

Soul in Direct Action

Women Marching Across Centuries



*We are not strangers to that public sentiment  
which says let women's influence be felt indirectly...  
As rational beings, we have naught to do  
with such suasion.*

*We seek not indirect action.  
The cause which demands our efforts;  
demands the energy and sympathy  
of the soul exhibited in direct action.*

-- Betsey addressing the Female  
Anti-Slavery Society in 1843<sup>1</sup>

September, 2025

Dear Betsey –

*I sip cedar tea from my mom's tea cup,  
and look at your photo sitting on my kitchen table.*

*Here you are, have some tea with me.*

*You have been staring at me for weeks.*

*I feel the independent spirit you exhibited from childhood,  
what was called an "uncommon tendency toward self-reliance."<sup>2</sup>*

*Uncommon because, while other women of your era  
were focused on attracting a husband,  
you wrote to your sister Cornelia that you*

*wished there was no such thing as marrying.<sup>2</sup>*



*Teaching was a career limited to single women,  
because married women were expected to manage the household.  
There was also a concern that pregnant woman  
could "taint the classroom with female sexuality."<sup>2</sup>*

*Society's view of women shifted after the American Revolution;  
up to the 1770s, they were depicted as passionate and lustful.  
By the time you were growing up, respectable women were seen as  
"completely devoid of sexual desire."<sup>2</sup>*

*Did you ever feel pressured, Betsey, as though it was the natural unfolding  
of a woman's life, to be married?*

*You and two of your sisters remained unmarried, finding your worth  
in legitimate occupations for a woman at the time,  
you as a teacher, and Cornelia, a professional musician.*

*In the last century, you might have been called "old maids" or "spinsters"  
Did you challenge dominant stereotypes for unmarried women?*



*You weren't alone in eschewing marriage; by the mid 1800s, ten percent of the population chose to embrace what Shakespeare in A Midsummer Night's Dream had coined "single blessedness."*

*There were friends and family who proposed certain men as good marriage material, but others, like Sibbel Austin, who suggested "You ought to spend your time in teaching and doing good. If you marry now, you will not be as happy as you are single."<sup>3</sup>*

*You surely were attractive and charming; I note, in particular, that you developed close friendships with older intellectually stimulating men, who found you sharp and engaging.*

*I had that experience with Fred Franklin, the Swedish executive director of the World YMCA, where I worked in Geneva in 1969. I was the token youth on staff; he was in his 60s.*

*There was no sexual interest, only a strong emotional and intellectual connection. After we discovered that we both quoted from Antoine St-Exupery's The Little Prince, a fresh rose appeared on my desk the next Monday morning, and every Monday morning after that. We exchanged books on philosophy.*

*Similarly with the psychiatrist whom I befriended while living in New Jersey. Again, an older man who would engage with me at an intellectual level, which felt safe. Such conversations with younger men were often tainted with that uneasy energy of what felt like a romantic or lustful search. Either that, or competition in the realm of ideas. Girls weren't supposed to be smart.*

*I also steered clear of marriage, Betsey; my generation had many more opportunities. You were connected to feminism's First Wave, along with the abolitionist Suffragettes. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, called the Second Wave, opened up worlds for us – travel, education, and work in almost any field.*

*Then there was the sexual revolution. Shall I write about the bed-hopping that was a defining feature of the 1970s for me?*

*You would be scandalized, Betsey, and see it as morally repugnant, I imagine. But it did allow me to challenge prudish sexual mores, to become more aware of my body and what gives me pleasure, and to connect with a wider range of men.*

*The sexual revolution was also a battleground, a constant wrestling with deeply ingrained misogynist attitudes.*

*Simultaneously liberating and oppressive.*



*During the 1970s and 1980s, we definitely challenged the institution of marriage, but superficially.*

*Women could choose to be addressed as Ms. instead of Mrs., even if they did marry.*

*Both of my sisters married and took their husband's surname. As neither of my brothers had children, I am the only one to carry on the Barndt name (ironically, still from the paternal lineage).*

*I actually was married briefly in the 1980s, to a Latin American political refugee, partly to protect his status in Canada. No flowing white wedding gown, no large reception with family and friends, no hefty invoices.*

*We just went to lunch with a couple of friends and, after the main course, walked over to City Hall for a quick official ceremony, before returning to the restaurant for dessert.*



*The marriage only lasted two years. He left me for another woman.*

*Later I had a child with another Latin American political refugee; it was an era of liberation movements when I fell [in love with revolutions and with revolutionaries!](#)*

*Even so, I never gave up my name, never remarried, and I raised my son primarily as a single mother.*

*Even now, at almost 80, I do not live with my current partner, a wonderful companion for 12 years and counting, sharing my interests in wild gardens and food, politics and reading, music and art, travel and adventure, friends and family.*

*Through him, I've inherited five grandchildren, a precious gift.*

*I didn't experiment much with my gender identity and sexuality, though this is a major accomplishment of these times and of the millennials and Generation Z.*

*I always thought the gender binary was too limiting, somewhat artificial, socially constructed, and culture-bound. I'm glad to see it being dismantled.*

*I wonder where you would fall on this question, Betsey, of challenging rigid definitions of male and female. Did you explore your sexuality...?*

*Were you constrained by issues of morality?*

*Or were you mainly rebelling against prescribed gender roles and discriminatory practices like pay inequities?*



*We're in the midst of another brutal backlash to any progress made on the front of gender diversity and sexual orientation.*

*The current U.S. president announced in his inaugural speech in early 2025 that there are only two genders: male and female. He has threatened the lives of gender neutral and trans people, denying them health care, excising them along with racialized people from the military, public programs, libraries, museums, and art shows.*

*A colleague of mine had a major [exhibit cancelled](#) in May 2025 at the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington, D.C., clearly because of the president's crackdown on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The exhibit "Nature's Wild with Andil Gosine," based on his book Nature's Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean, explores connections between environmental justice, sexuality, racial and sexual justice.*

*Overall, it is a very different world, Betsey, from the more conservative white rural context where you and I grew up.*

*How would you respond to the withdrawal of funding for any educational institution or school curriculum that promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion?*

*You probably wouldn't be allowed to teach about slavery in the current political climate, Betsey.*

*You and I both saw education as the primary base for our activism, Betsey.  
First as students, then as teachers.*

*You were one of the first female students to attend Oberlin College,  
a progressive liberal school and a hotbed of abolitionists in the 1830s and 40s.*

*As one of the first females admitted to the college, you became convinced that  
women and blacks could profit from education,  
just as well as a white male.<sup>4</sup>*

*While you saw the women's rights movement  
as integral to a broader reform movement,  
it was frowned upon at Oberlin as "an ultra-radical activity."*

*You lived with your Aunt Alice, then-president  
of the Oberlin Female Moral Reform Society,  
which instructed Oberlin women (and you?)  
"to wear modest clothing  
and to shun public speaking."<sup>4</sup>*

*I can see your ambivalence about this advice, as you admitted you were  
more ready to yield to temptation than to resist.*

*What did you mean by that, Betsey? Is there a story there?*

*You seemed to be the life of the party;  
your exuberant spirit drew people to you like a magnet.*

*Your friend at Oberlin, Professor Timothy Hudson,  
wrote to you, accentuating your differences:  
"My spirit is so stern, yours so playful.  
My character is so formal, yours so elastic and natural.  
My ways are so pedantic & magisterial,  
your manner [and] taste so entire the reverse –  
My perceptions of the agreeable social life so faulty –  
yours so delicate & true..."<sup>4</sup>*

*Your confidence and candour must have been threatening to men,  
as it was to Hudson, who admitted to preferring domesticated women.*



*You had a different vision of women's future, Betsey:*

*Oh! I do hope the time is not far distant  
when females will feel and act  
that they are made for something more  
than to flutter and to serve.<sup>5</sup>*

*Your biographer suggests that you had "little trouble making friends  
with your honest face, bubbling enthusiasm, and talent for sparking a conversation."*

*As I stare at your photo on my kitchen table, Betsey,  
I sense your unabashed joy and stalwart commitments.*

*We are both women known for our seemingly limitless energy.*

*Yet, I recall feeling, even as a teenager, that I had to tone down my public personality  
and rein in my boundless energy, that I was "too much" for most boys I met.*

*One of the reasons I was drawn to photography was because I could express my  
strong feelings and deeper ideas through images, without having to take centre stage.*

*I have been challenged by friends to "come out from behind the camera,"  
and speak more directly.*

*It's mainly in my elder years that I have begun to own my power,  
and not feel as though I have to apologize for it.*

*Perhaps it's just that I no longer care as much what people think.*

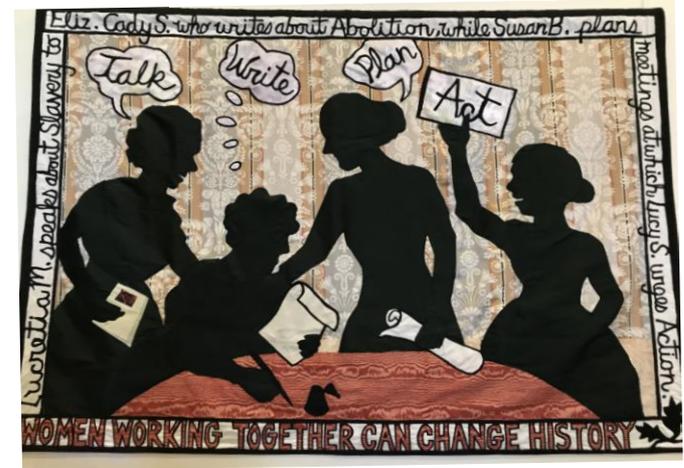
Think back to ourselves at 25, Betsey.  
How did you see your own personality?  
How did I see mine?  
What things excited and energized us?

The anti-slavery movement was your major life-long cause,  
but your commitment to women's rights was deepened by your advocacy.  
Not only because of the parallels between racial and women's oppressions,  
but because you experienced sexism within the abolitionist movement.

I saw this happen again, more than a century later,  
in the civil rights movement.

Women got tired of making the coffee  
and being the real community organizers,  
while the guys were the ideologues who got the credit.

[Second wave feminism](#) was born out of this tension in 1960s America.



When Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, she was denied a seat at the convention because she was a woman. She and Elizabeth Cady Stanton connected there, and went on to organize the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

You were part of the more radical Garrisonian faction of the anti-slavery movement, which allowed women's full participation. While you didn't attend the 1848 Seneca Falls convention, you presided over the second convention held in 1850 in Salem, Ohio.

One of the 1850 resolutions was that women shouldn't be compelled to pay taxes, since they couldn't hold office. The convention also condemned women "who content themselves with an idle, aimless life," and prepared a proposal to the Ohio Congress requesting women get the right to vote.

The Congress "urged legislators to eradicate laws that oppressed women, exposing the hypocrisy of the U.S. government espousing a doctrine of Equality in the Declaration of Independence."<sup>6</sup>

At the Women's History Museum in Seneca Falls, New York, I discovered the alternative Declaration of Sentiments that included an Indigenous woman and black abolitionist Frederick Douglass.





*It was at the next convention in 1851 that you gave your “Report on Labor,” sharing the stories of the horrific working and living conditions of female garment workers in New York.*

*This is another amazing convergence of our feminism and research histories. In the 1980s, I taught ELS to garment workers in Toronto; a decade later I gathered [stories of women workers in the tomato food chain](#) from Mexico to Canada.*

*To reach a broader public, I created [art exhibits](#) and books about immigrant women and migrant farm workers.*

*You spoke out of your own experience, too, by denouncing the fact that male teachers were paid 30 dollars more per month than female teachers. I also had to challenge salary discrepancies between women and men professors. We fought for an “anomalies” fund, and were eventually compensated for lost wages.*

*You challenged the law, the fact that married women lost all legal identity, without rights to property or children. But when your father died, and you and Cornelia jointly rejected \$2,000 worth of the family’s real estate, that implied taking responsibility for the family and home, neither of you “cared to sacrifice ambition for domestic bliss.”<sup>7</sup>*

*You left caring for the homestead to your sister Martha, and maintained your independence, moving around and outside the state to take teaching jobs and then supervisory positions.*



*When I visit your home, your great great great niece Margie takes us to the attic and opens the deer-skin covered trunk filled with your clothes, barely touched for 150 years.*

*She unfurls a hoop for the crinoline dresses, popular in the mid-1800s. How did you manage this contraption, Betsey?*

*Not only how, but why???*



*You clearly had your hoop days, posing against a painted nature backdrop in a Cleveland photo studio, a fox fur cape draped over your shoulders. When was that? Were you aware of the [debate about crinolines?](#)*

*While Southern ladies smuggled provisions under those wide skirts to the confederate states for the Civil War, there were also reports of horrific fires consuming hoop-wearers standing too close to a home fireplace!*

*Eventually crinolines were denounced from church pulpits as a “social evil.”*

*So, was it the Christian message, the physical danger, the social critique, or mere discomfort that eventually dissuaded you from wearing hoops?*

*You were probably also influenced by the Dress Reform movement of the mid-1800s that aimed to liberate women from restrictive clothing.*

*But even as a student at Oberlin College, you joined the “raving Bloomerites,” who wore shorter skirts over loose pants or bloomers.*

*You faced condemnation, even by friends who were more progressive politically. How did you feel about the scolding by the president of the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society, who wrote that your dress code didn’t meet the Moral Reform Constitution’s mandate that “women professing godliness should be adorned with modest apparel and sobriety at all times.”<sup>8</sup>*

*She claimed the bloomers would interfere with your work as a reformer, and you would have to answer for that “at the judgement hour.”<sup>8</sup>*

*Your struggle with the Puritanical strains of Christianity continued.*



*In my 20s, I found myself in the midst of the mini-skirt revolution. What would your moral reformers say about my exposed legs?*

*Even though it was considered cool American fashion, it might have challenged the primarily male staff that I met in 1970 during a three-month tour of 12 Middle Eastern and Asian countries representing the World Alliance of the YMCA, the Young Men’s Christian Association.*

*I chuckle as I see you and me seated, Betsey, in such different contexts, centuries, and costumes..!*

*You clearly had a fancy for elegance in clothing, Betsey, whatever the fashion era.*

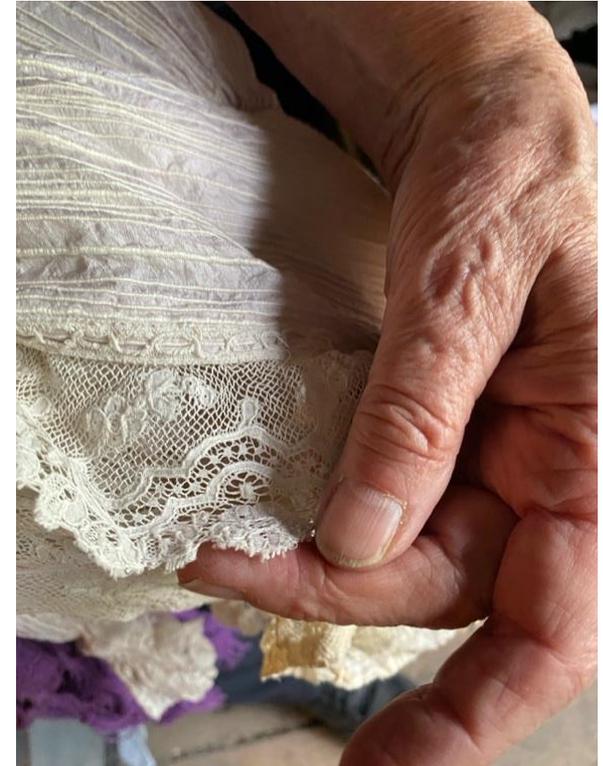


*I get goose bumps as I unwrap a delicate translucent blouse  
protected by paper across the decades.  
Through the light, I feel your shadow,  
against the land that was our common ground.*

*Your body is here, Betsey,  
tiny flakes of your skin  
hidden within the creases.*

*Your fingers, my fingers.  
Your clothes, my clothes.*

*We both loved beauty, texture,  
and fine craftsmanship.*



I have never been a tee-shirt and blue jeans feminist.  
Aesthetics is central to my self-presentation.  
I cover myself with my favourite colours, organic fabrics,  
hand-made textures, pleasing designs, and, most importantly,  
I seek out unusual earrings, like seeds, spirals, and trees.

*Let's start with colour!*

*I've been on a decades-long campaigner against what I see as the black uniform of artists and academics.*

*Why black? I recall a faculty meeting in August a few years ago...a humid summer day, and everyone was dressed in black except me, sporting turquoise or orange. Or perhaps purple.*

*The Colour Purple: not the famous novel, but my absolutely favourite colour.*

*My other favourite is green.*

*In 1995, I learned that purple and green were the colours of the Women's Suffragette movement. There must be a collective unconsciousness that draws me to these symbolically important colours!*

*But purple reigns. Yes, it's often associated with royalty. I associate it with power, with women's power.*

*Two of my granddaughters (ages 8 and 11) have decided that their favourite colour is purple, too; it has become a bond between us.*

*They give me presents wrapped in purple tissue, colour cookies with purple icing, paint me purple pictures.*

*Next: textures.*

*I hate the feel of synthetics!*

*I love the knobby feel of a woven top, the warmth of a knitted poncho.*

*I feel somehow closer to the earth, to the sheep whose soft woolly hair gets spun into yarn, to the insects whose dye infuses a thread, to the cotton or hemp plants that become organic cloth.*

*My passion for colourful hand-made clothes has also been inspired by living in Latin America and travelling in Asia.*





*As a teenager, I invented colourful accessories (cumberbunds, collars, cuffs); I even ventured into tailoring, making a coat for myself, lining and all, Jackie Kennedy style...!*

*I proudly placed my own labels in my creations.*

*In my senior year in high school, I made a sleek red velvet dress, which I wore when I was crowned "Sweetheart Queen." I was chosen by the girls in the home economics department, based on personality, not beauty.*

*When I rediscovered this dress in the attic a few years ago, I found the perfect home for it. There was a call for red dresses to be hung in the main hall of my university; I offered my velvet dress to the collection.*

*It became one of thousands displayed across the country to remind us all of [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women](#).*

*Powerful symbols, but not enough.*

*As you would say, Betsey, we need direct action, not indirect action!*

*Finally, in 2024, the first Indigenous premier of a province responded to years of community mobilizing to search a Winnipeg landfill, where the following year, they uncovered the remains of two Indigenous women brutally murdered by a serial killer.*

*Finally, the women will have a proper ceremonial burial, to become one with the healthy Earth in their communities, rather than remain discarded among the detritus of a wasteful urban consumer society.*

*I wonder if your compassion and commitment would embrace these women and their cause, Betsey? How would you understand what brought us to this point?*

*Would you recognize how the settlement of your ancestors was part of a horrific process that treats the original inhabitants as less than human?*





*Did you and your sisters make most of your clothes, Betsey?*

*The sewing machine was not invented until the 1850s, so you didn't have access to cheap, mass-produced clothing.*

*I know you were attracted to hats and fancy fashion, but that was later, when a trip to New York City in 1837 opened up the worlds of tailors, milliners, and dressmakers.*

*At your house, I spread out a flared taffeta jacket and finger a gold-threaded fastener on an elegant taffeta blouse that had been made for you.*



*Through my lifetime, the commercial world of clothing shifted again. As a young girl in Austinburg, my mother or I made many of my clothes, because we couldn't afford store-bought clothing.*

*Besides, in the 1950s, we were being trained to be good housewives; sewing was as essential as cooking to that duty.*

*The irony now is that global supply chains make clothes cheaper to buy, while the materials for home-sewn clothes are more expensive and harder to access.*

*Would you join others today, Betsey, in protesting the exploitation of the cheap labour of women in Asia and Latin America that makes store-bought clothes so affordable? I think so!*

*Your rage at injustice was ignited when you first visited New York's Five Points district in the 1850s.*

*You wrote about the seamstresses who worked fifteen to eighteen hours per day, earning three to six dollars per month, living in the upper story of some poor, ill-constructed, unventilated house, in a filthy street, breathing a most sickly and deadly atmosphere, which deposits seeds of debility and disease with every inspiration.<sup>8</sup>*

*Through your powerful oratory, you brought the issue of women's labour conditions and meagre wages to the foreground of the first Ohio Women's Rights Convention.*

*That's another common cause, Betsey. I spent decades gathering the [stories of women workers](#), mainly in the global food system, but also in the garment industry, before the global industry moved south to Latin America and to Asia with free trade.*



*In the late 1970s I taught English as a Second Language to seamstresses at a Toronto garment factory; we gathered after work in the cafeteria, women who came from all over the world learning English so they could talk with each other and speak back to their foremen.*

*They learned to read and write their own stories and common experiences, such as [just getting](#) to work on public transit in an alien city.*

*The daily lives of the workers became the text, sharing their frustrations with piece work, with machines breaking down, with low wages, with dangerous health and safety conditions.*

*We used song, drama, photos, and cartoons to bring the stories of their daily lives alive, culminating in a book and a multimedia tool kit, [English at Work](#).*

*In your report on women's labour, Betsey, you denounced the poorly paid and overworked women who made exquisite embroidery which so beautifully ornaments, and commands such prices in the princely establishments in Broadway.*

*When fighting against the first free trade deal with the U.S. in the late 1980s, I contributed to a photo exhibit which imagined what would happen to certain industries if the deal went through.*

*I interviewed a seamstress—a Filipina immigrant, who made elegant wedding gowns; she predicted her factory would go south, just as had happened in her home country. Today, those factories have disappeared from Toronto, and are in Central American maquiladores.*



*Maybe we could sing a duet, Betsey. Listen to Sweet Honey in the Rock, the African-American a capella ensemble, sing [“Are My Hands Clean?”](#) The song traces the journey of a globally produced shirt and its impact on women's bodies and the Earth's body.*

*You would love the powerful harmonies of the singers, descendants of Southern slaves, still singing about freedom, a never-ending struggle.*

*We're being challenged to construct another kind of “underground railroad” in this era of deportations of migrant workers, Betsey.*

*For rural women in Austinburg, in your time and mine,  
sewing was both their daily labour and a social activity.*

*I've read that you participated in sewing and quilting bees.  
Did you gather with other church women to make quilts  
from your family's old clothing?*

*I can still see women from my father's two congregations  
seated around a large frame in the church basement  
every Saturday afternoon.*

*Cutting up worn-out shirts and dresses,  
stitching them into patterns on a backing fabric.*

*Every year a new quilt completed.  
Every Christmas, a gift for the pastor's family.  
Seven family members. Seven years. Seven quilts.  
One for each of us.*



*I carefully remove my 70-year-old quilt from its plastic storage bag, and inhale its musty smell.*

*Each patch carries a story of a wearer and a tree: a farmer chopping firewood,  
a mother stirring apple butter, a daughter climbing a plum tree, a son gathering hickory nuts.*

*I imagine nimble fingers dropping threaded needles into the batting then lifting them out,  
again and again, stitching lives together.*

*Mostly, I like to imagine the conversations around the quilt frame,  
the gossip shared in this private, public space,  
where traumatic tales are woven into the talking:  
domestic strife, money troubles, sick children, dreams of a different life.*



*I finger the tattered remains of someone's clothing  
in this ancient quilt, and catch a thread  
as it tries to fly away.*

*Wonder where the descendants  
of those people are now....*

*Wonder if my descendants  
will touch this relic of a different time...*

*Or will it be abandoned in a landfill...?*

*What has happened to the quilting tradition in Austinburg?*

*While there's been a resurgence of quilting as an art form,  
the functional quilts made by church women have been replaced  
by barn quilts—painted reproductions on the sides of barns.*

*More like memorials to days past.  
Just as the barns that frame the "quilts" are often empty symbols  
of a once-thriving farming community  
that has been replaced by large industrial operations.*

*Farms with logos of agrochemical corporations on their walls.*



*While I don't think my mother joined the sewing circles in the church basement, she did quilt, and I was her final beneficiary, before arthritis crippled her hands.*

*My most prize possession is a [quilt she made me](#) for my 50th birthday—with my favourite colours, purple and green, the colours of the Women's Suffragette Movement.*

*I was touched by the hand-embroidered symbols she chose to represent my life: Canadian and U.S. flags, a peace dove, popular education, diversity (coded as circles, squares, and triangles), people holding hands in strength.*

*These on the upper border that curls around my neck as I sleep.*

*Only now have I discovered that she filled the lower border, appropriately at my feet, with leaves of diverse trees.*



This quilt will comfort me until my death.

Perhaps it will become my shroud,  
to decompose,  
along with my body,  
into the Earth.

Going underground.

Fertilizing a new tree.

## References cited:

1. Betsey quoted in Linda L. Geary. *Balanced in the Wind: A Biography of Betsey Mix Cowles*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses. 1989, 49.
2. All quotes from Stacey M. Robertson, *Betsey Mix Cowles: Champion of Equality*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 24.;
3. Ibid., 26.
4. Geary, 38; 41; 42.
5. Geary, 40.
6. Quoted in Debbie Weitbush, “Betsy Mix Cowles: Educator, Abolitionist, Reformer.” Unpublished essay for Civil War Seminar, June 7, 1976, 17.
7. Geary, 34.
8. Quoted in Weitbush.