Not all frontiers are geographical boundaries. Those created by social mores and cultural norms are as real, and can be far more difficult to cross. As Mary Easton Sibley's life demonstrates, such frontiers moved across the country with westering Americans in the early nineteenth century. An ambitious, talented, and strong-willed woman, Sibley felt driven to live a meaningful life and to find purpose as an activist in the public arena. She lived most of her life among a fairly select group of government officials, rising politicians, prosperous entrepreneurs, and their families in St. Louis and neighboring St. Charles, Missouri. In Sibley's day, this group was self-consciously coalescing into an urban elite, clinging with provincial fervor to the norms and status symbols of the "civilized" East from which most had so recently arrived. Mary Sibley found few kindred spirits in that group, and little tolerance for her aspirations or behavior. Though she spent all but the first years of her life in Missouri, and eleven years on the frontier, the West did not offer her freedom. Instead, she struggled against a tide of social pressure stronger than that she might have encountered in the family's old New York home, as she negotiated the gulf between her need to define herself and the definition that her society placed upon her.

Like her better-known contemporary, Catharine Beecher, Sibley was herself
bound to a very conventional understanding of woman's proper sphere—one dictated by her social class and the dominant culture of her time. Like Beecher, Sibley reconciled her aspirations with her values by devoting herself to evangelical Protestantism, social reform, and in particular, the cause of women's education. Historians have long been aware that middle- and upper-class women were strongly drawn to the evangelical Protestant movement in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Church and social reform movements seemed to offer a means of achieving significance and worth, and of self-expression and autonomy, in a society that typically denied women such aspirations. The opportunity was illusory, however, for evangelical Protestantism rested fundamentally on the same patriarchal religious and social values that shaped mainstream culture. Within or outside of the evangelical movement, a woman's identity was largely defined for her. Like other assertive and strong-willed women who chose this path, Mary Easton Sibley found that her evangelical friends were no more likely to accept her than were others. Only after her death, when her story had been reshaped to conform to accepted norms, would she be celebrated by her coreligionists.

Born in Rome, New York, in 1800, Mary Easton was the eldest of eleven children of Rufus and Abial Abby Easton. The family moved to Indiana, then to Missouri in 1804 where Rufus Easton accepted a minor government post in the frontier town of St. Charles, just north of St. Louis. He soon made his place in the network of government officials and prosperous American businessmen who were rapidly replacing the old French families as the local elite. Easton established himself as a lawyer, judge, politician, and real estate speculator. Mary seems to have been her father's favorite; he insisted that she receive an education worthy of her intellect and encouraged her strong sense of independence. At the age of thirteen, according to family stories, she accompanied him on a trip from their home in St. Charles, Missouri, to Washington, DC. As a girl she was active and outgoing, delighted in fashionable clothes, balls, and parties, romantic poetry and novels (she favored Byron's works), as well as in horseback riding and other outdoor activities.1

In August 1815, at age fifteen, Mary Easton married her father's thirty-three-year-old friend and business associate, George Champlin Sibley, who operated the government factory (Indian trading post) of Fort Osage on the Missouri River. The disparity in their ages was much less surprising in 1815, when such matches were not unusual even among the elite, than would be the case today. Certainly it seemed to raise no concern or comment at the time. No record survives of Mary's feelings about this match. She might have felt an attraction for George or for the romantic vision of an Indian trader's life in the wilderness. The marriage may simply have been arranged to seal a business alliance between Sibley and her father. Easton was deeply involved in land speculation; Sibley was interested in developing the area around Fort Osage and other real estate ventures. The two men had already cooperated in

some sort of business or legal matters, though the nature and extent of their partnership is not clear.

In any case, Sibley was pleased with the match, confident that Mary's "amiable disposition, mental acquirements, and personal accomplishments, and most excellent bringing up, eminently qualify her for the task she has with pleasure and zeal undertaken, to make me happy" (emphasis in original). One cryptic note suggests that the bride's feelings about the marriage may have been less sanguine. Shortly after his daughter's August wedding, Rufus Easton was elected territorial delegate, and left for Washington, DC. The following February, Mary wrote to him, chiding him for neglecting her and not writing. She needed his advice, she said. Perhaps he thought it would be enough for her "to attend to the wise lessons of a husband, if you do, I assure you, you are mistaken" (emphasis in original). She did not elaborate.

By March 1816, the newlyweds were at Fort Osage with as many of the comforts of home as could be carried along, including Mary's piano. One of Mary's sisters came along, no doubt to ward off the new bride's homesickness, but also to provide her with an acceptable female companion. There were a few women at Fort Osage, primarily the wives of Sibley's employees, soldiers, or local settlers. Most were probably of mixed blood, and none of sufficient social status or refinement to mix as social equals with the genteel young matron.

Sibley's Osage clients were in no sense social equals either but they had to be humored, and Mary was known to entertain them occasionally with piano recitals. The Indians, George wrote, "literally idolize her since they have seen her play." From the first, Mary no doubt expected to fill a semi-official role in her new home. As the factor of Fort Osage, George Sibley was not merely a fur trader, but also the official representative of the U.S. government at what was, until 1819, its westernmost post. He was responsible for maintaining good relations with the local Indian tribes (sometimes even negotiating treaties with them), policing the private American fur traders, and watching for any evidence of British activity on the Missouri River. Military and scientific expeditions, and individuals traveling along this major highway into the interior stopped at Fort Osage, expecting the assistance and hospitality of the factor and his wife. Mary seems to have enjoyed her role as the hostess of Fort Osage, and pursued it with the same energy and enthusiasm she previously devoted to the social life of St. Charles. She clearly took pride in managing affairs during her husband's absence on business trips. Stories that grew around her after her death have her teaching Indian children to read and write, though there is no evidence of this in sources from the period. She did often help care for sick neighbors, however, even when ill (from emerging wisdom teeth) herself. The few surviving references to her in this period are generally notes from prominent individuals thanking her for her assistance, which might range from the hospitality of a good meal and lodging, to the loan of a trunk, a canoe.

--George C. Sibley to Samuel H. Sibley, September 20, 1815. Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Mary E. Sibley to Rufus Easton, February 11, 1816, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
or even a servant until they could complete their journey.\(^3\)

In 1821, the United Mission Society of New York established Harmony Mission about eighty miles south of Fort Osage as a base for work among the Osage tribe. Though neither George nor Mary Sibley were particularly religious, both shared the view common to the educated elite of their day that the only humane solution to the “Indian problem” was to educate and “civilize” the natives so that they might be assimilated into Euro-American society. George helped the missionaries select a suitable site for their mission and reported favorably on their activities to his superiors in Washington, DC. The Sibleys aided the struggling missionaries with wagonloads of supplies at their own expense, and tried to use their influence with the Osage on the mission’s behalf. Typical of their time and class, their attitude towards the natives was paternalistic. When Sans Oreille, a chief of the Little Osage and George’s friend, died, the Sibleys took an interest in his impoverished family’s welfare. The mission’s director reported to George in 1827 that Sans Oreille’s daughter, “which Mrs. Sibley was so anxious to purchase or have under her care,” had been secured through the payment of a blanket and trade cloth to her mother. The girl was now enrolled in the mission school with the name of Mary Sibley, and instructed “hereafter to look to Mrs. Sibley for a mother.”\(^4\)

Political pressure from private fur traders, land speculators, and others, hampered by the chain of government trading posts along the frontier, succeeded in abolishing the system in 1822, and Fort Osage was closed. The Sibleys remained nearby on the farm they had developed, and George Sibley continued to speculate in land. The farm prospered; in 1824 the tax assessor counted five slaves, a number of horses and thirty head of cattle among George Sibley’s assets. Other business ventures were unsuccessful, however, and a disastrous effort to start a fur trading company with two former employees pitched him so deeply into debt that it would take him more than ten years to recover. In 1825, Sibley accepted an appointment as one of three commissioners to survey a road from Missouri to Santa Fe. It was an honor and a way to escape his troubles for a little while at least. He needed the income of a government job and hoped this might lead to some permanent position, or at least that the trip might improve his chronically poor health. The survey occupied George Sibley for much of the next two years. During that time, Mary ran their farm and attended to her husband’s business matters.\(^5\)

Sibley’s service in surveying the Santa Fe Trail did little to alleviate his financial problems. He was forced to sell most of his land holdings to clear his debts. Mary, meanwhile, seems to have had her fill of frontier farm life. After an extended visit to various family members in 1827 and 1828, she would not return to the farm with

\(^3\)Fragment of letter, George C. Sibley to Rufus Easton, no date, Box 4, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; Col. H. Atkinson to George C. Sibley, September 2, 1819, Sibley Collection, MHS; and William Clark to George C. Sibley, August 4, 1826, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.

\(^4\)Dr. William Belcher to George C. Sibley, October 29, 1827, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.

him, but instead remained with her parents in St. Charles. Within a few months, George came to St. Charles, agreeing to settle with Mary on a tract of land he owned just outside the town. There he established a new farm in 1829, which the Sibleys named Linden Wood. The farm, unlike George's business ventures, prospered.

Sibley loved the role of gentleman farmer, developing his land and experimenting with new crops and new theories of scientific agriculture. Mary, however, was bored. No longer enjoying the status of her husband's former government office or occupied with its attendant duties, and too far from town to participate as fully as she wished in its social life, she found insufficient outlet for her ambition, intellect, and talents. It may be that she then decided to do her part to pay off the financial debt still looming over George's head. It may be that the Indian mission and other experiences at Fort Osage had awakened her "social conscience," or simply that she seized on what seemed to be the only acceptable way available for a woman of her social class to express her individuality. In any case, late in 1830 or early in 1831, she opened a school for girls at Linden Wood. The circumstances of the school's founding and early years have been obscured by the folklore that grew around it in the twentieth century. It is clear that George approved of the project, and served more or less as the school's business manager. Local tradition and such evidence as survives, however, identifies Mary as the driving force behind it. Whatever her original motives for starting the school, she soon imbued it with a new and intense sense of mission.⁹

By the time Mary opened her school, if not earlier, she had made the acquaintance of Margaret Lindsey. Margaret and her husband, Thomas, a wealthy St. Charles farmer, politician, and state senator, were Scottish immigrants, deeply religious, and pillars of the local Presbyterian Church. The two women's friendship quickly deepened to intimacy, and Margaret, the elder of the two, soon became a second mother to Mary. Though Mary's own mother was still living, relations between the two were difficult at best, and Mary increasingly turned to Margaret Lindsey for affection, friendship, and advice. Through Margaret's influence, Mary became preoccupied with religion. In the spring of 1831, Rev. William S. Potts, fiery pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of St. Louis, led a series of revival meetings in the St. Louis/St. Charles area. In early 1832 he repeated his revival meetings, this time with the assistance of Rev. David Nelson, a noted Presbyterian preacher from Palmyra, Missouri. Cooperating with local Methodists, they launched a series of intensely emotional "protracted meetings" in St. Louis and St. Charles. Mary Sibley was quickly caught up in the excitement, and was soon agonizing over the state of her soul.

Just as the St. Charles meetings reached a fever pitch, Margaret Lindsey fell seriously ill. Mary rushed to her bedside and spent a week with her friend as she lay dying.

⁹Ibid., 215–23. Though modern Lindenwood University literature dates the original school from 1827, it could hardly have pre-dated the establishment of Sibley's Linden Wood farm. In promotional literature published by the Sibleys in the 1830s and 1840s, they consistently stated that the school was opened in 1830. There is no surviving evidence, however, that classes were being taught there before 1831.
As Mary later recounted in a long letter to Margaret’s relatives, the weeklong vigil became an extended prayer meeting, with Mary and Margaret’s family in constant attendance at her bedside, while Potts, other ministers, and friends from the church visited for prayers, Bible-reading, and hymn-singing. Margaret died on March 15, 1832. Still reeling from the impact of her friend’s death, Mary came forward at a Presbyterian meeting on March 25, made her profession of faith, and was admitted to the church. Her decision sent shock waves through her family.  

Typical of the St. Louis and St. Charles elite, her husband and parents accepted a broad, rationalist, and non-sectarian Christianity concerned primarily with ethics and moral behavior. They read the Bible and religious literature, might have attended services at a fashionable Protestant church on Sunday, and occasionally contributed small sums to church building funds, missionary societies, and other worthy causes from a sense of noblesse oblige. They were suspicious of organized religion, however, and strongly disapproved of sectarianism and the endemic quarrels within or between the different denominations. They particularly disliked evangelical preachers such as Rev. Potts and his colleagues, whom they regarded as fanatics because of their emotional, confrontational style of preaching, their mixing of social reform agendas with spirituality, the extreme preoccupation with religion that was demanded of followers, and the aggressive proselytizing and intolerance of any who held differing views. George Sibley, who seems to have routinely acquiesced to his strong-willed wife in everything else, expressly disapproved of her religious enthusiasm, while her mother reacted even more strongly. Mary wrote in her journal that Abby Easton, being “violently and unaccountably opposed to all sects of religionists,” and particularly to Potts and his colleagues, had declared that “she would rather have followed her children to the grave than to see them become Presbyterians.” When Mary tried to take her youngest sister to the meeting on March 25 to join her in making a profession of faith, Abby Easton refused to let the girl go. Mary and her mother quarreled violently; George apparently broke up the fight, but the two women did not speak to one another again for a year or more after the incident.  

Undaunted by her family’s opposition, Mary embraced her new religious calling with energy and single-minded determination. She attended prayer sessions and church services at least twice a week if not more often, and busied herself in handing out religious tracts and urging the necessity of religious conversion on everyone she met. (She wondered, in her journal, why so many old friends began avoiding her.) She recruited women friends from church to help her pray for the conversion of her mother and other notable “infidels” in St. Charles and St. Louis. She began a regular schedule of prayers for the conversion of Henry Clay and other Whig leaders; since her husband and his friends were determined to vote for them, she hoped Clay

7Van Ravensway, *Saint Louis*, 265–67; and Journal of Mary Sibley, 12–18, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.

8Sibley journal, 4–7, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
and the others might become “professing Christians” by the time they took over the national government. She apparently considered Jackson and his party hopeless, and did not even attempt to pray for them.

She started a Sunday school for the country children living in the vicinity of the Sibley farm. When most of her students turned out to be the children of recently arrived German immigrants, she struggled with the language barrier as best she could and ordered boxes of religious tracts printed in German to send home to their parents. Though she attended Methodist meetings as eagerly as Presbyterian services and condemned strife between Protestant sects, she was soon deeply involved in the bitter feud between “Old School” and “New School” factions raging within the St. Charles Presbyterian Church. Mary sided with her friend Thomas Lindsey and the Old School, and did not hesitate to voice her opinions, give advice, and even issue ultimatums to church elders in strong and boldly assertive letters. She drew her hapless husband into the fray, ostensibly as a neutral party to chair the committee raising funds for a new church building.9

Inevitably, Mary carried her new religious convictions into the school for girls she had recently opened on the Sibley’s Linden Wood farm, much to the consternation of the students’ parents. These students came from prominent families in and around St. Louis. Their parents were friends or at least acquaintances of the Sibleys; most of their fathers had been partners with Mary’s husband or father in business ventures of one kind or another. Prominent and wealthy land speculator William Russell explicitly stated his expectations, probably shared by all the parents, when he directed that his daughter be instructed in practical fields such as reading and arithmetic, in a program of study designed primarily to improve her mind and to inculcate good morals and a strong sense of honor and propriety. She was not to waste her time in reading novels, attending balls, theater, and other frivolities, and above all, she was not to be catechized, preached to, or indoctrinated into any particular religious sect.10

After her conversion, Mary disdained such parental strictures. One of her students, Theodosia Hunt, was a Catholic; when her mother enrolled the girl in school, Mrs. Hunt “particularly desired that no undue influence should be exerted to induce her to abandon her religion.” Mary now informed the woman that she had come to a new sense of duty toward her pupils, and Mrs. Hunt was free to remove her daughter from the school if she feared the consequences. It was unlikely that Theodosia would ever become a Protestant, however, as “she does not possess an investigating mind and wants application.” Mary added the gratuitous advice that Theodosia’s sister, Julia, would do much better at the school because Julia was bright and ambitious, though in

9Sibley journal, 7–12, 18–19, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and George C. Sibley, “The Presbyterian Church of St. Charles MO. Its Recent History and Disturbance,” Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
10Sibley journal, 47–48, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and William Russell to George Sibley, July 10, 1831, Sibley Papers, MHS.
her view, that meant the girl was also much likelier to become a Protestant.\textsuperscript{11}

While George Sibley tried to assure concerned parents that "a Religious bias of an intelligent Rational character, unconnected with parties or sects, has ever been encouraged and inculcated in my family," they must have heard a very different story from their daughters at the school. Mary's journal records numerous instances of Presbyterian worthies such as Thomas Lindsey, William S. Potts, and Elijah Lovejoy visiting the school and speaking to the girls. Mary Sibley required her students to attend Sunday worship and Sunday school, as well as daily sessions of prayer and Bible-reading, and took much satisfaction in her success at converting a number of her students. Martha Russell's father angrily withdrew her from the school when he learned of her conversion, complaining that "children could not be sent anywhere to school now a days but their religious opinions should be meddled with." The removal of a student from her school was not enough to discourage Mary, however. A year later she learned that Martha was engaged to marry a prominent Catholic. Mary wrote her former pupil a long letter, urging that if she could not or would not refuse the marriage, she must at least demand solemn assurances that she would be allowed to practice her own religion and raise her children as Presbyterians. Mary then wrote to Rev. Potts, urging him to visit Martha frequently and remind her of her religious duties. Such determined proselytizing upset parents, drove away students, alienated many of the Sibleys' old friends, and seems to have alarmed some of her coreligionists worried about their church's image in a community in which the old and resolutely Catholic French and Spanish families still exercised influence and economic power.\textsuperscript{12}

Other aspects of Mary Sibley's ideas and curriculum alarmed students' parents and sparked gossip in the town as well. Although restrained by her upbringing, by the influence of her husband such as it was, and by the conservatism of her close friends the Lindseys, Mary's views on moral and social reform grew more radical and militant after her conversion. Rev. Potts, whom she particularly revered, was involved with various reform movements and was a leading spirit in the group of Presbyterian ministers and reformers who started the \textit{St. Louis Observer} in November 1833. With the outspoken Elijah Lovejoy as editor, the newspaper quickly became notorious throughout the region for its virulent anti-Catholic rhetoric and increasingly explicit anti-slavery stance, though it also championed more broadly acceptable causes such as the Sunday school and temperance movements. By January 1834, Mary was regularly contributing articles to the \textit{St. Louis Observer}. Anti-Catholic pieces were her specialty, though she also wrote on other religious topics and slavery. Since her conversion she read eastern evangelical and reformist newspapers and journals voraciously. Soon she was contributing her articles to those publications as well.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11}Sibley journal, 22–23, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
\textsuperscript{12}George C. Sibley to William Russell, May 23, 1836, quoted in Jones, \textit{George Champlin Sibley}, 210; Sibley journal, 80, 87–90, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.; and William Russell to George Sibley, May 27, 1836, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
\textsuperscript{13}Van Ravensway, \textit{Saint Louis}, 265–67, 279; Dillon, "Elijah Lovejoy," 503–5; and Sibley journal,
Writing newspaper articles was only one expression of her commitment to moral and social reform. In early 1833 she revised her school curriculum, asserting, "Women instead of being raised helpless & dependent beings should be taught a habit of industry & usefulness." Some "intermeddling individuals" and probably the students themselves were soon spreading tales of well-bred young ladies forced to work like servants at Mrs. Sibley's school. By mid-August, angry parents were demanding explanations. In a lengthy letter to the families of her seven or eight pupils, Mary explained that alongside their academic education, the girls under her charge would be made "practically & habitually acquainted with domestic duties," and they could hardly become so if they merely followed servants about and watched them work. Her goal was to end

that pernicious system of education so common especially in slave countries, which turns upon the world thousands of my sex helpless dependent creatures, mere Doll babies dressed up for exhibition, decorated with external accomplishments...but of no manner of use either to themselves or their fellow creatures, when called upon to take their stations in society as wives, mothers & heads of families. (emphasis in original)

In response to her letter, some parents removed their daughters from the school while others endorsed her plan. Undeterred, she promptly wrote to friends in Louisiana to recruit more students. She particularly wanted girls from that state, she wrote, both in the hopes of counteracting prevailing educational fashions there and to spread "those principles of the Christian religion which are so little known to the inhabitants of the Catholic districts of Louisiana." 14

Mary Sibley's anti-Catholicism was intense, but typical of the evangelical movement in her day. Her writings on the subject were unoriginal repetitions of the numerous articles she read and sometimes clipped from the pages of evangelical journals and newspapers. Her attitude toward temperance and other moral and social reforms was equally predictable. The issue of slavery, however, was problematic. While Mary wrote articles for the Saint Louis Observer condemning "this stain on our national character," the Sibleys owned six slaves; indeed, they could not have operated their farm and school without them. George and Mary's families, most of their friends both in and outside of the church, as well as the parents of their pupils, likewise owned slaves. Mary expressed no personal sense of guilt on this matter, nor any condemnation of her family, friends, and acquaintances; the evil of slavery was an abstraction, or something that happened off at distance in the Deep South. For her part, she did her duty as she saw it. After a year of Mary's repeated urgings, her maidservant came forward to join the church at a revival meeting in March 1833. 15

62-67, 73, 77-78, 84, 92, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
14Sibley journal, 46-52, 58-59, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
15Sibley journal, 34, 67, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
About the same time, she began urging her church's women's auxiliary, the Female Benevolent Society, to organize a Colonization Society. In December 1833, after a visit and preaching by an agent of the American Colonization Society, an auxiliary society was formed in St. Charles. Although already a member of the St. Louis Auxiliary, Mary joined the St. Charles branch as well, to set a good example. "It is a cause that I feel very much engaged in," she wrote. George Sibley supported his wife's activities for the Colonization Society, just as he eventually came around to supporting most of her causes, and both remained colonizationists to the end. Though there is no indication that they intended to send their own slaves to Africa, George arranged for the passage of Thomas Lindsey's slaves to Africa according to the terms of Lindsey's will after the latter's death in 1844. Mary was still contributing funds to the American Colonization Society in 1853.16

Mary, however, needed to do more than collect and send funds to a distant office. In February 1834, she and two or three other women of the Female Benevolent Society started a Sunday school for slaves. She took much pride in the project, often commenting in her journal on the eagerness and attention shown by those in attendance. In April, however, three women "returned their books and said they were forbid [sic] to attend by their Masters." Rumors about the school spread through the town; local newspapers condemned it. That summer, cholera flared up in St. Charles; one of the school's teachers died from the disease, and the husband of another was taken seriously ill. Mary was distracted by the death of her own father at the time, and under the dual blows of family hardships and community pressure, the "African Sunday School" was closed.17

Mary Sibley's activism was constrained by her own conception of a woman's proper role, though her assertiveness and independence, as well as the impatience and "fretful disposition" for which she often chided herself, suggest that she was hardly content within that role. Not temperamentally suited to run a girls' boarding school, she complained frequently of the lack of privacy, the tedious routine, "the thousand little perplexities arising from the misconduct or inattention of the pupils," and her exasperation at the girls, their parents, and the conflicting demands of her various duties. Before her conversion, Mary dulled her driving need for a sense of purpose and accomplishment with a frenetic social life. "Since Mrs. Sibley left us our town has been dull," a friend complained in 1821. She enjoyed flirtations before and after her marriage. The last, with one of the "fascinating young men" who regularly courted her, nearly developed into something more serious, but the young man died suddenly. Thus, she later wrote, God protected her from a serious sin. In remembrance, she kept the record of her new religious life in the journal her young suitor had given her. She "was married very young," and "spent many years in folly, vanity

16Sibley journal, 32, 61–62, 106, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Commonplace Book #3 of George Sibley, March 1844, Sibley Papers, MHS.
17Sibley journal, 67–69, 74, 77, 80, 83, 85, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
"& sin," she wrote; now that she had found religion, she sought a true purpose in life, and the consolation of "true love between Christian friends."18

She now particularly desired the companionship of other evangelical women, but was usually rejected by them for her assertiveness and domineering behavior. Mary relished "the privilege of pouring out our feelings before God" at prayer meetings of the Female Benevolent Society, and could not understand why ever fewer came to the meetings when she attended. There was clearly much gossip about her and her school circulating in St. Charles, but this, she insisted, was due to the malice of infidels, not of her coreligionists. They probably saw things differently. Ann Benton Potts, wife of Mary's revered Rev. William S. Potts, once complained, "I expect a houseful next week & not such whom I should choose; Mrs. Sibley & her gang.... She has not enough of the feminine gender for me." Mary Sibley found in her religious calling a powerful emotional outlet and means of self-expression. The self she expressed, however, seems to have been simply too strong, independent, and assertive for her coreligionists' comfort.19

Though she may not have conformed well to it herself, Mary nevertheless shared the evangelical Protestant concept of a woman's proper role, and she could be quite critical of those who failed to meet her standards. In May 1833, she attended a lecture by a visiting woman missionary. Though the woman "preached the Gospel faithfully & with ability," her ideas about the millennium seemed doubtful. Above all, "believing as I do the injunction of Scripture is not to suffer women to speak publicly," Mary decided that she could "feel no fellowship with her as a Christian."20

While Mary Sibley never seemed to understand that others were judging her by comparable standards and coming to similar conclusions, her husband certainly did. George Sibley tried to restrain his wife's more aggressive tendencies in dealing with the public when he could, and did his best to repair the resulting damage when he failed. He was determined to keep the school going, both because he believed in the mission of educating girls for "all the peculiar duties of the sex" as wives, mothers, and teachers, and because, if properly managed, the school could be a valuable source of income. Despite the negative reactions provoked by Mary's personality, activities, and school policies, despite even the repeated cholera epidemics in the early 1830s and the onset of a national economic depression in 1837, the school survived through George's careful management. The Sibleys' relatives, social, business, and church connections supplied them with students, and his well-run farm provided food and other supplies. In 1835 and 1836, George Sibley remodeled the school building and hired Julia Strong, a Presbyterian minister's wife, to help with the teaching—or perhaps to move the controversial Mary to the background. "The School in Mrs. Sibley's

18James Kennerly to George Sibley, May 4, 1821, Sibley Papers, MHS; and Sibley journal, 1, 48, 75, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
19A. B. Potts to sister, May 6, 1838, Benton Papers, MHS.
20Sibley journal, 39–40, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
hands has been unpopular,” Mrs. Strong reported. Although later letters between Mary Sibley and Julia Strong are polite and even cordial, there seems to have been tension between the two while the Strongs were at Linden Wood. In any case, the minister and his wife soon moved on, and politely declined the offer when Mary invited them back in 1839 to take charge of the school.21

George Sibley tried again, hiring Miss E. D. Rosseter in 1837. She lasted, though various other teachers Mary Sibley recruited as assistants came and went. By 1839, and perhaps earlier, the Sibleys were operating a day school for boys and girls in St. Charles as well, which also required staffing. The day school enrolled forty-nine students in the 1839 fall term. Both schools closed in 1841, plagued by the continuing economic distress in the region and the difficulty in finding and keeping teachers who met Mary Sibley’s standards and could accommodate themselves to her personality. The Sibleys reopened their schools in 1842, though the problems continued. After two unsuccessful attempts to lease the Linden Wood school to ministers and their families to operate, Mary Sibley and Miss Rosseter again took charge of both Linden Wood and the day school in 1844. The following year Miss Eliza Ott from Albany, New York, and Miss Mary Butler of St. Louis joined the team. Several other women, apparently recruited from the East by Mary, also seem to have been employed for brief periods.22

Mary Sibley abandoned her journal early in 1836, and little evidence remains of her feelings and activities through this difficult period. She seems to have acted increasingly in an administrative capacity rather than as a teacher, though she certainly maintained close contact with the Linden Wood students and advised individuals on their personal lives and religion, as well as their scholastic affairs. “The Echo,” a newsletter produced by the students at Linden Wood in 1846, identifies their teachers as Miss Rosseter, Miss Eliza (Ott), and a newcomer, an unnamed woman, who with her three daughters, had lately returned from years of missionary work among the Osage and Shawnee. There is only one reference to Mary Sibley, but it implies much about her role and relationship with the students. In the December issue, the “editors” mentioned their hope of a longer holiday at Christmas, “but alas! Rules are in the way again and Aunt Mary thinks best not to consent to our wishes.”23

Mary Sibley’s writing for newspapers seems to have ended when public pressure closed the St. Louis Observer and forced editor Elijah Lovejoy to leave the city in 1836. Outraged by his increasingly virulent anti-slavery rhetoric, George Sibley broke with

21 Jones, George Champin Sibley, 232–34; and Julia B. Strong to Mary Sibley, March 20, 1839, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
22 Record Book, Linden Wood School, Box 14, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; Jones, George Champin Sibley, 299–302; Miranda Smith to Mary Sibley, July 11, 1842, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; Sarah Tuttle to Mary Sibley, June 29, 1847, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Julia Bartlett to George Sibley, October 16, 1847, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
23 Mary Sibley to Adie, December 15, 1848, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; “The Echo,” December 24, 1846, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
Lovejoy after the latter resumed publication in Alton, Illinois. If Mary remained in contact with Lovejoy thereafter, his murder in November 1837 certainly ended the connection. Otherwise she apparently continued the hectic schedule of activities she had set for herself in the early 1830’s: attending weekly church services and prayer meetings, teaching Sunday school, distributing tracts and proselytizing, visiting the sick, fund-raising and supporting the activities of colonization and temperance societies, and so on. The Sunday school for local farm children that she started in 1832 was still functioning in 1848 as the German Sunday school, now with several teachers and Mary at their head. However, her time was increasingly occupied with the Linden Wood school and with George’s declining health.

The year 1847 brought her tremendous turmoil and emotional upheaval, due primarily to a perceived betrayal by a close woman friend. The details can be only glimpsed in surviving letters. A bitter quarrel had broken out among the teachers at Linden Wood, apparently arising from a conflict between E. D. Rosseter and Eliza Ott, perhaps due to Ott’s engagement to Mary Sibley’s brother Alton Easton. Mary herself disapproved of the match, and Ott found herself out of favor at Linden Wood and exiled to the day school in St. Charles. The exact nature of Mary’s betrayal and the name of the betrayer are not stated in the surviving sources, but Rosseter was certainly deeply involved. After ten dedicated years of service to the school, Rosseter abruptly left Linden Wood. Surviving sources offer no explanation for her sudden departure and no evidence of any further contact between her and the Sibleys afterward.

Whatever the details, the affair shook Mary to the core. In an impassioned letter to her brother Alton, she confided that if he really knew her as well as he thought he did, he would not “wonder that I yielded my love & confidence to one who for years alone appeared to appreciate and desire both” (emphasis in original). Because of that relationship, Mary had been “misunderstood, misjudged and slandered,” though she had felt only “the warm affections & innocence of a little child desiring kind & tender & innocent caresses.” (A later hand here inserted “of a mother” in pencil). Instead of the affection she craved, she was “met with sternness & coldness from parent & husband” and now she had to “give up the only one who appeared to me to understand and appreciate my character & feelings.” But do so she must: “She can never be to me again what she has been.... I desire never again to love another human being with the devotedness that I have the individual alluded to” (emphasis in original). By the time the trouble was settled, Rosseter was gone, Ott was restored to favor and back teaching at Linden Wood, and Mary Sibley had fled to visit relatives in New York for six months.

Mary ended the 1847 fall term at Linden Wood early because there were so few

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24Elijah Lovejoy to George Sibley, April 27, 1837, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; George Sibley to Elijah Lovejoy, June 12, 1837, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Eliza Ott to Alton R. Easton, March 1848, Rufus Easton Papers, MHS.

25Eliza Ott to Alton R. Easton, June 19, 1847, Rufus Easton Papers, MHS; and Mary Sibley to Alton R. Easton, December 27, 1847, Rufus Easton Papers, MHS.
students. Ten enrolled for the 1848 spring term and supplied enough income to cover their expenses and pay Eliza Ott’s salary. Staffing and financial troubles continued to plague the school, however, and with only eight students for the 1848 fall term, the situation seemed unlikely to improve. George Sibley contemplated selling a section of the Linden Wood farm, but held back, hoping to find another way out of his difficulties. In 1841 and again in 1847, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church issued recommendations regarding education. The general plan was that each local church should maintain a grammar school, each presbytery an academy, and each synod a college. At least by 1851, and probably years earlier, the Sibleys were considering converting Linden Wood to a normal school (teachers college), hoping that they might look to the church for support. 26

Years of negotiations followed; it would be a long, hard campaign. Local church leaders expressed interest in the proposition, but remained wary of the expense. In January 1853, Rev. S. J. P. Anderson worried that the efforts of the Sibleys and their supporters to raise $20,000 for the school in and around St. Louis would interfere with his own efforts to raise an equal sum to win the “Great Western Seminary” from rivals in Ohio. If Anderson failed to raise the money by May, St. Louis would lose its chance to secure “this important institution..... The Female College on the other hand can wait.” George Sibley did his best to counter such arguments and give the general impression that he was in charge of this project; perhaps he believed he was. But Mary would not be relegated to the role of passive helpmate, and repeatedly leapt directly into the fray, writing letters, visiting supporters and opponents alike, and soliciting funds for the school. For years Linden Wood “had to struggle through much opposition, abuse, & slander,” she claimed, because “it was strictly a Presbyterian School, at the time when ... Protestants were so much afraid of being considered sectarian that they would not sustain their own schools” (emphasis in original). By 1853, Mary had decided that her school was “the first that lifted up the standard of opposition to convent Education in the West.” Though small, it was “of sufficient importance in the eyes of the Archenemy to make the Jesuits it traducers.” They had tried to destroy it by circulating “the most ridiculous stories and accusations,” and they had failed. Now, she insisted, the tide was turning and it was the duty of every Protestant to support the cause of Protestant education for women as well as for men. 27

Mary’s stirring rhetoric seems to have done more harm than good for their cause, but the combination of her flamboyant and relentless efforts with George’s methodical and businesslike campaign eventually wore down the opponents of their plan within the local Presbyterian hierarchy. In February 1853, Lindenwood Female

26Eliza Ott to Alton R. Easton, March 1848 and July 1848, Rufus Easton Papers, MHS; and Jones, George Champlin Sibley, 302-4.

27S. J. P. Anderson to S. S. Watson, January 11, 1853, Commonplace Book of George Sibley, #7, 95-111, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Mary Sibley to Rev. Anderson, May 10, 1853, Lindenwood Collection, MHS.
College was incorporated by an act of the Missouri legislature. George Sibley rewrote his will, bequeathing the Linden Wood estate to the college, with the provision that he and Mary would remain in possession of their home during their lifetimes. The St. Louis Presbytery agreed to take responsibility for the college and run it in accordance with general guidelines set by the Sibleys: the school would offer primary and secondary education as well as a normal school, it would accept both day students and boarders, keep tuition as low as possible, use the Bible as a primary textbook, and generally base instruction and discipline on Christian doctrine and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The curriculum would be designed to develop the students' intellectual, moral, and physical abilities, with the goal of producing Christian mothers and teachers. The first students enrolled in April 1855.28

The Sibleys played little if any part in the daily operation of the new school, though George supervised the construction of a new building for it and Mary continued a relentless campaign of fundraising. Increasingly, however, she was pushed out of any direct role in the school. Those with business to conduct dealt with George. The new teachers seem to have avoided Mary. As George's health steadily declined, Mary insisted on sharing his work as chairman of the building committee, keeping watch on the trustees of the college to ensure that they complied with the general guidelines set by the Sibleys, and calling them to task when, in her view, they failed to do so. George Sibley died in 1863. Thereafter, most people connected with the school apparently hoped that his widow would go into a discreet and proper retirement, and tried to behave as if she had done so. Mary, however, was hardly ready for the rocking chair. As a former student recalled, Mrs. Sibley always "wore gay colored clothes and hair ribbons and refused to wear black even after her husband's death."29

Increasingly shut out of any meaningful role at the college, in 1866 Mary Sibley turned to another crusade. That spring, wealthy St. Louis banker and philanthropist James E. Yeatman established Bethany House, the base for a "sisterhood" of missionary nurses to work with the St. Louis poor. With only two volunteers, the project faltered badly, and in December 1866, Mary Sibley was invited to take charge and revitalize it. With her usual energy, she reorganized the project, recruited more volunteers, and soon had seven women besides herself engaged in an arduous schedule of caring for the sick in the city's tenements, visiting the city hospital, workhouse, and jail, rounding up orphans and "fallen women" to be rescued from lives of sin, and proselytizing and distributing religious literature wherever they went. She abruptly dismissed one of her volunteers in April 1867 because she considered the woman's religious beliefs "entirely inconsistent with a professor of the Christian religion." Another candidate was rejected out of hand because she did not meet Mary Sibley's doctrinal tests. Other volunteers joined the sisterhood, though most

28"An Act to Incorporate Lindenwood Female College," Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Jones, George Champlin Sibley, 304–8.
remained only a few months. The grueling schedule and wretched conditions of the city’s poor discouraged some, others fell ill, and personality conflicts with the strong-willed Mary Sibley were not uncommon. Her intense hostility toward the Catholic clergy, her requirement of strict doctrinal conformity within the “sisterhood” and her emphasis on proselytizing, as well as escalating friction with upper class St. Louis women engaged in other charitable projects in the city, may well have concerned James Yeatman and the other financial backers of Bethany House. Certainly, Mary Sibley’s plans for a new hospital and other additions to the project were more than they had intended to take on. At the end of 1868, Yeatman and the other backers withdrew their funding, and Bethany House closed. Mary returned home to Linden Wood.30

Mary Sibley had no children of her own, but forged deep and affectionate bonds with many of the students at the school. They remembered “Aunt Mary” with much fondness in later years. She remained active in charitable and religious work in St. Charles and St. Louis as well, and occasionally formed warm relationships with other women engaged in that work. Sue McBeth, a single woman in her early thirties, left her home in Ohio during the Civil War to engage in social work for the Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. She stayed on after the war, supervising the Home for Young Women and working on other church projects, thereby making the acquaintance of Mary Sibley.

Mary, who was thirty years older than Sue McBeth, apparently assumed the maternal role toward her that Margaret Lindsey had once filled for Mary. The two became very close friends; Mary came to the rescue several times in Sue’s financial and emotional crises, and got her a job teaching at Lindenwood College. Sue McBeth remembered the older woman as having “advanced ideas” and being “one of the most avowed advocates of woman’s suffrage.” Mary Sibley was not too radical, however: when a promising suitor came along, she advised McBeth to get married, because the right husband could be useful in pursuing many worthy causes which a woman would find difficult or even impossible to advance on her own. When the man died of typhoid shortly before the wedding, Mary mothered the younger woman through that crisis as well. Such affection had a price, however. She was furious when Sue McBeth defied her wishes and advice, and left for Idaho to work as a missionary among the Nez Perce Indians. Though the two women continued to exchange letters until Mary Sibley’s death, the rift between them never healed. Sue McBeth believed that Mary, her “beloved second Mother,” died “feeling that I cared more for the Nez Perces than I did for her.”31

Late in life, excluded from any formal role that she considered meaningful in the school or the Presbyterian Church, Mary joined the Second Adventists. Letters from a Japanese seminary student whose education she subsidized in the early 1870s awakened her concern for women's education in Japan. In her mid-70s, she volunteered for missionary work in Japan, and set out for the West Coast. Ill health forced her return home before she could board a ship to Japan, however. She died at Linden Wood on June 20, 1878. In nineteenth-century Lindenwood College literature, George Sibley is usually hailed as the school's founder, though occasionally "Mr. and Mrs. Sibley" are so honored. In the 1920s and '30s, however, former students' reminiscences of Mary Sibley appeared in the school's publications and worked their way into popular history. Her controversial edges were smoothed over in nostalgic recollections for a new age more tolerant of assertive women. A new image of Mary emerged as the school's saintly mother figure and patroness. It was an image that she would perhaps have relished, but one that bears only a vague resemblance to the assertive, outspoken, and independent woman herself.\(^{32}\) The institution Mary Sibley founded is still functioning as an institution of higher education. Now Lindenwood University, the co-educational institution offers its nearly 15,000 students more than 120 different undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Archives
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\(^{32}\)Isaac Yokoyama to Mary Sibley, 1872(?) and May 3, 1873, Lindenwood Collection, MHS; and Jones, "Mary Easton Sibley," 699.