"Though my people slay me, yet I will trust in them:" Varina Davis and the Elusive Paradigm of the Politically Elite Confederate Woman

Ashley Whitehead

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
Whitehead, Ashley, ""Though my people slay me, yet I will trust in them:" Varina Davis and the Elusive Paradigm of the Politically Elite Confederate Woman" (2008). Undergraduate Honors Theses. Paper 835. https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/835

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
“Though my people slay me, yet I will trust in them”:

Varina Davis and the Elusive Paradigm of the Politically Elite Confederate Woman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in History from The College of William and Mary in Virginia

by

Ashley M. Whitehead

Dr. James Whittenburg, Director
Dr. Susan Kern
Dr. Katherine Preston

Williamsburg, VA
April 11, 2008
~To my loving family, for creating the dream and providing me with the support to pursue it through the most challenging of times; to my amazing friends, for keeping me grounded and giving me valuable perspective with which to dream; to Professor James Whittenburg, James Michael Moore, and all those who have provided me with the tools to make the dream come true; and to the Gettysburg Semester 2006, for never ceasing to inspire me and challenge me to dream ever more loftily.~

~From the bottom of my heart, thank you.~
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 2: “I Live in a Kind Of Maze”
  Section 1: A Confounded Youth.............................................................................................. 18
  Section 2: “Civil Wars”................................................................................................................ 22
  Section 3: “The Years Alone”.................................................................................................... 57

Chapter 3: Re-evaluating Varina Davis in History and Memory.............................. 75

Bibliography.................................................................................................................................. 94
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

In a letter dated April 7, 1865, Varina Davis wrote to her friend and confidante, Mary Chesnut, “My name is a heritage of woe.”¹ The Confederacy was just days away from its demise at the hands of the Union Army. As the wife of the first and only president of the Confederate States of America, Varina had experienced over a period of four years the euphoria and anguish of a country struggling against the odds for its survival. Through the storm of war, Varina’s role as First Lady of the Confederacy brought her both praise and notoriety. As a conspicuous and symbolic representative of the Confederacy, Varina was expected by both males and females of her political and social sphere to serve as the model of elite southern womanhood. As she attempted to do so, she quickly became both an archetypal figure and a target of considerable criticism by her peers.

To date, only three substantial biographies have been written about Varina Davis. Eron Rowland’s Varina Howell, Wife of Jefferson Davis (1927), was the first attempt to document and understand the life of the complex First Lady of the Confederacy. Ishbel Ross’s First Lady of the South: The Life of Mrs. Jefferson Davis (1958), delved deeper into Varina’s family background, the social and political world of the First Lady, and the controversies therein. More recently, Joan Cashin’s First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis’s Civil War (2006), has won much acclaim for its in-depth analysis of Varina’s complicated personal character, her relationship with Jefferson Davis, and her

image within the Confederacy. Of the three, Cashin’s biography is by far the best researched and most insightful analysis of Varina’s life.

Rowland’s book, which opens with an invocation that is not unlike those of the epic poets to their muses, is far too infused with personal sentiment and affection toward Varina to carry any significant scholarly weight in the world of academia. In the opening pages of her book, Rowland herself admits the intense personal reasons which drove her to publish Varina’s biography:

I first must say that I wrote this early life of Varina Howell because I love her; because I am in love with the gladness, sincerity and all the robust, divine purposes of her womanhood; because I am in love with her strong unflinching pride, her enduring strength, her depth and power of love, her loyalties, her infinite tenderness, her sound good sense, her salty, gay humor, her laughter and her tears; because I am in love with her transcendent and manlike courage and fortitude in later years.

Later, Rowland advances a highly romanticized image of Varina:

…delighting and begetting love of her in all women who love charm and grace and beauty. O spirit of Southern womanhood, of New Jersey, of Virginia, of the Mississippi Valley, of New England summers, of America of Queens, of First Ladies, of heroines of motherhood, of wifehood, of sisterhood, more charming and compelling you become the closer I draw to you! And loving you, Varina Howell, and all women like you as I do, it gave me joy unspeakable to write your young life…connect myself with you in this unbreakable bond.2

Written more as a glorification of Rowland’s childhood role model from the Lost Cause perspective than as a critical piece of researched scholarship, Rowland’s book must be discounted from any serious analysis of Varina Davis’s character and her ability or inability to live up to the expectations of her peers. Rather, one must approach Rowland’s book from an historiographical perspective, which in itself is integral to understanding Varina and her role as First Lady and will be addressed in the final third of this paper.

Ishbel Ross’s book is a comprehensive and well-researched piece of scholarship; however, the author’s decision to transform her work into what appears, at times, to be “novel form” detracts from the credibility of some of her details and adds an aura of dramatic exaggeration to the book as a whole. The breadth, depth and credibility of Ross’s sources are impressive, and clearly provide for a thorough study of Varina’s life beginning with her youth, continuing through her tenure as First Lady and concluding with her death in New York. However, it is unmistakably clear that the era in which Ross was writing influenced the focus of her research. Growing up in the wake of Lost Cause ideology, Ross was a product of the era when the “moonlight and magnolias” myth, as perpetuated by such works as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* and D.W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation,” dominated the re-telling of history. Inevitably, she was influenced by the need to smooth over the wounds of the nation by creating romantic images of the South---a South justified in its actions and serving as the producer of some of the noblest, most influential political and military “martyrs” of all time. Although her book thoroughly explores the controversies and contradictions inherent in southern ideology and Confederate leadership, especially as they pertain to the life and legacy of Varina Davis, it simultaneously presents an overly-simplified view both of Varina as an emotional, needy, but martyr-like First Lady, and of Varina’s relationship to Jefferson as unadulterated, thoroughly passionate, and traditionally “patriarchal.” Thus, Ross’s book leaves the reader rather restricted in his or her full understanding of Varina Davis; however, it does serve as a doorway to an invaluable realm of sources, both old and new, from which to glean further information about the Confederacy’s First Lady.
Joan Cashin’s recent biography of Varina Davis is, without a doubt, a remarkable and insightful piece of scholarship. The highly professional manner with which Cashin approaches her subject, as evidenced by the depth and breadth of her sources, the formality of her writing, the challenges which she poses to traditional and cherished views of the President of the Confederacy and his family, and the vital, if uncomfortable, questions which she unashamedly asks about the character of both Varina and Jefferson Davis, makes Cashin’s book a definitive piece of scholarship on Varina. Cashin makes no over-simplifications or sweeping assumptions, but rather offers opinions about Varina Davis’s legacy as First Lady of the Confederacy based upon well-researched and well-analyzed evidence. Unafraid to contradict or tarnish pre-existing views of the Confederacy and its First Lady, yet confident enough to defend Varina Davis against the criticisms of her peers which still echo through society today, Cashin inspires young historians to delve deeper into the often-overlooked aspects of Varina’s life, personality and societal obligations.

However, missing from Cashin’s biography, as well as from the biographies by Rowland and Ross, is extensive analysis of the views held about Varina by her female social and political equals. Both Ishbel Ross and Joan Cashin make reference to commentary about Varina offered by prominent Confederate women such as Mary Chesnut, Lydia Johnston, and Charlotte Wigfall; however, neither author pursues that commentary and the influence of these women in a broader context. Instead, the authors largely focus on the views of prominent men, South and North, both during and after the Civil War, to flesh out their biographies of Varina and draw their conclusions about her role in history and memory. The absence of an in-depth analysis relative to the impact of
the views of Varina’s female counterparts on the measurement of her success as First Lady of the Confederacy was the incentive for this paper.

The leading women in southern society during the war were vital players in the shaping of the Confederacy. In her acclaimed book, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust writes that, from the outset of sectional hostilities, elite southern women vowed that “the South’s crisis must be certainly ours as well as that of the men.” In making the South’s crisis their own, these women were forced to confront myriad social issues at home that accompanied the “males’ concerns for politics and battle,” and which frequently defied the traditional expectations held of southern women by the patriarchy in antebellum society. In one of the most frequently quoted sections of her book, Faust writes that “the harsh realities of military conflict and social upheaval pushed women toward new understandings of themselves and toward reconstructions of the meanings of southern womanhood that would last well beyond the Confederacy’s demise…necessity is the mother of invention.”

In a disordered society in which the majority of the male population was preoccupied on the battlefield, women were forced to redefine their societal roles and obligations with their own feminine touch, creating a new identity for themselves that was a fusion of traditional practices and necessary inventions. In order fully to comprehend the complexity of southern society during the Civil War, the far-reaching changes that the war brought to that society, and the forces and individuals that shaped and continue to shape perceptions of southern identity, one must delve more deeply into the lives of those who heretofore have been neglected or underestimated. In order that

---

we might understand better what was meant by Varina Davis when she wrote that her name was a “heritage of woe,” we must look to her female equals with whom she shared some of the social, political and emotional burdens of war, and from whose methods of coping with those burdens she undoubtedly deviated at times.

By analyzing the commentary of Varina’s female peers about her character and her performance as First Lady of the Confederacy, we are able to understand the expectations which elite women held for each other as female leaders of Confederate society. In doing so, we might attempt to construct a paradigm for the ideal southern woman of the elite social and political spheres during the Civil War. A significant amount of research has been performed in the past century by historians such as T.C. DeLeon, Faust, Gary Gallagher, George Rable, Sarah Gardner, Gerry Van Der Heuvel, and William Kimball about various female sectors of Confederate society. However, DeLeon, Faust and Gardner focus specifically on elite southern women as a group, and only DeLeon and Gardner discuss Varina Davis at length. All three of the authors fail to assess Varina specifically through the eyes of her female, social-equivalent peers. While some mention of female commentary is included in the works of the latter two authors, much of the focus of DeLeon’s and Gardner’s works is on the commentary made by males, the media and popular culture. Gardner’s book is largely a comparison of Varina and Mary Todd Lincoln and focuses on their respective places in history and memory as defined by men and the media. DeLeon’s book is in great part a description of the social life of the Confederacy as a whole rather than a critical analysis of its leading members; furthermore, DeLeon’s analysis of elite women focuses largely on the “belles” of the Confederacy rather than on the more mature “ladies” of the political elite.
Drew Faust’s book is a more complex piece of scholarship with which to grapple, as it comes closest to touching on the ideas explored in this paper. Faust’s deconstruction of feminine society in the slaveholding South includes an in-depth analysis of the changing social, political and economic roles of elite southern women as a result of the war. It also assesses these women through a multitude of additional lenses, including those of the familial, the religious, the moral, and the patriarchal. Central to her argument about the controversial, but necessary, evolution of southern womanhood during the war is her inclusion of the opinions of various elite women on the conduct of their female peers. However, Faust’s emphasis on plantation mistresses throughout the South and the impact of slaveholding on these mistresses again dodges the unique circumstances with which the women of Varina Davis’s sphere frequently were confronted.

Though they were part of the larger class of “elite southern women,” the women of the high political and social spheres were, in a way, a class entirely unto themselves. Segregated geographically, culturally, politically, and socially, they both defined and were expected to embody the elements of the quintessential cosmopolitan southern lady. But, of what, exactly were those elements comprised? What were the specific roles that these women were expected to fill, and who was supposed to reinforce such roles? In her capacity as First Lady, was Varina Davis expected to serve as the “queen” of southern society—the paradigm for her social equals? How did she measure up to the standards imposed on her by her peers and why? Do the positive comments or do the criticisms of her ultimately win out in defining her in history? Do the controversies surrounding her “reign” as First Lady and the contradictions in how she was viewed by her peers (as
alluded to by Rowland, Ross and Cashin), produce any definitive conclusions about the expectations concerning the unique and multi-faceted roles that the women of her class were supposed to fill in a society that was evolving around them?

This paper attempts to answer all of these questions through a careful study of Varina Davis as seen by the female peers within her class at a time when southern womanhood was undergoing a significant transformation---a study conducted against the backdrop of the historiography on Varina. It is hoped that by answering these questions we will achieve a fuller understanding of Varina Davis’s unique relationship to elite Confederate society, and be able better to comprehend her exact role in history and memory. Furthermore, we might finally be able to do larger justice to the unique class of women represented by Varina whose impact on the Confederacy and Confederate memory cannot be denied.

Before we begin, a brief explanation of sources is required, as is an outline as to how the analysis will proceed. The women whose commentary comprises the majority of the evidence on which this paper relies represents a cross-section of the women from the Confederacy’s elite social and political spheres during and immediately following the Civil War. Mary Chesnut served as one of Varina’s closest confidants throughout the war. Born into a family of wealthy South Carolina planters and raised by a father who served in the South Carolina Senate, Mary Chesnut received a broad education in both cosmopolitan and gentry plantation culture. Having attended an elite girls’ school in Charleston, Mary possessed a social and intellectual confidence and curiosity that ultimately attracted her to the pursuit of literature, travel, politics and social entertainments. After marrying the prominent politician and future United States Senator,
James Chesnut, in 1840 (at the young age of seventeen), Mary became immersed in an exciting life of politics and public social engagements. Bored by the isolation and rural location of the Camden, South Carolina, Chesnut family plantation, “Mulberry,” Mary eagerly traveled to Washington, D.C., to accompany her husband in his political pursuits. While in Washington, Mary assisted James in the writing of his speeches and letters, and continually challenged him to political debates within the home about current events. A firm supporter of nullification and southern rights, Mary often found herself at odds with the more moderate James. Although she always publicly supported her husband in his endeavors, Mary felt free to disagree with the “cool, overly-aristocratic” James both within the home and in correspondence with her friends.4

While in Washington, Mary formed friendships and made a reputation for herself that would define her throughout the war as an energetic, passionate, confident, opinionated and well-informed “progressive” southern belle. It was during this time that she first encountered Varina Davis, to whom she would refer the rest of her life as “one of the cleverest women in the United States.” Living a life of “paradox” (in the words of her biographer, C. Vann Woodward), Mary, in many ways the prototypical charming and socially adept southern belle, possessed a “bold feminism,” and was adamantly opposed to the oppression of women both within the home and in public society. She likened the plight of women to that of slaves. Women, like slaves, she confided in her diary, were “bought and sold, deprived of liberty, property, civil rights, and protection,” and were doomed to a life of dependency on their husbands. “There is no slave, after all, like a wife…all married women, all children and girls who live in their father’s houses are slaves,” she lamented. Mary dryly remarked that it was this hated oppression of women

4 Chesnut, pp. xxx-xxxi, xxxiv, xxxvii-xxxviii.
that, ironically, “led to the celebrated personality of southern womanhood,” which she herself embodied as the “proper” wife of an elite southern senator: “So we whimper and whine, do we?” she wrote, “Always, we speak in a deprecatory voice do we? And sigh gently at the end of every sentence and they say our voices are the softest, sweetest in the world….we are afraid to raise our voice above a mendicant moan.”

In her unwavering devotion to her husband and her love for and dedication to the elegance, charm, sophistication and beauty of the aristocratic South, Mary conformed to southern feminine precedent. However, her blatant detestation of the arrogance of many southern elites, in addition to the passion and confidence achieved from the unique perspectives which she gained from the depth and breadth of her literary background, and from her simultaneously cosmopolitan and provincial youth, lifted Mary Chesnut’s voice far “above a mendicant moan” during the Civil War, and turned her into one of the most celebrated historians and novelists of the “unwritten Confederacy.” As C. Vann Woodward has noted, Mary was fascinated by history, and was well aware that she herself was playing out a role in a “larger historical drama.” Well suited to serve as the wife of Jefferson Davis’s personal aide, and later, of a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, Mary “feared and dreaded war but embraced its demands with all the fierce passion of her nature.” The adventurous and curious Mary came to view the war as an “outlet for her frustrations and energies,” which previously had been restricted by the traditional expectations for southern womanhood.

From her extensive diaries, both public and private—most of which were based exclusively upon her war-time musings and were subsequently published shortly after the

---

5 Chesnut, pp. 729, li.
6 Ibid, pp. xlvi, xv, xlviii, xxxviii.
war’s end—we can glean a significant amount of information about not only the events of
the war itself, but also the changing cultural atmosphere of the South which produced,
defined, and challenged women such as Mary Chesnut and her beloved friend, Varina
Davis. These diverse experiences, perspectives and intellect, combined with her attention
to detail and her innate gift with words, have made Mary Chesnut such an influential
figure in understanding the history of the Civil War South. By merging and editing her
private and public diaries, C. Vann Woodward has enabled us to delve inside the intimate
thoughts and feelings of Mary Chesnut, those of her peers and of the society in which she
lived. For this reason, her diary provides a significant amount of the evidence used in
this paper to evaluate Varina Davis through the lens of her peers. Possessing traits
similar to those of Varina---intellectualism, open-mindedness about regionalism,
outspokenness, vibrancy, social confidence, individuality of thought, respect for tradition,
and political knowledge, but brutal honesty in her opinions of her peers---Mary Chesnut
offers an invaluable personal as well as cultural lens through which to view and assess
the First Lady of the Confederacy.

Several women left commentary that is essential for a cross-sectional
understanding of Varina Davis and the political and social roles that she was expected to
fill in the Civil War South. Constance Cary Harrison was the highly educated daughter
of a prominent judge and planter from Washington, Georgia and the wife of Burton
Norvell Harrison (Jefferson Davis’s personal secretary); after the war, Harrison became a
renowned author, newspaper journalist, and social commentator. Virginia Clay Clopton,
the Alabama-born, formally educated, acclaimed novelist and proponent of women’s
suffrage was the wife of United States and Confederate States Senator, Clement C. Clay.
Charlotte Wigfall was the opinionated, Texas-born wife of the influential Confederate States Senator Louis T. Wigfall. Lydia Johnston was the gentile Baltimore belle and wife of Confederate Major General Joseph E. Johnston. LaSalle Corbell Pickett, the (later) notorious Virginian belle, was the young bride of the colorful Confederate General George Pickett. Sara Pryor, the wealthy, sophisticated, well educated Virginian was the wife of the wealthy former U.S. Congressman, fiery secessionist, orator, and newspaper editor-turned-Confederate Brigadier General, Roger Pryor. The South Carolina native, Catherine Devereux Edmondston, was the wife of political activist, Halifax County, North Carolina, justice of the peace and leader of the first North Carolina Home Guard unit and cavalry troop, Patrick Muir Edmondston. Prominent Richmonder Janet Randolph was the wife of Major N.V. Randolph and head of the Richmond Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy. Mary Hunter Kimbrough was the Mississippi-born wife of the prominent Judge Allen McCaskill Kimbrough, a close friend of the Davis family and both confidant and legal assistant to Varina after her husband’s death. Sarah Morgan Dawson was the Louisiana-born, unwed, highly-educated, and politically passionate daughter of the judicial magistrate of New Orleans and later an outspoken South Carolina secessionist. Phoebe Yates Pember was a well-educated young Georgian widow who, after becoming a close friend of the wife of Confederate Secretary of War George Randolph, was appointed head matron at Richmond’s famous Chimborazo field hospital. Richmonder Judith McGuire was the daughter of a Virginia Supreme Court Justice, mother of two Confederate soldiers, and wife of prominent Episcopalian Minister and Virginia Secession Committee member John P. McGuire. Socially adept, highly introspective Petersburg resident, Myrta L. Avary was the daughter of a wealthy,
cultivated and cosmopolitan officer of the Bank of Virginia. In addition, the diaries and correspondence of some of Varina Davis’s closest Richmond friends from among the economically and socially elite, but not necessarily of the political sphere, aid in the reconstruction of Varina’s character and also the perceptions of her as noted by women at the time. These women include Lizzie Cary Daniel, Anne Grant, and Emma Bryan, among others.

One final key body of evidence consists of the post-mortem newspaper articles about Varina Davis that were influenced by Varina’s peers, as well as the post-bellum minutes pertaining to Varina from various chapters of the Daughters of the Confederacy, a group that was led predominantly by the socially and politically elite women of the South. This paper also consults the commentary of various other women, as well as prominent men, which has particular relevance to Varina and her unique societal role.

The first section of the next chapter will provide a brief biography of Varina Davis. The two succeeding sections of the chapter will present the evidence derived from primary sources, focusing on the raw criticisms and compliments about Varina Davis made by her peers both during and after the war. The final chapter will draw together the analysis and historiography on Varina Davis undertaken by Eron Rowland, Ishbel Ross and Joan Cashin and the raw evidence laid out in the second chapter. It also will include a discussion of some of the most significant secondary works to date on southern womanhood, social and political identity and the evolving culture of the Civil War South. Through this tri-segmented approach, I hope to deconstruct Varina Davis in history and memory. By evaluating her through a new analytical lens, one then might glean a clearer understanding of the unique, complex and often contradictory roles, expectations,
responsibilities and actions of a sector of southern society which heretofore largely has been overlooked.
CHAPTER 2: “I Live in a Kind of Maze”

Section I: A Confounded Youth

Born on May 7, 1826 to middle-upper class parents and raised just outside of Natchez, Mississippi on the large Howell family estate called “The Briers,” Varina Howell was acquainted from an early age with the lifestyle of genteel living. Varina’s illustrious family background, at the core of which stood a grandfather who had fought under George Washington in the Revolutionary War and who then served as Governor of New Jersey between 1793 and 1803, was a source of great pride for the Howell family. Varina’s pride in, respect for, and dedication to her northern relatives was a lifelong hallmark of her character. Her father, who had served with distinction as a second lieutenant in the Great Lakes Campaign during the War of 1812, added to her family’s pride. It was William Howell who ultimately moved to the South to establish the Howell family and its large plantation in Natchez. Varina’s mother’s side of the family—the Kempes—likewise stemmed from genteel stock, representing the refined and intellectual sophistication of the old southern planter family. By the time of Varina’s birth, the Kempes had evolved into prominent Whigs and Episcopalians with significant influence in the Natchez community. Varina’s distinguished family history, coupled with the formal and informal training that she received not only at home from her parents, but also from a northern attorney named George Winchester, as well as from a brief stint at Madame Grelaud’s all-girls’ boarding school in Philadelphia, in 1836, instilled in Varina

3 Ross, p. 15.
a certain confidence and intellectual curiosity that would serve her well in later years when she was in the political spotlight. Varina’s passion for literature, music, history and languages ultimately won her the affection of the charming, yet reserved, Jefferson Davis, of the nearby Mississippi plantation, “The Hurricane.”

Marrying the thirty-seven year-old politician Davis in February of 1845, nineteen-year-old Varina was thrown into a new, highly mature and somewhat intimidating world of intensely Democratic politics, in which she struggled to find her voice and reclaim her Whig pride and identity, while trying desperately to support her beloved new husband in his active career. From a young age, Varina had been advised by her mother to “control her emotions and do her duty to God and her husband.” Instructed in the tenets of adopting feminine self-denial and passivity in exchange for the protection and support of a husband, Varina grew up expecting such a social order to define and guide her actions in society. However, the reality of her own family’s confounded social circumstances, which resulted from her father’s bankruptcy just prior to Varina’s marriage, and Mr. Howell’s ensuing inability to provide adequately for his family, presented Varina with numerous challenges to adherence to the traditional ideals of southern womanhood with which she had grown up. Coupled with her father’s monetary and familial errors was Varina’s growing realization of her own strong will, intellectualism, and valuable insight on increasingly divisive issues such as race, regionalism, and politics. She quickly found herself at odds with her in-laws over their expectations for traditional and submissive womanhood. Varina’s comparative youth and emotional “immaturity,” the pride she took in her education and the increasingly public use of that education, as well as

---

4 Cashin, pp. 17-19.
5 Ibid, pp. 37, 26, 27.
Varina’s own concern and that of her in-laws about her possession of the “fortitude necessary to be a Politician’s wife,” caused her to balk at the idea of remaining home at the large Davis estate while her husband went out campaigning across the South for various political positions. In fact, she found it rather a relief and revitalizing for her to begin her life in the nation’s capital, in December of 1845, as the wife of the newly elected Congressman, Jefferson Davis.⁶

While in Washington, Varina blossomed into one of the most charming and gracious hostesses of her elite political and social circle. Taming the somewhat innately “tomboyish” and outspoken tendencies of her youthful days on the Natchez plantation and cultivating further the sophistication, etiquette, and intellectualism of cosmopolitan living with which her childhood also had familiarized her, Varina enjoyed close friendships with prominent figures such as Minna and Lizzie Blair, Franklin and Jane Pierce, Zachary and Margaret Taylor, Mr. and Mrs. Clement Clay and Judah P. Benjamin. With these friends, Varina enthusiastically indulged in intellectual conversation about literature, politics, and current events. Varina’s growing social maturity, coupled with her new and distinguished friendships, enabled her to rise to eminence within an increasingly competitive and extravagant Washington society. At the many receptions that Varina both hosted and attended, she distinguished herself as a “cultivated lady” and “superb conversationalist” in the eyes of both her male and female peers. Her physical beauty and elegant style of dress only added to her “amiability,” sincerity and social aptitude, and helped to mould her into a “queen” of Washington society.⁷

---

⁶ Cashin, pp. 42, 44, 45.
⁷ Ibid, pp. 42, 73, 81.
Varina possessed a biting sense of humor that could, at times, appear forward and “crude” to some of the Washington elite; several times she shocked those around the dinner table with her blatant honesty and cutting wit. Nevertheless, she easily won over Washington society with her cosmopolitan, yet humble, air, and both fascinated and impressed her intellectual equals (both male and female) with her ability to hold her own in political and philosophical discussion. Naval officer David Porter once remarked to future Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles that Varina was a “magnificent lady” who “shone in Washington like Venus, brighter than all the women.”

The secession crisis of the late 1850s, the firing on Fort Sumter, in April of 1861, and the ultimate departure of several southern states from the Union introduced Varina Davis to an entirely new political and social world, into which she cautiously stepped when her husband was elected President of the Confederate States of America. Several of her peers instantly noted both Varina’s hesitance at becoming the Confederacy’s First Lady and her fears about her husband becoming the Executive Officer of the fledgling nation. South Carolinian Mary Chesnut noted in March of 1861 that “Mrs. Davis does not like her husband being made president. People are hard to please. She says general of all the armies would have suited his temperament better.” As Ishbel Ross noted, Varina was well aware of the upheaval that the new appointment would cause in the family’s life. She went on to write, “The melancholy vein in which she wrote thirty years later of his election may well have reflected her tragic knowledge of the years between, but she knew from the start that her family would be at the heart of a great storm.”

Varina’s fears on behalf of her husband, coupled with her hesitance about her own new

---

8 Cashin, pp. 81, 93.
9 Chesnut, p. 25.
10 Ross, p. 105.
political and social position, produced significant criticism from her female peers almost instantly. They questioned her devotion to her newly appointed role, and to the Confederacy as a whole. She maintained cordial correspondence and intimate friendships with northern friends and family of the elite social and political spheres. The ensuing criticism by some of her southern peers that she would rather have been First Lady of the United States than of the Confederacy was Varina’s introduction to the maelstrom of criticism and continuous scrutiny under the political and social spotlights into which she would be thrown by her female peers during the later years of the war. Naturally, not all of the commentary made by Varina’s peers about her role as First Lady was negative; in fact, myriad women praised her repeatedly for her grace, elegance, and ability to adapt under such social and political pressures. It is here that we commence the core of this paper.

Section II: “Civil Wars”

Varina’s peers maintained numerous conflicting and nearly impossible expectations for their First Lady which resulted in simultaneous, passionate affirmation and denunciation of her character. They demanded that she simultaneously fill the roles of domestic wife and public nurse; beautiful, graceful southern belle and strong, mature woman; elegant lady and self-denying female martyr; domestic caretaker and national hostess; supportive Confederate nationalist and political realist; private homemaker and social queen; passive, refined female and confident, intelligent political intermediary; domestic mother and national matriarch; staunch regionalist and agent of social and political reform; as well as guardian of Confederate memory and proponent of regional

---

11 Cashin, pp. 114-120.
reconstruction. However, it proved impossible for one woman to fulfill such diverging and lofty expectations.

***

Perhaps it was jealousy. Perhaps it was the competitive nature of elite southern society. Perhaps it was the pressure from a rapidly changing political culture. Whatever the underlying causes may have been, Mary Chesnut confided to her diary, in late 1860, her extreme dislike of Varina Davis and her envy of the excessive attention lavished on her by males and females of their shared elite social sphere in Washington. Although she would later refer to Varina in Washington as one of the “cleverest ladies in the United States,” Mary Chesnut fostered, early on, a seething envy of Varina that resulted in a public social breach between the two women, in the summer of 1861, that would not be repaired for several months. What compelled Mary to restore her friendship with Varina in the fall of 1861, and what ultimately united the two women in a bond of lifelong companionship, ironically sprang from the source of Mary’s bitterness toward Varina in early 1861. The complex nature of Varina’s and Mary’s early relationship reflects the contradictory social expectations of the emerging Confederate culture and the multifaceted nature of the relationships among the leading ladies of that culture.

Both during and after the war, Mary Chesnut wrote fondly of her years spent in Richmond, first in 1861 at the Spotswood Hotel, then at the Arlington Hotel, “where life was one extended house party and gossip-fest in cramped quarters with the domestic affairs of great and near-great under close scrutiny.” Engaging in lavish dinners, amateur theatricals, and extravagant parties where she and her husband, James, formed both “political allies and social intimates,” Mary enjoyed a luxurious life under the social and

12 Chesnut, pp. xiv, xx.
political spotlights as a prominent member of Richmond’s elite. Residing across from the Brockenbrough Mansion, the “White House of the Confederacy,” from November of 1862 through early 1863, Mary was located at the epicenter of the premiere social scene of the Confederacy’s political giants. It was during her stay in Richmond that Mary became an intimate friend and observer of Varina Davis. However, prior to the First Lady’s arrival in Richmond, in May of 1861, Mary Chesnut had frequently dined at the first Presidential Mansion in Montgomery, Alabama, with her husband; there she had begun her early assessment of Varina’s character. Commenting on a dinner held at the Executive Mansion in Montgomery, on May 20, 1861, Mary praised Varina lavishly for her hostess skills. There was “everything nice to eat…and she [Varina] was as nice as the luncheon,” Mary wrote. “When she is in the mood, I do not know so pleasant a person. She is awfully clever, always.” Of course, as mentioned earlier, Mary was simultaneously voicing her jealousy of Varina’s abilities and attributes in other parts of her journal.

Mary also went on to note Varina’s wariness at her husband being elected President of the Confederacy, and her strong publicly voiced desire for Congress to move the capital out of Montgomery. Varina had confided to Mary in a letter, “I live in a kind of maze. How I wish my husband were a dry goods clerk. Then we could dine in peace…this dreadful hour of living day to day depresses me more than I can say.” Aware of her unpopularity among many of her peers, Varina wrote that she simply had to unburden her heart privately to her friend; otherwise she undoubtedly would be accused

13 Chesnut, pp. xl, 62.
of treachery and treason by her critics.\textsuperscript{14} About Varina’s lament, Mary simply wrote, “People are hard to please.” However, it is clear that Mary could not help but be impressed by Varina’s display of sophisticated southern womanhood, good character, and her unique sense of humor and intelligence in the face of such serious and somber political proceedings; after her short breach with Varina the following summer, she swore “eternal loyalty” to the Davises and “remained for life the devoted friend of Varina and champion of Jefferson Davis.” In August of 1861, Mary bespoke her allegiance to the Presidential family, and in doing so, attempted to create a precedent whereby other women might patriotically do the same: “We may be flies on the wheel. We know our significance. But Mrs. Preston [a close friend of Mary’s] and myself have entered into an agreement—our oath is recorded on high. We mean to stand by our president and to stop all faultfinding with the powers that be—if we can, where we can—be they generals or cabinet ministers….magnanimous, if we are feeble!”\textsuperscript{15}

Certainly, other women shared and were inspired by Mary Chesnut’s ultimately unwavering allegiance to the Davises. Many of Varina’s female peers in Richmond were won over by her charm, elegance and exceeding kindness to all sectors of the public. However, Varina learned early on in her tenure as First Lady that it was her ability, or lack thereof, to meet the expectations of her female peers and perform her designated social and political duties that ultimately would win her the greatest attention and commentary from those peers. Sallie Putnam described in her journal the myriad new responsibilities assigned to Confederate women at the outset of the war, and stressed the

\textsuperscript{15} Chesnut, pp. 25, x1, 43.
necessity that all women, regardless of class or social position, participate in the
maintenance and support of the Confederacy. To that end, Putnam wrote,

Now, there is work for everyone...those formerly devoted to gaiety
and fashionable amusement found their only real pleasure in obedience
to the demands made upon their time and talents, in providing proper
habiliments for the soldier. The quondam belle of the ball-room, the
accomplished woman of society, the devotee of ease, luxury and idle
enjoyment, found herself transformed into the busy seamstress.

Putnam praised the “high class women “who disregarded their “position and did whatever
needed to be done, never shrank from stern duties, despite luxuries they were used to,”
and the harshness that they were unused to. Putnam described these women as “very
cheerful and heroic,” acting in the “spirit of 1776,” and loving to claim descent from the
republican mothers of the revolution. She went on to praise the elite women’s “patient
endurance under the most severe trials and self-sacrificing devotion,” noting that “reveille
called soldiers and women to work.”

However, the most interesting aspect of Putnam’s accounts is her direct reference
to Varina Davis. Putnam commented on women’s experimentats for easier and cheaper
dyes with which to make clothing, and for more economical ways to flavor less-than-
gourmet food. She also praised the elite women for rejecting prior notions of personal
vanity with regard to their manner of dress and adornment. She wrote, “With
commendable pride we beheld the Southern gentlemen clad in the comfortable homespun
suit, and our ladies wearing domestic dresses that challenged comparison with the plaids
and merinos of commercial manufacture.” Impressed with and pleased by Varina’s own

---

self-sacrifice and mentorship to her female peers, Putnam commented, “to the rustic and virtuous simplicity of the times the honored wife of our President nobly conformed.”

Judith McGuire, a fellow elite Confederate devotee and member of one of Richmond’s numerous patriotic sewing circles, also affirmed, in her diary, the need for women of her class to unite in support of the Confederacy: “We must all work for our country,” she wrote, “the fires of our enthusiasm and patriotism were burning all the while to a degree which might have been consuming, but that our tongues served as safety-valves. Oh, how we worked and talked, and excited each other! One common sentiment animated us all; no doubts, no fears were felt!” …Or at least, no doubts or fears should have been felt, or worse yet, publicly expressed.

Sarah Morgan Dawson likewise expressed her love and dedication to the South in her journal, and stressed the necessity of women publicly to support the Confederacy; however, she also vehemently voiced her disgust for “Southern women who spoke Confederate praises they didn’t feel.” “Loud women,” she wrote, “What contempt I have for you! How I despise your vulgarity!...There are no politics in Heaven!” She went on to write,

I insist that, if the valor and chivalry of our men cannot save our country, I would rather have it conquered by a brave race than owe its liberty to the Billingsgate oratory and demonstrations of some of these “ladies.” If the women have the upper hand then, as they have now, I would not like to live in a country governed by such tongues. Do I consider the female who could spit in a gentleman’s face merely because he wore US buttons, as a fit associate for me?

---

17 Putnam, p. 251.
Perhaps more grounded in reality than some of her female peers who seemed swept away by the romantic ideology of Confederate pride, Dawson yearned for peace, but clearly voiced her patriotism. Unlike so many of her peers, Dawson refused to be the victim of “blind intolerance and sectional hatred,” but was concerned, rather, for the welfare of the nation. To her fellow countrywomen “down East” who insisted on excessive outpourings of patriotism, Sarah Morgan wrote in her diary, “YOU may do as you please; my brothers are fighting for me and doing their duty so that excess of patriotism is unnecessary for me, as my position is too well known to make any demonstrations requisite.” Perhaps Varina Davis’s initial wariness about the Confederacy and her fear of the toll that the war could take both personally and nationally might have been better understood by a woman such as Sarah Morgan Dawson. Or, perhaps Dawson may have criticized Varina for her blunt honesty at the dinner table and her refusal to submit wholly to the role of the passive, reserved and non-politically vocal southern belle. However, leaving little commentary in her journals specifically pertaining to Varina Davis, we will never know definitively if Sarah Dawson truly did respect Varina more for her realism and loyalty to her personal convictions than she did her fickle and idealistic peers with their “patriotic foolishness,” or whether she thought Varina too much of a deviant from the traditional southern “lady.”

Like Sallie Putnam and Judith McGuire, Mrs. Roger Pryor also stressed the necessity of all women, regardless of their social position, to assist in the nursing of wounded and sick Confederate soldiers in the Richmond hospitals and wrote of the nobility of donating linen and other prized materials for bandages and bed sheets. In her post-war *Reminiscences*, Pryor wrote that “every linen garment I possessed, except one

20 Dawson, p. xxi.
change, every garment of cotton fabric, all my table-linen, all my bed-linen, even the chintz covers for furniture, all were torn into strips and rolled for bandages for the soldiers’ wounds.” She praised her peers for doing the same, stating that one cannot omit “passing tribute to the heroic fortitude and devotion of Richmond women in the time of their greatest trial. These were the delicate, beautiful women I had so admired when I lived among them. Not once did they spare themselves, or complain, or evince weakness, or give way to despair,” but instead donated “remarkably unselfish service and devotion, gentle ministration, encouragement,” and hospitality.21

Emma Bryan, who lived at the corner of 10th and Clay Streets in Richmond and frequently rented out rooms to Varina’s friends upon request, greatly admired the First Lady for her humility, kindness, and devotion to the more “humble” Confederates. In her Reminiscences she wrote, “Mrs. Davis was a…handsome…woman…is now always plainly but well dressed. She was frequently seen driving to the hospitals to cheer the sick or wounded soldiers with a share of her dainties carried in a large basket.”22 Mary Chesnut affirmed Varina’s presence in Richmond’s hospital work, writing that all the women soon “began nursing, performing the Florence Nightengale role after battle…everybody went—Mrs. Davis setting the example.”23 Clearly Varina was expected to set the precedent for peers in terms of finding and filling an elite woman’s niche in the war effort, and she did so.

Emma Bryan also praised Varina for carrying out with much grace what she considered to be one of her most vital roles as First Lady of the Confederacy---the

23 Chesnut, p. 85.
gracious hostess. Greatly aware of the social and political significance of the Presidential dinner parties hosted at the Executive Mansion and of the necessity for such occasions to help maintain a unified spirit within the Confederacy and more clearly delineate the evolving social roles of the Confederate elite, Emma Bryan commented that Varina’s brilliant receptions at the Presidential Mansion were “attended by the elite of the city and many of the bright repartees of the belles and their make shifts for new dresses were commented upon by the whole city.” After overcoming her initial jealousy of Varina Davis, Mary Chesnut praised her profusely for her innate talents and invaluable services as the “Confederacy’s hostess.” Following a June, 1861, reception at the Spotswood Hotel, in Richmond, at which several prominent Confederate politicians and military men were promoted to general in the Confederate Army by Jefferson Davis, Mary Chesnut wrote that “Mrs. Davis was kind as ever. Met us in one of the corridors, accidentally. She asked us to join her party and to take our meals at her table….Mrs. McLean is here. Mrs. Davis always has clever women around her. They gravitate to her.” Clearly, Mary valued Varina as a “kingpin” around which the most intelligent and sophisticated women of elite southern society should rightly gather. Sallie Putnam likewise commented upon the elegance of the Davis’s luxurious Richmond mansion and the “elegant hospitalities for which they were ever distinguished.” Putnam even went on to praise Varina’s physical appearance and poise as highly appropriate and necessary for her new role as wife of the Confederate President:

Mrs. Davis is a tall, commanding figure, with dark hair, eyes and complexion, and strongly marked expression, which lies chiefly in the mouth. With firmly set yet flexible lips, there is indicated much energy of purpose and will, but beautifully softened by the usually sad

---

25 Chesnut, p. 82.
26 Putnam, p. 38.
expression of her dark, earnest eyes. She may justly be considered a handsome woman, of noble mien and bearing but by no means coming under the description of the feminine adjective “pretty.” Her manners are kind, graceful, easy and affable, and her receptions are characterized by the dignity and suavity which should very properly distinguish the drawing-room entertainments of the Chief Magistrate of a republic.  

In this role as “national hostess,” Varina was more than successful, and helped to transform some of the most important political and military ceremonies into opportunities for essential social and cultural development for both the men and women of the Confederacy.

Another of Varina’s most important jobs during the war was the preservation of family and holiday traditions among Richmonders. In her journal, Judith McGuire wrote of Varina’s dedication to maintaining social sophistication and elegance during the bloody, crude years of civil war. She cited numerous instances where Varina personally assisted in procuring food, dresses, and flowers for the many war-time weddings of Richmond’s belles. She specifically praised Varina for her generous and humble loan of the Presidential carriage to Hetty Cary for her wedding to General John Pegram, in January of 1865, at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, in Richmond. One of Varina’s most acclaimed social services to the people of Richmond was her “Last Christmas in the Confederate White House,” held in December of 1864, in which she recruited friends from the upper ranks of Richmond society to gather at the Executive Mansion on Christmas Eve and help organize a Christmas celebration for the orphans of Richmond at nearby St. Paul’s Church. Varina used the rice, molasses, flour, and pieces of meat that had been sent to her by various idolizing southerners to create a Christmas dinner for the orphans of the city. She also encouraged her guests to bring any candies, fruits or

---

27 Putnam, p. 38.
28 McGuire, p. 329.
“specialty foods” that they could spare for the orphans’ dinner. Employing the usual creative methods of the day, such as substitution and experimentation with different foods and household materials, Varina and her guests hand-made popcorn and apple decorations for a small Christmas tree, constructed small wooden toys and paper dolls for the children, and made small cornucopias filled with candy and fruits that they presented to the orphans on Christmas Day. While Varina’s guests labored over the orphans’ Christmas preparations, they enjoyed ginger snaps and eggnog provided personally by the First Lady.29 In order to facilitate such an elaborate celebration for the children, Varina and her friends sacrificed their own elaborate Christmas Day celebration for a “Starvation Party,” in which no food was served, and only water was consumed. Amateur musical performances provided by the guests themselves served as the entertainment of the evening.30

Not only did Varina’s “Christmas at the White House” help make the holiday season more cheerful for the city’s orphans, but it also united members of the upper ranks of Richmond society in a common effort for the benefit of their community. Varina served as a role model of the self-sacrificing and industrious elite Confederate, and buoyed the morale of the Confederacy’s ruling class in perhaps one of the most trying times of the war. Varina later produced an article for the New York Sunday World about the event and stated that “the expectant faces of our little children were a constant reminder that self-sacrifice must be the personal offering of each mother of the family.” She went on to praise the character of her friends and the integrity that they instilled in

elite southern society, stating that “these young people are gray-haired now, but the
lessons of self-denial, industry, and frugality in which they became past mistresses then,
have made of them the most dignified, self-reliant and tender women I have ever
known—all honor to them.” 31

At other, less acclaimed occasions, Varina was expected to act less as a
matriarchal figure and more as a social “queen.” Mary Chesnut recalled in her diary
numerous feasts and entertainments hosted by the First Lady throughout the war. She
wrote that Mrs. Davis quite frequently would give “matinee musicales” to visitors, in
which her guests (always men of the elite military, political and social spheres, and their
wives) would engage in singing, acting, and charades. Some of the “regulars” at these
get-togethers included some of the Davises’ old friends from Washington, such as Mrs.
Semmes, Mrs. Richard Anderson, Judah Benjamin, Virginia and Clement Clay, Mrs.
Stephen Mallory, Constance Cary and Benjamin Harrison, Custis Lee, and numerous
other members of the President’s staff and their wives. 32 In her journal, which was
published after the war’s end, Virginia Clay-Clopton recalled that the active “social life
of Washington was transplanted largely to Richmond,” and that “I almost imagined
myself in Washington!” 33 Virginia Clay-Clopton took great relief in these entertainments,
writing that they “lifted the spirits of war and the horrors of hospital work.” Certainly
such get-togethers were necessary to maintain the morale and spirit of the leaders of the
Confederacy! Constance Cary Harrison, the wife of Jefferson Davis’s private secretary,

31 “Christmas in the Confederate White House,” Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the
Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
32 Chesnut, pp. 433-434.
33 Virginia Clay-Clopton, A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, Covering Social and
Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-1866, put into narrative form by Ada Sterling, (New
also participated in Varina’s famous parties, and whole-heartedly praised Varina for her hostess skills. “Everyone knew the traditions of Mrs. Jefferson Davis, as handed down from her career as a senator’s wife in Washington, in the administrations of Pierce and Buchanan,” she wrote in her journal, which was then published after the war as *Recollections*. “Mrs. Davis is...a woman of warm heart and impetuous tongue, witty and caustic, with a sensitive nature underlying all; a devoted wife and mother, and most gracious mistress of a salon.” Constance Cary admired Varina’s personal participation in these charades, citing her acting skills and dedication to “historical authenticity” in performance as superbly impressive. These theatrical presentations always would conclude with an elaborate dinner prepared by Varina’s chef—a “genuine old-time banquet.”

Constance Cary viewed Varina’s drawing rooms as the necessary center of the social life and cultural development for “all the high world of government” during the war, and thought Varina the ideal “kingpin” of such cosmopolitan living. “No Wittier talk was ever bandied over the teacups in any land than passed daily between the several bright spirits thus assembled at the President’s table,” she remarked fondly in her wartime journal, (later published as *Recollections*). Nineteenth-century social commentator T.C. DeLeon wrote, in 1907, that the First Lady’s receptions were crucial in bringing together members of Richmond’s different social spheres, and that they often served as the breeding ground for new political ideology. Varina’s entertainments became such a staple of elite social life in Richmond that, occasionally, when her husband was ill or too

---

weary to host guests at night, Varina would be criticized by her peers for interrupting the familiar flow of social interchange upon which her friends had grown to rely during the war-torn years of the 1860’s. Also scorned by her peers for neglecting her notoriously wild and precocious children and yet simultaneously criticized for occasionally refusing social calls and dinner invitations so that she might look after the needs of her children, Varina’s desire to provide a home atmosphere that was conducive to her family’s health and happiness while still managing to placate the desires and social needs of the Confederacy’s political and social elite often tormented her with questions of familial versus national responsibility that were expressed in her Memoirs and letters to friends.37

The gaps which occasionally occurred between entertainments, due to family illness or to the President’s emotional weariness, even bred antagonism toward the First Lady for ostensibly not fulfilling her social and political responsibilities as the President’s wife.38

However, instead of critiquing Varina for these gaps in Richmond’s “social schedule,” LaSalle Corbell, the wife of the colorful General George Pickett, praised the First Lady in her post-war publications, for the many receptions which she did manage to host.

Believing that the benefits of the much more frequent, lavish receptions held at the Executive Mansion far outweighed the detriments of the rare gaps between receptions, LaSalle wrote that Varina’s light-heartedness and pleasant nature at the socials that did occur was invaluable in helping to divert the “weary President” from his daily toils, and helped to make him a more successful social presence, when he could muster the physical strength to attend the receptions, among his peers in Richmond. “[The President] owed

37 Cashin, p. 116.
his life to her devotion,” LaSalle wrote in her autobiography. Mary Chesnut bestowed prolific praise upon Varina for her geniality. Seemingly transfixed by the First Lady’s social skills, Chesnut wrote,

> Once for all, let me say—Mrs. Davis has been so kind to me—I can never be grateful enough... She is so clever, so brilliant indeed, so warmhearted, and considerate toward all who are around her. After becoming accustomed to the spice and spirit of her conversation, away from her things seem flat and tame for awhile.

However, not everyone seemed to have been so won over by the First Lady’s personal character and methods of entertainment. Varina was repeatedly criticized for her crass language and crude sense of humor. During the summer of 1861, even Mary Chesnut commented that “Mrs. Davis and Jeff Davis proved themselves anything but well-bred by their talk…I continue to dine at Mr. Davis’s table, but it is not pleasant.” She wrote that although many of the men found Varina a charming and intelligent conversationalist, there were many who “call Mrs. Davis the Empress…and do not like her. The notorious A.D. Banks abuses her worst of all—says she is so killingly patronizing.” On another occasion, Chesnut wrote that a male diner at the Presidential table confided to her that he knew of several men who despised the First Lady, who “only talk of her flirtations and keep out of her way because she is quarrelsome.” One woman at an elite Richmond party made a similar comment about Varina’s overly-flirtatious nature, but hinted rather that her appeal among so many of the well-educated men instilled within the unmarried belles of Richmond society bitterness and great envy of both her and the beautiful Virginia Clay: “Heavens! If we had ships of war whose aim

---

40 Chesnut, p. 429.
was as sure and as deadly as those pointing to Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Clay,” she remarked dryly.\footnote{Chesnut, pp. 85, 325, 559.}

After a particularly sarcastic remark made by Varina to a group of German guests who, while dining with other members of government at the President’s breakfast table, rudely demanded that Varina give them a “show of her talents,” Mary Chesnut sharply warned Varina, “Have mercy dear, never say that again. They will believe you. You do not know this Richmond. They swallow scandal with such wide open mouths, and their easy credulity is such—next winter they will have the exact length of our petticoats, and describe the kind of spangles we were sprinkled with.”\footnote{Ibid, pp. 433-434.} Varina herself admitted that, as a non-native to Virginia society, the elite women of Richmond seemed particularly difficult to please. Of their provinciality she wrote, “I was impressed by a certain offishness in their manner toward strangers; they seemed to feel that an inundation of people perhaps of different standards and at best of different methods, had poured over the city, and they reserved their judgment and confidence.”\footnote{Rowland, p. 205.} Mary Chesnut referred to numerous incidents in which Mrs. Davis received scathing comments, either directly or in private, about her “unladylike” and “unrefined” behavior or unbecoming appearance at the Executive parties, to which she responded, “Abuse Mr. and Mrs. Davis! What horrors did they devise and lay at the door of Marie Antoinette! In revolution men seem to go mad.” In 1861, Chesnut wrote that women continuously slandered Mrs. Davis’s “republican court” of ladies, “of which we are honorable members, by saying they, well, were not young, that they wore gaudy colors and dressed badly.” Chesnut wrote that many elite women thought Varina to be actually quite fat and spread rumors that she
wore a red wig and “mock jewels” to perpetuate her image as “Queen of the Confederacy.” In fact, Mary noted that, by 1864, “it was the regular thing at the Spotswood to tell people that Mr. and Mrs. Davis said dreadful things of them when Mr. and Mrs. Davis hardly knew of the persons so abused at all.”

Although a dear friend of Varina, Constance Cary Harrison admitted, in her *Recollections*, that Varina was “not always sparing of witty sarcasms upon those who had affronted her,” which occasionally earned her the reputation of being “too well-educated” and “too blunt.” Although she knew that “flouting society’s codes meant social death,” Varina’s unwaveringly unique sense of humor and impersonations of others were looked down upon by her peers, and several Richmond “ladies” thought it quite distasteful that the “unfitness of things” could provoke her to extreme and raucous laughter. Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory called Varina’s “sense of the ridiculous perfectly riotous,” and other elite women remarked that Varina’s overall character appeared crude because of her “lack of self control.” Although she was considered by many to be “brilliant,” she was sometimes scorned for being unrefined, and it was thought that she gave the “Cotton people in Richmond a shock.”

Despite her inability to conform in all respects to the ladylike expectations of her peers, Varina did her best to employ the social methodology adopted by her enemy, Lydia Johnston, that “a wise woman uses her foes as well as her friends for her own purposes.” To that end, Varina remained outwardly pleasant, cordial, and dedicated to

---

44 Chesnut, pp. 747, 95, 609.
45 Harrison, p. 127.
46 Cashin, p. 114.
48 Cashin, p. 113.
49 Chesnut, p. 729.
her southern peers, writing to a friend after the war that “though they slay” her, yet she “trusted in them” still. As mentioned earlier, women such as Emma Bryan and Mary Chesnut praised Varina Davis for her dedication to nursing work at the local Richmond hospitals. However, despite Varina’s generous donations of food and bandages to the local hospitals (for which she wished to remain anonymous and did so publicly until 1865), women such as Phoebe Yates Pember, the aristocrat-turned-hospital matron at Richmond’s Chimborazo Hospital, subtly scoffed at the contrast between Varina’s luxurious living conditions and the horrors and deprivations that she encountered in the hospitals. Pember bitterly remarked in her journal that, while she was bearing the emotional, social and physical burdens of hospital work as the only female matron at an otherwise male-dominated hospital, the First Lady was “growing very fine,” and sending out advertisements for a new housekeeper at the Executive Mansion. She also indirectly criticized the lavish lifestyle of Davis and her peers in February of 1864, subtly implying that it would be the fault of the Confederacy’s “high rollers” if the South should lose the war. “If Spartan austerity is to win our independence,” she wrote, we are a lost nation. I do not like the signs and fear the writing on the wall might in time come to us.”

Although she did not implicitly state it, Judith McGuire also seemed to have been ashamed of the upper class’s late-war indulgence in gourmet food, wardrobe finery and extravagant parties. She commented that, toward the end of the war, the Confederate

50 Mary Kimbrough to Mrs. N.V. Randolph, April 26, 1915, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
51 Cashin, p. 134.
army’s situation was so desperate that “country people were sending in [to the Richmond hospitals] all things, which they cannot spare, but do so anyway.”

The southern newspapers also continually criticized the “high-minded” Varina for not doing enough publicly to help out the sick and wounded “commoner” soldiers in the Confederate hospitals. Convinced that Varina was purposely avoiding the unpleasantness of hospital work (when in fact she had tried her hand at it, but was forced to resign as a result of personal illness and her husband’s refusal to let her “degrade” herself by working in such an environment), the papers accused Varina of evading her feminine duty and using her position as First Lady to justify doing so. Once again, the expectations of Varina’s peers contradicted necessity, and seemed (in the case of mere acquaintances) incapable of bending to acknowledge other efforts on the First Lady’s behalf, as well as society’s expectations that she conform to her husband’s wishes.

Another part of Varina’s role as social guardian, southern enthusiast, and intermediary between the political world of men and the social world of women also dictated her presence and accessibility after some of the major battles of the war to transmit news of the battle and of the fate of women’s loved ones to the public. After the battle of First Manassas, in July of 1861, Mary Chesnut wrote that “Mrs. Davis’s drawing room last night was brilliant, and she was in great force.” Mrs. Davis, Mrs. Chesnut, Mrs. Johnston and others already had gathered in Mrs. Davis’s room in the Spotswood Hotel to watch the troops parade by earlier that week. Shortly after the battle on July 22, Mrs. Davis received news of the fighting at First Manassas and took it upon herself to inform her peers about all that she had learned. Waking Mary Chesnut up in her adjacent

53 McGuire, p. 118.
54 Cashin, p. 134.
hotel room in the middle of the night, Varina told her, “a great battle has been fought—
Jefferson Davis led the center, Joseph Johnston, the right wing, Beauregard, the left wing of
the army. Your husband is all right. Wade Hampton is wounded. Colonel Johnson of
the Legion killed—so are Colonel Bee and Colonel Bartow. Kirby Smith is wounded or
killed.” After gathering several of the other wives of the Confederate generals and
politicians who were staying at the Spotswood that night, it was decided that Varina
should be the one to inform Mrs. Bartow of her husband’s death, which she did
graciously.  

Varina’s rallying of the women after First Manassas and similar actions on her
part during successive military and political crises transformed her into the central female
agent for political and social communication and action within the Executive sphere.
Judith McGuire recorded an incident in the Executive Mansion in which Varina was
engaged in some needlework in the Mansion’s drawing room when her husband received
a visit from the uncle of a Confederate officer who recently had been captured in battle.
The man begged the President to arrange a prisoner exchange for his nephew, who had
performed admirably thus far in the war. Halfway through the conversation, the
President was called away from the drawing room on emergency business, leaving Mrs.
Davis alone with the desperate uncle. Mrs. Davis comforted the man, stating that the
President, as a father, would feel “deep sympathy” for this man, “but if in the pressure of
public business he forgot,” she would remind him. She then invited the man to take tea
with her in her parlor. This incident was communicated to Varina’s peers shortly
thereafter and helped to create for them a very “favorable impression” of her “by ease of
manner, agreeable conversation and kindness of heart.” Varina, Mrs. McGuire stated,

55 Chesnut, p. 105.
perfectly embodied Virginian elegance and charm in her “political leadership” as First Lady.\textsuperscript{56}

Varina would be called on again and again throughout the war, and immediately following the surrender, for favors on behalf of her countrymen and women. Mary Chesnut noted an incident, in December of 1863, when Varina asked Mary to accompany her on a visit to the family of a deceased soldier whose pocket watch she had promised to send home to the man’s parents upon his death. On their way out to visit the family, Varina misplaced the watch and grew terribly upset at the thought of having lost such a sacred item. Luckily she was able to recover it, and the keepsake was returned with much sympathy to the family of the deceased soldier.\textsuperscript{57} Here, Varina both enjoyed and felt socially obligated to fulfill her duties as literally the “mother of the Confederacy.”

Chesnut noted yet another incidence of Varina acting in a “nationally maternal” role in May of 1864, when a woman arrived at the Executive Mansion to seek Mrs. Davis’s help in securing a pardon from the President for her husband, who had been fighting with the Confederate army. The woman was shabbily dressed and pale, but tried to dress up for her visit by adorning her outfit with a few ribbons, artificial flowers, and “mushed feathers.” The pathetic-looking woman explained to Varina that her children were terribly sick, and some of them were even on the verge of death, and that all of her slaves had run away, leaving her family destitute and without food or sufficient supplies to survive. Her husband had tried to return home to take care of his family but had been arrested in the process. Varina smiled sympathetically at the woman and returned within a few minutes with a pardon from the President. In another incident, Chesnut praised

\textsuperscript{56} Chesnut, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, p. 504.
Varina for rescuing a slave boy on the streets who was being publicly whipped and verbally abused by his master. Appalled at this behavior, Varina snuck the boy away from his master in the Executive carriage, dressed him in the clothes of her son, Joseph, and let him live at the Executive Mansion throughout the rest of the war.58

Although Varina won much praise and respect from her peers for these honorable deeds, she was also greatly criticized for her confidence and public aggressiveness in her role as First Lady. A great fear persisted among Richmond citizens that Varina excessively influenced Confederate politics and the affairs of the war due to her intimate knowledge of battle news and her easy access to the latest reports in the local newspapers.59 Varina herself confided the strength and rather unorthodox nature of her political opinions in the spring of 1865 to her good friend, General Preston. She wrote,

> You know I am a revolutionary and, therefore, will excuse the expression of a habitue of free thought to me so dear and intimate. Our Constitution is framed for peace and nothing but a pure intelligence could be governed in times when the selfishness of man is so severely tested….a strict construction of our Constitution is incompatible with the successful prosecution of a war… I am disheartened with popular sovereignty, still more with state sovereignty… however, if we have erred in Judgment we had a right to indulge our own theories of government and I do not regret it.60

Varina repeatedly fielded both requests from visitors and letters from acquaintances to assist friends in acquiring appointments in the military and bureaucracy, and she was accused of persuading her husband to grant various commissions, pardons, and appointments according to her personal interests. Due to her fortitude of will and strength of opinion, as well as her relative physical strength in comparison to her husband’s physical frailty and continuous maladies, the public became convinced that

58 Chesnut, pp. 610-611, 568.
59 Cashin, p. 140.
60 Wiley, p. 120.
Varina was “stronger than Jefferson Davis,” and that, in the words of Catherine Devereux Edmondston, she “indoctrinated her husband and rewarded those who came to her.” She was even criticized by males and females alike for forbidding, upon occasion, the entrance to the Executive Mansion of certain politicians and other visitors whom Varina feared might upset the frequently ailing President or her small children.

Varina’s critics viewed these actions as “proof” of the First Lady’s attempts to “control” the proceedings of the Executive branch to benefit her personal interests. However, even the critical Edmondston admitted, in her diary, that the Jefferson Davis actually kept his wife remarkably “in the dark” and segregated from important political proceedings, and that “she knew it.” Clearly, although Varina was expected to serve as the liaison between the elite political sphere and the public, she was not socially “permitted” to overstep the bounds of traditional southern womanhood and let her own personal thoughts and emotions influence those of the more masculine and professional world.

Perhaps the most dramatic “political” confrontation with her peers occurred in late 1863 between the First Lady and Lydia Johnston. Although the dispute between the two women ultimately was labeled by Lydia as political in nature, in actuality, its roots can be traced back to the conflicting personal social interests and divergent expectations that prominent Confederate women held both for themselves and for their peers. Thus, the quarrel further reflects the inconsistent and incompatible roles that Varina and her socially equivalent peers were expected to fill.

61 Cashin, p. 142
64 Edmondston, p. 256.
Having enjoyed an intimate friendship with Lydia in Washington, D.C. during the
decade prior to the Civil War, Varina had regarded her as one of her closest confidantes.
However, as the war progressed and it became clear that Lydia’s husband, General
Joseph Johnston, was under the strict control of Jefferson Davis, tensions between the
two Confederate leaders’ wives grew immensely over the status and influence of their
husbands within the Confederacy. This tension began in August of 1861, when the
President promoted Joe Johnston to full general in charge of the entire Army of Northern
Virginia. It bothered Johnston immensely that, despite his nominal control, Generals
Robert E. Lee, Albert Sidney Johnston, and Samuel Cooper still outranked him.65
Following General Johnston’s wounding at Seven Pines during the Peninsula Campaign
of 1862, Davis removed him from power and gave control of the Army of Northern
Virginia to General Robert E. Lee. It was Davis’s refusal to return this power to Johnston
upon his recovery, coupled with Davis’s insistence that General John Pemberton not
withdraw from the besieged and doomed Vicksburg (upon Johnston’s request) in July of
1863, and Davis’s November, 1863 promotion of Braxton Bragg over General Johnston
to control of the Army of Tennessee prior to the Confederacy’s disastrous loss at
Chattanooga, which ultimately destroyed the friendships between of the Davises and the
Johnstons. Solidifying the breach between the Johnstons and the Davises was the
President’s unexpected removal of Johnston from the head of the Army of Tennessee, in
July of 1864, and his replacement with the newly promoted Lieutenant General John Bell
Hood.

Living in an era in which women’s social roles largely were defined by the men
whom they married and whom they were expected to support in all aspects of life, Lydia

65 Wiley, p. 100.
and Varina naturally were both highly protective and defensive of their husbands. Throughout the war, Varina was plagued by worry and heartsickness for her husband’s physical well-being and public reputation. As early as August of 1861, Mary Chesnut noted, “Mrs. Davis is being utterly upset. She is beginning to hear the carping and faultfinding to which the president is subjected.” Varina’s obsession with her husband’s physical and emotional well-being would continue throughout the war and well into the turmoil of reconstruction. Naturally, Lydia Johnston possessed a similar obsession with her husband’s success. Lydia’s correspondence with her good friend, Charlotte Wigfall, reflected a constant anxiety for the General’s physical safety and rise in military rank. In March of 1863, Lydia wrote from Jackson, Mississippi that she was in a “most uncomfortable frame of mind” not knowing whether her husband had been assigned new headquarters or if he was coming to Montgomery. She also wrote of the disgust she felt at the Confederate government for favoring Braxton Bragg as the new General of the Army of Tennessee over her John Pemberton, and good friend of the Johnstons. She even asked Charlotte Wigfall to try to convince her husband, the influential Confederate senator Louis Wigfall, to secure from Jefferson Davis the desired position for Pemberton by sweetly stating, “I have great faith in your husband’s advice ….and influence over him [Davis]….there are few so loved as you by your friend [Lydia].” She also continuously expressed her desires for her own husband’s personal and deserved happiness, writing that, “I wish I could see him gratified, I tell him to be…with high hope.” Clearly Lydia viewed it as her responsibility, and the job of her female peers, to network among the wives and husbands of the politically prominent

66 Chesnut, p. 141.
68 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, January 19, 1863, Library of Congress.
Confederates to secure personal benefits and comforts for their husbands and friends. But what would happen when the conflicting interests of prominent women, such as Lydia Johnston and Varina Davis, collided?

In April of 1863, Lydia again expressed anxiety at not being apprised of the Confederate government’s plans for her husband’s future movements. A month later, she wrote of her physical illness due to worry for the General and his part in the siege of Vicksburg. Tortured by the knowledge that her husband had passed through Montgomery just two days after she herself had left, Lydia wrote to Charlotte, desperately seeking her guidance as to whether she should remain in Alabama and try to find her husband, or whether she should live the “shameful life” of a refugee in Georgia. Lydia’s anxiety for her husband, anger over his “poor treatment,” and dissatisfaction with her own unstable lifestyle resulted in harsh personal attacks on “Queen Varina” Davis and her “lavish and luxurious” lifestyle in Richmond. In May, Lydia bitterly reported to Charlotte that her friend General Preston spoke “in glowing terms of the Lady Queen...have you heard of any of the executive finery *being sported*?” In August of that year, Lydia’s resentment at the Johnston’s perceived mistreatment by the President reached a new level. She reported to Charlotte that her husband had received a letter from the President, “15 pages long, of such insult as only a coward…could wish…it is not possible for [Johnston] to aid the course when Mr. Davis….writes 15 pages of rebuke of an officer commanding an army under such circumstances!” Turning her disgust for the President toward his wife, Lydia proceeded to write with revulsion that “people here who despise Mrs. D. speak of the lady’s

---

69 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, April 19, 1863, Library of Congress.
70 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, May 17, 1863, Library of Congress.
c cultivation and graciousness; Mrs. D. speaks scarcely of friends to the influence of you and me...”

Lydia reaffirmed her resentment of both of the Davises with a caustic last few lines about the “Royal Family:” “I am disgusted that I ever cared for him [Jefferson Davis], though I never really did; nothing will cause me to forgive either of them whom I blame for my husband’s grey head and care worn face; I could almost have asked God to punish them!... War is a burden on my home and heart... all due to one wicked man.”

In December of 1863, when her husband finally was ordered by President Davis to replace General Bragg as commander of the Army of Tennessee, Lydia wrote bitingly to Charlotte about the long-delayed appointment, stating that she had received a telegraph from the General about a “change of headquarters [which] leads me to think some change has been made in the general’s command by the ‘great commander-in-chief.’” Lydia went on to express her disgust with the President’s treatment of her husband, stating “if it could be possible [to find] any way of mortifying him it would be done...he has been thoroughly used here, but I am sure it will come out right yet.”

Lydia later accused Varina Davis of attempting to ally the people of the South against her, in the same way that the President had supposedly acted with regards to her husband, in an effort to bring down the Johnston family as a whole. She wrote,

I have made some good friends, in spite of my pusiped [sic] friend, Mrs. D... a lady told me she had... addressed her and to trouble herself to describe me, I was ‘worldly and insincere.’ I think it was going out of her way to try and prejudice the people of a place where her husband’s injustice to mine compelled me to live, a stranger too, to everyone, as I was, but I think it gained friends for me, certainly she has left few here. I’m told they are making great efforts to have a pleasant home in Richmond.

72 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, August 2, 1863, Library of Congress.
73 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, August 2, 1863, Library of Congress.
74 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, December 25, 1863, Library of Congress.
75 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, July 5, 1864, Library of Congress.
Lydia even had convinced herself at one point during the war that Varina had sent her “northern” friend, Mrs. McLean (the daughter of Union General Edwin V. Sumner), south to Chattanooga to “spy” on Lydia and her friends for Varina.  

(This sentiment also sprang from Lydia’s suspicions of Varina’s Unionist sentiments, which will be addressed later in this paper).

Lydia Johnston obviously viewed Varina as inextricably tied to her husband and his “wickedness,” and thus deserving of such hateful sentiments. Even the aristocratic South Carolinian Catherine Devereux Edmondston accused Varina of having influenced her husband’s decisions regarding General Johnston, especially pertaining to his replacement by General Hood. Edmondston wrote in September of 1864,

> The army is in fine spirits, well disciplined and defiant, but long for Johnston to be again at their head. They do not understand Hood and he possesses their confidence and affection but in a less degree than Joe Johnston whom they all look upon not only as unequaled in strategy but as martyr to personal ill will, either of the President or some one high in his influence. Rumor whispers that Mrs. Davis has much to do with it.

However, despite the obvious fact that Varina was well aware of Lydia’s resentment toward her, there is no evidence that Varina ever truly played an active part in the “poor treatment” of General Johnston, his wife and friends. The definitive breach in friendship between the General and the President that occurred shortly after the rift occurred between Lydia and Varina undoubtedly was partially influenced by their wives’ estrangement; however, there is no evidence that Varina specifically tried to influence her husband’s treatment of the General in light of her deteriorating relations with the General’s wife. Even if there were evidence of such influence, was Lydia Johnston not

---

76 Lydia Johnston to Charlotte Wigfall, January 19, 1863, Library of Congress.
77 Cashin, p. 139.
78 Edmondston, p. 617.
79 Cashin, p. 139.
trying to do precisely the same thing with her husband through the manipulation of the
Wigfalls? Was Lydia more upset at Varina’s perceived “overstepping” of her social and
political bounds in “siding” definitively with her husband against the General, or was she
merely perturbed that Varina had not tried to use her influence over her husband to help
out a former friend’s military career? If Lydia Johnston expected women of her social
and political sphere to support and guide their husbands in making decisions, how could
she rebuke Varina for not challenging her husband’s decisions? And if Lydia expected a
woman of Varina’s influence to remain segregated from the “masculine world” of politics
and military affairs, how could she herself have explained her own influence in trying to
attain military benefits for her husband and friends? Would not Varina’s acceptance of
her husband’s decisions have complied exactly with such a notion of “feminine
passivity?”

Lydia Johnston’s opinions of Varina certainly influenced her close friend’s
opinion of Varina and altered Charlotte’s own expectations of the First Lady’s behavior.
As early as June of 1861 (when Lydia and Varina began their quarrel) Charlotte wrote to
her son, Halsey, that “I don’t think Mrs. Davis improves much our acquaintance; she has
some good qualities, but many very objectionable ones.”\(^{80}\) Lydia and Charlotte’s
“obsession” with criticizing Varina soon began to take on more than just a political and
social nature. Lydia and Charlotte even began referring to Varina as a crude and “coarse
Western belle,”\(^{81}\) and other “ladies” of their sphere began to criticize Varina for her olive,
“nearly-mulatto skin,” unusual height, “overly-commanding” and almost “masculine”

\(^{80}\) Charlotte Wigfall to Halsey Wigfall, June 11, 1861, Library of Congress.
\(^{81}\) Chesnut, p. 139.
appearance as compared to the pale, frail classically beautiful belles of Richmond.\textsuperscript{82} Marion Myers, the wife of the Confederate Quartermaster General, even went so far as to call Varina a “squaw” for her dark appearance and “wild” personality.\textsuperscript{83} Clearly, as the war dragged on, there was for many elite southern women an increasing influence of political and social discontent upon personal opinion, and vice versa.

Yet another somewhat personal and social-turned-political issue over which the expectations of Varina’s peers clashed with her own perceptions of her role as First Lady was that involving Varina’s relative open-mindedness regarding regionalism. As the granddaughter of a Revolutionary War hero-turned-governor of New Jersey, as well as a Philadelphia-educated woman, Varina Davis took great pride in her family’s heritage. Unlike other “fire-eating” secessionists of her time, Varina did not immediately sever all personal ties to the North or repudiate any sympathy Unionist ideology following the firing on Fort Sumter. Even in Washington in 1860, when regional tensions began to divide the close-knit social circles of the influential politicians’ wives, Varina refused to let such frivolity destroy her friendships, and she was noted for remaining “cordial to all visitors” throughout the final days of union in the national capital.\textsuperscript{84}

However, as Virginia Clay-Clopton astutely noted in her journal, nineteenth-century Richmond was a place of “blood ties, not education,”\textsuperscript{85} and many of Varina’s southern peers were shocked by the Confederate First Lady’s pride in her “Yankee background” and by her dedication to preserving friendships with staunch northerners during the war itself. Mary Chesnut recalled Varina’s visible sadness at leaving her

\textsuperscript{82} Cashin, p. 112.  
\textsuperscript{83} Wiley, p. 100.  
\textsuperscript{84} Cashin, p. 88.  
\textsuperscript{85} Clay-Clopton, pp. 74-75.
friends and the social scene in Washington when she moved to Alabama in 1861: “I
drove out with Mrs. Davis. She finds playing Mrs. President of this small Confederacy
slow work after leaving friends such as...in Washington. I do not blame her. The wrench
has been awful with us all. But we don’t mean to be turned into pillars of salt.” In June
of 1861, Chesnut reported an incident in which a Richmond lady had approached her
nervously and “told me under her breath that Mrs. Davis had sent a baby’s dress to her
friend Mrs. Montgomery Blair. And Mrs Blair had responded, ‘Even if the men kill one
another, they (Mrs. D and Mrs. B.) would still abide friends to the bitter end—the
grave—etc!’ Clearly this woman was shocked—insulted, even—at Varina’s “traitorous”
friendship with the Union Postmaster General’s wife. Although many southern women
would have found such news to be equally scandalous, Varina’s close friend and more
cosmopolitan acquaintance coolly replied, “Why not? I said nothing because I will be
taken aside and told by somebody else, ‘that Blair story is all false, made up by these
malicious, gossipy women etc.’ In this wild confusion everything likely and unlikely is
told you—and then everything is as flatly contradicted.” Chesnut aptly stated, “In this
death and destruction the women are the same—chatter, patter, clatter... full of airs.”
Clearly, the social world into which Varina had entered as First Lady of the Confederacy
was one of chaos, suspicion and ruthless gossip. Her peers expected her to love the South
in the way that they believed that all wives of the Confederacy’s most powerful leaders
should love it. There was no room for error on Varina’s part, as there were some things
that unquestionably accompanied her responsibilities as the President’s wife. And so it
was that Varina confided to her mother at the beginning of the war, in 1861, that,

86 Chesnut, p. 60.
87 Ibid, p. 82.
although she doubted that the Confederacy would win, she was “resigned to come here and be happy no matter what danger there was and to run with the rest if needs be.”

An important component of elite southern females’ criticisms of Varina’s relative non-conformity to southern regionalism was the fear that her ancestral provenance and open-mindedness implied a lack of dedication to and faith in the southern cause. As stated earlier, Varina was apprehensive about southern secession from the beginning of the conflict. Terribly worried that the war and executive responsibilities would destroy her frail husband and her family, Varina grew extremely depressed upon her husband’s appointment as President of the Confederacy. Mary Chesnut noted in her diary shortly after the war that, “At West Point the year before the war began, Mrs. Davis said to Mrs. Huger sadly, ‘The South will secede if Lincoln is made president. They will make Mr. Davis president of the southern side. And the whole thing is bound to be a failure.’ So her worst enemies must allow her the gift of prophecy.” Naturally, expression of such sentiments easily could be perceived by Varina’s enemies as proof of her lack of faith in the Confederacy, and they were. After Jefferson Davis ordered his wife to evacuate the Confederate capital, in May of 1862, as a result of the nearby battles of the Seven Days Campaign, Varina’s critics, such as Catherine Devereux Edmondston, wrote bitterly of Varina’s “cowardly flight” from the capital. “Another blunder is that Mrs. Davis has left Richmond and gone to Raleigh,” she wrote. She has “fairly deserted her colours! I fear me she is not a woman of the true stamp. I fear she does not strengthen her husband, or she would never have abandoned her post and set such an example to the rest of the

---

88 Cashin, pp. 394, 182.
89 Ibid, p. 90.
90 Chesnut, p. 800.
women of the Confederacy.” She furthered her attack on Varina just days later in another journal entry, writing,

Mrs. Davis is, I hear, a Philadelphia woman! That accounts for her white nurse and her flight from Richmond. I fear she is not worthy of her husband, for I learned that she is neither neat or ladylike in her dress, travels in old finery with bare arms covered with bracelets. Would that our President, God bless him, had a truehearted Southern woman for a wife. She would never have deserted him!

Almost three years later, after hearing of General Lee’s evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond, Edmondston attempted to analyze the state of the Confederacy based upon Varina’s reactions to the recent events. She acrimoniously wrote, “Mrs. Davis has left Richmond and gone to Charlotte, but she left once before, so it may be again only a cry of “Wolf.” Edmondston criticized Varina’s perceived cowardice further by stating that “the Government may not intend to follow and Richmond may be safe.”

As noted earlier, several of Varina’s peers, including Lydia Johnston, were greatly suspicious of the First Lady’s close friend, Margaret McLean, the daughter of Union General Edwin Sumner. Concerned that Varina was sharing secret government information with her “northern” friend from Maryland, Varina’s critics became even more suspicious of Varina when they discovered, through the government’s standard screening of all southern mail, that Varina was engaging feverishly in correspondence with northern kinfolk and with Mrs. Montgomery Blair. Certainly, they concluded, these could not be the actions of a truly patriotic First Lady and southern devotee!

Compounding the critics’ fears of Varina’s lack of devotion to the Confederacy was the First Lady’s sudden departure from her husband’s swearing-in ceremony, in February of 1862. Constance Cary Harrison, among others, commented on Varina’s strange behavior, but concluded that the First Lady had left the ceremony due to a severe attack

---

91 Edmondston, pp. 176, 180, 688.
of anxiety over the whirlwind chain of recent events. Harrison’s peers were not so forgiving, however, and later used Varina’s flight from her husband’s inauguration as further evidence of her ineptitude and unwillingness to perform the role of First Lady of the Confederacy.92

Varina’s private correspondence with Mary Chesnut and her own husband bespoke her significant doubts about the Confederacy at various times during the war. Doubtless, Varina presented a much cheerier outlook to the public and to the government officials she frequently entertained than she did to most of her intimate female friends. Indeed, Varina tried desperately to conform to her peers’ expectations of her as the “cheerleader” of the Confederate army. She proudly displayed in the Executive Mansion the numerous trinkets and knickknacks sent to her by Confederate soldiers, and repeatedly made visits to the local Confederate camps to cheer up and re-supply the weary troops. However, her own weariness with the war could not have been completely disguised by her efforts, as lassitude ran deep within the soul of the First Lady. In the spring of 1862, after the Davis’s black coachman, William Jackson, escaped to Union lines during the Seven Days battles and was interviewed by the New York Tribune about the Presidential family, Varina received terrible public press regarding her lack of faith in the Confederacy. Jackson claimed that Varina was “a devil” who doubted the Confederacy from the start, “knew” that foreign aid would never come, longed to escape to Europe, and viewed the Confederacy as doomed from its very inception. He also reported that Varina accused Richmonders of being “Unionists,” compared to her friends from the Deep South, but that her sympathies lay with the North and her ancestral heritage anyhow. Although Jackson grossly exaggerated and fabricated a majority of his

92 Cashin, pp. 115, 117.
claims, the wide press he received in the New York papers and journals such as *Harpers Weekly*, as well as in influential southern papers, frightened Varina into being more guarded about her most intimate opinions and emotions.\(^93\)

Nevertheless, as early as July of 1862, Varina confessed in a letter to her husband that she remained “still pessimistic about the South;” she felt intimidated by the North’s greater resources, habits of discipline, and perseverance, and declared that “if the South should fail, it would be God’s decree.”\(^94\) In the late fall of 1864, Varina confided to Mary Chesnut, “I confess I do not snuff success ‘in every passing breeze’ but I am so tired—hoping, fearing, and being disappointed.” She proceeded to stress to her friend her sincere efforts “not to be disconsolate, even though thieves break through and steal.” Nevertheless, she admitted that she had a “blind kind of prognostics of victory for us, but somehow I am not cheered….state rights and consequently state wrongs are rampant.”\(^95\)

In 1865, Varina yet again revealed her pessimism for the South to her friend, “General Preston.” She wrote to the General of how she, like many women of the lower classes who had suffered immensely from the physical and emotional toil of war, now criticized southern men for entering the war. She confessed that she no longer believed in popular sovereignty or states rights, but “only in the guarantee of republican society.” The war had been a mistake, Varina wrote, but a mistake that the South “had to try.”\(^96\)

At the beginning of the war, Margaret McLean wrote of Varina, “She is as full of feelings as of wit, and there are times when both are called into play, though I fear she has too much of the former to make her a happy woman in a revolution where she will

\(^{93}\) Cashin, pp. 119, 126-128.  
\(^{94}\) Ibid, p. 129.  
\(^{95}\) Chesnut, p. 674.  
\(^{96}\) Cashin, p. 156.
play so prominent a part as the wife of the acknowledged Southern leader.”\textsuperscript{97} Ultimately, McLean was correct in her assessment for, although she tried her hardest to conform to her peers’ expectations, Varina never was truly happy nor comfortable in the prestigious role of First Lady of the Confederacy. In November of 1864, Varina lamented to Mary Chesnut of the miserable condition into which Richmond society had fallen, due to the political and social pressures of the war: “Scandal is rife here,” she wrote, “God forbid I should repeat such black reports as I was treated to a few days ago. Girls and women are the victims—and to tell you the truth, I think the most of it is told over campfires by idle men.” Varina viewed herself as a primary victim of the war’s destruction of southern culture. She continued candidly to grieve to Mary that she felt as if her Richmond peers had killed her spirit, and that the only way to proceed was to numb herself to her surroundings and take pleasure in the kindnesses of the very few. Although her people had slain her spirit, she found ways yet to love them, for “the people no longer snub me, as it was only while the Lion was dying that he was kicked—dead he was beneath contempt. Not to say I am worthy to be called a lion—nor are the people here asses. Only I mean that I am so forlorn that they do not tell me how forlorn they think I am but are kind, and some are even affectionate—for which I thank them.”\textsuperscript{98}

\textbf{Section III: “The Years Alone”}

Perhaps one of the most controversial periods of Varina Davis’s life involving her proper role as “First Lady of the Confederacy” and the paradigm for elite southern

\textsuperscript{98} Chesnut, p. 674.
womanhood actually occurred after the war’s end. The importance of this period in assessing Varina Davis and defining her role in history and memory warrants that the final portion of this chapter focus on the post-bellum actions and treatment of Varina by her peers. Her first significant encounter with post-war contention transpired over her perceptions of how properly to memorialize the war while simultaneously to piece together the fragments of her shattered life. After spending the first two years following the war relentlessly lobbying for the release of her husband from imprisonment in the crude casemate at Fortress Monroe, Varina joined the ranks of other elite southern women in seeking a meaning in the four years of war-time suffering which the South had endured. Central to this search for understanding was the assignment of Jefferson Davis to a proper place of honor and symbolic victory within southern history and memory. However, Varina’s efforts apparently proved unsatisfactory to the majority of her female peers.

Varina did receive the praise and assistance, in forms monetary, emotional and political, of many sympathetic southerners during her husband’s imprisonment. She profusely thanked the “impoverished and desolate” ladies of the South for their contributions to her family, writing,

> These are my own people, and it is a privilege of which no change of circumstance can deprive me. To the accepted prayers of our widows and orphans, our suffering but heroic women…If a merciful Providence so ordain it, we hope so to live and die among you, mutually consoling and bearing each others burdens. I hope to God we may be restored to the home of our childhood.\(^99\)

Varina was welcomed into the homes of Georgia and North Carolina women during her refugee period following the evacuation of Richmond in April of 1865. Eliza Frances

---

\(^99\) Varina Davis to the Ladies’ Southern Association, December 4, 1865, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
Andrews, who willingly opened her home to the desperate Varina in Macon, Georgia, wrote in her diary,

> The poor woman is in a deplorable condition—no home, no money and her husband a fugitive. She says she sold her plate in Richmond, and in the stampede from that place, the money, all but fifty dollars, was left behind. I am very sorry for her, and I wish I could do something to help her, but we are all reduced to poverty and the most we can do is for those of us who have homes to open our doors to the rest.  

However, many women refused to even acknowledge the former First Lady, a phenomenon that Mary Chesnut had noted immediately after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. Many southerners, much to Chesnut’s disgust, were afraid to befriend Varina Davis, as they feared that the United States government would take vengeance upon them for doing so. Varina lamented to her friends that she felt “unprotected and punished for being Mrs. Jefferson Davis and born in the South.” (Ironically, after her husband’s death, Varina would adopt the signature “Varina Jefferson Davis” in nearly all of her correspondence out of pride in her familial name). The scorn that Varina felt from the women for whom she had labored so intensely and for whom she had attempted to be a role model, coupled with Varina’s natural tendency toward friendship and reconciliation with the beloved north of her pre-war memories, compelled her to look forward, rather than backward, to rebuilding southern culture and identity. As Joan Cashin astutely observed, in the years following the war, Varina had significantly more “time to reflect, read, and write” about her experiences than many women whose lives and fortunes had been shattered by their husbands’ involvement in the war effort. In addition, even among elite women, Varina possessed “experience and education which surpassed that of many women,” and thus enabled her to reflect more critically upon the

101 Chesnut, p. 785.
South’s past and potential for the future. Indeed, she admitted to herself that her husband’s political choices had hurt his family; he had lost the war and spilled blood in vain. This acceptance of the President’s faults and failures was more than many women of her sphere could bear and, as a result, was criticized that she herself might have hurt the southern cause more than she knew with her own personal political vacillation and Union ties.\(^\text{102}\)

In private correspondences to friends, Varina confided her pain at having been snubbed by so many of her supposed “countrywomen.” Writing to Mary Chesnut in 1865, Varina lamented of “life’s fitful fever…out of the depths of wretchedness and uncertainty, the worst has raised and buoyed me a little. I, at least, expect nothing more just now of a public nature….taking account of my dead hopes…we are benumbed.” Seeing little room for herself in the new and altered South, Varina commented with resignation, “There is an old fable of the tortoise and hare. Perhaps my luck may be that of the tortoise. If not, I have my shell to go into.”\(^\text{103}\) And at times, that is precisely what she was compelled to do. Again in private correspondence, the disheartened Varina confessed that she had “never truly believed in the Southern people,” as they were “too self-indulgent and unwhipped of justice.”\(^\text{104}\) Varina publicly strove to meet the expectations of her peers that she might lead the way in indulging Lost Cause nostalgia and ideology, and both accompanied her husband on various publicity tours throughout the South and spent years attending unfailingly to the increasingly frail ex-President’s emotional and physical needs; nevertheless, she seemed incapable of overcoming the

\(^{102}\) Cashin, pp. 276, 168-169.
\(^{103}\) Chesnut, pp. 786-787.
\(^{104}\) Cashin, p. 167.
emotional and ideological boundaries which had sprung up between her and her peers; thus, she never appeared able to do quite enough to please the southern people.

Between 1868 and the ex-President’s death in 1889, Varina labored intensely to assist her ailing and depressed husband with the management of family finances, business relations, correspondence, and the writing of his personal memoirs, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. Accompanying her husband on trips to Europe and throughout the American South for various business excursions and celebrations of southern pride and monumentalizing former vital Confederate cities, Varina Davis even “gave away” her daughter, Winnie, to the Lost Cause, supporting her nomination to the official title of “Daughter of the Confederacy.”  

After the death of her husband, in 1889, and that of her daughter Winnie, in 1898, Varina strove to fill in the gaps which Jefferson’s and Winnie’s deaths had left in southern culture. Her correspondence throughout the 1890s was filled with descriptions of the numerous ceremonies that she graciously attended for the dedication of various monuments, the laying of symbolic monumental cornerstones, and the honoring of various Confederate war heroes who had recently passed away. She frequently donated pictures, pieces of clothing, badges and other personal accessories that belonged to her husband and her daughter to museums and memorial organizations. She also lobbied and worked feverishly with the Sons of Confederate Veterans, in 1902, to help preserve Beauvoir, the Davis family home and Varina’s place of residence until 1890, as a Confederate soldiers’ home and memorial to her husband and daughter. (Ironically, however, the restrictions which she imposed upon

---

105 Cashin, p. 180.
106 Varina Davis to Anne Grant, October 21, 1895; Varina Davis to Anne Grant, November 11, 1899, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA; Cashin, p. 277.
107 Varina Davis to Lizzie Cary Daniel, January 6, 1899, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
the SCV regarding the memorialization of the home and her insistence on inserting her personal opinions into every aspect of the home’s preservation cost her the inclusion of her own name in the designation of the various rooms). 108

Perhaps one of Varina’s most contentious actions was her decision to bury her husband in Richmond, rather than in his native state of Mississippi. Following his death, Varina was solicited by numerous governors and memorial agencies with the request that Jefferson Davis be buried in their respective cities or states due to his provenance or service to those places. Among the requests were solicitations from Alabama, Mississippi, and Virginia. However, after one and a half years of deliberating, Varina decided that the appropriate final resting place for her husband would be in the old Confederate capital of Richmond. She declared that Mississippi was not a viable option, as it was below sea level, and she feared for the safety of her husband’s remains during the great gulf storms to which the state was frequently subjected. In private, however, Varina confided that she had rejected Mississippi’s requests because she did not receive from the state the “preparation which I think due to his services,” and was disappointed that the state legislature did not “court” her more for the possession of her dear husband’s remains. Varina’s insistence on the ex-President’s burial in Richmond outraged Mississippians who had viewed Jefferson Davis as their “native son,” and thus the “property” of the state. Varina Davis, they thought bitterly, once again was dictating the affairs of her entire region, and was more interested in promoting her own selfish interests than she was in pleasing the former country that her husband had headed for

four long years. Nevertheless, Varina stood firm in her decision. However, not even
the ladies of Richmond were satisfied with all of the ex-First Lady’s decisions; for years
they fought with her over the design and placement of the monument that was to mark
her husband’s burial site. Convinced that she possessed the right, and the insight, best to
select her husband’s monument, Varina insisted that the Richmond Ladies’ Association
follow her guidelines in erecting the statue. However, the Ladies responded to Varina
with the now-familiar accusation that her own selfish interests and claims to possession
of her husband’s memory were interfering unjustly with the interests of her late
husband’s people.

Yet another misinterpreted labor of love on behalf of her husband and the
grieving South was Varina’s 1890 publication of *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir*, a lengthy
biography of the ex-Confederate President and a passionate defense and justification both
of his actions as President and of the South’s right to secede. The *Appeal-Avalanche*
wrote, in March of 1891, that Varina graciously dedicated her *Memoirs* to “the soldiers of
the Confederacy, who cheered and sustained Jefferson Davis in the darkest hour by their
splendid gallantry, and never withdrew their confidence from him when defeat settled on
our cause.” The editorial praised Varina for her devotion to her husband and her obvious
dedication to preserving southern memory. Varina was lauded for her cumbersome
transcription of her husband’s notes, having “preserved it all, supplied connecting links
and so supplemented Mr. Davis’ recital that the reader has the whole story of his career
clearly set forth by a devoted heart that saw in him only the rarest and best of men who

---

109 Dolensky, p. 102, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
110 Cashin, p. 300.
never departed from the pedestal upon which her young love had placed him.” The editorial went on,

Mrs. Davis is to be congratulated upon her success in making this true exposition of the life, the career and the character of the man whose position in American history will be at once so conspicuous and so unique. Here she has told not only of vicarious suffering for a nation, but she has unfolded to us the inner nature of the hero, his domestic virtues, his personal traits…these things Mrs. Davis recites in the most loving prose.111

Despite the Appeal-Avalanche’s ability to appreciate Varina’s hard labors and unfailing dedication to her husband, even beyond his death, the majority of readers did not possess similar views about the publication. A financial failure and an extremely controversial publication among loyal southerners, Varina’s Memoirs did serve as an honest attempt to defend her beloved husband’s name in history and in southern memory.112 As Sarah Gardner noted, women of Varina’s sphere were expected to participate “directly and influentially in a conscious effort to fashion a distinctly southern story of the war and combat northern accounts” of the war with their male peers. However, such participation was only supposed to paint a very specific, “culturally sanctioned view of past.” Gardner wrote that southern women, “as susceptible as men to grandeur, pathos, sentiment, emotion, curiosity, tragedy and the romance of war” readily produced a steady flow of “celebratory accounts in fiction and prose to consecrate the war…for generations to follow.”113 Varina Davis certainly was expected to conform to such practices in her writing and her actions. However, it was the complex juxtaposition of Varina’s sense of realism, intellectual honesty about the Confederacy, and her emotional desperation to defend her husband and fulfill her peers’ expectations (as

111 Appeal-Avalanche, March 2, 1891, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
112 Dolensky, p. 92, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
113 Gardner, p. 5.
essentially the only remaining vestige of the Presidential family), that ultimately tainted
the actions of her final years with resentment, misunderstandings and personal grief.
Varina’s *Memoirs* opened the floodgates of criticism by her peers which would follow
her to her deathbed, and even beyond. Overly zealous about praising her late husband on
certain fronts, yet bluntly critical of him and the Confederacy on others, Varina alienated
many sectors of her audience. Long criticized for being overly emotional and dependent
upon her husband,\(^{114}\) while simultaneously scorned for being “selfish,” and not
traditionally passive enough, politically loyal to and emotionally-subordinate to her
husband, Varina never had found a successful happy medium in her public relationship
with Jefferson Davis. Thus, her life with the ex-President and her post-mortem affiliation
with his memory confounded many southerners and transformed Varina into a strange, if
not dangerous, contradiction to the complex ideology of the New South. In addition,
Varina possessed a tendency toward dramatic exaggeration in prose, and made obvious
errors and personal additions in quoting certain speeches and personal correspondence
that severely discredited her writing and ultimately doomed the *Memoirs* to failure in
both the North and the South.\(^{115}\)

Varina’s perceived “irreparable breach” with the South, in the eyes of her peers,
occurred nearly a year after the publication of her *Memoirs*. Suffering from severe heart
trouble and on the verge of poverty, Varina decided to move to a cooler climate and the
economically more viable New York City, in late 1890, with her daughter, Winnie.
Residing in various hotels for the last fifteen years of her life, Varina created a
comfortable and cosmopolitan existence for herself and for Winnie (until Winnie’s death

\(^{114}\) Cashin, pp. 83-84.
\(^{115}\) Dolensky, pp. 101, 98, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
in 1898). She enjoyed the company of several other former Confederates who had moved North for economic reasons, and continued her elegant, though now scaled-back, parties and entertainments for friends and visitors.\footnote{Cashin, p. 303.} Employed by Joseph Pulitzer as a columnist for the \textit{New York Sunday World}, as well as a frequent literary critic of the works of emerging female authors, such as Constance Cary Harrison,\footnote{Varina Davis to Constance Cary Harrison, December 9, (year unknown), Library of Congress.} Varina established herself in the literary world as an astute social commentator and analyst of current affairs. Her editorials voiced support for moderate women’s rights in society, which included female education, female public employment and equal pay, but discouraged women from procuring the right to suffrage. Interestingly enough, although Varina stressed the equality of the sexes, she believed that women should still remain submissive to their husbands. Her columns, which often included guidelines for female etiquette at various social engagements, used descriptions of her own actions as hostess of the Confederate White House as examples for how other upper-class women should behave.\footnote{New York World, May-June 1898, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA; Cashin, p. 274.} The seeming paradox in Varina’s opinions, as well as in her own actions, produced significant controversy among her critics.\footnote{Cashin, p. 283.}

Varina also wrote passionately about her personal opinions on national politics, including her disapproval for the Spanish-American War, and her belief that the Civil War and previous regional tensions should no longer influence Americans’ social relations with residents of their formerly-opposing region. A close friend of Julia Grant while living in New York, Varina produced an article in the \textit{World} in 1898 entitled “The Humanity of Grant” that lavishly praised the Union General for his tactful military
command and defended him against his critics for being a “butcher” of his own men. Despite these passionate editorials, Varina also wrote of the necessity for women to stay out of public politics—that such involvement was an “infringement” on society and detrimental to the development of young ladies. For her aggressive and “unfeminine” participation in what had formerly been a male profession, and for the somewhat unconventional and seemingly confounded views which she proffered about feminine duties and rights, Varina received significant criticism from many female southern traditionalists.  

Even more shocking to southerners was Varina’s apparent defection to the North and northern ideology from the South that had “supported” her for over sixty years. Following a visit to Richmond in 1899 at the request of the United Daughters of the Confederacy that she attend their annual meeting, Varina received significant criticism from several prominent members of the Daughters for the food bills that she accumulated during her stay at the Jefferson Hotel. The Daughters accused her of living off of the “bounty of the South” which she had so bitterly alienated since her move to New York. Naturally, Varina responded with much resentment to the Daughters’ claims, reminding them that she had moved to New York in the first place largely to secure a successful job by which she could support herself instead of needing to rely on the scant funds of the struggling South, and that she sent a significant amount of her earnings home to her family in Mississippi. Writing to Anne Grant in December of 1899, Varina stated, 

I am galled to the quick by things which have been published in the newspapers of the utterances of the Richmond chapter of the Daughters…

120 Cashin, pp. 284, 294, 298, 283, 279-280.
121 J. William Jones to Judge A. McC. Kimbrough, November 28, 1906, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
122 Dolensky, p. 103, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
123 Cashin, p. 275.
I should not have accepted the invitation if I had suspected ill feelings on their part. In the end of the invitation was this remark, ‘that is the best the Daughters could do for you’ which I thought a vulgar tone but not the result of a desire to offend (this strictly between us).

Although she was infuriated by the false accusations of the Daughters and their President, Mrs. N.V. Randolph, Varina went on to write, “I do not propose to explain my feelings to anyone but you, but I am BITTERLY indignant at the disrespect attempted to be offered …and the incivilities Mrs. Randolph managed to make us feel.”\textsuperscript{124}

The criticism of the UDC only increased as Varina’s health worsened, thus prohibiting her from attending chapter meetings and memorial dedications. Despite Varina’s charming public persona; her previously tireless post-war efforts to attend UDC chapter meetings across the South; her meticulous organization of various ceremonies honoring Jefferson Davis, (including that for the re-interment of his body in Richmond, in 1893); her continuous donations to museums and societies; and her unceasing defense of her husband’s wartime record and public laudation of the Confederate army’s determination to “fight to the end,” Varina simply could not win the respect of the UDC. Varina’s occasional rejection of the invitations of the UDC and various veterans’ organizations, coupled with her loyalty to her new northern friends and lifestyle in New York City, earned her the scorn of many of her southern female peers.\textsuperscript{125} The wealthy, extremely conservative and provincial ladies of the UDC argued that Varina’s aforementioned controversial actions simply were not acceptable for the former First Lady of the Confederacy and the last remaining vestige of their beloved President.

Feeling utterly betrayed by the former President’s wife, one Virginia woman wrote bitterly, “I never cared for her and I believe the older Southern people who were in a

\textsuperscript{124} Varina Davis to Anne Grant, December 2, 1899, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
\textsuperscript{125} Cashin, pp. 277, 292.
position to know did not care for her either. She wasn’t a Southern woman, and while we may admire her loyalty to her husband and her adopted cause and country, we realize it was self-interest rather than simon-pure patriotism that actuated her.”

To such resentful sentiments, Varina commented in a public interview,

> The sneers I am reputed to have cast upon the boarding house keepers and school teachers have pained me greatly, as they constitute an attack upon a class to which I am bound by many ties of friendship, respect and blood. These two occupations have been sought and pursued by members of the oldest and most dignified families throughout the South...and all the country and the obligations...owed to the latter cannot be estimated or diminished by the assumption of a fancied superiority by any person or class.

Even Varina’s death, in October of 1906, could not squelch the controversies surrounding the embattled First Lady of the Confederacy. Determined to have the final say in the divisive dialogue in which she had engaged her critics over the past couple of decades, Varina produced a letter, in 1894 (and revised in 1905), to be read to the UDC upon her death. She entrusted this letter to her neighbor at Beauvoir, Judge Allen Kimbrough, and supposedly asked his wife, Mary, to reveal the contents of the letter to the ladies of the UDC after her death. Varina’s infamous “Post-Mortem Letter” incensed the women of the Gulfport Chapter of the UDC, when Mary Kimbrough finally read it aloud to the UDC members one month after Varina’s death. The letter served as Varina’s passionate testament to her unfailing efforts to please and fulfill the expectations of the female peers in her social sphere. Vehemently defending her decision to bury her husband’s remains in Richmond rather than Mississippi, justifying her reasons for moving to the North, and validating her reasons for not glorifying the state of Mississippi more in her Memoirs with the contention that Mississippi had never really liked or

---

126 Dolensky, p. 101, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
appreciated her nor her efforts on behalf of the Confederacy, Varina was perceived by the elite women present at the UDC conference as attacking the very “nation” upon whose bounties she had largely survived.\textsuperscript{128} To these women, it appeared that Varina insisted upon not only alienating her own people during her life, but that she was selfish and proud enough to condemn them in death!

The news of Varina’s letter spread rapidly throughout the South and aroused a flutter of commentary from various sectors of the southern community. The \textit{Atlanta Constitution} published a piece on the letter, in late November, that described the uproar the letter had caused among the ladies of the UDC. The newspaper reported that the UDC had viewed Varina’s letter as “caustic in some parts, and indulg\textsuperscript{[ing]} in tart criticisms of Mississippi.” The \textit{Constitution} accused Varina of writing “severely” in her commentary about Mississippi’s perceptions of her and her husband, and reported that she was “sparing in pleasant references” to other southern states; however, she seemed to praise Virginia with unnecessarily “fervid rhetoric,” and spoke almost too tenderly of Richmond. Though Varina’s testament had sought to vindicate her for the harsh criticism that she had recently received, “Not for many a day,” the article read, “will the ladies there forget this letter” and the insults that it hurled at the South.\textsuperscript{129}

Not everyone took such offense to Varina’s words. Mary Kimbrough adamantly defended her late friend’s testament and called the attacks made on Varina “unjustified” and “deserving of reprimand.” Mary wrote to Varina’s fiery critic, Mrs. Randolph, in 1915,

\begin{quote}
I feel that Mrs. Davis’ memory should be sacred to the Southern people, and all misunderstandings as to the course she pursued should be explained, and that not only those who are living now, but that generations to come may have a true conception of this splendid woman who was so unjustly criticized…I am determined that the false impression created by her enemies and by thoughtless people shall be eradicated.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{128} Cashin, p. 308.
\textsuperscript{129} “Post Mortem Letter of Mrs. Davis stirred Daughters of the Confederacy,” \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, November 21, 1906, p. 1, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
Mrs. Kimbrough argued that Varina’s words must be accepted by even her most critical enemies, insisting that “there could be no higher authority than Mrs. Davis’s own statement.” Henrietta Morgan Duke wrote to Mary Kimbrough, in 1907, to praise her for reading aloud Varina’s letter and vindicating the poor First Lady. Duke confided,

I for one, who in the past had questioned Mrs. Davis’ loyalty to the South, was only relieved to know that I had been unfair, and thought that all the Daughters who had also been unjust were only too willing that Mrs. Davis should justify herself….I admire the courage of your convictions…if those who were guilty of having in life been unjust to Mrs. Davis, are made to feel uncomfortably, let them stand the discomfort of hearing the truth.

More intimate revelations of the impressions which Varina had left upon her peers surfaced shortly after the former First Lady’s death. However, once again, Varina emerged for some as a perfect paradigm for elite southern women, while appearing to others as the perfect paradigm for the antithesis of such a woman. Virginia Clay-Clopton published a heartfelt piece upon Varina’s death entitled “In Memoriam,” in which she commented.

Mrs. Davis, in the evening of a long and eventful life, but useful, was peaceful and brilliant to the end. Endowed intellectually beyond most women, and thoroughly educated and accomplished, there was no diminution of her mental powers in the passing years, her companionship and delightful converse being sought by hundreds until the light failed!...She remained Jefferson Davis’s devoted wife and faithful follower thro’ sunshine and shadow to the bitter end in his chequered military, official and social life.

A clipping from the Rutherford Scrapbook in the collections of the Museum of the Confederacy described Varina as “endeared to Southern people, not just because of title but also her own gracious qualities and nobility of character.” The journalist praised Varina for being so well cultured, stating that she had been “broadened and cultivated by

---

130 Mary Kimbrough to Mrs. N.V. Randolph, April 26, 1915, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
131 Henrietta Morgan Duke to Mary Kimbrough, February 15, 1907, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
a finished education and by association with the most elegant society of the times, “and referring to her as a “highly bred Southern woman.” The author sought to remind readers of Varina’s continuous assistance to her husband “with grace and comfort.” Described as “engaging, generous,” and possessing such “kindness of heart and mental endowment,” Varina, exhibited the most “winsome of social graces.” Having looked after and defended her husband at Fort Monroe, and having served the Confederacy with perfect grace, Varina had been “an angel to the poor,” a charming hostess with “Christian charity,” and thus “challenges our unqualified admiration.”  

The *Richmond Evening Journal* celebrated Varina’s intimate link to the Confederacy and the beloved Jefferson Davis, praised the love and esteem that she received from her peers, and asserted that the news of her death would bring great grief to the South. Likewise, an editorial in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* lauded Varina’s charm, tact and social ability, asserting that she had “won the hearts of all.” Her dedication to the southern cause, as evidenced by her sewing of battle flags, her cheering for the troops passing by the Executive Mansion in Richmond, her visiting the Confederate soldiers in camp and delivering food and goods to the city’s orphans, was evidence of the First Lady’s good character and leadership. Furthermore, the article went on to point out the numerous sacrifices made by Varina on behalf of her husband and the Confederacy, and justified her absence as a nurse in the Richmond hospitals with the statement that Mr. Davis simply wouldn’t allow such things, but that she more than made

133 “Jefferson Davis and His Family,” Rutherford Scrapbook, Vol. XIII, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
up for this fact by sending supplies to the troops and attending various parades and ceremonies.\textsuperscript{135}

Countering these kindly statements about the First Lady, however, were curt and rather unfeeling “tributes” to Varina by various southern women’s groups. In an article published in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* by the United Daughters of the Confederacy bluntly entitled “Resolutions of Regret Adopted,” the UDC produced a short and rather brusque statement about Varina’s death that essentially declared that Varina would be missed due to her association with the Confederacy as the wife of the first and only President of the Confederate States of America and the mother of the Daughter of the Confederacy. Varina’s “personality meant much” to the UDC, the article stated, because of her association with the war and the “struggle afterward.”\textsuperscript{136}

In an almost equally cool statement about the loss of the First Lady, the Ladies Hollywood Memorial Association (the organization with which Varina had argued over the design of her husband’s monument, and that recently had been taken over by Varina’s resentful enemy, Mrs. Randolph), stated “Our association reveres her memory as the wife of the President of the Confederacy.” Stressing her title far more than any personal qualities, the statement clearly was written to deliver the impression that it was largely Varina’s association with Jefferson Davis that won her any positive recognition in Richmond. The statement did go on to say that the Ladies “remembered her as the wise and generous Christian, who in the trying times and waning fortunes of the Southland labored with the devoted women of Richmond for the amelioration of those who so

\textsuperscript{135} *Richmond Times Dispatch*, (exact date unknown), 1906, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA; Cashin, p. 306.

sorely needed help and consolation.” However, the tone of their statement suggests that such acknowledgement was simply required by protocol, and that Varina’s efforts were simply in conformity with those of her peers and not exceptionally praiseworthy. Rather, it seems, the “devoted women of Richmond” were receiving more praise than Varina herself! In a requisite and rather generalized closing statement, the Ladies wrote, “We admired her for her wonderful qualities of mind and heart, for her dignity and for her affable manners, which drew to her so many friends”—an ironic statement, to say the least, from a group of women who were notorious for being some of Varina’s greatest enemies! Even the Richmond Evening Journal contradicted its former statements about Varina’s invaluable presence to the South by reopening the sore topic of Varina’s residence in the North. The paper stated that her decision to live in New York had withdrawn her from the popular women’s associations of the South, and intimated that it was merely her former residence in Richmond that ultimately would justify her mourning by the city. Hinting at Varina’s “personal and intimate relations,” which earned her the “love of the South,” but avoiding further elaboration, the Richmond Evening Journal essentially snubbed Varina as an individual and merely regarded her as the appendage of the former President. Though Virginia Clay-Clopton’s aforementioned “In Memoriam” overall spoke of Varina in rather glowing personal terms, one cannot help but discern from her the suggestion that Varina’s glory derived primarily from her former title. It is true that Clay-Clopton acknowledged Varina’s personal actions during and following the war as “a tribute from Mrs. Davis of the high regard in which she held the

137 “Resolutions of Regret Adopted,” Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
138 Richmond Evening Journal, (date unknown), Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
Lost Cause and its noble defenders,” and praised her for her unceasing post-war devotion to the Confederate veterans, writing that she had been “a central figure through the stormy years of the Civil War, but in neither role has she been more highly esteemed or appreciated than as the benefactress of the hoary-headed, horny-handed sad-heartened Veterans of that cruel war.” However, she concluded her article with the telling, somewhat impersonal summarization of Varina’s ultimate historical and cultural significance, stating that “her actions should link her name in the hearts of Southern people widely known as wife of the United States Senator and President.”

---

139 Clay-Clopton, “In Memoriam,” Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.
CHAPTER 3: Re-evaluating Varina Davis in History and Memory

In life and in death, Varina Davis proved complex and controversial, serving both as a role model for the grace, intellect, charm, generosity and devotion of elite womanhood and as an archetype of the dangers of elite females’ excessive intellectual independence, social confidence, political awareness, and public influence within the highest southern social and political spheres. Simultaneously despised and beloved by her peers, Varina struggled throughout her life to meet the impossible expectations of a society of women as complex, opinionated, competitive, and judgmental as the Confederacy’s upper sects. Unable to accommodate the divergent interests and desires of her female peers into a single personal paradigm of elite southern womanhood, Varina instead served as the unique embodiment of the confounded reality of Confederate female life. An assessment on an individual level of Varina’s successes or failures to live up to the expectations of her peers proves unfair and somewhat detracts from a proper understanding of her significance in history and memory. We must view Varina as a conglomeration of the conflicting interests and cultural trends of the broader Civil War era South. If we do, we allow ourselves to appreciate fully the wonderfully intricate personality of an embattled woman who, in her attempts to mould herself into a definitive model of social propriety, ultimately transformed herself into a far more genuine incarnation of social reality.

Varina Davis’s multi-faceted position as First Lady of the Confederacy dictated that she both conform to and challenge the roles of traditional elite southern womanhood. As historian Drew Faust states, prior to the Civil War, a woman had “but one right and
that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey. A husband, lord and master…nature designed for every woman.” However, the war “vested with new responsibilities for survival,” initially “unsexing” them from their originally-perceived “pure” femininity, then ultimately strengthening their roles both at home and in public by forcing them into new positions of “power” within the spheres of business and cultural guardianship. Faust continues her description of evolving women’s roles during the war, writing that “women had to face a new world spawned by war with destruction of society that had privileged them as white, yet subordinated them as female.” In this world, women discovered “new foundations for self-worth and self-definition as whiteness, wealth, gentility and dependence threatened to disappear.” In other words, these women “knew how much they had to lose,” and so adapted to ensure not only their survival but the survival of southern culture. “Necessity could make a different woman of me,” wrote one woman to her husband.¹

In this new world, women attempted to construct new identities out of their prior preconceptions of proper womanhood.² However, as was evidenced in the criticisms of Varina Davis by her peers, not every woman possessed a similar vision for the future of the elite southern lady, yet nearly every woman possessed the opinionated personality that was quick to laud or criticize the social changes that they saw in their peers. Drew Faust argues, in Mothers of Invention, that the war produced a “distinctive burden for women” that was comprised of ceaseless doubts, a restrictive sense of social limitations, and elements of desperation and continual disappointment. In Faust’s opinion, success at redefining a new and comprehensive model for womanhood, at least among the women

¹ Faust, pp. 6, 7, 243.
of the elite slaveholding class, proved rather elusive. The necessity to combine elements of the old and traditional with the new and unfamiliar created a complex environment in which women were expected to participate in public displays of patriotism without indulging in “unfeminine oratories and demonstrations;” endure self-sacrifice of home and personal luxuries without destroying family and the southern tradition of patriarchy in the process; and buoy the spirits of their peers and the Confederacy as a whole by hosting cheerful dinners and parties, while simultaneously not ignoring the sufferings of the South nor allowing “frivolities” to drain the Confederacy of its precious resources.

Elite Confederate women were expected to reaffirm the traditional notion of “passive” womanhood but assume the responsibilities of public service in hospital work, sewing, material donations, teaching, business ownership and public political support of the “Confederate cause” which the war demanded of women; indulge emotions of female dependency on men and grief at having been separated from them, while simultaneously remaining stoic and supportive of husbands, fathers and brothers; and engage in self-examination and discovery, as well as document the history transpiring around them, through continuous reading, writing, discussion and even publication of personal opinions and sentiments, while yet not questioning certain accepted notions of female naivety in the realm of politics, philosophy and journalism.  

Faust argues that, following the war, as evidenced by the descriptions in Lizzie Cary Daniel’s Confederate Scrapbook of the ceremonies and bazaars hosted and attended by elite women, as well as by the songs and poetry composed by the same ladies, women were expected to exalt the memory and cause of the old Confederacy, essentially dedicating their lives and souls to the preservation of southern memory and to the

---

3 Faust, pp. 256, 205, 242, 244, 81, 109, 110, 233, 16, 11, 178.
justification of southern secession. In doing so, women thus were laden with seemingly contradictory responsibilities. They were expected to rehabilitate the traditional culture of southern patriarchy and to re-concede to men the social, political and economic responsibilities women had been required to assume during the war, while simultaneously employing the knowledge, skills and intellectual independence which they had acquired during the process in broadening women’s influence in the public sphere. It was demanded that they to look after the physical and emotional well-being of veterans, as well as the moral character of the war-torn South as a whole by forming ladies’ aid associations, temperance societies and literary leagues, while trusting in the protection and morals of men publicly to institute systems of societal reform which would benefit women and southern culture as a whole. Women were expected to record and glorify the history of the Confederacy and memorialize the war as well as the courage and sacrifices of southern manhood through organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Ladies Memorial Association which simultaneously demanded the public spotlight through incessant rallies, parades and stoic affirmations of Lost Cause ideology yet stressed the maintenance of feminine propriety through demands for womanly nostalgia and emotionalism, political passivity, conformity to male demands and celebrations of feminine weakness. Most importantly, women were expected to assist in the reconstruction, rehabilitation and independence of the shattered South while simultaneously refusing to forget the proud heritage and traditional cultural institutions of southern society.

5 Faust, pp. 253, 247, 252.
As William Brundage noted in *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*, elite white women “willingly and aggressively” became “guardians of the past to create a white public memory and an infrastructure for dissemination of a collective historical memory.” As the “architects” of this white historical memory, women were empowered in unprecedented ways and expected to “explain and mystify roots of white supremacy and elite power in the South,” and to glorify the South’s social and political hierarchies.

It was this extension of “Republican motherhood,” to a larger sphere of “moral housekeeping”—this simultaneous rise of female civic duty and public influence with the reaffirmation of feminine domestic responsibility and gender deference—this contradictory celebration and perpetuation of the “strength and frailty” of southern womanhood and the South as a whole, Faust argues, which laid upon women the “peculiar burden of Southern history”—a burden whose foundations upon both “Altars of Sacrifice and Steel Magnolias” proved impossible to shoulder comprehensively by the South’s leading women, and which ensnared in its incongruity victims such as the embattled Varina Davis.

George Rable paints a similar picture of the disharmonious nature of southern womanhood in his book, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*. Rable affirms southern women’s role as war-time martyrs and argues that, in their efforts to conform to traditional standards of feminine propriety, while adapting to the demands imposed upon them by war and the men involved therein, women both “sustained and

---

7 Faust, p. 257.
undermined” the southern cause. Women’s “pledges of patriotic devotion” and the simultaneous “tragic meaning” of those pledges with regard to feminine stability and happiness dragged the leading women of the Confederacy into roles and responsibilities for which they were unprepared, which they were both willing and unwilling to fulfill, and for which they received the simultaneous praise and criticism from their opinionated peers. Yet, the more these women clung to the past in the face of ever-mounting pressures and sufferings from the war, Rable argues, the more they came to realize the inherent problems and inefficiencies of southern paternalism. The ambivalence of leading women toward their new roles made them increasingly easier targets of the more vocal females of southern society who stressed the necessity for “Spartan womanhood,” “Republican motherhood,” and a reliance on the memory of women from the American Revolution as inspiration for the women of the upper class who were expected to serve as cultural role models for their “country.” To quote a New Orleans newspaper cited in Rable’s work, it was perceived that women’s “weakness is their strength; their delicacy, the seat of their power; their dependence, their protection, and the smiles the axis upon which the busy world turns.” And so, Rable states, the war produced in women “change without change,” a sort of “private reconstruction” of individual women merely for survival that easily crumbled at the criticisms and demands of others. Rable argues that southern women were, at best, embodiments of the fleeting necessities imposed on them by a war that confounded, more than clarified, their societal roles.

---

10 Faust, pp. 221, 241, 266.
Bell Irvin Wiley confirms the apparently inherent incongruities of elite southern females’ expectations of each other, with particular reference to Varina Davis, in his book entitled *Confederate Women*. Wiley writes that Varina was simultaneously perceived as too regal, and yet too crude; too supportive of some politics, yet too dissenting of others; too indulgently social, yet simultaneously too aloof, selfish and unsocial; too regionally proud, yet too cosmopolitan; a decadent and inadequate material supporter of the Confederacy, yet idolized by some to the extent that she received gifts of horses, gourmet food and fine dress materials from anonymous southern women. Wiley argues that cultural divisiveness and contradictions in women’s social expectations did more to destroy leading women such as Varina Davis than it did to uphold them.

In his publication, *The Confederate War*, Gary Gallagher portrays a slightly different image of southern women, arguing that internal discord among the Confederacy’s women was virtually a non-factor in comparison to the sense of unity that women felt over their “true” loyalty to the South “in all their trials.” Gallagher argues that women simply placed the Confederacy above their personal interests, and expected others to do the same. Likewise, Elizabeth Varon argues, in *White Women in Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, that the alterations to the responsibilities of southern womanhood ultimately transformed southern femininity permanently by uniting women in a common cause to uphold the morale, economy, morals, and traditions of southern culture in a rapidly evolving new society. Varon acknowledges that, at times, women were torn by fear and devotion to the Confederacy as well as by dissatisfaction with pre-Confederate

---

11 Wiley, p. 139.
womanhood and loyalty to antebellum prescriptions of feminine propriety. However, she asserts, these women were able successfully to adapt to the new pressures placed upon them by war and ultimately were able to reconstruct a new and comprehensive model for a more publicly prominent and aggressive, yet refined and subordinate, southern lady.\textsuperscript{14} William J. Kimball affirms such views by quoting T.C. DeLeon and Constance Cary Harrison, in \textit{Richmond in Time of War}, that, although elite southern women “struggled in the face of their new circumstances,” they all “faced their duties,” and united over shared sorrows, sacrifices, public service and an overall “lack of pretense” for former notions of social division and diverging cultural opinions.\textsuperscript{15}

In her book entitled \textit{All Things Altered: Women in the Wake of Civil War and Reconstruction}, Marilyn Culpepper argues that the war actually transformed women, in socially accepted ways, into individual agents of collective reform and cultural strength, providing them with new opportunities for the outlets of their energies and ideas through public service and the creation of female literary and political associations that promoted Lost Cause ideology. Quoting a newspaper editorial written just after the close of the war, Culpepper notes that the war and its aftermath taught women to “think like heroes and act like angels,” as their country required their aid more than ever during the crisis of civil war, and forced them onto the “threshold of change” as comforters, assistants, agents of hope, encouragement, faith, gentility, love, and loyalty.\textsuperscript{16} How could such noble causes possibly have produced anything other than uniformly congenial yet

\textsuperscript{14} Varon, pp. 169-170.
ambitious women who could not help but be united by shared efforts of self-sacrifice and a dedication to traditional Lost Cause ideology, Culpepper intimates. Culpepper asserts that, after the war, “gone were admiration for fragile and dependent, helpless women,” for ladies continued their united front to repair the bleeding South by “making their own living instead of subsisting on charity.”

17 Jane Censer affirms Culpepper’s sentiments in her book, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895*, writing that “non-dependence in domestic or other roles…self reliance and capability,” as well as a greater sense of responsibility for moral influence on society as created by the war, pushed women into a socially-accepted sphere of public recognition and influence, and that women actually could bolster their reputations by making efforts to support themselves, establish their name within the community, become active in local organizations, demonstrate a strong personal will, celebrate their individuality and indulge their new sense of self-confidence and talents by moving out of the realm of the familiar into the foreign and more cosmopolitan world as teachers, writers and social reformers. Censer even argues that these “new southern women” actually looked to northern models of society for inspiration to reform their own, and that they dared to criticize southern society and encourage the rise of the “emancipated woman” in politics and cosmopolitan living in the face of pressures from groups such as the UDC to revive the image of the more traditional “southern belle.” Censer also claims that, although many of these women freely took part in Lost Cause celebrations and memorial ceremonies, they equally as freely criticized such events as restricting the South’s

---

17 Culpepper, p. 229.
progress toward true reconstruction and national reconciliation. If such indeed were the case, would not Varina Davis have been widely extolled by her peers for her independence of thought and more cosmopolitan and reconciliationist views, as well as her personal decision to assume a new residence and occupation in the North in order to help spare the South of further expenses and become a self-supporting and future-oriented woman?

Certainly other leading ladies like Varina Davis existed who exhibited a similar refusal to live out their days as the helpless victims of the Confederacy. Lesley Gordon writes, in *General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend*, that the confident and socially affluent LaSalle Corbell Pickett applauded some women’s ability to “learn from the past, but not live in it,” and readily accepted a job as a clerk in the Federal Pensions Office, in Washington, to help support herself and her young son upon her husband’s death. Intelligent and ambitious, LaSalle was determined to create for herself a “new social role out of the old gender limits.” Her saving grace, however, was her unceasing public devotion to the glorification of her husband’s memory and her indulgence in Lost Cause ideology. Surviving largely off of profits earned from the publication of several laudatory books on her husband and his role in attempting to save the “glorious Confederacy,” LaSalle retained positive standing and social acclaim in southern society simply as a result of her unabashed pride, and indulgence in, as well as her commitment to and “dependence” upon, her reputation as “General Pickett’s widow” and her refusal to criticize southern society in any form. Varina Davis’s deviance from LaSalle’s

---

approach to remain simultaneously independent from, yet still intricately entwined with, southern traditionalism ultimately seems to have cost her the post-war success of leading southern women such as LaSalle Corbell Pickett.

Did such deviance ultimately taint Varina’s reputation and role in history? In an interesting comparative study of Varina Davis and Mary Todd Lincoln entitled *Crowns of Thorns and Glory: Mary Todd Lincoln and Varina Howell Davis: The Two First Ladies of the Civil War*, Gerry Van der Heuvel somewhat bridges the gap between the perception of Varina as a victim of the social changes and expectations within southern culture caused by the war and as an ultimately victorious symbol of “new southern womanhood” which emerged during the years of Reconstruction. Like Mary Todd Lincoln, Van der Heuvel argues, Varina was subjected to extreme criticism as the First Lady of an embattled and stressed nation. Betty Caroli notes in her book, *First Ladies*, that social and political criticism of president’s wives was not a novel phenomenon and was quite common, especially in the instance of First Ladies who possessed independence of intellect and emotion. First Ladies could, in fact, expect simultaneously to be “recognized, criticized and emulated.”

However, despite Varina’s personal sufferings and humiliations as First Lady of the Confederacy, as well as her disgust at having been subjected to witnessing first-hand her husband’s emotional and physical torture at the hands of his southern critics and northern brethren, respectively, Van der Heuvel believes that Varina ultimately managed to survive as a “symbol of national reconciliation,” and “ended her days honored by the North and the South” alike.

---

20 Caroli, p. 57, 83.
But did Varina ever truly receive, in historiography, the respect to which she was entitled after the personal holocausts that she endured for over forty-five years as a result of her position as First Lady of the Confederacy? How has her image been defined and reconstructed over time, and does a truly definitive form of that image exist today in historiography? T.C. DeLeon, the acclaimed, period social commentator of the Confederacy and author of the popular *Belles, Beaux and Brains of the 60’s*, asserted that “fortunately, it chanced that Mrs. Varina Howell Davis was a woman of too much sound sense, tact and experience in great social affairs not to smile to herself at the rather provincial iciness” of her peers. He wrote fondly, but honestly, of the First Lady, “Varina Davis was very gracious and proficient for all…she was politician and diplomatist in one, where necessity demanded,” but that “long personal knowledge of her” had already convinced DeLeon that she “preferred the straight road to the torturous bypath. She was naturally a frank though not a blunt woman, and her bend was to kindliness and charity. Sharp tongue she had, when set that way and the need came to use it; and her wide knowledge of people and things sometimes made that use dangerous to offenders.” DeLeon quoted the words of Varina’s peers, stating that her sense of humor was “painfully acute.” However, he argues that “the silly tales of her sowing dissension in the cabinet and being behind the too frequent changes in the heads of the government are false, there seems small reason to doubt.” DeLeon even, somewhat exaggeratedly, credits Varina with gradually winning the “warm friendship of the best women of conservative Richmond” and “the respect and admiration of all.” DeLeon himself seemingly had no qualms with Varina’s highly controversial post-war decision to
move to New York and to pursue a career in journalism. Of the First Lady’s actions he wrote,

No honest thinker could have condoned the discrediting of the wife of the dead president for selecting her own residence. Brave and brawny men have done the same, in hundreds of cases, leaving home, friends and traditional surrounding for the openly avowed purpose of gain. Criticism has never assailed them, and there was less cause for the singling out of a bereaved—and somewhat neglected—woman for venomed, if misdirected shafts. But what the few said, the many never heard, nor, hearing, had believed, until the needless post-mortem defense raised futile whispers to a roar and set up a skeleton in the united feminine closet.22

Though originally hailing from Alabama, DeLeon possessed a cosmopolitan attitude toward the war and southern culture, both indulging in the romanticism of a society filled with southern belles, chivalric men, grace, elegance, and an unfailing dedication to tradition and sectional pride, while scorning sectional prejudice and bitterness.23

DeLeon’s cosmopolitan background allowed him to view Varina through a much broader lens, such as that through which more modern historians such as Bell Irvin Wiley, Frances Simkins and James Patton have approached the First Lady of the Confederacy. Wiley praises Varina for her ability to hold her own in conversation, for her vibrancy, charm, good looks, warm personality, good taste in fashion and décor, unique sense of humor, poise and graciousness to all members of the social spectrum. Wiley asserts that Varina loved people, especially those who were intelligent, was well-informed, calm and realistic, (though occasionally outspoken) about the potential of the Confederacy. He acknowledges that Varina’s temper could, at times, be explosive and that she frequently responded hypersensitively to criticisms of her husband. Wiley also asserts that, though he believed that Varina never tried directly to influence her husband’s political decisions,

---

23 Ibid, p. 458.
her charm and intelligence most likely “influenced him more than he knew.” Alert, witty, and possessing a seemingly magnetic personality throughout even the last years of her life, Varina Davis was, in Bell Wiley’s estimation, overly-criticized and tormented by some of the same women whom she had once referred to as her “friends” earlier in her lifetime.

Frances Simkins and James Patton similarly defend Varina in their book entitled *The Women of the Confederacy*, in which they state that “not all of the women of the Confederacy were motivated by supreme optimism and arrogant faith…the wise ones tempered their emotions with the salt of reality, philosophized upon the vanity of war,” and regarded the Confederacy with tenderness, yet apprehension. Varina Davis, foreseeing the difficulties that her new government would be forced to endure from the outset and believing that the North would give the South “a hot time,” exhibited just such wisdom and personal restraint in her tempered support of the Confederate cause, both during and after the war. Simkins and Patton laud Varina’s “kindness, grace and affability,” and state that her extravagant receptions, for which she frequently was criticized (especially late in the war), possessed the “dignity and suavity which should very properly distinguish the drawing room entertainments of the Chief Magistrate of a republic.” Vying with well-established Richmond families such as the Lees, Harrisons and Randolphs who initially were suspicious of women from the “Lower South,” Varina proved herself more than capable of offering to her “court” of politically and socially elite ladies the very best of Victorian propriety. Though such entertainments made Varina and her peers an easy target of resentful lower class women who, like one Mobile woman from 1864 complained, “The Confederacy is writhing in the throes of mighty

---

agony, yet women can bow down to fashion’s shrine and burn the most costly incense…as long as they can buy glittering baubles, and throw their treasure in the extortioner’s hand, so long will he press his iron hell upon the aching heart of the Sunny South,” such entertainments were expected and, in fact, required of Varina as First Lady.\(^{25}\) Despite the fact that Varina’s elite peers were accused of “lolling back in their silks and satins, with tall footmen in livery, driving up and down the streets while the poor soldiers’ wives were on the sidewalks,” in the opinions of Simkins and Patton, these women remained loyal to their responsibilities as the South’s morale boosters and agents of social relief from the political and economic anxieties of war, while still managing to find ways to contribute a significant amount of their excess resources to the war effort.\(^{26}\)

To those who continued to question the former First Lady’s dedication to and love for the South, a November, 1906 issue of *Confederate Veteran* on Varina’s recent death published a defense of her post-war actions in her own words. The article quoted Varina as saying,

>I would stay here always if I could; I only wish that I could live here. But I cannot stand the heat. It overpowers me completely…God only knows how I love my country, this dear old Southland, endeared by so many hallowed memories…these are my people, and I love them as perhaps they will never know. Their devotion, their love, their reverence for the memories of my husband and daughter touch my heart very deeply. I read with interest none can tell all the sweet and kind things that are said about them; I watch the beautiful celebrations held and note how much is done to honor the memory of my husband and teach their children to do it. I can never, never forget all the honors and homage that these dear, devoted people paid my husband and daughter in their lifetime. How the old veterans loved them and what sympathy and love were shown me in my great sorrows! Yes, I love the South, my own land; I love my own people, and I would that I could stay with them always.\(^{27}\)


\(^{26}\) Ibid, p. 185.

\(^{27}\) *Confederate Veteran*, Vol. XIV, No. 11, November, 1906, Nashville, TN.
Defending Varina’s decision to move to New York City in 1890, the article stated that “Mrs. Davis and her daughter were in position there to do more for the honor of their Southland than they could anywhere else in the world, and they did it faithfully.” The article, clearly written by veterans whose unique perspectives on the First Lady instilled in them an almost unanimous adoration and admiration for Varina and her service as First Lady, as well as for her post-war efforts to achieve personal economic independence and proper, honorable recognition for the veterans’ actions in the war, further begged southerners to lay aside their personal grudges against the former First Lady. The veterans pleaded, “let every true Southerner make amends now, as far as possible, by faithful tribute to her memory. Those who had the good fortune of an intimate acquaintance with her should be diligent to testify to her wonderful ability and unceasing loyalty to the South’s honored martyr” and affirmed that “it shall be the mission of the Veteran now that she is dead, to place her where she deserves to be—as a most worthy wife of one of the noblest patriots and heroes that ever lived…whose marvelous ability was hardly realized.”

28 Perhaps the men of the Confederacy were more open-minded, more forgiving of the First Lady’s faults, or simply more appreciative of her qualities that other women could only perceive as incentives for jealously, competition and criticism. Perhaps a fair and comprehensive assessment of Varina Davis requires a more cosmopolitan background and an overall more removed look at the embattled First Lady of the Confederacy. Whatever the case, in the past one hundred years since Varina’s death, slightly more flattering and open-minded assessments have been formed out of the relatively small amount of research in which most historians have bothered to engage

28 Confederate Veteran. Vol. XIV, No. 11, November, 1906, Nashville, TN.
surrounding Jefferson Davis’s wife. Surely Eron Rowland, the devout southerner and relative contemporary of Varina, whose biography of the First Lady was discussed briefly in the first chapter of this paper, worshipped her as the ideal role model for a woman growing up during the height of Lost Cause ideology; and undoubtedly Ishbel Ross, though acknowledging Varina’s occasional social and emotional flaws and outspoken nature, nonetheless revered her as a martyr of the Confederate cause. However, from Joan Cashin we receive a more intellectually honest and analytical discussion of Varina in history and memory. Cashin’s analysis has elucidated Varina’s character flaws, blatant mistakes, incidents of tactlessness and cultural mishaps which have not yet been approached from the appropriate angle, but an understanding of which has produced a clearer understanding of Varina Davis and the perceptions and expectations which her peers held of her.

Undertaken against the backdrop of what has been written about Varina by previous historians, the personal research conducted for this analysis of Varina’s role in Confederate history and memory, as well as that of her female social and political equals, reveals that, in fact, Varina Davis was expected to serve a myriad functions, including that of “national matriarch,” “national hostess,” a paradigm for public service through self-sacrifice, an intermediary between the masculine world of politics and the feminine sphere, a role model for “Spartan,” yet “Republican” womanhood, a leader and champion of southern cultural glorification, and a social and political devotee of the Confederacy and its “martyrs,” southern traditionalism and Lost Cause ideology. Restricted both by the praise of her friends and by the criticism of her enemies, as well as by her own often complex emotions and contradictory personal opinions, Varina was caught in the
crosshairs of numerous, forceful and almost impossible expectations, never seemingly able to please either her peers or herself in accommodating comprehensively the needs and desires of the Confederate elite..

Varina’s awareness of her faults and of the uncertainties about her that were expressed by her supposedly “forsaken” peers and that continued to haunt her throughout her life, was not exposed lucidly until the moment of her death. Poignantly uttering her last words, Varina offered a plea to God to rescue her, at last, from her lifelong personal holocaust in the name of those who dared slay her, but in whom she refused to lose all trust: “Oh Lord, in thee have I trusted, let me not be confounded.”

Bibliography

*Note on sources: As is evident below, while the majority of the diaries and journals cited in this paper were written during the Civil War and published shortly thereafter, there are a few which were written entirely after the war and either were based upon notes recorded during the war years or were merely reflections and reminiscences of that era, naturally subject to the distortions of time and memory. Research emphasis was placed upon the more “period” journals and diaries; however, detailed comparisons of the more recent sources with the older sources were performed to clarify and confirm certain facts and statements, and a close consideration of potential biases or exaggerations in post-war writings was involved before solidifying the evidence and content of this paper.


Franklin Stringfellow Papers. Virginia Historical Society.


Jefferson Davis Papers. Library of Congress.

Jefferson Davis Family Collection: Varina Davis. Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.


Mary Custis Lee Papers. Virginia Historical Society.

Mary S. Kimbrough Correspondence. Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.

Meade Family Papers. Virginia Historical Society


Rutherford Scrapbook. Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.


United Daughters of the Confederacy Scrapbook. Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.


