

The Southern Way of Life and  
Planter-Class Women's Perceptions of the Civil War

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The Civil War period was a time of immense change and adjustment. People's ways of life were disrupted and altered, and in some cases, lost forever. The people who felt this loss of their lifestyle most were the planter class women of the South. Before the war, their lives were about conforming to the strict Southern code of womanhood. This ideal of womanhood had essentially four characteristics that any good and proper young elite woman should cultivate: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. These traditional standards included accepting their role in the patriarchal system. White elite men had power over women, lower class whites, and slaves. The elite southern way of life and patriarchal dominance affected planter-class female perceptions about the war and allowed them to step out of their socially defined gender prescriptions in order to support the Confederate Cause.

The demands of the war offered Confederate elite women the opportunity to be a part of the struggle for Southern independence, and, like their men, define themselves as "independent" Southern women.<sup>1</sup> However, many elite women felt that to step out of their traditionally defined roles was too difficult and too detrimental to their privileged way of life. In Mothers of Invention; Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War, Drew Gilpin Faust suggests that the war that challenged a society so dependent on racial hierarchy also forced Southerners to reconsider the traditional roles of women as well. During the war, white elite women had to step out of gender prescriptions in order to assume the responsibilities of the plantation and to survive, but at the same time, they were expected to retain their feminine qualities.<sup>2</sup>

Women were supportive and confident in the new Confederacy and in the men who fought for it. Sarah Morgan, an elite white woman started her diary in 1862, when she was nineteen years old. She was living on her father's plantation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana during the war. She wrote in January 1863, "Well! I boast myself Rebel, sing Dixie, shout Southern Rights, pray for God's blessing on our cause, without ceasing, and would not live in this country if by any possible calamity we should be conquered."<sup>3</sup>

Scholars of Civil War history have many different opinions of the roles of elite women during the war. Some writers believe that these women stepped out of their traditionally female roles to take over economic and financial business while their men were away at the front. Other writers, however, believe that women did not abandon their socially-defined roles of femininity to look after and maintain the plantations while their husbands were absent.

According to Laura Edwards, author of Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore, Southern Women in the Civil War Era, southern elite women, while they lived lives of comfort and luxury before the war, endured second class citizenship for their affluent lifestyles. Class privilege came at a heavy price to southern women. Women obtained status through husbands, brothers, and fathers, so subordination to men was obligatory. The connection between slavery and marriage in Southern society reveals a great deal about the power structures of the plantation patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> Both slaves and white women were the inferior, submissive subjects of white plantation owners: the husbands and masters. Slave masters were the husbands of planter wives, and for a woman or slave to challenge one, was to challenge the other; the slave owner was also the husband, and therefore, the head of the household.<sup>5</sup> Before emancipation, many Southerners defended

slavery by calling it “as natural as marriage, equating the subordination of women and slaves”.<sup>6</sup>

Edwards demonstrates the subordination of young elite women in the way that they were raised and brought up to be elite wives. Daughters of plantation owners were disciplined by their parents as they approached their teen years, in order to prepare them for their futures as the wives of plantation owners. Women of the elite class were expected to submit to their husbands, maintain the authority necessary to oversee and direct house slaves, and to conform to the strict standards of womanhood as established by their class. Difficult training and regulations primed the girls for their lives as plantation mistresses.<sup>7</sup> The “coming out” ceremony of mid-to-late teenage girls was not only a social event; it was the quest to find a suitable husband for the belle. The final choice of a husband was crucial to her and to her family’s future in order to create and stabilize social and economic networks. Love was seldom a factor in the choice of a husband. More important was gaining respectability, social status, financial security, and mastery combined with kindness from a man in good social standing. Gertrude Clanton, the daughter of an elite plantation owner, chose Jefferson Thomas as her husband because “just such a master will as suits my woman’s nature, for true to my sex, I delight in looking up and love to feel my woman’s weakness protected by man’s superior strength”.<sup>8</sup>

Although Southern women didn’t marry for love, they still desired the romance so often mentioned in books and conversation. However, when a husband was distant or indifferent, Edwards indicates that a wife would simply change her expectations so as not

to question or challenge the southern way of life or to overstep her position.<sup>9</sup> They were the ones who had to adjust to the system.

In Tara Revisited; Women, War, and the Plantation Legend, Catherine Clinton attempts to dispel the plantation legend of “Gone with the Wind” and other embellishments of Confederate society, to focus on how a typical planter-class woman survived the war. Planter-class women were expected to fulfill a “mother” role on the plantation. The expectation of domestic self-sacrifice, and thus, the “true woman”, was to be the maternal figure for both her children and for her slave dependents.<sup>10</sup> As Southern landowners increasingly came to depend on the slave system, demands of the plantation wife also increased. She was eventually expected to provide for her husband’s slaves in four important areas: food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Although she seemed like mere decoration, she was extremely important in the care of the slaves.<sup>11</sup>

As Clinton illustrates, while women were given this maternal responsibility, the plantation master was the supreme ruler of all that happened on his property. The slave system revolved around paternalistic domination and upon the power of white males over both women and slaves. The head of the household was expected to maintain social order on the plantation, as well as exert dominance over the slaves.<sup>12</sup> The plantation embraced the hierarchical structure of the patriarchal society of the South, and served as the organizing standard of southern households. It functioned as the most important mechanism of race control. John C. Calhoun, the South’s most powerful antebellum defender, said “The Southern States are an aggregate...of communities, not of individuals. Every plantation is a little community; with the master at its head...These

small communities aggregated make the State in all...Hence the harmony, the Union and the stability of that section.”<sup>13</sup>

As Edwards suggests, many elite Southern women disagreed with slavery. They saw it as unmanageable, they knew of their husbands’ sexual relationships with female slaves, and some religious teachings opposed slavery. Although they disagreed, they knew that the institution of slavery could not be abolished if their way of life, social position, and privileges were to be retained.<sup>14</sup> Women of the planter class remained loyal to the Confederacy because they had much more invested in the existing social structure than other southerners did, but their loyalty to the Confederacy did not establish devotion to the slave system. At the beginning of secession, elite white women assumed that all Southerners supported the Confederacy as strongly as they did, because they believed that their interests were the same as all other Southerners.<sup>15</sup> The higher a man or woman’s economic standing, the more likely he or she was to support the Confederacy. Slave-owning women chose to support the Confederate cause to maintain their way of life.

Yet as the war progressed, elite white women experienced challenges to that way of life. With so many of their men in the Confederate army, Southern elite women found themselves trying to control slaves for the first time. Although women relied on male kin and neighbors, the men became increasingly scarce.<sup>16</sup> Increasingly, managing the slaves caused slaveholding women to feel helpless. The “plantation mistresses” did not command the same authority as the male master. A Georgia planter commented in 1864 that the slaves “are very difficult to control” because they had “no fear of the women”. The fear and frustration of managing slaves caused many elite white women to question

whether slavery was worth the trouble it caused.<sup>17</sup> While elite Confederate women desired to retain their leisure lifestyle, they feared the slave system, and what could happen to them with the absence of white men who were fighting in the war. Rumors and reports of slave insurrections and violence, especially after the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation, got the attention of plantation women.<sup>18</sup> As more and more men left for the battlefield, women found themselves in a world of white women and black slaves. The responsibility of managing slaves fell to the plantation mistresses, an unwanted burden, which under growing black assertiveness, caused them to question the moral and political legitimacy of the institution. However, the war situation did not allow for thinking about the value of the slave system.<sup>19</sup>

For women of slave owning classes, the departure of husbands and sons and the continuing pressures of war took on additional significance. The burden of slave management, the designated responsibility of male planter and overseers before the conflict, now fell to the plantation mistresses. Because of the isolation of many of the plantations, and the huge imbalance of slaves to mistresses, the unsupervised slaves became an extreme threat. However, when the majority of men enlisted for military service, the Confederate government failed to provide means of controlling plantation slaves. Under these circumstances, many elite women felt terrified, but also abandoned and betrayed. Slave management was a duty that women felt inappropriate for their gender.<sup>20</sup>

Slaves often shared their mistresses' apprehensions of slave management. Because of impending black freedom, the mistresses found themselves managing a different kind of institution than their husbands, and female anxiety resulted from fear of

rebellion. Faust explains that complex relationships formed between slaves and their mistresses during the war because women increasingly relied on slave labor for survival at a time when slaves saw diminishing motivation for work and obedience. Before the war, male slave owners used violence to control and subordinate slaves. However, many women found the task of violence impossible. Just as “paternalism” and “mastery” were concepts of Southern masculinity, violence was also gendered. The entire system depended on the threat and use of violence. As slaves grew more assertive, the women realized that physical coercion was more essential and more difficult. Many mistresses bargained with violence, hoping that if they didn’t use it, the slaves would remain loyal. Many white plantation women avoided physical punishment, even for insolence or poor work. Plantation mistress Lizzie Neblett in Texas urged her part-time overseer to not beat her slaves so often for their insubordination. “I told him not to whip Joe, as long as he done his work well...that he might run away & we might never get him & if he never done ma any good he might my children.”<sup>21</sup>

Women had so much difficulty using violence because it was a power associated with masculinity. They were reluctant to use a method which, Drew Gilpin Faust suggests, because of their gender and therefore inferior status, was not rightfully their own.<sup>22</sup> Violence was the foundation of power in the South, but gender traditions excluded women from purposeful exercise of physical control.<sup>23</sup> Given this, Confederate women called for male support to manage plantations. By the middle of the war, plantation women had begun to write to newspapers and Confederate officials begging for men to be discharged from the military to control the slaves and manage the institution.

From the very beginning of the war, plantation wives had to deal with another issue with the slaves: runaways. Lizzie Neblett wrote to her husband in 1863 that “the negroes are doing nothing. But ours are not doing that job alone; nearly all the negroes around here are at it, some of them are getting so high in anticipation of their glorious freedom by the Yankees...that they resist a whipping.”<sup>24</sup> Charlotte St. Julien Ravenel described the situation on her plantation in her diary. “The field negroes are in a dreadful state; they will not work, but either roam the country, or sit in their houses. At first they all said they were going, but have changed their minds now...I don’t see how we are to live in this country without any rule or regulation. We are afraid now to walk outside of the gate.”<sup>25</sup> Sarah Morgan was shocked and felt abandoned on March 14, 1863, when her slave, “...Liddy has run off to the Yankees.”<sup>26</sup>

The departure of their slaves was so appalling because, for plantation mistresses, their sense of identity and social status depended on having servants who did the work on the plantation. Drew Faust suggests that as more slaves deserted them, the women realized the extent of their dependence on their slaves. Many elite women lacked the basic skills of life, as they had grown up with slaves who performed essential domestic tasks. These women had been sheltered and taught that they were weak, and because of this, many felt incapable to adjust to their new lives that the war had brought.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the problems and their own doubts, many women learned how to manage their plantations and were successful. However, many others longed for their men to return, and for the reinstatement of their pre-war lives. Many plantation mistresses began to feel that the institution of slavery was more trouble than it was worth. These doubts seldom came from moral debates about slavery, but from the difficulties in acting as

slave masters.<sup>28</sup> With the war's end, elite white women of the South, in their brief stint with male responsibility, realized that a change in the patriarchal system would bring more burden than benefit. Their status as white females and the protection that came from this status was too valued to give up.<sup>29</sup>

The patriarchal traditions of religion supported the idea that women needed this protection from men. Religion also reinforced the ideal of slavery and the required submission of women to men. Laura Edwards stated that "God stood at the head of the Christian household, just as white men presided over their earthly ones. White women, like slavers, were supposed to realize their spiritual mission through cheerful obedience to the authority of white men."<sup>30</sup> Religious salvation was equated with the ability to fill their social roles as wives of wealthy slave owners. In continuance with patriarchal dominance, slave holding society proclaimed motherhood as a woman's "highest mission" in life, to provide "numerous (preferably male) heirs to sustain the family line".<sup>31</sup>

From the opening days of the war, Southerners found justification and consolation in religion. Both government and church leaders supported the divine purpose of the Confederate "experiment".<sup>32</sup> Christian faith gave some elite Confederate women redemption. They struggled to find some sense as to why their fathers, brothers, and sons were being murdered in a war they felt may not have been winnable.<sup>33</sup> Many privileged women turned to religion to make sense of their anguish and to find the courage to endure the hardships and losses they faced.<sup>34</sup> However, the war contradicted the logic of Christian submission. As Faust demonstrates, for elite Southern women, necessity, or what they called, "the mother of invention", became the source of change for their

lifestyles. The harsh realities they faced during the war years caused many of the plantation mistresses to realize the dangers of dependence on man, and inherently, God. A new sense of God's distance combined with a new distrust of the men on whom they had depended for protection for so long, drove Confederate women towards a new independence, whether they wanted to embrace it or not.<sup>35</sup>

Men were encouraged by both women and Southern cultural norms to uphold duty, honor, liberty, and home. As the heads of households, men were given the duty to protect and provide for their dependents, which included wives, children, and slaves. Through the performance of their duties, men gained honor and power. "Conversely, the dereliction of duty or the surrender of liberty meant dishonor and shame."<sup>36</sup> Planter class women believed that the war would elevate the status of Southern men and justify and affirm slave holding society. "When husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers joined the Confederate army to defend their homes, family honor, and Southern culture, they connected the family and household to Confederate nationalism."<sup>37</sup> Women looked to these men to display and extend family honor during the war.<sup>38</sup> Sarah Morgan said that "The North Cannot subdue us. We are too determined to be free."<sup>39</sup>

According to Giselle Roberts, "Southern honor was firmly entrenched in the family unit, the community, and the political spheres of the South...honor was made up of three major components: the inner conviction of self-worth, the claim of that self-assessment before the public, and the assessment of that self-worth before the public."<sup>40</sup> Family and family honor were clearly connected to the honor of the South and its 'Cause'. "Gallantry in battle often received public recognition or a promotion. Ultimately, this public assessment of self-worth was vital to the maintenance of family

honor as well as the success of the Cause. The absence of such recognition often caused considerable anxiety amongst elite women.”<sup>41</sup> Kate Stone, daughter of one of the wealthiest plantation owners in the South, was proud of her brother for his achievements in battle. “I am very happy for my darling Brother has been mentioned for distinguished gallantry in the late battles. We are not surprised for we know him, but it is grateful to have others appreciate him.”<sup>42</sup> In July 1861, Gertrude Clanton Thomas, an elite woman in Augusta, Georgia, wrote that she did not want her husband to stay at home with her. “When Duty and Honour call him it would be strange if I would influence him to remain ‘in the lap of inglorious ease’ when so much is at stake. Our country is invaded-our homes are in danger- We are deprived or they are attempting to deprive us of that glorious liberty for which our Fathers fought and bled and shall we tamely submit to this? Never!”<sup>43</sup>

The outbreak of war strengthened gender roles as Confederate men set out for the battlefields to defend their families and their “manhood”, while Confederate women increased their commitment to their men and to the Cause.<sup>44</sup> Rigid expectations of men’s appropriate behavior during wartime enhanced many women’s enthusiasm for the Confederate Cause. The association of manhood with honor, courage, and glory were more important than how women felt to give up their men. They had learned to believe that the value of a man was inseparable from his willingness to die for his country. Kate Cumming said that a “man did not deserve the name of a man if he did not fight for his country.”<sup>45</sup>

Protecting white women from the threats of the slave system was also an essential part of the planters’ paternalistic responsibility.<sup>46</sup> War was full of dangers exclusive to

women, and none was more feared than rape- or, as white Southerners deemed it, a “dishonor infinitely worse than death.” When the conflict began, the men who left women alone on plantations hoped that the Northern soldiers would be controlled by officers and gentlemen who would enforce the strict military ban on sexual misconduct. Both sides had determined that rape would result in a court-martial and possible execution. The possibility of confrontation and danger were the plantation mistress’s worst nightmares.<sup>47</sup> Sarah Morgan realized the need for protection when she wrote in her diary, “Oh my brothers, George, Gibbes, and Jimmy, never did we more need protection!”<sup>48</sup>

However, the privilege of gender did provide protection for Confederate elite women. Most Yankees were reluctant to harm these white women of the upper class. Union officers restrained and reprimanded men who failed to show the women respect. White elite females were seldom victims of rape by Northern soldiers. Instead, lower-class white women and slave women were subjected to the violence of the invading soldiers.<sup>49</sup>

Some planter-class women embraced this immunity provided to them by their class and gender. After New Orleans fell to Union Major General Benjamin Butler in April 1862, the ladies of the city treated the occupying Union soldiers with extreme hatred. By spitting on them, crossing streets to avoid Federal soldiers, or leaving streetcars when soldiers got on, southern women sought to humiliate their conquerors. Butler knew he had to control their actions, for “a city could hardly be said to be under good government where such things were permitted.” On May 15, he issued General Order No. 28, an order designed to compel the women of New Orleans to restrain their

hostile outbursts. “As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans...it is ordered that hereafter when any female shall, by work, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.” Women who stepped outside of their gendered social sphere would not be privy to the protection which was accorded to “ladies”.<sup>50</sup>

Horrified at the idea of being identified as a woman of the lowest moral and social standing, the white elite women of New Orleans again became restrained and docile.<sup>51</sup> Mary Chestnut complained to her diary on May 21 about the situation in New Orleans. “There is said to be an order from Butler, turning over the women of New Orleans to his soldiers! This hideous, cross-eyed beast orders his men to treat the ladies of New Orleans as women of the town; to punish them, he says, for their insolence.”<sup>52</sup> Sarah Morgan also mentioned the General Order in her writing. “A new proclamation from Butler has just come. It seems that the ladies have an ugly way of gathering up their skirts when the Federals pass, they prevent contact, and some even turn up their noses- unlady-like to say the least, but which may be owing to the odor they have, which is said to be unbearable even at this early season of year. Butler says, whereas the so called ladies of New Orleans insult his men and officer, he gives one and all, permission to insult any or all who so treat them, then and there, with the assurance that the women will not receive the slightest protection from the government, and the men will all be justified.”<sup>53</sup>

Both Mary and Sarah had criticisms of the actions of the women in New Orleans. Mary said that “A man is supposed to confide his honor to his wife. If she misbehaves

herself, his honor is tarnished.”<sup>54</sup> Sarah wrote that “In my opinion, the Southern women, and some few of the men, have disgraced themselves by their rude, ill mannered behavior in many instances. I insist, that if the valor and chivalry of our men cannot save our country, I would rather have it conquered by a brave race, than own its liberty to the...demonstrations of some of these ‘ladies.’”<sup>55</sup>

As the elite women of New Orleans showed in their actions toward Union soldiers, secession and war intensified women’s loyalty to their men of the same race and class, not just because they were taught this, but also because a threat to the powers of the male head of house caused a threat to their place in the household and in society.<sup>56</sup> White women stood firmly by their men, identifying and supporting the Confederate cause and at the same time supporting their own traditional subordinate and supportive place within the Southern patriarchy.<sup>57</sup> Sarah Morgan said, “I confess my self a rebel, body and soul. Confess? I glory in it! Am proud of being one; would not forego the title of any other earthly one!”<sup>58</sup>

After the fall of New Orleans, however, women who accepted the traditional definitions of male honor, their men had disgraced themselves by surrendering the city.<sup>59</sup> Women soon realized their defenselessness against the invading army. Southern men could no longer protect them, and their confidence in their protectors crumbled. The men of the Confederacy were no longer “men”.<sup>60</sup> However, the women did not let the Yankee troops see their disappointment in their men. They consistently stood up to the soldiers, but they could not help but feel abandoned and betrayed.<sup>61</sup> Elite women had to face the new life caused by the war, and they struggled to deal with the destruction of their way of life, and the society in which they were privileged to be white, but subordinate as

females.<sup>62</sup> Sarah Morgan conveyed her fear of the destruction of the Confederacy. “Can we so submit? God have mercy on us and deliver us from the hands of our enemies! This degradation is worse than the bitterness of death! I see no salvation [on] either side. No glory awaits the Southern Confederacy if it does achieve its independence; it will be a mere speck in the world, with no weight or authority.”<sup>63</sup>

Confederate women, even after the defeat of the Confederacy, still supported and respected their men. Many women wrote poems and songs to show their admiration and gratefulness to the soldiers who fought to protect them.

“The Confederate Flag” Louise Wigfall Wright

The hands of our women made it!  
 ‘Twas baptized in our mother’s tears!  
 And drenched with blood of our kindred,  
 While with hope for those four long years,  
 Across vale and plain we watched it,  
 Where the red tide of battle rolled  
 And with tear-dimmed eyes we followed  
 The wave of each silken fold.

As high o’er our hosts it floated,  
 Through the dust and din of the fight,  
 We caught the flint of the spear-head  
 And the flash of its crimson light!  
 While the blood of the men who bore it  
 Flowed fast on the reddened plain,  
 Till our cry went up in anguish  
 To God, for our martyred slain!

And we wept, and watched, and waited  
 By our lonely household fire,  
 For the mother gave her first born,  
 And the daughter gave her sire!  
 And the wife sent forth her husband,  
 And the maiden her lover sweet;  
 And our hearts kept time in the silence  
 To the rhythmic tread of their feet...<sup>64</sup>

Louise Wigfall Wright, with this song, attempted to pay tribute to the women of the South, who “wept, watched, and waited”, and who “gave her first born”. Her prose immortalizes Confederate women, and commemorates their efforts to maintain their duty, as they waited out the war and watched their men die.

While men physically defended the South and its way of life, women could not possibly physically defend themselves, families, or property. Instead, they practiced honor through domestication and support of the Cause. The women supported the Confederate army and soldiers by encouraging enlistment, donating supplies, as they felt pride for their husbands, brothers, and fathers as they left for battle.<sup>65</sup> Vicksburg women put heavy pressure on the men to go to war. By gossip and finger-pointing, they pressured stay-at-homes to join the army.<sup>66</sup>

Elite women soon lost their enthusiasm for the war. As more and more men left for the front, women began to feel unprotected and vulnerable. Women of the southern elite class considered protection by males an entitlement for being a woman.<sup>67</sup> They were forced to become frugal and economical as shortages hit. The feeling of vulnerability increased as the fighting moved closer and closer with the Union occupation.<sup>68</sup> Public conversation and government policy in the Confederacy clearly recognized the gendered foundation of its society. From the beginning of the fighting, Confederate leaders were uneasy about women running plantations and managing slaves.<sup>69</sup>

The women of the Confederacy were expected to support their men who marched off to war to fight for them. It was their duty and responsibility to the Confederate Cause to encourage their men to service. In the South, Confederate loyalty was not only the duty

of white women but a weapon the government used to bring straggling men into patriotic service.<sup>70</sup>

Women had no problem with embarrassing young men in order to satisfy their duties. A group of women wrote to a Rome, Georgia paper, poking fun of the number of representatives nominated for state legislature. They implied that too many men were not living up to traditional standards of masculinity- women have to shame these “cowards” into doing their duty. “And what better way to humiliate men in the nineteenth century South than to have women publicly pointing out their lack of courage?”<sup>71</sup> In Texas, a group of young women sent bonnets and hoop skirts to all the young men who stayed at home to show their feminine delicacy in not going to war.<sup>72</sup> Southern elite women were expected to shift their interests and their productive labors out from the family circle to the entire Confederate community, in order to serve the Confederate Cause.<sup>73</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century creed of domesticity had encouraged self-denial and service to others as women’s mission. The war, however, changed some of these prescriptions, in that women’s self-sacrifice for her loved ones became the sacrifice of those individuals to the Cause.<sup>74</sup> By the summer of 1861 the effort to create the new Confederate woman was under way in the press. The needs of manpower required the support of women of their men in the military and their direct interest in protecting them.<sup>75</sup> A plantation master’s enlistment might rob the household of its head, but it was a woman’s duty to deny men any choice in the decision to enlist. With their love for their new nation and its cause, women assumed the role as the “virtuous conscience.” White women were expected to rally their men to the Confederate Cause, and to be the “bedrock” upon which the new nation could be built.<sup>76</sup>

While the onset of the war changed women's entire way of life, they expressed themselves as being unconditionally wedded to the cause.<sup>77</sup> However, many women began to have feelings of discontent and uselessness. To quell this rising problem, public discussion focused on women's roles to determine specific contributions women could make to the Southern Cause, and to valorize their passive waiting and sacrifice as extremely important.<sup>78</sup> Sarah Morgan expressed these feelings of uselessness. "I am proud of my country; only wish I could fight in the ranks with our brave soldiers...But if I can't fight, being unfortunately a woman, which now I regret for the first time in my life, at least I can help in other ways. What fingers could do in knitting and sewing for them, I have done with the most intense delight...I have lost my home and all its dear contents for our Southern Rights, have stood on its deserted hearth stone and looked at the ruin of all I loved without a murmur, almost glad of the sacrifice, if it would contribute its mite towards the salvation of the Confederacy."<sup>79</sup>

The plantations were an essential part of the Confederate war strategy, and made clear that without planter cooperation, the war effort was doomed. Agriculture was necessary to feed the army, and planters were encouraged to grow crops rather than staples such as cotton and indigo. Women were compelled to stay on their land, despite having the means to escape, in order to serve the Cause and ensure the production of food crops for the soldiers. However, staying on their land required strength and courage to survive the hardships, which included the threat of enemy invasion, as well as the growing resistance and threat of outright rebellion of the black labor force. Planter women stayed not only because of their patriotism, but because someone had to keep the home fires burning.<sup>80</sup>

Many Southern women were able to take on their plantations. These mistresses were capable of managing on a small scale during previous planter absentness, and before the war, had been the master's eyes, ears, and his voice during his absence.<sup>81</sup> Laura Edwards, author of Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore, Southern Women in the Civil War Era, said that planter class women kept plantations running, and that when men left for the front, women stepped into this traditionally male role and took over the difficult task of plantation management under particularly demanding circumstances. While husbands often wrote letters home to their wives about plantation management, the mail service was slow and sporadic, and regular advice from men was rare. Women, therefore, were basically left alone to manage their plantations.<sup>82</sup> Judith Giesberg, author of Civil War Sisterhood, agrees with Edwards. She said that Southern white women defended their homes and property from invading forces and slaveholding women took over the management of plantations and slaves.<sup>83</sup>

Planter-class women saw the expansion of home manufacturing as a way to support the Cause, saving money for redirection into the support of the war effort and their men. Many of the elite women prided themselves on their role in the social order.<sup>84</sup>

Confederate mothers found themselves in difficult positions. It was their children who were fighting the war, and if the Cause was to be won, women, especially mothers, would have to submit in their decision to leave.<sup>85</sup> The endless call for soldiers distressed many women who thought that their men would not achieve glory on the battlefield, but death instead. Sarah Espy said about her son's enlistment, "I do not like it much, but will have to submit."<sup>86</sup> Sarah Morgan also dealt with this issue when her brother had to go

back to war. "Gibbes has gone back to his regiment. I can't say how dreary I felt when he came to tell me good bye. I did not mean to cry; but how could I help it..."<sup>87</sup>

Whether it meant giving up their children to the war, accompanying their men to the front, or contributing through expanded domestic labor, patriotic women should be willing to sacrifice everything to support their men.<sup>88</sup>

As Union forces moved closer to the Deep South and New Orleans, many women began to realize the danger of defeat. Their futures and the preservation of their way of life were in jeopardy with each Union victory. Lemuella Brickell, an elite woman in Mississippi, anticipated defeat. "Suppose our armies will not be successful? O I can't bear to think about it. What if they should take it all would be lost".<sup>89</sup> Sarah Lois Wadley in Louisiana wrote in her diary, "I shudder to think of the future. Should the Confederacy fall I feel I can never know joy again."<sup>90</sup> The Union invasion of the South was a reminder that the Confederacy was weak, and without honor, because the men could not protect their nation.

However, in order to preserve family and individual honor, women did not relate the military defeat to their men. They focused on individual acts of courage, and connected them to the display of family honor. The Confederate men were acting on traditional southern manhood by defending their families and property, and therefore brought honor to themselves and their family names.<sup>91</sup>

The Southern elite women endured hardships, unique to their social class. With the end of the Civil War, change came to every aspect of their lives. "White Confederate women had expected to make material and personal sacrifices. They were willing to dress down, do without, run life on the homefront and even give up their menfolk. But they had

not expected to do so indefinitely. They had supported the war to preserve what they had...The sacrifice that even the most die-hard among them were the last willing to make was the surrender of their social standing- their place as women in the slave holding class at the pinnacle of white southern society. As they saw it, that standing was what the war was about.”<sup>92</sup>

Southern elite women experienced the end of the Confederacy with disbelief and a sense of loss. Myra Inman, the daughter of a plantation owner in east Tennessee, who began her Civil War diary when she was just thirteen wrote: “Mysterious it is to me why God permitted such a sad calamity to befall our South. Why he permitted the noblest blood of the South to be sacrificed for the bondage of the sable race. Many a bitter tear and sad regret has the termination of this unhappy ending caused me- unjust as I would deem it, if I did not believe that God had decreed it thus.”<sup>93</sup>

Many Southern women, while they tried to accept defeat, believed that their ways of life would be preserved. “While the realities of war meant that many families entered 1866 with more than one ‘vacant chair’, women insured...that many aspects of antebellum southern culture would not die with the defeat of the Confederacy.”<sup>94</sup>

However, many planter-class women discovered that they had been completely dependent on slaves for the comforts and necessities of their daily lives. They lacked the basic domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Doing this kind of labor symbolized the degraded social positions of the formerly privileged women.<sup>95</sup> An elite Dandridge woman wrote “I work harder than I ever did in my life before...I rise at half past four in the morning and go to bed at half past eight generally and always tired but I sleep soundly.”<sup>96</sup> Malvina Black Gist said that she “Wish I had been taught to cook

instead of how to play on the piano. A practical knowledge of the preparation of food products would stand me in better stead at this juncture...”<sup>97</sup>

Elite women’s dependence on slavery extended beyond housework, as their way of life depended on enslaved field hands. Such women were financially dependent on their husbands, who in turn were financially dependent on slavery.<sup>98</sup> Many women began to teach school in order to earn money for the family. Husbands, however, refused to allow their wives to work- until they were desperate for money. Husbands felt that to have their wives work for wages announced their failures to provide for their families, and this reduced honor and power in southern society.<sup>99</sup> The preoccupation with Southern gender and the lack of honor of Southern men was frequently voiced by many socially and politically prominent men of the North in the immediate postwar period and the early years of Reconstruction.<sup>100</sup>

Without slavery, elite women did not know who they were. Their social standing and class had depended on slavery. “Slavery had anchored slaveholding women’s racial and class status as well as their own identities as women. In their minds, their own family members and their slaves had been inseparable pieces of a larger whole.”<sup>101</sup>

However, many Confederate elite women were still loyal to the Cause they had suffered so much for. After the war ended, federal troops, a presence that did not disappear fully until the late 1870’s, were a constant visible reminder of the Confederate failure. Many white Southern women railed against Union watchdogs, carrying on the wartime tradition of detestation and protest. All over the South, white women boycotted social functions at which federal soldiers might appear.<sup>102</sup> Sarah Morgan summarized in

April 1865 what many Southern white women were feeling in this time. “My life change, changes.”<sup>103</sup>

The destruction of the South caused the traditional way of life to change forever. While the patriarchal system was still intact, and women were still second-class citizens, their time-honored and accepted lifestyles had been abolished. They still, however, did not blame their men or the South for their defeat. “Elite white women directed their rage at the North and at African Americans, For elite women, the war was truly a struggle to protect the elite white way of life, and its traditional domesticity. Many of these women had believed that while the Confederacy was clearly outmanned and outgunned, it would prevail, because the soldiers were fighting for their independence as well as the dependence of their patriarchal system of order. They fought to protect and defend their families and home. In this way, for elite women, the war transformed from an expression of male duty into a fight to protect white domesticity.”<sup>104</sup>

Women were a cornerstone of this fight, as they supported their men leaving to fight for an unattainable victory. Women learned how to step out of the prescriptions of their gender to gain some independence and managed plantations and slaves. Women learned that dependence could be dangerous, as they were disappointed with their men and their army for the lack of protection, but at the same time, women longed for the restoration of their old lifestyles, in which patriarchy ruled all.

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