A Measure of their Devotion: Women and Gender in Civil War Virginia

Kate Fraser Gillin

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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A Measure of Their Devotion:
Women and Gender in Civil War Virginia

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Kate F. F. Côté
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Master of Arts

Kate F. F. Côté

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Carol Sheriff

Leisa Meyer by Shelby

Scott Nelson
In memory of Kate Fariss Fraser Straus
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ABSTRACT

In the antebellum United States, the efforts of middle- and upper-class northern women in the growing reform movement prompted gradual and subtle changes in northern gender conventions. Both northern and southern women considered their roles as wives and mothers foremost among their responsibilities, but in the 1830s reformers began to integrate into those roles a wider array of interests in the fields of politics and economics. As a result, these elite women expanded the definitions of both motherhood and womanhood. Southern women, by contrast, were relatively untouched by the reformism that swept the North. Southern urban centers developed limited networks of poor relief, public health, and other reform enterprises, but the isolation and disinclination of most women prevented the rise of a comparable movement. The principles of southern womanhood therefore remained largely intact before the Civil War.

The Civil War posed a challenge to southern gender conventions, but elite southern women ably confronted that challenge. The war— particularly in occupied or heavily trafficked areas like Virginia— placed women in a position to reconstruct the parameters of gender relations in the South. With much of the male population in service to the Confederacy, women organized and sustained fragmented communities. The extent and nature of their activities varied, but southern women were united in a basic goal: the preservation of their culture and society. Women like Cynthia Coleman, Ada Bacot, Harriette Cary, and Amanda Edmonds struggled to maintain the framework of that society because their race, class, and gender afforded privileges that might not have been available in a "new" South. Those privileges, they believed, outweighed the limitations and burdens of womanhood. In their defense of southern society, many elite women temporarily skirted the boundaries of traditional female behavior, but they did so in order to secure those boundaries.
A Measure of Their Devotion:
Women and Gender in Civil War Virginia
Part I

The Civil War opened an avenue for elite, white, southern women to redefine the restrictive gender conventions that circumscribed their lives throughout the antebellum era. With the absence of husbands and fathers during the war, it became possible for women to participate in public arenas previously reserved for men. The extent to which they rejected or embraced these opportunities is reflected in their war-time activities. The subjects of this study illustrate a pattern of southern women's reactions and approaches to the potential for developing new standards and roles for their sex in a time of crisis and social upheaval. The protection and regulation of the homefront was transferred largely to the hands of the women Confederate soldiers left behind. The Confederacy inadvertently offered women more active—although not always desirable—roles in politics, economics, and warfare, in addition to traditionally domestic responsibilities. Many women subsequently ventured beyond the antebellum ideal of womanhood by pursuing these opportunities, but they ironically shared a common goal with those who upheld that ideal more directly. These two apparently contradictory activities ultimately reflected resistance not to traditional gender roles, but to changes in those roles.
American women were not new to the difficulties war presented their families, homes, and communities. Wars in which Americans had participated had consistently placed unique burdens on women who—as mothers, wives, and active participants in the family economy—struggled to maintain their communities as well as their immediate domestic circle. Wars introduced not only economic hardships and the prospect of losing family and friends, but new ideas with the potential for transforming American culture.

Historians continue to debate the extent to which the responsibilities of American women in times of war affected changes in gender roles and women's self-definition. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, for example, has argued that northern women consistently acted as their husbands' deputies during the American Revolution. Despite the enormous social, political, and economic questions the war posed, women continued to raise their children, perform domestic chores, and participate in the community economy by producing goods for sale, barter, and consumption within the home. By contrast, Mary Beth Norton suggests that the Revolution "dissolved traditional gender boundaries."¹ But Ulrich denies the assertion that a single event revised well-entrenched habits, instead maintaining that women neither defied gender definitions nor established permanent changes in women's duties during the war. Ulrich argues that while specific

chores may have been altered, women behaved much as they had before the war, completing the tasks necessary to sustain their families within both the home and the larger community.

Following the Revolution, however, Americans gradually devalued those tasks, which by and large had remained unchanged. The new Republic instead chose to emphasize the contributions of men's wage labor rather than the varied roles of women (economic or otherwise). Historian Jeanne Boydston has argued that "a gender division of labor was becoming...a gendered definition of labor."² Men and women no longer simply divided their responsibilities according to their needs and skills, but designated types of labor as either male or female, the former assuming greater import than the latter. Ultimately—and ironically—women responded by employing the rhetoric of the Revolution to remind American society of their integral place in the new nation. The "Republican Mother," according to her authors, would produce the next generation of loyal Americans. Ideally, she was responsible for the creation and education of good republican citizens, but she was also a tool: an essential symbol of women's contributions to their homes and communities, and the means by which many women reclaimed a public role in their society and culture. The Revolution itself may not have drastically altered the functions women performed within their society, but its rhetoric helped shape

the ways in which Americans defined themselves and their activities in the era that followed.

War has commonly initiated ideological as well as physical and economic changes for American society. For women, such conflicts intensified and complicated traditional duties, but larger changes in socially constructed gender roles—public and private—were apparently made in the eras following. Wars have certainly disrupted social and economic routines, but the answer to whether or not they altered or shaped gender conventions seems to lie less in the actions of men and women during the conflict than in their later beliefs and ideals.

The Civil War would prove to be as much or more of a crisis as the Revolution, forcing Americans once again to confront conflicting interpretations of race, republicanism, and the future character of the nation. As in the past, women—particularly southern women—were left with enormous responsibilities on a threatened homefront. Elite southern women encountered social, political, and economic pitfalls, the survival of which was often found in activities considered outside popular gender definitions and gender roles. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust suggests that the Civil War endangered the dominance of southern white men by offering women greater access to social power through traditionally male roles. But Faust adds that "the challenge to the very categories that had defined and embodied that
dominance" is equally notable. Virginia was an important field for that challenge. In addition to economic difficulties and the absence of a large percentage of white men, women in Virginia witnessed some of the bloodiest battles of the war, and they endured the intermittent presence of northern soldiers.

Harriette Cary, Amanda Edmonds, Cynthia Coleman, and Ada Bacot each experienced the effects of the Civil War in Virginia. All four women were members of affluent southern families, and each found herself deeply invested in the success of the Confederacy. At the outset of war, Cary and Edmonds were young and unmarried. Their youth and sheltered lifestyles affected their attitudes toward the North, the war, and their own role in southern society. They accepted and ultimately embraced the restrictions the South placed on women of their age and class because they were not without compensation. Over the course of the war, Cary and Edmonds resisted potential changes in women's status, and what appears to be passivity was actually an eager faith in the gender roles delineated by their society.

Coleman and Bacot had both been married and widowed by 1860. In the years before the war, each had apparently worked toward fulfilling her domestic duties. They embodied many of the attributes of ideal wives and mothers of their class, but the Civil War would propel them into more public,

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active roles than most southern women. Coleman and Bacot were members of a small but influential group of women who stretched the boundaries of their society's definition of womanhood. But their intention was to preserve that society and its soldiers, each of which insisted upon women's submission to male control.

Southern women aspired to recognition as "ladies." The myth of the southern lady described a woman who was gracious, fragile, pious, and dependent upon southern men. Elite men as well as members of alternate classes and races were also subject to behavioral standards, and such standards were modified only within class, race, and gender lines, not across them. Just as poor white or black women and men could not become ladies or gentlemen, ladies could not assume roles or responsibilities traditionally assigned to their husbands and fathers. Southern gender prescriptions were not entirely dissimilar from their northern counterparts, but regional differences—notably slavery—played a role in the former's character and endurance.4

Contemporary writers often compared the dependence of women to the dependence of slaves. Coleman's father, Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, published several papers in defense of slavery. Like most men of his class, he held similar

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4Suzanne Lebsock, in The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860, addresses both changing southern gender prescriptions and the question of southern distinctiveness with regard to gender relations. She argues that southern and northern women were not greatly dissimilar, but she does add that slavery in particular inhibited the development of a feminist consciousness among southern women.
views toward women, including his daughter: "society demanded that woman remain under man's control...with humility and devotion...She should channel her social prestige and position into a nobility of spirit and service to her family, particularly to her husband."

Historians continue to debate the degree to which white women formed bonds of commiseration with their female slaves, but in terms of gender ideals, the southern lady was white. White women, in fact, were dependent upon slavery for many of the distinctions and privileges that characterized them as ladies. They benefited not only from the labor of their slaves, but also from the abusive conditions surrounding slavery that elevated the status of white women.

Slave women, for example, could not legally marry. Consequently, their children were born out of wedlock enabling southern society to construct the image of the Jezebel to explain slave women's perceived sexual improprieties. The Jezebel served to further enhance the

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6 The historical debate surrounding the relationships between white women and black women is well documented in Elizabeth Fox Genovese's Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), Catherine Clinton's The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), and Suzanne Lebsock's The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860 (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984); Fox Genovese in particular argues that elite white women's privileges stemmed largely from the enslavement of black women, and that white women were willing to endure the hardships southern society imposed on their gender in return for those privileges. Additionally, in Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War, Drew Gilpin Faust argues that traditional racial prerogatives persuaded most white women to resist changing gender prescriptions during the Civil War.
"inherent" virtue southern society assigned to its elite white women. The stereotype also extended to the exploitive relationships between slave women and their masters: "some [white southerners] were convinced that slave women were lewd and lascivious, that they invited sexual overtures from white men."7 The figure of the Jezebel allowed abusive masters to explain and justify rape and violence against black women to the larger society.

Slave women's physical appearance was indictment of their basic sexuality and further served to distinguish them from white women. White women's dress revealed little, while slave women were commonly insufficiently clothed. Black women also worked in the fields, developing physical strength that set them apart from white women who were able to avoid both exercise and the sun. By the nineteenth century, white womanhood was defined as the opposite of black womanhood. Southern society reserved motherhood, domesticity, family, virtue, protection and gentility for white women alone.

Historian Suzanne Lebsock argues that both urban and rural women shared a basic faith in the principles of the southern gender system. Upper and middle-class women subscribed to its ideals, and to the best of their ability, attempted to embody them. These ideals could prove limiting, but they also had enormous benefits for elite women. As ladies, they were entitled to the protection and support of

men. Their race and class commanded—at least superficially—the respect and admiration of their society. And, although their lives were rarely marked by total luxury and ease, their labors were relatively less demanding than those of slaves and poorer white women.

The limitations surrounding their activities, however, were indeed extensive. Antebellum southern society did not expect elite white women to occupy themselves with politics, economics, or warfare. Many women had opinions about the law, foreign and domestic policies, economics, and secession, but few challenged their husbands and fathers, or made their thoughts public. Women of politically moderate families articulated moderate views, just as women of families with extreme political views seemed to share those convictions. Historian Elizabeth R. Varon has argued that the development of female partisanship in the 1840s reveals the roots of the politicization of southern women. Varon argues that "women's private and public expressions of partisanship articulated a new ideal of feminine civic duty...[and] embodied the notion that women could--and should--make vital contributions to party politics."8 Women sewed banners and supported their party's platform, but their political affiliations rarely varied from those of their husbands or fathers. They were certainly in a position to influence members of their households, and while many did, their influence was commonly

directed toward reinforcing ideas already promoted by the men of the family. Many women were knowledgeable of their section's and nation's political debates, but their accepted role was as political observers and moral patrons. To defy that role would be to risk alienating their society and losing the benefits they enjoyed as ladies.

Elite southern society clung to the ideal of the dependent woman. A young woman passed from her parents' home to her husband's, and although her responsibilities changed, she remained subordinate. The myth of the southern lady, according to historian Anne Firor Scott, defined women as spiritual rather than intellectual: "her mind was not logical, but in the absence of reasoning capacity, her sensibility and intuition were highly developed."\(^9\) Even the most virtuous and accomplished women required the direction of a man. Southern gender conventions also assumed women were naturally self-denying: restraining their individualism was not only required, but considered the natural condition of womanhood.

On the road to adulthood, the southern woman of means first experienced the life of the "belle." The life of the southern belle was a precursor to that of a lady and therefore embodied similar limitations: "from earliest childhood girls were trained to the ideals of perfection and submission."\(^{10}\) Both Cary and Edmonds had reached this stage.

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\(^{10}\)Ibid., 7.
at the outset of the war. These women enjoyed the benefits of youth, eligibility, and status despite their impediments. The belle became a lady at marriage, but the rules governing her behavior remained relatively the same. Elite southerners believed that ladies were the moral guides of the Victorian South. As such, young women like Cary and Edmonds were conditioned to conduct themselves with grace and self-control. Among the results of these limitations was a skewed view of the larger world:

The importance of seeing the world as society demanded required a strenuous attempt to alter one's perception of reality, quite literally to see selectively; the effort expended to repress any perceptions or feelings not sanctioned by code or legend.11

During the war, Cary and Edmonds would become well-practiced at such self-deception.

Society placed restrictions on both women's behavior and emotions: the belle "[was] taught by her society to repress instincts and displace emotions that linger in her unconscious, awaiting release."12 Southerners expected their young women to be virtuous and discreet. The belle should clearly understand the world around her and her role in it, but extraneous knowledge was discouraged: "clear perception of the world at large is not something in which a belle [had] much practice."13 Elite young women, however, commonly received an education, if not in a formal institution, then

12Ibid., XIV.
13Ibid., 61.
in the home. The Bible was a central text used in home education, and romantic novels became increasingly popular in the antebellum era. These novels reinforced what parents and peers taught young women. The content and underlying messages of popular books told the belle that she was to be held up as representative of southern virtue.

Young women were often taught to read and write by their mothers, and their early skills were frequently monitored in a journal or diary. Coleman, Bacot, Cary, and Edmonds, for example, each kept a diary as a record of her experiences during the war. Mary Louise Weaks states that "in searching for her individual voice, in evaluating her own life [through her journal], each woman cultivates a certain degree of power."\(^{14}\) Drew Gilpin Faust argues that keeping a journal "required self-reflection, the acknowledgment of self as individual and subject," rather than merely the decorative appendage of a husband and family.\(^ {15}\) But antebellum diaries tended to conform to expectations of proper subject matter and expression. Women knew that they were writing for an audience composed of at least their mothers. They "sustained their journals for deeply personal reasons, which could not entirely be separated from their sense of the journal's

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Journals trained young women in subjects appropriate to their class and gender. If they did not write what they necessarily felt, the diaries at least reveal what they believed they should say. The diary echoed notions of the ideal southern woman, and illustrated its owner's struggle to manifest those tenets in her own behavior. During the war, the diary entries of Coleman, Bacot, Cary, and Edmonds were often passionate, but on the whole, their journals reflect traditional ideologies and past practices.

When young women attended schools outside the home, these institutions tended to emphasize appropriate behavior and domestic skills. As the antebellum period progressed, women's education received greater attention, and the rising number of women working as teachers during the war propelled a well-supported movement in favor of improving educational opportunities and standards for young ladies. But women's education was not intended to alter traditional gender roles. Southerners--male and female--believed that "an educated woman could inhabit the [domestic] sphere more gracefully and conduct her female responsibilities more effectively." Coleman briefly attended one such school. Her father hoped his daughter's formal education would supplement that which she had received at home to better prepare her for marriage and motherhood.

The church similarly endorsed southern gender conventions. Religion served as an outlet for women's anxieties, but simultaneously reinforced the structure of their lives. They were taught to submit to the wills of God and man and to strive for perfection. That perfection required that they curtail independent thoughts and questionable actions. God-fearing southern women "were persuaded that the very qualities which made any human being a rich, interesting, assertive personality--a roving mind, spirit, ambition--were propensities to be curbed."¹⁸ Men were also steeped in religion, but society did not view their submission to God as incompatible with their broader educational opportunities and dominant role in society. Religion, however, restrained southern women from aspiring to more than the domestic sphere offered. Cary, the most overtly devout of the four women, would call on her religion throughout the war, and in accordance with these antebellum ideals, would do so from the confines of her home and the remnants of her social circle. Cary's faith, in fact, would succor her need to resist the unpleasant realities of war and the potential threats to gender prescriptions and their advantages.

The advantages gender conventions afforded southern women, however, cannot conceal the fact that few women were carefree ladies of leisure. For example, southern society revered motherhood as the most important role of its women, ¹⁸Ibid., 13.
but motherhood yielded significant frustrations and fears. The myth of the southern lady portrayed woman as the greatest influence on the new generation, but it failed to note the terrifying aspects of pregnancy and childbirth which often threatened the lives of both mother and child. Anne Firor Scott argues that "in the face of the idealization of the family and the aura of sanctity surrounding the word 'mother,' only in private could women give voice [to]...the dreadful fear of childbirth."19 The sanctity of motherhood lent greater significance to female gender conventions, but the accompanying anxieties and pressures left little room for the liberality implied by the myth of the southern lady: "for the majority, life was simple, demanding, limited to domestic assignments, and quite self-contained."20

In addition to the rigors of motherhood, southern ladies performed a number of necessary chores within the home. The presence of slaves might reduce the amount of sewing, cooking, and cleaning, but often the mistress of the house was responsible for monitoring and directing the slaves. The nature of her labors depended on a woman's wealth or station in society, but the majority had a number of domestic responsibilities. Anne Firor Scott and Suzanne Lebsock both note that urban women like Coleman and Cary--both of Williamsburg, Virginia--performed similar chores as their

19 Ibid., 37.
20 Ibid., 43.
rural counterparts, but that such women did not usually have the number of slaves at their disposal as plantation wives.\textsuperscript{21}

The myth of the southern lady was restrictive, but because southern society judged and defined women based on the myth's standards, women who deviated from gender conventions risked losing their respectability. More importantly, they risked losing the benefits of their race, gender and class—the foundation upon which they had established themselves in their society. Wealth and privilege were compelling arguments in favor of the status quo, but gender conventions reached into more personal arenas as well. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese maintains that southern gender roles were indeed confining, but that "they delineated an order that confirmed the women's deepest sense of who they were."\textsuperscript{22}

These qualities were not exclusive to the South and southern women. Northern middle and upper-class gender roles reflected a similar admiration for virtue, piety, and morality among women, and both northern and southern women aspired to those standards. Many northern women, however, had accommodated gender conventions to activities, such as reform work, which they did not share with their southern peers. As a result, northern gender systems gradually


deviated from those of the South, moving northern middle and upper-class women toward economic and political interests previously reserved for men.

Southern women, in general, were isolated from larger communities of women. The South was primarily rural, and did not develop the number of urban centers sprouting throughout the North in the antebellum era. Women on farms and plantations were often without the social advantages of local, well-attended churches and other community centers that might allow for more extensive contact with women of their race and class. They had their families and neighboring friends, but were commonly dependent upon long-distance relationships for extensive social circles. In the more densely populated North, by contrast, both urban and rural women had greater access to others who shared their status and interests. These "bonds" were strengthened by the rising tide of reform that began during the Second Great Awakening.

By the 1830s, numerous northern middle- and upper-class women had organized in moral and social reform efforts that comprised a broad spectrum from public health to abolition. According to historian Lori Ginzberg, female benevolence was originally justified and sustained by the notion that women were morally superior to men and therefore able to improve their communities through public reform. In response to critics wary of any potential threat to gender conventions, "reformers replied that benevolent work merely extended the
job of motherhood," but it ultimately allowed women access to new experiences and resources.23 Northern women feminized the work of benevolence, but benevolence gradually led these women and their daughters toward traditionally male responsibilities: "virtually all women who employed the language of moral change...moved casually into organizing for legislative action."24

Ginzberg traces the history of reform work in the North and argues that as the system of benevolence became more complex, many women became increasingly convinced that politics and benevolence were necessary bedfellows. Benevolence may have been distinctly female work, but early on, it had allowed women to augment gender conventions. For example, reformers began to legally incorporate their organizations. The process enabled them to own property, a right many women did not yet share. Similarly, fundraising grew to such levels that many women acquired financial skills on a far larger scale than the average home economy. Their activities retained their feminine character, but throughout the antebellum period and the Civil War, they acquired greater systemization and professionalization. At the same time, northern middle-class gender conventions were experiencing gradual and subtle changes.

24Ibid., 71.
Toward the end of the antebellum era, most reformers realized that they required political skills, contacts, and legal rights to achieve their diverse goals. From the beginning, reformers had developed working relationships with political figures, and many women became adept at manipulating the system, particularly upper-class reformers who socialized with politicians and office-holders. By the Civil War, however, most reformers acknowledged the need for more overt political alliances and access to the vote. Most did not call for national suffrage for women, but did request voting rights in reference to issues such as education and temperance on organizational and local levels. Reformers argued that women's moral superiority alone had failed to illicit the transformations for which they and their mothers had worked.

These new ideals emerged slowly through decades of experience and diversification, and affected groups of reformers at different times and with varying intensity. The nation as a whole turned its attention to the electoral process with renewed interest, and it was not inconsistent for the reform movement to do the same. Nevertheless, without voting rights, northern women were excluded from the reform process which had earlier been characterized as female. They recognized the need for tangible power within their organizations and local political efforts. As a result, middle- and upper-class reformers gradually insisted upon their right to determine policy and participate as
equals, at least within the confines of organization elections. The concept of women voting incited criticism from many corners, but the majority of benevolent workers did not seek enfranchisement on a national scale, and they met with successes sporadically.

By the Civil War, reformers had moved beyond the concept of morality as exclusively female, and gender conventions—by-and-large—had grown with their ideology. Women slowly feminized and professionalized reform work, subtly altering socially constructed gender roles to accommodate their activities. A small group of women, however, soon emerged demanding entrée into the political process as equals. The members of the nascent woman's rights movement had learned organizational and other skills from the abolitionist movement, but on issues such as suffrage, they veered dramatically from public reform's relatively conservative roots. In addition to suffrage, they addressed issues such as women's education and civil rights. They sought to reconstruct gender conventions along more equitable lines, and met resistance from both women and men. In the last years of the antebellum era, the woman's movement remained an unpopular cause in the North. Most viewed the movement as a complete violation of appropriate gender roles, despite the fact that those roles had not gone unchanged in the previous thirty years. Through reform, middle- and upper-class northern women had extended the definition of motherhood into very public arenas. The process had allowed them to hone
financial and political skills even as they remained virtuous helpmates and mothers, culminating in a gradual and subtle reevaluation of gender conventions.

The woman's movement was at least as equally ill-received in the South. Virginian John Hartwell Cocke, for example, was violently opposed to the activities of women he described as "this most impudent clique of unsexed females."\textsuperscript{25} Southern society remained inflexible, particularly on the issues of slavery and the status of women. Hidden behind the cloak of concern for women's virtue, prevailing paternalism sought to keep changing gender prescriptions in the North from gaining a foothold among the ladies of the South. Southern writer George Fitzhugh claimed that "women fare worse when thrown into this warfare of competition...the delicacy of her [sic] sex and her nature prevents her exercising those coarse arts which men do in the vulgar and promiscuous jostle of life."\textsuperscript{26} Women, southern men maintained, required protection from the dangers of public life. Women should function within the prescribed boundaries of their sex, and men, in turn, should protect and govern them.

Although some southerners encouraged extending the woman's sphere and expanding women's legal rights, the changes they supported were distinctly domestic. Alabama


fire-eater William L. Yancey, supported legislation for women's property rights. In particular, he advocated a woman's right to act as guardian to her children in her husband's absence. Yancey, however, placed a limit on women's rights and the extent of women's influence: "he would not 'disturb man's supremacy in the management of the political world.'"\(^\text{27}\) A woman's right to control her house and children did not, in his opinion, infringe on male prerogative in more public arenas.

Reform and relief organizations did emerge within the South's few urban areas, but their numbers and range did not parallel efforts in the North. Southern women were largely unable— if interested—to organize extensively among themselves. Again, the isolation of an agricultural region hindered cooperative efforts. In cities such as Richmond, Petersburg, and Charleston, women did participate in reform movements, but lost authority within their organizations in the 1850s. Perhaps alarmed by women's cooperative efforts and their potential effects on gender conventions, southern men overran women's charitable networks. Suzanne Lebsock argues that "the effect was to erase, in symbol and in organizational structure, the appearance of autonomous action by women in the public sphere."\(^\text{28}\) Southerners aborted a process that had been flowering in the North for decades, and

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"the voice of domestic politics was muted," at least temporarily, in the South.  

Had women like Cynthia Coleman, Ada Bacot, Harriette Cary, and Amanda Edmonds been interested in altering their society's gender prescriptions, they would have confronted almost universal opposition. Their decision to support the limitations that circumscribed their lives was shared by many—if not most—women of their race and class. These women had been raised to abide by certain rules that southern society deemed appropriate to their elite status, and their upbringing was imbued with lessons of quiet acquiescence: "southern women...fashioned aspirations for themselves in conformity with the dominant culture and social relations of their society." That culture allowed for few alternatives within gender constructions, race, and class, but in turn, women experienced innumerable benefits. The Civil War presented those women with the difficult problem of maintaining the roles and privileges that defined them as ladies in the absence of much of the male population.

The Civil War made unfamiliar demands of southern women, but expectations of appropriate behavior changed more slowly. The war left many women without the protection provided by their husbands and fathers, but since childhood, women had

29Leeann Whites, "The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender," from Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.
been "taught to believe, that for one half of the human race, the highest end of civilization is to cling upon the other, like a weed upon a wall."31 Elite southern women confronted difficult choices. They could continue to function according to prescribed mores and rely on Providence and the army for protection and deliverance; they could contribute to the cause from a rarely explored public realm; or they could find a way to actively respond to the war's demands that did not violate gender roles. Drew Gilpin Faust wrote in 1992 that "the American Civil War served as an occasion for both reassertion and reconsideration of gender assumptions."32 Women were in a position to become antebellum southern society's linchpins or the new South's architects. One South Carolina woman wrote, "I am constituted so as to crave a guide and protector, I am not an independent woman nor ever shall be," but like many others, this woman would have to navigate her way through the war despite her fears and reservations.33 The war forced southern women to announce their intentions regarding the future of their society.

Diaries often charted the course chosen by southern women. Many journals that once spoke only of religion, family, and society would now include references to rudimentary politics, experiences among wounded soldiers, and

32Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds. Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 171.
an amplified attachment to faith. Faust writes that antebellum women "celebrate[d] helplessness," but that the war "began to undermine abstract ideological commitments to notions of appropriate female roles." To many women, however, the ideal woman was neither an abstract nor helpless, but a tangible and admirable goal that required effort and skill, and provided enormous benefits. The war may have gradually denuded their society's pretenses, but few elite women believed that the concept of the lady was a pretense. These women responded to the necessities of war in ways that were often foreign to them, but that does not mean they necessarily relinquished their antebellum principles. Their writings would ultimately reveal to what extent they had defied the conventions of their pre-war lives and recreated gender prescriptions.

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Part II

From March to May, 1862, Confederate forces on the Virginia Peninsula stood ready as General George McClellan inched his way north. The town of Williamsburg stood in direct line of the planned assault on Richmond from the Southeast. At the outbreak of war in 1861, Williamsburg's citizens found that their loyalty to Virginia outweighed the mixed feelings for secession that many felt. On May 5, 1862, a few of those citizens witnessed the brief Battle of Williamsburg from the cupola of the Eastern State Hospital. The last of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's rearguard pulled out of Williamsburg that night, and the following morning, McClellan and the United States army marched into and occupied Williamsburg. Over 3,400 men had been shot or killed during the battle, and Union soldiers brought the wounded of both armies into the town. The Baptist and Episcopal churches, the College of William and Mary, the court house, and several private homes became temporary hospitals. Abandoned houses served as barracks, and McClellan ordered all homes in which the owners had

remained to be guarded by sentries in order to protect and monitor the movements of their residents.

On May 9, McClellan continued up the Peninsula, leaving the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry to occupy Williamsburg. Victoria Lee was sixteen during the first summer of Williamsburg's occupation. She later recalled,

The United States troops who were left in Williamsburg ... used [the Williamsburg Inn] as a commissary. A large flag—a United States flag, of course—was placed on the front of this building, so that it hung out over the sidewalk; and the girls of Williamsburg, to avoid walking under it, used to walk out in the road. The United States troops, not to be outdone, however, got a long flag and stretched it completely across the Main Street.37

Over the course of the Civil War, Williamsburg would endure occupation by Union soldiers for nearly three years, interrupted by intervals of local Confederate successes. For the residents who remained—primarily women and children, slaves, invalids and the elderly—food and fuel supplies decreased rapidly. One absent husband and father wrote that his family in Williamsburg was "for the most part living upon the charities of our vile enemies. What a condition!"38 Several of Williamsburg's citizens confronted their situation with extraordinary personal fortitude. Just as many, however, figuratively retreated into relative isolation and the comforts of tradition.

38Letter from John R. Coupland. Dorsey Coupland Papers. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
One of Williamsburg's affluent citizens, Harriette Cary, kept a journal during the first summer of Williamsburg's occupation. Cary, then 23, wrote to assuage her fears, and she protected the diary within the folds of her skirt. The diary provided an opportunity to release her growing anger and frustration, emotions which would not ordinarily have been expressed as passionately in polite company. Cary was among those southern women who found refuge in the past. She created a world of peace within her occupied town by adhering strictly to her antebellum routines and standards. She stayed close to her home and friends, and although she was a staunch Confederate, she avoided speaking publicly on the subjects of politics and war. Even within the confines of her diary, Cary addressed only the war's immediate effects on her community, and avoided any discussion of the larger issues of slavery and secession.

Cary was one of many women who consciously resisted change by clinging to antebellum conventions. She was not unaware of the war, but she chose to defer to the past in constructing her present and future. Historian Suzy Clarkson Holstein writes that "by allowing herself to serve as an ideal symbol, the Southern woman believed herself to be fulfilling her duty to her country."39 Cary, among others, adhered to the ideals of southern womanhood when confronting Union occupation. She expressed patriotism through her

inactivity, and in so doing, sustained the limitations within which she had been raised.

The thread that runs consistently through Cary's journal is her faith in God and Providence. Her prayers interrupt and conclude each passage with increasing intensity. Like many southern women, she subscribed to the notion that God was on the side of the Confederacy and would not forsake her. In 1936, historians Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton contended that "the most potent factor in stimulating the faith of the women in the Confederacy...was their sincere and almost absolute belief in a just and omnipotent Providence." More recently, Drew Gilpin Faust has argued that religion was the "most fundamental source of legitimation for the Confederacy." Cary prayed often for the soldiers and her new country: "May God continue his support for which we pray, and give us the Victory!"

Religion constitutes the bulk of her diary, and her feelings are often those of revenge. These prayers appeal to a more vengeful deity than the one to whom she addresses her pleas for peace. Her anger toward the Federal army and unionists in general was satiated with the hope that this righteous and just God would allow the Confederacy to conquer its oppressors. She wrote, "through God we shall do valiantly--

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42 Harriette Cary, Diary. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
it is he that shall tread down our enemies."43 Her devotion is not surprising considering the emphasis placed on the religious piety of antebellum southern women. Cary had been well schooled in the tenets of evangelical Protestantism, as defined by the South. She deferred to God and men in all things, and regardless of her situation, continued to hold her tenuous faith throughout the long summer.

The final God to whom she appealed was the father and protector. In the early entries of her journal, her faith is unerring: "may God in his mercy grant us his aid! Hear us Heavenly Father when we humbly lift our hearts to thee....We must patiently await the glory I confidently believe God will vouchsafe us!"44 By and large, she remained calm, but as the summer progressed, she became more anxious. The Confederate army had been otherwise engaged and unable to reclaim Williamsburg.

Cary continued to pray for soldiers and friends, and began to attend daily prayer meetings. The participants, early in May, became concerned that the soldiers would disrupt their services. The arrests of several citizens by the military governor had thrown the town into disarray, and the truly pious chose to worship in private: "in our closets then we will lift up our hearts to our Preserver."45 They met frequently and secretly in the homes of her friends. This intensity of devotion illustrates the tenacity with which

43Ibid.
44Ibid.
45Ibid.
many women clung to the religion that had dominated their childhood and had defined their lives before the war, women's deeply rooted religious faith, the very core of their being...ultimately provided solace and helped in their eventual acceptance of life's adversities. Illness, death, and even the war itself were viewed by many as manifestations of the will of God.46

Southern women were inculcated with the notion of their subordination to men, including God. Cary is exemplary of that ideal. Author Virginia Cary wrote in 1831,

Religion, if not most manifest in feminine deportment, is at least most necessary to enable women to perform their allotted duties in life. The very nature of those duties demands the strength of Christian people to ensure their correct and dignified performance; while the nature of female trials, requires all the meliorating powers of faith, to induce a requisite measure of patience and fortitude.47

The war, above all, was the greatest trial of Harriette Cary's life, and her religious upbringing appears to have given her access to the consistency and comfort of her life before 1862. Drew Gilpin Faust has noted that religious institutions throughout the South supported the Confederate cause and preached Confederate ideology by likening southerners to the children of Israel.48 Religious leaders argued that both were victims of a brutal oppressor, and they drew a connection between the tenets of southern

evangelicalism and the distinctly southern interpretation of republicanism. Cary accepted and endorsed this explanation, despite the fact that for many southerners, their religious convictions became more difficult to sustain with every northern victory. Cary's God was political as well as benevolent. She believed that He knew that the southern cause was just, and would therefore ultimately alleviate her suffering and deliver the South from the war. Cary gradually became more concerned about the fate of Williamsburg—the tone of her entries is increasingly desperate—but she did not relinquish her faith. It continued to serve as the foundation of her diary and daily life despite Williamsburg's declining condition: "O God, be not angry with us forever—in mercy help us—make no long tarrying, O my God!"49

Cary, absorbed by her religion and routine, made few, aborted visits to the hospitals. She described eye witness accounts of their horrors, but generally stayed away. Society discouraged southern women from working as nurses: "there was no tolerance whatever for young, unmarried women in these positions."50 But the Civil War necessitated adjustments, and Virginia, as a primary and consistently bloody theater of war, required a large nursing staff. As a result, many southerners came to overlook the impropriety of women's participation in the hospitals. Cary, however, spent

49Harriette Cary, Diary. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
her time visiting friends, reading, and praying, regardless of these exceptions. Her devotion to God implies a serious minded, pious young lady, but the remainder of her diary illustrates an ill-informed, often frivolous "belle."

Following one of her few trips to the hospital, she wrote

I could control neither tongue nor tears and told [the Federal director of the hospital] as I wept 'twas inhuman to torture the suffering . . . Called on a friend after this heart-rending scene, whom I've not seen since the grand entrée.51

The experience in the hospital is retold dramatically, but the discussion immediately shifts to gossip. The tone of the diary continues in this vein; Cary prays with intensity and then calls on her network of friends from whom she seeks gossip and diversion. She would not have been turned away from the hospitals, but dwelling too intently on the victims of the war would directly acknowledge its impositions on her life. In addition, tending to the needs of southern soldiers, most of whom were members of the lower classes, might blur the distinctions that defined her own status and its advantages. Cary instead chose to live much as she had before the war.

In the antebellum South, "calling" consumed a significant portion of a woman's time. Cary appears to have tried to retain a sense of past normalcy by occupying herself with similar activities. The subjects of conversation changed in particular households, but the ceremony had not.

51Harriette Cary, Diary. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
She wrote of her visits as if nothing else were going on in Williamsburg: "found our beloved Pastor upon reaching home, who accompanied me on a visit to Q. D. with whom I have spent the remainder of the day, am spending the night, and know not when I shall tear myself from her delightful society."52

The majority of wounded Confederate soldiers with whom Cary came into contact were those recuperating in private homes. She did not seem to acknowledge the serious nature of their situation. Once well enough, the wounded were taken as prisoners of war to be either exchanged or imprisoned in Federal camps. For Cary, however, they were an added diversion, and the war was incidental to the entertainment they provided,

Sociability very much alleviates our bondage--I see my friends frequently, with pleasure, while the little attention I pay the suffering whiles the tedium of indoor life--Nearly every family has one or more of the wounded, whom it affords them great pleasure to nurse.53

Diaries before the war were filled with descriptions of visits to friends and family: "part of virtually every day was spent visiting with one's friends and otherwise circulating."54 The events and conversations included in Cary's diary are startlingly similar to those of antebellum women: "the conversation so far as it has been recorded,

52Ibid.
53Ibid.
dwelt heavily on personal topics, with religion running a close second."\textsuperscript{55}

"Calling" symbolized the antebellum social order. It was an activity of white, elite women. Calling thereby delineated one's circle of friends and social status, but it also provided companionship for women: "in towns and cities...fashionable calls articulated a female society."\textsuperscript{56} Cary ignored many of the restrictions imposed by the Union army regarding residents' movements. Her old routine provided a needed distraction and diminished--at least superficially--the challenges posed by the war. Cary's extension of this practice also suggests the intensity of her faith in southern society and its requirements for young women. Despite occupation and the rapid disintegration of that society, Cary maintained the guise of a southern lady and refused to challenge its limitations.

Early southern writers viewed the belle as representative of the South itself--pure, spiritual, and noble. Their novels presented the ideal woman heroically clinging to her virtue and piety as she is tested and eventually vindicated. Novels echoed popular thought by delineating the boundaries of appropriate behavior and illustrating the incorruptibility of the true southern woman. She was ideal in both demeanor and appearance, but the latter


had serious consequences for many young women. Katherine Lee Seidel has argued that "the Old South...produce[d] a woman whose appearance was emphasized from babyhood, to the detriment of her intellect, personality, and talents."57 As a reminder of the attributes she was raised to embody, Cary read Maria Edgeworth's Helen. Southern women "viewed reading as directly relevant to their lives, [novels]...encoded a fragile balance between the self-promotion of the belle and the self-abnegation of the Christian wife and mother."58 Edgeworth's novels were considered appropriate reading for young women because they advocated the piety and restraint necessary for becoming a proper southern lady. Helen is the story of a woman who struggles with misfortune, and who is ultimately redeemed by sacrifice and her innate virtue. Cary's choice of Helen reflected her upbringing and reinforced her rejection of changes in her society:

Yet there is comfort in the hope of some respite—in which we may once more enjoy the comforts and beauties of the past...[I] have been completely engrossed by Miss E's delightful style, which I enjoyed to the end, and regret very much that it cannot be prolonged.59

Women read to "compensate for their limited intellectual opportunities" and to escape the monotony and pressure of their pre-war lives.60 During the war, "the realm of

57Katherine Lee Seidel. The Southern Belle in the American Novel (Tampa: The University of South Florida Press, 1985), XV.
59Harriette Cary, Diary. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
books...offered them a world beyond suffering, war, and death, a world in which they found an order, and a sense of control and purpose."\(^6^1\) Helen reminded Cary of the alleged power of the ideal woman and provided a momentary and entertaining escape from occupation.

Cary enjoyed her diversions and was not interested in an active role in the politics of the war and occupation. She had one central conviction: she was without remorse for her hatred of Yankees. Christian charity did not extend to her enemies, and she often wrote of injustices and thievery. The events of war, however, did not play a role in her journal. She dismissed them as "Yankee lies," or reverted immediately to prayer in response to unsettling news.\(^6^2\) She did not choose to write about the more pertinent issues of the war, let alone participate in local efforts to alleviate the burdens of both Williamsburg and the Confederacy. Cary, for example, did not describe battles, specific events during Williamsburg's occupation, or organized attempts on the part of civilians to aid the South. She was apparently not well versed in the politics of her time, and allowed an overarching dislike for all things northern to guide her. She further left the outcome of the war to God, and ignored the allowances made to those women who wished to contribute more than their prayers to the Confederate cause.


\(^6^2\)Harriette Cary, Diary. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
Ultimately, Cary believed that her greatest contribution lay in faith and her attempts to observe pre-war society's demands on its young women. Her efforts indicate that she was not passively accepting her situation, but neither could one call her an active participant. She resisted action as well as change. Cary's behavior was reactionary and conservative, and she remained firmly within the confines of antebellum southern gender conventions.

Another Virginian followed Cary's example and managed to sustain it for the duration of the Civil War. Amanda Virginia Edmonds, a resident of Fauquier County in northern Virginia, was in her mid-twenties at the outset of the war. She was born in 1839 in Paris, Virginia. Her home, Belle Grove— an ironic sobriquet for the house of a young, single, southern girl— stood in the Piedmont Valley, an area known as "the Debatable Land" because its residents split their allegiances between the North and the South. It was also an area of considerable military activity. In 1862, John Singleton Mosby, then a Lieutenant in the Confederate army, led frequent scouting parties and raids on behalf of General J.E.B. Stuart's 6th Virginia Cavalry. Mosby's men often stayed in the homes of Confederate loyalists, adding an atmosphere of perpetual socializing to an otherwise war torn region.

Edmonds, also known as "Tee," began her diary four years before the attack on Fort Sumter. Her narrative detailed her daily activities, her devotion to the church, and her
affection for a series of men. Like Cary's diary, Edmonds' largely reflects the education of the belle. Edmonds was concise, and she attempted to bring an immature poetry to her language. At the death of her father in 1857 she wrote, "O! it cannot, cannot be that he is gone, O gone from us forever; that he is now in the cold embrace of death, that his lonely chamber will be forsaken forever." 63

Edmonds was a dedicated diarist. She described her clothing, the weather, trips into town, and her family— all subjects appropriate for her sex and age. Once the war began, she, like Cary, remained fairly consistent in the nature of her entries. The war prompted changes in the basic framework of her writings, but her concerns and activities did not diverge from her earlier interests. Edmonds' diary revolved around her romantic attachments to men both before and during the war. Her fanciful notions of love ultimately circumscribed her discussions of the antebellum and Civil War South.

Edmonds was a Methodist and participated in lengthy revival meetings as well as Sunday services. Initially, she appears to have been devoted to her religion. She wrote about the sermons she heard and the hymns of the day. Upon discovering that a friend had converted to the Baptist church, Edmonds lamented, "poor fickle girl what will ever become of her. The course she has taken!...Do they know what

a solemn thing it is to make pretensions of religion?" The statement is ironic considering the remainder of the diary: despite Edmonds' self-proclaimed religious devotion, her attendance and attention often depended on the appearance of the minister running the service. In August, 1858 her traditional pattern of observance suffered a lapse of interest: "Mr. Waugh like to have put me to sleep though I heard a little of the sermon." Edmonds reserved much of her concentration for particular ministers. Her devotion often hinged on the fact that her pre-war romantic interests were limited to members of the clergy.

Ministers traveled throughout the area, creating a random rotation of clerics within Edmonds' church. Revival meetings also brought new faces into upper Fauquier County. Several of Edmonds' comments were innocent: she admired certain ministers for their conviction and the power with which they delivered their sermons. Nevertheless, a different motive underlies many of her entries: "Mr. Dashield...after delivering one of his great sermons, he solemnly offered the house to God...he is looking well and handsome as ever; he used to be a great favorite of mine on the circuit." Among her other "favorites" was the Reverend George V. Leech. She admired his ability as a man of God, but she soon developed a deeper affection for him. After sewing her

64 Ibid., 9.
65 Ibid., 15.
66 Ibid., 2.
initials into the lining of one of his gloves, she remarked that he was "the present star of my attractions."\(^6^7\) She lost interest in the church once he left to assume his duties at another pulpit. Until, of course, she saw his brother at a revival meeting: "I could not keep my eyes from following him....If he wasn't so bad, I should have lost my heart for his brother's sake."\(^6^8\) Elements of sincere piety still emerge from her diary. In September, 1858, she attended three prayer meetings in four days, and was particularly impressed with one minister's sermon on the evil of vanity, yet her genuine devotion was overshadowed by her passion for romance.

On one occasion, she deviated abruptly from the more proper tone of the rest of her early entries. She was infatuated with a new preacher, Theodore Carson, but her dreams included George Leech as well as his brother, Samuel:

> I saw Theodore pass in the stage...I went to Paris [Virginia] and found myself at the parsonage enjoying myself very much listening at Sam [Leech's] long tongue. Mrs. Waugh and I were very good friends, was lying on the bed resting my head on her lap...listening and talking to Bro. L....I was on the eve of asking about Bro. George, but was disturbed.\(^6^9\)

She later remarked that she was perhaps destined to love only those associated with the church.

> With the advent of the war, the object of Edmonds' affection changed, but the tone of the diary did not. She continued to write about her romantic liaisons--real or simply desired--with little regard for the overall context of

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\(^{6^7}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{6^8}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{6^9}\) Ibid., 20-21.
the war and its hardships. Unlike Williamsburg, Fauquier
County was not continually occupied by Union soldiers. The
region frequently changed hands, and much of the early
success was the Confederacy's. Amanda Edmonds often had more
to celebrate than Harriette Cary, but like Cary, Edmonds
translated her antebellum routines and attitudes into her
war-time experiences.

Edmonds found that her abiding love for the clergy
expanded to include Confederate soldiers. In fact, she
rarely mentioned the clergy once her neighbors began to
enlist. Edmonds' two brothers both joined J.E.B. Stuart's
Company A, and she became acquainted with many of their
friends throughout the war. Like Cary who viewed the wounded
as an extension of her social circle, Edmonds wrote of
soldiers as potential beaux rather than as participants in a
war that constantly affected her community. By April, 1862,
she was carrying an ambrotype "of my southern soldier
friend," Lieutenant Matthew Ferrell Magner, in her pocket to
protect this "treasure" from uninvited Yankee visitors.70 She
paid little or no attention to that fact that her romantic
entanglements were dictated by a larger, sobering, and
devastating series of events.

The Edmonds family received frequent visits from the
Union army. Soldiers appeared at the Edmonds' door demanding
food and often initiating conversations with Virginia. She
does not appear to have been particularly friendly, but

70Ibid., 74.
neither was she rude during their exchanges. Her record of these conversations are straightforward and lack the intense hatred of Cary's narrative: "a little fellow about thirteen or fourteen told me his name was Benny Butler...He was a happy faced little fellow and the most polite I have seen. While they ate, we had a chat. They seemed sanguine of whipping the South." Edmonds remained true to the Confederacy, however. She injected loyalist comments when speaking to Union soldiers, but she largely remained a polite young southern woman. Her crueler remarks were often couched in flirtation. After a lengthy and not entirely unpleasant visit from Union soldiers, she "told them I hoped to hear of them soon having a fight and running. I could have added killed but I thought that too severe." She reserved these relatively harsher comments for her diary. Her boldness reflected the emerging confidence of many southern women, but Edmonds was tempered with a self-restraint reminiscent of the lessons of her adolescence.

Edmonds' favorite visitors were the soldiers of Stuart's Cavalry. The diary is filled with descriptions of recent battles and lost friends, but Edmonds found the company of soldiers enlivening at the least: "how I do love to see strangers and hear them talk of their adventures and everything connected with our great calamity." Edmonds was not alone in her distraction. Many women attributed the war

71Ibid., 75.
72Ibid., 76.
73Ibid., 138.
with a romance not found on the battlefield. Throughout the war, cities like Richmond, Virginia held parties that celebrated victories, reminded citizens of past grandeur, and, in particular, bolstered morale. Women in both rural and urban areas attended parties, picnics, and dances, and young, single women often succumbed to the patriotic glamour of southern soldiers. Some women frowned on war-time frivolities, but as many enjoyed the diversion and appreciated the confidence the parties temporarily rebuilt. Women and men yielded to the need for such distractions, and although Belle Grove's residents did not have the opportunity to attend grand parties, Edmonds found pleasure in dining and visiting with young soldiers.

Despite her apparent fickleness, Edmonds claimed to have remained faithful to Lieutenant Magner: "I have succeeded in breaking the ice of reserve between us and, if I can keep the resolution, I will break more than that before we part our respective duties of life." But another prospective suitor, George Chappelear, won Edmonds' heart with patience and perseverance. She wrote that she was reluctant to believe his intentions were romantic: "I can not believe it. No! No! until I have further evidence...that he deeply, madly loves me. I have, I hope...erased the erroneous impression he had received of my being a flirt, for flirt I am not." Her protests notwithstanding, Edmonds could not resist teasing

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74 Ibid., 199.
75 Ibid., 198.
and tormenting him. On one of his visits, she brought out an ambrotype of an old beau "and commenced going on about it, when he grabbed it from me and tore it to pieces, thus hoping to destroy my particular love for Methodist ministers." Edmonds admitted privately that her affection for the clergy was indeed past her, indirectly admitting that she had replaced it with the company of soldiers. Unlike Cary, she acknowledged changes in her social life. But like Cary, she ignored the significance of the enormous catalyst that initiated the substitution of ministers with soldiers.

Although Edmonds' discussions of particular events in the war were extensive, her attention was always overtaken by romance. Her mother visited local hospitals, and cared for wounded Confederates, but Edmonds remained in a routine dominated by social activities. She called on neighbors and attended church, but her religion largely remained a worship of earthly men. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes that the antebellum South "was a society in which the protection of belonging, of associating oneself with a white male, was often a political necessity." In Edmonds' case it appears to have assumed significance not only politically, but emotionally as well. In the face of unbearable changes in southern society, Cary intensified her religious faith, and Edmonds re-focused her sense of romance. Both relied on the

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76Ibid., 198.  
dominant component of their antebellum lives to endure and, perhaps, outlast those changes.

Anne Firor Scott argues that women's ability to remain confident and continue an active social life waned by the end of the war. Edmonds is testimony to the fact that women were able, even in areas of prolonged occupation, to fight for the society they understood by adhering to its routines. By 1865, Edmonds was still a belle of the pre-war South. She derived her strength and resolve from her byronic encounters with soldiers, and like many antebellum belles, concerned herself with the search for a beau or husband. Although she never ignored the facts of the war, Edmonds was largely able to prolong the life of her social sphere by romanticizing the war's participants.

Cary's and Edmonds' relatively passive approach to Federal occupation represented a direct statement of their intention to ignore the changes that followed the presence of an enforced northern order. They continued the antebellum routines of calling and otherwise socializing, and resisted commenting directly on the war. Both women visited the hospitals as infrequently as possible, and viewed those wounded with whom they came into contact as an extension of their social lives. Finally, they reminded themselves of life before the war through prayer, reading, romance, and writing in their diaries. Neither could avoid the fact of the war, and their basic acknowledgment is evident in their prayers, but they could avoid accepting its encroachments on
their daily lives and sphere. Cary and Edmonds did not run away from the challenges of war, but confronted them with the specific intention of preserving the society they understood. That society had defined these women since childhood as ladies, an ideal that entailed behavior appropriate to their race, class, and gender. To relinquish such conventions would risk undermining their sense of identity and the privileges they afforded.
Part III

A Union officer stationed in Greenville, South Carolina during Reconstruction commented that

they certainly are, these "Southrons," a different people from us Northerners; they are, perhaps, as unlike us as the Spartans to the Athenians, or the Poles to the Germans; they are more simple than we, more provincial, more antique, more picturesque.78

This officer undoubtedly encountered women like Cary and Edmonds during his tenure in the post-war South. Notions of the belle and the southern lady survived the war, but this demure domestic icon had been temporarily altered or abandoned by many. Cary, Edmonds, and numerous women throughout the South maintained their home-bound intensity. But many breached those conventions, commanding the respect and provoking the ire of the Federal army. Had this officer witnessed the war-time activities of women like Williamsburg's Cynthia Coleman, his impression of southerners might not have been quite as patronizing.

Cynthia Beverly Tucker Washington Coleman lived in Williamsburg in May, 1862. Coleman, then 30 years old, stayed in her family's house with, among others, her mother and younger sister. She sent her daughter—the only surviving child of her first marriage to Henry Augustine

Washington—to Richmond with relatives. Washington had died in 1858, and his widow remarried in October, 1861. Her second husband, Dr. Charles Coleman, left Williamsburg to secure a position in the Confederate medical corps. Cynthia Coleman chose to stay in Williamsburg to care for her family and the soldiers who were forced to remain behind.

Throughout her childhood, Coleman's father, Nathanial Beverly Tucker, emphasized "passivity, domesticity, and moral power," and he dominated the life of his daughter. Coleman had been taught rudimentary reading, writing, and domestic skills at home, and was sent to boarding school in 1847. Her brief formal education centered around preparing her for a future as a wife, mother, and moral guide. Coleman thereafter was taught by her parents and cousins, conservative leaders of the Old South. The death of her father in 1851 led to her deeper commitment to the adult responsibilities he had proscribed.

Coleman kept a journal of her experiences during the war. Following the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, she took her entries and began writing a series of essays as an explanation of her struggles. She described her activities, small victories, and revelations with the intention of explaining the events of the war and her role in it to her children.

Antebellum male gender conventions were defined in large part by politics, economics, and warfare. By contrast, female conventions primarily revolved around religion, social and personal events. The most notable difference between the diaries of Cary and Edmonds and that of Cynthia Coleman is the latter's activity beyond the strict boundaries of her gender. She chose to become a witness to the war's brutalities, and took a deliberate, public stand against perceived injustices. But regardless of their drastically different and often opposing approaches to occupation, Cary, Edmonds, and Coleman believed they were acting in the best interests of women and the South.

Cynthia Coleman's diary did not focus on literature, socializing, or religion. She described a Presbyterian minister praying under the windows of several homes, and like Cary, mentioned participating in the homebound prayer meetings. Coleman, however, kept herself occupied in the various makeshift hospitals throughout the town. Cary found solace in religion and routine, and Edmonds in romance, but Coleman was comforted by a more active and public role.

Coleman chose to nurse the wounded in Williamsburg's overcrowded hospitals. Society tolerated her actions because the war made her new role necessary, but Coleman's participation was bearable largely because she was married. Society came to sanction the use of "women of maturity" in
the hospitals, from both the lower and elite classes.\textsuperscript{80} Southerners believed that older, married women were safer from strange young soldiers' advances than young, single belles. But more importantly, many women were able to justify their work as nurses because—much like early northern reform efforts—they could associate nursing with the maternal instinct inherent in the tenets of womanhood.

Coleman wrote of her extensive experiences with the wounded. She viewed the Federal doctors largely as incompetent drunks: "the victims suffered everything of mutilation and ignominy from a brutal, drunken surgeon...He won for himself... the sobriquet of 'Head Devil'."\textsuperscript{81} Her heroism and the suffering of the wounded rebels dominate her journal. She saved a young man from losing his arm by hiding him in a closet and feeding him secretly until he recovered. When the "Head Devil" told her that he had volunteered for service without pay hoping to receive his reward in Heaven, Coleman, infuriated by his treatment of rebel soldiers, replied, "I trust you may get what you richly deserve, but it will not be in Heaven."\textsuperscript{82} She found strength and a sense of purpose in this public role, and she appears to have spent a majority of her time in it.

While Coleman continued to practice her religion and care for her home, she felt that contributing to the

\textsuperscript{80}Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton. \textit{The Women of the Confederacy} (New York: Garrett & Massie, Incorporated, 1936), 89.
\textsuperscript{81}Cynthia B. T. Coleman, Diary. Tucker-Coleman Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
\textsuperscript{82}Ibid.
Confederate cause through nursing the wounded better suited her. Publicly, such women were rarely acknowledged for their efforts because "the prevailing conception of feminine propriety prevented the creation of hospital heroines through newspaper publicity," but Coleman persisted.83 Southern women who worked outside the home before the war were predominantly from the lower classes. Elite women—or ladies—were expected to remain at home. Coleman had thus taken advantage of a situation that allowed her to participate voluntarily in a world of outspoken decision-makers, recently reserved for men.

Society and religion contributed to a belle's sense of herself. Cary and Edmonds regretted what they seemed to be losing and made every effort to cling to it. Coleman had already achieved marriage and motherhood—ostensibly the goals of the belle—and was more interested in establishing a temporary place for herself within a desperate and changing society. She did not spend her time socializing, but fighting for the rights of the wounded by constantly observing and challenging their treatment by Federal doctors. In the antebellum South, such outspokenness would not have boded well for her reputation. A northern contemporary wrote of women that "passionate ambition, virile energy, the love of strong excitement, self-assertion, fierceness...are all qualities which detract from her ideal of womanliness, and

which make her less beautiful than she was meant to be." But by defending the rights of southern men, Coleman acted to protect southern ideals and social standards. Coleman's beliefs varied from Cary's and Edmonds' only in that her methods involved nursing soldiers rather than flirting with them.

Coleman's efforts in the hospitals transgressed prevailing gender prescriptions. Her contact with the Federal army represents a step—albeit limited—into local politics, but further reflects her attempts to preserve Williamsburg's past. Coleman frequently confronted Union officers, demanding better treatment for wounded Confederate soldiers, and she publicly criticized their management of Williamsburg's occupation. In the absence of both her husband and father, Coleman came to know members of the Federal army and did not reserve her demands or advice for her diary. She could not determine policy, but she did not simply demur to a male opinion. Williamsburg was not void of southern men, and she could have allowed a Confederate doctor to speak for her. Coleman, however, did not seek a male representative for her opinions, and she risked censure—at the very least—to venture into an unfamiliar arena.

Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton wrote in 1936 that "the general attitude of the Southern women toward the men who were invading their states was characterized by

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an inordinate hatred."85 Coleman, while bitterly opposed to the North, does not appear to have applied her animosity to the individuals with whom she came into contact, unless they provided her with sufficient cause. She disliked the Federal doctors because she believed they abused the Confederate wounded, but Coleman was guided in her evaluations of particular northerners by the values with which she had been raised. Ironically, these values allowed her to interact on pleasant terms with several Yankees, including a 24-year-old lieutenant named Dissosway.

Lieutenant Dissosway procured a pass for Coleman to enter the Confederacy. They spoke briefly about the war on the day he delivered it to her. Although she dismissed his reasons for fighting—"he made some foolish reply about the flag—as they all do"—she was grateful for his efforts on her behalf.86 He died shortly after their visit from wounds inflicted by a subordinate. Coleman supervised the shipment North of Dissosway's body, writing letters of condolence and sending flowers to his mother. She later wrote: "I am very sorry, for I liked him as well as I could one of his hated race...He was very much a gentleman and attractive in all ways but one--being a Yankee soldier was certainly very much against him."87 On a trip down the peninsula at the end of the summer, she was stopped by Union soldiers, but released

86Cynthia B. T. Coleman, Diary. Tucker-Coleman Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
87Ibid.
when they realized that she was the woman who had sent Lieutenant Dissosway home with such care. She wrote, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."\(^8\) Her kindness toward Dissosway and his mother did not spring from a new opinion of northerners, but a habit of nurturing which had constituted a majority of her education. In applying those standards consistently, she re-affirmed her faith in the righteousness of her up-bringing.

Although Coleman's intermittent generosity was both thoughtful and compassionate, it was not unique: "the women of certain areas, in which the attachment of the population to the principles of the Confederate cause was not so pronounced, were willing to exhibit cordial tendencies toward the invaders."\(^9\) But like most southern women of her class, Coleman remained a loyal Confederate. She was defiant of Federal authority and reveled in frustrating Union soldiers: "I am so glad no Yankee has ever gotten the better of me. I quite enjoy their hatred, though they may yet make me suffer for it."\(^0\) Her experience with Dissosway and his family was the conditioned response of a wife and mother who had been inculcated with the ideals of virtue and morality. She acknowledged the favor returned to her by the Federals, but the same ideals with which she was raised included dedication to the society that defined those ideals. Ultimately, her

\(^8\)Ibid.
\(^0\)Cynthia B. T. Coleman, Williamsburg Essays. Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library.
resistance to, and communication with, the Federal army were necessary to her goal of preserving Williamsburg and its social order.

Coleman appears to have leapt into a space abandoned by southern men. She did not restrict herself to "the imprisonment" to which Cary was "resigned."\(^\text{91}\) Her work in the hospitals, defiance of Federal oppression—particularly in fighting for the rights of wounded Confederate soldiers—and her direct contact with members of the Union army indicate that she sought a place for herself in the society of occupation beyond that of wife and homemaker. She was older than Cary and Edmonds, and married, giving her greater access to the hospitals, but both married and single women were commonly subject to limitations that applied to women as a group. In contrast to her antebellum life, Coleman's public activities seem unusually bold. But her behavior did not constitute direct defiance of the southern ideal of womanhood.

Northern women had made similar advances in the decades before the Civil War, rewriting gender prescriptions in the process. Coleman, however, made little attempt to retain the independence she had achieved. In essays written during Reconstruction, she revealed not only that she had returned to a relatively subordinate role, but that she looked back on her activities as unfortunate necessities: "it was a very

\(^{\text{91}}\) Harriette Cary, Diary. Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
wild thing for a woman of my mature years to engage in, and I have often regretted it because it did not meet with the approval of my husband then absent."92 She had acted outside of the conventional boundaries of southern womanhood, and once reunited with her husband after the war, she returned comfortably to deferring to his judgment.

Dr. Coleman alone, however, could not solve his family's immediate financial problems. The war devastated the southern economy and shortages continued after the surrender. In response to her family's needs, Cynthia Coleman once again expanded the lessons of her upbringing and the function of her domestic haven. In 1866, Coleman opened a school for young ladies, listing herself as its principal and primary instructor. The overall success of her investment is unknown, and she continued to dedicate the majority of her time to her home and children, of whom four were born during Reconstruction. Drew Gilpin Faust argues that, following the war, southern women "found it difficult any longer to celebrate helplessness."93 She maintains that southern women were unprepared for the war's demands, yet eventually recognized the value of the skills they learned during the conflict. But as both Bacot and Coleman demonstrate, many women employed skills rooted in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Antebellum southerners praised the

dependent woman, but they did not commend incompetence in either men or women. Coleman embraced abilities which she had learned within the confines of womanhood and antebellum prescriptions. Her post-war activities were consistent with that role. They reflect her proficiency as a provider for her family, and they were shaped by her parenting skills. The context of Coleman's life had changed, and she had learned of crisis from experience, but her domestic creed—both its lessons and its limitations—endured essentially intact.

Cynthia Coleman and women like her chose to publicly contribute their skills and resources to the Confederate cause in the Virginia theater. Many were raised as elite members of southern society, but they participated in the war effort as doctors' assistants, administrators, and companions for the wounded. Their role was that of caretaker, and did not vary distinctly from that of wife or mother. Like many early northern reformers, they believed that their public activities were an extension of their duties as women. They approached those tasks with the socially constructed roles and responsibilities of their sex in mind.

One such woman, Ada W. Bacot, was born into a wealthy South Carolina family in 1832. She was educated at St. Mary's Academy in Raleigh, North Carolina, and married her second cousin, Thomas Wainwright Bacot, Jr. in 1851. They set up housekeeping on a new plantation, and had two daughters, both of whom died young. When Bacot's husband was
killed in 1856 by their overseer, she returned to her home in Society Hill and adopted a child, Flora. Her father was careless with his money, and often turned to Bacot for support. She began to feel responsible for two children: one, an unruly adolescent, and the other, a critical and capricious parent.

When the war began, Bacot desperately wanted to contribute to the Confederate cause and believed that she could best do so by serving as a nurse in Virginia. She received no support from her friends and neighbors in South Carolina. She had a personal fortune in real estate exceeding $30,000, but required legal tender for the journey to Virginia. Banks and other lenders turned down her requests. Her father, in a rare moment of encouragement, wrote to the bank on her behalf. She finally made the journey to Charlottesville in December, 1861 with several other volunteers, leaving her adopted child in her family's care. The volunteers joined the South Carolina Hospital Aid Association, which was eventually controlled directly by the Confederate government, and worked diligently in the several hospitals established in Charlottesville.

Bacot was not a Virginian, but she believed that Virginia would provide the greatest opportunity for her to exercise her skill and dedication. With the Confederate line of defense constantly changing, and the periodic influx of Union soldiers, Virginia became an arena of opportunity for women's potential. Before the war, Bacot was constantly
scrutinized and criticized by her father and brother, and she wanted to prove that she could take care of herself and others in a crisis. She was also dedicated to the South. In an entry devoted to the deaths of her children, Bacot enthusiastically wrote, "Now I can give myself up to my State, the very thought elevates me. These long years I have prayed for something to do". She did not want, however, to pursue permanent independence. Like Coleman, Bacot's experiences and the impressions she formed as a nurse illustrate a woman seeking not a drastic alteration of women's role in society, but an appreciation for her abilities within that sphere.

Bacot's hopes were temporarily quashed: "the women who came from South Carolina to serve as nurses...found their actual activities in the ward restricted, as did most women who worked in Southern hospitals." But Bacot eventually assumed responsibility for the preparation of meals, the laundry, and visiting with the wounded. All but one of the women with whom Bacot worked were either widows or spinsters. Despite their maturity, and the respect they earned from the staff and local residents, the nurses still faced enormous prejudice from certain doctors and society in general.

Bacot was a devout Episcopalian and Confederate. Like Cary, she believed divine Providence would sustain her. And like Edmonds, she never gave up hope that the Confederacy

95Ibid., 8.
would prevail. Bacot, however, adopted a course of action akin to Coleman's. Religion and devotion to the South had been elements of her education, and they contributed to her development as a southern lady. She did not view her role in Charlottesville as a challenge to that standard. Jean V. Berlin, editor of Bacot's diary, observes that "nursing was not for her a way to assert her power in the face of male supremacy; rather it was an appropriate way for an obedient daughter of the patriarchy to serve her country." 96

Although Bacot sought to confirm her faith in her abilities and strength, she was not without initial reservations. Before she left for Virginia, she wrote, "I wonder if there really [sic] [was] any danger could I defend myself. Some times I think I could then again I fear not, I fear I am nothing more than a weak woman at last." 97 Despite her fears, however, she left the safety of Society Hill. Once in Virginia, Bacot had difficulty adjusting to her work. The continuous stream of wounded was exhausting and tested her devotion. Like Cary, Edmonds, and Coleman, she derived strength from gender conventions. Bacot called on the lessons of composure and silent suffering: "my ward is now full, five new ones came today, some I fear quite sick[.]. I am thourely [sic] sick of the sight of men, & would gladly get away for a time to rest, but I know these are not the right feelings and will suppress them." 98 Self-sacrifice was

96Ibid., 11-12.
97Ibid., 49.
98Ibid., 76.
an important element of southern womanhood, and as many others did, Bacot reserved her frustrations for her diary.

Politically, she remained an ardent Confederate. She was responsible for several wounded Union soldiers, but like Edmonds, kept her bitterest statements to herself. Coleman, Edmonds, and Bacot all had the ability to judge individual men primarily on their behavior rather than their affiliations. These women abhorred the North and the Union army, but reciprocated civility as southern ladies would. Edmonds, the most immature of the three, might have taunted the Yankees, but was never overtly cruel. Bacot had her own reservations about the Union, but set them aside in favor of her duty as a nurse. Of two Federal soldiers she wrote, "One of them is polite & grateful for any thing done for him the other is sulkey [sic], says very little & pretends to sleep most of the time."99 Although she acknowledged the first's good nature, she had difficulty surmounting her general aversion to what the soldiers represented. She completed her assigned tasks with as little personal contact as possible: "I force myself to ask after their health once a day, & I see that they get their food regularly. I have never inquired there [sic] names nor do I intend to."100

Bacot did not wish to change the South. She desired confirmation of her strength and skills, but she did not intend to use them to redefine gender boundaries. In South

99Ibid., 126.
100Ibid., 126.
Carolina, she felt restrained by her father and brother: "My prayer is that I may soon be released from this bondage."\textsuperscript{101} They were often unfairly and excessively critical, and she needed to prove, at least to herself, that she was a capable woman. Her personal holdings gave her financial security, but experience gained at the hospital validated her self-reliance. By 1862, Bacot seemed to have taken a private stand on behalf of strong women. In February of that year, General P.G.T. Beauregard traveled through Charlottesville by train. Members of the hospital staff—including only one woman—went to catch a glimpse of him, but Bacot chose to stay behind: "I have no fancy for going to see men[.] I would certainly have looked at Beauregard if he came my way, but I wouldent [sic] run after him or any great man."\textsuperscript{102} She was not awe-struck by male heroics. She had witnessed courage among women when men were at their weakest. Her father's hypocrisy and the dependence of the wounded boldly illustrated the value of strong, capable women.

On a visit home in November, 1862, she wrote, "the inclination to stay at home is very strong some times, but when I think of what I can do for the suffering Soldier, I am willing to forgo every pleasure & return to my duties."\textsuperscript{103} Bacot, however, returned to South Carolina in 1863. For a time she continued to assist the wounded, but in 1864, she gave up the practice entirely. She had remarried in 1863,

\textsuperscript{101}Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{102}Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{103}Ibid., 165.
and her husband was killed in 1864. That same year, her father died soon after Bacot gave birth to a son. This last set of personal tragedies is a possible explanation for why she finally discontinued her work. She was responsible for a new baby, as well as Flora, and she would have had a difficult time attending to their needs as well as those of the wounded.

After returning to South Carolina, Bacot assumed her old routines of visiting with neighbors and caring for her family. She did not desert the war effort completely: her brief work in a South Carolina hospital allowed her to exercise the skills she had strengthened in Virginia. But Bacot did not desire complete independence. She wanted a husband and children, and a life resembling the comfort of her antebellum society. During the war, she sought and received the assurance that she was an able and accomplished woman. Her self-confidence appears to grow with each entry of her diary. Nevertheless, she did not consider her role as a Confederate nurse to be far from her role as a southern woman. She deferred to her superiors in the hospital, exercised the self-deprivation her family encouraged during her childhood, and viewed other people's opinions as a measure of her achievements. She saw herself as a dutiful southerner, but always in the context of domesticity: "truly I am a child of the South, I love her as a fond Mother."104

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104 Ibid., 51.
She left nursing confident that she had performed the tasks expected of a southern lady.

Bacot, perhaps more than Coleman, stood at the threshold of new gender ideals. She was single, financially independent, and able to work and look after herself. But Bacot, like Coleman, rejected total independence. She remarried, had another child, and left nursing before the war was over. She even discontinued her diary once she moved back to Society Hill. But like Coleman, Bacot's experiences in Virginia seem to have, at least mildly, affected her post-war activities. In a somewhat unusual twist for a woman aspiring to the ideals of domesticity in the South, Bacot insisted that her second husband sign a pre-nuptial agreement before they married. The agreement ensured that her money and property remained in her name and would pass directly to her children. Such marriage contracts were not entirely abnormal. Middle- and upper-class married women had established separate estates as early as the 1820s.¹⁰⁵ The measure was commonly intended to safeguard part of the family's finances from potential debts incurred in the husband's name. Women's property legislation before and after the war was also meant to do just that, but was enacted out of concern for the family rather than with regard for women's particular interests.¹⁰⁶ The pre-nuptial agreement

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gave Bacot a pivotal role in her family's economic future, but based on her concurrent activities, it was secondary to her desire to return to the confines of an upper-class southern household.

The circumstances of Bacot's second marriage do not reflect a desire to adopt traditionally masculine responsibilities, but indicate that she wanted to retain a measure of self-reliance. She had not sought permanent change in Virginia, rather the chance to contribute to the Confederate effort and employ her skills as a wife and mother. Far from her home and family, she worked in a field once dominated by men, but she did so as a southern woman with no intention of challenging her society or its constructions of gender roles. Just as she entered the war with useful—potentially lifesaving—skills, Bacot entered her second marriage with property that would continue to benefit her family if kept in her name.

Bacot and Coleman were in eminent company in their decision to yield their wartime strengths to post-war society. Historians have praised Mary Chesnut's diary because her personal reflections appear ahead of her time. Her writings demonstrate that she was an intellectually distinguished woman with highly developed opinions about her society. But Chesnut, like Coleman and Bacot, refrained from asserting her opinions after the war. Chesnut edited her own diary several times, but it was never published during her life. Suzy Clarkson Holstein argues that Chesnut's concern
for her public image overcame her private interests, and that her reticence "indicates the pervasive power of the myth [of the southern woman] and the enduring tension of the Southern woman's position." Unfortunately, Holstein's statement does a disservice to women like Chesnut, Coleman, and Bacot. She implies that women were not the agents of change—or lack thereof—but simply succumbed to the pressures exerted by gender ideals and by returning husbands and fathers. The evidence, however, depicts southern women consciously and willingly rebuilding the restrictions that once surrounded their lives.

Anne Firor Scott argues, with regard to women's war-time activities, that "the broadest division was simply between those who faced up to the demands of the times and those who evaded them or ran away." But among the women of this study, these differing reactions represent two methods of addressing the same struggle. Coleman's and Bacot's public roles and their defiance of particular southern social mores were intended to sustain a system that ultimately relegated them to a position of dependence. Their resistance to the changes prompted by early northern reform efforts is ironic because they temporarily partook of their fruits: southern women who chose to participate in the male-dominated public sphere justified their actions as an extension of their role

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as daughters, wives, mothers, women, and ladies—much like the earliest northern reformers. But Coleman and Bacot became active members of the public world in order to preserve a society that would return them to the private. They did not insist upon permanent changes in gender prescriptions, but assumed an active role in the politics of occupation and the hospital because it was both necessary and temporary.

Harriette Cary, Virginia Edmonds, Cynthia Coleman, and Ada Bacot represent two patterns of behavior to which many of Virginia's women adjusted and adhered. While Coleman and Bacot threw themselves into a relatively foreign society, both Cary and Edmonds avoided the hospitals and based their war-time experiences on their antebellum routines. They, in fact, intensified their religious and romantic fervor, respectively. Anne Firor Scott argues that women such as these figuratively ran away from the war, but both Cary and Edmonds indirectly acknowledged the war by devoting their diaries to bolstering southern society against its encroachments. As belles, they were raised to believe that women would mold the next generation of southerners. Their activities do not indicate a desire to desert the southern cause, but the need to retain antebellum standards for the future. They rejected opportunities to alter gender conventions because they willingly and eagerly accepted them. Their relative inactivity was motivated by a belief they shared with Coleman and Bacot: the southern lady was a vital
and essential element of southern society with enormous advantages for women of their race and class.
Conclusion

Virginians witnessed literal and figurative southern losses. Occupation or the recurrent presence of northern soldiers continually threatened the dominance of white southern society. That threat coupled with the absence of southern men meant that elite white women in Virginia stood to create new roles for their sex. The extremity of Virginia's experiences during the war required its women to respond more vehemently to potential losses. Anne Firor Scott states that "it was the women who brought greater adaptability and elasticity to control circumstances, and to lay the foundations of a new order." While women did adjust in an effort to control their situation, the choices they made reflect a deliberate yet instinctive return to the standards set by their education as southern ladies, not the creation of a new order. Directly and indirectly, women intensified their attack on northern influences, and made an indisputable stand in favor of antebellum gender conventions and the larger social order they delineated.

Historian George C. Rable attributes this prevailing conservatism to the South as a whole. He argues that the war challenged the southern patriarchy, but that both men and

women chose to preserve gender prescriptions: "the war had opened doors for these women but had closed them just as quickly, and traditional notions about femininity survived more or less intact." Southern men were resistant to the new roles women created for themselves during the war. However, in a society physically and economically decimated, with a considerable percentage of its population dead, the key to the rejection of permanent changes for women lay in the hands of those women. Cary, Coleman, Edmonds and Bacot reacted to their distinctive experiences in order to achieve a single goal: the preservation of the South. Southern women asserted themselves in different ways in the face of their enemy, but they set the course of their actions based on their immediate interests and not simply the judgments of their male counterparts. Whether they chose to sustain tradition because of the instability caused by the loss of so many men, or because of a simple preference for the way things were, depended largely on each individual woman. Of greater significance is the fact that they alone were responsible for their decisions. The strength of their convictions during military occupation was consistent with the choices they made later in the presence of peace and their return to domesticity, but they did indeed make those choices themselves.

Southern women were given an opportunity to break out of their limited sphere during the Civil War. The absence of men blurred gender boundaries, leaving vacancies in customarily male arenas that were often filled by the women who remained behind. By temporarily filling these gaps, however, women contributed as much to the maintenance of antebellum ideals as those women who chose to do little or nothing outside their traditional routines. Southern women eventually developed the networks of reform organizations that so altered gender roles in the North. These organizations ultimately led to the politicization of a small group of southern women and their demand for suffrage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such efforts took root in the missionary societies of the 1870s and the temperance movement of the 1880s. Many of the women who had struggled to sustain their families during the war participated in the earliest efforts, but broader changes in gender conventions were the province of a younger generation of women with access to educational and professional opportunities unavailable to their older counterparts.111

111Anne Firor Scott describes the rise of the southern reform movement and the evolution of the feminine ideal in The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970); although she argues that the war was the most critical event in southern gender relations, she clearly illustrates that the overall process of transforming gender roles lasted well into the twentieth century. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, in New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), agrees with Scott's description of the rise of southern reformism and the influence of post-war educational and professional advantages in shaping the new reformers. For a description of the black middle-class reform movement and its relationship to white organizations see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's Gender and Jim Crow: Women
Drew Gilpin Faust argues that wars have historically called gender boundaries into question, and accordingly, the Civil War prompted changes in women's responsibilities. Before the war, southern society asked its women to sacrifice their opinions and interests in favor of the--male-dominated--greater good. During the war, Faust notes, society further asked women to sacrifice their husbands and sons, and constructed "an ideology intended to direct Southern women, to outline appropriate behavior in the abruptly altered wartime situation."112 Public ideology accommodated many of southern women's temporary roles. Nevertheless, both men and women maintained strict limits for appropriate behavior. Nursing became a tolerated pursuit, but society continued to scorn full-time, young, or unmarried nurses. Age and class played as much of a role in determining the proper behavior of women as they had in the antebellum era.

Southern women, by and large, chose to accept these limitations. Revised conventions, in other words, were rejected not simply by the men of the South, but by the women. Coleman and Bacot were two members of a particularly bold group, but even they retreated back into a domestic ideal. Coleman's and Bacot's post-war actions imply that they may have carried some measure of their wartime experiences with them, but they no longer asserted their

independence. They had felt threatened during the war, not by the social patriarchy, but by a foreign presence that challenged their way of life. They temporarily restructured their roles as southern women in order to prevent change, not advance it. Many women were not given such a choice after the war. More than a few continued to run their homes or work as teachers, either because their husbands and fathers had died or were physically or emotionally debilitated. But they too often "hoped to once again take up their comfortable dependent roles" once they had regained some measure of economic security.113 The war may have challenged gender boundaries, as Faust argues, but the potency of the ideal of the southern woman is illustrated by the tenacity with which its female proponents fought to sustain it.

Faust also argues that women's participation in the public sphere after the war "can perhaps best be understood as a determination never to be entirely helpless or dependent again."114 While many women did resist total dependence, it seems excessive to imply that antebellum southern women were helpless or that they celebrated a condition of helplessness. The Civil War had indeed posed new challenges, but antebellum ladies were not without skills or responsibilities. Gender conventions left womanhood with a distinctly domestic aura, but the domestic "sphere" was one in which women bore the

burdens of childbirth and childrearing, slave management, and marriage at the very least. Elite women enjoyed the protection of white men, but not without developing the capabilities necessitated by the conditions and experiences of womanhood. Many, if not most, elite women faced the Civil War with the skills—if not the willingness—necessary to respond to the formidable problems of war.

Following the war, the South heralded its women for their contributions to the Confederacy. Readers eagerly absorbed women's published accounts of their experiences, but the portraits of these heroic women retained and perpetuated the aura of the ideal antebellum lady. Women were among the earliest southerners to venerate a romanticized past. As a result, the myths of the Lost Cause and the Southern Lady gradually became intertwined and interdependent. Women, in fact, were the first to pursue the public celebration of the Confederacy through monuments. Ladies' Memorial Associations initiated the earliest wave of statues and monuments, and by the 1890s, chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy dominated these projects. H. E. Gulley writes that southern women used organizational skills acquired during the war to "bolster [sic] traditional social customs that limited their own freedom."115 Southern women helped shape public memory both during and after the war, and while their actions were perhaps a reflection of recently emerging

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strengths, they chose to exercise those strengths to preserve the ideals that defined and--they believed--enhanced their lives.
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VITA

Kate Fariss Fraser Côté

cum laude in 1992 from Middlebury College in Middlebury 
Vermont, with honors in history. Entered the Master's 
program in history at the College of William and Mary in 
August, 1994. Continued at the College in 1995 as a doctoral 
candidate.