

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Independence, Slavery, and Freedom: Southern Women's Thoughts during the Civil War

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF HISTORY

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August 2022

Independence, Slavery, and Freedom: Southern Women's Thoughts during the Civil War

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This study explores the complex relationship between southern women and their ideas of independence and freedom during the Civil War years. In addition, this study seeks to investigate how southern women's attitudes regarding slavery changed from 1861-1865. With their husbands, brothers, and fathers serving in the war, southern women were forced to become the sole white authority figures on their estates, and this reality shift made them come to understand just how dependent their independence was on slavery. Southern women believed that independence could only come to the Confederacy, and it was inconceivable to have a simultaneous future where the Confederacy won and the slaves gained their freedom. The women who entered the war in 1861 with assumptions about slavery did not, and could not, view the institution through the same lens by the war's end in 1865. Slavery had been legally eradicated by the 13th Amendment at the end of 1865, but it remained to be seen how the important new change would be treated in the states, especially the ones from the late Confederacy where southern women held significant influence.

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Introduction

It is a rope of sand, this Confederacy, founded on the doctrine of Secession, and will not last many years—not five. [Yet,] The North cannot subdue us. We are too determined to be free. They have no right to confiscate our property [including our slaves] to pay debts they themselves have incurred. Death as a nation, rather than Union on such terms... If that be treason, make the best of it!¹

This quote, written by a young woman from Louisiana named Sarah Morgan Dawson, captured how the Civil War shaped southern women's attitudes regarding independence, freedom, and slavery. Her reflection depicted the complicated and nuanced struggle southern elite women experienced during the Civil War. Slavery was inextricably linked to her idea of independence as she came from a slaveholding family who supported the Confederacy, the institution of slavery, and the righteousness of secession. She later stated in her diary, "Take from us property, everything, only grant us liberty!"² These words reveal the complex problem of what independence meant during the Civil War to elite southern women like Dawson who had to reconcile independence with the issue of slavery. In politics and the law, these ideas were linked and served as the foundation of secession ordinances in all eleven Confederate states, yet southern women could not believe in a society where independence and freedom were synonymous because they assumed that independence for the Confederacy meant the continuance of slavery, the opposite of freedom for their slaves. While these women may have felt more independent from male authority, that independence was built on the assumed perpetual dependence of slaves.

¹ Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 14 May 1862, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25004/25004-h/25004-h.htm>. Project Gutenberg.

² Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's*, 29 June 1862.

The attitudes and actions of southern women were distinct aspects of their lifestyles. As a result, even while their attitudes toward slavery changed significantly during the course of the Civil War, they could not let their actions completely condemn slavery because their lifestyles depended on it. Being forced to become the sole white authority figures on their plantations and estates made them see just how dependent their independence was on slavery. Elite slaveowners, such as Laura Lee, Louisa S. McCord, Cornelia McPeake McDonald, Mary Jeffreys Bethell, Mary Jones Polk Branch, Sarah Morgan Dawson, and Sarah Lois Wadley, led lives that were intimately linked to slavery even as they yearned for independence for their cherished Confederacy. Many of these women lived in either the Carolinas, Virginia, or Louisiana, all Confederate states.

Laura Lee from Winchester, Virginia owned few slaves, but she was not dependent on male authority, so she did not hesitate to step into the role of all-authoritative mistress when the Civil War reduced her household to her and two other unmarried, white women. Louisa McCord was the wealthiest of all these women, even as a widow, and owned many hundreds of slaves. She was accustomed to the institution of slavery, had been a proponent of it for many decades, and its possible demise during the Civil War made her defend it outrightly. Cornelia McPeake McDonald from Virginia was wealthy and, although not quite as wealthy as McCord, boasted of her aid to the Confederacy in her memoir entitled *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865*. Mary Jeffreys Bethell was from North Carolina and owned slaves, but she recorded very few thoughts on the institution of slavery as a whole. However, the religious overtone of her diary leads readers to believe that she did not believe that slavery was immoral, a reality common in that region and era. In company with many other southern women, Sarah Morgan Dawson defended the Confederacy above slavery. In

fact, often in her writings, she emphasized that ‘Liberty’ was dependent on the Confederacy’s independence, which was dependent on the preservation of slavery. In other words, she firmly believed that ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ were two very different sentiments.³ Sarah Lois Wadley was only 15 when she started her diary in 1859, and her father’s work as president of a railroad company moved the family and their slaves across the region, from Louisiana then to Mississippi, and then back to Louisiana in 1861. Her and her family defended slavery and their right to own slaves and treat them as their property. Ultimately, though, Wadley was one of the many southern women who put loyalty to the Confederacy above any other allegiance, including that of slavery. To these women, independence for the Confederacy from the Union meant the preservation of slavery.

In addition to the aforementioned women, there were also some who did not possess a personal stake in regards to slavery, but who were still devoted to the Confederacy nonetheless. These women include Constance Cary, who became the wife of the personal secretary of Confederate President Jeff Davis. Even though she did not personally own any slaves or explicitly support slavery, she defended the Confederacy in any way possible during the war. Confederate spies included Belle Boyd and Rose O’Neal Greenhow. In fact, although only a teenager when the Civil War broke out, Boyd became a devoted Confederate spy and was instrumental in carrying much significant information to Confederate forces throughout the war. She believed in the Confederacy and lived for it, devoting her formative years to its prosperity as recounted in her memoir: *Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison*. Furthermore, the impossibly situated Josie Underwood, who lived in Kentucky, a battleground state that sent a significant number of soldiers to both the Union and the Confederate armies also did not support Lincoln or

³ Dawson, 14 May 1862.

the Confederacy, yet owned slaves. Throughout her diary, she never seemed to give an outright defense of slavery, but she did not publicly condemn it either. These women's life stories illuminate just how fine the line was between independence and freedom in the 1860s.

Slavery and independence were not only contradictory, but also necessarily distinct in the minds of women such as Sarah Morgan Dawson. In addition to issues like the tariff, tensions over the institution of slavery led to the Civil War in April of 1861 as the South fought to separate from the Union. When violence broke out, the men fought on the front lines and, although the women did not officially fight, they waged an unofficial war on the home front. The same women who used slave labor or condoned the use of it were forced by the absence of their brothers, fathers, and husbands to run their plantations and households that resulted in them having to confront the institution of slavery from a different perspective amid the upheaval of war.⁴ Like Dawson, southern women were forced to become independent in their own rights, “[f]or all their efforts to cling to accustomed privileges and familiar identities [such as slavery], women of the South's master class found themselves buffeted by change and tried by adversity” during the war years.⁵ Undoubtedly, slavery defined the experiences of these elite southern women as they became the authority in households and plantations across the South. The women who entered the war with pre-conceived ideas about slavery in 1861 did not view it through the same lens by the war's end in 1865.⁶

⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 4; see also Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*, first edition, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); see also Sarah Gardner, *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives, 1861-1937* (UNC Press, 2006).

⁵ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 234.

⁶ Faust, 247.

Many southern women in the Civil War era did not see the question of slavery as a complicated moral question. To them, it was a reality of life, especially when economic aspects were taken into account.⁷ Slavery had been the mainstay for their families before the war, and these women, especially at first, sought to keep their slaves because of the familiar economic prosperity that their labor brought.⁸ As a widow, Louisa McCord, a South Carolinian, realized the independence that owning slaves brought her as she reflected on “the memory of her great-aunt’s experience...and...the possibility of spinsterhood stretching before her” without slave labor.⁹ If slavery was in jeopardy, her comfortable way of life was as well.

To these women, independence took on a new meaning with the absence of male authority on the plantation during the war. As one southern woman wrote in her diary, the women first “[violently wept] at the thought of being left” and thought of themselves as free because their homeland was still free.¹⁰ Yet, with their men gone, they experienced independence as the singular authority in their households while “in the prewar years.... No gendered code of honor [had] celebrated women's physical power or dominance.”¹¹

⁷ Antonia Ford Willard, “Southern Belle, Yankee Wife” in *Virginia Women: Their Lives and Times*, edited by Cynthia A. Kierner, and Sandra Gioia Treadway. Volume 1, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 89.

⁹ Leigh Fought, *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 65.

¹⁰ Cornelia McPeake McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865*, (Nashville, Cullom & Ghertner Co., 1935), 40. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/diarywithreminis00mcdo/mode/2up>.

¹¹ Faust, 56, 63.

Southern society relied on slaveholding women to maintain order during the war. Prior to the war, a male overseer was usually present to watch and discipline the slaves.¹² However, the Civil War changed this, and without white male authority left in the households, southern women assumed the duties of their husbands and overseers.¹³ Women filled their shoes and worked with “a decided aim” that was different than ever before because they now possessed unprecedented authority over the slaves.¹⁴

Moreover, the women left to run the plantations fought their own type of war as it became clear that power relations with slaves was altered by war, access to resources, and the absence of men. Southern women struggled to protect themselves amidst the absence of their male counterparts and the presence of slaves.¹⁵ The majority of these women wanted independence from the Union, not freedom for their slaves as “[s]outhern mistresses... watched helplessly as slaves fled to the safety of Federal military camps.”¹⁶

¹² Rebecca Sharpless, "Southern Women and the Land," *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 (Spring, 1993): 30-42.

¹³ Orville J. Victor, *The History, Civil, Political and Military, of the Southern Rebellion from Its Incipient Stages to Its Close; Comprehending, Also, All Important State Papers, Ordinances of Secession, Proclamations, Proceedings of Congress, Official Reports of Commanders, Etc., Etc.* (New York: J.D. Torrey, 1861), The Civil War Collection, Jerry Falwell Library Special Collections, Liberty University at Lynchburg, VA.; see also E. C. Cabell, Thomas L. Snead, and B. M. T. Hunter, “The ‘Convention’ by Which Missouri was Transferred to the Confederacy,” 31 Oct. 1861, The Civil War Collection, Jerry Falwell Library Special Collections, Liberty University at Lynchburg, VA.

¹⁴ Maria J. McIntosh, *Woman in America: Her Work and Her Reward*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 1850), 126. Making of America Books.

¹⁵ Justin Behrend, "Rebellious Talk and Conspiratorial Plots: The Making of a Slave Insurrection in Civil War Natchez," *The Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 1 (02, 2011): 17-52; see also J. David Hacker, Libra Hilde, and James Holland Jones, "The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns." *The Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 1 (2010): 39-70.

¹⁶ Giselle Roberts, *The Confederate Belle* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 149.

In the Civil War, the South fought to safeguard the existence of slavery. After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the war aimed to both preserve the Union and to abolish slavery.¹⁷ Although chattel slavery, the type of slavery that reduced the slaves to movable property, emerged in the colonial period, it existed primarily in the South by 1860. But, as James C. Bonner asserts in his 1945 article, “The romantic picture of a plantation master sitting...calling up his slaves...was not a spectacle often encountered in the cotton belt.”¹⁸ Huge plantations with hundreds of slaves were uncommon. It is significant to note that the numbers of southerners who owned slaves decreased as the number of slaves increased. The slave population in the states that had joined the Confederacy reached about 3.9 million by 1860, and few states possessed a slave population of over 50%. By 1860, South Carolina had a very significant slave population of over 400,00 individuals, but there were only eight slaveholders in South Carolina who held more than 500 slaves, eight in Georgia, and only one each in the states of Arkansas and Mississippi.¹⁹ South Carolina, the only state that voted unanimously to secede, was a state that had a population of over 700,000 with 400,000+ of those being enslaved.²⁰ In 1860 most

¹⁷ Jeffrey Zvengrowski, *Jefferson Davis, Napoleonic France, and the Nature of Confederate Ideology, 1815–1870*. *Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2019), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2316400&site=ehost-live&scope=site>; see also Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); see also Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 12; see also Abraham Lincoln, “The Emancipation Proclamation, 22 Sept. 1862,” from *The U.S. Constitution and Other Key American Writings*, edited by JoAnn Padget, Melinda Allman, and Traci Douglas, (New York: Canterbury Classics, 2015), 145-6; see also James M. McPherson, *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War*, (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2007), 36.

¹⁸ James C. Bonner, “Plantation Architecture of the Lower South on the Eve of the Civil War,” *The Journal of Southern History* 11, no. 3 (1945): 381.

¹⁹ “Holdings of Southern Slaveowners by states, 1860” from *Historical Statistics of the United States* (1970), https://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics_on_slavery.htm.

²⁰ *Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union: and the Ordinance of Secession*, (Charleston, 1860). *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*; see also “Chart: Slave population in 1860,” Bill of Rights Institute, <https://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/chart-slave-population-in-1860>.

southerners who owned slaves held an average of five, while few owned hundreds like Louisa McCord and Louisa McPeake McDonald. Already a small group of the population, the women of the South analyzed in this study represent those who, in addition to being the elite, had the leisure time and the ability to leave behind their reflections from this era.

To many southern women, supporting the Confederacy meant supporting slavery, and this distinction did not cause hesitation.²¹ Sarah Dawson reflected in her diary, “Tell me [if] it would be of service to the Confederacy, and I would set fire to my home—if still standing—willingly! But would it?”²² She would not hesitate to sacrifice anything and everything for her treasured Confederacy, and she did not deem it necessary to make a distinction between it and the institution of slavery. The plain reality was that slavery was tied up in the Confederacy’s fate, and, similar to many southern women, Dawson embraced this reality.

Pride in their homeland and the defense of the institution of slavery bound these women together and shaped their sense of place in a region defined by hyper-gendered notions of women as they believed, “in the sovereignty of the States, and the absolute political and moral right of secession.”²³ Southern society, as a whole, was built on slave labor, with the slave population standing at about 49% of the whole population in 1860.²⁴ Southern women were considered by

²¹ Eugene McClean, “When the States Seceded,” in *The Women’s War in the South: Recollections and Reflections of the American Civil War* edited by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg, (Turner Publishing Company, 1999), 54-79. Ebook.; see also Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*. (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017), 206.

²² Dawson, 13 Aug. 1862.

²³ Caroline E. Janney, “Mothers of the Lost Cause: An army of determined Southern women buried the dead but kept a mythic Confederate legacy alive,” *America’s Civil War*, (November 2008), 56; see also: Belle Boyd, Sam Walde, Hardinge, and George Augustus Sala, *Belle Boyd, In Camp and Prison*, (New York: Blelock & Company, 1865), 55-6.

²⁴ “Slaves as a Percent of the Total Population selected years, by Southern State,” Historical Statistics, 1970.

society as the keepers of the family and home. Truly a cherished tradition, southern women were held in high regard as the fairer sex who kept the households in order. In many instances, keeping those households running meant, at the very least, tolerating slavery. Maria McIntosh, a prolific slavery defender of the 19th century wrote, “But while all the outward machinery of government...are man’s, woman, if true to her own not less important or less sacred mission, controls its vital principle.”²⁵ The ‘mission’ being referred to here was the household and all aspects of it. The belief that households could not be run smoothly without slave labor made southern women see slavery as not only a convenience, but a necessity.²⁶ In addition, a majority of southern women believed that the expectation to be a perfect wife, plantation mistress, and mother forced them to accept being slaveholders. As Louisa McCord argued, “slavery was a necessity...[especially for] the maintenance of peaceful relations between classes and races.”²⁷

²⁵ Maria J. McIntosh, *Woman in America*, 25; see also Lenoir Family Papers, Personal Correspondence, 1861-1865, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/lenoir/lenoir.html>. Even though Southern women, even those who did not personally own slaves, overwhelmingly supported slavery, this does not mean that they always believed that the institution was morally right. As children, these Southern women were indoctrinated with the belief that their feelings and inner convictions came second to almost every other matter in society. Therefore, a large majority of these women were accustomed to stifling their objections, especially when their feelings went against the accepted way of life in society. In many cases, their actions were not true representations of their hearts. Southern women’s constant beatings of slaves could point to their inner convictions about the injustice of slavery, giving more strength to the argument that many southern women had inner doubts about slavery. For example, in some cases, simply a slave’s presence angered southern women, causing them to lash out violently. Some, but not all, southern plantation mistresses dealt with guilt-ridden consciences because of their role in perpetuating the immoral institution of slavery. For further research, see Angelina Grimké’s speech, “History of Pennsylvania Hall which was destroyed by a Mob on the 17th of May, 1838,” in *Women and Slavery in America: A Documentary History, 1860-1865*; Stacy Pratt McDermott, *Mary Lincoln: Southern Girl, Northern Woman*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ffjf01>; the *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter, 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>, and Thavolia Glymph’s, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 70-7.

²⁶ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 65-6.

²⁷ Fought, *Southern Womanhood and Slavery*, 43.

Historians argue about the role white, elite southern women played in relation to the institution of slavery. One interpretation views southern women as slaves in a hyper-gendered, patriarchal society, and this view is evident in Isabel Quattlebaum's article, "Twelve Women in the First Days of the Confederacy," Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, and Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*. These scholars use journal entries of southern women to prove that they deserve more sympathy than blame regarding slavery. Quattlebaum states, "Southern women in the beginning [of the war] did not realize that in less than four years all the slaves would be freed," and asserts that many southern women took slavery for granted. Using twelve diaries of southern women, she argues that many southern women's attitudes regarding slavery did not change even after the abolition of slavery.²⁸ Fox-Genovese centers her book on the argument that southern women struggled to survive the oppressive patriarchal atmosphere of the Deep South and to engage with slavery as a political and not moral issue governed by the law instead of the church. She avers that southern women found their identity in being mistresses of slaves. Any "lines of class and race gave mistresses a license to interpret any sign of independence [on the slaves' parts] as impudence, impertinence, [and] obstinacy."²⁹ Faust examines the individual lives of southern women and concludes that the years of the Civil War and the resulting abolition of slavery changed how southern women defined the term 'lady' as they were caught in the middle of a war and the ensuing "loss

²⁸ Isabel Quattlebaum, "Twelve Women in the First Days of the Confederacy," *Civil War History* 7, no. 4 (December 1961): 385, doi:10.1353/cwh.1961.0036.

²⁹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 129, 212.

of...property that had provided the foundation for privilege undermined the wealth and position of [all] formerly slave-owning families.”³⁰ In addition, she argues that “white women's dependence on their slaves grew simultaneously with [their] slaves' independence...creating a troubling situation of confusion and ambivalence for mistresses.”³¹ These important texts serve as seminal writings on southern women and continue to provide important conceptual frames for interpreting the words and actions of elite southern women during the Civil War.

A second perspective maintains that southern women's relationship to slavery was more complex than either victim or perpetrator. A new look at the diaries and memoirs left behind by southern women and those in close contact with them reveals that being a plantation mistress and/or a slaveholder was not clearly defined. Historians Giselle Roberts, Leigh Fought, Clara Junker, Kelly H. Crosby, and Thavolia Glymph, claim that blanket statements about southern slaveholding women and their role in the institution of slavery during the Civil War era are problematic. They argue that a case-by-case analysis reveals that some southern women did perpetuate slavery while others opposed it, and this needs to be understood to avoid generalization. In *The Confederate Belle*, Giselle Roberts challenges the myth that all southern women were plantation mistresses similar to individuals like the fictional Scarlet O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind*. By using primary sources from women who lived through the Civil War and secondary sources written by historians since that era, Roberts concludes that the idea of a “southern lady” had to undergo fundamental changes in order to survive the war.³² Antebellum mistresses were often “shielded from the harsh realities of life in the fields or the culture of the

³⁰ Faust, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³² Roberts, *The Confederate*, 164.

quarters,” which led to varied responses on how they managed slavery once that shield was gone.³³

Leslie Fought in *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879* analyzes the life of the prominent southern slave-owner, Louisa McCord. Although Fought builds on ideas found in Fox-Genovese’s 1988 book, she focuses more on the contradictions in McCord’s life than Fox-Genovese does. Fought argues that these contradictions ultimately led McCord to believe, as an adult, that slavery was necessary and divinely sanctioned. She relies on McCord’s own writings and highlights that even though the Confederacy lost the war, McCord, similar to many other prominent southern women, held on to the belief that slavery was a right. Fought, through the life of Louisa McCord, argues that southern women were the keepers of all that was cherished in the South and by the time that the Civil War broke out in April of 1861, slavery was very much a vital institution in society.³⁴ Clara Junker, in her 2004 article, evaluates the diaries of two southern women, Floride Clemson and Cornelia Peake McDonald, and shows that they are indecisive about slavery.³⁵ Kelly Crosby, in her 2014 work, maintains that southern women coped with slavery by believing in a mythical-type of slavery where the slaves were the beneficiaries of the paternalistic system. She investigates the diaries of Eliza Fain and Catherine Edmonston, both strong supporters of the Confederacy. Claiming these two women as ideal southern women, Crosby studies their diary entries to analyze the difference between the

³³ Roberts, 151.

³⁴ Fought, 12.

³⁵ Clara Junker, “Women at War: The Civil War Diaries of Floride Clemson and Cornelia Peake McDonald,” *The Southern Quarterly*. 42, no. 4 (2004): 93, 99.

mythical slavery that these southern women believed existed and the reality.³⁶ Along with illusions regarding slavery, Crosby states, “A discrepancy between the ideal and real identity of women developed and led to an incremental merge of their place in public and private spheres.”³⁷ Moreover, Thavolia Glymph claims “It is only by looking at the two, separate and together (slaves and southern slaveholding women), as recent scholarship in southern women’s history has demonstrated, that we can begin to understand what the sources tell us and see how certain ways of looking can muffle that understanding.”³⁸ Southern women and slavery had a complex relationship.

A third perspective that has gained traction among historians in the last five years is southern women as perpetrators of slavery. Historian Emily West details how white southern women intentionally forced enslaved women to breast feed their children for convenience.³⁹ Numerous primary sources left behind by white southern slaveholding women and the female slaves prove that southern women often forced their female black slaves to be wet-nurses for their own babies. The motivation that propelled southern women to use enslaved wet-nurses was that having a baby and raising children was often seen as too big a commitment for southern women. By forcing female slaves to wet-nurse, southern women were able to escape the duties

³⁶ Kelly H. Crosby, "The Ideal and the Real: Southern Plantation Women of the Civil War" (2014), Student Publications, 286, https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/286. See also *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938*, Vol. 2: Arkansas Narratives, pt. 2, 40-1. Library of Congress, loc.gov; see also Mary Jones Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "within the Lines," and a Genealogical Record*, (Chicago: Joseph G. Branch Publishing, 1912), 18, In *Documenting the American South, First-Person Narratives of the American South, Beginnings to 1920*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/branch/branch.html>.

³⁷ Crosby, “The Ideal and the Real,” 2.

³⁸ Glymph, 177.

³⁹ Emily West, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 1 (02, 2017): 37-68.

that motherhood demanded and enabled those southern mothers to choose how involved they were in their children's lives while also exerting considerable domination over their female slaves.

Patricia Wilde focuses on Confederate female spies, Belle Boyd and Rose O'Neal Greenhow. Wilde's article is a warning to other historians to not fall into the trap of framing historical figures in a way that fits the narrative while sacrificing the truth, no matter how offensive the truth might be. This includes when the historical record on the relationship between southern women and slavery becomes potentially offensive. As Belle Boyd and Rose O'Neal Greenhow dedicated much of their lives to supporting the Confederacy, they were aware of the audience of their writings, and sought to portray slavery as picturesque as possible. They did not work to abolish slavery, but devoted their lives as active agents to support the institution.⁴⁰ In addition, Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers' *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* uses testimonies from former slaves and other demographic records to assert that southern women were active participants in the institution of slavery.⁴¹ There were many instances in the Antebellum South when southern husbands had to exercise their authority to restrain their wives when they punished slaves. Jones-Rogers maintains that southern women did not bow under male authority or leave slave management to the men of the household.⁴² Likewise, Stephanie McCurry in *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War* argues southern women's economic investment in slavery led them to hold on to slavery as one

⁴⁰ Patricia A. Wilde, "(Re)Telling the Times: The Tangled Memories of Confederate Spies Rose O'Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd," *Rhetoric Review* 38, no. 3 (2019): 310.

⁴¹ Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁴² Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, Chapter 3.

of the most significant anchors to stabilize their lives. When this security was threatened by the war “women were among the most bitter and vengeful of ex-slaveholders,” speaking to the years that followed the war.⁴³ This research argues that elite southern women were perpetrators of slavery.

When it comes to the subject of how southern women related to the ideas of independence and the institution of slavery in the Civil War era, the answer is not simple. Independence, in southern women’s minds, did not correlate to freedom for their slaves. Most often, independence for the Confederacy meant continued slavery. Independence did not equal freedom.

With each year of the Civil War came new challenges that shaped the attitudes of southern women about the war and slavery. The first chapter investigates 1861 to 1862 as southern women’s attitudes towards slavery altered significantly between the start of the war and the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 1862. When the Proclamation went into effect on January 1st, 1863, it made slavery’s fate an official stake in the war, and many southern women, including Nancy Emerson from Augusta County, Virginia recorded that, although it may have been meant to put slavery on the path to extinction, it only caused southern women to defend slavery more fervently.⁴⁴ In the third chapter, 1864 is analyzed, and the conclusion examines the end of the war when slavery was abolished. Southern women’s attitudes towards slavery altered over this five-year period and set the stage for the problems that the

⁴³ McCurry, Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 2-3.

⁴⁴ Nancy Emerson, Diary, 8 Jan. 1863, Valley of the Shadow Online Archives, valley.lib.virginia.edu.

Reconstruction era brought to a vanquished and occupied region filled with poverty, displaced people, disease, and violence.

Chapter 1: A New Reality

Southern slave-owning women's relationships with slavery and the idea of independence was complicated. Sarah Morgan Dawson of Louisiana captured this when she said, "Take from us property, everything, only grant us liberty!"¹ Serving as both master and mistress gave southern women a taste of unparalleled authority.² As southern men fought for independence from the Union, southern women fought for their own, unique version of independence, and they often found it in being the authority figures to which their slaves were accountable.

Born in Louisiana in 1842, Dawson started her diary in early 1862. She blamed slavery for the Civil War and all of the damage that had ensued.³ The interesting thing about her diary is that she did not give an argument in support of slavery, but neither did she explicitly condemn it. Still, she outlined the damage that the fight over slavery had caused thus far. She may have occupied the middle road when it came to slavery, but the Civil War made her staunchly pro-slavery. Ultimately, she supported the continuation of slavery, although her motives for that decision waver between disgust for the black race and another extreme, namely that owning slaves was convenient for her. As in many lives of southern women, convenience won out over any misgivings she might have had regarding slavery.⁴

An "Appeal for Peace" sent to the North's Lieutenant General Scott from the women of Maryland on July 4th, 1861 shows that the outbreak of the Civil War led many southern women

¹ Dawson, Sarah Morgan. *A Confederate Girl's Diary*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 29 June 1862. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25004/25004-h/25004-h.htm>.

² Kelly H. Crosby, "The Ideal and the Real: Southern Plantation Women of the Civil War" (2014, 2), Student Publications, 286, https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/286.

³ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's*, 23 August 1862.

⁴ Dawson, 29 June 1862.

to stand up for the Confederacy. Independence for them did not correlate to freedom for their slaves. In fact, to many southern women, the South could not truly be independent if slaves were set free. Preserving the South meant preserving slavery.⁵

In the appeal, the women of Maryland appealed to Union General Scott's humanity to end the war. It is clear that these women held Confederate sympathies, as they characterized Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Beauregard with many flattering adjectives, such as "good and noble" and "the loved Davis."⁶ Yet, slavery is not mentioned. Scott, they wrote, was "Hope's last beacon" and the war was "the sorrow of [their] souls." In essence, the women stated that their desire was for life to continue as normal with no more bloodshed.⁷ The existence of slavery did not figure prominently in this appeal because its continuing existence was assumed. The Confederacy's independence included the contradiction of slavery. This was not an innovative idea to southern women, but a distinction that did not need explanation. In southern women's minds, slavery was not a significant issue to separate from independence for their homeland.

Moreover, this appeal reiterates that southern women believed that their way of life, dependent upon slavery, was divinely righteous as taught by many clergymen, especially in the South. As this appeal stated, the South's "primal greatness" could only be restored when the Union troops stopped "each day taking from us (the South) all that supports life!"⁸ Maryland

⁵ Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir* (New York: Belford Co., Publishers 18-22 East 18th Street, 1890). The Civil War Collection, Jerry Falwell Library Special Collections, Liberty University at Lynchburg, VA; see also Cornelia McPeake McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865* (Nashville, Cullom & Ghertner Co., 1935). Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/diarywithreminis00mcdo/mode/2up>.

⁶ The Women of Maryland, "Appeal for Peace" sent to Lieutenant General Scott, July 4, 1861, Theodore R. McKeldin Papers, Maryland Manuscripts Collection, item 5463. <https://digital.lib.umd.edu/image?pid=umd:77613#fullMetadata>.

⁷ The Women of Maryland, "Appeal for Peace."

⁸ Ibid.

never officially left the Union, so the existence of this appeal is notable because these women clearly had Confederate sympathies and believed that the Confederacy should be allowed to exist unmolested and with slavery.

A further example of the belief in southern culture that slavery was righteous is the sermon that the Reverend Thomas Atkinson gave in 1861. From North Carolina, he taught a sermon in the spring of 1861 and told his congregants that God was fighting for the Confederacy and “maintain[ed] before God and man that *now* at least we of the South are in the right.”⁹ He simultaneously encouraged and rebuked his congregants regarding the Civil War by stating this, as he also warned his listeners that the war must not distract God’s people from sharing Christ’s grace with others. In another church in St. Louis, Missouri, the Reverend Samuel James Pierce Anderson gave a similar sermon in January of 1861 that stood up for the South’s cause and painted it in a righteous light.¹⁰ In actuality, these sermons are prime examples of the usual type of sermons that were taught by southern clergymen during the Civil War, even though the women of Maryland would, in all likelihood, not hear these sermons, but may have read them, especially in circles that were sympathetic to the Confederacy.

⁹ Thomas Atkinson, “Christian Duty in the Present Time of Trouble,” A Sermon Preached at St. James’ Church, Wilmington, N.C., on the Fifth Sunday after Easter, 1861. In *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 6. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/atkinsonsermon/atkinson.html>.

¹⁰ Samuel James Pierce Anderson, “The Dangers and Duties of the Present Crisis: A Discourse Delivered in the Union Church, St. Louis, January 4, 1861, pamphlet, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Schreiner University; see also Stephen Elliott, “Ezra’s Dilemma [sic].” A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, on Friday, August 21st, 1863, being the Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States. Savannah, Ga.: Power Press of George M. Nichols, 1863. In *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/elliott ezra/menu.html>.

In Biblical terms, the southerners, and not their slaves, were the metaphorical Israelites (Exod. 1-5, New International Version).¹¹ The South wanted to be free from the tyranny of the pharaoh-like North. The chains that held them oppressed were the ones linking them to the North and the Union in general. From southern women's perspectives, the chains that held their slaves in bondage were not the chains that needed to be broken. As a result, it leaves little room for questions as to *why* southern women did not often speak out or work for the abolition of slavery: slavery was seen as a righteous institution that was blessed by God and given to the South to defend as one of "Heaven's mandates."¹²

Female abolitionists in the South were the exception to the rule. For example, Elizabeth Van Lew lived her life in Virginia, but she chose not to support the Confederacy in the Civil War. She was born on October 12, 1818 in Richmond, Virginia where she became a Yankee spy during in the 1860s. The Civil War forced her to choose between her region and the nation. Furthermore, although she lived in the South, she abhorred slavery. Interestingly though, none of her actions can be categorized as overtly anti-slavery until the Civil War, even though she was surrounded by slavery her whole life.

Despite her place in a slaveholding family, Van Lew considered slavery evil. Instead of immediate abolition, she believed that slavery would die out as the result of compassionate acts

¹¹ Dawson, 26 June 1862.

¹² John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).
https://liberty.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/openurl?institution=01LIBU_INST&vid=01LIBU_INST:Services&%3Fctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info:ofi%2Fenc:UTF-8&rft_id=info:sid%2Fsummon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi%2Ffmt:kev:mtx:book&rft.genre=book&rft.title=When%20Slavery%20Was%20Called%20Freedom&rft.au=John%20Patrick%20Daly&rft.date=2015-02-05&rft.pub=The%20University%20Press%20of%20Kentucky&rft.isbn=9780813122410&rft.externalDocID=j.ctt130j3j9; see also: The Women of Maryland, "Appeal for Peace."

done by whites.¹³ By southern society's standards, her parents' attitudes toward slavery and the general bent of her upbringing should have shaped Van Lew into a genteel southern woman who supported slavery without hesitation. However, Van Lew became one of a small number of southern women who would betray her homeland and support the Union during the Civil War, convinced of the wickedness of slavery. She loved Richmond, Virginia, but she had been brought up to revere the Union above all else. When she was forced to choose, she chose the Union. Slavery, and the Confederacy were evil, which meant that she had to abandon them.

Another interesting aspect about Van Lew's life is that her religious convictions were not the main reason why she desired to bring about an end to slavery and spy for the Union. Other women, such as Elizabeth Rhodes, Mary Jeffreys Bethell, and Nancy Emerson, leaned primarily on their religious beliefs to get them through the war, but Van Lew did not.¹⁴ In Van Lew's case, it was her unwavering loyalty to the Union and strong abhorrence of slavery that prompted her to make such a drastic decision.¹⁵ She believed, "slavery...had made southern whites antidemocratic, coercive, intellectually backward, and dangerously self-righteous and arrogant."¹⁶ The southern women who stood out as exceptions were indeed noteworthy.

¹³ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁴ Jennifer Newman Treviño, "Elizabeth Rhodes: An Alabama Woman's Religious Beliefs during the Civil War," *Alabama Review* 62, no. 4 (10, 2009): 243-61; see also Mary Jeffreys Bethell, *Diary, Jan. 1, 1861-1865*, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>

¹⁵ Varon, *Elizabeth Van Lew*, 48.

¹⁶ Varon, 48.

Mary Jones Polk Branch, as opposed to Van Lew, defended slavery when it was threatened during the Civil War.¹⁷ In her memoir, she recollected “we were taught to treat them (slaves) with respect.”¹⁸ Branch was not a proponent of using violence as a slave mistress. She was surrounded by slavery her whole life and recalled the influence of her father who was a devoted member of the Episcopal church.¹⁹ She later wrote in her memoir, “There was such a kindly feeling on both sides between the owners and their slaves — inherited kindly feelings.”²⁰ She audaciously asked the question, “How could it be otherwise?”²¹

Branch was no stranger to slavery and firmly believed that the institution was beneficial to both races. Prior to the Civil War, she referred to her life with her slaves as satisfying, describing it as, “An innocent and ideal life.”²² When she married in 1859, she became the plantation mistress to hundreds of slaves owned by her husband who was a “very successful [man who had been] a member of the legislature at twenty-one, and president of a bank.”²³ She lived on a cotton plantation and described in her memoir that, “Upon these plantations were four hundred slaves before mine came, given me by my father from his plantation near Helena, Arkansas.”²⁴ Her married life differed little from her childhood regarding the treatment of the

¹⁷ Mary Jones Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "within the Lines," and a Genealogical Record*, (Chicago: Joseph G. Branch Publishing, 1912), 47, in Documenting the American South, First-Person Narratives of the American South, Beginnings to 1920, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/branch/branch.html>.

¹⁸ Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman*, 11.

¹⁹ Branch, 7.

²⁰ Branch, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-8.

slaves on the plantation as Colonel Branch had his land “laid out in regular rows of houses with streets between, two hospitals — one for the men, one for the women — a nursery for the children, and two old women to take charge of them.”²⁵

Branch’s actions became distinctly pro-slavery during the war, and her memoir is filled with boastings about the aid she gave to the Confederacy. For example, she detailed smuggling supplies to her brothers while they served in the Confederate forces.²⁶ Her efforts reveal that those who fought for the South were held in high regard.²⁷ Also, in her writing, she rarely used the word ‘slavery,’ proving that, in her mind, independence for the Confederacy and freedom for the slaves were two opposing notions.

Like Branch, Belle Boyd, a Confederate spy, gained acclaim by helping the Confederacy against the Union. Barely seventeen years old when the Civil War broke out, Boyd helped convey valuable information to the Confederates regarding Union movements from her home in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. She was imprisoned twice for her actions and narrowly escaped a third time, but little is mentioned in her memoir, *Belle Boyd, in Camp and in Prison*, regarding her thoughts on slavery. Only once did she record her thoughts on the subject and write that the colored “race prefers servitude to freedom.”²⁸ Her noticeable lack of passion on this topic seems to be characteristic of many southern women. In fact, many southern women

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

²⁶ Ibid., 39.

²⁷ “The Confederate Soldier’s Wife Parting from her Husband,” Poem, 1861, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wife/wife.html>.

²⁸ Belle Boyd, Sam Walde Hardinge, and George Augustus Sala, *Belle Boyd, In Camp and in Prison*, (New York: Blelock & Company, 1865), 54.

simply referred to their slaves as ‘servants’ instead of ‘slaves,’ language that strengthens the idea that southern women believed in a mythic slavery rather than the realistic one.²⁹

Furthermore, many women who supported the Confederacy did not outright support slavery. Mary Jeffreys Bethell of North Carolina was a slave-owner who started a diary at the beginning of 1861. Several of her male relatives, including her husband, fought in the war on the side of the Confederacy, and she supported secession. She wrote: “The slavery question is the cause of all this trouble. Southern states have seceded... [and] if the North and South can't agree, they had better separate. Abraham Lincoln the President is opposed to the institution of slavery, [and] he don't seem disposed to make any compromise with the South [sic].”³⁰

Although in the first half of 1861 Bethell gave little information regarding her personal thoughts about slavery, on her 40th birthday entry on June 26th, 1861, she did not include her slaves in her list of blessings, indicating that she did not think of slavery as a separate part of life, but assumed it existed without specifically referring to it.³¹ She did not list her ‘servants,’ meaning her ‘slaves,’ as a blessing because she did not believe slavery to be over and above what she deserved. She had been brought up with slaves, and had, by her 40th birthday, come to assume that slavery was normal in the South. It did not need to be specifically defended or treated differently than any other aspect of life.

²⁹ Susan-Mary Grant, "When the Fires Burned Too Close to Home: Southern Women and the Dislocations of the Home Front in the American Civil War," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 4 (2017): 568-583.

³⁰ Mary Jeffreys Bethell, Diary, 29 April 1861, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>.

³¹ Bethell, Diary, 26 June 1861.

The financial freedom that slavery brought southern women is most striking in the recollections of Laura Lee and her family. A southern slave-owning woman, Lee started a diary in 1862 and the crucial event that prompted her to start writing down details of her daily life occurred when the Union army occupied her hometown of Winchester, Virginia that year. Notably, Lee was unmarried and lived with her sister, Antoinette Lee, and her sister-in-law, Mary Greenhow Lee. Due to this absence of white males in the household, the women were uniquely independent, including financially.³² As a single white-woman, Laura Lee believed the Civil War to be a fight for her homeland's independence and not one that concerned her slaves. Historian Laura Odendahl argues, "while [Laura Lee] described feelings of captivity (during the war), her enslaved servant women experienced exactly the opposite: as the war thundered on, the servants obtained greater freedom."³³ Being independent, and therefore maintaining a unique position for a southern lady, her financial security stemmed from slave ownership, and she did not believe that that ownership should be endangered as "the enemy (the Yankees) threatened...[her] entire way of life" by engaging in war.³⁴

In addition, Lee's diary entries indicate a change in southern slaveholding women's attitudes toward their slaves when a Union victory seemed inevitable.³⁵ For instance, when the Union army won a victory at Kernstown in Virginia during the month of March in 1862, "three miles away in Winchester, the Lee household responded to the subsequent Union occupation

³² Laura Odendahl, "A History of Captivity and a History of Freedom" in *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries*, Thomas H. Appleton and Angela Boswell, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 122.

³³ Odendahl, "A History of Captivity," 122.

³⁴ Odendahl, 126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

according to antebellum gender proscriptions. The men joined armies while the women maintained households.”³⁶ Lee, in her writing, revealed white women’s attitudes toward their slaves were superior and dominating.³⁷ Odendahl states: “On paper, slaves were property, but in reality, they were human beings who required dignity no matter how small the measure. Slaveholders often simplified the complex relationships by describing their slaves as members of the family. Mary Greenhow Lee followed this tradition somewhat, while Laura Lee did not.”³⁸ Even though Laura Lee did not ascribe humanity to her slaves, her entries reveal that white female slaveholders became increasingly courteous and somewhat respectful to their slaves as the Civil War continued. She identified this change as a practical one because those same slaves became free with the Union’s victory at Winchester in 1862. The transformation in her attitude toward slaves changed as a consequence of the outside circumstances of war and occupation.³⁹

Like Lee, Sarah Lois Wadley’s recollections reveal that loyalty to the Confederacy did not mean a belief in the righteousness of slavery. Wadley was one of many southern women who put loyalty to the Confederacy above any other allegiance. She recorded her grief about secession, but its ultimate righteousness when she wrote:

Oh! may our countrymen see our wrongs ere it is too late, may they retrace their course ere they plunge themselves into a gulf of ruin from which they cannot escape. The North has more towns and villages, she has a greater population, but southerners when called to fight for their homes, for their liberty will they not prove superior to fanatics whose zeal will soon cool, and whose sober reason (if reason they have) will tell them they are

³⁶ Ibid., 128.

³⁷ For other instances of this, see also Kate S. Carney, *Diary, April 15, 1861-July 31 1862*, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/carney/carney.html>.

³⁸ Odendahl, 127.

³⁹ Laura Lee, “A History of Our Captivity,” *Laura Lee Diary*, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, <https://hdl.handle.net/10288/22515>.

impolitic as well as wicked? Besides, the North is not all filled with Abolitionists, there are some true hearts left [sic].⁴⁰

Her usage of the word ‘true’ from this previous quote in contrast to ‘Abolitionists’ implies that any individual who wanted to abolish slavery was not to be taken seriously. That person was to be considered a traitor, an enemy.

Sarah Wadley’s very existence proves the point that many southern women saw slavery as natural. A teenage girl born in New Hampshire and raised in Louisiana during the Civil War; Wadley did not mince words when it came to the topic of slavery. She was only 15 when she started her diary in 1859, lived in Louisiana, and had lived in Mississippi and later moved to Georgia after the Civil War. Her father’s work as a president of a railroad company moved the family and their slaves across the region, and in 1858 Amite, Louisiana became their new home. From there, the family and their slaves went to Vicksburg, Mississippi and then settled back in Louisiana by 1861. The fact that her family’s slaves followed wherever the Wadley family went highlights that she came from a family who believed that their right to hold slaves must always be defended and even recorded.⁴¹ As further proof of her belief in the naturalness of slavery, Wadley saw whites and blacks taking part in communion in June 1861, and wrote: “slaves seem so much more dependent, their position in society makes their deportment so much more humble, that it is peculiarly interesting to see them receive the spiritual body and blood of Christ.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Sarah Lois Wadley, *Diary*, 26 Oct. 1860, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wadley/wadley.html>.

⁴¹ Wadley, *Diary*, 10 Dec. 1860.

⁴² Wadley, 24 June 1861.

Moreover, a southern woman did not have to personally own slaves to be loyal to both the Confederacy and the institution of slavery. In fact, although Sarah Morgan Dawson was not a plantation mistress, she supported slavery. Her background and childhood may have figured prominently into her stance during the war as several family members served in the Confederate army. After her homeland in Louisiana was attacked, she recorded in her diary that she was “never a Secessionist.” Furthermore, she claimed:

father went over with his State, and when so many outrages were committed by the fanatical leaders of the North, though he regretted the Union, said, ‘Fight to the death for our liberty.’ I say so, too. I want to fight until we win the cause so many have died for. I don’t believe in Secession, but I do in Liberty. I want the South to conquer, dictate its own terms, and go back to the Union, for I believe that, apart, inevitable ruin awaits both.⁴³

Slavery was not a separate issue to Dawson. It was not significantly important if she had hesitations about slavery. It was the Confederacy with slavery and those two could never be distinct. The sentence ‘I quietly adopted father’s views on political subjects without meddling in them’ is indicative of the reality of how southern women were expected to conduct themselves. She committed a scandalous act by being a woman and involving herself in politics, but she did it ‘quietly,’ and redeemed herself somewhat by not ‘meddling in them.’ The next word ‘but’ is a turning point, not only in the thought, but also as a symbol of the turn her life had taken. She was not going to sit back and let the males of her country fight this war alone. By memorializing her opinion by putting it to paper, she armed herself as her father told her to ‘fight to the death for [their] liberty.’ She emphasized that ‘Liberty’ was dependent on the Confederacy’s independence, which was dependent on the preservation of slavery. She passionately believed that independence and freedom were two very different ideas. This sentence explains the

⁴³ Dawson, 14 May 1862.

dilemma that southern women faced. Many believed secession was required to achieve true liberty. Slavery was necessary to obtain independence. The words ‘secession’ and ‘liberty’ had to be made distinct, just like ‘independence’ had to be made distinct from ‘freedom.’

As Dawson vehemently continued, “The North Cannot subdue us. We are too determined to be free. They have no right to confiscate our property [including our slaves] to pay debts they themselves have incurred. Death as a nation, rather than Union on such terms.”⁴⁴ Submission had become the true enemy as the villainous ‘North’ tried to deprive southerners of their ‘property,’ which Dawson did not see as separate from slaves. She chose not to include the phrase “including our slaves” to specify the word ‘property’ further because she did not view slaves as distinct from property. The Confederacy was above, and not distinct, from slavery. Dawson reaffirmed the reality that as independence and freedom were distinct, the Confederacy and slavery were not and never could be.

Like Dawson and Wadley, Josie Underwood had complicated views. From Kentucky, and born into a family that owned slaves, she did not support Lincoln or the Confederacy. She neither spoke out publicly about slavery, nor did she support it and believe in its morality, as shown through her actions, words, and feelings. In addition, she did not become a spy for the Union like Elizabeth Van Lew, yet her views on slavery ultimately drove a wedge between her and her family. In her diary the entries mentioning slaves have a compassionate undertone. For instance, she wrote on August 6th, 1862 that her father had put his affairs in order before he left for war and tried “to hire out as many of the negroes as he [could] to *good* people where they

⁴⁴ Ibid.

[would] have *good* homes and *be cared for* till he [got] back [emphasis added].”⁴⁵ Her parents treated their slaves with respect despite the harsh reality of slavery. When she wrote about a time when her father could not stop rebel soldiers from destroying slave cabins and possessions, her genuine emotion is clear.⁴⁶ Underwood saw slaves as human beings, but any misgivings that she had about slavery were not enough to cause her to oppose it. The Civil War did not drive her to defend slavery. She was a slaveholder, but did not believe in the righteousness of slavery. She was in a precarious situation like her home state of Kentucky and represented another layer in the complex way that southern women related to independence and slavery during the Civil War.

Although slavery had a history in the North, it was largely a southern institution because of the cash crop economy that the South maintained. This meant that when the Confederate army needed men desperately as the war continued,

white women came to assume responsibility for directing the slave system that was so central a cause and purpose of the war. Yet they could not forget the promises of male protection and obligation that they believed their due. Women's troubling experiences as slave managers generated a growing fear and resentment of the burdens imposed by the disintegrating institution.⁴⁷

Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22nd, 1862, stating that those states in rebellion would have until the start of the new year to willingly come back into the Union or, if not, the slaves within those states would be free. As President of America, Lincoln admitted the following to his Cabinet members:

⁴⁵ Josie Underwood, and Nancy D. Baird, *Josie Underwood's Civil War Diary*, (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 94.

⁴⁶ Underwood and Baird, *Josie Underwood's Civil War Diary*, 114-6.

⁴⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 56.

‘I wish it was a better time...The action of the army against the rebels has not been quite what I should have best liked...but they have been driven out of Maryland, and Pennsylvania is no longer in danger of invasion. When the rebel army was at Frederick I determined, as soon as it was driven out of Maryland, to issue a proclamation of emancipation...I made a promise to myself and...to my Maker...I must do the best I can, and bear the responsibility of taking the course which I feel I ought to take.’⁴⁸

Officially, the fate of slavery was now tied to the outcome of the Civil War. If the South won, chattel slavery would persist. If the North won, it would be abolished.

The period between the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and the end of 1863 was transformative for southern women regarding their attitude toward slavery. Some argued that the institution of slavery would die out naturally over generations, but the idea of gradual abolition soon became neither practical nor desirable.⁴⁹ These same women, as revealed through their diaries and memoirs, responded to this change with either stubborn pride or uncompromising indifference as they continued to hold fast to their conviction that the Confederacy should be independent and slavery preserved.

⁴⁸ Salmon P. Chase, “Lincoln Proclaims Emancipation,” September 22, 1862, in *Eyewitness to America: 500 Years of America in the Words of Those Who Saw It Happen*, edited by Colbert, David (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 220-1.

⁴⁹ James Loring Baker, “Slavery,” (Philadelphia: J.A. Norton, 1860), *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*.

Chapter 2: 1863

That on the 1st day of January, A.D. 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people whereof shall be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free...And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God.¹

Nancy Emerson lived with her brother and his wife on their plantation in Augusta County, Virginia where she wrote explicitly about her reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation: “Lincoln's proclamation has brought no desolation.”² As a matter of fact, the South relied so heavily upon slave labor that it was believed that the Emancipation Proclamation would put an end to any prosperity that the region enjoyed. By writing this one-line statement, Emerson was denouncing any end to slavery. She believed the Confederacy was in the right, and that included its fight to preserve slavery.

Southern women yearned for independence from the Union, but they were appalled that the Union forces, headed by Lincoln, would put the freedom of what these southerners considered property on the line. The extinction of slavery started when Union General John C. Frémont issued a proclamation at the end of August 1861 in the state of Missouri that any and all slaves were “declared free men.”³ A few months later, the Confiscation Act was passed in December of 1861 and again the next year that made enslaved persons in Union lines ‘contraband.’ Also, in July of 1862, the “Militia Act” was passed by the Union that allowed men of color to serve in the army by laboring. In all of this, southern women’s reactions to their

¹ Lincoln, “The Emancipation Proclamation, 22 Sept. 1862,” from *The U.S. Constitution and Other Key American Writings*, 145-6.

² Nancy Emerson, Diary, 8 Jan. 1863, Valley of the Shadow Online Archives, valley.lib.virginia.edu.

³ Frank Moore, ed., *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, with Documents, Narratives, Illustrative Incidents, Poetry, Etc.* (New York: G.P.Putnam, 1862), III: 10.

slaves continued to follow the “local circumstances.”⁴ As Laura Lee’s diary shows, the southern women who owned slaves displayed unashamed authority over their slaves when the Confederacy was winning the war. However, when the tables turned, their attitudes toward their slaves underwent a dramatic transformation. These women had to cope with the everchanging tide of the war and the ensuing loss of control. What many of them had feared the most had become the reality. The Union army could win the war, slaves could be freed, which meant the loss of property for southerners, and it was all happening when those same women were, for the most part, without any protection from white males.⁵

However, since the Emancipation Proclamation only freed slaves that were held in states that were in rebellion, the Union government had no practical power to enforce it. As Union troops moved into previously-held Confederate states, slaves were set free, but since Lincoln’s preliminary issuance of that same proclamation in September of 1862, no states that had been in the Confederacy had rejoined the Union. Even as this proclamation became the law of the land, southern women’s best defenses became sarcasm, ignorance, or even denial that change was coming and unstoppable.⁶ These women’s existences that relied heavily on the labor of their slaves was coming to an end. Many of these women worshipped convenience, comfort, and the status quo over righteousness, which left them unable and/or unwilling to see chattel slavery as

⁴ Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), Chapter 7.

⁵ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, Chapter 7.

⁶ Mary Jeffreys Bethell, Diary, 1861-1865, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>, 1861-1865; see also Nancy Emerson, Diary, 1862-1864, Valley of the Shadow Online Archives, valley.lib.virginia.edu; see also Isabel Quattlebaum, “Twelve Women in the First Days of the Confederacy,” *Civil War History* 7, no. 4 (December 1961): 370-85, doi:10.1353/cwh.1961.0036.

wrong. Certainly, even as this change was upon them and even though it was not explicitly desired, slavery was not the main issue to them. It was instead part of life.⁷

Denial of the significant changes brought by the Emancipation Proclamation to the legal status of slavery offered a haven for many southern women who could not conceive of a future without slavery. In Nancy Emerson's record of this moment, it is clear that she was aware of the Proclamation and its effects. Emerson chose not to be ignorant of the Union's efforts to free enslaved people. Instead, she reacted with sarcasm when she wrote "What awful disappointment will be experienced by our friends the abolitionists."⁸ Taken at face value, it is not completely clear that this statement was meant in a sarcastic manner, but her upbringing and surroundings show that one of Emerson's main beliefs was that the Civil War was God's punishment for those who wanted to abolish slavery. In that light, having sympathy for northern abolitionists reads as a frivolous one. Furthermore, she was yet another woman who placed great emphasis on the religious righteousness of slavery. In her mind, God and the Bible justified the institution, hence she could support it without hesitancy.

It is true that Emerson was a pro-Confederate southern woman who believed in the righteousness of slavery and, as such, addressed her changing views on slavery in 1863 when she recorded that she was "a thousand times better satisfied of the propriety of slavery than I was before the war."⁹ Slavery was convenient and righteous. Being informed was her source of

⁷ Quattlebaum, "Twelve Women in the First Days of the Confederacy," 373.

⁸ Emerson, Diary, 8 Jan. 1863.

⁹ Emerson, 6 Jan. 1863.

power, and sarcasm was her weapon of choice as the Civil War increasingly endangered the whole institution of slavery.

Moreover, although Emerson defended the South's right to own slaves and believed in the righteousness of the institution, she did not completely equate the Civil War with slavery. In an entry in early 1863, she stated that the fight currently raging over the fate of slavery was "the most monstrous humbug ever got up since the flood," but she did not use the word 'slavery' much more in her diary.¹⁰ In fact, throughout her diary, and in good company with many other southern women, Emerson used the word *servant* to mean *slave*, showing a denial of the reality of chattel slavery.¹¹ Her words are read differently given the knowledge that she was born in the North but lived in the South when she wrote the previous words and had so thoroughly assimilated into the region that she referred to Union soldiers as "barbarians."¹² She perceived that the Union was a significant threat to her way of life that was made comfortable by the family's slaves. Having lived in both regions of the United States, instead of questioning slavery at all, she decided to defend it. Her home had become the South, and slavery had come along with that as, in her eyes, a God-given right that was worth preserving, no matter the cost.

Whether abolition came from Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, orders from Union generals such as Frémont and Hunter, or from rogue troops who took matters into their own hands, southern women who owned slaves witnessed their personal means of wealth fade away. Laura Lee and the other women of her household could only preserve their independence by

¹⁰ Emerson, 6 Jan. 1863.

¹¹ Ibid.; see also Anna and Floride Clemson, "A Confederate Girl Visits Pennsylvania, July-September 1863," in *The Women's War in the South: Recollections and Reflections of the American Civil War*, edited by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg (Turner Publishing Company, 1999), 234-97. Ebook.

¹² Emerson, 6 March 1863.

preserving slavery. In fact, she was a lady who was not afraid to use the legal system to her advantage, and she did so when the law seemed to threaten her slaves as the absence of white males, due to her brother-in-law's death, loomed precariously over her, her sister, and sister-in-law. After Mary Greenhow Lee's husband died, she was appointed administrator of his estate that included slaves.¹³ Furthermore, slaves had been a vital part of the sisters' inheritance as the slaves provided necessary "labor within the household or produced income through being hired out."¹⁴ There may not have been any official battle lines, but these women fought their own "personal battles" in their homes, without commanders, fellow troops or reinforcement.¹⁵

In addition, Louisa McCord was a southern plantation mistress born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1810 and, even though she lived in some northern states at various times in her life, supported the Confederacy during the Civil War.¹⁶ She moved many times during her life due to her father's career as a statesman, lawyer, judge, planter, and a former president of the Bank of the United States. Also, her father owned four different plantations, a summer home, and about 300 slaves in South Carolina.¹⁷ South Carolina became Louisa's permanent home in 1829, and she married David James McCord a decade after.

¹³ Laura Odendahl, "A History of Captivity and a History of Freedom" in *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries*, Thomas H. Appleton and Angela Boswell, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 125.

¹⁴ Odendahl, "A History of Captivity and a History of Freedom," 125.

¹⁵ Quattlebaum," 373.

¹⁶ Louisa McCord was also an avid writer, most famous for her play, *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. Although she was not formally educated, she took her self-education very seriously and often "advocated political economy and...the submission of women." She can be studied further through Leigh Fought's *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Leigh Fought, *Southern Womanhood and Slavery*, 28.

Although everything pointed to McCord being a staunch pro-slavery southern woman, her upbringing alone did not cause her to consider slavery “the more ideal arrangement.”¹⁸ A decade before the Civil War, she fought for the preservation of slavery and emphasized its benefits. Having lived a life in the North without slaves and then with her father’s gain of over 300 slaves, historian Leslie Fought argues: “slavery was an ever-present phenomenon of Louisa Cheves’s [McCord’s] life from her birth through the Civil War...”¹⁹ In fact, her reality later resulted in her deciding that “slavery [w]as a necessity, not only for her own well-being and upkeep, but also for the improvement of people of African descent.”²⁰

McCord had experience at both ends of the table and committed her life to the defense of slavery. Unlike some southern plantation mistresses who were happy to leave the management of the plantation and slaves to their male relatives, McCord controlled the slaves she inherited from her father and those of her new husband. By the time the Civil War started, she worked to preserve slavery. According to Fought, McCord believed:

slave labor elevated white people, allowing them to pursue art, literature, science, and all other fields that led to the creation of ‘civilization.’ Second, slave labor acted as a form of social control. Embedded in both arguments, and backed by the scientific evidence of the nineteenth century, was the assumption that people of African descent were neither capable of creating their own civilization nor of functioning in an existing civilization without the guiding force of slavery. Therefore, her third argument was that slavery improved the condition of black people.²¹

¹⁸ Fought, *Southern Womanhood*, 3.

¹⁹ Fought, 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

As a result of this belief, McCord, “donated horses, slave labor, [and] needlework...[and] most of the men in her extended family, including her brothers...died for the ‘Cause.’”²² When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, she considered it illegitimate and instead of benefitting the white or black race, it harmed both. Louisa McCord was uncommon for her time, as she was an elitist from an extremely wealthy family that owned hundreds of slaves, and her attitude regarding the institution during the Civil War is clear.

Not all southern women were in that same boat, and not all had experienced life both with and without slavery like McCord. This resulted in southern women being less conscious, but not completely unaware, of the reality of chattel slavery. For instance, Mary Jeffreys Bethell of North Carolina whose sons had enlisted in the Confederate army, still had her husband at home until the final stages of the war. As 1863 came and went, she recorded nothing relating to the Emancipation Proclamation and instead wrote of personal matters regarding her immediate family members and faith in God.²³ To many women, slavery was not its own topic, but fell under the umbrella of daily life.

In addition to Bethell, Sarah Lois Wadley also started her diary during the Civil War and recorded nothing about the Emancipation Proclamation. Instead, in her January 1st entry, she wrote about her reflections over the past year, how she had progressed, the “Yankees” siege of Vicksburg, and her recent and expected guests.²⁴ Her complete lack of regard for the effect that

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Mary Jeffreys Bethell, Diary, 3 Jan. 1861, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>.

²⁴ Sarah Lois Wadley, Diary, 1 Jan. 1863, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wadley/wadley.html>.

the Emancipation Proclamation had on the present and future state of slaves points to a pattern among southern plantation mistresses who were either in complete denial that the Emancipation Proclamation had gone into effect, or did not believe it to be significant. Ignorance aided by denial allowed southern women to escape the fact that their independence brought about by slave labor was quickly eluding their beloved Confederacy's grasp.²⁵

As Wadley's diary shows, slavery was not the issue on the forefront of every southern individual's mind. Even though southern men as a majority fought for the Confederacy and southern women also defended slavery's right to existence, the mindset that the Civil War was only about slavery was not all-encompassing. Varina Davis, in her book, *Jefferson Davis Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir*, published in 1890, worked to save her husband's legacy from the cruelty of history. The part of her book about slavery is rather insignificant. On writing upon the death of her husband, she stated that the family's former slaves even sent their condolences and had only encouraging things to say about their time as slaves.²⁶

In addition, Mary Branch who practically viewed the Battle of Murfreesboro, Tennessee that took place from the 30th of December, 1862 until January 1st of 1863, was more concerned with her family members who fought in it than that that it was a Confederate defeat. As can be seen by her memoir, Davis did not openly associate slavery with the Confederacy.²⁷ Slavery was

²⁵ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 161.

²⁶ Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir* (New York: Belford Co., Publishers 18-22 East 18th Street, 1890) 933. The Civil War Collection, Jerry Falwell Library Special Collections, Liberty University at Lynchburg, VA.

²⁷ Mary Jones Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "within the Lines," and a Genealogical Record*, (Chicago: Joseph G. Branch Publishing, 1912), 33, In Documenting the American South, First-Person Narratives of the American South, Beginnings to 1920, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/branch/branch.html>.

a secondary issue to the women in the South. Moreover, they wanted others to know that too much had been made of the issue and that it was not worth a full-scale war.

However, the men in the Confederate Army underwent significant religious revivals in late 1863 and early 1864, and southern women on the home front situated the topic of religion prominently in their diary entries during this time.²⁸ Wadley recorded in her journal on July 26th, 1863 that, “if it be his will to take from us what is dearer than home, friends, or life itself, our country, can I not believe that Our Father doeth all things well. I will try thus to believe, Oh, Lord, help thou mine unbelief [sic]!”²⁹ The fact that she put her ‘country,’ meaning the Confederacy, above even her ‘life’ is proof that it was not simply a choice between the Confederacy or slavery. It was the Confederacy, and slavery was assumed in that label. Certainly, she was confident that God was Lord of her life, and she did not allude to slavery in this entry, but instead used slavery synonymously with the Confederacy and ‘our country.’³⁰

In addition, Constance Cary, who became the wife of the personal secretary of Jefferson Davis, was opposed to slavery, but she defended the Confederacy. Cary was from a well-established Virginian family and connected to President Jefferson Davis through her fiancé, and later, husband. In her work, *Refugitta of Richmond: The Wartime Recollections, Grave and Gay, of Constance Cary Harrison*, she wrote of “the curse of slavery upon our beautiful Southern

²⁸ Steven E. Woodworth, *While God Is Marching on: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

²⁹ Wadley, Diary, 26 July 1863.

³⁰ Ibid.

land,” and yet, after that one mention, she did not mention slavery again.³¹ Her opposition to slavery combined with her support of the Confederacy still made her a staunch Confederate supporter. In her view, slavery was not the root of the conflict. Although she was opposed to slavery, it was a necessary evil that had to be accepted for the greater good, which would ultimately be the triumph of the South. Her choice to support the Confederacy despite her aversion to slavery signaled the possibility of being respected in southern society without supporting slavery.³² Not all elite southern women owned slaves and how they related to the institution of slavery came in varying shades and degrees of fervor.

The Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in 1863, and both the North and South waged multiple battles that drew slavery’s fate into question. One of those significant battles was the Battle of Chancellorsville on April 30th-May 6th in Spotsylvania, Virginia. Sarah Lois Wadley left no record of her feelings after this decisive Confederate victory. As a matter of fact, her closest entry is May 16th, 1863, and she mentions nothing of the battle, but records what dinner parties she attended, those she visited with, and the excitement over the visiting Confederate army.³³

Back to Constance Cary, who possessed the married surname Harrison and used the *nom de plume* Refugitta as she wrote of the Battle of Chancellorsville with concern. She recorded, “Nothing in the war, perhaps, excepting the surrender, ever struck Richmond with such stunning

³¹ Burton Harrison, Mrs. Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, and S. Kittrell Rushing, *Refugitta of Richmond: The Wartime Recollections, Grave and Gay, of Constance Cary Harrison*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 29-30.

³² Harrison, Cheairs, and Rushing, *Refugitta of Richmond*, 41-2.

³³ Wadley, 16 May 1863.

force as the announcement of Stonewall Jackson's fall, of the amputation of his arm, and finally of his death, following the battle of Chancellorsville."³⁴ There is no way to simplify how the women in the South related to slavery.

Before July of 1863, the war seemed to be going in the Confederacy's favor, which meant that slavery would be preserved. This was celebratory news for many plantation mistresses until the Battle of Gettysburg, fought from July 1st-3rd, 1863, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This battle followed the Confederacy's victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, yet the city of Vicksburg, a Confederate stronghold, was under siege by the Union, and the Confederacy, led by General Robert E. Lee, needed a victory at Gettysburg to boost Confederate morale and turn the war in the favor of the Confederacy. Unfortunately for the CSA, the reality was much different. The Confederacy lost. Gettysburg was the bloodiest battle of the war with over 55,00 men dead, wounded or captured on both sides, and historian Stephen Sears argues, "Gettysburg marked the turning point of the war in the East."³⁵ The memoirs left behind by southern women speak to their great distress as the abolition of slavery seemed all but official. Independence and freedom were not synonymous to southern women who hoped that the Confederacy would reign victorious and bring independence to the South, not freedom to the slaves. Their worst nightmare, that of losing the war to the Union and losing the forced labor of their slaves seemed to be coming true.

Moving on, Cornelia McPeake McDonald was a southern slave-owning woman, but it was not by choice that she owned slaves. Her family was respected in the South, and she grew up

³⁴ Harrison, Cheairs, and Rushing, 94.

³⁵ Stephen, W. Sears, *Gettysburg*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), xiv.

around slavery, but in her journal she wrote, “I think that in [my] heart [I] always felt that slavery was wrong.”³⁶ When she heard about the battle at Gettysburg, her first thoughts were not about slavery, but about the dead and wounded men. She lamented, “the dreadful echoes from the field of Gettysburg [that] sounded in our ears, and put an end to our joy,” which the recent Confederate victories brought about.³⁷ She related to her slaves in a familial way and referred to them as her ‘servants.’ She abhorred slavery, yet it was crucial to her standard of living. Throughout the war, she lived in denial that the freedom of the very people that she held in bondage was being decided on those same ‘fields’ that she wrote about.

Furthermore, Mary Jeffreys Bethell recorded that there had been a “battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, [with a] great many killed on our side,” but the rest of her entry is not political in the least.³⁸ She never once used the word ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ in the entire entry, but instead poured out her heart regarding her spiritual concerns. In the end, she came to a point where she stated, “I have peace and comfort, I rejoice in the Lord, my soul is happy, hallelujah.”³⁹ She does not associate suffering with the war or her status as a slaveholder. Instead, her overarching theme throughout her writings is less political than pro or anti-slavery, or even pro-Confederacy or pro-Union. Instead, her emphasis is on God versus Satan and evil. She owned slaves, but she did not believe it was a sin.

³⁶ Cornelia McPeake McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865* (Nashville, Cullom & Gertner Co., 1935), 2. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/diarywithreminis00mcdo/mode/2up>.

³⁷ McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences*, 177.

³⁸ Bethell, *Diary*, 29 July 1863.

³⁹ Bethell, 29 July 1863.

As the war continued post-Gettysburg, pro-slavery sentiment lost significant confidence and anti-slavery sentiment was buoyed. Laura Lee and her sister-in-law, Mary, recorded what they felt regarding the impatience from their ‘slaves,’ in the latter half of 1863. The status of the family’s slaves had gone back and forth between slave and free and these ‘servants,’ as Laura designated them, did not withstand any more disrespect after the Union seemed on the verge of winning the war. However, Lee and her sister-in-law were not defenseless and employed tactics to keep these ‘servants’ in line. In fact, Laura described an incident where she locked up one of her former slave’s clothes to hinder her from running away because Lee “believed that the clothes belonged to the mistresses, and she denied Betty’s (the slave’s) claim to personal property.”⁴⁰

After Gettysburg, the war turned in favor of the Union. The day after the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg, the Confederate-defended city of Vicksburg surrendered to Union forces. Then, a week later, the Confederate army retreated from the state of Pennsylvania on July 13th and 14th of 1863.⁴¹ As a response to this disheartening turn of events, Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation on August 1st specifically addressing the trials of the women supporting the Confederacy from the home front. He stated:

I conjure my countrywomen, the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the Confederacy—to use their all-powerful influence in aid of this call, to add one crowning sacrifice to those which their patriotism has so freely and constantly afforded on their country's altar, and to take care that none who owe service in the field shall be sheltered

⁴⁰ Odendahl, 135.

⁴¹ "The Year in Review: 1863," House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/index.php/almanac/1863>.

at home from the disgrace of having deserted their duty to their families, to their country, and to their God.⁴²

Most of the women worked on the home front, and Davis wanted to make sure that they did not underestimate themselves. True, some women who considered themselves supporters of the Confederacy did not support slavery or have any stake in it like Anita Dwyer Withers or Constance Cary.⁴³ Davis made sure that by not mentioning slavery in the proclamation, the majority of southern women who were not slave-owners knew that slavery was not the unifying thread that held the Confederacy together. Instead, it was the inclination to live life without governmental interference.⁴⁴

However, this proclamation neither changed the course of the war nor southern women's attitudes regarding slavery. Union troops occupied Fort Wagner in South Carolina in early September 1863 after withstanding a 59-day siege. In addition, Union troops defeated Confederate troops at the Battle of Bayou Bourbeau on November 3rd, 1863.⁴⁵ Mary Jeffreys Bethell used her last entry to write of her personal affairs, including her family members, and made no mention of the battles.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Nancy Emerson closed off 1863 back in July and did not write again until July 8th, 1864. A year went by without her recording anything,

⁴² Jefferson Finis Davis, "Proclamation concerning Military Service, Richmond, Virginia, August 1, 1863," House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/40694>.

⁴³ Withers, Anita Dwyer Withers, *Diary, May 4, 1860- June 18, 1865*, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/withers/withers.html>.

⁴⁴ Davis, "Proclamation."

⁴⁵ "The Year in Review: 1863," House Divided.

⁴⁶ Bethell, 17 Nov. 1863.

but she used the last entry of 1863 to record a story that portrayed Grant (a Union commander) in a negative light while Confederate sympathizers were presented in a positive light. She told a story about a slave who was a supporter of the Confederacy and secession and, because of this, he was “kept on nothing but water for three days because he refused to work & said he was ‘secesh.’”⁴⁷ The strangeness of a slave supporting the Confederacy puts this anecdote in a unique light. In her reflection on this enslaved man, Emerson wrote, “Noble fellow. It does one good to hear [of] such instances.”⁴⁸ By the end of 1863, Emerson believed the significance of the reality she was facing: the declining power of the Confederacy and whites’ role as master over their slaves. As the year went on, Mary Polk Branch was in good company with other women of the Confederacy when she wrote that the year was characterized by “this [pervasive] gloom...”⁴⁹

Going in to 1864, morale in both Union and Confederate sympathizers waned. Individuals, especially southern women like Mary Polk Branch, noted the pre-war years with yearning for the “charity and hospitality, for which the South was so noted in ante-bellum days.”⁵⁰ Most of her family members had devoted their lives to the war as not only had her brothers served in the Confederate army, but her husband was jailed, and upon his release was told that if he was ever found in Federal lines again, he would be hanged.⁵¹ In Wadley’s last entry of 1863 she stated, “What is in store for us in the coming year we cannot tell, but from all we see now it will doubtless be fraught with sorrow and trial, the next new year’s eve we may be

⁴⁷ Emerson, 26 June 1863.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Branch, 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

homeless, but whatever happens I want to have a firm faith in God, in my Redeemer, then all else will be easier to bear.”⁵² It is clear that Wadley referred to the damage that the Civil War caused and the Confederacy’s failing hopes. Sarah Morgan Dawson wrote a tribute to the passing year of 1863: “No! Go and welcome! Bring Peace and brighter days, O dawning New Year. Die, faster and faster, Old One; I count your remaining moments with almost savage glee.”⁵³ These women of the South were only too anxious to leave the destruction and devastation, on top of the Union’s official proclamation to end slavery of 1863, behind them. Still, America would have to endure this Civil War until April 1865, but many southern women saw the effects of the war endure long after that year and felt the sting of slavery’s death even before it was made official by the Thirteenth Amendment.

⁵² Wadley, 31 Dec. 1863.

⁵³ Dawson, 31 Dec. 1863.

Chapter 3: 1864 and the Continuing War

Oh! how I long to fly away and be free--must we be pent in the wilderness for years yet to come? We see no prospect of peace. People are afraid to let us have their negroes, we are so near the coast. We have now a man and woman and two children but they are not enough. Dianah is now away having her Christmas and we feel quite uncomfortable to be obliged to cook and run about in the cold [sic].¹

These words from a Georgia woman, Julia Johnson Fisher, sum up the sentiment among southern women as the Civil War went into its third full year. She lamented, “If this war continues long I fear that such (a life without slaves) will be our fate, the negroes are becoming so scarce [sic].”² Southern slave-owning women’s ideas of slavery, freedom, and independence were complicated. In many southern women’s minds, it was as simple as the Confederacy winning the Civil War so slavery would continue. Most southerners decided that the perpetuation of slavery was a price worth paying in order for the Confederacy to be free of the Union.

By 1864 the Emancipation Proclamation was in effect for a year, and southerners’ ability to keep their slaves was steadily shrinking. As southern women ran the households, the reality of losing the war and the abolition of slavery became a reality. One of the women whom this affected was the wealthy and well-educated Louisa McCord. As historian Leigh Fought claims, “Emancipation brought mixed feelings for [her] and her daughter.”³ The McCords went through the spectrum of emotions over the war and the Emancipation Proclamation, but they ended up being angry at their loss of property. When one of their slaves ran away, they were convinced, “On the one hand... it was one less mouth that they had to feed. On the other hand, they came to

¹ Julia Johnson Fisher, *Diary, 1864*, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC), 1.

² Fisher, *Diary*, 3 Jan. 1864.

³ Leigh Fought, *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 179.

realize how dependent upon slave labor they had been.”⁴ Known as Lou, Louisa the younger had only known life with slaves and was lost now that those she had depended on were no longer in her service. The McCord family may not have measured their wealth solely by the number of slaves they owned, but when those slaves were emancipated, the McCord women found that their wealth had run off with their slaves. These women found themselves helpless and hopeless as “living without servants became a great inconvenience for them.”⁵

In the end, as Union forces advanced and the Confederacy became increasingly desperate, southern women felt the sting of loss keenly.⁶ Historian Drew Gilpin Faust states, “In Columbia (where McCord lived), constant reminders of the war existed, particularly in the presence of the hospital and in high inflation. Still, in some respects, keeping a facade of normality was possible from the initial excitement of secession in 1861 until the Union invasion in late 1864 and early 1865.”⁷ By 1864, southern women could no longer downplay the cost of war. Also, as a widow, Louisa McCord was dependent on the financial benefits of slave ownership, so she was not immune to emancipation. Faust claims, “ownership of these slaves gave her real financial security and the chance for independence, a rare luxury for women in the nineteenth century.”⁸ This security was a safety net that she never thought too hard about until the Civil War ripped it from her. She had to rely on her writing and outside profit in increasing intervals.

⁴ Fought, *Southern Womanhood*, 180.

⁵ Fought, 180.

⁶ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 251.

⁷ Faust, 159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

Another widow, Mary Greenhow Lee, also had to grow accustomed to her role as independent widow. A widow since 1856, by the mid-1860s, independence was not her default mode.⁹ She had, at one time in her life, known the security that came with a husband, but now, less than ten years after her husband's death, she faced a growing threat that her financial independence would be taken away. She was not the only woman in the house, which was both beneficial and disastrous at the same time. She had the moral support of the other women of the house, but that also meant that she was responsible for them, particularly because she was the oldest.¹⁰ Nothing about this caused her concern until her inheritance, her financial means, was threatened when slavery became in danger of extinction. Her situation became progressively common as the Civil War slowly kept diminishing the independence that single or widowed southern women possessed.¹¹

Mary Greenhow Lee's sister-in-law, Laura Lee, was no exception to the waning strength of slavery as an institution. She had no male authority over her and possessed the coveted financial independence that many other southern women did not, but her lifestyle was tied to slavery. When her slaves were emancipated, she lost her wealth. As Federal troops brought black soldiers to her town as Union forces advanced, her slaves' actions caused dismay. Historian Laura Odendahl states, "Betty left with the Yankees in August 1864, and no more was heard

⁹ Laura Odendahl, "A History of Captivity and a History of Freedom" in *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries*, Thomas H. Appleton and Angela Boswell, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 123.

¹⁰ Odendahl, "A History of Captivity," 123.

¹¹ Odendahl, 123.

from her. Emily (another slave) did not leave, but she married and, thus, became less dependent on the Lees.”¹²

Likewise, Julia Johnson Fisher wrote about her economic troubles in her diary. By 1864 she held a few slaves, but grieved the changes that were taking place. She complained, “[t]he oldest (of the slave children) is scarcely ten years of age and very sickly. She (her female slave) told me today that although she could not read and write she can iron and scrub. It is said that she and the next, aged eight, cook, wash, etc.”¹³ She was not the only woman in her hometown who felt the loss of slaves. Actually, Fisher recorded one particularly hard-hit woman who despaired of ever seeing her female slave again due to her unaccounted-for absence of several days. When the two women finally saw “Old Nelly,” emotions ran high. She wrote, “Light and joy entered the household in the form of an old worn out negro, thus we [were] lead to appreciate what we once cast away as almost useless [sic].”¹⁴ The words ‘thus we [were] lead to appreciate what we once cast away as almost useless’ are revealing about how southern women regarded slaves as a whole. When prosperous times were to be had, these women thought little of slavery or the financial security it afforded them and their family. It was only when they were faced with its possible abolition that individual slave’s merits were reflected on.

Southern women also found out that independence meant authority. Men joined the ranks of the Confederacy as conscription became common by 1864.¹⁵ McCord’s husband died a decade

¹² Ibid., 137.

¹³ Fisher, 3 Jan. 1864.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1 Feb. 1864.

¹⁵ David Carlson, “Citizens of the County of Their Domicile: Conscription and Confederate Citizenship.” *Civil War history*. 62, no. 4 (2016): 423.

earlier, but she felt the decreasing power of male authority during the wartime years. William Tecumseh Sherman ravaged Georgia and, many believed, aimed for South Carolina. Most believed he would go to Charleston. In reality, Columbia, the home of McCord, still stood in one piece. In her predicament, McCord knew she could not rely on her husband for protection. She could not rely on slaves. She had to rely on herself. The Confederacy was losing. The morale of the southern home front was left to the southern women as they reluctantly made the transition from mistress, to both master and mistress, and then to landed lady without slaves. These women became the last line of defense against the Union army and abolition of slavery.¹⁶

Mary Polk Branch also found this alternate meaning of independence as she continued to navigate the Civil War without her husband. Colonel Joseph Branch was in the state of Tennessee, then under Federal lines, and because he could not journey to see her, she had to journey to see him. In her *Memoirs of a Southern Woman*, she made certain to include her experiences regarding Federal officers. She wrote, “The [Federal] captain refused to take pay from a Southern woman, until I assured him [that] I was well supplied with money.”¹⁷ Before the Civil War, finances were a male-dominated sphere, and a southern lady would not even dare travel far without a male chaperone. Times changed, and especially by 1864, southern women could not depend on their husbands, brothers, and/or slaves. As a result, Branch was a woman without a male chaperone. On her trip, she recorded only one topic that would sway a Federal officer to let her pass. She wrote about a time where she was forced to state, “I see, General, that

¹⁶ Fought, 167.

¹⁷ Mary Jones Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "within the Lines," and a Genealogical Record*, (Chicago: Joseph G. Branch Publishing, 1912), 40, In *Documenting the American South, First-Person Narratives of the American South, Beginnings to 1920*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/branch/branch.html>.

this gives you pleasure, but as I hear that you are a dear lover of the negro race, let me go to the plantation and take medicine for your friends there.”¹⁸ Branch discovered that the cause she supported and the cause her family members fought for required her to assume responsibilities which were often thought of as male duties. The idea of independence for the Confederacy meant autonomy for southern women where responsibility rested on their shoulders.

As the war went on, the cost that many women paid for the Confederate States of America added up. Little to no mention of slavery exists in many remaining Civil War diaries of women after 1864. For instance, Belle Boyd doubled down when it came to her support of the Confederacy. She published her memoir in 1865, after the Civil War had concluded. Moreover, she published her memoir in May of 1865, too late to help the Confederacy, but she held onto the hope that her experiences would influence the British against the Union.¹⁹ This shows the power of the pen and how many women used it as a weapon. Most often, they did not don a soldier’s uniform, but their pens became their swords in support of the Confederacy, as many of the diaries, memoirs, and journals were written with the knowledge that their voices had influence.²⁰ Boyd dedicated much of her life to what was now irrevocably known as the “Lost Cause,” but she was never passionate about the issue of slavery.²¹ Granted, she believed it was the South’s right to preserve it and that it was better than having free negroes in society, but she did not

¹⁸ Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman*, 40.

¹⁹ Patricia A. Wilde, "(Re)Telling the Times: The Tangled Memories of Confederate Spies Rose O'Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd," *Rhetoric Review* 38, no. 3 (2019): 300; see also Belle Boyd, Sam Walde Hardinge, and George Augustus Sala, *Belle Boyd, In Camp and Prison*, (New York: Blelock & Company, 1865), 14.

²⁰ Kelly H. Crosby, "The Ideal and the Real: Southern Plantation Women of the Civil War" (2014), Student Publications, 286, https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/286.

²¹ Boyd, Walde, Hardinge, and Sala, *Belle Boyd*, 54.

believe slavery to be the sole cause of secession or the Civil War.²² Without a doubt, her actions during the war left little room to doubt her loyalty to the Confederacy.²³ She was willing to die for it, and slavery was a cause that was important to the Confederacy, so it was important to her.²⁴ She claimed that the Confederacy's "only crime has been that love of freedom which the Pilgrim Fathers could not leave behind them when they left their island home."²⁵ She did not see the South's desire to preserve slavery as a crime.

Cornelia McPeake McDonald knew by December of 1864 that she had sacrificed her husband in defense of the Cause yet, she still did not back down.²⁶ When she reached the house where she knew her wounded husband stayed, she penned, "the object I first saw was my husband's corpse."²⁷ In addition, she added another sacrifice to the growing list, as she learned of the death of her sister, Lizzy. Her sister died from the shock of what the Federal forces did to her house and plantation.²⁸ Despite this, McDonald was determined to not turn her back on the Cause that her husband and multiple other family members had died for. She held steadfast to the conviction that her remaining children would not become extra casualties of the war and would always know the love of at least one parent. Even though she was a widow, the world she now lived in had forced her to grow accustomed to filling the role of head of the household, and this

²² Boyd, Walde, Hardinge, and Sala, 55.

²³ Wilde, "(Re)Telling the Times," 300.

²⁴ Boyd, Walde, Hardinge, and Sala, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁶ Cornelia McPeake McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865* (Nashville, Cullom & Gertner Co., 1935) 239. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/diarywithreminis00mcdo/mode/2up>.

²⁷ McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences*, 239.

²⁸ McDonald, 240.

reality did not lessen her resolve. There was nothing else for her to do except support the Confederacy until the end.²⁹

Moreover, there is evidence that many southern women who supported the Confederacy often used the colloquial term of *servant* instead of *slave*.³⁰ For instance, there was Mary Jeffreys Bethell, who by 1864 had not lost any of her religious fervor or support of the Confederacy.³¹ Likewise, Elizabeth Rhodes, a woman from Alabama who owned few slaves, also chose not to dwell on her losses due to the Civil War, and instead looked to God for her strength while also painting the Confederacy in a positive light.³² Their sole reason for living and supporting the Confederacy was not slavery, but their lifestyles and diary entries reveal that they were open to, and even supported, the idea of the preservation of slavery through the triumph of the Confederacy.

As the war continued, many women's devotion to the Confederacy prevailed despite the desperation of Confederate forces and the cost of war. In an April 1864 entry, Mary Jeffreys Bethell wrote, "It has been some time since I wrote in my diary, owing to the scarcity of writing paper."³³ Her last entry before this was from the end of January 1864, but instead of complaining

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁰ Lenoir Family Papers, 15 March 1864; see also Frances Woolfolk Wallace, *Diary*, 30 April 1864, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; see also Odendahl, "A History of Captivity," 125; see also Grant, "When the Fires Burned too Close to Home," 568.

³¹ Mary Jeffreys Bethell, *Diary*, 1 Jan. 1864, 9 May 1864, in *Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>.

³² Jennifer Newman Treviño, "Elizabeth Rhodes: An Alabama Woman's Religious Beliefs during the Civil War," *Alabama Review* 62, no. 4 (10, 2009): 261.

³³ Bethell, *Diary*, April 1864.

about the 'scarcity of writing paper,' she moved on to other topics. She regarded it as another sacrifice that had to be made for the Confederacy, and it was one that she was eager and very willing to make. Her husband and sons went off to fight. These sacrifices had been much harder to make, but she was not alone in her unwavering allegiance to the Confederacy, even amidst the pitfalls of 1864.³⁴

The slaves that southern women owned all but disappeared, either by legal emancipation via the Emancipation Proclamation or by way of them running off in an attempt to reach Federal lines. Even so, southern women did not abandon the Confederacy. Sarah Morgan Dawson lost two brothers in the Confederate army by 1864 in addition to other family members, but she wrote, "Starting out at half-past eight daily, and returning a little before three, does not leave me much time for melancholy reflections. And there is no necessity for indulging in them at present; they only give pain."³⁵ There was not much time for depression as she continued to fill the role of the strong southern woman. It is important to note that she did not include the word 'regret' or 'remorse' next to the word 'pain.' She knew loss, but she did not allow it to make her bitter towards the Confederacy. She lamented that it had cost her family members their lives, yet the sacrifices that she had to make had not been in vain so long as the Confederacy survived.

Furthermore, about a year before the Confederacy's official surrender, Sarah Lois Wadley's diary entry relating to slavery and the attitude of the Confederacy and the Union

³⁴ Caroline E. Janney, "Mothers of the Lost Cause: An army of determined Southern women buried the dead but kept a mythic Confederate legacy alive," *America's Civil War*, (November 2008), 56+.

³⁵ Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 31 Dec. 1864, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25004/25004-h/25004-h.htm>. Project Gutenberg.

towards that institution reveals that she, even in 1864, did not believe the Union to have the higher moral ground. She recounted:

Mr. Ludeling from Monroe had come out to see Maj. Waddill in the morning, said that he was never placed in such a humiliating position in his life, as when in town, he was sitting in his office one day since they came, when a Yankee came up [o]n the pavement before the door and walking up to Major Bry who was standing there made him an abolition speech, said that he was an abolitionist of the deepest dye, that there were four classes of men, the aristocrats or slave holders, the negroes, or slaves, the free negroes, the mules and lastly the poor white men, that he wanted to abolish the slaveholders, exterminate the slaves so as to give an opportunity for the poor white man to rise, this with a good deal more in the same formed his speech. I dare say these are the true sentiments of many a one, 'tis not the welfare of the poor negro they seek [sic].³⁶

She theorized with those wanting what is best for the 'negroes,' but she did not explicitly say what she believes that is. However, by putting the slavery issue in an us versus them frame, meaning the Confederacy versus the Union, she backed up her support of the Confederacy.

She lamented that a new conscript law was passed that forced her father to join the Confederate army, but she did not condemn the Confederacy.³⁷ She wrote that her father's absence was yet another sacrifice she had to endure in order to support the Confederacy. After her father enlisted in the Confederate army, she penned fear as 1864 brought reports of misery. Yet, she remained faithful to the Confederacy as she wrote:

It is reported that the Yankees will be here before many days... Was there ever such a *dark period in a nation's history before*, sometimes it seems that all is dark, all is east of the Mississippi, the soldiers are deserting by scores, the officers are most of them cowards or knaves and the people seem to have lost patriotism, even the shadow of

³⁶ Sarah Lois Wadley, Diary, 12 April 1864, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wadley/wadley.html>.

³⁷ Wadley, Diary, 14 Jan. 1864.

patriotism; to be high in rank in this army is almost synonymous for high in corruptness, to the east of the Mississippi lies our only stay, our only hope [emphasis added].³⁸

By reminding herself that, “I have determined to keep a faithful journal of all I see and hear,” she remained objective, yet her diary reveals hopes of proving to herself and succeeding generations that choosing to support the Confederacy was always the best option.³⁹ She was not immune to the sacrifices that she was required to make to keep in good standing as a daughter of the Confederacy. Despite this, even as she saw the waning light of her beloved homeland, she did not turn her back on it, but her belief in the righteousness of the Confederacy and all that it stood for prompted her to record, “I read the President's message this morning, it is indeed fine in every respect, so calm, earnest, eloquent, and bringing all it's strength from that high faith in right and humanity, and that strong reliance on God which so enobles human nature.”⁴⁰

In Virginia, Nancy Emerson allowed considerable time to lapse between her last 1863 entry and one in 1864, but her loyalty to the Confederacy proved to be stronger than ever. Time had not loosened the bond. In fact, she wrote on July 13th, 1864:

The Yankees (I give them this appellation because every body else does) took off all the negro men & boys they could, as well as all the horses, told the women they would take them next time they came. Many sent their horses to the woods. Some of these were found & captured. People here do their farming with horses instead of oxen, & it is an immense loss to have them & the servants swept off to such an extent, just as harvest is about to begin too [sic].⁴¹

Her way of supporting the Confederacy with her pen was by denigrating the ‘Yankees’ and celebrating that her actions could in no way be associated with the enemy.

³⁸ Wadley, 25 March 1864.

³⁹ Ibid., 12 April 1864.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20 Dec. 1864.

⁴¹ Nancy Emerson, Diary, 13 July 1864, Valley of the Shadow Online Archives, valley.lib.virginia.edu.

Southern women were not only courageous on paper against the Union forces, but put that courage to the test in real ways. In Augusta County, Emerson boasted about a time when Union soldiers, referred to as ‘Yankees,’ searched the house where she and several women referred to as ‘Sister C., Cate and Ellen’ lived. Emerson recalled:

They (the Yankees) went peeping under the beds, looking for rebels as they said. Baxter told them there were no rebels here (meaning rebel soldiers) [while] Cate spoke & said We are all rebels. Ellen spoke & said "Yes Baxter, I am a rebel." The Yankee looked [up] from her drawer, which he [was] searching...Cate then said, "I am a rebel too & I glory in it [sic]."⁴²

From her own admission, she was not part of the exchange, but Emerson’s pride in her relations and the Confederacy is evident. These women sacrificed much in order to support the Confederacy, but they still had their intellect and their passions that they were resolved to use until even those were no longer available to them. In the end, Emerson thought so highly of their sentiments that she included it in her diary.

Varina Davis is another example of southern women who found strength behind the pen. Decades after the war, Davis still felt a dedication to the Lost Cause. When she published her memoir in 1890, her passion for the Confederacy was still fervent. Although it was then dubbed the “Lost Cause,” her experiences led her to write down the truth regarding the man and the Confederacy which so many had deemed corrupt.⁴³ She, along with many other southern women, strove for objectivity and in the opening pages of her memoir wrote, “I shall endeavor to do exact and equal justice to the antagonists of the South, as well as to her leaders...If I fail, it will be because my love for the Southern people, and their lost cause and leader, may unconsciously

⁴² Emerson, Diary, 9 July 1864.

⁴³ Varina Davis, *Jefferson Davis Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir* (New York: Belford Co., Publishers 18-22 East 18th Street, 1890), 1-2. The Civil War Collection, Jerry Falwell Library Special Collections, Liberty University at Lynchburg, VA.

influence my judgment of the men and beliefs that were arrayed in deadly conflict during the war between the States.”⁴⁴ If she had not felt strongly regarding the righteousness of the cause that the Confederacy stood for, she would not have taken the time to write and publish this memoir. If she had been ashamed of it in any way, she would not have allowed her innermost thoughts to be made known to the world. If she felt any remorse for the part she played in the existence of the Confederacy, or if she felt that her husband had erred in his stance during the Civil War, she would not have forced herself to relive those days of uncertainty with the clarity that she permitted in her *Memoir*. She relied on her husband’s words often and did not insert her own attitude much in this work, yet there was no regret, either for the Confederacy or the fact that slavery was a significant part of that Cause. Even though her own words are not often given in this memoir, the existence of such a memoir is proof of her love for the Confederacy decades after its existence.

Varina Davis sought to redeem her late husband’s memory and, in order to do so, related how he, from a very young age, yearned for hard work and was disgusted with equality with the field hands on his father’s plantation. In her *Memoir*, Davis devoted a section to the childhood of Jefferson Davis and in it, she stated, “The next day, furnished with a bag, I (Jefferson Davis) went into the fields and worked all day and the day after. The heat of the sun and the physical labor, in conjunction with the *implied equality with the other cotton-pickers*, convinced me that school was the lesser evil [emphasis added].”⁴⁵ These were the very words of Jefferson Davis as he had dictated them to a friend before he died, and although it is difficult to draw Varina’s own attitude relating to slavery and independence from these words, the very presence of this account

⁴⁴ Davis, *Jefferson Davis Ex-President*, 2.

⁴⁵ Davis, 17-8.

seems to suggest that she was not ashamed of her husband's desire for superiority when it came to the cotton-picking slaves of his plantation. It can be inferred that her decision to include this account and not shy away from the crystal-clear suggestion that equality with slaves was a thing to be despised is revealing. Instead of backing away from this fact about the Confederacy, Varina Davis did not apologize for it, nor did she propose that the Confederacy or her husband had erred in any way.

Constance Cary, the wife of the secretary of Jefferson Davis, was, as has already been stated, opposed to slavery, but the fact that she spent time to write down her memoirs shows her devotion to the Confederacy despite her opposition to one of its cornerstone ideologies. After the Confederacy had lost, she still reveled in the culture that its memory inspired in others. In the closing pages of her book, *Refugitta of Richmond*, she chronicled,

But amid all this bedazzlement to ex-Confederate eyes, it is not to be supposed that our hearts swerved from continual remembrance of the dear ones left behind, with whom we were in constant correspondence. Their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, were ours, and tears often flowed in thinking of them. My mother, indeed, carried the Confederacy written in her heart till death, as Queen Mary once bore Calais.⁴⁶

Her longing for the Confederacy's glory days had nothing to do with slavery, yet she wrote with a reverent tone as if the word 'Confederacy' was too good to be associated with other lowly words. Certainly, how one-time proponents of the Confederacy dealt with its defeat drew her admiration, and this quote can be interpreted as a boast of her fellow Confederates. It was the Confederacy above all, and for that, Constance Cary willingly overlooked slavery and devoted her life to the Stars and Bars.

⁴⁶ Burton Harrison, Mrs. Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, and S. Kittrell Rushing, *Refugitta of Richmond: The Wartime Recollections, Grave and Gay, of Constance Cary Harrison*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 187.

In addition, Belle Boyd yearned for the Confederacy's freedom from the Union, which meant continued bondage for slaves. Following in the footsteps of many southern women, Boyd did not see a contradiction in these ideas, but pledged allegiance to the Confederacy and all it stood for because she was convinced that independence was for the Confederacy and not for the slaves. In 1864, Boyd attempted to sail for England to turn over valuable documents to the British, but the ship was stopped by Federals. It was then that she met her soon-to-be husband, Samuel Hardinge, for the first time. She was a Confederate spy who had been arrested for such behavior, but he was an officer in the Union army. Still, they fell in love and were married soon after.⁴⁷ She even persuaded him to help her in her work for the Confederacy after he had left the Union army.⁴⁸ It was the Confederacy's freedom first, and everything after that.

Rose O'Neal Greenhow was a spy like Belle Boyd, but, unlike Boyd, Greenhow made the ultimate sacrifice for the Confederacy. Her body was found washed up on shore in 1864.⁴⁹ She sent numerous dispatches to Confederate generals with information that had proved vital to their winning the early battles of the Civil War. Growing up, her family had owned slaves, but slavery was not the primary reason for her supporting the Confederacy. In fact, she had afforded the matter very little thought, but she gave the Confederacy her whole life. She consistently spied for the Confederacy and even went so far as to travel to England in an effort to gain recognition for the CSA. As she saw an incoming Federal ship, she ultimately lost her life as she attempted

⁴⁷ Boyd, Walde, Hardinge, and Sala, 206-9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁹ Sheila R. Phipps, "Rose O'Neal Greenhow: 'Bearer of Dispatches to the Confederate Government,'" in *North Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, edited by Michele Gillespie and Sally G. McMillen, 73. (University of Georgia Press, 2014).

to leave the sea-worthy vessel that she was on because she feared another stint in Federal prison.⁵⁰

By the end of 1864, prosperity was uncommon for any supporter of the Confederacy. As Julia Johnson Fisher wrote, the war affected the well-being of their slaves and peace was longed for.⁵¹ As awful as the suffering, it did not induce southern women who had pledged their loyalty to the Confederacy to go back on that promise. It is a strange truth that suffering often breeds determination, and this sentiment rings true when it comes to the women of the Confederacy. The end had drawn near, and many women of the Confederacy knew it.⁵² They endured the emancipation of their slaves as the Union forces advanced, but emancipation was not yet the law of the land because a president whom they did not recognize, Abraham Lincoln, had declared the Emancipation Proclamation. It had not been the sentiment of their treasured homeland and those words would never be made official by the Confederate President, Jeff Davis. At the least, the next year would be revealing and momentous as the Civil War ended and slavery's fate was decided.

⁵⁰ Phipps, "Rose O'Neal Greenhow," 86.

⁵¹ Fisher, 6 Feb. 1864.

⁵² Wadley, 5 April 1864.

Conclusion: 1865 and the End

Thursday the 13th came the dreadful tidings of the surrender of Lee and his army on the 9th. Everybody cried, but I would not, satisfied that God will still save us, even though all should apparently be lost. Followed at intervals of two or three hours by the announcement of the capture of Richmond, Selma, Mobile, and Johnston's army, even the staunchest Southerners were hopeless. Every one proclaimed Peace, and the only matter under consideration was whether Jeff Davis, all politicians, every man above the rank of Captain in the army and above that of Lieutenant in the navy, should be hanged immediately, or some graciously pardoned. Henry Ward Beecher humanely pleaded mercy for us, supported by a small minority. Davis and all leading men must be executed; the blood of the others would serve to irrigate the country. Under this lively prospect, Peace, blessed Peace! was the cry. I whispered, "Never! Let a great earthquake swallow us up first! Let us leave our land and emigrate to any desert spot of the earth, rather than return to the Union, even as it Was [sic]!"¹

Sarah Morgan Dawson expressed the state of much of the South in April of 1865.

Starting on December 21st of 1860, the fateful day that South Carolina started the secession of states from the Union, mistresses and slaves existed in ambiguity. These relationships would not become clearly defined even with the official end of the Civil War and succeeding legislation. As southern women were left behind while the men went off to fight, "liberty," the right to practice slavery without anyone's or any government's interference, became tantamount.² Truly, elite southern women had a complicated relationship to slavery and the idea of independence, especially as the war came to a close.

Mary Polk Branch was only one southern woman who believed independence meant that the Confederacy would not be beholden to the Union anymore, but freedom for the slaves currently held in bondage did not figure into her idea of this term. In her *Memoir*, it is clear that

¹ Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 19 April 1865, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25004/25004-h/25004-h.htm>. Project Gutenberg.

² Edward Porter Alexander and Gary W. Gallagher, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998). VitalSource.

she still believed bondage for the slaves yet independence for the Confederacy to be ideal. She recorded, “So late as last winter, nearly a half century since the slaves were freed, I received a letter, written in Chicago, from one of them (former slaves),” the “daughter of Grandison, [Branch’s] dining room servant, who wrote at the request of her father, who was on his deathbed.”³ Branch believed the sentiments expressed in the letter and the existence of the letter itself was proof enough that the white race had been the “natural protector” of the slaves.⁴ She described the contents of the letter in more detail as the daughter had written: “He (her father) said that he must ‘say farewell to my old mistress before he went.’ He recalled to me the question of the Federal general to him: ‘How does the ex-slave feel toward his former owner?’ and his reply, ‘Nothing but death can sever the tie between the old master and his ex-slave.’”⁵

After relating that anecdote regarding that former slave, Branch delved into an even more reflective state as she asserted that slavery had been a blessing. She stated, “How many instances could I enumerate of their (slaves’) fidelity” and went on to explain: “To them I owe the preservation of my silver during the war.”⁶ Once, her servant (slave) that she referred to as ‘Aunt’ Beck and her husband’s “body-servant, Braxton, dug a hole at midnight on the banks of the lake. There was a massive breakfast service, and all the flat silver, spoons, forks, and the silver pitcher and waiter. These they enclosed in a trunk and buried in the sand.”⁷

³ Mary Jones Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "within the Lines," and a Genealogical Record*, (Chicago: Joseph G. Branch Publishing, 1912), 46, in Documenting the American South, First-Person Narratives of the American South, Beginnings to 1920, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/branch/branch.html>.

⁴ Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman*, 49.

⁵ Branch, 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

These reflections support the life she lived due to the convictions she held. To her, independence for the Confederacy was right and the continuance of slavery was also right.

When Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, southern women knew that slavery was over. Yet, even as southern women were forced to become increasingly independent, they questioned the ideologies of society.

They were invested in their hierarchical and paternalist culture that clearly delineated subordinate roles for white women and for blacks...[yet]... did not recognize that as they adequately performed men's jobs, they were disproving the ideology of separate spheres. Instead, most continued to seek paternal advice and protection. Also, with the end of slavery, many of the diarists' racism increased as they longed for their former privileged lifestyle.⁸

A widowed woman more 'independent' than most southern women, Louisa McCord knew that slavery was over. At the end of the war, she denounced the reality where "Union soldiers [were] on every corner, freedmen who no longer deferred to white people [were] on the street, [and] racial mingling [was happening] in places that had once been 'white only.' [It] "all served to remind her of the social order that had been lost [by the Confederacy's loss in the Civil War]."⁹ Her nightmare had turned to reality as "the loss of that social order, [and] the sacrifice of her independence throughout her life was rendered meaningless."¹⁰ For Branch, the 'sacrifice of her independence' came by marrying and taking on the role of the submissive wife, "[b]ut in that marriage, she was the superior spouse because she controlled the household wealth."¹¹ Yes, she

⁸ Kimberly Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 24.

⁹ Leigh Fought, *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 181.

¹⁰ Fought, *Southern Womanhood*, 181.

¹¹ Fought, 91.

controlled the slaves even when her husband was alive, but “[w]hen the Confederacy fell and emancipation eliminated the institution on which she had based her entire notion of society, all her sacrifices seemed in vain.”¹²

Laura Lee, as a single, white-woman, also knew independence because of slavery. When slavery’s death peal sounded, she became utterly dependent in a way that she had not known. Gone were the days when living “as a household of single, independent women” was sustainable.¹³ Outlawing slavery had become all but official when General Robert E. Lee surrendered in April 1865, and the women who had built an ‘independent’ lifestyle with the backbone being their slaves’ labor dreaded this. Historian Drew Faust asserts that the institution of slavery was “the ‘cornerstone’ of the civilization for which their nation (the South) fought, [and it] increasingly seemed a burden rather than a benefit” to many of these women as time went on.¹⁴ The brothers, husbands, and fathers that had fought on the bloody battlefield for the ‘independence’ of the Confederacy had failed. ‘Independence’ was no longer a reality that could be grasped and by

failing to guarantee what white women believed to be their most fundamental right, [and] in failing to protect women or to exert control over insolent and even rebellious slaves, [those] Confederate men [had] undermined not only the foundations of the South’s peculiar institution but the legitimacy of their power as white males, as masters of families of white women and black slaves.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 191.

¹³ Laura Odendahl, “A History of Captivity and a History of Freedom” in *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South across Four Centuries*, Thomas H. Appleton and Angela Boswell, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 141.

¹⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 79.

¹⁵ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 79.

Southern women learned of a new type of ‘independence’ during the war as they were required to make decisions and manage plantations in ways only men had done, but that ‘independence’ was no longer feasible once slavery was removed from the equation.¹⁶

These women and their way of life became a casualty of the Civil War. Since they desired to be seen as ‘patriots,’ sacrifices were expected of them, and they knew as much. Certainly, “patriotic womanhood superseded the antebellum feminine ideal. It demanded that Confederate women sacrifice everything for their beloved cause: to give up their men, their homes, their fine dresses, and their social occasions to ensure the establishment of a new nation and the preservation of elite ideas about race, class, and gender.”¹⁷ Mary Jeffreys Bethell was a Confederate woman through-and-through and the words that she recorded on the third of March 1865 were laced with heartache: “This is a dark hour for our country, the enemy are still advancing, taking possession of our cities and destroying property, thousands of our men have been slain. The war has been going on nearly four years, it is thought that slavery will be abolished, the enemy have been victorious [sic].”¹⁸ No, the Civil War was not quite over, but the CSA would only last about another month before surrendering to Grant. Clearly, Bethell wished anyone who had read or was going to read her words to undoubtedly categorize her as a true daughter of the Confederacy. Yes, she had relinquished the security of her husband and sons, but they had returned at the end of the war.¹⁹ As such, she had not sacrificed nearly as much as other

¹⁶ Faust, 251.

¹⁷ Joan M. Johnson, Valinda W. Littlefield, and Marjorie J. Spruill, *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Time* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 5.

¹⁸ Mary Jeffreys Bethell, Diary, 3 March 1865, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>.

¹⁹ Bethell, Diary, Dec. 1865.

women had who supported the Confederacy, but she still felt the loss keenly. On August 7th, she mourned, “Our armies have surrendered to the Federals, the war is over. The slaves are set free.”²⁰ She qualified her statement as she continued and wrote, “I hope the poor negroes will be learned to read the Bible and be enlightened and become christians. A great many slaves have left their homes and perished for want of food and shelter [sic].”²¹ The reality had hit home for her as “14 of [her slaves had] left...[and] Since [she] last wrote some more of [her] servants [had] left, 24 in all...”²²

Only after the beloved Confederacy did slavery come, but even though it was secondary, it was not forgotten. As Sarah Lois Wadley welcomed in the year of 1865, she quickly foresaw that it was to be a tragic one for the “falling cause” of the Confederacy.²³ Within the first two weeks of that year, she had been told of another defeat that the CSA had suffered and grieved as she wrote,

We heard such bad news Sunday, received a paper full of it. Oh, it was so dreadful at first, it seemed to me I could hardly bear my grief, and my hatred to the Yankees. Sherman has taken Savannah; he has marched from north to south, through the heart of Georgia, and boastfully says that he met with no hindrance nor obstacles...this in Georgia of which I was so proud, it seems it cannot be, and yet the evidence is too circumstantial to doubt, oh the proud boastful invaders, may they meet a downfall...²⁴

²⁰ Bethell, 7 Aug. 1865.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sarah Lois Wadley, Diary, 13 May 1865, in Documenting the American South, The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/wadley/wadley.html>.

²⁴ Wadley, Diary, 14 Jan. 1865.

Her pure hatred for the ‘Yankees’ and everything that they stand for is perfectly clear as she assesses everything related to the Confederacy to be significantly more honorable.

Wadley had sacrificed the comfort of her brother, William Wadley, as he went off to fight in the Confederate forces, but she did not regret it in the slightest. She chronicled that,

Though I feel a great deal of sympathy for the hardships Willie must endure, and anxiety about his welfare... I cannot help being very much gratified that he is now in a position which I conceive to be the only noble, honourable one a young man can now be engaged in, that is in active service for his country...I do not love Willie any more, my tenderness for him could scarcely have admitted increase, but this feeling is now joined with a sort of proud satisfaction that he is now doing his clear and manifest duty; and I am so deeply thankful that this course has resulted in an improvement of his health; may God graciously preserve him unto the end [sic].²⁵

She heartily believed that the only honor that a man could hope to possess came from service to the CSA and without that, she could not respect any man. Her standard for a decent man included his serving as a Confederate soldier, and she held every man to this standard even as “Capt. Griffen.... a Yankee cotton speculator” came to their house for a visit.²⁶ Loyal to her cherished Confederacy, she knew that he was a part of the enemy and, in keeping with her hatred of the Yankees and devotion to the Confederacy, she “left the parlour in disgust before he dismounted... [because she] felt it impossible to meet one of their hated nation [sic].”²⁷

Her hopes of ‘independence’ for the Confederacy, which she referred to as “my great love, my pride, [and] my life,” came crashing down, yet she did not regret the sacrifices she or the Confederate soldiers had made.²⁸ She allowed herself to complain by stating, “I am depressed

²⁵ Wadley, 25 Jan. 1865.

²⁶ Ibid., 3 Feb. 1865.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 20 April 1865.

almost to despair, life seems to have lost its interest, earth its beauty, of what use is courage under difficulties, hope in misfortune, when courage can no longer avail, hope no longer cheer.”²⁹ All that seemed good to her in life was snatched away when the Confederate troops surrendered in April of 1865. She gave a factual update, but near the end relied on her own emotions as she wrote: “Richmond is evacuated, and it is reported, and universally believed, that Lee and Johnston have surrendered, and also Forrest, if this is true all is lost, lost, my God what a word, our country gone, I feel as if all were gone.”³⁰ She was implacable as she continued to lament that she “had never felt the possibility of this blow, all that makes life glorious; what virtue can be left to one that has no country, even resignation seem like treason to our principles; it is like darkness, it is so terrible.”³¹

Her patriotism was so strong that she no longer gave any other significance to life without the Confederacy. She dared to ask the question that many from the South were silently wondering: “Have our brave soldiers fought for nothing, died for this! No, not for nothing, if it be indeed so, if this dreadful calamity fell upon us, yet have they not died for nothing.”³² She went on and stated, “I *cannot* regret our course, better die protesting for our liberty than tamely submit; the bitterness is that we might have won, it was never before known that such a people perished and shall we perish, shall we indeed perish [emphasis added]!”³³ Life would have to continue, but her desire for ‘independence’ as a daughter of the Confederacy had failed. Her

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

resolute answer that she ‘cannot regret [her] course’ sounded throughout many southern women’s minds and hearts. No, Wadley did not regret her actions, but she desperately wished for them to not have come to naught.

Cornelia McPeake McDonald had seen her husband’s corpse before the end of the war and struggled desperately to keep her surviving family together. Slavery no longer had much, if any, room in her thoughts, but the tragedy of the Stars and Bars she loved did.³⁴ As she reflected, she stated,

“No one was to be blamed for such a state of things, but the cruel circumstances in which we were placed compelled it. If the brave, the well born and the chivalrous could have done all the fighting there would have been no shrinking, no desertion; but alas! their boys lay buried on every battlefield in Virginia; a whole generation nearly, of young men of good birth and breeding had been swept away, and as many others who, though of plainer people, had true soldierly hearts, and bore themselves bravely in the shock of battle, and patiently and uncomplainingly in the long march or the weary watch.”³⁵

Her precious Confederacy had fallen, and her hopes had fallen with it. She mourned that “I felt as if the end of all things had come, at least for the Southern people. Grief and despair took possession of my heart, with a sense of humiliation that till then I did not know I could feel.”³⁶

When Sarah Morgan Dawson found out about the Union President, Abraham Lincoln’s, death after the surrender of Lee she recorded that “Our Confederacy has gone with one crash—the report of the pistol fired at Lincoln.”³⁷ She was devoted to the CSA and mourned the loss as she did her brothers’ deaths. Later, she chronicled, “Across the way, a large building,

³⁴ Cornelia McPeake McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865* (Nashville, Cullom & Ghermer Co., 1935), 248. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/diarywithreminis00mcdo/mode/2up>.

³⁵ McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences*, 249.

³⁶ McDonald, 256.

³⁷ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl’s*, 15 June 1865.

undoubtedly inhabited by officers, is being draped in black. Immense streamers of black and white hang from the balcony. Downtown, I understand, all shops are closed, and all wrapped in mourning. And I hardly dare pray God to bless us, with the *crape* hanging over the way. It would have been banners, if our President had been killed, though [emphasis added]!”³⁸ The Stars and Stripes were victorious as she languished over the defeat of the Stars and Bars. By the phrase ‘our President,’ she referred to Jeff Davis, the President of the vanquished CSA, and her grief is painstakingly apparent as she sees more and more visual evidence of the defeat of her beloved Confederacy.

Sarah Morgan Dawson was similar to other southern women whose loyalty to the CSA was not merely superficial. For the past four years, they had sacrificed much, and, even at the official end of the war, they could not, or would not, easily admit that the Confederacy was shrouded in defeat. Dawson was so emotionally devoted to the CSA that she chronicled her icy meet with a Yankee soldier who happened to be an old beau of hers. On a carriage ride on her way home after the war, she met a “Mr. Todd” who, she wrote, was “my ‘sweetheart’ when I was twelve and he twenty-four, who was my brother's friend, and daily at our home, [and] was put away from among our acquaintance at the beginning of the war...Cords of candy and mountains of bouquets bestowed in childish days will not make my country's enemy my friend now that I am a woman.”³⁹ Every part of her body had served the Confederacy for the past four years, and she resolved that her heart would not betray her in the end. She could not give a

³⁸ Dawson, 19 April 1865.

³⁹ Ibid., 22 April 1865.

Yankee her love, if for no other reason than that he was a Yankee and she a daughter of the Confederacy.

“After their experiences of war, southern women found it difficult any longer to celebrate helplessness.”⁴⁰ The 13th Amendment officially making slavery unconstitutional was ratified on December 6th, 1865 as the momentous year came to a close. No cannon booms ushered in the New Year of 1866, but tensions were high nonetheless. The Union had won. Slavery had been legally eradicated, but it remained to be seen how the important new change would be treated in the states, especially the ones from the late Confederacy. Southern women held the metaphorical reins when it came to the South’s future and attitude. It was a fact that “Privileged white women simply did not believe...household drudgery was theirs to do. A different reality and spirit drove them.”⁴¹ The abolition of slavery meant that much of the work that their slaves had done was now these women’s responsibilities. Truly, “For the white women within these [southern] households... emancipation had a...personal significance. The daily work of domestic life and the routines of white women's lives were revolutionized by the coming of free labor.”⁴²

Left widowed and impoverished, the once-proud Confederate Cornelia McPeake McDonald fought to keep her family together and realized that she had to either learn how to keep herself gainfully employed or rely on the charity of her relations. Attempting the first, she kept [her] drawing class and devoted its poor proceeds to supplying [her family’s] most urgent

⁴⁰ Faust, 251.

⁴¹ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235.

⁴² Faust, 250.

need.”⁴³ The war divested her of everything that brought her wealth and security: her slaves, her husband, and her ability to not concern herself with material matters. She concluded her diary on a note of resignation and yet reserved a small amount of hope for her and her family’s future as she wrote, “And here ends my account of my trials; and though they were not at an end entirely, I was able in various ways to take care of my family till they were fitted to be of use themselves; and when they were able to bear the burden they took it up manfully and acquitted themselves well [sic].”⁴⁴

Louisa McCord learned with painstaking finality what the Confederate loss and abolition of slavery meant for her and her lifestyle. As historian Leigh Fought claims:

The policies of Reconstruction touched Louisa in two ways. The end of slavery and the requirement of swearing an oath of loyalty to the Union in order to conduct property transactions underscored the defeat not only of the Confederacy to which she had been so dedicated, but also of her very understanding of society. All that she had sacrificed in the war became glaringly obvious to her as she wandered, virtually homeless, in the ensuing years, even exiling herself to Canada for a time.⁴⁵

She no longer had leisure time and could not count on any financial security to come from her slaves. She may have “wished to shed herself of responsibilities,” but the abolition of slavery put an end to that.⁴⁶ She could not realistically do that while simultaneously living comfortably.

Those two goals were highly incongruous. She wanted to return to her beloved way of life, but she understood the fact that her old way of life was no longer viable. She finally decided on leaving the South and with a very heavy heart, she recounted all of the comforts she would never regain. “She had sacrificed her son and the previous five years of her life to the southern ‘Cause.’

⁴³ McDonald, 261.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 271.

⁴⁵ Fought, 177.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 180.

The loss of that ‘Cause’ had been painful and made all of her sacrifices seem worthless.”⁴⁷ She knew herself well enough to understand that she could not live on her home plantation and not recall the pain the Confederacy’s loss had brought upon her and her fellow southerners’ way of life. She needed to leave South Carolina and start anew somewhere else, which she finally did in 1871.⁴⁸

In the end, even while southern women’s attitudes toward slavery changed significantly, they dared not let their actions entirely condemn slavery because their lifestyle depended on it, and the past several years had shown them as much. Elite slaveowners, such as Laura Lee from Virginia, Louisa McCord from South Carolina, Cornelia McPeake McDonald from Virginia, Mary Jeffreys Bethell from North Carolina, Mary Jones Polk Branch from South Carolina, Sarah Morgan Dawson and Sarah Lois Wadley, both from Louisiana, led lives that were inextricably linked to slavery. To this end, they worked for, and supported, ‘independence’ for their country, the Confederacy, and not ‘freedom’ for their slaves. Truly, the ‘independence’ that they had once believed to be their right as a result of their slaves’ labor was no longer a feasible reality. The abolition of slavery was one step toward realizing the truth in the statement, made famous by Thomas Jefferson through the Declaration of Independence that “all men [were] created equal,” regardless of skin color. Yet, as a new reality faced these women, one where freedom came about at the cost of the independence of the Confederacy, southern women’s attitudes towards slavery set the stage for the problems that the Reconstruction era brought to the once-proud Confederate states.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 182.

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