Laura Strumingher Schor

,La Voix des Femmes'

Women and the Revolution of 1848 in France

The first issue of La Voix des Femmes was published on March 19, 1848 by Eugénie Niboyet, former Saint-Simonian and experienced author, translator and editor. The publication followed by three weeks the February Revolution, which had removed Louis Philippe from the throne. Equally significant, it followed by three days announcements of the Provisional Government for the coming election. The men who were raised to power by the revolutionaries of February declared the right to vote the supreme right of man and asserted that universal suffrage would put an end to inequality among citizens.¹ In addition, the revolutionaries believed that the right to work was a fundamental right of citizenship and that the government should provide jobs for the unemployed. Despite the egalitarian rhetoric, by mid-March it had become clear that the Provisional Government did not intend to include women in the expanded electorate nor were they eager to set up employment opportunities for women who were without work. But the women of 1848, especially those who gathered around Niboyet and La Voix des Femmes, those who came to meetings in Paris and others who sent letters and articles from all over France, were determined to express different opinions on the political and social issues of the day.

There is ample evidence - both written and iconographic - of the involvement of women from all walks of life as supporters of the February actions at the barricades and as economic supporters of the Provisional Government in the immediate aftermath of the battles.² In the excitement of the early days following the return to a republican government, some women were emboldened to believe that they, too, would be accorded the rights of citizenship. The best known of these is Pauline Roland, a Saint-Simonian, who was in February 1848 living in the small commune of Boussac. Eager to participate in the revolutionary events, yet far from the scene of the battles. Roland decided to make her stand at the ballot box and later in the mailbox. A strong supporter of Pierre Leroux, she tried to cast a vote for him in the municipal elections. Though she was denied the right to vote, she succeeded in signing the register, using the enigmatic and memorable signature, Marie Antoinette Roland. Roland then described her effort in a letter to friends in Paris, women who were close to Eugénie Niboyet.³ Eighteen months later, Jeanne Deroin, another Saint-Simonian and friend of Pauline Roland and Eugénie Niboyet, demonstrated her belief in political equality for women by launching her own campaign for election to the new Legislative Assembly.⁴

Other women focussed on the Right to Work promised by the Provisional Government. One group submitted a petition to the Government asking that women be named as delegates to the Commission on Labor to organize women's work. They demanded that lists of unemploved women be formed, and that national restaurants, laundries and sewing workshops be created to give women employment. It would take several weeks and many more petitions before the Commission responded to these demands in a partial fashion by creating a national workshop in the second arrondissement under the leadership of another friend of Rolànd, Deroin, and Niboyet, Désirée Gay.5

Women's right to vote and to work were the two substantive issues addressed by women in the immediate aftermath of the February revolution, but a third issue emerged as women sought to expand the definition of citizen. French women who spoke and wrote about women's rights were ridiculed both for the content of their remarks and for the act of participating in public debate. Ironically, the satirical attack on women, helped to expand the range of issues under discussion from suffrage and work to the broader issues of education and the sensitive topics of marital obligations and divorce.

In March and April 1848 hundreds of newspapers and political clubs opened in Paris, responding to the new freedom from censorship rules and suspension of cautionary fees which had been features of the latter days of the July Monarchy. Few women dared to attend these club meetings since membership was restricted to men and meetings were often raucous affairs.⁶ Fewer still had the courage to seek the rostrum at these meetings to discuss women's rights.⁷ Niboyet, Deroin, and Gay, all former Saint-Simonian leaders and previous editors of women's journals, were increasingly aware of women's isolation from public debate. They dedicated their efforts to pierce the silence using the vehicle of La Voix des Femmes. They sought the support of women writers and social activists and were rewarded by the early adherence of Suzanne Voilquin, Elise Lemonnier, Gabrielle Soumet, Hermance Lesguillons, and Amélie Prai. The only woman who snubbed them and denigrated their efforts was George Sand.⁸

From the beginning, they saw their newspaper as part of a larger effort to educate women and to involve them in wide-ranging social action. They dedicated themselves to the moral, intellectual, and material rights of all women. They planned a newspaper, a library and public instruction for women, and an association which would specifically address the problems of women in need.⁹ They planned to involve their readers in all aspects of this work. Earlier women's journals had combined literary meetings and instruc-

tional opportunities; La Voix, built on this model, was unique in specifically opening meetings and columns to women of all classes and levels of instruction. In recognition of the needs of their readership, they also included a job placement service in their objectives. Opening the circle of readers/participants to all women transformed La Voix des Femmes from a newspaper written by women activists for themselves to a newspaper which offered a forum for all women with concerns about rights and duties. The selection of the title, La Voix des Femmes, the Voice of Women, was not without purpose. Earlier women's journals used more neutral, less evocative titles like, La Tribune des Femmes,¹⁰ La Gazette des Femmes, and Le Journal des Femmes. Why La Voix? Niboyet and her colleagues left a clue in an article by Hortense Wild in the April 15th issue of La Voix. Using the pseudonym Henriette, artiste, Hortense described the conspiracy of silence she and her friends encountered when they tried to publicize a petition to the Provisional Government demanding work for women artists, workers, authors and teachers. The Petition was circulated to each of the major newspapers of the day; personal visits followed to the journal offices. All of these efforts proved futile. Henriette concluded, "women being nothing, the press would not take on the mission to make them become something."¹¹ Niboyet and her associates believed in women's rights; they were determined to replace women's silence with women's voices.

By mid-March they cobbled together the first issue which included a Profession of Faith, an article about women's

education, one about the organization of work, a letter to the people from Marie M., a review of the foreign press, an article about prison work and the unfair competition it created, a list of donations to the republic, a discussion of a request for a two-hour work reduction from laundresses, the story of Pauline Rolànd's attempt to vote, and a few announcements. This eclectic issue, relying on the accumulation of weeks of material, was a trial balloon. Many newspapers were launched in the spring of 1848 which lasted for only one or two issues. However, with the second issue of La Voix which appeared on March 22^{nd} , the editors proclaimed success. The response of the readers was so strong, they reported, that from this issue on La Voix would be published daily. Niboyet and her editorial committee knew that to participate in political debates in a meaningful way they would have to appear more frequently than any previous women's journal had dared.

Despite the optimism of Niboyet and her associates, there was little reason to believe that they could sustain a daily newspaper for women readers. Fuelled by the euphoria of the early successes accompanying the overthrow of the July Monarchy and by the conviction that La Voix would be a forum for women that would enable them to participate in the public debate, the editors launched the first feminist daily on a shoe-string.¹² Relying on friends and relatives, they patched together the next issues of La Voix. Paulin Niboyet, Eugénie's son, contributed a serialized novel as well as several theatrical reviews. Louise Crouzat, a friend, sent articles on the education of girls in Algeria, Hortense Wild contributed a piece about

the midwives of Athens, Bettina von Arnim sent in a two-part article about misery in Germany, Anna Knight contributed her letter to M. Coquerel, and all the members of the editorial committee contributed articles frequently. Later issues included some advertising for women's health care products and products for the home which presumably generated revenue and helped to fill the four pages printed daily.

The price of La Voix des Femmes two francs per month - was designed to encourage a wide readership.¹³ Regrettably, a search of the archives has turned up no evidence of the number of copies printed of each issue, nor any information about subscribers.¹⁴ Fortunately, the newspaper itself provides interesting clues about its readers. First, it is clear that La Voix reached a large readership outside of Paris as well as in the capital. The columns of the petite poste included the editors responses to subscribers in Lyon, Castlenaudary, Besançon, Marseilles, Macon, Amiens, Lille, and Brussels.¹⁵ In addition to subscriptions, individual copies of La Voix were hawked on the streets of Paris like other dailies¹⁶ blazing a new trail for women's periodicals. Judging from the response in the humorous Charivari, the mere fact that La Voix was sold on the streets gave cause for alarm.¹⁷ Niboyet seems to have had trouble hiring and keeping hawkers.¹⁸ It is likely that the hawkers, like the editor, became the targets of abuse in the streets.

Despite the attempt to trivialize La Voix, serious letters arrived from all over the country; petitions to the Provisional Government, stories and articles of general interest, and plans to ameliorate the

condition of women added to the copy available to the editors. In the fourth issue, on March 24th, the editors announced the formation of an editorial association which met in Niboyet's home and debated proposals about women's education, about national workshops for women, and about the role women should play in the general amelioration of society. The association called on "sisters" who had useful information on these subjects or others to write or to come in person to the home of the editor every day between twelve and two. The next day the editorial association established themselves as Association fraternelle des femmes. A few days later, perhaps wishing to distinguish themselves from other groups of women, they changed their name to the Society of La Voix des Femmes. Later still, they adopted the satirical name by which they were widely known in the press, the Club des femmes.¹⁹ An article describing the formation of the Society opened with the optimistic observation: "The times were ours. Our newspaper was meant to succeed. The success it has known since its appearance has surpassed our hopes." It closed by reaffirming the central commitment of the editors: "No one will be excluded. Women of all ranks and ages have the same rights to our efforts." 20

The founding members of the Society of *La Voix des Femmes* ranged in age from thirty-eight to fifty-two,²¹ women who had some experience with the Saint-Simonian or Fourierist movements of the prior decade. Others who joined later like Marie-Noémi Constant and her friend Adèle Esquiros were younger, less experienced, and more willing to take risks.²² Still others like Widow Mourey and Eugénie Foa appear to represent an older generation even more traditional than Niboyet. The members of the Society counted on the support of their readers and were not disappointed. Letters to the editor poured in and were printed in virtually every issue of *La Voix*. Like the membership of the Society, readers who sent letters represented a range of opinions and of educational background and writing experience. Some wrote just a few lines while others wrote long letters that covered a wide range of subjects in an informal essay style.

Young enthusiastic readers like Augustine Génoux showered praise on La Voix des Femmes for treating women's issues seriously in contrast with other journals by women which concerned themselves only with fashion and tapestry patterns. Genoux called on her "sisters" to fight for emancipation, signing her letter, "Courage and Unity! Citizen Augustine Génoux."23 Claire J., who used the salutation, "Mes soeurs", volunteered to help the endeavors of the new Society in whatever way she could. She recommended a motto for the organization: "Do not rest until the grave!"24 An anonymous letter printed on March 28th called for the Society to open its meetings to "our brothers, especially those who support our emancipation." The editors responded primly, "So that our meetings don't frighten our fathers and husbands, they will be among ourselves."²⁵ The issue of meeting size and format and topics for discussion and price of admission remained problematic for several weeks. By the end of May the editors were forced to change their policy concluding that allowing men to attend would create less con-

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troversy than continuing the policy of exclusion.

Letters sent by Widow Mourey, Eugénie Foa, Suzanne Voilquin and Mme Chenard shifted the focus from women's rights to women mobilizing to help unemployed women. This was a topic that appeared on the agenda of every meeting of the Society. In an early editorial on this subject, Niboyet signaled the support of the Society for such work by proposing a plan for "ladies" to work with teams of working women and representatives of each mayoralty in Paris, creating a house-to-house collection to aid working women and men.²⁶ While waiting for Niboyet's plan to secure support from the mayors, something which never materialized, Mourey urged the Society to use each of its meetings as an opportunity to collect funds for "poor sisters" who were in severe need due to the economic disruptions of the Revolution. Funds collected at meetings could be deposited with the cashier of the Society and would then be used to buy coupons for bread and meat. Anyone associated with the newspaper, either as a subscriber or author, would be entitled to refer needy women to the cashier for immediate help while the reorganization of society was being planned and implemented. Mourey urged Niboyet to continue to use the Society as a forum on behalf of women who needed immediate assistance.²⁷

Eugénie Foa, like Mourey, first presented her ideas to a meeting of the Society and then sent a letter to La Voix des Femmes asking for support for the creation of a National Institute for Women whose aim would be to reduce the misery among working women and to rescue them from "the vice which misery attracts." In Foa's plan, each "lady" would work with a delegate from the government to take up a collection in her parish. This money would be used to create national workshops for girls and women. It would also provide a dowry, an infirmary, and funds to be shared by the workers as an incentive to productivity.²⁸

Another woman who addressed Society meetings and also wrote letters to La Voix was Suzanne Voilquin, a Saint-Simonian who had worked with Deroin and Gay fifteen years earlier. In 1848, having returned from Egypt where she had gone in search of the female messiah predicted by Enfantin, Voilquin was practicing as a midwife and shared their economic plight. Competition posed by physicians, who increasingly treated more affluent women, meant that midwives were unable to earn a living. Serving poor families who frequently could not afford to pay for their services, and prohibited from treating any other women's ailments or from writing prescriptions, the midwives organized into the Society of United Midwives to present their concerns to the Luxembourg Commission on Labor. Voilquin asked La Voix des Femmes to support the proposal that midwives be considered civil servants and paid a state salary so that they would not have to rely on charity.²⁹

One final example of a woman who was a member of the Society and sought support for her campaign to ameliorate the conditions of poor working women is Mme Chenard. Chenard sought support from the Provisional Government to set up a center for unemployed domestic workers which would provide lodging, food and work and would remove the unem-

ployed from the danger of idleness and from the traps of poverty. She did not expect the government to fund everything. She tried to create an association of domestic workers whose members would each contribute one franc per month to establish a sick fund and an emergency fund. If the workers and the government would contribute, Chenard was convinced she could establish a center which would be directed by a committee of its own membership. She received the sponsorship of La Voix des Femmes which repeatedly ran announcements of the formation of the Association fraternelle des femmes à gages and identified it as a group founded under the patronage of the Society of La Voix des Femmes.³⁰

La Voix also printed petitions and letters of working women addressed to the Provisional Government and copied to the editors. In late March P.G. ouvrière, a working woman, wrote:

"I come in the name of a great number of women afflicted by adversity and with no other resources than their work. [I come] to draw you a picture of their misery and make you grasp the urgent need to address their situation. There is no more work for them; today, the little which is reserved for them brings such low wages that is impossible for them to live well, or to even put bread on the table (...) Needlework, no matter what kind, is no longer a paying proposition (...) Commerce, which has been invaded by young men, leaves only the infrequent spot for women. In good conscience, I ask if a man should be poking around in gauze, lace, and other objects appropriate to the toilette of women who are often so embarrassed at having to deal with them (...) If the stores which employ so many clerks were to take on women clerks, they would be seen full of zeal honestly earning their livelihood".³¹

P.G. continued her letter offering advice on marriage, its dissolution, women's right to keep part of their marital property and women's right to keep their children following a divorce. She concluded with a demand for education for women and a hope that the members of the Provisional Government would be sufficiently influenced by the principle of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity to repudiate the abuses of the former regime.

P.G. ouvrière's letter reflects the oral tradition developed in the laundries and workers' faubourgs. In 1848 this oratory moved into the national arena because the author accepted the invitation of the editors of *La Voix des Femmes* to all their readers to submit their views for publication. Another working woman who contributed to the expanding discussion was an anonymous writer to *La Voix des Femmes* on April 1st. No longer using the term 'sisters', this author pointedly called on 'Citoyennes!':

"The Republic has been proclaimed everywhere! It will be known throughout the world. Let us take advantage of its reign and demand our independence! Let the wife no longer suffer under the power of the husband. May she, like he, sell, buy, transact. We want a revision of the civil code which says – 'A wife must submit to her husband.' What tyranny, what abuse (...) No more slavery, no more master, equality between the spouses, let us destroy abuses; it's time for us to stand up for our rights." She called on, "Women citizens of all classes, from all conditions of life" to meet and share ideas. She pointed out that "liberty has not changed it (our situation) (...) let us not wait any longer; it is time for those in the forefront to share their ideas".³²

The editors endorsed her proposals though they anticipated the ridicule that would ensue. The topic of divorce generated considerable attention in the satiric press for the next several months, lasting much longer than the proposals for reform themselves. It was not until June 4th and 6th that La Voix published a two-part letter on this topic by Gabrielle Soumet, a frequent contributor and recognized author, addressed to Citizen Crémieux, Minister of Justice. By this time, meetings of the Society were routinely disrupted by unruly men and Niboyet had been personally satirized for weeks in the popular press. Soumet stated her case calmly and eloquently, arguing that the divorce laws of 1803-1816 should be reinstated. She noted that in a republic, the right to divorce should not be confused with the religious beliefs in the sanctity of marriage.³³ Aided by the testimony of working women about the inequities of their situation. Soumet and La Voix des Femmes moved the debate about divorce into the expanding definition of "citoyenne". Having commenced with élan, La Voix des Femmes closed its doors quietly. The last issue was dated June 15th-17th. It presented an ominous letter from R. H., an artist, foreshadowing the coming events and denouncing the changing attitude of the government. Describing an arbitrary arrest and mistreatment in a crowded cell, R.H. concluded that under the Republic of 1848 this was an anachronism. Niboyet and other mem-

bers of the Society and the readers of La Voix were, like R.H., keenly aware of the historical moment in which they lived. They seized the opportunity of heightened political awareness to demand political rights, employment opportunities, divorce law reform and professional and higher education for women. Some of the women signed their letters and articles with initials, others with first names, and some left no signature; as a result, many of these women have remained resistant to historical study. Their voices, as recorded in their newspaper, reveal their thinking, their meetings, their activities, and their disagreements. Listening to them closely we can hear their determination to be included in the political and economic discussions which were actively debated during the spring month of 1848.

Footnotes

1 'Proclamation du Gouvernement provisoire à la nation, au sujet des élections prochaines,' (Paris, March 16, 1848), in: Recueil complet des actes du Gouvernement provisoire (février, mars, avril, mai 1848), Paris 1848, 148-149, cited in Joan Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer, Cambridge 1996, 193 f.

2 The heroism of Citizen Julie Bregniard, a poor working woman, who rushed to aid victims of the battle at the Palais Nationale was described by "Femme Wagner" in a letter to the Voix des Femmes, No. 16, April 6, 1848. See also accounts of women who assisted their husbands on the barricades in: Voix des Femmes, No. 2, March 22, 1848 and No. 24, April 15, 1848. For examples of support offered to the Provisional Government see: Voix des Femmes, No. 5, March 25, 1848, No. 6, March 26, 1848, No. 18, April 9, 1848, No. 19, April 10, 1848.

3 La Voix des Femmes, No. 1, March 19, 1848.

4 Campagne Electorale de la citoyenne Jeanne Deroin et petition des femmes au peuple, in: L'Opinion des femmes, 10 May 1849. 5 La Voix des Femmes, No. 15, April 4, 1848, No. 24, April 15, 1848, refers to a petition from women in the 1^{st} arrondissement for national workshops; No. 28, April 20, 1848, Mme Gay is removed from her position of director of 2^{nd} arrondissement.

6 Peter Amann, Revolution and Mass Democracy. The Paris Club Movement, Princeton 1975, 67-68.

7 La Voix des Femmes No. 23, April 14, 1848, describes a woman speaking at the Club Lyonais; No. 28, April 20, 1848 and No. 31, April 23, 1848 describes Jeanne Marie (pseudonym for Jeanne Derion) speaking at the 'Club d'Emancipation des peuples'.

8 Laura Strumingher Schor, Politics and Political Satire. The Struggle for the Right to Vote in Paris, 1848–49, in: The European Legacy, Vol 1 (1996), no. 3, 1037–1044.

9 The following statement appeared on the masthead of the newspaper from March 19 through April 16, 1848. It was also printed in the form of a large public announcement (in a box) on March 28^{th} and 30^{th} :

La Voix des Femmes is the first and only serious tribune which is open to Women. Moral, intellectual and material interests will be openly supported here and in the name of this goal we hereby issue an appeal to all for sympathy and support. Not only will we publish a newspaper, but we will form, for women, a library of public instruction. We will open public courses, we will form an association, and through our concerted efforts, we will come to the aid of the country as well as to the aid of families. Useful information for the newspaper must be given to Mme. Eugénie Niboyet, 34 Grand'Rue Verte. She is there everyday from noon until 2 pm (...) We ask that all letters and packages be addressed to the directors or to the provisory bureau of the Newspaper, Rue des Bons Enfants, 29 and that they be stamped.

10 'La Tribune des Femmes' was the final

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name of a journal which started out as 'La Femme Libre', changed to 'La Femme de l'Avenir', then 'La Femme Nouvelle', and 'L'Apostolat des Femmes'. See Lydia Elhadad, Les Femmes prénommées. Les proletaires saint-simoniennes rédactrices de 'la femme libre' 1832–34, in: Révoltes logiques 4 (1977), 63–88.

11 Henriette, artiste, contributed many articles to the Voix des Femmes, engaging in all aspects of discussion of women's rights, roles and duties. See No. 17, April 7, demand for public latrines; No. 24, April 15, recommendation to read articles about Flora Tristan; No. 31, April 23, on midwives; No. 33, April 26, Royalty and its evils; No. 41, June 6-8, on Lamennais' position on divorce.

12 The 'Voix' relied on subscriptions and donations until April 10^{th} when it announced the sale of stock (50 franc shares). The only major participant in this offering was Olinde Rodrigues, who bought 81 shares for 4,050 francs. For evidence of Niboyet's financial problems see her letter to the editor, Democratie pacifique, May 15, 1848.

13 The 'Voix' advertised subscriptions at 20 francs per year, 10 francs for six months, 6 francs for three months.

14 'La Voix des Femmes' is not listed in the inventory of the F7 2585-2595 Insurrection . de 1848 et événements de 1851; nor in F18 1-182: Enregistrement des déclarations des imprimeurs parisiens (1815-34) (1838-81); nor in F18 IV 1-411: ouvrages périodiques (1842-1912).

15 Petite poste appeared in La Voix des Femmes issues No. 17, April 7, 1848, No. 19, April 10, 1848, No. 30, April 22, 1848.

16 Baroness Bonde, Paris in '48: Letters from a Resident Describing the Events of the Revolution, New York 1903, 72.

17 The author reported his surprise at hearing a male voice hawking 'La Voix des Femmes'. He assumed that authors of the Voix belonged to the Vésuvienne legion and that from this point buttons would no longer be sewed back on pants. Charivari, March 26, 1848, vol. 17, No. 86. See Strumingher, The Vesuviennes. Images of Women Warriors in 1848 and their Significance for French History, in: History of European Ideas 8 (1987), no. 4/5. The image of women refusing to sew buttons on men's pants is recurrent in Charivari.

18 La Voix des Femmes No. 15, April 4, 1848 - 20 additional hawkers wanted. Issue No. 16, April 6, 1848 and No. 20, April 20, 1848 -The management is seeking new hawkers for hire and announces that the paper will be distributed every morning from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm (rue Neuve Trevisse, 8) and if need be, throughout the day until 5:00 pm.

19 The title was already in use in the May 30^{th} issue of the Voix (No. 38). On June 4^{th} , the editors reported: "One must accept this name since it was given to us (...) the women's club therefore ours, is the news of the day, the object of general curiosity. They all want to see us, to hear us."

20 La Voix des Femmes, No. 5, March 25, 1848.

21 Eugénie Niboyet was born in 1796; Suzanne Voilquin in 1801; Pauline Roland in 1805; Jeanne Deroin in 1805; Elise Lemonnier in 1805; Desiree Gay in 1810.

22 Marie Noémi Constant was born in 1826; Adele Esquiros in 1819.

23 La Voix des Femmes, No. 14, April 3, 1848.

24 La Voix des Femmes, No. 7, March 27, 1848.

25 The presence of men at meetings of Society of Voix des Femmes is documented in announcements of meetings listing ticket prices for men: Issue No. 28, May 30, 1848: Entry fee 1 franc for men, 25 centimes for women; 300 25 centimes entry cards available for male workers at newspaper's office. The same announcement appeared in No. 40, June 4–6, 1848, The next issue, No. 41, June 6–8, 1848, carried a new announcement: 25 centimes for women, 50 centimes for men; workers can obtain 25 centimes entry cards on request from newspaper's office. Two days later, No. 43,

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June 10–13, 1848, another modification: Men must be accompanied by a member. Fee: 50 centimes for women, 1 franc for men.

26 La Voix des Femmes No. 6, March 26, 1848.

27 La Voix des Femmes No. 18, April 7, 1848.28 La Voix des Femmes, No. 14, April 3, 1848.

29 La Voix des Femmes, No. 28, April 20, 1848. Earlier reference to Association fraternelle des sages-femmes in No. 11, March 31, 1848.

30 'Association fraternelle des femmes à gages' was advertised in Voix des Femmes No.
37, May 28, No. 38, May 30, No. 39, June 1–
4, No. 40, June 4–6, 1848.

31 La Voix des Femmes, No. 11, March 31, 1848.

32 La Voix des Femmes, No. 12, April 1, 1848.

33 La Voix des Femmes, No. 40 and No. 41, June 4 and 6, 1848.

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