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A Smoking Gun and a Woman’s Touch: President Chester Arthur’s Transformation that Reformed American Politics in the Late Nineteenth Century

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“I may be the President of the United States,” affirmed Chester Arthur, the corpulent yet fashionable man with the striking mustachios, “but my private life is nobody’s damned business.” The twenty-first president, Chester Alan Arthur, was a man with an intricate and often contradictory personality. He spent most of his career in the public eye, yet he detested the intermingling of personal affairs and political personas. Resolutely dedicated to separating the multiple facets of his life, Arthur burned most of his personal correspondence toward the end of his life. Not only was he an influential “Gentleman Boss” in Roscoe Conkling’s corrupt “Stalwart Republican” political machine, he was also a pawn in Conkling’s plot to dominate New York State politics through the patronage system of political appointments. Yet, once he rose to the Presidency, Arthur oversaw massive improvements to the American Civil Service selection process—the relatively unbiased system through which many United States governmental positions are now filled. As vice president for President James Garfield, he never wanted to be President of the United States, but he labored tirelessly when elevated to the office upon the death of Garfield. A lifelong beneficiary of the patronage system that dominated United States politics for the majority of the nineteenth century, Arthur curiously dedicated his presidency to righting the corrupt, political wrongs that had allowed
him to achieve the nation’s highest office in the first place. How exactly did Arthur transform American politics in the late nineteenth century and why did he begin the process of dismantling a political system that he had spent three decades strengthening in his home state of New York? Although Chester Arthur’s critical political decisions, at first glance, often seem uncharacteristic and disjointed, they are better understood when examined in conjunction with the life-altering events and realizations that bombarded Chester “Chet” Arthur during his tenure. Garnering a proper understanding of Arthur as a president involves mounting a thorough investigation into the personal life that he so diligently strived to hide from his political career. If we hope to fully understand the motivations that propelled Chester Arthur toward the important civil service reform that dynamically shaped nineteenth century politics, we will eventually find ourselves staring into the warm heart of a New York gentlewoman and down the cold barrel of a madman’s gun. Although their contributions to the life of Chester Arthur are radically different, both Julia I. Sand, the gentlewoman and friend of Arthur, and Charles J. Guiteau, the misguided madman, became two of the most significant political characters in the presidency of Chester Arthur. By examining the often-neglected role that Guiteau and Sand played in shaping Arthur’s personal beliefs and presidential tenure, we can learn more about how extraordinary circumstances and personal aspirations for political reform powerfully transformed American politics in the latter half of the Gilded Age.

We must first establish an understanding of what historians already know about President Arthur and what still needs to be discovered. Marked by unwavering dedication to both the Republican Party and the political machinery that controlled it, Chester Arthur’s unexpected rise to power is an ideal example of Gilded Age political advancement via the spoils system; however, the era is often overlooked and
trivialized by some scholars of American political history. For example, Henry Adams, an American historian and descendent of both President John Adams and President John Quincy Adams, put forth an unenthusiastic description of the Gilded Age in his well-known, 1907 account *The Education of Henry Adams*: “*No period so thoroughly ordinary had been known in American politics since*” Christopher Columbus first disturbed the balance of American society…The period was poor in purpose and barren in results.”\(^2\) Largely devoid of the momentous social and political unrest of the US Civil War and the drastically increased globalization of World War I, the Gilded Age and its political leaders, such as Chester Arthur, are often underappreciated for the critical roles they played in shaping the future of American politics. In fact, Chester Arthur is one of the least studied individuals to have achieved the office of the Presidency. Historian Thomas C. Reeves, an expert on the presidency of Chester Arthur, even admits that Arthur is “the least well known and most elusive man ever to become chief executive.”\(^3\)

Although the Gilded Age and the presidency of Chester Arthur are underappreciated periods of the American political saga, a number of works on the Gilded Age that were published predominantly in the 1960s and 1970s dealt with President Arthur’s role in civil service reform. An expansive biography by Thomas C. Reeves, several studies by Ari Hoogenboom, and a portion of H. Wayne Morgan’s bibliography have all contributed to how we understand this elusive president’s critical role in reform; however, the vast majority of the scholarship on the topic focused primarily on the policy initiatives of the Arthur Administration and how these decisions altered the political future of the United States. Conversely, my project unpacks the key factors that underscored President Arthur’s revolutionary political decisions. Drawing on nineteenth-century court records, newspaper articles, speeches, and correspondence, this article provides critical insight into the
life of the nation’s twenty-first head of state. Because he is one of the least studied presidential personalities in one of the most underappreciated intervals in American political history, there is a great deal of untapped, historically-significant material concerning the political career of Chester Arthur, and this article sheds light on some of the most overlooked motivations in Arthur’s life during his presidency.

A tragic occurrence in the history of the United States and a significant influence on the policies of President Arthur, the assassination of President James Garfield is one of the few events of the Gilded Age that was afforded considerable attention by American political historians during the second half of the twentieth century. The conclusions made in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the significance of Garfield’s assassination in shaping the policy initiatives of Chester Arthur are still relatively unchallenged in today’s scholarship. In Thomas Reeves’s biography, he notes that Arthur “dared not give Roscoe Conkling a major seat in the Cabinet, for this would signal the haughty Stalwart’s control of the administration and the intensification of political warfare.”

In another study, Justus D. Doenecke asserts that “Once he became president, Arthur ceased to act like a ‘Gentleman Boss’” because he “did not want his office tarnished by partisan warfare.” Both Reeves and Doenecke, amongst others, agree that Arthur did experience a significant political change once he rose to the Presidency, and both accounts affirm that it was political pragmatism and public opinion that brought about Arthur’s ideological reformation on the issue of civil service reform. While Arthur’s opinions were definitely influenced by the outcries of the American people in the wake of Garfield’s assassination, the existing secondary accounts of Arthur’s political transformation often overlook the personal effect that Garfield’s murder had on Arthur and his policies. Therefore, by examining the contents of the remaining state papers and speeches of Chester Arthur, my study argues
that the assassination of James Garfield brought about a moral transformation in Chester Arthur, both politically and personally. While the brutal assassination of James Garfield and subsequent outcry of the populace definitely influenced Arthur’s political reformation, there were other, more intimate factors that may have pushed Arthur to become a better man. Although he ordered that the vast majority of his personal correspondence be burned before his death in 1886, a number of Arthur’s personal papers did survive within the Arthur family for decades. In 1958, Chester Arthur III, the president’s grandson, sold a large number of these remaining papers to the Library of Congress (LOC), giving historians a much needed glimpse into the forces that motivated Arthur during his presidency. Amongst these newly acquired documents, there was a collection of twenty-three letters from a previously unknown New York gentlewoman named Julia Sand. Although Arthur’s responses to Sand’s letters, if they ever existed, were not included in the documents, the contents of the one-sided correspondence reveal a great deal about the nation’s enigmatic twenty-first president. These letters have now been available to the public for over half a century, but their effect on President Arthur has been, for the most part, overlooked by historians of the Gilded Age. In a 1971 article on the Sand letters, Thomas Reeves explains how the correspondence had been interpreted by historians up to that point: “Ari Hoogenboom found them interesting and full of ‘motherly fondness.’ He also took them seriously” whereas “H. Wayne Morgan saw ‘Julia Sands’ [sic] as a ‘mysterious lady friend’ of the then widower President,” and he “ignored Miss Sand’s political commentaries, and noted only her willingness to scold the President.” Although both Hoogenboom and Morgan make use of the previously unknown letters, none of these existing studies emphasize the effect the letters had on Chester Arthur, the individual. Admittedly, Reeves’s abridgments of the existing narratives
concerning the Sand letters are somewhat outdated; however, with the exception of Reeves himself and a 2017 Chester Arthur biography written by Scott Greenberger, the letters have yet to be included as a major factor in any other notable academic publications. While both Reeves and Greenberger do provide excellent summations of the different Sand letters in the broader context of Arthur’s presidency, I emphasize the ethical reawakening and subsequent political decisions, particularly concerning the issue of civil service reform, that arose within the heart of President Arthur as a result of Sand’s emotional appeals.¹

To fully encapsulate the people, events, and locations that morphed Chester Arthur into the man he eventually became, we cannot begin with Charles Guiteau and Julia Sand; we must first cast our gazes back to a New York City courtroom in the year 1860, when Chester Arthur was nothing more than an upcoming New York City lawyer. In the years leading up to the US Civil War, Arthur proved himself to be a gifted attorney, an upstanding citizen, and an ardent abolitionist. He was willing and able to protect and defend those most oppressed by the racial prejudices of the early nineteenth century, most notably in the case of Lemmon vs. New York. Migrating from Virginia to Texas, slaveholders Jonathan and Juliet Lemmon, alongside their eight enslaved people, traveled to New York, where they were to board a steamship destined for the Gulf of Mexico. However, the enslaved people, according to Justice Elijah Paine, Jr. of the New York Superior Court, were automatically free because they had been brought into the free state of New York. After several unsuccessful appeals, Justice Paine’s ruling eventually reached the New York Court of Appeals, where a team that included the young Arthur successfully defended Paine’s decision. As proclaimed by Chief Judge Hiram Denio of the New York Superior Court when passing down his ruling on the case of Lemmon vs. New York, “The meaning of the statute is as plain as though the Legislature had declared in
terms that if any person should introduce a slave into this State, in the course of a journey to or from it, or in passing through it, the slave shall be free.”9 Although Arthur was not exclusively responsible for the outcome of this juridical battle, he was an active participant in the effort to secure freedom for the enslaved people.10 By most accounts, the Chester Alan Arthur who made his living in New York City courtrooms was an idealistic Republican with a progressive sense of justice, morality, and honor.11

Due to his abolitionist principles and dedication to ensuring racial equality, Arthur was an exemplary candidate to serve in the New York militia during the Civil War, which was an endeavor that introduced young Arthur to the world of patronage and politics. An avid proponent of the Republican Party and steadfast supporter of Abraham Lincoln’s doctrines, Arthur quickly impressed the leaders of the New York State political machinery and rose steadily through the political ranks of both the New York State militia and the state government, primarily through the exploitation of the patronage system. Appointed to the position of Quartermaster General by the current governor, Edwin Morgan, Arthur easily mastered the administrative responsibilities of his position, which made him a valuable ally for Roscoe Conkling, an infamous force in New York politics and the boss of the “Stalwart” Republican machine – as it was called. A gifted delegator with a somewhat forgettable presence when compared to the ruggedly handsome Roscoe Conkling, Arthur, once ingratiated with Conkling, was often left in command of the Stalwart machine’s day-to-day operations – which included registering and incentivizing voters, overseeing political programs, and reinforcing the machine’s network within New York. This power allowed Arthur to, as one author put it, accomplish “more to mold the course of the Republican Party in this state than any other one man in the country.”12 For a man that started his political career doling out trousers to the New York militia, Arthur had
successfully played the game of patronage politics and came out on top. In fact, President Ulysses S. Grant even appointed Arthur to the Collectorship for the Port of New York, a highly lucrative, patronage position that provided substantial economic compensation.\(^{13}\)

Importantly, following the 1876 election of Rutherford B. Hayes, many of the nation’s longstanding beliefs concerning patronage and machine politics began to change, and the system that Arthur knew so well began to crumble around him. A long-term beneficiary of the spoils system with an acquired affinity for opulence, Chester Arthur and his wife Nell enjoyed the monetary stability offered by his patronage positions. Wed in October of 1859 after a brief courtship, Arthur and Nell’s union appeared to have been happy at first, but due to Arthur’s time-consuming commitments to the Stalwart machine, this happiness seemed to fade. In an attempt to appease the two major influences in his life—the Stalwart machine and his wife—Arthur continually exploited these aforementioned patronage positions, a reality that angered President Hayes to such an extent that he removed Arthur from the Collectorship on July 11, 1878. Despite this obvious setback in his career, Arthur continued to dedicate the majority of his time to the Stalwart machine. As a result, Arthur was not present for his wife’s sudden death on January 12, 1880, an oversight that he would regret for the remainder of his life. Perhaps escaping his personal troubles, Arthur still attended the Republican National Convention, where he was unexpectedly nominated for vice president as a number of Republicans hoped he would secure Stalwart support for James Garfield of Ohio, the dark horse nominee for president. Relatively unknown outside of New York, Arthur never imagined that he would be elevated to a position as stately as the Vice Presidency, and he was not at all prepared for the assassination of President Garfield on July 2, 1881, a day that would permanently alter his view on life and politics.\(^{14}\)
“I am a Stalwart of Stalwarts,” said aspiring civil servant, Charles J. Guiteau, just moments after brutally shooting President James Garfield in the back, and he coldly affirmed, “Arthur is President now.” A lifelong Republican with an overinflated sense of self-worth, Guiteau assumed that his rather insignificant contribution to the successful election of James Garfield in 1880 would guarantee him a lucrative, patronage position, preferably the Paris consulship, which would allow him to represent the interests of the United States abroad. However, because Guiteau was also an irrational evangelist with a questionable past, Secretary of State James G. Blaine concluded that the hopeful civil servant was not qualified for any such appointed position. This was the understanding that Secretary Blaine bluntly emphasized when he exasperatedly told Guiteau, “Never bother me again about this Paris consulship so long as you live.”15 Although President James Garfield was an exceedingly busy man who knew little to nothing about Charles Guiteau’s frequent attempts to receive a federal appointment, the gunman assumed that Garfield, a relatively avid supporter of civil service reform, had personally blocked his appointment because of Guiteau’s Stalwart leanings. As a result, the evangelist, who claimed to be sent by God, decided to assassinate President Garfield, assuming that Stalwart Vice President Chester Arthur would pardon him for his crimes and laude him as the hero who saved the patronage system. Unfortunately for Guiteau, Arthur was not willing to commit such an egregious transgression of moral boundaries, and the aspiring consul was hanged for murder on June 30, 1882. While Roscoe Conkling and other leaders within the “Stalwart” machine almost certainly did not support Charles Guiteau’s decision to assassinate Garfield, the gunman vocally considered himself a proponent of that machine, a realization that undoubtedly rattled Garfield’s replacement, Chester Alan Arthur.16

When Arthur ascended to the nation’s highest office
following the unfortunate death of his predecessor, the country was in shock, the Republican Party was collapsing from the inside due to the chaos brought on by civil service reform, and the American populace hoped for a political change that was at odds with Arthur’s Stalwart past. As a result, many assumed that Arthur would alter the vision espoused by the late President Garfield in favor of policies that would better suit his machine cronies. Surrogate Delano C. Calvin of New York County, New York, for example, said in a New-York Tribune interview that, “General Arthur’s principal danger lies in his dispensation of patronage, and the possible feeling on his part of such an obligation toward ex-Senator Conkling as to make him a prominent member of his Cabinet,” which would “be certain disaster to his [Arthur’s] Administration.”

However, despite overwhelming pressure from the Stalwart machine to engage in patronage politics, these aforementioned prognoses of corruption and despair that dominated the days preceding Chester Arthur’s presidency never came to fruition. In fact, when delivering his first national address as President of the United States on September 22, 1881, Arthur promised that “All the noble aspirations of my lamented predecessor which found expression in his life, the measures devised and suggested during his brief Administration to correct abuses… will be garnered in the hearts of the people; and it will be my [Arthur’s] earnest endeavor…to see that the nation shall profit, by his [Garfield’s] example.” While the “Gentleman Boss” did continue to lavish his former Stalwart associates with banquets and gifts for the remainder of his life, Arthur curiously seemed to have left his affinity for patronage politics at the door to the White House. Although Arthur initially became successful by ingratiating himself with one of the most corrupt political machines in United States history, the abrupt murder of James Garfield over an issue as insignificant as a political appointment forced Arthur to contemplate the veracity of his longstanding, partisan beliefs. This resulted in
a significant alteration to Arthur’s understanding of patronage positions and machine politics.19

On July 13, 1881, Puck Magazine, the nation’s premier satirical publication on American political issues, released an edition that satirized the unacceptable governmental practices that ultimately caused James Garfield’s assassination. On the cover of this editorial, Charles Guiteau proudly displays both his handgun and an ultimatum demanding either, “An office or your [Garfield’s] life” (see Figure 1). The cartoon is captioned with both a phrase, “A Model Office-Seeker,” and a quote from Charles Guiteau, ‘I am a Lawyer, a Theologian, and a Politician.’20 Clearly a scathing rebuke of the unnecessary, overly political processes that dominated the patronage system of the time, the magazine hyperbolically depicts the nation’s dissatisfaction with the existing political system in the days immediately following the brutal assassination of the president. Originally an ardent supporter of machine politics and an active participant in the patronage system, Chester Arthur never planned to be the driving force that oversaw the first successful attempt at civil service reform; however, following the death of the popular, twentieth president, he realized that the American people would not support the current political system, whose corrupt doctrines actively contributed to the death of President Garfield. Therefore, despite knowing that his actions would anger his Stalwart allies, Arthur dedicated himself to repairing the broken system that was responsible for Garfield’s death in an effort to protect the legacy of the late president, whose “exalted character…noble achievements…and patriotic life will be treasured forever as a sacred possession of the whole world.”21 Covered in blood and shrouded in smoke, Charles J. Guiteau, an unstable evangelist, was partially responsible for ushering in an era of unprecedented political reform, though Chester Arthur, a former “Stalwart” lieutenant, would be the man to lead it.22
Despite having participated in machine politics for nearly three decades, Arthur was willing to set aside his previous notions of acceptable political procedures in an effort to bring about civil service reform, going so far as to sign the revolutionary Pendleton Act into law. Originally proposed by Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio, the act was the first major initiative by the federal government to move away from the outdated, corrupt patronage system, in which Chester Arthur began his career, in favor of a regulated, merit-based system. Under the Pendleton Act, a Civil Service Commission, composed of three members, was tasked with creating and administering a Civil Service examination, which
would determine an individual’s capability to serve in certain government positions. Moreover, the act guaranteed that individuals could not be removed from office without proper cause, thus ensuring that newly elected executives were not able to fill the Civil Service with unqualified party members. Essentially, the act ensured that “No person in said [civil] service shall use his official authority or influence either to coerce the political action of any person or body or to interfere with any election.”23 Although Arthur had greatly benefited from the system that he agreed to undermine by signing the Pendleton Act, the “Gentleman Boss,” deeply shaken by the circumstances surrounding the assassination of James Garfield, understood the necessity of reforming the Civil Service in order to strengthen the United States government. Thus, Arthur was willing to set aside a lifetime of machine politics in order to properly carry out his responsibilities as president.24

Like many influential men throughout history, Arthur was urged, compelled, and guided into action by the gentle yet firm words of a woman who resided behind the scenes. A bedridden yet well-educated New York gentlewoman, Julia Sand had never interacted with Chester Arthur before his ascension to the Presidency and did not have any personal stakes in the success of the Arthur Administration. Nevertheless, once Arthur became the nation’s Chief Executive, Sand unexpectedly began writing to the president in hopes that he would not degrade himself or his home state of New York throughout his tenure. While historians know little about Sand, she was seemingly invested in seeing civil service reform, and she dictated how Arthur should act as president and what policies he should support during his term. She even ridiculed his character from time to time when she felt it would assist in her endeavor to reform the potential reformer. For example, in her first letter to President Arthur on August 27, 1881, Sand writes, “What if a few days hence the hand of the next unsatisfied ruffian should lay you low, & you should
drag through months of weary suffering in the White House, knowing that all over the land not a prayer was uttered in your behalf, not a tear shed, that the great American people was glad to be rid of you- would not worldly honors seem rather empty then?”

Despite having scorned Arthur in her first letter, Sand was dedicated to bringing about both moral and political reform within the United States and Chester Arthur, himself. Metaphorically styling herself the President’s dwarf, an homage to the dwarves of European courts who were the only individuals willing to tell their monarchs the truth, Julia Sand spent the majority of Arthur’s term in the shadows, all the while chipping away at his Stalwart exterior and revealing the kindhearted, decent man that resided underneath.

Although it is not known if Chester Arthur ever responded to any of the Sand letters, the fact that the letters are extant is evidence that they were likely significant to the president, a man who burned almost all of his personal correspondence. In fact, in a letter dated August 15, 1882, Sand scolded the president for never returning her correspondence: “Well, have you not free minutes to spare for me-when I have spared so many hours for you, in this long, sad, exciting year?”

Just four days after the August 15 letter, Julia Sand wrote another strongly worded letter to Arthur concerning his unwillingness to respond in which she asks, “Are you offended with me-really-seriously? Do the few harsh things that I have said to you, outweigh all else[?]”

Almost immediately after receiving these harsh letters, however, Chester Arthur visited Julia Sand in New York without first alerting her of his plans. Due to the unexpected nature of this meeting, Sand, who was likely both excited and distressed by Arthur’s presence, spent the entirety of the conversation hiding behind a curtain and just out of the president’s sight; thus, while Arthur and Sand did engage in lively discussion for nearly an hour, the president probably never actually saw Julia Sand. Because Arthur visited Sand immediately following her harshest letters
to him, it is very likely that Arthur valued the letters he received and wanted her to continue sending them. During their lengthy discussion at her home, Arthur even alluded to at least one of the recommendations that Sand made within her previous letters regarding his policy initiatives. While it cannot be definitively proven that Chester Arthur supported civil service reform because of Julia Sand’s letters, the willingness of Arthur, an undoubtedly busy man, to visit Sand in New York and keep her letters until the day he died strongly suggests that Julia Sand had a lasting effect on Arthur, the man, and the policies that he came to support.\textsuperscript{20}

In her first letter to the president in August 1881, Julia Sand espoused a vision for the future of the United States, and while her tone grew consistently warmer throughout the next few years, she was unwavering in her opinion that he would revolutionize the American political system. As she says in her first letter, “Do what is more difficult & more brave. Reform!…devote the remainder of ones \{your\} life to that only which is pure & exalted.”\textsuperscript{31} Although Arthur’s political record did not coincide with the beliefs that Julia Sand hoped he would come to adopt, she never hesitated in her assertion that Arthur would be the executive leader behind civil service reform within the United States. As she says, “If any man says, ‘With Arthur for President, Civil Service Reform is doomed,’ prove that Arthur can be its firmest champion.”\textsuperscript{32} Simultaneously compassionate and reproachful, Julia Sand did everything in her power to push Chester Arthur toward the reform she knew was necessary for the revitalization of the American governmental system. By maintaining a reproachful tone throughout much of her first letter, Sand made it clear that Arthur’s previous political decisions were reprehensible to much of the American populace; however, by her second letter, the gentlewoman had changed tactics entirely. Roughly one month after sending her first letter, in which she tells Chester Arthur that the American people would not mourn
him if he were to die in a way similar to James Garfield, Sand reached out again, explaining her motivations for writing: "I felt I owed you an apology for what I had written... My only excuse for this letter is the deep sympathy I feel for you in your sorrow." By beginning her correspondence with a scathing rebuke immediately followed by an apology, Julia Sand ingratiated herself with Arthur, giving her the opportunity to remain in his good graces and bring about political reform from within. Although most of the letters sent by Julia Sand could be interpreted as relatively mundane and perhaps repetitive, she maintained the correspondence in hopes that President Arthur would remember the bedridden gentlewoman and the revolutionary doctrine she championed. Sand’s letters became progressively more affectionate as the correspondence continued during Arthur’s presidency. This strongly implies that Arthur’s and Sand’s relationship, although it began with a concerned citizen offering advice to a civil servant, quickly became more than political, at least in Sand’s heart and mind.

Although Chester Arthur’s opinion of Julia Sand is still a mystery, it is quite clear that, by the end of their correspondence in 1883, Julia Sand had become emotionally attached to the man she had been writing to. As she says in her final letter on September 15, 1883, "I would like you to come & talk to me. It is absurd I know—but I can’t help it. I like the sound of your voice... If you can remember a time when you were very unhappy & I tried to say things to comfort you & you did care for my sympathy, then do come." Very different in tone from her first message, Julia Sand had clearly grown closer to Arthur by this time, and she probably did not want their relationship, whatever it was, to end. However, with the passage of the Pendleton Act in January of 1883, there were no longer pressing political issues on which Sand felt she needed to advise the president. Although the relationship between Chester Arthur, a recent widower, and Julia Sand began with unsolicited political advice and a scathing rebuke
of the gentleman’s character, it had clearly blossomed into so much more for Julia Sand and perhaps Arthur. While it is not known why the relatively steady correspondence came to an abrupt end in September 1883, it is almost definite that the letters influenced President Arthur’s decision-making process throughout most of his presidential term. By appealing to Chester Arthur’s sense of decency and expressing a level of concern that Arthur had probably not known since the death of his wife, Julia Sand reminded Arthur of the gentle reformer he had been before getting involved in politics. Although bedridden and with “no political ties,” Julia Sand was one of the most prominent, albeit unknown, influences in the life of President Chester Arthur, and through her correspondence with President Arthur, she potentially became one of the most important figures in the history of civil service reform and a major historical actor in the politics of the Gilded Age.36

“Since I came here I have learned that Chester A. Arthur is one man and the President of the United States is another,” said Arthur when denying a former Stalwart ally’s request for a political favor at a formal state dinner.37 Bookended by acts of selflessness and decency, Chester A. Arthur spent most of his career reinforcing the power of political machines within New York State; however, with one motion of his pen, Arthur reversed the political maneuverings that he had spent a lifetime strengthening. While Arthur must be given credit for the unexpected decision he made on behalf of the American people with the Pendleton Act, a madman and a gentlewoman were with the president throughout the entire process. Throughout the history of the United States, the vast majority of political decisions have often been attributed solely to the individual in charge when they were made; however, behind each of these studied individuals, there are casts of diverse, influential characters whose stories must also be explored in order to fully understand the historical narrative. After Charles J. Guiteau raised his hand and pulled his trigger, something
snapped in Chester Arthur, and perhaps for the first time in decades, he realized the hypocrisy of the political system he had helped to build. Moreover, Julia Sand, a previously unknown New York socialite, took up the task of helping Arthur come to terms with the emotions he experienced in the wake of Garfield’s tragic death. While Charles Guiteau and Julia Sand influenced Chester Arthur individually, the political outcomes would have been different had they not both been participants in the narrative. Guiteau’s act of unnecessary violence helped Arthur realize the need for political change, and Julia Sand’s scathing rebukes and emotional support forced the president to remember the kind hearted, reform-minded abolitionist he had been before becoming involved in national politics. Chester Alan Arthur, the nation’s twenty-first president, was not a malicious man, but he did spend most of his life entrenched in a broken political system. Nevertheless, following a series of rather incongruous events, he was able to see the error in his ways and implement groundbreaking political reform that transformed the politics of the Gilded Age at the expense of his own political career.
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Notes


⁴ Reeves, *The Gentleman Boss*, 252.


⁷ Reeves, “The President’s Dwarf,” 73-74.


¹⁰ The Lemmon trial was only one of several cases in which Chester Arthur protected the rights of those faced with racial oppression. For example, when he was only twenty-four years old, the future president successfully defended Elizabeth Jennings Graham, an African-American woman arrested for riding on a New York City streetcar, in the Jennings v. Third Ave. Railroad case. This ruling ensured that eventually all New York City public transit would no longer be segregated on the basis of race. For more on race during the Gilded Age, see C. Vann Woodward,
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18 Chester A. Arthur, “Inaugural Address as President of the United States, September 22,1881” in _State Papers Etc., Etc., Etc. of Chester A. Arthur, President of the United States_, (Washington, D.C.: The United
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²² Reeves, The Gentleman Boss, 238-267; Reeves, The Gentleman Boss, 244-250; Reeves, “The President’s Dwarf;” Reeves, “The Search for the Chester Alan Arthur Papers.”


²⁵ Julia I. Sand to the Hon. Chester A. Arthur, August 27, 1881, Chester A. Arthur Papers, microfilm, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.


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32 Ibid.


34 Reeves, *The Gentleman Boss*, 244-250; Reeves, “The President’s Dwarf.”


36 Direct quote: Julia I. Sand to the Hon. Chester A. Arthur, October 5, 1881, Chester A. Arthur Papers; Paraphrase: Reeves, *The Gentleman Boss*, 244-250; Reeves, “The President’s Dwarf.”

37 Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Anecdotes* (Oxford University Press, 1996), https://books.google.com/books?id=N0JRvfAIUFwC&pg=PA175&lpg=PA175&dq=I%20have%20learned%20that%20chester%20arthur%20is%20one%20man%20and%20the%20president%20is%20another&source=bl&ots=5jZXqHHipO&sig=ACfU3U3F7UcgdG4OGm4m_TeB53MKXONe1g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi0qveZ4tTIAhXIt1kKHZAZA9oQ6AEwCxoECAoQAQ#v=onepage&q=I%20have%20learned%20that%20chester%20arthur%20is%20one%20man%20and%20the%20president%20is%20another&f=false).