

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 2

April 2018

Susan Elston Wallace: Linking Deep History to an Environmental Ethic

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Susan Elston Wallace (1830-1907) is known to us—if at all—as the wife of General Lew Wallace, author of *Ben-Hur*, the bestselling book of the 19th century. Only the Bible sold more copies. Lew Wallace was a man of great personal accomplishment who, among other distinctions, was a Civil War general, a New Mexico Territorial governor, and an ambassador to Turkey. Despite the towering shadow cast by her worldly and literary husband, Susan's own literary efforts were not obscured. In fact, Susan Wallace was recognized by General Wallace and by her contemporaries as a most worthy literary partner and thinker. She published in the national press before her husband; she wrote several novels and works of non-fiction widely read and highly regarded in her day.

While Susan was not a settler in the West like the women Annette Kolodny examines in *Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, Wallace did invest deeply both as writer and as thinker in her New Mexico home of three years. This was partly due to a remarkable discovery she made—which led to, I think, her most remarkable thinking and writing. Here is that remarkable discovery:

In a locked room in an outbuilding adjacent to the Governor's Palace, Wallace came upon and then personally helped salvage much of the territory's surviving early recorded history. She was tutored by these documents. They ignited her curiosity and her imagination. Here she is in her own words: "One day, while mousing or, as President Lincoln used to say, browsing among the manuscripts, and musing about the dead . . . and how times have altered . . . I came on a letter which differed from the commonplace documents littered about, and was not emblazoned with the splash of any great seal. It

was very yellow and musty, stained in one corner by a blue book thrown on it in the time of President Johnson. It required the daintiest handling.” (123)

This careful curatorial work, coupled with her fine general education, well qualified Wallace to write for a national audience not only about the landscape, the flora, fauna, and the peoples of New Mexico, but to do so within the context of its deeper history, a good deal of that history brought to light thanks to her. Wallace’s book about her New Mexico sojourn, *The Land of the Pueblos*, is comprised of twenty-seven essays first published as “travel pieces” in prestigious national magazines and newspapers, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Independent*, and the *New York Tribune*. These periodicals were read by intellectual leaders of the day. The Wallaces lived in New Mexico Territory from 1878-1881.

The freshness and wit of Susan Wallace’s outsider perspective imbue her essays with a liveliness comparable to today’s best environmental non-fiction. Careful, non-scientific and non-dogmatic prose, freed from *most* of her era’s stereotypes, recognized that people and their environments tend to be exploited and to change together.

The Wallaces’ time in New Mexico were the early days of the Southwest mining rush: eleven of the essays that make up *Land of the Pueblos* involve miners or mining. Whether attending a Pueblo corn dance, searching for Montezuma’s Palace, or examining the turquoise mines of Cerrillos, Susan witnessed firsthand how this land and its inhabitants had been transformed by the Mexicans, the United States, and, especially, by the Spanish colonial presence.

In contrast to the more domestically-inclined women writers of the West—the ones Kolodny studies— Susan Wallace had little interest in the fantasies of developing gardens and gentled down communities, themes central to earlier women writers. For her part, Wallace was keen to observe and contextualize historical events within the landscapes in which they occurred. Wallace is equally clear about the culpability of invaders who pursue turquoise, silver, and rubies single-mindedly. In consequence, these “travel sketches,” of hers offer “proto-environmental” responses to late-nineteenth century territorial New Mexico. Wallace’s well-articulated views stand in marked contrast to mainstream histories of her era and beyond.

New Mexico made Susan Wallace aware of environmental issues. Increasingly knowledgeable about her surroundings and thereby more fully conscious of how human life in New Mexico had been shaped, she soon apprehended how the Spaniards had affected the land and its original inhabitants.

The *Land of the Pueblos* is put together loosely in chronological fashion without particular emphasis on historical dates. Wallace's interest was in seasons, weather, and the human scene before her. The first words of her first essay set readers down in the heart of a northern New Mexico summer night:

I am 6,000 feet nearer the sky than you are. Come to the sweet and lonely valley in the West where, free from care and toil, the weary soul may rest; where there are neither railroads, manufacturers, nor common schools; and so little is expected of us in the way of public spirit, we almost venture to do as we please, and forget we should vote, and see to it that the Republic does not go to the 'demnition bow-wows.' (5)

This lively voice—which records here a camping trip when she and the General and friends slept under the stars up near where the Santa Fe ski area is now--will soon be backed with formidable knowledge of New Mexican history, its original peoples, and its landscapes. Wallace does not shrink from imagining a central fact of colonialism, which the discovered documents verified:

Many a picturesque and gloomy wrong is recorded in mouldy chronicles, of the fireside tragedies enacted when a peaceful, simple people were driven from their homes by the Spaniard, made ferocious by his greed of gold and conquest; and the cross was planted, and sweet hymns to Mary and her Son were chanted on hearths slippery with the blood of men guilty only of the sin of defending them. (14)

Straightway then, Susan E. Wallace also proves herself an intelligent conveyor of and reflector on moral and ethical aspects of history. Her awareness of the land appears early as well. In Chapter Two of "Historic," Wallace lets her readers know some facts about how the actual land and its peoples are bound:

Four hundred years ago the Pueblo Indians were freeholders of the vast unmapped domain lying between the Rio Pecos and the Gila, and their separate communities, dense and self-supporting, were dotted over the fertile valleys of Utah and Colorado, and stretched as far south as Chihuahua, Mexico. Bounded by rigid conservatism as a wall, in all these ages they have undergone slight change by contact with the white race, and are yet a peculiar people, distinct from the other aboriginal tribes of this continent as the Jew are from the other races in Christendom. The story of these least known citizens of the United States takes us back to the days of Charles V. and the 'spacious times of great Elizabeth'." (15)

Note here how in this passage Wallace identifies the "vast unmapped domain" of the Pueblos and identifies their communities as "separate," "dense and self-supporting." She identifies the land as fertile and the Pueblos as having a distinct culture, comparing them favorably to Jews among Christians. She calls the Pueblos "citizens."

Wallace's use of the term "conservative" in this passage may be accurately rendered as "stable." So, the nature of the Pueblo peoples, she says, have "undergone [only] slight change by contact with the white race." By using this terminology, she points toward stabilizing forces that were afoot in 19th century America, when colonies that promoted shared, stable agrarian living were being intentionally created. The Shakers, New Harmony, and the Amanos were and are communities so notable that their names and accomplishments come down to us today. In the previous passage, Susan Wallace described

the Pueblo communities, their governance, and their farming practices with phrases admired by her own culture and era. New Mexico's native peoples were freeholders; self-supporting; communities; citizens.

The later nineteenth century's dominant mode for thinking about the environment was to see it as a more or less infinite resource serving the country's goals for economic success. Wallace sees beyond this and forwards a sharply different perspective, one that has more in common with our contemporary sense of environmentalism that includes "respect for other species and appreciation of the interconnected complexity and fragility of peoples and of ecosystems." (Levi) Wallace's worldview imbeds people within a place, not as conquerors nor as economic exploiters but as dwellers. As she draws connections between natural history and human history, reporting vividly on land erosion in mining areas, she illustrates well that human behavior degrades or protects living places. In our day these are environmental truisms, but not in hers.

To highlight Wallace's prescient and important observations, we'll examine for a moment the far more common and dominant versions of the history of New Mexico which proliferated far into the 20th century. Paul Horgan's popular and highly regarded *Centuries of Santa Fe* (1956) demonstrated a common type. Its three large segments are called: Book One: Under Spain; Book Two: Under Mexico; Book Three: Under the United States. Horgan's book is a story of conquering heroes and their destinies. In striking contrast, Susan Wallace's book is called *The Land of the Pueblos*. The simple title itself announces that New Mexico *is* land and *is* Pueblo peoples. In chapters entitled "The City of the Pueblos" and "Laws and Customs," Wallace closely studies the Pueblo peoples and their worldview. Such careful underpinnings anchor her narratives about mining and about the effect of Spanish dominion. In Wallace's New Mexico, the original inhabitants and the land hold primacy.

In the essay "Historic," she described how that primacy was disrupted when the Spaniards set up a system that, over time, let them and later occupiers take the Pueblos' land by "legal" means. She stated:

After their first experiments the Spaniards saw the policy of conciliating a confederation so numerous and powerful as the Puebloas, and as early as the time of Philip II. Mountains, pastures, and waters were declared common to both races; ordinances were issued granting them lands for agriculture, but the title in no instance was of higher grade than possession. The fee-simple remained in the crown of Spain, then in the government of Mexico, by virtue of her independence, and under the treat of Guadalupe Hidalgo, February 2, 1848, passed to the United States. (30)

Wallace easily moves from such vast, historically detailed, and consequential descriptions of “mountains, pastures, and waters” and whole empires changing hands over time to close up views of the land she observes directly, landscapes which in many cases are diminished:

The grama grass is low and dry, like wiry moss, and in the distance takes a wan, ashen hue, more ghastly than white. The cactus is the only shrub in sight....The lively prairie dog (who is no dog, but a marmot) saluted as we passed....Nor shall we ask how he exists without water...It was June; but not the leafy month of June. The only timber—dwarf cedar—which can grow in this barren soil was cut away years ago; and absence of trees includes absence of birds. (85)

In many a descriptive passage, Susan E. Wallace brought to readers’ attention such vistas. Notably, her ire at the varied degradations built as she saw more, learned more, and reported more. In Wallace’s mind, after study and on-the-ground observation, the worst of the lot for destroying landscapes and disrupting the peoples’ original relationship with them was Governor-General Don Diego de Vargas, the 17th century conquistador who, ironically, for centuries has been loosely regarded as Santa Fe’s heroic founder. Especially after reading documents which she recovered, Wallace recognized the terrible error of absenting the Pueblo people from their own story. Granting native peoples’ a place of consequence in New Mexico history clashed strongly with the standard “male conqueror” narrative of this state’s history, which we’ll look at a bit more closely.

Paul Horgan’s book, *The Centuries of Santa Fe*, for instance, does not include a Pueblo protagonist nor information about their ancestral way of living as part of “the centuries of Santa Fe.” This omission allowed Mr. Horgan to conclude that DeVargas “is the grand example of a true public servant. As pacifier of the Pueblo Indians he left a great gift both to them and to his own people.” (339)

This conquest version of New Mexico’s history is thoroughly Eurocentric. It is also in line with the idea that the environmental resources were to serve human welfare by maximizing economic growth for enlightened conquerors. According to this formula, the Mexicans succeeded the Spanish and the Americans succeeded the Mexicans until the New Mexican piece of America’s Manifest Destiny fell into place in 1846.

Given this widely accepted version of history that Horgan espouses, it is no wonder that he not only displaced the Pueblos, he displaced Susan Wallace as a New Mexican historian. He did not draw upon the documents she rescued nor her published writing. To add insult to injury, he obscures her well-documented archival discoveries. Horgan wrote, “The historical archives of the Museum [of New Mexico] owe much to their first serious reader, Bandelier himself and to Governor Lew Wallace, who

saved what he could of the collection of documents already scattered, lost, or sold by his predecessors.” (336)

Horgan’s authoritative reporting, so common among mainline historians of the 20th century, rendered the Pueblo peoples, their land, and the intelligent woman who told their stories in the 1880s invisible. This pattern is, of course, familiar to women, environmentalists, and native peoples alike. Horgan ignored Susan Wallace’s work and her conclusions: we won’t ignore them today.

Susan Wallace laid out her arguments about Governor-General Don Diego De Vargas carefully. She stated:

The chronology of this period [the 17th century] is some times in a hopeless tangle; [as she well knew from sorting, drying, and helping bring order to the documents] but the march of Governor-General Don Diego de Vargas is pretty well connected. He lives in history as one of the most bigoted and brutal of the Conquistadores. As has been written of the Duke of Alva: ‘His vices were colossal, and he had no virtues.’ From shreds and patches of mouldy MSS. his march is traced with tolerable clearness, and the conduct of the foreigners was so nearly alike that their stories are much the same. (131-32)

She then proceeded carefully, drawing upon DeVargas’s own journals as he rampaged through the state. DeVargas’s activities in Zuni are especially detailed. To sum up what she reported, “He was successful from the very outset. The reader will remember that the Pueblos lived in community houses, built in a hollow square. A whole tribe sometimes inhabited one house, and one after another they were reduced to submission.” (132) She continued: “The invading army found game in abundance; but the blessing of the early and the latter rain is not for New Mexico, and the scarcity of water made great suffering” so, at harvest time, the ‘bold land-robbers feasted in the cornfields,’ eating hares and other supplies of the natives. The invaders’ journals also comment on the hospitality they received from many of the pueblos. The conquerors, though, saw this only as sign of their superiority and referred to the ‘paltry trinkets of glass pewter and tinsel’ they were given...along with their hosts’ “choicest stores.” (132) DeVargas, as Wallace reported here, was as cruel to resources as to the peoples themselves. De Vargas himself wrote, “The chief burden [of my mission] is the Indian.” Susan Wallace added:

The chronicles are heavily laden with details of grievances the conquerors were obliged to bear from him. How he refused to accept slavery as his best estate; and, worse than that, how he rebelled against the power which would force him to worship the unknown, unseen God whose sign was the red cross, whose ambassadors’ march was tracked by the smoke of cities sacked and burnt, lands made desolate, the widow’s cry, the orphan’s wail. (133)

She summed up this travesty using his words: “I have been obliged to raze whole villages to the ground, in order to punish their obstinacy.” (133) Wallace speculated, seeing the land and the peoples in her mind’s eye, “Possibly here we have the secret of the uninscribed ruins now slowly crumbling down in the valleys by the narrowing waters of the Pecos and the Rio Grande.” (133)

In consequence of this careful work with primary sources, and her large knowledge of world history and cultures, and of the landscapes spread before her, Wallace reached very different conclusions about the retaking of Santa Fe than Horgan did. She noted:

How La Villa Real de Santa Fe was lost and won is an old tale and often told. . . . Enough that, after the summer camp at or near Old Zuni, Vargas with his army pressed on to the siege of the Capital. The slayers were a few hundreds of white men, with red allies; the slain were of a number that has never been reckoned. (149)

In Chapter XIV, she boldly stated:

The brutal instincts of this Vargas...hardened and intensified with increasing power and advancing years....He wrote to the viceroy of Mexico, applying for more troops to carry on the crusade arguing: 'You might as well try to convert Jews without the Inquisition as Indians without soldiers.'"(150)

As much as these selected quotations might suggest it, Susan Elston Wallace was not writing bold political pieces expressing empathy for Native Americans and condemning Spanish colonialism. Her incendiary remarks are offered as sidebars to the narrative strand of the "travel piece" into which they are imbedded.

The main story of Chapter XIV (one of the "Among the Archives" chapters) is an imaginary recounting of lovers' lives based on the 17th century love letter Wallace found. That "yellow and musty" letter I mentioned at the start of this paper, was addressed to Antonio Eusebio de Cubero, secretary to General DeVargas, from his love Rosita at home in Spain. From that frail page, Wallace spins an imaginary love story of the errant wanderer to the New World pined for by his cloistered sweetheart back in Old Spain. Their story is the main narrative of that particular "travel piece." Employing her fictional talents to entertain her readers, she chose to set the historical Eusebio de Cubero apart from all those things she had reported about his bloody boss, De Vargas: ". . . we will believe [he--Eusebio] had the soul of a true knight, and no part or lot in these ignoble transactions." (150) Of course it is just those sidebars, reporting "ignoble transactions" that give modern readers access to Susan Wallace's environmental ethic.

Wallace's proto-environmental voice emerges throughout her essays, but nowhere are these recognitions about people and place as starkly highlighted as when she writes about mining in New Mexico. Centuries of mining had taken a toll on New Mexico and Susan Wallace recorded that. She traveled to witness it—again and again. One can only imagine that her husband as Territorial Governor

was invited to visit mine after booming mine in the territory and Susan, the first lady, with a most observant eye, was invited too.

At Cerillos she wrote about hiking across a “ragged pavement, which bruised our feet, tore our shoes, and wore out our patience.” (91) They headed for the most ancient mine, also much the largest:

The yawning pit is two hundred feet deep and more than three hundred in diameter....On the walls of the great excavation Nature has gently, patiently done what she could to smooth the rugged crags, and has thrown out of their fissures a scant growth of shrubs, and trailed a scarlet blossom here and there on a thread-like stem. At the bottom on stones crumbling with age, stained and weatherworn, are dwarf pines, the growth of the centuries....Thousands of tons of rock have been crushed from the solid mass, and thrown up in such a high heap it seems another mountain, overgrown with old pines and dry gray mosses....The tradition is that the chalchuite mines, through immemorial ages known to the primitive race, were possessed by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. Indian slaves then worked them, under the lash of the conqueror, until 1680, when, by accident, a portion of the rock from which we had our first view fell, and killed thirty Pueblos. The Spaniards immediately made a requisition on the town of San Marcos for more natives to take their places; when with a general uprising, they drove the hated oppressor from the country as far south as El Paso del Norte. (92)

This is one of the Pueblos’ own stories of how the General Uprising of 1680 began. Wallace said this tale was passed on “for what it is worth,” but it is one she had heard often.

I won’t belabor the point. Susan Elston Wallace, in her era of untrammelled exploration of the West and its mineral resources, uncovered a broader, deeper story, a story we in our century would regard as a radical environmental one. At several points in her essays, which kept their identity as “travel pieces,” she tucked in detailed, observed, or well-imagined images and anecdotes of what it would have been like to have been a miner-slave in New Mexico under the Spaniards. She had seen witnessed of how this work would have been carried out all over the territory and it led her to conclude that:

History holds no deeper tragedy than the record of foreign invasion in North America. The man on horseback assumed that slavery was necessary, therefore right, therefore just; and by the grace of God (which meant the iron hand in the glove of steel) he rewarded captains and corporals with lands wide as whole counties, as yet unmapped and unsubdued. (176)

She even knew her New Mexico home well enough to observe that, after the Spanish had left, the Pueblos reshaped the mining environment once again. She observed that even though “the early colonists were all miners” it was not always easy to see because, in testament to the centuries of enslavement, the Pueblo peoples had, upon the Spaniards’ departure, “taken care to conceal almost all the mining operations so they could never again be used in such a way.” All that is left, Wallace reported, are “miles of earth cut into running galleries and driven tunnels.” (177) This led her to tell her readers, not two decades after slaves were freed in the South that “Slavery everywhere, when applied to field labor, is destructive to human life. What must it have been when directed to mining, under taskmasters who did not value one life at a pin’s fee?” (177)

In a subsequent essay on “The New Miners,” she noted that “In [their] irrepressible yearning for liberty the Pueblos escaped from mines, such as I have attempted to describe....How many perished in these realms of silence and despair none but the recording angel can testify.” (188)

In conclusion, Susan Elston Wallace certainly was entertaining the intelligentsia of the East and the Midwest with tales of Montezuma and adventures of travel in the wild West, but what she vividly did at the same time was introduce her readers to what happens when “a native self-sustaining people, independent of the Government, the only aborigines among us not a curse to the soil” (259) find themselves amidst a cataclysmic environmental disaster brought about by the greed for mineral wealth. In the late nineteenth century, even though she was the spouse of the then current occupying governor of New Mexico Territory, Ms. Wallace, through her careful study of history, people, and landscape, boldly gave voice to an environmental perspective and even to environmental outrage.

Lew and Susan Wallace were remarkable people, exceptionally forward-thinking in many realms of their lives. Few would think of either of them as environmental pioneers. Yet earlier in the decade in which they served in New Mexico, the U.S. Geological Survey was founded, Yosemite had already been set aside, Yellowstone became the world’s and the nation’s first national park. Arbor Day was founded. So, during the late nineteenth century, noted for its Manifest Destiny claims, for its gold rushes, and for its often single-minded belief that men make history, a few strains of responsible stewardship had begun to be voiced and institutionalized. Susan E. Wallace helped magnify that strain and deserves to have a place as a dissenter to colonial history’s one-stranded and obliterating story. She gave voice to the land and to its original peoples. Susan Wallace was a proto-environmentalist.

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