

Constructing and Maintaining Voluntary Associations in Women's Meeting Minutes

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Introduction

In 1838 a group of young men in Boston penned the constitution for an association called the Anti-Bell-Ringing Society. The preamble begins:

We hold this truth to be self-evident, that all good and sensible men are created equal: and therefore that we have the same right to unite and form an Anti-Bell-Ringing Society, as others of our fellow citizens have to unite together and form Anti-Slavery, Anti-Swearing, Anti-Smoking, Anti-Tea-and-Coffee-Drinking, Anti-Skating, Anti-Swimming, Anti-Rope-Skipping, Anti-Marble-Playing, Anti-Nine-Pin-Rolling, Anti-Kissing, Anti-Courting, and other Moral and Benevolent Societies already in existence.¹

If the language used within the Anti-Bell-Ringing Society's farcical documentation sounds familiar, it should. Part of its joke depends on the very commonality both of its rhetoric (recalling national documents like the Declaration of Independence) and of the formation of self-serious voluntary associations in the early to mid-nineteenth century. This preamble's sarcastic laundry list of "anti" organizations pokes fun at this proliferation, as well as at the overregulated nature of associations' documentation and, by extension, the overregulated nature of voluntary associations themselves. After all, who among us hasn't rolled our eyes at the static nature of our own organizations' meetings, ignoring the inevitable follow-up email filled with diligent meeting minutes we are certain we will never read?

But even in farce, the Anti-Bell-Ringing Society's language also points to how forming voluntary associations has always been an act of claiming authority, or at the very least a challenge to others' absolute authority, by carving out space for collective self-formation. Creating an "anti" society is an act of collective pushback against societal, cultural, or in some cases even legal norms. In poking fun at meeting minute conventions, the Anti-Bell-Ringers

make those conventions visible; they acknowledge the constructed nature of the practices and strategies voluntary associations use to claim authority in meeting minutes. These minutes, like many minutes taken by notetakers for voluntary associations in nineteenth-century America, consist of iterative descriptions of each meeting, structured around such strategies as speaking in the passive voice, adopting the third or collective first person, and emphasizing consensus over dissent. In mimicking these common meeting-minute practices, the authors behind these farcical minutes point to the ways in which the authority voluntary associations' claim is *not* natural, but rather a result of a series of strategic labors, often rendered invisible by the very grounds upon which they operate.

In this article, I take seriously the labors that notetakers practiced for voluntary associations, rather than making them into a farce. By analyzing the kinds of rhetorical situations that inspired notetakers to use these conventions as active strategies, we can resist seeing what appears to be a static genre as simply a rigidly regulated, preestablished order and instead recognize the fluid ways notetakers use meeting minutes to continuously maintain collectives and perpetuate collective action.²² Even within the conventions of minutes, notetakers were constantly negotiating what was and was not speakable, attempting to redraw the lines of what kinds of constraints and freedoms were possible for individuals in a society. Furthermore, while both men and women served as notetakers, the role of the secretary for voluntary associations became increasingly feminized during the nineteenth century. As a result, the strategies behind these practices and the authority these strategies claimed became—both then and now—devalued, dismissed, or even forgotten. By recognizing how women's notetaking constitutes an often-invisible labor that nonetheless participates in the transformation from collective written acts to collective social and political ones, I argue that we should conceptualize these secretarial acts as essential and editorial.

In the nineteenth century, notetaking became a way for women to claim authority as well as more political agency under social and legal constraints.³ In thinking about notetakers' practices in meeting minutes as a form of editorial work, I refer to notetakers' curatorial acumen and meeting minutes' revisionary authority. But even more than this, I mean to adopt Sarah Blackwood's recent framework for thinking about "the shift in editing as masterful taste making to editing-as-service."⁴ In this framework, Blackwood invites us to think about editorship as a form of care work, one that "speak[s] to *serve* the commons" and "erases itself... [U]nless an author calls attention to it, a reader should never know it was there."⁵ A notetaker was valued not for her ability to stand out or provide original insight, but rather for her ability to invisibly channel the larger association, creating and maintaining that collective in the act of speaking for them. Although, as we will see, this is not to say that in doing so, notetakers did not exert their own agency or insert their own agendas. Rather, it is to put pressure on the tension inherent in both notetaking and editorial practices in which the labor's value is dependent on its service to others and its invisibility, a dual requirement that simultaneously devalues it. In this way, I seek to respond to Blackwood's call to "articulate an ethics of editing, especially in relation to questions of labor exploitation."⁶

Handwritten meeting minutes are almost never the focus of analysis by scholars. Some scholars working in the field of rhetoric have taken a closer look at meeting minutes. For instance, Julie D. Nelson's analysis of a 1960s African American women's club minutes takes the analysis of meeting minutes seriously to demonstrate how notetakers constituted their own organization's identity through what she calls "rhetorical remembering."⁷ Yet her enlightening investigation into the way notetakers crafted and controlled their histories looks only at notes taken long after the genre's sedimentation in the nineteenth century.⁸ Such examples of scholarship that take meeting minutes as their object of study also tend to focus more on rhetorical strategy than historical, cultural, or social implication. Others, like Denise Burgher and Anne Ruggles Gere, have used minutes to discuss social and cultural

movements—the Colored Conventions and women’s clubs, respectively—but pay less attention to the rhetorical, generic, and literary qualities of minutes specifically. In this article, I attempt to link these two missions, considering what rhetorical studies’ focus on ordinary genres can illuminate about the gendered, classed, and raced dimensions of literary and political production in larger social and cultural contexts.

Even when scholars such as these do pay attention to the documentation of voluntary associations from this period, the genre far more likely to be studied is the annual report.⁹ Annual reports are more likely to survive in physical and digital forms. They provide brief printed summaries of an organization’s activities from the previous year. As such, they are more public, sometimes even printed in periodicals, and more concise. One report can often stand in for more than a dozen sets of meeting minutes. Where handwritten meeting minutes are intended for internal circulation, reports speak to those outside the collective: people who may consider joining, people who may donate, or even people who might oppose the organization’s mission.

But what do we miss by looking only at how associations projected themselves to others, rather than at how notetakers depicted an organization’s workings to its own members? I argue that meeting minutes make visible the vital work women continuously undertook to maintain associations at a local scale, even as a growing awareness of mass audiences began to eclipse them. Meeting minutes reveal what it means to seek consensus across difference. They also demonstrate the processes by which writing becomes what Michael Warner calls “constitutive text[s],” or texts that perform or “giv[e] substances to the people’s authority.”¹⁰ As constitutive texts, meeting minutes are “no longer merely a better way of keeping records[; the] writing gives original existence to its author.”¹¹ In other words, writing meeting minutes becomes a social act, one that creates and maintains collectives through its repetition.¹² Like the editorial process, secretarial notetaking is an always ongoing process of reforming and redrawing what a collective can be and accomplish, in different contexts and for different audiences.

The iterative nature of meeting minutes—their ongoing collection of documents, their seemingly excessive repetition in format and content, their always-unfinished quality—is exactly what constitutes the labor of maintaining social and political collectives. Yet this same iterative nature also contributes to meeting minutes’ invisibility. We might consider such handwritten meeting minutes as examples of what Jennifer Sinor calls “ordinary women’s manuscript materials,” or “writing that is typically unseen or ignored, is primarily defined by its status as discardable.”¹³ It’s worth acknowledging that not all meeting minutes were taken by women. While I sketch the sharp increase in women being elected as notetakers for mixed-gender societies, such an increase in women’s participation in notetaking does not entirely encapsulate the feminization of meeting minutes. Their status as ordinary, iterative, and ignorable contributes to this feminization as well. Laurie Langbauer defines ordinary women’s manuscripts similarly as “the very things we cannot read because they are so commonplace as to be boring, to refuse our regard or interpretation.”¹⁴ Both Sinor and Langbauer point to how ordinary manuscript materials are overlooked or devalued because of their very commonality; they represent what might have been discarded and yet somehow they were not. Because we think we know these materials so well, we tend to overlook their complexity.

By focusing on voluntary association meeting minutes in the nineteenth century, I show how notetakers’ renegotiation of this genre is distinctly feminized. Mixed-gender associations became increasingly common, and as a result, frequently women were elected only to secretarial roles. In addressing the feminization of meeting minutes, I interrogate not only the increase in women notetakers but also the feminization of notetakers’ strategies, what those strategies valued, and how those strategies were (de)valued in return. To be a good notetaker in the context of

parliamentary procedure became aligned in many ways with what it meant to be an ideal woman: to obscure the self to make space for the collective; to make one's own opinions invisible for the sake of harmonizing the socially and ideologically dissonant registers of those speaking.

I begin this article by sketching out the proliferation of the genre of meeting minutes across the nineteenth century, which occurred alongside an increase in secretarial roles either falling to or being claimed by women. I then take a deeper dive into the rhetorical and material structures of meeting minutes to analyze feminized values of social harmony and deference that notetakers' strategies promote. Meeting minutes as a genre became feminized across the century not just because of the number of women working as notetakers but also because of more systemic values that deemed the conventions of meeting minutes more naturally suited to women's abilities. In the second half of this article, I argue that rather than a simple act of recording, notetaking is a vital set of community-building efforts that includes editorial labors and complex interpretative strategies. By paying attention to the rhetorical strategies notetakers use, we can better acknowledge and value the oft-overlooked efforts that undergird the actions taken by organizations. Furthermore, the tensions within these documents help us to recognize the limitations of such efforts across the fault lines of gender, race, and class as well as how methods of organization that are now taken for granted are created and recreated by notetakers themselves.

The Gendering of Meeting Minutes

One reason meeting minutes often go overlooked in archives is that they are a surprisingly stable rhetorical genre across the long nineteenth century as well as across the country. The structure of meeting minutes in Boston from the early 1800s, for example, looks very similar to the structure of meeting minutes in small Michigan townships at the end of the century. The reason for this homogeneity might be attributable to books seeking to standardize voluntary association meetings, a practice that began in America with Thomas Jefferson's 1801 pamphlet *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* and proliferated during the 1810s–1830s, resulting in steady sellers like *Robert's Rules of Order* (1876). Such publications speak to the popularity of voluntary associations and the increasing efforts to distribute strategies for forming and maintaining them to the larger public, especially to groups that may not traditionally have learned such generic conventions.

In meeting minutes themselves, notetakers still take up the genre in ways that vary and interpret these conventions for their own contexts and uses. Furthermore, across the nineteenth century, women increasingly kept the minutes for voluntary associations, and the strategies of good notetaking became increasingly feminized. In this section, I offer a short history of nineteenth-century notetaking in voluntary associations to demonstrate how women began to claim often invisible authority through their roles as notetakers in these organizations. Then, in the section that follows, I delve into the feminized strategies women notetakers used to covertly speak the unspeakable through meeting minute conventions. The forms of authority women claimed in being notetakers and in strategically leveraging meeting-minute conventions embraced the recursive, often-invisible nature of promoting collective harmony over individual autonomy. When we acknowledge the strategies women used as notetakers and editors, we also recognize how women often leverage an underrecognized form of agency that is vital to making the social relations that comprise a civil society sustainable.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, many of the associations using parliamentary procedure were upper class, white, and all male. This tendency is likely a reflection of who was educated in parliamentary procedure prior to the nineteenth century and who was not. But even as all-male organizations remained predominant, the knowledge and practice of meeting minute conventions were expanding to other marginalized groups, a shift reflected in how notetakers framed their preambles. For example, the Montgomery Farmers & Mechanicks Debating Society, founded in 1823, was an all-men's group that admitted only working class members. Their preamble states, "We whose names are hereunto annexed being desirous of forming ourselves into a society the objects of which will be the promotion of sociality and friendship, relaxation after labor and toil, the excitement of a spirit of inquiry and reflection, and the improvement of the mind."¹⁵ In these inaugural meeting minutes, we see the moment of formation through the syntactical coming together of a singular voice into a collective "we." But we also see a mission that suggests an expanded understanding of those who typically enter into such unions; this group's emphasis on "relaxation after labor and toil" and "a spirit of inquiry and reflection ... the improvement of the mind" foregrounds their working-class status and desire for intellectual mobility.

While primarily single-sex organizations existed in the first decades of the nineteenth century, by mid- to late century, mixed-gender organizations became increasingly common. Founded in 1842 and lasting for decades, the Upper Alton Presbyterian Sabbath School Society provides a useful case study for this transition, because of the timing of its founding and its longevity. This society was a mixed-gender organization comprised of teachers who met on weekends for Bible study. Their minutes demonstrate the lingering separation of members by gender within the organization. Early on, one of their secretaries, Mr. Thorpe, takes up the common practice of listing the names of present members at the beginning of each meeting. He does so by separating on the page the list of men from the list of women participants, spatially enacting the separation in the organization (Figure 1).

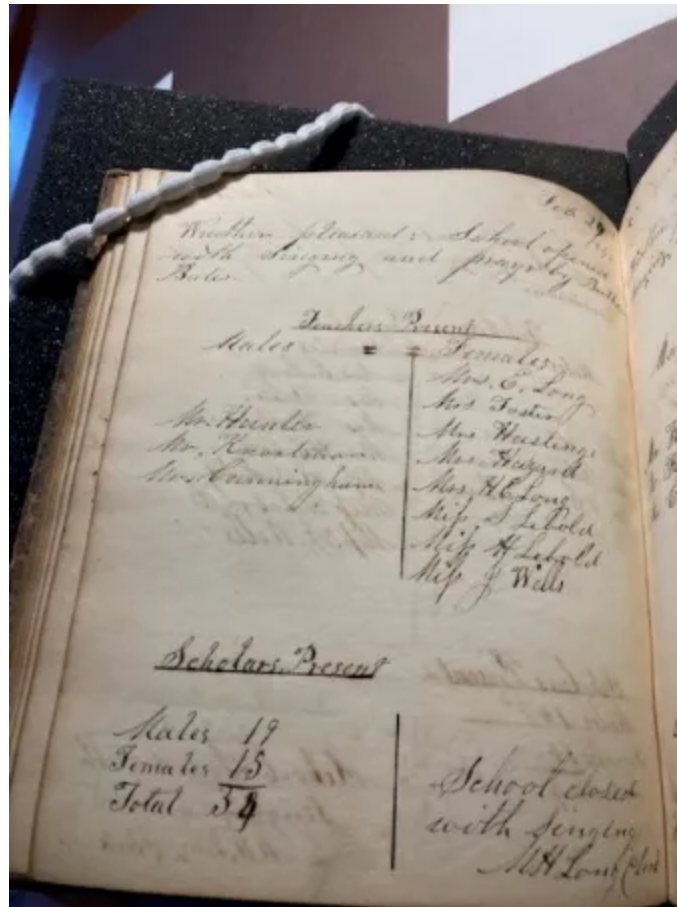


Figure 1. Upper Alton Presbyterian Sabbath School Society minutes, February 29, 1850, William Clements Library.

The spatial structure of association minutes provides clues about the hierarchical organization of a society. For example, notetakers frequently list the officers present first, followed by the larger group of participants present. Secretaries may also indent sections devoted to committee reports and arrange them in order of perceived importance. These strategies of spatial organization give insight into the divisions within a collective. In the Upper Alton Society, the divide between men and women who participated in meetings and appeared on the page is impossible to erase. These hierarchical practices demonstrate how keeping the minutes is part of, rather than secondary to, the acts of the organization itself. The rhetorical organization of the meeting minutes and the structure of the organization are mutually constitutive.

But just as an organization's internal structure is not static, neither are its meeting minutes. By 1850, for example, the Upper Alton secretary included a new column for "scholars" in its members lists, likely meaning students who were allowed to attend these meetings (see Figure 1). While this list reflects further divisions—scholars were separated from and likely subordinated to teachers—it does demonstrate change: an expanding of who is included in this collective, a shift in how the different genders of teachers relate to each other, and an addition of a mixed-gender category (scholars are grouped together regardless of gender). The other major change by 1850 is that female participants outnumber male participants on a frequent basis, a fact made visible by the gendered division of attendance lists. This rise in engagement by women in organizations is not limited to Upper Alton but appears across mixed-gender organizations at mid- to late century. This trend reflects women's more consistent presence in the public sphere and, by extension, their exposure to voluntary association conventions.¹⁶

As women's participation in such associations grew, so did their taking of leadership roles within mixed-gender collectives. The Montgomery Qui Vive Society, for example, was a mixed-gender association that organized entertainment nights. By 1881, female members outnumbered male, a fact made obvious in the meeting minutes given that they, too, divided present women and men members into two different columns.¹⁷ As more women began participating, they also took on more roles, especially ones that did not come with specific officer titles. These jobs could be anything from offering their houses to host the meetings, cooking and providing other hostessing duties, volunteering to perform, and writing out the entertainment programs. As Burgher makes clear in her exploration of documents from the Colored Convention Movement, such hostessing work required a great deal of skill and labor but is often overlooked both in organization records and in our descriptions of such associations today.¹⁸ This list of roles, like the roles Burgher describes, demonstrates the variety of feminized labors required for organizations to function.

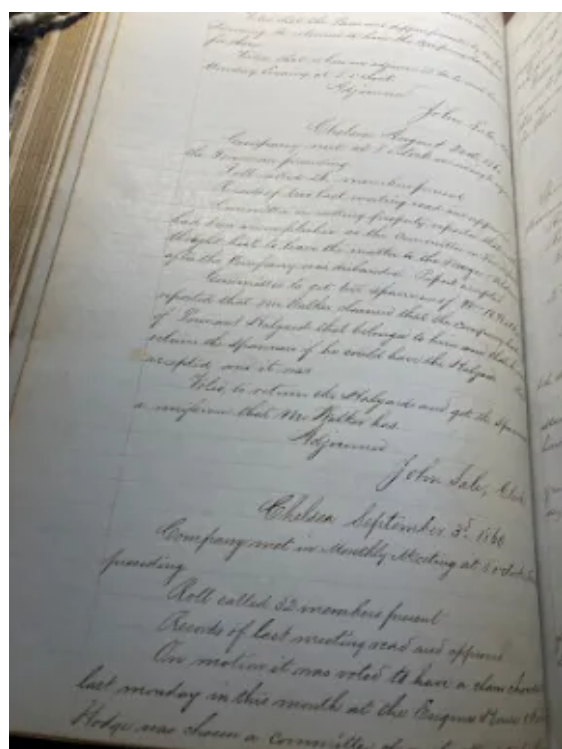
Eventually, however, women began to acquire more officer positions as well. Interestingly, women often achieved these positions through a sustained commitment to participation rather than through the electoral process. For example, in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, women assumed officer positions when the male officer was unavailable. In 1854, when the secretary, Haworth Wetherald, died, a woman, Miss or Mrs. Jones, took up the role for the first time. Even after the next election, when a man is reinstated in the position, Mary Greer began taking the minutes instead because he failed to attend meetings. This strategy of having a man-by-name but a woman-in-practice in an officer role escalated when James Mott was elected president in 1855. Although James was technically the president, because of his frequent absences, his wife, Lucretia Mott, served as temporary president in his place. Because published accounts of organizations only print official officer names, meeting minutes enable us to witness Mott and Greer assuming leadership roles.

When it came to publicly named officers, women in such mixed-gender organizations were typically elected to a secretarial position, if they were given any role at all. In the Youths Literary Society, for example, only one woman was elected as an officer in 1867, and she was assigned the secretary position.¹⁹ This inequity also occurred in the Qui Vive Society. Even as the officer positions within the Qui Vive Society became increasingly mixed-gender, the secretary position was always given to a woman. Notetaker-as-woman was becoming a persistent assumption. The one time a man was given the secretary position in Qui Vive, in 1883, trouble ensued. After his minutes were read at the start of the next meeting, they were "not approved on account of an omission, either by carelessness or forgetfulness on the part of the former secretary and consequently were sent back for correction."²⁰ This description was written by a new—again, woman—secretary as the group then enforced "the resignation of J Wilkins of his position as Recording Secretary, owing to his inability to attend to its duties."²¹ This event underlines the seriousness with which organizations took their minutes but also their increasing feminization. It is possible that Wilkins's minutes did not cohere to the group's standard of meeting minutes either in their style, organization, or level of detail.²² But it is also possible the women in this association played up the offending nature of the minutes to reassert their authority as superior notetakers. In doing so, they would have staked a claim to notetaking as an often invisible but thereby powerful position of authority, particularly in the context of an increasingly bureaucratically organized American culture.

Negotiating the Conventions of Meeting Minutes

As women claimed a range of notetaking labors in the nineteenth century—from crafting the minutes themselves to organizing associations’ documentation and translating meeting minutes into printed annual reports—they also had to navigate the use of common meeting minute conventions. In taking a closer look at the standard elements of meeting minutes that have been characterized as static across the century—including the structure of meeting minutes on the page, secretaries’ use of the passive voice, and notetakers’ tendency to emphasize consensus over dissent—I argue that these elements are not simply examples of women adhering to genre conventions. Rather, how and when a secretary engages in these practices reveal them to be set of strategies that enact the vital and yet overlooked work of not only constituting associations but also maintaining them. Furthermore, in selecting what to include in the minutes and how to rhetorically craft the minutes’ content, notetakers engage a series of overlooked editorial labors that are essential to the work of maintaining collectives.

While meeting minute books tend to begin with the preambles and constitutions established at a voluntary association’s inaugural meeting, the meeting minutes for every meeting thereafter take on a new format, one that is repeated by the association’s secretary for every following meeting. The standard format for meeting minutes includes, in order: the date and place of the meeting, the reports given by subcommittees, the collective resolutions resulting from those reports, and the statement of the meeting’s adjournment (Figure 2).



← Statement of meeting date and location

← Reports/content overview

← Statement of resolutions (here called “Voted”)

← Statement of Adjournment

← Secretary signature

Figure 2. Sample page from the record book of Hamilton Engine Company No. 4, 1860, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

Beyond this standard format, minutes tend to include other key components in their content. Often, associations will begin their meetings by reading and approving the previous meeting’s minutes. At the opening of the minutes, many secretaries will also add a list of those present at the meeting. Some associations, depending on their function, might include within their minutes a treasurer’s report that details the current budget and collected dues. Finally, some secretaries will include their signature at the end of each meeting’s minutes. These

signatures, if present, are often the only places where the individual identity of the secretary becomes obvious; they are frequently omitted unless a substitute secretary had to take the place of the regularly elected secretary for a meeting or two.

While this format persists for meeting minutes across the long nineteenth century, notetakers occasionally varied it depending on the association type. For example, since there are no subcommittees in the Farmers & Mechanics Debating Society (referenced earlier) to present reports, the minutes instead mention the debate question that was selected for the day, along with which side won the debate and which question was decided upon for the next meeting. This format necessarily acknowledges dissent within the debate (the notetaker tallies the votes), but there is often little description of the disagreement itself. Eliminating descriptions of dissent moves the minutes quickly to the section of meeting minutes that lists “resolutions,” the collection of agreements the collective makes by the end of a meeting. Despite recording a debate society, these meeting minutes emphasize consensus rather than dissent, and they offer just one example of notetaker’s revisionary authority, or their ability to “edit” reality in the minutes to project an imagined consensus and, by extension, community.

The convention of emphasizing consensus in meeting minutes is perhaps one of the genre’s most foundational tenets. In analyzing women’s clubs’ meeting minutes, Gere calls this tendency the “calculus of intimacy.”²³ In ensuring that confrontation is “deliberately downplayed,” notetakers promoted a sense of intimacy among members and a perception of that intimacy externally.²⁴ Notetakers understood the importance of highlighting consensus, not because disagreement did not exist but rather exactly because it did. Promoting consensus was important for a strongly cohesive association. Of course, this strategy has its limitations, as it obscures individual difference and disagreement that can alienate some members. Furthermore, complete consensus is often impossible to sustain. For instance, even as notetakers downplay disagreement in the Farmers & Mechanics Debating Society, they still list the questions the society debates. Additionally, some notetakers describe the intensity of the debate more than others. While most secretaries do not describe the debate at all, one secretary, during a debate on the question “Should females receive as good an education as males?,” noted “the difficulty of the question.”²⁵ The question proves so challenging to the group that they have to resort to using their president as a mediator: “after hearing voluminous arguments the president ... gave a general outline of the debate.”²⁶ The secretary concludes commentary on how this debate ended in a tie. The president made the tiebreaking vote, a decision that frustrated many. This shift in how much of the debate is recorded reflects the individual differences that are inevitable in meeting minutes as the secretary role is passed from one person to another. The standard format of meeting minutes is not so much an arbitrary set of generic conventions as it is a series of tried-and-true strategies for managing conflict. Nevertheless, the different ways secretaries take up these strategies display the inevitability of variance even within formalized associations.

Despite the slight differences one can spot between secretaries, the overall consistency of minutes across different recorders suggests that associations value a new secretary’s ability to imitate the previous secretaries’ styles. An association’s appreciation of a secretary’s ability to imitate well may be most visually obvious in secretaries’ often perfect handwriting. On the one hand, the recognizable change in handwriting between secretaries alerts a reader to the individuality and mutability of the person mediating the record on the page in a way that printed reports of meetings do not. On the other hand, as Meredith McGill states, we should be cautious of our quickness to assign handwriting the authoritative and authenticating mark of the individual.²⁷ Handwritten meeting minutes are often produced as fair copies, showing signs of being written or rewritten in pencil before

copied later in pen. Minutes sometimes even explicitly dismiss the fantasy of the secretary writing with one hand while simultaneously listening to the unfolding meeting. In a common article included in associations' initial meeting minutes, the role of the secretary is outlined as follows: "to keep a fair record of all the transactions of the Society in books to be provided for that purpose ... at least three days previous to the time of a meeting."²⁸ This timeline, alongside the carefully crafted handwriting and the past tense of all meeting minutes, reminds us that the handwritten nature of minutes does not align with any imagined documentary immediacy, but rather with their retrospective, crafted nature. In other words, these are not records copied from life, but rather retrospective texts that have been carefully edited by their writers. In a period of the increasing prevalence of type, handwriting here allows notetakers to hide the editorial nature of meetings, instead giving the perception of documentary authenticity and displaying a secretary's consent to becoming part of an indistinguishable collective.

The individuality of secretaries remains occasionally visible if not in their handwriting, then in the content of minutes. Some secretaries are more descriptive about the meeting; other secretaries differ in terms of how much of their own opinion they insert into the minutes. For example, the 1836 Maternal Association of St. Michael's Church had a longtime secretary who, in the more traditional style of meeting minutes, obscured her own subjectivity.²⁹ But this does not mean her entries are ideologically neutral. Her description of how "we are rearing our children for endless happiness or indominable woe" doubles down on the pressures the church's larger institution put on mothers and the pious nature of the collective's mission. Additionally, while her language remains conventionally tied to the collective "we," her underlining suggests a more subjective series of unspoken emphases to align the association's purpose with the larger Church's mission.³⁰

Nonetheless, when a new secretary takes over, her inclusion of subjective description breaks with the norms of her predecessor to surface different opinions on motherhood and the association itself. Rather than emphasizing the importance of their responsibilities, the new secretary notes that the women who gather for one meeting seem to enjoy themselves because "it is good for us to be here. To lay aside for a short hour or two the cares and anxieties of life & take much counsel together."³¹ Instead of reminding its members of their maternal pressures, this notetaker uses the minutes—and, by extension, the organization itself—to relax into the joys of collective support, celebrating the benefits of having a space for women to rest together and relate to each other. In fact, such an entry suggests that while the society's stated purpose is to help mothers better understand how "the holy spirit [can] aid us in bringing up our children," the ultimate goal for many association members may have been about sociality or about finding space in which to be with other women, rather than alone as mothers.³² When this comforting all-women space is broken by a reverend attending in order to "instruct" the mothers, this secretary records, a bit tersely, how "he also recommended neatness of dress which was particularly desirable in the young by all means to have their seasons modestly clothed [and] not allowed them to quit their toilet half dressed. (In his opinion) it had been one of the great means of breaking the 7th commandment."³³ Her parenthetical assertion of "in his opinion" suggests skepticism, but it does so gently, critiquing a man she is otherwise not in the position to critique in the enclosure of parentheticals. Such an aside demonstrates the way women used meeting minutes as spaces not just to record meeting occurrences but also to silently take note of their opinions—and even dissensus—within the safety of convention.

Even as secretaries find ways to insert more subjective stances into their meeting minutes, they still tend to follow other meeting minute conventions such as the use of passive voice and the vacillation between third-person and first-person plural. In most cases, secretaries never make themselves visible with the use of the first-person "I."

Instead, they either refer to themselves as “we” or write only of “the members,” removing themselves entirely. Eliminating the “I” illustrates how acting on behalf of a collective requires performing an evacuation of the self. In a similar effort to eliminate the “I,” notetakers often engage the passive voice, as in “the minutes of the last meeting [were] then read and approved.”³⁴ Passive voice, here, not only eliminates the “I” but also continues the project of emphasizing consensus. The tense allows everything to already be decided and achieved, an act that was always meant to be rather than one that is up for debate.

This statement of the minutes being read and approved is another common opening feature of most meetings’ minutes. The frequency with which this practice occurs in associations’ meeting minutes signals the importance put on the minutes as a site for collective cohesion. While minutes were often approved, approval was in no way guaranteed. For example, in an October 1859 meeting of the Ladies’ Christian Union, after the previous meeting’s minutes were “read and discussed,” “it was the decided opinion of most of the members present that those minutes were out of order, and a Committee of three were appointed to rewrite them.”³⁵ The rejection of meeting minutes, both in this association and others, is rare, but it reminds association members that meeting minutes were being scrutinized at every meeting. It also speaks to what Nelson has called the “rhetorical remembering” function of meeting minutes; minutes were the mechanism for how an organization performed and revised the version of themselves they wanted future members to see.³⁶ But the regular discussions associations had over whether “minutes were out of order” also marks the difficulty of constructing both literal and rhetorical “order” in the first place.

It can be hard for readers of meeting minutes to be attuned to secretarial elisions in meeting minutes because they may only appear as gaps, if they appear at all. Sometimes we cannot even notice that absences exist until they are written into being. The Michigan Anti-Slavery Society’s meeting minutes are particularly helpful in displaying the stakes of such secretarial strategies. This regional chapter of the American Anti-Slavery Society offers an intriguing case study because of the breadth and seeming cohesion of its surviving archive. Collected, preserved, and donated to the William L. Clements Library by one of the organization’s secretaries, Harriet DeGarmo, this collection is a testament to the often-invisible powers secretaries held even beyond the literal writing of the minutes.³⁷ Despite this seeming completeness, gaps appear here, too. In March 1853, a series of letters the chapter wrote to William Lloyd Garrison are alluded to but not brought into the minutes. Instead, the secretary, Anne Hayball, simply records in the minutes that they are kept “on file,” although they are now not included in the otherwise meticulously maintained larger archive.³⁸ Perhaps these letters were lost at some point, or perhaps a combination of Hayball and/or DeGarmo purposefully excluded them. We might consider these moments when gaps appear in the minutes—whether or not they are brought to our attention explicitly—as examples of what Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe have called “silence and rhetorical listening.” Glenn and Ratcliffe argue that “because speaking out has long been the gendered signal of masculinity, silence as long been gendered ‘feminine,’ as a lamentable essence of weakness.” Yet moments of silence and listening, too, are strategic acts that “are particularly effective for historicizing, theorizing, analyzing, and practicing the cultural stances of power of both dominant and nondominant (subaltern) groups.”³⁹ In part because they are gendered, rhetorical silences are contentious sites of power negotiation, and can be, depending on the context, strategies of exclusion, performed dominance, refusal, or reparation.

Secretaries perform a variety of labors to maintain collectives—from buying paper goods, to keeping track of funds, to organizing minutes, to hosting meetings, to imitating past secretaries’ styles, as well as other

miscellaneous tasks. But they also engage, perhaps most prolifically, in acts of listening that must be edited on the page as a negotiation between heard disagreement and aspired-to consensus. Sometimes, it can be impossible to discern moments of silence in meeting minutes that stand in for concealed disagreement, given that all gaps or silences are not trying to accomplish the same thing. But one place to look for the suppression of dissent is in the reading of minutes themselves. In one 1853 meeting, the previous meeting's minutes are rejected as "it appeared that the Secretary [Hayball] had omitted ... a letter received from the Executive Committee of the Western Anti-Slavery Society. With the addition of which the minutes were adopted by the Committee."⁴⁰ This identification of incorrect meeting minutes leads to a scolding, also recorded in the minutes: "the Secretary was directed to ascertain as near as might be" what has occurred.⁴¹ This instruction to capture "as near as might be" what happened is revealed, through Hayball's previous omission, to be more challenging, contentious, and slippery than the dictate implies. Even (especially) when documenting something, notetakers still make editorial decisions about what is important and what is not, how to frame it, and when to move on.

A related rhetorical strategy that notetakers used in minutes to put these skills of imitation on display is that of a secretary throwing her voice to perform as if they are a visiting speaker at the meeting. Sometimes it can be difficult to catch when a secretary slips into this ventriloquizing, given the seamlessness of the transition. One example is a rare moment of disagreement that appears in the notes, in which someone "took exceptions to some of [a previous speaker's] remarks in regard to the Church."⁴² Although this line is in the third-person perspective of Hayball recounting the meeting, she embodies the voice of the speaker in the next line: "He should make exceptions—nothing was gained by misrepresentation."⁴³ This comment is actually the dialogue of the person voicing disagreement, but because of the way in which it figures in her normal narration, it could easily be mistaken for the secretary's own sentiment. Hayball's choice to include this point of contention suggests that the argument is important to her. She further emphasizes its import by ventriloquizing the person who raised the disagreement. By doing so, she lets them speak through her, implying agreement both on her part and on behalf of the collective she speaks for.

When secretaries make this ventriloquizing of select speakers obvious, they subtly emphasize the points the speakers they channel are making. In an 1856 meeting, the secretary, now DeGarmo, records an entire speech by Henry C. Wright in the first-person perspective of the speaker: "I know it would be wrong to make me a slave therefore I know it would not be right to make any one else a slave."⁴⁴ Given the infrequency with which secretaries use the first-person singular, this is a jarring moment, one that adds emphasis and immediacy to this particular speech. This speech DeGarmo chose to include also underlines the tension of who is included versus excluded in the collective. This "I" of both the speaker and the secretary is white, a fact made even more obvious by the way they are comparing the wrongness of making "me" a slave and making "any one else" a slave.⁴⁵ The implied understanding that the "I"—shared between the speaker and the secretary—is white suggests that even within an association that invites Black members, the voice of the collective is assumed to be white.

There are limitations to secretaries' abilities to maintain collectives while simultaneously speaking for individuals. In the same meeting, when Sojourner Truth speaks, DeGarmo notes that "Sojourner Truth followed and in her inimitable way glanced briefly at the trouble in Kansas—at the selfishness of the slave holders and their abettors and their enormous crimes—spoke briefly of her conceptions of God and of her experience in becoming acquainted with His laws."⁴⁶ While it is somewhat typical for secretaries to recount who spoke at meetings and about what, DeGarmo's description of Truth's speech as "inimitable" stands out because of how infrequently

secretaries use subjective opinions in meeting minutes. This description appears at first glance as a compliment, and yet it also marks DeGarmo's inability to replicate Truth's speech the way she does for other speakers that day. On one hand, DeGarmo's choice to keep Truth's voice separate from her own resists any imagined seamlessness between them. Truth's own "experience" remains hers, particularized by her position as a Black woman. On the other hand, DeGarmo's choice to keep Truth's speech at a distance demonstrates DeGarmo's inability to imagine her collective being represented by such a voice.

This moment in which DeGarmo edits out the actual content of Truth's speech in the minutes reveals the farcical nature of the individual collective an indivisible collective. But it also puts on display the difficulty of projecting such a fantasy in the first place, a burden secretaries continuously shoulder in crafting minutes. In curating which speeches to ventriloquize in the minutes and which to elide, secretaries use their editorial acumen in minutes to set parameters on their collective, implicitly making judgment calls about who should or could be included in an association's shared voice. This tension between unity and division, inclusion and hierarchy, are inherent in every notetaker's editorial acts: they must decide what to include and what to leave out, how to structure and organize their content, who to speak for and who to speak with. As Lydia Maria Child puts it in one of her letters about the American Anti-Slavery Society, for which she was currently serving as the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, "the idea that different sects can labor together harmoniously for universal good, must be numbered with many other pleasing illusions of my imagination."⁴⁷ And yet this illusion is a useful one for abolitionists on the brink of the Civil War, as it remained a useful one for many voluntary associations. It is the notetakers who must maintain this allusion via their editorial labors in meeting minutes. By taking meeting minutes seriously, we can see how such "harmonious unions" are not natural but must be continuously and laboriously created and recreated.

Conclusion

Thousands of pages of minutes and reports from many types of associations across decades exist in archives today. And it is perhaps this very abundance that makes minutes daunting objects of study for scholars. Meeting minutes can consist of handwritten notes recounting a meeting, account books, constitutions, bylaws, membership lists, letters, reports, periodical descriptions of conventions, and the list goes on and on. Rather than deeming them unexceptional or even boring because of this repetition, scholars might recognize such quotidian and constant labors—including notetaker's interpretation of the content of meetings, keeping the order, obscuring themselves for the performance of a collective, navigating ever-shifting questions of who constitutes the collective, and translating and retranslating a society's actions and beliefs to new audiences—are exactly what maintains an association over time. These familiar elements of meeting minutes are also what makes such labors of notetaking akin to editorial labors. In these cases, the notetaker eschews individuated authorship in favor of emphasizing a collective, ongoing process. Just as editorial work requires the care work of invisibly tending to and promoting another person's efforts, a notetaker's work resides not just in the interpretation and recording of a person's efforts once, but also doing so again and again as indiscernibly as possible.

This process should sound familiar to scholarly editors today. Particularly when working with ordinary women's manuscript materials, like meeting minutes, scholarly editors must attune themselves to documents whose

authors/writers negotiate the tension between agency and convention. Scholarly editors locate within these texts the writers who often slip into anonymity because of the very strategies they use, such as the passive voice and the collective first-person perspective. For scholars invested in the historical nature of social and political organization in America, meeting minutes can be a valuable way of discovering how women have long engaged in editorial labors to build and maintain collectives, if often at the expense of having their labor unrecognized. We should be wary of equating meeting minutes with pure transcriptions of an association's meetings; they are less transcription and much more crafted records of an association's sustained labors, the performance of its maintenance. In recognizing the crafted nature of minutes, and the editorial strategies women engaged to construct them, I encourage scholarly editors to approach meeting minutes in the archive by attuning ourselves to what Tina Campt calls "the quiet but resonant frequencies ... that have been historically dismissed and disregarded."⁴⁸ I invite us, instead of avoiding archival excess and iteration or dismissing that which may have been characterized as conventionally static, to instead consider the following questions. What does the process of repetition produce in its excessive labors? And who do we fail to see when we ignore that which appears "common"?

The work women notetakers undertook was certainly fraught. The strategies women notetakers used to maintain collectives often required them to obscure their own agendas, thus erasing their labors and devaluing their complexity. Yet, as Blackwood suggests, critiques asserting that "the alignment of labor and love, care and work ... hurts workers and devalues work" also "show how very difficult it is to imagine editing outside of liberal individualist models of work, labor, voice, and compensation."⁴⁹ What would it mean for us to acknowledge the complexity inherent in such service-based labors that are "often erased *in the very moment* of [their] acknowledgement"?⁵⁰ How might that help us to see the value of labors undertaken by notetakers rather than continuing to dismiss the importance of the work of maintenance they shoulder? We often valorize moments of declaration and constitution, the initiating act that establishes sovereignty. But meeting minutes reveal what happens afterward, embodying in the perpetual loops of their handwriting the work of maintenance that enacts that sovereignty, again and again.

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1. "Preamble," *Constitution of the Anti-Bell-Ringing Society*, 1838, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan. ↵
 2. I am indebted to the William L. Clements Library's fellowship program for providing funding for researching minutes housed in their archive. While most of the meeting minutes discussed in this essay are from their collection, I also cite minutes from the following archives: the New York Historical Society, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. ↵
 3. See Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004). ↵
 4. Sarah Blackwood, "Editing as Carework: The Gendered Labor of Public Intellectuals," *Avidly*, June 6, 2014, <https://avidly.org/2014/06/06/editing-as-carework-the-gendered-labor-of-public-intellectuals/>, 6. ↵
 5. Blackwood, "Editing as Carework," 5, 6. ↵

6. Blackwood, "Editing as Carework," 9. ↵
7. See Julie Nelson, "Rhetorical Remembering in the Meeting Minutes of the Tuesday Morning Study Group," *Peitho* 25, no. 2, Winter 2023. ↵
8. Robert McEachern's and Joanna Wolfe's analyses of the genre of meeting minutes are other examples of work in rhetoric studies that takes meeting minutes seriously; both, however, focus on more modern examples of the genre in the context of business or technical writing. See Robert McEachern, "Meeting Minutes as Symbolic Action," *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 12, no. 2 (1998): 198–216; and Joanna Wolfe, "Meeting Minutes as a Rhetorical Genre: Discrepancies Between Professional Writing Textbooks and Workplace Practice Tutorial," *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 49, no. 4 (2006): 354–64. ↵
9. For example, scholarship on voluntary associations referenced elsewhere in this article tends to base its analysis on annual reports rather than handwritten meeting moments. See Denise Burgher, "Recovering Black Women in the Colored Conventions Movement," *Legacy* 36, no. 2 (2019): 256–62; and Ann Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997). ↵
10. Michael Warner, "Textuality and Legitimacy in the Printed Constitution," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 97, no. 1 (1987): 59. As Warner goes on to point out via Derrida, such texts and such a concept are problematic within the context of Revolutionary America because in such a system "law is defined by its derivation of authority from itself," 71. ↵
11. Warner, "Textuality and Legitimacy," 66. ↵
12. The fact that meeting minutes are a rhetorical genre that constitutes a social act is perhaps why meeting minutes have garnered the most attention in rhetoric studies. The field's commitment to studying everyday—as opposed to exceptional or literary—genres and its embrace of Carolyn Miller's concept of genre as social action emphasize how the powerful constitutive function of quotidian texts is often taken for granted. See Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 2 (1984): 151–67; and John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2005). ↵
13. Jennifer Sinor, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 5. ↵
14. Laurie Langbauer, "Absolute Commonplaces: Oliphant's Theory of Autobiography," in *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive*, ed. Dale J. Trela (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 126. ↵
15. Montgomery Farmers & Mechanicks Debating Society meeting minutes, 1823, Clements Library. ↵
16. See Anne Boylan's *The Origins of Women's Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) for a more detailed account of women's increased participation in the public sphere and voluntary

associations during the nineteenth century. While she outlines three stages of women's increased organizational involvement, she also details the constraining gender norms that dictated their participation.

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17. Montgomery (NY) Qui Vive Society record book, 1881, Clements Library. At this meeting, the women outnumbered the men by thirty-eight to eighteen. ↵
18. Burgher, "Recovering Black Women," 258. While Burgher identifies moments when women like Frances Watkins Harper break through the exclusion of women from minutes, she also poses minutes as a "hostile archive" (260); I take a slightly different approach by acknowledging the feminization of this archive even as I also read its exclusion of women and people of color. ↵
19. Youths Literary Society minutes, 1867, Clements Library. ↵
20. Qui Vive Society, 1883, Clements Library. ↵
21. Qui Vive Society, 1883. Wilkins's resignation is clearly the will of the collective—rather than simply his own decision—as when a woman president then tries to resign from her post, but "It being voted on, it was not accepted" (January 30, 1884). ↵
22. The offending minutes are absent from the record book, having been replaced by minutes taken by the new secretary. ↵
23. Gere, *Intimate Practices*, 22. ↵
24. Gere, *Intimate Practices*, 45. Gere is talking about printed reports which were used for external circulation, compared to handwritten minutes which were used internally. ↵
25. Montgomery Farmers & Mechanics Debating Society minutes, March 4, 1823, Clements Library. ↵
26. Montgomery Farmers & Mechanics minutes, March 4, 1823. ↵
27. McGill explores how Edgar Allan Poe's authorial origin story demonstrates the way authors "use handwriting to claim authority," not because of handwriting's "authenticity or self-mastery that stands over and against the impersonality of print, but for the hand's" ability to remind us that "printed text [is also] crucially mediated" (42–43). Meredith McGill, "The Duplicity of the Pen," in *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 39–71. ↵
28. United Sons of Salem Benevolent Society minute book, 1839, Clements Library. ↵
29. I cannot name this secretary or future secretaries for this particular society because their minutes do not include the names of the newly elected officers or signatures of the secretaries at the end of each entry, as some meeting minutes do. Removing individual names and signatures furthers this particular association's emphasis on the evacuation of the self for the sake of the collective. ↵

30. Maternal Association of St. Michael's Church minutes, February 22, 1837, Clements Library. ↵
31. Maternal Association minutes, August 29, 1838. ↵
32. Maternal Association minutes, 1836. ↵
33. Maternal Association minutes, January 30, 1839. ↵
34. The Ladies' Christian Union minutes, November 1858, New York Historical Society. ↵
35. Ladies' Christian Union minutes, October 1859. ↵
36. Nelson, "Rhetorical Remembering," 3. ↵
37. DeGarmo was also elected a rare women vice president for this regional contingent of the society in 1853. She and her husband, Edwin, were founding members of the Michigan chapter after working for the primary organ of the American Anti-Slavery Society. For more information on DeGarmo, see the finding aid for the Harriet DeGarmo/Fuller papers, Clements Library. ↵
38. Harriet DeGarmo/Fuller papers, March 1853. ↵
39. Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Acts*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011): 4, 2. ↵
40. Michigan Anti-Slavery Society meeting minutes, January 2, 1853, Clements Library. ↵
41. Michigan Anti-Slavery Society minutes, January 2, 1853. ↵
42. Michigan Anti-Slavery Society minutes, January 2, 1853. ↵
43. Michigan Anti-Slavery Society minutes, October 22, 1853. ↵
44. Michigan Anti-Slavery Society meeting minutes, October 11/12, 1856. ↵
45. Technically, this "I" could be stretched to include a freed Black person, yet the separation between the speaker's "I" and "any other person" implies the wrongness of the potential for making others marked by difference slaves as well. ↵
46. Michigan Anti-Slavery Society meeting minutes, October 11/12, 1856. ↵
47. Letter, Lydia Maria Child to Louisa L., April 1839. ↵
48. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2017), 11. ↵
49. Blackwood, "Editing as Carework," 7, 8. ↵

50. Blackwood, "Editing as Carework," 8. ↵