The Life and Times of a Victorian Lady:
Jane Lathrop Stanford
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ON THE COVER:
Jane Lathrop Stanford poses for San Francisco studio photographers Bradley and Rulofson in 1869, a year after the birth of her son.

THIS PAGE:
Jane Lathrop, 1850.

Photographs are courtesy of Stanford University Archives.
A bout ten years ago, one of Jane Stanford’s biographers made this rather simplistic summary: “Following the death of her husband in 1893, Mrs. Stanford . . . acquired a position of financial independence and power eagerly sought by feminists throughout the United States. She now had a clear choice of roles — to exert her influence as businesswoman and sole financial backer of Stanford University, or to relinquish control of the estate to business managers and return to domestic life. The sixty-five-year-old Mrs. Stanford accepted the new responsibilities without hesitation.”

What led her to that decision? How do we go about evaluating its personal implications rather than its influence on university management and policy?

Since I am the person who made that statement, perhaps I should find the answer by looking at Jane Stanford’s life up to that point and the influences that shaped her response.

Mrs. Stanford remains a particularly enigmatic personality. Her image is remarkably malleable while the reality remains elusive. She seems not quite human. In part, it is because both Leland and Jane Stanford are veiled in the fables of the founding and difficult early years of Stanford University. They are integral to a carefully monitored public image of an institution that personifies itself in such terms as “pioneering,” “innovative” and “progressive.” While the Stanfords contributed much to the formation of these values, our understanding of Jane and Leland Stanford is defined more often by the needs of our times than by the context of their own.

It is also because we have at hand an uneven record. Mrs. Stanford left a rich resource of letters regarding her later life, especially her university and museum responsibilities, but we’re at something of a loss to account for her first forty to fifty years. She didn’t like her comings and goings discussed and was highly conscious of her public image. The stories she passed on in her later years to her secretary Bertha Berner, published many years after Jane’s death in Berner’s Mrs. Leland Stanford: An Intimate Account, were highly selective. Yet, when read with this in mind, these stories are quite illuminating. It is through Berner, for example, that we learn that Jane’s
correspondence with Leland, written during their three-year separation during the Gold Rush, was so meaningful to her that she didn’t want the letters read by prying eyes. She burned the letters following Leland’s death.

Unfortunately, the real Mrs. Stanford is also obscured behind what we assume we know about her times. Her life (1828-1905) framed what we fondly misname America’s Victorian Age. She seems to exemplify the kind of Victorian matron so scathingly described in the twentieth century by Sinclair Lewis in his novel *Ann Vickers*: “She believed in purity. She had — possibly as a result of fifty-five years of complete abstinence from tobacco, alcohol, laughter, sexual excitement, and novels — a dark bagginess under her eyes, and twitching fingers.”

We dislike Victorianism because we think we have rebelled against its sentimentality, narrow-mindedness, ruthlessness and hopeless prudery. Yet we long for what we think of as its sense of stability and order, of community and family values. Of course, it isn’t that simple. The nineteenth century was not the age before change, but the era that gave birth to the changes we think of as exclusively our own. It was a complex, anxiety-ridden world of communication, transportation and sexual revolutions; of dramatic social, political, demographic and economic change; of alienation, atomization and commercialization. Interestingly, Jane Stanford’s life experiences before Stanford University illustrate important aspects of these changes in American life.

I’d like to take a closer look at two of these historical periods to better understand Mrs. Stanford’s world view and bring her to life: the antebellum world of upstate New York and California, and the post-Civil War Gilded Age.

Jane Eliza Lathrop was born August 15, 1828 in Albany, the busy capital of New York state. She was the third of seven children born to Dyer Lathrop and Jane Ann Shields, the eldest of their two daughters. Like many upstate New Yorkers, the Lathrops traced their roots to New England ancestors and self-consciously contrasted to older, allegedly indolent York-ers, or Dutch settlers, their own hardy Yankee values of sturdy self-reliance, an almost obsessive focus on industry and thrift, and an interactive relationship with a very personal and responsive God.

By the time of Jane’s birth, however, other forces were at work. The market economy had taken firm hold, both in town and in rural life, extending itself well into “the West” along the Erie Canal, beyond the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi River Valley. Changing market forces were remaking cultural perceptions, provoking a new emphasis on the self-made man, on individual self-fulfillment and success, and on the social position these were to reflect in contrast to inherited wealth and position. But the economy was unpredictable, often cruel. As many moved down as up. Life was fraught with a new sense of anxiety and an urge to impose some sort of order on what appeared to be a disintegrating society torn from traditional means of community control and influence.

Everyday working life was changing, too. Increasingly, men worked in locations away from their homes in a public world of cash and credit transactions. Women largely continued to work at home at household production and maintenance. While many women augmented family incomes by doing the housework of others or other wage work, a growing number, like Mrs. Lathrop, were now able to engage help for more menial tasks. Thus, the emerging American middle-class family was defined by the spatial division of its men and women. Mr. Lathrop, a successful town merchant, was joined in his store by his sons. Mrs. Lathrop focused mightily on her home responsibilities while her daughters helped with specific tasks preparatory to their future duties as wives, mothers and managers of their own comfortable, middle-class households. Their work was, of course, unpaid, and this was an important symbol of their status. The social implications of paid work can be seen in Jane’s later distaste for sewing. When Jane visited Leland’s family during their engagement, Mrs. Stanford gave her twenty-five cents for helping to mend the boys’ shirts. In her own household thereafter, Jane passed sewing on to domestic help on the grounds that she had trouble hiding the knots.

The changing spatial boundaries of women’s work had a far-reaching influence on Jane’s generation. The concept of a “woman’s sphere” placed
women at the heart of a newly important social and moral space: The Home. The year of Jane’s birth, 1828, saw the launching of *The Ladies Magazine*. Its editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, relentlessly celebrated and elevated the “woman’s sphere,” or what one historian has dubbed “the cult of true womanhood.” Home was a refuge from the perils and anxieties of cut-throat competition, base commercialism and political intrigue. While men were debased by confrontations in the mundane world of market and politics, women — inherently more moral, modest and virtuous — molded the character of children while uplifting the character of husbands. It was a powerful notion. While it remained an ideal for most women who faced the realities of limited family incomes, the concept linked women together in a newly esteemed vocation. It fostered a positive consciousness of their sex that had not existed during the Colonial period, and gave the home a new emotional and material significance for both women and men. Whether or not Mrs. Lathrop read the new magazine, her daughters learned well the values of the woman-centered home where women’s obligations and compensations were private, domestic and personal, and where women stood as shining examples of benevolence, amiability, delicacy of moral sense, purity of affection, obedience and intuition over reason.

Jane remembered her own early life as “almost without event.” She recollected merely a very stern upbringing in a cold, abstemious house. Yet the Lathrops appear to have been a part of a new trend toward an increasingly integrated family life that fostered stronger emotional bonds between parents and children while inventing new forms of social control over younger family members. The Lathrops spent their evenings together in the dining room, one of the only two heated rooms in the house. For Jane, it was the pervasive influence of her father, rather than her mother, that she remembered most vividly — reflecting an earlier, patriarchal time. He was at the center of these evenings. She joined him on visits to the Al-

*Dyer Lathrop and Jane Ann Shields Lathrop pose with two of their youngest children, Charles and Henry.*

*Proud of their New England ancestry, they fostered a strong sense of family obligation.*
bany Orphans Asylum that he, not her mother, helped found. Unlike fathers of an earlier age, Dyer Lathrop did not use physical punishment to discipline his children but turned instead to modern precepts of relentless surveillance and the fear of public opinion. This was especially important with daughters. Although this was a time of growing interest in individualism and the need to instill personal qualities that would make a self-directing, self-sustaining adult, this was the purview of American boys. A girl’s development of her sense of self remained heavily dependent on her understanding of her relationship to others. While Dyer Lathrop preferred Jane’s company to that of his other children, or so she claimed, he relentlessly instilled in her not only a sense of self-discipline but also of self-abnegation and womanly propriety.

This “garden of domesticity” was, as one historian describes it, a closely confined one and the “final brick” enclosing it was the fear of being characterized as deviant. On an outing to the theater with a young gentleman and her younger sister Anna, Jane was distressed that the two laughed so freely together in public, but she was aghast when Anna reached for a handkerchief to stifle a giggle and pulled out a white stocking. Jane refused to see the young man when he next called, and he was asked never to return. One of her biographers, looking for signs of proto-feminist self-possession and independence, points to her love of dancing at this time and notes that she was angry when she was criticized by her minister; in retaliation, she supposedly changed churches. Most likely, this was not her motivation. Throughout her life, Jane was highly sensitive to public opinion. Her humiliation in being reprimanded in so public a manner and her hesitance to return to the congregation that witnessed the event are the more likely reasons. Like the majority of her generation, Jane accepted and internalized beliefs that kept her well-adjusted to her surroundings and that promised parental approval as well as social esteem.

Biographers are also intrigued by Jane’s brief attendance at the Albany Female Academy, founded in 1814. Formal education for women of this generation was not meant to lead to a vocation or advanced education but rather to provide a modicum of self-improvement. However, the small but increasing number of female academies provided their students with an important emotional, as well as intellectual, experience as an interlude from family in the company of peers. They also trained hundreds of female teachers needed to fill the new low-paid, low-status teaching posts of the expanding public school systems of the Northeast. Jane did not require a future post, nor did her parents grant her much of an interlude. She made little of this experience in later life and sensed an opportunity lost rather than gained.

If, for the Lathrop girls, the family was a world complete, for the six Stanford boys the world was virtually without boundaries. The Stanfords were an ambitious, amiable and busy clan. Like the Lathrops they proudly espoused Yankee values of industry, rectitude, frugality and drive. Unlike the Lathrops, they were willing to take risks and loved to talk about it. Josiah Stanford tried his hand at all manner of entrepreneurial projects — with mixed success — and encouraged his sons to do likewise. They were cheerfully political in a volatile political environment. As ardent Whigs, they believed in the future of the American market system, expected proactive government encouragement of regional development, and felt confidence in the prospect of upward mobility. Only Leland, third of the six, chose to follow a professional rather than mercantile career. After trying several academies, including one that was coeducational, he took up the study of law in a prominent Albany firm and contemplated a future in politics.

Though outwardly driven, Stanford, like many young men of his background, remained close to his family regardless of the many miles that often separated them. He valued family life and, shortly after passing the New York bar, became engaged at the comparatively young age of twenty-four. Jane was twenty. At mid-century, it was deemed prudent to wait to marry until one was able to support a wife and children comfortably and properly rather than to marry to begin building that support. About half of American men did not marry until they were almost thirty; that number dropped to only twenty-eight percent among those in the professions. As yet unable to support Jane Lathrop in the manner her father expected, Leland could have stayed in Albany to slowly build his capital toward a later marriage. Instead, he chose the riskier but potentially more lucrative avenue of a frontier law practice in the thriving new state of Wisconsin. The risk paid off. After
altogether when a disastrous fire destroyed Leland's fine law library, a gift from his father. Jane and Leland, encouraged by his father, decided to head for California where his brothers were doing well selling supplies to gold miners.

Dyer Lathrop, not surprisingly, had other ideas. No doubt he feared for Jane's safety. For three years, sensational stories of gold rush mayhem had filled eastern newspapers. More to the point, his illness required close attendance and his wife appeared too "fully occupied with family affairs" to meet his needs. Lathrop believed he had prior claim. Jane became her father's nurse, day and night, for the next three years while Leland Stanford thoroughly enjoyed himself in the rough and tumble of "El Dorado."

Jane was devastated by her separation from Leland. She was so affected by the letters he sent faithfully by each monthly mail steamer that she took to reading them in the attic to hide her display of emotion from her father. It was not her father's demands, however, that she openly resented but what she took to be Albany's judgment. Doing her womanly best Leland Stanford, promising lawyer, and Jane Lathrop, for her family, she was appalled to find herself the subject of local gossip as an abandoned wife.

Whether or not Albany was as ignorant as she in Albany, New York, I 850. only two years, they were able to marry and return together to Port Washington, Wisconsin.

For women of Jane Lathrop's background, marriage often meant simply shifting from one man's household to another, acquiring more complex domestic responsibilities but conducting them in an even more confined space. In her case, however, marriage to Leland was a liberation from a very tightly controlled family space. It gave her a new sense of accomplishment, bolstered her self-confidence and considerably broadened her life experience. The 1840s and 1850s were a time of great geographic as well as social mobility. The majority of young New Yorkers would move away from their hometowns at least once in search of better prospects. The Stanford brothers were especially mobile. While Leland went west to Wisconsin, his brothers went to the Far West, and two would push on to Australia. By 1852, Port Washington lost its bid for state capital to Madison and business came to a standstill. It lost its attraction

As Californians, we would like to believe that Jane's move to Sacramento in 1855 was a momentous event and that we can attribute to her the label
Former governor Leland Stanford and Mrs. Stanford enjoy the front porch of their Sacramento house around 1868 for the camera of Alfred P. Hart, official photographer of the Central Pacific Railroad. The house, purchased in 1861 and extensively renovated in 1871, was considered "the handsomest house in Sacramento."
of “pioneer.” Yet, going west was not the “middle passage” experience for Jane that it would be for many other American women. Most women who went west were separated, often without their consent, from homes, family, and friends, from all they knew and cared for, including material possessions, domestic routines, female companionship and familiar social institutions. Jane, however, was enthusiastic about leaving behind the familiar life of Albany as she looked forward to reclaiming her married life with Leland. She would soon be joined by her sister and mother and, eventually, three brothers.

Equally important, unlike many westering women, Jane did not make a dramatic transition from town to mining camp or isolated farm, from solidly built house to leaky sod cabin or tent. From the busy capital of New York, she moved to a house, albeit a modest one, in the busy capital of California. Life in Sacramento was an urban life much like that of any busy town along the Erie Canal. By 1855, the Gold Rush was already a part of California’s nostalgic past. More newspapers were printed per capita here than in New York State; only New York rivaled California in the amount of federal patronage and international commercial investment it received. A transportation as well as communications revolution was underway. Statewide telegraph and railroad lines were on the drawing boards, and steamer passage between New York City and San Francisco, by way of a railroad across Central America, now took about six weeks rather than six to ten months. Leland already was fully engaged in the commercial and political life of the state and Jane immediately felt herself an active part of that life by managing their domestic budget so that Leland could put their money to good account.

Only five years later, the Stanfords made the significant move to what Jane considered “a more commodious house,” signifying not only their success but their decision, for a second time, not to return to Albany. Jane remembered this decision as her own but the thirty-seven-year-old Leland had gambled that if he remained in California as the Republican party’s candidate for governor in 1861, he could win election on the heels of Lincoln’s victory in a notoriously Democratic state, which he indeed did. Their new house, purchased in 1861, was considered the “handsomest house in Sacramento.” It also reflected the changing material shape of Mrs. Stanford’s world. The Victorian Lady had become a consumer. The Sacramento house illustrated the Stanfords’ ever-improving status and their enthusiasm for the technology they saw as the source of American prosperity.
By Jane’s accounting, it was neither her move west in 1855 nor that eventful year 1861 that served as a watershed, but 1868. That year, at the age of thirty-nine, she gave birth to their son and only child, Leland, at the house in Sacramento. This important period of her life, which Jane Stanford considered her most joyous, also corresponds to America’s Gilded Age of the 1870s and early 1880s, the “most dynamic but least governable phase of America’s growth.” It was a new, aggressive, industrialized age, an age of the rise of the metropolis; of increasing secularization, bureaucratization and professionalization; and of a dramatic increase in immigration from a new list of “undesirable” places. It has also been called an age of excess, Mark Twain’s “gilded” era of “incredible rottenness” when increasingly powerful corporations stifled competition and swallowed individuals, and America’s small farmers were trapped into cycles of credit and debt. Bribes in high places became a convention of political life. Misery and alienation were more visible in the cities than ever before. Cash reigned supreme. And the rich and famous reveled in their good fortune.

Chief among the agents of change was the railroad, the most conspicuous machine of the age. The railroad was an enormous physical presence in everyday life. It determined the dimensions of one’s physical community — urban, suburban and rural — by affecting the location of home, work, shopping and the extent of social life. Concepts of region and local autonomy were shattered as old notions of space and time were left behind. Railroads also introduced to the public robber barony on a corporate scale. Railroad men exercised unparalleled ruthlessness in economic power and political influence. They also wielded large personal fortunes, making them an influential new cultural presence.

The era’s changes were so swift and traumatic that they were still seen in personal terms. Americans did not yet speak of corporate culture or the “organization man,” but preferred an earlier language of the self-made man: of individualized competition and battle, of heroic endeavor and personal risk. Jane was not alone in perceiving the rivalry between Leland Stanford and Collis P. Huntington within the South-ern Pacific corporation as one of personal combat and individual honor. In considering their new position of wealth and power, Jane and Leland Stanford firmly believed that the risks of organizing, building and managing the railroad had been personal ones and that their ample reward was both well-earned and just. They were the pioneers of the age of incorporation — stunningly memorialized on a huge triumphal arch that stood, until 1906, at the front of Stanford University’s Main Quad.

The Stanfords, however, also felt the precariousness of new wealth and were especially conscious of the peculiarity of hierarchies of wealth in a model republic. Wealth could only confirm quality if there was a perception of the opportunity to rise. Henry
Vista across a portion of the Stanford family's art gallery in their San Francisco mansion. The house was destroyed in the great 1906 fire; much of the art collection had already been moved to the Leland Stanford Junior Museum on the university campus.

Ward Beecher, the influential New York minister, advised this new elite to generously share, not their money but their public space. Elevation of the less fortunate came not through handouts, nor the intrinsic aesthetic quality of art, but in a moral lesson: the man above gave the lesser folk a glimpse of opportunity by allowing them to view the comforts and treasures they, too, might have. In this way, “the power of the mind at the top of society will determine the ease and rapidity of ascent of the bottom.”

Jane, as yet, had little interest in cultural institutions beyond her now resplendent hearth, but Leland took an early interest in the interplay of art and technology as a patron of both landscape art and photography. Both encouraged their son’s interest in the obligations of their class to elevate the less fortunate through the public display of art and material culture and began their own forays into art collecting.

All of these things were intrinsic to the character of the Stanfords’ residences, first in extensive 1871 renovations to the Sacramento house but most especially in the design and decoration of their new home in San Francisco in 1876. The Nob Hill mansion, home of a railroad magnate and, after 1885, a U.S. Senator, was meant to inspire. It was filled with public spaces, grand vistas and sitting areas, an art gallery, even a smaller gallery for the display of Leland Jr.’s collections. Yet it was also a home filled with favorite private spaces — the breakfast room, Leland’s library. The Stanfords were keenly aware of themselves as a family and were resolutely middle-class in their family ways. While Leland Jr. would be privately tutored, preparatory to his attending a university, he was encouraged, unlike boys of his financial means, to develop both practical, technical skills as well as a broadly classical education. Also unusual, Leland Jr. was a powerful physical and intellectual presence in his parents’ lives. Many remarked on his kind disposition as well as his enthusiasm and energy, his “common touch” and his relative maturity. He understood himself to be fortunate and had absorbed a strong sense of duty to
help others, but he also took from his parents the confidence and expectation that he would be in a position of power to do so.

An important element of any young gentleman's education was foreign travel, usually with a tutor or companion. Leland Jr.'s grand tours began at the relatively young age of ten, with itineraries driven as much by his parents' illnesses as by his intellectual interests. Illness had become an influential player in the Stanford family, as it was in the lives of most Victorian ladies. A mid-century survey found that women suffering from debilitating illnesses — nervousness, headaches, backaches, eye and stomach problems, lethargy — outnumbered healthy women three to one. Women generally had good reason to be wary of physicians, most of them poorly trained and quite ready to attribute all female complaints to uterine malfunctions. Patent medicines heavily laced with opiates and alcohol were the predictable response, as well as fad diets, water cures, even phrenology. Ill health seemed to plague Mrs. Stanford throughout her life. She believed, she later claimed, she should be spared mundane household concerns, and welcomed her son's and husband's special attentiveness.

Whether at home in San Francisco or Palo Alto, or in a hotel in Paris or Rome, the Stanfords considered the family itself to be their refuge rather than the physical space of home. Leland Jr. was aware of, and adept at, his role as companion, confidant and protector of his mother in his father's absence. The son's untimely death just before his sixteenth birthday was a crushing blow to both his parents, but especially to Jane. She believed in some way that she was at fault.

By all accounts, Leland Jr. at fifteen was healthy and hardy, with a lively intellect and firm interests. As tall as his father though more "lean in shoulders," he was enjoying their much anticipated trip to the "mysterious East" in late 1883 and the opportunity to study antiquities of Athens and Troy before buckling down to life at Harvard. In hindsight, Jane Stanford could recollect no enjoyable events on this trip, no notable impressions of places or people, only a mounting series of disturbing signs regarding her son's health. She remembered each moment of undue excitement and eagerness, each time he seemed pale or unusually fatigued. By the time they reached Italy, by way of Turkey and Greece, both Jane and Leland Jr. were ill. She had, she later said, a premonition and looked back critically at her years of illness as ones of "indolence." In Florence, Jane's health improved but her son's fever increased. He was diagnosed with typhoid. Little could be done to stop this still untreatable disease that seemed almost random in its victims. On March 13, 1884, Leland Jr. died. Mr. Stanford, his health already fragile, suffered a complete physical collapse. Mrs. Stanford held out until her husband was on the mend weeks later in Paris, then gave way herself.

A dapper Leland Stanford Jr., at nearly fifteen, poses for this 1883 portrait in a fashionable Paris studio on his last trip to Europe. He planned, on his return, to attend Harvard while his parents took up temporary residence in New York, but died in Italy just before his sixteenth birthday.
Death had a greater presence in nineteenth-century lives, and people were more accustomed than we are to expressing their sense of loss. Mrs. Stanford was not unusual in working through her grief, her guilt and her contrition, in long, poignant letters to friends and strangers alike. The Stanfords were also public figures. The intimate details of the tragedy were immediately made public, not through town gossips but the greatly expanded American press. American journalism, too, had grown by leaps and bounds, matching technological improvements with new strategies for building circulation: gossip and "personals," stories of scandal and corruption, news from exotic places, celebrity interviews, human interest stories. The Stanford story had a bit of everything. Indeed, as the Stanfords developed plans for their memorial university, they used the press consciously to compose the institution's public image and to reinforce their own. Perhaps not so coincidentally, news of the newly established, tuition-free Leland Stanford Junior University coincided with Leland Stanford's bid for California's U.S. Senate seat. In his biography of Jane Stanford, Gunther Nagel commends Mrs. Stanford as a woman of "iron will," an organizer, a manager, a builder in a man's world. This is well-earned praise, but it comes on twentieth-century terms. Dr. Nagel struggled to understand why Jane should take refuge periodically behind her "timidity and womanly reserve." Surely an independent spirit, a feminist, lurked behind it all. Her contemporary, Bertha Berner, on the other hand, was struck by the fact that while Jane had wealth and position, she was oppressed by a sense of failure "to come to terms with uncongenial surroundings." The walls of her garden had been well built.

However, it is important for us to accept Mrs. Stanford not as simply a victim or a beneficiary of the
"cult of true womanhood," but as a singular personality with singular life experiences. She was a shy, serious, and very self-conscious young woman, with strong emotions and stubborn opinions. She gained abundant wealth, unexpected opportunities and considerable power in adulthood. Mrs. Stanford understood that her wealth, not her education or personal accomplishments, gave her power and she was conscious in 1900, in ways she was not in 1870, of the complications such power brought to her private life.

Decades after Mrs. Stanford’s death, Jesse Knight Jordan, the Cornell-educated wife of Stanford’s first president and a woman of a much later generation, remembered a serious, dignified and impressive Jane Stanford, her manner cordial but "distinctly that of a woman with an assured position in the social and financial world.” But she also thought back to Mrs. Stanford, in a wide-brimmed hat, happily tending her rose bushes at the edge of her elegant garden. “Her affections,” Jordan wrote, “were exceedingly deep and tender, and she often used to talk freely with us about her joys and sorrows. She seemed then very human and appealing.” Jane Lathrop Stanford was, then, a woman of will and power, and yet of quiet generosity and utter dedication to family — a product of both her life and her times.

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Jane and Leland Stanford, mounted on horseback, personally lead the railroad through the Sierra in this model for the “Progress of Civilization” frieze for the Quad’s Memorial Arch, which was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.