Representing the Ideal American Family: Avard Fairbanks and the Transformation of the Western Pioneer Monument

CYNTHIA CULVER PRESCOTT

Cynthia Culver Prescott teaches in the Department of History at the University of North Dakota.

Communities throughout the U.S. West erected monuments to white pioneer mothers in the late 1920s. While other western sculptors’ interest in frontier women soon faded, Avard Fairbanks continued to produce prominent public monuments to pioneer women and families for the next fifty years. Fairbanks’s pioneer monuments provide a valuable case study for examining the ways in which changing social norms influenced public monuments over the course of the twentieth century. Focusing on Avard Fairbanks’s fifty years of pioneer-themed monuments highlights the sculptor’s role in transforming idealized images of settler families from objects of purely regional memory into a national American family ideal.

Key words: Avard Fairbanks, pioneer mother, public monuments, historical memory, frontier myth, maternalism

In 1928, prominent sculptor Avard Fairbanks completed a life-sized bronze Pioneer Mother for the city of Vancouver, Washington. Local residents eagerly awaited the unveiling of the statue, which commemorated U.S. women’s efforts to establish farms and communities in lands inhabited by Indians and claimed by Great Britain. Fairbanks’s design, shown in Figure 1, would both honor those women’s sacrifices on the frontier and instruct their granddaughters—this at a time when young women’s behavior seemed to threaten the civilization that pioneer women had worked so hard to build.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, communities across the U.S. West looked to commemorate the sacrifices of white female settlers by erecting pioneer mother monuments. Then the movement faded.

The author thanks Michael Lansing for his guidance on this article.

Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 85, No. 1, pages 110–142. ISSN 0030-8684, eISSN 1533-8584
© 2016 by the Pacific Coast Branch, American Historical Association. All rights reserved.
Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: 10.1525/phr.2016.85.1.110.
Though many Westerners lost interest in pioneer mother monuments, Fairbanks continued to create pioneer-themed monuments that simultaneously spoke to local cultural values and contemporary political concerns.¹ Over the course of his long career, Fairbanks

---

¹ On the tension between depictions of pioneers in western monuments and the realities of white settlers’ lives, see Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).
recast his monuments’ stock pioneer characters to accommodate changing national cultural norms and changes in American historical memory, while still speaking to local communities. Meanwhile, their western identity was gradually subsumed by national creation myths centered on the frontier. Over time, the white women, children, and men in Fairbanks’s western pioneer statues transcended the frontier and came to represent the ideal American family. By the 1980s and 1990s, his representations took on new life as conservatives advocating so-called traditional family structures invested the statues with new power.

The tenth son of Mormon farmer and artist John B. Fairbanks, Avard T. Fairbanks (1897–1987) studied under James Earl Fraser and other prominent sculptors in New York City and at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He was granted a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Yale University and received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study creative sculpture in Europe. Beginning in 1920, Fairbanks taught art at the University of Oregon, the University of Michigan (where he was awarded a Master of Arts and a Doctorate of Philosophy in anatomy), and other universities before being appointed dean and charged with organizing a college of fine arts at the University of Utah in 1947. Throughout his long career, the sculptor created sacred art for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Fairbanks also created many well-known secular sculptures, ranging from the fanciful La Primavera to several Abraham Lincoln monuments, and even a ram hood ornament for Dodge Motor Company. But he is best known for his pioneer-themed monuments for secular audiences.3

In the 1920s and early 1930s, communities throughout the U.S. West responded to anxieties about urbanization, immigration, and new roles for women by erecting monuments to an iconic and imagined white pioneer mother. Interest in erecting pioneer mother monuments faded in most western communities by the start of World War II. But even as other western artists returned to perennially popular subjects such as cowboys and American Indian warriors,

---


Fairbanks persisted in sculpting settler families into the late twentieth century. Particularly at times of widespread anxiety about rapidly changing gender roles and race relations, mainstream audiences in some communities embraced the rural nostalgia embodied by Fairbanks’s stock pioneer characters—not only in the 1920s, but also in the 1950s and the 1970s. Following Fairbanks’s death in 1987, other western artists returned to pioneer family nostalgia amid the culture wars of the 1990s.

Because Fairbanks persisted in sculpting pioneer mothers throughout his remarkably long and productive career, Fairbanks’s pioneer monuments provide a valuable case study for examining the ways in which changing social norms influenced public monuments over the course of the twentieth century—and how those monuments, in turn, influenced cultural conventions. Yet little has been published on Fairbanks’s monuments. Moreover, while scholars have examined the ways in which monument-building reflected contemporary concerns about politics, race, and gender in various regions and time periods, few have focused on how changing ideas about race and gender have shaped monument designs over time. Focusing on Fairbanks’s extraordinarily long and illustrious career therefore provides a valuable lens through which to examine the influence of changing cultural conventions on the project of monument-making.

Furthermore, Fairbanks’s secular pioneer monuments reflected and reinforced the dominant culture’s changing conceptions of the ideal American family. As the historian Natasha Zeretsky argues, shared ideas about the family are “intrinsic to a sense of [American] The Ideal American Family and Pioneer Monuments 113

4. For more on Mormonism in Award Fairbanks’s pioneer monuments, see: Prescott, “The All-American Eternal Family: Sacred and Secular Values in Western Pioneer Monuments,” in We Are What We Remember: The American Past through Commemoration, eds. Jeffrey Meriwether and Laura D’Amore (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 334–58. Most of the only other studies of Fairbanks’s monuments were completed by the sculptor’s son, Eugene, and all tend more toward hagiography than critical analysis: Eugene F. Fairbanks, A Sculptor’s Testimony; Eugene F. Fairbanks, Abraham Lincoln Sculpture Created by Award Fairbanks (Bellingham, Wash.: Fairbanks Arts and Books, 2002); Kent Ahrens, “Avard T. Fairbanks and the Winter Quarters Monument,” Nebraska Quarterly 95, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 176–85.

5. Kirk Savage examined changing depictions of race relations within monuments to the Old South erected in the second half of the nineteenth century. Kirk Savage, Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Existing studies of pioneer woman monuments have focused almost exclusively on individual prominent monuments erected during the 1910s and 1920s.
national identity,” but “[d]uring periods of large-scale social transformation” those “familial values [have] undergone revision.” An early twentieth-century emphasis on maternal roles gradually gave way to celebrations of the child-centered nuclear family. That nuclear family took on new meaning amid cultural fragmentation beginning in the 1970s. In the final years of his long career and after his death, Fairbanks’s stock pioneer mothers came to represent ideal American family life, tying his subjects into a rhetoric that was no longer specific to the West as a region. Focusing on Fairbanks’s fifty years of pioneer-themed monuments highlights the sculptor’s role in transforming idealized images of white settler families from objects of purely regional memory into a national American family ideal.

The Pioneer Mother Movement

Statuary played a central role in celebrations of pioneering from the start. In 1883—thirty years after his arrival in Oregon Territory and a mere twenty-four years after statehood—prominent settler W. Lair Hill urged members of the Oregon Pioneer Association (OPA) “to gather up the scattered materials and erect a monument to the pioneer mothers of Oregon.” It took Oregonians another two decades to erect such a statue—one of the earliest pioneer monuments erected in the U.S. West. Erected by the Portland Woman’s Club for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition Alice Cooper’s 1905 bronze Sacajawea statue was celebrated by prominent suffragists as a tribute to that trailblazer and to the “pioneer mothers of old Oregon” who followed in her footsteps. But Anglo American men


and women throughout the West soon came to challenge the idea that an image of the famed Shoshone guide of the Lewis and Clark Expedition could rightfully commemorate the sacrifices of white settlers. This female sculptor’s depiction of a Native woman—whose dedicatory plaque claimed to simultaneously celebrate the accomplishments of a specific Shoshone woman and a broader class of white female settlers who migrated westward several decades later—soon yielded public attention to male sculptors’ celebrations of generic pioneer mothers as symbols of rural nostalgia, white domination, and supposedly traditional gender roles.9

Organizations like the OPA sought to remember and celebrate the earliest white settlers in various western territories. The historian David Glassberg notes that “commemorative rituals—often celebrating the origins of a community—have always been part of the American scene,” and that in the nineteenth-century West, many historical societies’ first activities “mark[ed] the anniversary of the arrival of the first ‘white’ settler.”10 Groups like the OPA and California’s Native Sons of the Golden West offered commemorative rituals such as pioneer reunions and also sought to record their members’ accomplishments for posterity.11

Celebrations of early white settlement collided with rapid social change in the early twentieth century, inspiring white Westerners to embrace a growing national trend of rural nostalgia that helped Americans to balance their pride in technological progress with anxiety over the social changes that progress inspired.12 Declining availability of homesteading lands coincided with rising anxiety about dramatic shifts in American society. Urbanization, increasing immigration from Asia and Southern Europe, falling birth rates among native-born white Americans, and the highest divorce rate in the world all convinced many that the American family was in crisis. These fears inspired efforts to shore up white civilization by promoting more conservative domestic roles for white, native-born

9. Prescott, Gender and Generation.
women at the same time that native-born women and men tended toward nostalgia for an idyllic rural frontier past. Female progressive reformers sought to improve living conditions for poor immigrant, indigenous, and rural mothers, and they viewed their own standards of modern “scientific motherhood” to be a route to Americanization. But those standards were increasingly challenged by more conservative women who hearkened back to the antebellum “moral motherhood” ideology that had characterized mothers as the “angel of the house.” These 1920s conservatives adapted nineteenth-century moral motherhood to encompass a patriotic, exclusionary form of native-born white motherhood. Meanwhile, prominent men such as Theodore Roosevelt and the sociologist Edward Ross celebrated the traditional (rural, white) American family, embracing a racialized form of Jeffersonian agrarianism. Rurality—particularly that embodied by white farmers’ wives in the midwestern “heartland” and recently settled portions of the Far West—seemed to offer a crucial alternative to the dangers of modernity.

While prominent Americans worried about race suicide and celebrated rural families, conservative elements throughout the United States embraced public sculpture as a way to remember what had been lost and to instruct future generations. Like monuments to Civil War soldiers and to supposedly vanishing American Indians erected in the late nineteenth century, twentieth-century memorials


to white men and women who settled the western United States were typically funded through private donations and were designed by sculptors who had to gain public approval for their depictions. Whether erected in the Far West amid tributes to early settlers and fears over the declining availability of farmland, or in the Midwest, where—as historian John Bodnar argues—minority groups celebrating their own cultural heroes competed with dominant Anglo American memories of earlier white settlers, monuments to early white settlers consistently labeled those settlers as pioneers who had carved a path for others to follow. Communities erected these pioneer monuments to meet their own perceived needs at a particular point in U.S. history. The monuments thus reflect those communities’ ideals at the time that they were erected. Unlike Civil War and Native American statuary, little scholarly attention has been devoted to twentieth-century pioneer monuments.


While western states erected many statues to honor their own founding fathers, it was a generic pioneer mother who increasingly captured the American imagination during the interwar period. National organizations, local governments, and private donors all participated in a veritable Pioneer Mother Movement in the 1920s and 1930s. As American women gained new political, economic, and social opportunities—and concern with “new immigration” from Southern and Eastern Europe and from Asia grew widespread—monuments erected by conservative groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and western pioneer organizations celebrated an earlier golden age of clearly defined gender roles and Anglo American dominance. In fact, the nativist DAR embraced pioneer monuments as a means to simultaneously resist rapidly changing gender norms and to celebrate white civilization. The twelve identical August Leimbach statues erected by the DAR’s National Old Trails Road Committee to mark major western trails celebrated nineteenth-century gender roles along the nation’s new automobile highways by embracing iconography typical of the Pioneer Mother Movement (see Figure 2).20

At the height of the movement, prominent male American sculptors created a number of monuments to settler women; these monuments bore remarkable resemblance to one another. These iconic pioneer mothers were always white and usually young. Often surrounded by her children, but rarely accompanied by her husband, the pioneer mother symbolized the arrival of white settlement, advanced civilization, and Anglo American gender norms to the savage frontier.


Figure 2. August Leimbach, *Madonna of the Trail*, crushed granite, stone, marble, cement and lead, Springfield, Ohio, 1928. Photograph by the author.
norms from the 1890s to the 1920s led to stronger, more active roles for women in western art during that period than had been typical during the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{21} Yet an examination of the many statues erected in the late 1920s and the 1930s reveals that these changes appeared less frequently in public monuments intended to memorialize the sacrifices of donors’ ancestors than they did in other works of western art. And although pioneer mother monuments occasionally defied nostalgic domestic imagery, they still represented a golden past to individuals discomfited by significant changes in women’s social roles during the 1920s. Intensely domestic images continued to define pioneer monuments long after stronger women’s roles emerged in the 1920s—in no small part because of the sculptor Avard Fairbanks, who continued to land commissions across the West.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Pioneer mothers and fathers}

In July 1929, prominent citizens gathered across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon, to dedicate Fairbanks’s bronze memorial “typifying ‘the pioneer mothers.’”\textsuperscript{23} Rather than depicting any particular nineteenth-century woman, Fairbanks intended the statutory group erected in Vancouver, Washington, to be “an idealization of all the pioneer mothers who came to the perilous new western country side-by-side with the pioneer fathers.”\textsuperscript{24} In his design, shown above in Figure 1, Fairbanks played to white Pacific Northwest residents’ determination to believe—however inaccurately—that their ancestors had maintained distinct gender spheres while traveling West on the Oregon Trail. In fact, he depicted a domestic ideal that had been closely held by westering men and women in the 1840s and 1850s (and the many eastern artists who embraced Prairie Madonna imagery in that era) but that their children in late nineteenth-century Oregon and Washington had

\textsuperscript{21} Stott, “Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women.”


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
abandoned. At the statue’s unveiling ceremony, Judge W. W. McCredie “suggested that all mothers were well typified by the statue,” including primary donor Ida Crawford, who, though childless, “displayed the qualities of the [white] pioneer mothers in her loyal and tender care of her husband.”

In the Vancouver monument, Fairbanks balanced nostalgia for separate gender spheres with more modern, active forms of motherhood. He sculpted a larger-than-life woman surrounded by three young children, with her left hand resting tenderly on the head of her eldest child, a daughter. This daughter, in turn, reassures the youngest child, while a son grasps their mother’s skirts. Interestingly, Fairbanks’s 1928 pioneer mother strays from some of the iconography typical of other artists’ work. Although she is armed with a rifle, she does not trample cactus or march westward. Instead, Fairbanks’s Pioneer Mother rests demurely against a shoulder-high concrete backdrop whose shape evokes domestic features. The ruffled neckline of her flowing gown emphasizes her femininity and suggests modern clothing styles. Meanwhile, the shawl on her shoulders gently echoes the Madonna-like headscarves typical of western art produced at the height of the cult of domesticity nearly a century earlier, rather than the sturdy sunbonnet designed to protect and contain white womanhood in the western wilderness. The statue’s original setting of a waterfall and flowering shrubs further softened the scene. While she has a son at her side, he is balanced by an older, nurturing


26. “Vancouver Unveils Fountain Memorial.”


daughter on her other side. Overall, Fairbanks’s maternal grouping hearkened back to mid-nineteenth-century domestic ideology. Yet Fairbanks’s domestic scene was nestled within a park dedicated to the memory of Esther Short, who, according to the Morning Oregonian, was “a pioneer mother who not only defended her home and children against the Indians but also against encroachments of the Hudson Bay company.”29 Like Short, the idealized mother grasps a rifle with which to defend her young children; however, she appears unprepared to use it. This demure pioneer mother evoked conservative 1920s moral motherhood ideology, which emphasized maternal sacrifice and viewed motherhood as the basis of female citizenship.30

Fairbanks’s Pioneer Mother celebrated an idealized image of mid-nineteenth-century domesticity while simultaneously honoring the heroism of women’s contributions to tasks outside that domestic sphere—a precarious balance struck in varying ways by many Pioneer Mother Movement statues. In his Vancouver statue, Fairbanks balanced women’s domesticity and heroism by mirroring the tension between celebratory notes struck in pioneer tributes and early settlers’ published reminiscences and the realities of settlers’ lives.31

The sculpture’s gentle domesticity was reinforced by a medallion affixed to its back: a recasting of Fairbanks’s earlier Old Oregon Trail bas relief, which depicts a hardy pioneer guiding his covered wagon and ox team over rough western terrain, while his bare-headed wife holds their baby in a Madonna-like pose, the arc of the wagon cover forming a halo encircling her head (see Figure 3). Fairbanks’s 1924 Old Oregon Trail medallion echoed both the insignia of

29. “Vancouver Unveils Fountain Memorial.”
30. While historians have generally assumed that the antebellum ideal of “moral motherhood” was replaced by the rise of “scientific motherhood” during the 1920s, Rebecca Jo Plant argues convincingly that traditionalists continued to view “American motherhood” as a national social and political institution throughout the interwar period. Plant, Mom, 55–85.
31. At least one daughter of Oregon settlers disagreed with this imagery. Izella Surfus Osterud viewed the Fairbanks monument in the late 1960s. “‘T’wasn’t like that at all. Not at all,” she informed her granddaughter, Grey Osterud. “First thing is, the baby would be dead… The danger wasn’t wildcats or Indians, but cholera,” she replied, speaking as much to the statue as to [Osterud]. ‘Guns weren’t any use for that. And a mother couldn’t protect her children, either.’ She concluded, ‘Should have waited a couple of years and taken the train.’” Author correspondence with Grey Osterud, 20 October 2009. On the tension between pioneer memory and frontier reality, see Prescott, Gender and Generation.
the DAR’s National Old Trails Road Committee and W. H. D. Koerner’s famous 1921 *Madonna of the Prairie* painting. For the purpose of the Vancouver monument, Fairbanks adapted his earlier design slightly, renaming it *The Pioneer Mothers*, and thus redefining it as a tribute to rural women’s nurturing role and devotion to the domestic sphere, even in the roughest western conditions.\(^{32}\)

A series of bronze bas reliefs that Fairbanks created in the late 1920s for the front doors to the U.S. National Bank building in nearby Portland, Oregon, paired a similar covered-wagon Madonna with more modern roles for women. One panel repeated the imagery of the *Old Oregon Trail* and *The Pioneer Mothers* medallions, with

a bare-headed Anglo American woman riding in a covered wagon along a rock-strewn Oregon Trail, guided by her brave pioneer husband. Another panel depicted established white settlement: a young mother stands—tall and proud and dressed in fashionable late nineteenth-century attire—holding her young son by the hand as they admire Oregon’s first steamboat. Meanwhile, her farmer husband plants an orchard on the river bank. Taken together, these panels represent progress and the coming of white civilization to Oregon—civilization that was personified in Fairbanks’s iconic white pioneer mother. This gentle, nurturing mother reappeared regularly in pioneer monuments created by Fairbanks over the next fifty years. However, her role within an idealized pioneer family shifted in the 1930s, reflecting changes in American family ideals.  

During the Great Depression, monuments to pioneer women produced by other artists such as Leo Friedlander and Cyrus Dallin often depicted white women alone, unaccompanied even by their children. As the economic downturn challenged both women’s newfound independence and men’s breadwinner identity, prominent sculptors stepped back from the strong female imagery of sunbonneted women striding westward that had been popular among many artists in the late 1920s. Monuments erected on statehouse grounds in Oregon and Kansas deployed images reminiscent of Fairbanks’s more domestic Vancouver Pioneer Mother. Moreover, as many Americans struggled to feed their families, sculptors generally abandoned maternal imagery in pioneer monuments in favor of solo, apparently virginal young white women. As other artists embraced the gentler images Fairbanks favored (but without children), Fairbanks—who was Mormon—shifted his focus to Mormon pioneer families. While both Mormons and non-Mormons placed pioneer women on a pedestal, the pioneer-themed sculptures that Fairbanks produced for the LDS Church emphasized the centrality of family units in the Utah migration.

36. See for example: Dallin, Pioneer Mother; Burman, The Pioneer Woman; Friedlander, Pioneer Woman; [Pioneer Woman], Mount Hope Cemetery, Ellis, Kansas, 1933.
At the height of the Depression, amid nationwide calls for men to become involved fathers, Fairbanks sculpted a pair of Mormon families for the LDS Church’s display at the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair: *A Tragedy at Winter Quarters* and *Youth and New Frontiers*.37 These monuments were later cast in bronze for important LDS sites.38 *A Tragedy at Winter Quarters*, shown in Figure 4, depicts the artist’s ancestors burying their baby. More broadly, this statue of a westering white mother and father side-by-side, unified by their grief as they stand over their infant’s open grave, commemorates the suffering of Mormon families both at Winter Quarters in Nebraska and on the journey west to Utah. This Mormon pioneer mother faces tragedy unimagined in Fairbanks’s earlier, secular works. In the postwar period, the pioneer mother would gradually yield her place at the center of the family to her husband and children. For now, however, Fairbanks’s LDS couple stands united in mourning the loss of their beloved child, and the sturdy pioneer patriarch embraces his young wife, protecting her with his strong arm and swirling overcoat.39

37. Scholars such as Peter Filene, Steven Mintz, and Susan Kellogg have argued that their inability to support their families during Great Depression caused men to withdraw from parenting. However, Ralph LaRossa demonstrated that the popular parenting literature of the 1930s actually encouraged men to take a more active role in raising their children, compared to an emphasis on “the father as pal” to older boys in the 1920s. Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988); Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

38. Westward migration was a central part of the Mormon experience in the mid-nineteenth century, as church members migrated to Utah. Because early church leaders believed that God had called them to settle and establish their church in Utah, the Mormon migration to Utah represented a sacred calling and a central event in church history. In the twentieth century the church commissioned art depicting that westward migration. Fairbanks’s *A Tragedy at Winter Quarters* was soon cast in bronze and erected in Omaha, Nebraska, 1936. In 1948, the First Presidency cancelled their order for *Youth and New Frontiers* (also known as the *Mormon Pioneer Family*). The piece was installed decades later as *New Frontiers* in the new LDS Conference Center in Salt Lake City. Avard T. Fairbanks, *A Tragedy at Winter Quarters*, bronze, Omaha, Nebraska, 1936; Avard T. Fairbanks, *New Frontiers*, bronze, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1934; Agreement between the First Presidency and Avard Fairbanks, 1948, Folder 5, Box 1, L, Avard T. Fairbanks Papers (1906–1987), MSS 5866, Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah [hereafter Fairbanks Papers, Lee Library]; First Presidency to Avard Fairbanks, 19 October 1948, Folder 5, Box 1, L, Fairbanks Papers, Lee Library.

39. While this work was displayed in clay at the 1934 world’s fair, it was soon cast in bronze and erected as part of the Winter Quarters Cemetery Monument in Florence, Nebraska. Avard T. Fairbanks, *A Tragedy at Winter Quarters*; Eugene F. Fairbanks, *A Sculptor’s Testimony*, 80–95; Jonathan Fairbanks, “Eternal Celebrations in American Memorials,” in
Figure 4. Avard Fairbanks, A Tragedy at Winter Quarters, bronze, Omaha, Nebraska, 1936. Photograph by David M. Prescott.

Youth and New Frontiers offered hope to counterbalance the grief of A Tragedy at Winter Quarters. As shown in Figure 5, it depicted a young patriarchal family full of life and health. Fairbanks explained that the “man is placed characteristically as the foremost figure,” while the “mother is placed as the central figure and is upon a pedestal, an evidence of the high esteem in which Latter-day Saints hold womankind and especially mothers.” While Fairbanks described the woman as the “central figure” and placed her at the physical center of the monument, he referred to her by her familial role—whereas he referred to her husband as simply a “man,” independent of his familial role. That man, their son, and even the baby appear nearer to the viewer, upstaging the woman’s central location and placement on a pedestal that Fairbanks intended to symbolize Mormons’ respect for mothers. Far more than the sainted pioneer mother, or even the son whose seeking of “new frontiers” gives the statue its name, it is the father—as the foremost figure and the one in the most active pose—who draws the viewer’s attention and thus becomes the central character in this work. He provides (as evidenced by the grain in his right hand), and he supports his family (symbolized by his left arm supporting—but not cradling—the baby). Whereas other sculptors placed a Bible in a pioneer woman’s hand, symbolizing her role of bringing Christian civilization to supposedly savage western lands, it is the father and patriarch who provides both material support and spiritual guidance for Fairbanks’s Mormon family. While LDS men and women might stand united in the face of tragedy, Fairbanks sought to emphasize fathers’ patriarchal leadership. Abandoning the celebration of moral motherhood that had resonated with the descendants of Oregon Territory settlers in his 1928 Vancouver Pioneer Mother, Fairbanks emphasized the centrality of men as leaders of the family unit in this pair of sculptures created for the LDS Church.40

This Mormon focus on the male-headed family unit recurred throughout Fairbanks’s later sacred art. For example, in a 1942 Bell Tower plaque created for Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah, a pioneer father holds a young baby while his wife gazes lovingly at

---

Figure 5. Avard Fairbanks, *New Frontiers*, bronze, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1937. Photograph by the author.
the infant, her opposite arm embracing their young son. A description of this *Pioneering* bas relief in the LDS *Relief Society Magazine* explained that the family group—consisting of “a stalwart father, a tender mother, an infant child, a sturdy boy”—typifies the Mormon family as it ventured forth into the unknown West.” While Fairbanks moved the father to the rear of the family grouping in this work, the patriarch’s more active pose and greater dimensionality still draw the viewer’s attention to his dominant role in the family. Although the father in *Youth and New Frontiers* holds their infant, its body is nestled closer to its mother than to its father. In *Pioneering*, both parents gaze at the infant, which is clearly cradled by the father. While the mother’s arm encircles her son and gently holds his hand, her gaze remains trained on the baby—who would return to her arms in future Fairbanks family sculptures. As Fairbanks gradually moved the mother and baby to the background, he made the father more central in both sacred and secular pioneer monuments.

**Pioneer families**

Just as growing roles for women and immigrants following World War I inspired xenophobia and nostalgia for an imagined agrarian past, economic and baby booms following World War II inspired an idealization of the white, native-born nuclear family. That family form featured the husband as patriarch and breadwinner, wife as nurturing mother, and several young children at home. By the 1950s, many Americans viewed children as the center of the American family. Advice books and popular magazines taught that family life should revolve around the needs of young children. A woman was expected to find fulfillment in her role as wife and mother and—in the words of the historian Stephanie Coontz—was “pityed if she did not want what was expected of her.”

44. However, Stephanie Coontz made clear, this ideology was not embraced by all women, particularly working-class women and women of color. Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*;
as Joanne Meyerowitz, Jessica Weiss, and others have demonstrated that many families—both white and non-white—failed to fit the prescribed pattern of a male breadwinner, female homemaker, and three or more young children, all united in family “togetherness.” Nonetheless, many Americans—particularly those in the growing middle class—accepted the new glorification of the white nuclear family so prevalent in the mass media and aspired to live it out.

This emphasis on the nuclear family unit can be seen in pioneer monuments created by Fairbanks throughout the postwar period. Immediately following World War II, as other sculptors and monument donors largely abandoned pioneer mothers, Fairbanks explicitly embraced the Madonna-like imagery that he had previously used only in bas relief panels. For the first time, Fairbanks placed a babe in its mother’s arms. Rather than utilizing the relatively strong imagery of solo women holding babies that had been typical of other sculptors’ works in the 1920s and 1930s, however, Fairbanks returned to the Madonna imagery typical of mid-nineteenth-century western paintings and adapted it to new social conditions. Far from a celebration of women’s independence, the 1946 Pioneer Family Group, which was erected on the lawn of North Dakota’s new art deco capitol, incorporated new postwar ideas about the importance of the nuclear family and suburban domestic life even as it evoked nineteenth-century domestic ideology (see Figure 6). In this work, the baby that Fairbanks placed in its mother’s arms served to identify her unequivocally as a nurturing mother and drew her attention aside to domestic matters, while her husband stepped into a clear leadership role. As Fairbanks explained to the governor of Idaho:

My desire in this monument was to express the family as a unit with the individual characteristics of each. The feminine qualities in the figure of the mother of tenderness and love, strength and dependability in the father and the suggestion of adventure in the adolescent youth who holds to his

---


father for guidance are universal ideals and the latter expresses the father
and son relationship particularly.\footnote{47}

Thus Fairbanks sought to include such typical white characters as
a strong, hardworking man and a gentle, loving mother that were

\footnote{47. Avard Fairbanks to Governor C. A. Robbins, 3 September 1948, Folder 2, Box 11, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library.}
characteristic of his pioneer monuments of the 1920s in this postwar monument. He also sought to represent idealized white family life as it was (re)defined in the immediate postwar era: family togetherness, mothers’ domesticity and nurturance of young children, fathers’ central role as breadwinner, and young men embodying hope for the future.

Interest in pioneer mother monuments declined precipitously in the postwar era even though the appeal of the mythic West in popular culture increased significantly in the 1950s. Film and television conflicts between “white hats” (good guys) and “black hats” (bad guys) in the Wild West became a convenient way to grapple with Cold War–era anxieties about the battle between good and evil. Importantly, Americans gravitated not only toward stories of white cowboys dominating red Indians, but also tales of strong men and nurturing women settlers. Pioneer narratives increasingly became part of the nation’s foundation myths. In this new context, rural folk held on to their nostalgia for pioneering.

In ballooning western metropolises, bronze pioneer statues became less popular. Undaunted, Fairbanks continued to visit smaller communities throughout the interior West, producing tributes large and small to white pioneer mothers, including at a public demonstration in Pocatello, Idaho, in 1954. Fairbanks was also eager to sculpt a pioneer woman statue for Salem, Oregon, where janitor and elevator operator Caroll Moores had left nearly his entire life savings “in the hope of inspiring the people of the world to the greatness of our pioneer heritage.”

When the officials responsible for Moores’s bequest at the aptly-named Pioneer Trust Company indicated their intention to

48. Avard Fairbanks to Russell Reid, 13 October 1947, Folder 4, Box 6, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library.
51. Avard T. Fairbanks to Barbara Cross, 22 May 1956, Folder 6, Box 4, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library. See also: Mrs. Avard Fairbanks to George Putnam, 11 October 1954, Folder 8, Box 1, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library.
use Moores’s money to purchase a nude Pierre-Auguste Renoir *Venus Victorieuse* statue as their monument to Oregon pioneers, the people of Salem were shocked. As *Time* magazine reported, “‘What we want,’ said one member of the Lions, ‘is a statue of a pioneer woman in a gingham dress and a sunbonnet . . . not this trash.’”

Although the popularity of such monuments had declined after World War II, many of Salem’s 43,000 residents indeed seemed to want and expect yet another 1920s-style white pioneer mother monument. Public protest apparently persuaded the Pioneer Trust officials to reconsider their decision to purchase the valuable Renoir casting. The people of Salem presumably were relieved by the selection committee’s eventual choice of the design submitted by Fairbanks, who had once taught art in nearby Eugene and was now renowned for his many pioneer monuments. The artist was overjoyed that his traditional pioneer imagery prevailed:

Had [the plan] been completed Oregon would have had a French female nude to represent the pioneer mothers of the great Oregon Trail. What a travesty . . . Fortunately, we have real Westerners and true Americans who still believe that our cultural heritage is well worth memorializing with true and sincere presentations rather than by sophisticated misrepresentations.

Tellingly, Fairbanks declared the iconic white pioneer woman to represent not only Westerners whose ancestors had carried Anglo civilization westward, but also all “true Americans,” whose identity had become inextricably linked to western mythology by the 1950s.

As Fairbanks worked on his proposal for the Salem statue, he explained to an acquaintance in Oregon that in his monuments he sought “to keep alive in the memories of oncoming generations the heroic characters and their deeds which have built a great nation.”

Indeed, echoing work at the height of the Pioneer Mother Movement, Fairbanks adapted his 1924 *Old Oregon Trail* medallion yet again for the Oregon Centennial bas relief, which he attached to the reverse of this 1958 monument’s marble backdrop. Yet Fairbanks’s model for the Salem sculpture—which ultimately beat out

---


53. Fairbanks to Cross, 22 May 1956, Folder 6, Box 4, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library.

54. Avard Fairbanks to W. C. Calder, 29 January 1954, Folder 8, Box 1, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library.
both the nude Renoir and several more conventional renditions of the pioneer theme—focused not on a popular pioneer mother character, nor on a solo male pioneer, but on a child, as shown in Figure 7. Fairbanks explained that he chose to place a young man at the center of the 1950s Salem monument because—in keeping with mainstream family norms of that era—“all life and our ideals are centered in youth, for therein lies the great futures, not only in our times, but in all times and in all ages.”55 The boy’s tender and loving mother (with no babe-in-arms requiring her intensive nurturance) stood just behind him and to one side with her hand on the youth’s shoulder, while his strong father stood in the background, providing a firm foundation while allowing the younger generation to lead. This father’s occupation as a farmer would enable him to train and mentor his young son, rather than abandoning him for long hours each day at the office as many postwar middle-class fathers did.56 At the same time, his guidance would protect his growing son from the danger of excessive emotional dependence on his nurturing mother.57 Yet unlike the father in the Depression-era Youth and New Frontiers, this modern father stepped aside and encouraged his son to lead. In the midst of Cold War uncertainty, mainstream America’s energetic youth, rather than its mothers’ civilizing influence or even its fathers’ steadfastness, represented the nation’s greatest hope for the future. But the nineteenth-century frontier myth still underpinned American national identity.58

Western frontier mythology and the promise of America’s youth lost much of its cachet in the 1960s when the previous decade’s

55. Quoted in “Guidance of Youth,” Capital Journal, no date, Folder 11, Box 12, Fairbanks Papers, Marriott Library.
56. Weiss, To Have and to Hold.
57. Psychological experts urged mothers to provide intensive nurturance to infants but warned that continued emotional dependence was dangerous for older boys and adolescents. Plant, Mom, chapter 3.
Figure 7. Avard Fairbanks, *Guidance of Youth*, bronze, Salem, Oregon, 1958. Photograph by the author.
appearance of cultural conformity splintered amid student activism, calls for civil rights, and the sexual revolution. Significantly, no major pioneer monuments were erected during the 1960s.

The American Family

In the 1970s, women’s liberation and various self-help movements inspired many Americans to rethink the proper role of men and women in marriage and family life. Fathers were encouraged to be present at the birth of their offspring, and expectations for paternal nurturing of children grew.59 The LDS Church finally embraced full church membership for African Americans, and some challenged women’s exclusion from the priesthood, but the Church organized against the Equal Rights Amendment.60 Fairbanks responded to these rapid social and religious changes by returning to a spiritual vision he had first expressed in a model sketch more than three decades earlier. His moment of “profound spiritual significance” inspired a bronze family grouping installed in front of the county courthouse in Provo, Utah, in 1978.61 In many ways, this work, titled The American Family and shown in Figure 8, echoed earlier Fairbanks treatments of white western settlers. But the father moved from the rear to the foreground, his young son at his knee. While the loving pioneer mother remained at the apex of the sculpture’s triangular shape, once again tenderly holding her


infant child, her presence seemed almost superfluous, as her husband’s dual roles as nurturer and patriarch took center stage.  

Rather than emphasizing the sacrifices of white pioneers, Fairbanks told a local newspaper that he created *The American Family* “to commemorate the significance of the family in American history.”63 Although the LDS Church had finally accepted African Americans into full membership, Fairbanks still envisioned an Anglo American family ideal. He held out his own white LDS family as a model of national family values. Fairbanks’s decision to replace the monument’s earlier working titles—first *God Bless Our Home*, and later *The Eternal Family*—with one emphasizing American familial ideals highlight its creator’s careful co-mingling of Mormon family values with national family and western histories.64 The fact that the LDS *Deseret News* and the Provo *Herald* persisted in referring to the sculpture as *The Eternal Family* even as its unveiling neared, however, suggests that Mormon Utahans viewed it as a sacred statue despite its secular setting.65 Even as the statue embraced changing national family norms, it also spoke to its primarily LDS audience about their Mormon identity. They had become more American than the wider society at a time when many—Mormon and non-Mormon alike—believed that that society was straying from its core family values. They embraced Fairbanks’s appeal to a white American family norm, at a time when long-standing Mormon cultural values suddenly seemed to align with the nascent New Right’s emphasis on “traditional (white) family values.”66

Another major Fairbanks sculpture placed in the interior of the same Utah County courthouse the following year reinforced the

sculptor’s desire to put white pioneer families at the center of national identity. *American Motherhood* was erected by the American Family and Motherhood Statue Committee in 1979 (see Figure 9). While not explicitly a pioneer monument, it featured a mother with babe in arms who bore a striking resemblance to the mothers featured in the


nearby *The American Family* and Fairbanks’s 1946 North Dakota *Pioneer Family Group*. For the first time in fifty years, Fairbanks depicted a pioneer mother and an attractive young daughter unaccompanied by a family patriarch and strapping son.  

68 *American Motherhood* is unique in Fairbanks’s use of white marble (rather than bronze) to depict the purity of Anglo American motherhood, and is one of two Fairbanks pioneer monuments to be installed indoors. While the courthouse was hardly a mid-nineteenth-century mother’s rightful sphere, the work’s placement indoors nonetheless suggests the woman’s domesticity even more effectively than the concrete backdrop protecting the Vancouver *Pioneer Mother* that Fairbanks created a half-century earlier. At a time when growing numbers of American women were embracing paid work outside the home, Fairbanks returned to an antebellum maternal ideal, presenting the (white, middle-class) American mother as a symbol of the nation’s virtue and commitment to traditional values.  

69 This image clearly spoke to Americans concerned about changing family roles, as models of *American Motherhood* were presented to the Utah County, state, and national Mother of the Year recipients by the inter-faith American Mothers, Inc.  

70 The white paternal and maternal images that Fairbanks created in his 1920s and 1930s pioneer monuments had, by the late 1970s, come to represent not only Mormon or western families, but *the* American family.

**Fairbanks’s pioneer families**

At first glance, Fairbanks’s many pioneer-themed statues and bas reliefs appear remarkably similar. In the early twentieth century, at a time of rapid social change and nostalgia for so-called traditional rural life, Fairbanks and others built massive bronze monuments idealizing white settler women. However, Fairbanks’s embrace of moral motherhood—and his own LDS religious beliefs—inspired him to depict western women in ways more typical of mid-nineteenth-century domestic ideology. By introducing men into his monuments,

68. In keeping with what Plant called the “transformation of motherhood” in the postwar era, by 1979 a mother tending to a growing boy would have been perceived as a threat to his budding masculinity. Thus, in the absence of a strong father figure, Fairbanks replaced the sons he had favored for decades with a well-groomed little girl. Plant, *Mom.*  

69. Ibid.  

and then by rearranging the characters within each sculpture, Fairbanks changed his depictions of stock pioneer characters to fit the times. His post–World War II statues simultaneously reflected and helped to reinforce new beliefs in the centrality of the white nuclear family. For fifty years after creating Vancouver’s domestic Pioneer Mother, Fairbanks remained wedded to Madonna imagery. But his images of a pioneer patriarch and a Prairie Madonna eventually became far more than nostalgic celebrations of local settlers. Indeed, for Fairbanks, his donors, and social conservatives, they had become the ideal American family—and an embodiment of the American nation.

Interest in pioneer monuments grew once again just as Fairbanks’s long sculpting career ended with his death in 1987. Renewed anxiety about immigration and changing gender and sexual norms inspired renewed interest in pioneer commemoration. Several smaller communities in the interior West erected centennial monuments in the late 1980s that resembled Fairbanks’s pioneer families. But the conservative movement that generated interest in Fairbanks’s monuments in the 1970s and in similar monuments after his death helped spark a culture war in the 1990s—one that played out dramatically, for instance, in Portland, Oregon. Ninety years after suffragists erected a statue of Sacagawea as the first tribute to “the Pioneer Mother of Oregon,” the installation of a Fairbanks-like bronze trio of pioneer father, mother, and son within walking distance of the Cooper Sacajawea (and less than ten miles from Fairbanks’s Vancouver Pioneer Mother) sparked controversy. While conservatives embraced the erection of David Manuel’s The Promised Land, an outspoken minority of more progressive Portlanders challenged the statue as being exclusionary both racially and religiously. Critics were particularly concerned by the statue’s seeming celebration of the destruction of indigenous peoples. Yet at the same time, smaller communities in the interior West enthusiastically erected their own monuments to pioneer families that look a great deal like Fairbanks’s postwar pioneer families.71

Throughout the twentieth century, western American communities erected monuments to commemorate their early settlers.

---

Tracing changing depictions of men, women, and children in pioneer statues over the course of Fairbanks’s remarkably long career highlights changing western gender norms and American family ideals. In Fairbanks’s hands, tributes to the triumph of white civilization gradually yielded to celebrations of (white, middle-class) nuclear family life. Remembering the primacy of rural women’s maternal role gave way to celebrations of fatherly guidance and love. Family togetherness trumped separate gender spheres, and families increasingly focused on children as the new center of the family. Yet Fairbanks’s final pioneer-themed works—and similar works created after his death—also promised a return to mid-nineteenth-century domesticity as American nuclear families splintered at the close of the Cold War. While both the artist and these sculptures’ donors sought to commemorate a nineteenth-century “golden age” of the American family, their monuments more effectively enshrined rapidly changing popular conceptions of ideal family life in the twentieth century. At the same time, these monuments served to reframe the myths of the frontier. In the monumental works of sculptor Avard T. Fairbanks, western history became American history, and the mythical frontier family came to embody the American nation.