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# From Self-Sacrifice to Self-Preservation: The Changing Roles of Southern Women During America's Civil War

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From Self-Sacrifice to Self-Preservation:  
The Changing Roles of Southern Women  
During America's Civil War

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The Civil War is an event in American history that will continue to be discussed and analyzed for years to come. The conflict affected the entire population of the country, regardless of social class or race. One of the most important changes in southern society was the change in the roles and ideologies of southern women as a result of the war. Before the war, the South was a patriarchal society with prominent gender roles and ideologies on how the “perfect” Southerner should behave. Ideally, the Cavalier Man, filled with honor and chivalry, was meant to be in complete control. The counterpart was the Cavalier Lady, whose job was to remain charming and sophisticated.

However, when war broke out white Southern men enlisted in great numbers. Thus, women had to take on their responsibilities and duties. At the beginning, many women were ardent patriots of the Confederacy. They volunteered as nurses and organized events and associations to support the war effort. Some women even acted as spies on behalf of the Confederate army. However, as war raged on, the patriotism slowly faded. War fatigue took over, and women encouraged their husbands to desert the army and even participated in acts that undermined the Confederacy. Because of the Civil War, many aspects of the Southern lifestyle were altered. Women were now active in the public sphere and used this power to get what they wanted. The once subservient Southern belle transformed into a patriot of the Confederate Cause. After months of facing harsh realities, however, that patriot developed into an activist whose actions helped bring about the decline of the Confederacy.

### **The Antebellum South and the Roles of Women**

Gender roles and ideologies were rooted the culture of the Antebellum South, where the Cult of True Womanhood ideology shaped conventional roles for women.

Women needed to uphold a certain standard in order to be accepted in the eyes of Southern society. According to Barbara Welter, women were judged by four “cardinal virtues”: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>1</sup> This ideology suggested that the perfect woman stayed strictly in the private sphere where she attended to the domestic responsibilities and focused on the well-being of her family and home. Public affairs were strictly for men and were considered unfit for a lady. Lucy Wood, an upper-class woman from Virginia, wrote in a letter to her fiancé, “I have no political opinion and have a peculiar dislike to all females who discuss such matters.”<sup>2</sup> Most women of Wood’s class were not ignorant to political matters. However, it was the men that voted and spoke publicly about politics, while “ladies remained within the sphere of home and family.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Antebellum South, women of the planter class had few formal responsibilities or chores. Schooling for young girls usually was not a focus of parents, and it often ended at a young age.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the focus was on preparing girls to become the ideal lady or Southern belle. Religion and family connections were important for preparing a girl to be a Southern belle.<sup>5</sup> Evangelical Protestantism encouraged “women’s subordination to the men of their class and their commitment to slavery.” Laura Edwards discusses the social hierarchy that was taught by Southern Evangelical Protestant ministers when she writes:

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” <http://www.old.li.suu.edu/library/circulation/orihel/hist4760moweltercultoftruewomanhoodsp2011.pdf> (accessed August 7, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

God stood at the head of the Christian household, just as white men presided over their earthly ones. White women, like slaves, were supposed to realize their spiritual mission through cheerful obedience to the authority of white men. As members of the slaveholding class, they were also to share in the privileges and responsibilities of overseeing African Americans. This social order, the South's ministers assured their congregations, was not just natural but divinely ordained. Any change would bring down the wrath of God.<sup>6</sup>

The irony of this social hierarchy is hard to overlook. It places the status of women under that of the male, directly next to enslaved individuals. It preaches subordination, yet encourages women to exert their power over African Americans. Perhaps this encouragement of female power was a contributing factor to their participation in the war.

Family networking was particularly important to Southern planter class families, because it provided a "social and economic support system." Young women often spent time writing to and visiting relatives. Edwards writes, "Growing to adulthood in the constant presence of kin also discouraged girls from seeing themselves as independent individuals. Instead, they forged their identities through family relationships, as daughters, nieces, mothers, wives, aunts, and cousins."<sup>7</sup> After years of preparation, expensive dresses, and complete makeovers, girls became belles when they reached their mid-to-late teens.<sup>8</sup> Many belles traveled to different cities, attending social events and parties as a type of showcase in order to meet men their parents deemed suitable to marry.<sup>9</sup>

The memory of the Antebellum South is often marked with romantic narratives, which, in fact, are not always accurate. More often than not, belles married for economic

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 20.

advantage and for a secure future instead of love. With marriage came new responsibilities for young women. While slaves performed most of the household chores in planter class families, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, the woman of the household was in charge of managing these tasks.<sup>10</sup> In her diary, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas writes, “My domestic affairs in which I take quite an interest and what little sewing I do cause me to have few leisure moments. I have recently added to my sources of occupation in a flower garden.”<sup>11</sup> Prior to the war, Thomas felt as though her tasks were burdensome. She was not prepared for what was to come once the fighting began.

### **Patriots of the Confederate Cause**

The election of Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth president of the United States on November 6, 1860, triggered what historians call the secession crisis. Many Southerners simply could not accept Lincoln as their president due to his views on slavery and its expansion. On December 20, 1860, delegates of the South Carolina State Legislature signed the Ordinance of Secession that stated, “The union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of ‘The United States of America,’ is hereby dissolved.”<sup>12</sup> During this time, southerners voiced their opinions on secession. Beginning to emerge were the voices of southern women.

According to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, many women were troubled when it came to their secession opinions.<sup>13</sup> Women were challenged because of their inclination to internalize their views and remain a lady within the private sphere.<sup>14</sup> However, they

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 21.

<sup>11</sup>Virginia Ingraham Burr, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas* (Chapel Hill; The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 121.

<sup>12</sup>[South Carolina Ordinance of Secession, December 20 1860], in Constitutional and Organic Papers. [S 131053] South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC.

<sup>13</sup>Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 12.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

refused “to stand aside while history unfolded around them.”<sup>15</sup> A group of women called the Ladies of Broward’s Neck went as far to write an address to the *Jacksonville Standard* asserting their pro-secession attitudes. Agitated over the lack of territory designated for slavery in the westwardly expanding United States, they urge readers to consider secession.<sup>16</sup> They write that the reason why there are anti-secession sentiments around them is out of fear of an end to clothing imports from the North.<sup>17</sup> The writer dismisses these claims and insists that a break from the North will bring about a “long desired” trade agreement with Europe.<sup>18</sup> They write that opening trading with European merchants would allow them to receive “an abundance of as good clothing and on as good terms as could be gotten from Yankeedom, which [they] could easily and directly pay for with [their] cotton.”<sup>19</sup> Faust describes this small step for women by writing, “War had not yet begun, but southern women had already inaugurated their effort to claim a place and an interest in the national crisis.”<sup>20</sup> The first shift in the roles of women was here, when they emerged from the private sphere and voiced either their pro-secession or anti-secession points of view. Ultimately, ten other states would follow South Carolina’s lead, creating the Confederate States of America with Jefferson Davis as their president.

### **Involvement in the Public Sphere**

Although tension had been present for several years, the first engagement of the American Civil War was on April 12, 1861, when Confederate forces fired on the Union-occupied Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. Patriotism engulfed

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Samuel Proctor, “The Call to Arms: Secession from a Feminine Point of View,” <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30139773>, *The Florida Historical Quarterly* (January 1957), 268-269.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 269.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 12.

Southern society at the start of the war. Pride for the South affected both men and women, and while some women were reluctant to give up their men, others urged their sons and husbands to fight for the Cause.<sup>21</sup> Faust notes one woman who wrote, “Your country calls... I am ready to offer you up in defense of your country’s rights and honor; and I now offer you, a beardless boy of 17 summers, not with grief, but thanking God that I have a son to offer.”<sup>22</sup> The way this war would impact society, particularly for Southern women, was yet to be understood.

Tasks formerly prohibited by Victorian values became integrated into society. In fact, Faust writes that there was an “effort to create a new Confederate woman.”<sup>23</sup> Southern press agencies were actively trying to transform the subservient Southern belle into a supporter of the Confederate cause. The support of the women was desperately needed by the Confederacy. There needed to be a workforce to raise revenue, support the soldiers, and keep up with the work on the homefront. One could argue that propaganda was used to instill patriotism and encourage women to support the war effort. “Songs, plays, poems, [and] even official presidential pronouncements” with persuasive intent were implemented in the South starting in the summer months of 1861.<sup>24</sup> One song called *Heart Victories* addressed the hardships women faced because of the war.<sup>25</sup> According to Faust, “Every woman rich or poor was confronted by her own ‘stormy battle.’”<sup>26</sup> Songs like these encouraged women to let their loved ones go, because they were reassured when they knew they were not the only ones going through a difficult time. Whether the

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<sup>21</sup>Ina Chang, *A Separate Battle* (New York: Lodestar Books, 1991), 14.

<sup>22</sup>Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 14.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

selflessness was caused because of propaganda, a romantic haze, or pure patriotism, the efforts women made to support the Cause at the beginning of the war were impressive.

Among the most popular ways to support the Confederacy and their men away at war was sewing uniforms, organizing fundraisers, and collecting donations. In addition, Faust lists several other contributions women made at the start of the war: “sewing countless flags, uniforms...penning patriotic songs and verse; submitting dozens of designs for the national flag to the Confederate Congress; raising money as Ladies Gunboat Societies... and sponsoring dramatic performances to benefit soldiers.”<sup>27</sup> Contributions such as these were critical in the South. Without the manufacturing capabilities of the North, the Southern war effort depended on women to supply the soldiers with everything they needed.

The Lynchburg Hospital Association in Lynchburg, Virginia was an example of an aid society that assisted Confederate soldiers. In a printed solicitation by the organization, the writer described its purpose and alerted readers as to where they could drop off donations. Lynchburg Hospital Association volunteers aided soldiers by “bathing their feverish brow, putting up curtains to shield aching eyes from the sun’s dazzling rays, ...speak a word of encouragement to the desponding, offer to write letters to the dear ones at home, read God’s precious word to those who love it, and in many ways alleviate their sufferings.”<sup>28</sup>

Gunboat Societies were another type of association with female participation. According to author Judith Harper, the demand for ironclad warships was high after the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 175.

<sup>28</sup>“Printed solicitation, Lynchburg Hospital Association,” *University of Virginia Library Online Exhibits* (accessed October 22, 2013), <http://explore.lib.virginia.edu/items/show/1871>.

famous battle between the *USS Monitor* and the *CSS Virginia*.<sup>29</sup> Ironclad warships had iron hulls that replaced the traditional wooden hull, which was prone to destruction when fired upon. In the spring of 1862, women in several Southern port cities formed Gunboat Societies to raise money for the Confederate Navy.<sup>30</sup> The goal of these societies was to raise revenue to build more ironclad warships that would defend the port cities and protect them from a Union attack.<sup>31</sup> Like other aid societies, fundraisers included “raffles, fairs, bazaars, elaborate entertainments, and also solicited contributions from prominent citizens.”<sup>32</sup> These associations, among others, collected donations from the community and used them to support the Confederate war effort.

Women also started running the businesses their husbands left behind and took care of farms and plantations. Wealthier women had to learn how to manage their plantations and slaves. The male had always been regarded as the master, which made running a plantation extremely difficult for a female. Many slaves did not have the same fear or respect for a white woman as they once had for a white male and therefore did not always cooperate. Some women literally planted and harvested crops with their own hands, something they would never have dreamed of doing before the war. The efforts women took to manage the farms and plantations were crucial to the Confederacy, because without Southern agriculture the entire Confederacy would be without food.

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<sup>29</sup>Judith E. Harper, *Women During the Civil War: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 180.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

Because of these contributions, soldiers were supplied with food rations and other goods for some time.<sup>33</sup>

### **Nurses and Spies**

In the years preceding the Civil War, there were several advances in weapon technology. In previous wars, soldiers typically carried guns that took a long time to reload and were also inaccurate. The rifled gun barrel and minie ball were revolutionary new ideas that lead to considerably more casualties. A grooved barrel with a bullet that fit perfectly caused the bullet to spin, increasing accuracy significantly. According to Evan Andrews, in addition to this new type of gun, there were lesser-known weapons, such as hand grenades, rockets, and early machine guns.<sup>34</sup>

With one bloody conflict after another, wounded and ill soldiers rapidly filled southern hospitals. Before long, existing hospitals were at their capacity and the need for new hospitals, supplies, and personnel was at an all-time high. The South was unprepared for the casualties and ailments that the Civil War brought. Without the time, resources, or money to build new establishments, the South resorted to constructing makeshift hospitals out of any area possible, including people's homes. One southern woman, Sally Tompkins, created a hospital inside a friend's home that could support twenty-two people. This gesture caught Jefferson Davis' attention, and he awarded Tompkins by giving her the rank of captain.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, most of the hospitals were poorly constructed, overcrowded, and unsanitary, which allowed disease to spread rapidly. Some of the more unsanitary

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<sup>33</sup>Lisa Tendrich Frank, "Women during the Civil War," <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/ArticlePrintable.jsp?id=h-2719#> (accessed October 22, 2013).

<sup>34</sup>Evan Andrews, "8 Unusual Civil War Weapons," <http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/8-unusual-civil-war-weapons> (accessed September 27, 2013).

<sup>35</sup>Chang, 37.

hospitals were those that were located in vacant barns. Structures that had previously housed farm animals were now the homes to wounded soldiers who needed extreme medical attention. Some soldiers contracted diseases like malaria, typhoid, and pneumonia, while others suffered from severe gunshot wounds. Unfortunately, modern medicine was at its beginning stages. Many doctors simply were not qualified and had never encountered some of the ailments that the soldiers had.

Prior to the Civil War, nursing was considered to be manual labor, and those in the field were not respected. Victorian ideals deemed the medical field as a place strictly for males and unfit for women. However, gender distinctions were cast aside, and women made way in the medical field, forgetting about their traditional role in society. The South did not have a relief program like the North's United States Sanitary Commission. Therefore, Northern medicine and medical personnel were far superior. Nonetheless, the Southern civilians did what they could to help the sick and wounded. One woman in particular, Kate Cumming, served as a nurse throughout the entire Civil War. She did not have a nursing background, and her family saw it as an unfit practice for a lady. However, she stepped into the public sphere despite the existing cultural norms.

Cumming was a Scottish immigrant who settled in Mobile, Alabama, with her family at a young age. Having grown up in the South, she was extremely attached to the land and was arguably one of the most outspoken and patriotic nurses in the South. Her passion for the Cause and for the land she loved can be seen in her diary, later published, entitled, *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee*. In this work, Cumming addresses a day-in-the-life of a Southern nurse. Another important aspect of

Cumming's work is how it addresses the way women were treated at the time, especially women like her who "were trying to enter the male-dominated arena of war."<sup>36</sup>

Cumming's first stop in her career as a nurse was Corinth, Mississippi. She wrote that it was a wealthy part of Mississippi. She arrived several days after the Battle of Shiloh and dove right into work.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of several days in her diary, Cumming describes numerous experiences she had at a converted hospital in the Tishomingo Hotel. In one entry, Cumming vividly describes the dismal atmosphere of her placement:

The men are lying all over the house, on their blankets, just as they were brought from the battle-field. They are in the hall, on the gallery, and crowded into very small rooms. The foul air from this mass of human beings at first made me giddy and sick, but I soon got over it. We have to walk, and when we give the men any thing kneel, in blood and water; but we think nothing of it at all.<sup>38</sup>

Cumming also described several of her experiences caring for the wounded. In one entry, she explains in detail a man who underwent an amputation surgery: "A stream of blood ran from the table into a tub in which was the arm. It had been taken off at the socket, and the hand, which but a short time before grasped the musket and battled for the right, was hanging over the edge of the tub, a lifeless thing."<sup>39</sup> Many other experiences like this one are described in Cumming's diary. However, as the weeks go on, the descriptiveness dies out, and she eventually stops recording the gruesome episodes.<sup>40</sup> After seeing so many horrific events, she did not feel the need to record each of them. Instead, she wrote down the names and hometowns of those who died around her as a

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<sup>36</sup>Jessica Fordham Kidd, "Patriotism over Propriety," <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/33424156/patriotism-over-propriety>, *Alabama Heritage* (accessed October 22, 2013) 22-23.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*, 23.

<sup>38</sup>Kate Cumming, *A Journal of Hospital Life in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: from the Battle of Shiloh to the End of the War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1959) 15.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, 25.

<sup>40</sup>Kidd, 24.

type of memorial.<sup>41</sup> What Cumming saw as a traveling nurse sparked an enormous amount of compassion in her. She developed zero tolerance for women who were not involved in the Cause.<sup>42</sup>

A society that was once completely against having women play roles outside of the domestic sphere was turning into one that resented those who did not. In one journal entry Cumming wrote, “I also said a man did not deserve the name of man, if he did not fight for his country; nor a woman, the name of woman, if she did not do all in her power to aid the men.”<sup>43</sup> The work Civil War nurses did in hospitals, and even on the front lines, gave them a sense of worth not received from working in the domestic sphere. These women were not paid for their services and were still not held in as high of regard as the men. Nevertheless, without the hard work and dedication of Civil War nurses, the Confederacy would not have been able to sustain its army for as long as it did.

Another form of involvement in the public sphere was the activity of female Confederate spies, including Rose O’Neal Greenhow from Maryland. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Greenhow was living in Washington, D.C, which made it easy for her to spy on Union troops.<sup>44</sup> In 1861, Greenhow found out about Union General Irvin McDowell’s plan to attack Confederate troops outside Manassas, Virginia. She discovered important information on the size and movement of his troops, and relayed the message to Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard. With this information, Beauregard was able to win an important victory at the First Battle of Bull Run. Although she was jailed because of her actions, she was regarded as a heroine back

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 29.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Chang, *A Separate Battle*, 58.

home. Greenhow spent the rest of her life doing activities that would help the Confederacy. In a letter she wrote to Secretary of State William Seward she said, “My sufferings will afford a significant lesson to the women of the South, that sex or condition is no bulwark against the surging billows of the ‘irrepressible conflict.’”<sup>45</sup> Women’s efforts at the beginning of the war helped aid the Confederacy and shaped a new lifestyle that no longer involved being tucked away in the domestic sphere. Many women saw “the war through a romantic haze; many planter-class Confederate women initially saw it as an exciting adventure that would affirm the mastery of their menfolk.”<sup>46</sup> However, reality would soon enough sink in, prompting yet another change in the ideals of Confederate women.

### **We’re Tired of War**

Months of harsh realities piled up led to severe war fatigue within the Confederacy. The patriotism that engulfed society at the beginning of the war was no longer shining in the spring of 1863. On the battlefield, the death of Stonewall Jackson contributed to low morale among the soldiers. Then in July of 1863, the Battle of Gettysburg severely damaged the Confederacy physically and mentally. Because of the 23,231 casualties and next-to-no available resources on the side of the Confederacy, most historians consider this the turning point of the American Civil War in favor of the Union.

On the homefront, many women faced difficulty keeping up with the multitude of new responsibilities that they were required to take on with their husbands or fathers off

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<sup>45</sup>Rose O’Neal Greenhow, “Letter to the Hon. Wm. H. Seward, November 17, 1861,” Rose O’Neal Greenhow Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University, <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/greenhow/1861-11-17/1861-11-17.html> (accessed October 22, 2013).

<sup>46</sup>Edwards, 73.

at war or killed in action. Prior to the war, it was the male's responsibility to oversee the slaves on the plantations. However, this task and many other household duties were left to woman during wartime. Agricultural women took control of the plantation their husbands left behind. Oftentimes, their new tasks were too much to handle. Emily Lyles Harris wrote in her diary, "I shall never get used to being left as the head of affairs at home. The burden is very heavy, and there is no one to smile on me as I trudge wearily along in the dark with it. I am constituted so as to crave a guide and protector. I am not an independent woman nor ever shall be."<sup>47</sup> Women began to grow tired of the household burdens they were required to take on while the men were off at war.

Another burden on Southern women was the constant fear of a slave rebellion. According to Faust, "By the middle years of the war, women had begun publicly to voice their fears, writing hundreds of letters to state and Confederate officials imploring that men be detailed from military service to control the slaves."<sup>48</sup> The vulnerability was sometimes too much for Southern women to handle and, thus, many resorted to sending petitions to government officials and discouraging letters to soldiers.

A woman named Hattie Motley begged the Confederate Secretary of War to release her husband from the army because of a situation that occurred with a slave at a plantation close to her home.<sup>49</sup> Faust writes that other women expressed their concerns to government officials about how they felt unsafe without their husbands to protect them from rowdy slaves.<sup>50</sup> In a letter to Jefferson Davis, Almira Acors states her opposition for the Confederacy when she writes, "I do not see how God can give the South a victory

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<sup>47</sup>Harper, 13.

<sup>48</sup>Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 58.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

when the cries of suffering mothers and children are constantly ascending up to him... if I and my little children... die while there[sic] Father is in service I invoke God Almighty that our blood rest upon the South.”<sup>51</sup> At first, women branched out into the public sphere and supported the Confederacy with aid societies and community service endeavors. However, once patriotism declined, they used their newfound political involvement in ways that would ultimately undermine the war effort.

Simply stated, the Confederate homefront was tired of war. Families were running out of money and patriotism was rapidly declining. After months of declining resources, many Southern women were growing desperate. As a result of the increasing household tasks, soldiers’ aid societies began to fall apart as early as the end of 1862.<sup>52</sup> Women simply could not keep up with the amount of tasks that were now required from them. Now that women were actively involved in both public and private spheres, their responsibilities doubled. Harper writes:

As time passed, many women found that the hardships created by war forced them to redefine their patriotic obligations. For most women, fulfilling the needs of their families superseded their duty to their government... Many Southern women found that the struggle to keep their children alive demanded that they openly protest the Confederate government’s expectations of them.<sup>53</sup>

It simply was not practical for women to be patriotic anymore. Morale was low and everyone was exhausted. The Confederacy depended on the support of the women and could not afford to return the favor. For months women did all they could to support the Cause, and by the spring of 1863 they had ran out of energy. War fatigue shifted the

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<sup>51</sup>Drew Gilpin Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds. *Divided Houses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 194.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 347.

<sup>53</sup>Harper, 293.

focus from aiding the Confederacy back to caring for their own well-being and that of their families. Many families were literally starving and thousands became homeless due to destruction from battle.<sup>54</sup> Such physical hardships led to the decline of women's support for the Confederacy. The tides changed and women now needed the support of the Confederacy. They could not provide for their families anymore and therefore abandoned the notion of supporting the entity that took away their men and caused their strife. Economically, the Confederacy could not afford to assist the starving and homeless families on the home front, nor could they support the soldiers on the battlefield. Women's actions were now focused on receiving what they felt was entitled to them rather than organizing efforts to aid their government.

### **Give Us What We Want**

Without the support of the aid societies and because of the Union blockade, food shortages ran rampant in the South. The Confederacy was in desperation, and there was little hope of recovery. Confederate leaders could see the low morale and instructed women not to send discouraging letters to the soldiers. In fact, according to Harper, an Alabama newspaper told its readers: "Speak words of encouragement; cheer their hearts, fire their souls, and arouse their patriotism."<sup>55</sup> However, many women disregarded this instruction and wrote dreary letters to their loved ones informing them of their hardships.<sup>56</sup> Other letters included pleas to desert the army. Women argued to their loved ones that they were gone long enough and needed them to come home. A woman named Martha Revis wrote to her husband in a letter: "I want you to come home as soon as you

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<sup>54</sup>Edwards, 90.

<sup>55</sup>Harper, 298.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

can after you get this letter.”<sup>57</sup> After months of fighting, Southerners were exhausted and wanted things to go back to the way they were before the war. Women wanted their loved ones to return and started to take desperate measures to assure that this would happen. Harper writes, “As desperate women urged their husbands to return home, the Confederate press and the government charged that women were staging the ruin of the Confederacy.”<sup>58</sup>

Soldiers and women on the home front alike were desperate for food. Historian Laura Edwards writes, “Traffic in stolen goods reached epidemic proportions, as white women increasingly turned to illicit trade for affordable supplies.”<sup>59</sup> Because of the increasing involvement in politics and the public sphere, two women, Mary Jackson and Minerva Meredith, led perhaps the largest riot of the Civil War era. What is most surprising about these women is that they were not acting on account of starvation. Jackson, a market huckster, and Meredith, a butcher’s apprentice, were among the working class and “inspired more from their political convictions than from hunger.”<sup>60</sup> On April 2, 1863, “several hundred working-class women of Richmond, Virginia, and its surrounding communities armed themselves with axes and homemade knives, horse pistols, and hatchets.”<sup>61</sup> When the governor of Virginia refused to meet the demands of the people begging for food, Jackson, Meredith, and their followers marched into the city’s commercial center and ransacked dozens of stores and warehouses.<sup>62</sup> After stealing food and other goods, the Police Guard finally subdued the mob.<sup>63</sup> Known as the

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<sup>57</sup>Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” 195.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Edwards, 93.

<sup>60</sup>Harper, 43.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

Richmond Bread Riots, this event was one of several rebellions within the Confederacy. The string of such rebellions led by disgruntled Southern women demonstrates the change in the ideologies of women who became desperate in the middle years of the war. The patriotism instilled in the hearts of Southern belles at the beginning of the war was gone. What emerged in its place was a political force used by women to get what they wanted. Whether or not women were actively trying to bring down the Confederacy is debatable; however, it is clear that through a cease in their support, government pleas, discouraging letters, and riots, women's actions contributed to the fall of the Confederacy.

### **Deliberate or Inadvertent Subversion?**

While it is true that the actions taken by women toward the ending years of the war undermined the war effort, is it fair to say that they, themselves, actively sought to bring down the Confederacy? How could a pious and virtuous Southern belle transform into an ardent patriot and then into a saboteur within a span of a few years? Simply stated, it is not possible. To go as far as to call these women saboteurs is unfair. The South had gone through countless changes within a timeframe of only a few years, and the people were simply exhausted. Fatigued and scared, Southern women pled for their loved ones to come home because they were frightened and certainly not accustomed to the new responsibilities that were forced onto them. Many were now homeless and starving and when desperation kicks in, it is only human nature to do what one can to recuperate. When women stopped supporting the war effort, began writing discouraging letters, and taking part in riots, they indeed undermined the Confederacy. However, what each of these actions has in common is that they were completed by women in order to

focus their energy on themselves and on their families. Continuing to support a government that could give nothing back to them was no longer plausible. Toward the end of the war, women did not have the energy or the resources to support the Confederacy and needed to revert the attention back to their families. When looking at these women collectively, it seems as though they actively sought to bring down the Confederacy. However when looking at their individual stories, it is clear that the subversion was done passively. Faust writes, “Women’s willingness to be selfless, to embrace the needs of the nation as prior to their own, had begun to disappear. Their initial dedication to the Cause proved to be conditional, dependent on their own capacities to endure war’s hardships and on a hope for the Confederacy’s future that was rapidly evaporating.” It was clear that the Confederacy would not prevail, thus naturally, patriotism had declined. Uneasy about their future, and longing for their loved ones, many women participated in acts that ultimately brought down the Confederacy. However, their intent was not the overthrow their government; they simply wanted to return to what they remembered as a state of bliss that was the Antebellum South.

### **Conclusion**

Prior to the Civil War, Victorian ideals cast aside women from public society. Their place was in the homes where they were meant to either be domestic workers or virtuous and sophisticated Cavalier Ladies. When the war broke out, the romantic adventure captured the imagination of both women and men. As the men left for war, some women stayed behind to make uniforms, raise funds, or take over their husband’s role at home. Others, like Kate Cumming, looked past the critical eyes of their families and became nurses. In addition, there were also instances of women acting as spies to

support the Confederacy. After months of fighting and suffering, however, supplies and morale were diminishing rapidly. Now that women were in the public sphere, they became politically involved and began writing letters and petitions to local officials and soldiers that encouraged desertion. Thousands of starving, desperate women rallied behind political activists Jackson and Meredith in an event that was later called the Richmond Bread Riots, the best example of women using their newly found power to get what they thought they were entitled to. At first, Southerners saw the war through a romantic lens. However, once the harsh realities of war set in, patriotism declined and instead of rallying behind the Cause, women grew weary and longed for their loved ones. Exhaustion and desperation set in when thousands of women and families were starving and left without a home. The actions that women took toward the middle years of the war undermined the Cause, because without the moral and physical support of the homefront, the Confederacy had nothing left to cling to. However, to say that the women deliberately sought to overthrow their own government is a stretch. By failing to provide revenue for the war effort, writing petitions and discouraging letters, and participating in riots, women were now using the power they gained from stepping into the public sphere to acquire what they wanted. They did not desire to bring about the fall of their government; rather, they wanted the safe return of their loved ones and an end to their suffering. The way that they sought to acquire these things, however, is what ultimately undermined the war effort and could, in fact, be one of the main reasons why the Confederacy fell. Kate Cumming's diary entry is eerily accurate as she predicts: "[If the Confederacy] did not succeed, the women of the South would be responsible."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," 198.

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