – to posit a different approach to understanding conversion than that which historians have relied on thus far. Jane Sedgwick did little that would qualify as “important,” so one might wonder why her life is worthy of a complete biographical study. It is precisely her relative unimportance that allows us to approach the tired narrative of the road to Rome with fresh eyes. We do not need to understand her conversion because she founded an order, like Mother Elizabeth Seton and Isaac Hecker, or because she was a significant public intellectual like Orestes Brownson. Her conversion does not next to explain something else she did, nor does some significant social contribution need to be understood in light of her conversion.

20 The major published stand-alone conversion narratives include Stephen Cleveland Blyth, *An Apology for the Conversion of Stephen Cleveland Blyth, to the Faith of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church* (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1815); Isaac T. Hecker, *Questions of the Soul* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855); Orestes A. Brownson, *The Convert; or, Leaves From My Experience* (New York: Edward Dunigan & Brother, 1857); B.W. Whitcher, *The Story of a Convert, as Told to his Former Parishioners After He Became a Catholic* (New York: P. O’Shea, 1875); Joshua Huntington, *Gropings After Truth: A Life Journey from New England Congregationalism to the One Catholic and Apostolic Church* (New York: Christian Press Association Publishing Co., 1896).

Relieved of this explanatory weight, Jane's conversion becomes one element of a rich and complex life, and can no longer be an end unto itself. Rather than understanding conversion as a path that takes an individual from one cultural world into another, a journey that ends with reception into the new faith, this dissertation argues that conversion must be understood as a life-long process of cultural collision and adaptation. Instead of beginning with her conversion and reading back to find out "why," this project begins by situating Jane in the world into which she was born and raised, over which she had little control, before exploring the choices she made that expanded her world and brought her to add "Catholic" to the groups with whom she self-identified.

Born to a prominent and well-to-do Massachusetts and New York Unitarian family, Sedgwick was wary of religious zeal throughout her childhood and teenage years, openly mocking a cousin who went to Burma as a Baptist missionary and an acquaintance who became a nun. Yet as a young woman, Sedgwick became friendly with women of her own social standing who had chosen Catholicism, including Ruth Charlotte Dana, Sophia Ripley, and Mary O'Sullivan Langtree. The intimacies of women's friendships in the nineteenth century allowed for intense discussions of theology and personal observations of others living their faith. Sedgwick's friendship with convert women who shared her birth culture allowed her to see Catholicism as a viable religious path for someone of her standing and heritage.

Sedgwick and her cohort of antebellum Catholic converts, inhabiting several distinct and overlapping cultures, endeavored to surround themselves with others who shared their experiences. Facing critical family and friends, they turned to those friends who understood and validated their choices and supported each other's new Catholic-inflected benevolent activities. Sedgwick spent the last twenty years of her life attempting to establish a Catholic school in her

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hometown. The local church hierarchy disagreed sharply with her over issues of gender, class, and authority, but also desired the funds and respectability a convert like Sedgwick could bring. During two decades of conflict and miscommunication over the school, Sedgwick constantly sought reassurance from other elite converts that her views about Catholic institution-building held merit and deserved acknowledgement. Sedgwick's existence as a convert was, at times, emotionally painful as a result of cultural conflict between her two worlds, but it was also painful when the patriarchal structures in each of her worlds robbed her of opportunity and control.

Jenny Franchot's *Roads to Rome*, a rich book on the Protestant fascination with Catholicism, provides an excellent resource for understanding the imaginative world of Catholicism in which Sedgwick was raised. Moreover, her work examines the conversion of Sophia Ripley and Elizabeth Seton, focusing on what brought these women to Catholicism and the internal re-imagining that resulted from their conversion and led them to enter religious life. Anne Rose's work on interfaith families provides another model for understanding how converts lived their faith, though her work primarily focuses on converts in the context of marriage, as with Anna Ward, a Catholic convert, and her husband Thomas.²¹ Franchot and Rose study the self and the family, two central concepts in nineteenth-century American history, but the nuclear family and the cloister were not the only places where converts found religious community. Jane's conversion, omitted from both books despite her close friendship with both women, comes into view when friendship is taken into account. Ripley's friendship helped guide Jane to Catholicism, and Sedgwick guided Anna Ward, one of Rose's subjects, to her reception into the Church.

21 Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome*; Anne C. Rose, *Beloved Strangers: interfaith families in nineteenth-century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Anne C. Rose, "Some Private Roads to Rome: The Role of Families in Victorian American Conversion" *The Catholic Historical Review* 85 (January 1999): 35-57.

Studying converts also means qualifying any discussion of an “American Catholic community.” Scholars argue that the mid-nineteenth century saw a “turning away from a Catholicism grounded in the American democratic tradition,” and as Peter D’Agostino’s work demonstrates, events like the Pope’s political difficulties tended to unify American Catholics.²² Yet Sedgwick believed her previously existing views on women’s rights and slavery could co-exist with her new faith, and she supported lay control and influence within the Church itself, placing herself in the barely-settled debate over the so-called “trustee system.”²³ By examining the pre- and post-conversion views of Sedgwick and her friends, this study illuminates the way that converts blended seemingly-incompatible elements of their “native” and new cultures with the support of other converts; it challenges the assumption that converts to Catholicism fell into lock-step with Rome. Sedgwick’s own explanation of her conversion demonstrates how much she understood herself to be a combination of cultures; she told her cousin Kate Minot that she had examined her religious options rationally, in true Unitarian fashion, until she found the one that seemed most reasonable to her.²⁴

With the exception of her aunt Catharine Maria Sedgwick, herself a convert to Unitarianism, who said her niece’s conversion made her want to put on sackcloth and ashes, Sedgwick’s family was remarkably receptive to her conversion.²⁵ Yet converts expected disapproval from their families, and scholars have assumed such disapproval was present, given

22 Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: a history of religion and culture in tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9; Maura Jane Farrelly, *Papist Patriots: The Making of an American Catholic Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Peter D’Agostino, *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

23 Patrick W. Carey, *People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1987).

24 Jane Minot Sedgwick II (JMSII) to Kate Sedgwick Minot (KSM), 2 June 1853, Box 92, Folder 18, Sedgwick Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. (The collection and repository will be referred to as SFP and MHS respectively.)

25 Catharine Maria Sedgwick (CMS) to KSM, April 11, 1852, New York, NY, Reel 4, Catharine Maria Sedgwick Papers, MHS.

the seemingly-rampant anti-Catholicism of the period.²⁶ This study argues that the Sedgwick family's approval was based not in any particular acceptance of Catholicism, but in their desire to see Sedgwick fit their Unitarian-influenced model of female domestic virtue and behavior. Family members fretted over the impetuous, independent behavior Sedgwick exhibited and the periods of depression she endured during her search for a "useful" life. They hoped she would find emotional stability, unlike the other members of her family who had suffered mental illness. Catholicism seemed to provide Jane with the stability and occupation they expected in a woman of her status, so they accepted her choice. My work complements John McGreevy's scholarship on the nineteenth-century conversation about the compatibility of Catholicism and American culture by exploring the private, gendered spaces where that conversation took place, places that often consciously considered Catholicism separate from questions of class or immigration.²⁷

Well before Sedgwick's conversion, a family friend wrote to her mother, counseling her to accept the fact that her daughter was unlikely to meet a man with whom she could have an equal partnership. But, he argued, if they could encourage her to find some purpose in her life, "Jane will be useful, and because useful, happy."²⁸ As Lee Chambers-Schiller has argued, and as Catharine Maria Sedgwick herself demonstrated, there was a space, if limited, for unmarried women of means in New England to be active in a political and philanthropic word, though there is no indication that Jane's unmarried state was a conscious political choice like those of the

26 Scholars look for "familial" separation when looking at converts, and find it, but it often goes unspoken that when examining *female* converts, scholars are looking for rifts between wives and their husbands, brothers, and fathers. For instance, Rose notes that Anna Ward's husband "underreacted" to her conversion, but that he must not have been pleased by it, demonstrating that there's an assumed "correct" reaction on the part of male family members. In addition to Samuel's rather benign reaction, Anna's letters indicate a deepening relationship with her daughters and her sister after conversion, including their reception into the Church. Franchot notes that Ripley was "fueled by familial and marital isolation" to write to her cousin and close friend Charlotte Dana, also a friend of Jane's, without noting that that was *also* a familial relationship, albeit one with a woman. Rose, Franchot, 305.

27 John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), ch. 1-3.

28 Gaetano de Castillia (GdC) to Jane Minot Sedgwick I (JMSI), 19 June 1846, , Box 30, Folder 10, SFP.

From *Jane Minot Sedgwick and the World of American Catholic Converts, 1820-1890*, Erin Bartram, 2015.

women Chambers-Schiller examines.²⁹ Nor is it clear that her decision to remain unmarried reflected a belief that she idealized marriage and felt herself unworthy, something Zsuzsa Berend argues motivated some women at the same time.³⁰ It is not clear that her choice to remain unmarried was actually a choice at all, but unmarried Jane remained, and rather than attempt to explain the reasons for that state, this dissertation considers the boundaries and freedoms of single womanhood, and argues that despite her status, Jane still found her movement and choices restricted not by the approval of male society, but by the legal and financial restrictions placed on women in the period.

For Catholic women like Sedgwick, there was also the additional possibility (and pressure) of a call to vocation. The scholars Maureen Fitzgerald, Carol Coburn, and Martha Smith have pointed out that the Catholic Church provided women with a different set of opportunities than the broader secular culture, opportunities historians have often overlooked because of Protestant-inflected understandings of the channels of gendered power.³¹ For instance, Patrick Allitt's *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome*, covering the period between 1840 and 1960, relegates women to a single chapter under the assumption that a monolithic patriarchal culture unified America, Britain, and the Vatican across time, preventing convert women from making any significant contributions.³² Sedgwick never felt the call to religious life, but she often engaged in theological discussions with high-ranking

29 Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a better husband: single women in America: the generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). See also Christine Jacobson Carter, *Southern single blessedness: unmarried women in the urban South, 1800-1865*

30 Zsuzsa Berend, "'The Best or None!': Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 935-957.

31 Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of compassion: Irish Catholic nuns and the origins of New York's welfare system, 1830-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

32 Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1-16, 127-158.

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clergymen, confidently asserting and defending her own interpretations. She disagreed with local clergy not over theology but over money, control, and sacramental availability, mirroring her secular experience.

Beyond any analysis of their intellectual engagement, this project illuminates the contentious role of convert women in serving a rapidly-expanding Catholic community. Sedgwick's participation in American Catholic institution-building, rooted in a sense of her own power and duty as an elite woman, often brought her into conflict with members of the hierarchy, particularly those she viewed as "beneath" her. Her bishop and local parish priest repeatedly denied Sedgwick's assertion that she deserved a role in her parish's decision-making process, though they simultaneously solicited her financial support by appealing to her sense of elite benevolent obligation. This analysis of the role of converts in 19th century Catholic institution-building contributes to the literature on gender, authority, and opportunity within the American and transnational Church during a crucial period of growth.³³

The first chapter situates Jane as a member of the third generation of an important Massachusetts family. Though eclipsed in power and wealth by the 1830s and 1840s, when Jane came of age, the Sedgwicks remained among the cultural elite, connected to the most prominent writers, artists, thinkers, and activists of the age. Only ten when her father died in 1831, Jane felt pressure from her mother and close relatives to be worthy of her Sedgwick name, to be a useful, educated woman who could stand as a model of virtue in her community. As she grew into

33 The story of American Catholicism in the 19th century has largely been told as one of immigrant-based growth, so the literature on this topic is large. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*; Mary J. Oates, *The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us: Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Dolan, ed., *The American Catholic parish: a history from 1850 to the present, 2 vol.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*; McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*; Dolores Liptak, *Immigrants and their Church* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); Steven K. Green, *The Bible, the school, and the Constitution: the clash that shaped the modern church-state doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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adulthood, Jane worked to find usefulness, but also simply wanted to be happy; in the context of three generations of mental illness, including the suicide of her cousin Charlie in 1841, striking the right balance between the two took on greater import. The second chapter therefore explores Jane's attempts to find usefulness and happiness, balancing independence and social connectedness. These attempts culminated in a solo trip to Norfolk, Virginia, where she worked as a teacher to prove to herself, and to her detractors, that she could live independently. Having thus tested herself, Jane moved to adulthood with a greater sense of confidence in her own abilities to chart a successful course for her life, even if that was a life lived alone.

The project's third chapter explores Jane's conversion to Roman Catholicism, arguing that it was her friendship with her best friend, Mary "Cheery" O'Sullivan, another convert, that helped make Catholicism a legitimate religious option. Cheery was a convert to Catholicism, and their friendship allowed Jane to see Catholicism lived and practiced by someone of a similar social and cultural background. Even before Jane showed any interest in conversion, members of the Sedgwick family commented on how "respectable" Cheery remained, though they joked about her Catholicism from time to time. When Jane began to seriously consider conversion, her family was concerned, but in time, they reconciled themselves to her choice because it seemed to make her happy, a state of mind that mattered in the context of familial mental illness and Jane's struggles with depression more specifically. Though several priests played important roles in the final stages of Jane's conversion, the most important factors in her conversion were the support and friendship of other convert women of similar status and the eventual acceptance of her closest family members. As a result, rather than drawing her from her family, Jane's conversion provided her the contentment she needed to settle down and take up her role as the dutiful daughter and maiden aunt in Stockbridge.

As she moved into her thirties, the warm, tightly-knit family in which Jane had grown up began to spin off into separate nuclear families, and then began to disappear in a series of untimely deaths. This familial collapse, and the steps Jane took to build a new life following it, are the subjects of the fourth chapter. In the space of two years, Jane suffered the loss of her sister Fanny, her mother, her nephew (Fanny's child), and her brother-in-law (Fanny's husband). At the age of forty, she found herself evicted from the family home so that it could be occupied by her brother's wife and children, and losing the temporary custody of her sister's baby, who she had cared for throughout his brief life. While Jane's family feared the Church would take her away from her family, instead it provided her refuge and purpose when her family collapsed. She did not enter religious life, however; the Catholics who sustained her were not sisters, or priests, but a growing circle of convert women like herself with whom she spent her time. With these women, Jane engaged in many of the occupations of an unmarried woman of status – traveling, attending concerts and lectures, visiting baths – but also engaged in many occupations with a distinctly Catholic flair – reading theology, visiting with important members of the clergy, and working with other convert women to gain new converts to the Church.

With the support of these women in the late 1860s, Jane entered into a work of benevolence that occupied the remainder of her life: the establishment of a Catholic school near her hometown of Stockbridge. The fifth chapter explores the contentious relationship that developed between Jane, her bishop, her local parish priest, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and a series of important Vatican clergymen. Stymied by a bishop and priest who refused to allow a poorly-funded school to become a drain on a parish already staggering under the weight of debt, a debt she herself had contributed to, Jane used her own social connections to gain the intervention and influence of a number of cardinals over the situation. In doing something that seemed natural to

her as an elite woman, she deeply angered her bishop, to whom her behavior was deeply subversive. Rather than blame this on her convert status, however, Bishop O'Reilly saw Jane's failings as a product of her gender.

The clergy with whom she interacted were as prone to cultural misunderstandings as she was, and often saw her as a selfish wealthy woman, not recognizing the financial restrictions placed on her by her gender and unmarried status. Parallel to her struggle with the Church, she fought against the financial control of her cousin William Minot III, the administrator of her trust, whose poor accounting practices and apparent dishonesty often left her in a precarious financial position. Even as she struggled with learning to live in a different, Catholic world, she faced similar difficulties in both worlds. In both worlds, she was controlled by men, if not explicitly, then through law and custom. She constantly sought to gain some measure of control over her life by marshalling information that she could use to persuade her few male allies, especially her brother and prominent members of the hierarchy, to intercede on her behalf.

Scholarship on American religion often remains separate from the broader history of the nation, and this project seeks to integrate more fully the histories of 19th century American religion, gender, family, and class by studying converts, whose lives cannot be understood without this integration. By exploring Jane Sedgwick's life at the intersection of several conflicting cultures, my analysis suggests new ways of understanding how conversion occurred and how it affected converts' spiritual, social, and family lives. This project explores how Jane Sedgwick adopted the beliefs and practices of Catholicism while retaining an attachment to cultural values of her New England Unitarian upbringing, resisting pressures to "choose" one side or the other with the help and support of her fellow converts. Most importantly, however, my work situates Sedgwick in a wider world of American converts and American Catholicism,

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demonstrating that the acceptance and fulfillment she found was not unique, and that presumptions about American anti-Catholicism must be tested against the lived experience of converts.