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Eliza Farnham and Georgiana Kirby



The Roots of Santa Cruz Feminism

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The advocacy of women's rights began in Santa Cruz County with the advent of that grand champion of her sex, the immortal Eliza Farnham, who braved public scorn because of her advanced views for many years before the suffrage movement assumed an organized form. Mrs. Farnham's work rendered it possible for those advocating women suffrage years later to do so with comparative immunity from public ridicule."

This was the tribute written to Eliza Woodson Farnham in a volume of *History of Women Suffrage, 1876-1885*, edited by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage.

Mrs. Farnham came to Santa Cruz in 1850, but was never granted space alongside the men in biographical sketches devoted to early pioneers, never rewarded with more than grudging admiration for her intellectual powers, never credited for her invaluable contribution to local history in both action and word.

She was California's first feminist, one who dared believe women superior to men.

Reformer, author, lecturer, phrenologist, abolitionist—Eliza Farnham was a bold and freethinking woman, New England-born and for the most part self-educated. Her life ambitions were far beyond the ordinary for women of the mid-19th century, much more unorthodox than was fashionable for society of the 1840s.

The saga of her journey west to Santa Cruz is a perfect illustration of her independent spirit, her love for challenge and an unconventional manner that earned her quite early the reputation of an eccentric.

Ultimately, there were those in this town who called her "she devil."

In a time when New England women who worked were belittled and male dominance was sovereign, Eliza raised two young sons alone while her husband left her for adventure in the West. She supported her family with a job that suited her authoritative air and somewhat stern appearance: she accepted the appointment in 1844 as matron of the Female State Prison at Mount Pleasant (Sing Sing), New York.

It was at Sing Sing that Eliza mastered a talent for notoriety. Her insistence on humane treatment for prisoners revolutionized the New England penitentiary system, because Eliza viewed her inmates first as women, rather than criminals. She broke the rule of silence and allowed prisoners to speak; put lights in their cells so they could read; replaced lectures on hell-fire with readings from Dickens; sent them music from a piano in the corridor.

Her acts created a scandal—one that aroused the fury of religious leaders afraid for society's moral

welfare. Within four years, Eliza was ousted from the job.

At the moment she lost that position, Mrs. Farnham was caught in the whirlpool of a national excitement. California had become a state and the gold rush was on. Hundreds upon thousands migrated West—to the one place where the role of womanhood was yet undefined, where women might at last claim their right to equality.

And coincidentally, the first women's rights convention was held that summer at Seneca Falls, New York. The year was 1848, Eliza was restless, and then she

would be "one of the surest checks upon the many evils" in the mining country. Her circular, then, called for more than 100 "intelligent, virtuous and efficient" women over the age of 25 years to accompany her westward on the ship *Angelique*.

The proposal was endorsed by such New England intellectuals as Horace Greeley, preacher Henry Ward Beecher, poet William Cullen Bryant and writer Catharine M. Sedgwick, who said of Eliza, "She has nerves enough to explore alone the seven circles of Dante's Hell."

and the accommodations cold and uncomfortable. So Mrs. Farnham took logical action—she organized the passengers and confronted the captain with a petition. In reply, he tricked her into going ashore at Valparaiso, off the coast of Chile, and then left her there while he sailed on to San Francisco with her children.

It took Eliza a month to catch up, and she found her sons still onboard the *Angelique* in the harbor. Within two months, she had filed an unsuccessful suit against the ship's master and settled her deceased husband's

Thomas Farnham obtained title in August, 1847 to Santa Cruz land purchased at \$1 per acre from 11 men, all native Indians. Farnham gave his ranch the ironic name "La Libertad."

Eliza's own five-year stay at the ranch began Feb. 22, 1850, with a cold, mid-winter splash in the salt-water. "We had come down from San Francisco by sea," she said. "Been landed like bales of goods through the surf, partly in boats and partly in the arms of seamen."

She then paid \$25 for each ship-to-shore landing of her belongings and another \$8 for every wagon-load to the ranch. She herself walked the two-miles with her children. Eliza then discovered her "ranch" was a floorless, windowless, stoveless house of slab construction—infested and uninhabitable.

Mrs. Farnham immediately put all energy into the provision of more adequate quarters. During the first months, she later recalled, she was to be "harder at work than any Southern slave—books, pen, thinking, talking—all as utterly given up as if I were an Esquimaux woman in her ice hut. No not that either," she added, "for I have lived an experience within myself, that will never be lost."

This was the beginning of her transformation from a sophisticated easterner to a rougher, yet more liberated woman.

Eliza rebuilt the cabin, made plans for a new home, hired ranch hands, purchased farm equipment and took fancy to a horse named "Shiek," on which she began treks throughout the north county—observing, writing, analyzing. As an example, "Farnham Road," up near the summit had been named for Eliza because she was among the first Yankees to tackle the mountain ride.

It is the words of Eliza alone that comprise much of her great contribution to history. Years later, Bancroft researchers traipsed all over the state recording the time-shaded memories of the first settlers in their twilight years. But Eliza took notes, and by 1856, had published her book, *California Indoors and Out*. In it are details all about her life in Santa Cruz, including thoughts about her neighbors—some of them unflattering comments about the most venerated pioneers.

She noted early that the pool of floating laborers in Santa Cruz seemed to be either drunks or invalids. "Most of the floating laborers to be picked up at this time were either too infirm in health to be able to go to the mines, or too intemperate to trust themselves there," she said. "Invalids, or drunken sailors, were the staple of the laboring community . . ."

There were no "how-to" books to guide her about the techniques of successful farming in California, no seasoned hands to steer her first



Santa Cruz Feminism: the Early Years

ELIZA WOODSON FARNHAM

Carolyn Swift

Word of the brideship idea spread like fire across the continent, setting aflame the deepest wish of miners who longed for women of a marriageable kind. They wholeheartedly agreed with Eliza's plan, although they scarcely knew of her intent to bring stability and decorum to their rough settlements. They only rejoiced that she was to bring Yankee women within reach of their clutches and cared not at all what kind.

She seemed assured of success, the applicants numbering more than 200 within a brief time. But the staid New England society perceived the miners' eagerness and outright lust, and began to attack Eliza's brainstorm as an immoral ploy—hinting it was perhaps a cover for prostitution. Mrs. Farnham was verbally stoned with jeers and gossip, and was taken back by the insinuations and total lack of understanding. Under the guise of an illness, she abandoned the project, and sailed on the *Angelique* with less than a handful of single ladies.

On the trip around Cape Horn, Eliza's reformist character and activist expression had little rest. The food was bad, water was scarce

debts in the city before sailing again, this time bound on a short trip to the tiny coastal settlement of Santa Cruz in the county known briefly then as "Branciforte."

The county was brand new, its official boundaries not yet fixed into the shape and title of today. It was one of the most isolated, hard to reach regions of the entire state. There were no wharves for disembarking passengers, no bridges to link the few and generally poor roads, and as yet not even an election of public officials to see about fixing such things.

Most of the able-bodied local men had gone to the mines at the start of the gold rush. Still, the community knew of Mrs. Farnham, and had been well-acquainted with her lawyer-author husband, Thomas.

It was Thomas who had come in 1840 and allied himself with the Yankee point-of-view against the *Californio*. And when frontiersman Isaac Graham (of Graham Hill Road, and other things) was arrested with local "foreigners" and sent to prison in Mexico, Farnham followed. He eventually engineered a pardoned release and compensation for Graham, and in return, the settler helped Farnham secure land near his own in Santa Cruz.

Recorded deeds show that

received this news: Thomas Farnham, her wandering husband, was dead in San Francisco.

He left her a freighting business and law firm in the city to dispose of, and several parcels of land near the state capitol at San Jose. In addition, there was a small ranch of some 200 acres near the Mission Santa Cruz. This was to become Eliza's destination.

Shortly after the new year of 1849, she was ready to travel, and in so doing she issued a peculiar circular in New York that announced the formation of the "California Association of American Women." Eliza had a plan—to civilize the western territory with the superior power of women, to accomplish "some greater good" through her own trip west.

She understood the on-going conflict in California between the land-wealthy *Californio* and the overwhelmingly male, gold-hungry Yankee population. Life in the mines was crude, and men outnumbered women 20-to-1. At some point, Eliza knew, the dust would settle into new communities. Anglo women of any kind were in great demand. What a difference it would make, she thought, if the first to arrive were scholarly, chaste and honorable.

Eliza believed such women

fruitless attempts. To Eliza, it was the experience that counted anyway—results were secondary.

When summer came, Eliza decided she was ready to tackle new challenge as a carpenter. Once again, it was the action that was significant. The house itself was poorly constructed, and by 1868, an article in the Santa Cruz *Sentinel* was entitled, "An Old Landmark Gone."

"The old and singularly shaped house, above and fronting on the potrero, built many years ago (but never finished) by Mrs. Farnham, has been torn down and replaced by a new farm house. The former building had five gables and was a wild looking edifice. Its dormer windows strangely contrasted with the beautiful fields and romantic scenery surrounding it."

Eliza had been proud of it, and as she built the house had laughed that she was "expected to pay a man \$14 to \$16 per day for doing what I found my own hands so dextrous in."

In the midst of this construction, Mrs. Farnham welcomed her first houseguest, Georgiana Bruce (later Kirby). She had met Georgiana in 1844 in the parlor of Horace Greeley's home, and later brought her in as best assistant and close friend that first year at Sing Sing Prison.

Georgiana was to be the link between Eliza and the growing suffragist movement in the west. Within two decades, she would announce the official organization of a women's rights movement in Santa Cruz.

A native of England, Georgiana was a former member of the Transcendentalist experiment at Brook

Farm, Mass. Her associates included Emerson, Ripley, Dana and Hawthorne. Her mentor was Margaret Fuller. Like Eliza, she was largely self-educated, a dedicated reformist, teacher, nurse and writer.

The teaching profession was Georgiana's ambition. She left the job at Sing Sing with plans to travel, but was robbed in Cincinnati and to survive had taken teaching jobs in the southern slave states. She left these a confirmed abolitionist, but she found the midwest no better.

At one job in the free state of Ohio she was required to judge the complexions of children with tinted cards, to determine if they were three-fifths white and therefore eligible for an education. She refused.

Georgiana came west at Eliza's invitation, but it was Greeley who paid her way. In fact, the man who said, "Go West, Young Man," said it first to a woman, and only lent money to the young fellow after Georgiana had repaid the debt. (In Georgiana's obituary years later, the San Francisco *Chronicle* noted that Greeley even considered Georgiana a better investment, since she was more successful.)

The debt Georgiana owed the newspaper editor was repaid in a six-month job on the potato farm of a man named J. Bryant Hill, former superintendent of farming at Brook Farm and the first Yankee farmer to plant crops in the Pajaro Valley. (Watsonville was still non-existent as a town.) Hill sampled the vast productivity of the valley's agricultural lands and started a potato boom that ended, sadly, with a glut on the market.

Once again, it was feminists who provided the most valuable account of county life in the days before newspaper production. Georgiana kept a journal from 1852-1860, and in it she pinpointed with amazingly sharp perception the very issues and events of foremost significance to women and history. She wrote, in fact, almost as if she could see into the future.

The last paragraph of the journal is the best example. Following a painful miscarriage, Georgiana said: "My thoughts in those days ran on the freedom of women, on what slaves we are and have been to the decisions of men. A hundred years hence, it will be looked on with astonishment . . . that a woman is prevented by public opinion from having a child unless she finds a man who she wishes to accept as the master of her life."

In the first days Georgiana and Eliza worked together as carpenters, they quickly decided to do away with their cumbersome skirts in favor of more comfortable attire. And so, long before Amelia Bloomer ever coined the phrase for women's trousers, the two feminists of Santa Cruz were seen on the streets in tunics and "Turkish pants."

Georgiana boasted with a hint of arrogance to her friends in the East: "By the way," she said, "it is my belief that this modification of Turkish and Albanian dress which Mrs. F. and I find so convenient will eventually become the fashion here, for you see, we are amenable to no vulgar public opinion, and I say it with all due modesty—we are *the people* of the place, live more like civilized beings than anyone else, and if anything worthy does come to Santa Cruz, it comes to our house."

found as a respected citizen in those early historical biographies. Eliza's mate was William Fitzpatrick of Ireland, a man Georgiana was soon to describe as "the greatest black-guard in the country, who strikes and otherwise mistreats her."

The two women became pregnant about the same time, and had baby daughters born within two weeks of one another. But their lives had begun to shift toward differing fates. Georgiana's marriage thrived, for example, and her child grew healthy. Eliza's

Her death would allow her to converse at length with her spiritualist followers here, the editor joked, and such ethereal talks would no doubt provide more converts within the asylum walls.

Eliza was gone, but Georgiana stayed on to keep the cause of feminism alive in Santa Cruz. She organized the first local society of suffragists in 1869, and gathered nearly 200 county signatures on a statewide petition to the California Legislature in 1870. In that year, she also accepted title as one of the vice-presidents at the first state women's rights convention. The following spring, Georgiana and one of the society's local members then staged a citizen action that involved the national suffragist leaders.

This member, Ellen Van Valkenburg, was the widow of Henry, owner of the San Lorenzo Paper Mill, who was killed by a falling tree during a storm in 1862. For nearly a decade, Mrs. Van Valkenburg paid taxes and supported her family alone. She determined she had earned the right to vote.

The suffragists confronted the county clerk, Albert Brown (in actuality, a sympathizer to the cause). Mrs. Van Valkenburg asked to enter her name on the register to vote. Brown refused, under law, and the issue went to court.

The ruling of denial was announced at the exact moment Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony approached Santa Cruz on a statewide tour. They addressed the local controversy at rallies held in both north and south county. Eventually, the petition to vote went to the Supreme Court, and was again denied.

Many years later, Susan B. Anthony met Georgiana's daughter Ora on a visit to Berkeley. "My dear, I visited your mother when they threw rotten eggs at me, and now they throw bouquets," the suffragist said.

Georgiana spent her remaining years in Santa Cruz, and finished her autobiography *Years of Experience*, just before her death in 1887.

Author Mary Hallock Foote, writing of a visit to Santa Cruz in 1877, summarized in a single paragraph the qualities that have left Santa Cruz County with such a rich heritage in the feminist cause. In a description of Georgiana, she said: "Mrs. Kirby's life, as she depicted it with her extraordinary gift of language, struck me as being somewhat like her garden, heterogeneous and crowded, yet there was room in it for great loneliness, one surmised. She was a difficult woman to be quite just to: she made a great appeal to me. Intellectually she was far in advance of the town, of any town those days no older than Santa Cruz. Some of her theories that were new at the time and risky, to say the least (like birth control), she drove so hard that whoever did not agree with her was quite likely to hate her . . ."



GEORGIANA BRUCE KIRBY

It was important in 1851 for Georgiana and Eliza to give their New England friends the impression that life was a *savoir faire* adventure. Only in her journal did Georgiana record the truth of Mrs. Farnham's growing unpopularity and frustration at her own failure to find a teaching job. She also wrote down, privately, her anger at Eliza's financial irresponsibility and the loss of title to her lands. She was further annoyed at the manipulation of Mrs. Farnham by her hired help.

The topics addressed by both women were the very same struggles that concern women today. They spoke of health care, food prices, physical dangers, social injustice, the callowness of society (referring to neighbors as "wooden spoons"), loneliness and literary starvation. On one occasion, Eliza observed the generosity of the Spanish-speaking *Californio* culture, and then noted how women were positioned as "humanly-treated slaves." Similarly, Georgiana later chastised Watsonville for its segregation of Black school children.

While they worked and wrote, Georgiana and Eliza also made plans to marry. Each did so in separate ceremonies on the same day, March 23, 1852. Georgiana's husband was Richard C. Kirby, a tannery owner who can indeed be

daughter and one son died shortly before she gained a legal court divorce.

Eliza was further tormented by a public that scorned her ideas on phrenology and lectures on spiritualism. Discouraged, she returned East, where she authored another book, *Women and Her Era*, a treatise that firmly asserted the superiority of the female sex.

On May 13, 1858, Eliza revealed these theories before the Women's Rights Convention at Mozart Hall, New York City. She said it was man's given task to maintain a physical environment for the species while the woman provided for the moral and spiritual elevation of the race. It was beneath women, she implied, to strive for equality with an inferior sex.

She made one last visit to Santa Cruz in 1859, and then took a job briefly as director of the Insane Asylum at Stockton. She had returned to New England and was a member of the Women's National League at the start of the Civil War. Eliza was a nurse on the battlefields when she died of pneumonia at Gettysburg in December, 1864. She was 49 years old.

An article in the *Sentinel* recorded her death and at the same time dealt one last sarcastic blow. The story recalled her spiritualist interests as well as her short employment at the insane asylum.

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