Transcript:

OK, hi everyone. My name is Emma and welcome to my podcast episode where I'll be discussing female husbands in 19th century America, specifically how the press and other popular media really played this pivotal role in the conversation surrounding female husbands and gender in America, and how eventually the definition of the word will change because of that.

Now, if you're wondering just what female husbands are, we have to go back a bit to 1746 to Charles Hamilton, a female husband and a quote "quack doctor", as the newspapers put it Hamilton is one of the more well known female husbands by today standards, but that's largely due to an over exaggeration of their story.[1] See Hamilton was originally assigned female at birth, and in their teenage years, they put on male clothes and started to transition and identify as male. Additionally, Hamilton also married a woman named Mary Price. This is significant because Hamilton did not disclose their sex to Mary Price,[2] and while by today's standards we could easily separate Hamilton's gender from his sexuality, in 1746 those distinctions were not yet made.

while the headlines worked hard to make a narrative around Hamilton, referring to his career as a quack doctor or a Monteback,[3] trying to portray him as an untrustworthy individual, but it was the author Henry Fielding that would draw the most attention to Hamilton's story by selling his work of fiction titled *The Female Husband*, based off of Hamilton's life and largely emphasized. Fielding reports that Hamilton had 14 other wives while being married to Mary Price.[4] This story would help seal the definition of a female husband, someone who would be assigned female at birth, transition and identify as male, and then proceed to marry a woman. This story also helped seal how society at that time understood female wives. They viewed them as victims who were unable to discern the sex of their partner, and it's really interesting because a lot of the female wives were aware that their husbands were transgender men, and they were okay with that.[5]

Like in the UK, in America, conversations around gender and female husbands were being shaped by the headlines in the press, as well as essays that were being published to enforce rigorous gender norms, like stories such as quote, "The Tomboy who Turned Into a Real Boy"[6] Stories like these were often used to sensationalize transness as something wrong, but also something that needed to be reprinted in the headlines and constantly be retold.[7]

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[1] Jen Manion, Female Husbands: A Trans History (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pg 19 .
[2] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 21.
[3] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 21.
[4] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 28.
[5] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 23.
[6] Manion, Jen. Transgender Children in Antebellum America. Outhistory.
[7] Bayker, Jesse. "Some Very Queer Couples: Gender Migrants and Intima y in Nineteenth-Century America." Gender and History 35, no. 1 (2023): 103-123.

The first report of a female husband in America happened in 1830, and he went by the name of George Wilson. Newspaper headlines would often use words such as extraordinary case of the female husband, oftentimes trying to portray it as that sensationalized story is something different, and make it seem like it's a rarity.[8] George Wilson was alive during an interesting time because it was the Industrial Revolution. So it was a time when women were starting to want to join the workforce, but they weren't making the same wages as men, which led to problems. So it was often practical for a woman to dress in men's clothes and present as male while not identifying as male. so that they can receive a man's wage.[9] So female laborers were disguised for work, and female husbands did it more for an identity, so they were two different things, but the newspapers started to join them together, and very slowly it started to shift the focus away from male identifying female husbands, and it starts to focus in on and lump in masculine presenting women who identify as women.[10]

Female laborers, who often worked men's jobs, yet identified as female, were more often praised in the press, for their masculinity, while female husbands were often put down in the press for their identifying as male. Throughout the early nations, there was a lot of debate about what crime a female husband was even committing.There were no ordinances against cross-dressing until 1848, so if a female husband wasn't married to a woman and they were caught, they oftentimes weren't breaking any laws, and would just get released. Oftentimes cross cross-dressing could maybe get one charged with vagrancy, which was a 90-day punishment.[11] But oftentimes women who dress as men for work or other reasons they were accepted a lot easier than female husbands. Society really started to take an issue when their patriarchal hierarchy started to be threatened, if individuals who are assigned female at birth can transition, marry other female wives, and then fulfill the male role to a point where the wives don't even know that their husbands are female husbands, then that poses a major threat to what the patriarchy defines as marriage.[12]

The way in which society accepted masculine-presenting women yet opposed male-identifying female husbands would best be exemplified through the story of Joseph Labdell, who was an individual assigned female at birth, and when they were young, they presented as male, as a means to make a wage for their family.[13] When they were young, Ledella was often praised in the press for taking care of their family in such a masculine way. However, when Labdell started to fully embrace his identity as male and would then marry a woman named Marie Louise Parry,

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[8] Bayker, Jesse. “Some Very Queer Couples: Gender Migrants and Intima y in Nineteenth-Century America.” Gender and History 35, no. 1 (2023): 103-123.
[9] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 139 .
[10] Manion, Female Husbands, pg151 .
[11] "[Syracuse N. Y; Justice; Penitentiary]." *Weekly Wisconsin Patriot* (Madison, Wisconsin) 2, no. 48, May 3, 1856: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[12] Manion, Female Husbands, pg23 .
[13] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 203.

the praises of Liddell's life and support from his community seemed to stop altogether, leading to his institutionalization by his brother John in 1879. Most of the testimonies against Lobdell have to do with his gender expression and the fact that he considered himself a husband to Marie Perry, which is interesting because when he presented himself as male, there was no issue.[14]

Despite all of the uncertainty surrounding the definitions between gender and sex and female husbands, the press would often work to keep these stories still sensationalized in the papers. When reading the story of James Allen, for example, a female husband, the same story that happened in Connecticut was reprinted in Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.[15] Another example would be about a female husband named James Walker, who was arrested in New York City for public drunkenness. However, upon being found out as a female husband, they were published in Florida, New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire,[16] The consistent reprinting of the same stories ensures that female husbands are constantly on people's minds, while simultaneously using language that makes it seem like female husbands or something rare and new, like example, the word “extraordinary” case of the female husband. Some media outlets would take it a step further and would report negatively on female husbands, referring to them as something called quote "sapphic slashers,” highlighting instances where female husbands would hurt or have murdered their female wives,[17] regardless of the fact that the same situations were happening in heterosexual marriages. The protection of the female wife was the public's main concern when it came to female husbands. Oftentimes, society viewed female wives as innocent victims of female husbands, when in many cases they were very aware that their husbands were female husbands.[18]

Nearing the end of the civil war, public opinion on female husbands started to get harsher, but the topic was still being reported on and sensationalized nonetheless a story about a female husband named Albert Gulliffe outlived in England yet his story was being reported on all the way east of Mississippi and Louisiana, Virginia, and North Carolina.[19]Guliffe had an interesting story because while he identified as a female husband, he oftentimes went back and forth and took a more ginger fluid approach to being a female husband. By 1856, Gulliffe was accused of tricking his second wife into marriage. This story printed in the press was unusual, because, originally, Gulliffe had presented himself to his future wife as a female, upon getting to know them, he then presented himself as a male, claiming to have always been a male, but secretly pretending to be a female.[20] After marriage, it would come to light that Guliffe was assigned female at birth,

[14] Manion, Female Husbands, pg222.
[15] "A Female Husband." *Baltimore Patriot* (Baltimore, Maryland) XXXIII, no. 63, March 14, 1829: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[16] Cleves, Rachel Hope. “What, Another Female Husband?: The Pre History of Same Sex Marriage in America. *The Journal of American History* 101, no. 4 (2015): 1055–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44285272.
[17] Rachel Cleves, “What, Another Female Husband?” The Journal of American History, p 12.
[18] "'by Themselves'." *Trenton State Gazette* (Trenton, New Jersey), no. 2873, June 7, 1856: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[19] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 182.
[20] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 180.

however, it's important to note that his second wife, upon finding out that he is a female husband, wanted to stay with him, and that was printed in the press.[21]

In 1883, the press no longer became the number one deciding factor in defining female husbands; a Dr. PM Wise would medically examine Joseph Lebel and publish his findings. It's important to note that Lebel is in this situation against his will as mentioned earlier, he was institutionalized by his brother John upon claiming his gender and marrying Marie Parry. Weise had concluded two things that Lebell was both masculine and aggressive. It's important to note that the aggression was probably from the fact he was being institutionalized against his will, because of these two factors, Dr. Wise had decided to label them as a lesbian, not as a female husband, and this all but changed the definition of the word unintentionally, the word female husband once meant to transition or identify as a male regardless of your sexuality, afterwise as diagnosis, it came to be equated with masculine presenting lesbians, which has so much more to do with sexuality than gender.[22]

This conclusion, unfortunately, erases the identity that comes with female husbands as well as erases the stories of female husbands in the 19th century that didn't necessarily fit into that categorical box of what a female husband was. An example of that would be Charles and John Ward. They both disguised themselves and claimed to be brothers, but in fact they were lovers. However, just assigning that is the same sex relationship, a race is the fact that Charles was assigned a female at birth, and could technically be considered a female husband by equating female husbands to masculine presenting lesbians, identities such as Wards gets completely eradicated in history.[23]

while the term female husbands isn't one that's commonly used to day, it's important to note that the acceptance of female husbands did not solely rely on media and newspaper headlines, but also was determined case by case, according to the female husband's class, race, occupation, where they stood with the church, or even just where they stood with society, goods standing members of society were most likely going to be accepted easier as female husbands than none. examples like this would be James Howe, who was considered a pillar of his community, and after his wife's passing, when, coming out as a female husband, was generally accepted into the community how he had always been.[24] I also want to add that at the time the word female husband was meant to be an umbrella term that encompassed many versions of that identity, such as, for example, Gulliffe, who was a female husband, but also took a more gender fluid approach to how they presented themselves, changing their clothes to present more masculine or

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[21] "'by Themselves'." *Trenton State Gazette* (Trenton, New Jersey), no. 2873, June 7, 1856: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

[22] Manion, Female Husbands, pg 226.

[23] Bayker, Jesse. "Some Very Queer Couples: Gender Migrants and Intima y in Nineteenth-Century America." Gender and History 35, no. 1 (2023): 103-123. DOI.org/10.11http://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.1255511/1468-0424.12555.

[24] Manion, Female Husbands, pg182.

feminine.[25] Labdell, however, was strictly masculine, presenting,[26] so it's really hard to pinpoint an exact moment when the word female husband began to change, but the use of popular media and newspaper headlines was detrimental in causing that shift.

Anyways, that's all I have, guys, so thanks so much for listening!

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[25] Manion, Female Husbands, p 44.
[26] Manion, Female Husbands, p220.

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