

Discussion Guide

A Civil Life in an Uncivil Time: Julia Wilbur's Struggle for Purpose

By Paula Tarnapol Whitacre

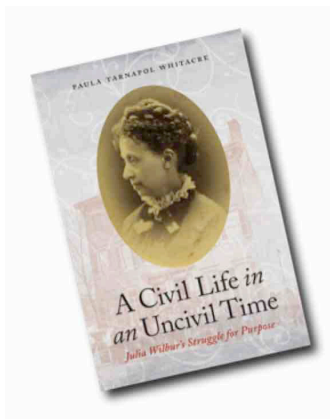
Whether you are reading this book in a classroom, as a member of a book club, or on your own, I hope the summary and questions below will enhance your appreciation of Julia Wilbur and her world.

I would love to visit your group in person or online. If that is not feasible, feel free to use, and reproduce, this guide, but please credit me as the creator and copyright holder.

Happy reading,

Paula Tarnapol Whitacre

About the Book



A Civil Life in an Uncivil Time: Julia Wilbur's Struggle for Purpose focuses on a woman involved in the greatest reform movements of the 19th century, including the fight to improve social and legal conditions for African Americans and women.

The book begins in pre-Civil War upstate New York, where Wilbur, a teacher, knew Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and others. A family crisis drew her inward, causing her to leave her job and the public “sphere.” But the Civil War re-charted her life yet again. In 1862 she moved to Union-occupied Alexandria, VA, with the goal of helping African Americans escaping slavery.

The second section of the book turns to Alexandria and Washington during the War. Wilbur allied with Harriet Jacobs, a black woman who had escaped from slavery in the 1840s. As advocates for equality, the two women often found themselves up battling the male military establishment. She had a first-hand look at the impact of the Civil War on soldiers and civilians, white and black, and on both sides of the conflict.

At the end of the war, Wilbur realized she could lead a more purposeful life in Washington than back home. How she went about doing this—supporting herself and building a life—are the focus of the third section of the book. She worked in the Freedman’s Bureau and in the Patent Office, a member of the first generation of female government workers. She was active in the fight for women’s suffrage.

Wilbur's diaries, letters, and other primary sources form the basis for the book. Archives and libraries for research include Haverford College (where diaries and some other personal papers are located); University of Michigan and University of Rochester (letters, mostly to abolitionist colleagues); the Rochester, Alexandria, and Washington, DC, Local History Collections; National Archives; Library of Congress; and others.

Discussion Questions

1. The Preface discusses finding, transcribing, and deciding to share Julia Wilbur's diaries. If you keep a diary, what do you think about sharing it—in your lifetime or after it, with a select group of people or more widely? Do you write it with the idea that other eyes may look at it?
2. How did family obligations affect Julia Wilbur's decisions and life? What might have been different if her mother had not died in 1836? If her sister Sarah had not died in 1858? How has family affected the path you have taken or not taken?
3. Only a small percentage of white Americans were abolitionists before the Civil War, despite the retrospective view that slavery was universally opposed above the Mason-Dixon line. What did you know about the 19th century anti-slavery movement and about emancipation before reading this book? What surprised you?
4. Just about every American could remember where they were when they first heard the news about President Lincoln's assassination. How did the way that Julia react seem the same or different as your reaction to such events as the JFK assassination or 9/11? How does the 24/7 news cycle and social media affect watershed events today compared to the past?
5. As detailed in the book, people escaping slavery usually had no money or possessions. A debate ensued about how much to provide them lest they become too dependent on hand-outs. What did you think of this topic in the book? How does it relate to issues today, whether welfare reform, Medicaid, or other policy decisions?
6. What did you know about Harriet Jacobs before you read the book? If you have read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, or at least a summary of it, how do you think it predicts the role that Jacobs defined for herself in Alexandria and Washington?
7. Most of us study the Civil War in school, with much less time on Reconstruction—the period after the War through 1877. What were your conceptions about Reconstruction before reading the book? What changed?
8. The women's suffrage movement split for several decades, with one of the most divisive issues whether to push for voting rights for black men first or push for voting rights for women as well. What do you see as the pros and cons of the two sides? Is there a

similar issue today in which a battle over strategy is dividing people who generally are on the same side?

9. The book describes Alexandria and Washington during the Civil War. What was your town like? What were women doing there during the war?
10. What do you think Julia Wilbur would be doing if she were alive today? What do you think she would say about some of the current debates on civil rights?
11. What other question do you have that you would like to ask me? Please feel free to pose a question via my website (<http://www.paulawhitacre.com/contact>) or on Goodreads (https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2824978.Paula_Tarnapol_Whitacre)

About the Author

I am originally from New London, Connecticut, and have bachelor's and master's degrees in International Studies from Johns Hopkins University. Early in my career, I worked for *The Washington Post* (local topics) and was a Foreign Service Office in San Jose, Costa Rica. For the past 20 years, I have been a freelance writer and editor, usually writing about health, the environment, or international development.

In the mid-1980s, I moved to Alexandria and, almost inevitably, became interested in the area's rich history. Although I have written publications throughout my life, *A Civil Life in an Uncivil Time* is my first commercially available book. As for diaries, I faithfully kept one from my senior year in high school through my late 20s and only occasionally ever since.

Additional Resources

- My author's website (<http://www.paulawhitacre.com>) includes more background and blog posts on related topics.
- Transcriptions of the "Civil War" years of Julia Wilbur's diaries are online through Historic Alexandria. (<https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/civilwar/default.aspx?id=62774#Wilbur>)

In addition, while far from an exhaustive live, here are a few readily available online sources.

Pre-War Rochester

- University of Rochester, River Campus Libraries, Post Family Papers Project: <https://rbsc.library.rochester.edu>

- Monroe County Library Local History & Genealogy:
<http://www3.libraryweb.org/research.aspx?id=512460#>

Civil War & Reconstruction

- Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Civil War & Reconstruction, 1861-1877:
<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-war-and-reconstruction-1861-1877>
- Civil War Washington: “A digital resource that chronicles the war’s impact on the city”:
<http://civilwardc.org/>
- Alexandria: Office of Historic Alexandria, Alexandria During the Civil War:
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/CivilWar>

Women’s Suffrage

- Library of Congress Primary Sources:
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/womens-suffrage/>
- National Women’s History Museum Primary Sources:
<http://www.crusadeforthetvote.org/primary-documents-1/>

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