The Honorable Women of Williamsburg: Resistance to Union Occupation and Female Honor

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THE HONORABLE WOMEN OF WILLIAMSBURG

Resistance to Union Occupation and Female Honor

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Rebecca Sommers

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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ABSTRACT

Many historical studies have focused on why men, both black and white, rich and poor, Northern and Southern, fought in the American Civil War. Few historians however, have looked at why and how Confederate women also engaged in their own battles against the Union during the Civil War.

This thesis focuses on how a number of white elite Confederate women in Williamsburg, Virginia used various forms of resistance to fight their own war against the Union Army during its occupation of the city from 1862 until the end of the war in 1865. By acting as spies, smuggling goods, shunning their captors, and refusing to take an oath to the United States of America these white elite women resisted Union rule.

A driving force that sparked Confederate white men into battle was honor. Honor defined Southern manhood. Without honor a man had nothing. While honor was part of the male sphere, separate from the female sphere, women also understood the importance of defending one’s honor at all costs. Confederate elite women saw their husbands’ and fathers’ leave in order to defend their own honor and the honor of their family. Left alone on the homefront as the head of the household some of these elite women followed the lead of their male counterparts and took on the responsibility to protect their homes, their family’s and their own female honor from the enemy.

Female honor, based on the guiding principles of male honor, gave the women of Williamsburg an incentive to resist the Union. In the spotlight now, it was their reputation and honor on the line.
THE HONORABLE WOMEN OF WILLIAMSBURG
INTRODUCTION

For five days and nights ears of the inhabitants were assailed by the constant tramp of the troops, the clank of sabers, the neighing of horses, the rolling of wheels as caissons, ambulances, wagons, artillery, cavalry, and Infantry possess themselves of the devoted city. The streets impassable, filled with mud and water and surging soldiery...After giving the little comfort that lay in their power to the wounded the women returned to their homes, now their prison houses. ¹

Those were the sights and sounds of Williamsburg, Virginia, described by Cynthia Coleman, following the battle of Williamsburg on May 5, 1862. The Union troops had worked their way down the peninsula and in the early morning hours during a steady rainfall, encountered and fought elements of the Confederate army. After a day of battle, the Confederate troops fled in the middle of the night. The soldiers in gray subsequently traveled fifty miles to the northwest to defend Richmond. Their departure left the town of Williamsburg defenseless. The Federal army occupied the old colonial capital for the rest of the war. The remaining southerners, white and black, enslaved and free, men, women, and children of Williamsburg found themselves subject to Union occupation for over three years. For those white residents who considered themselves loyal Confederate citizens, the enemy had become their captors and their homes had become their prisons.

Background

The American Civil War can best be described as a conflict without defined battle lines. There was no rigid boundary between home front and battlefront. As a result this war directly touched the lives of men and women, black and white, poor and rich, young and old, both in and out of uniform. This was especially the case in the hard hit Confederacy, where most of the fighting took place. For one of the first times many of

¹ Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary. Tucker-Coleman Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary, May 5, 1862.
the white women, children, as well as the enslaved African Americans who remained on the home front, were left to defend their homes, their land, and of course their honor against the enemy without the direct help of their white male kin.

The Union army occupied many areas of the South throughout the war. These occupations resulted in a variety of interactions between Union soldiers and the residents of these conquered territories. Occasionally white southerners had Unionist sympathies. In other cases citizens had little outward reaction to Yankee invasion and went about their lives with little change in their routine. But for a great many white southerners nothing could be worse or more humiliating than having the enemy as their master. Cynthia Coleman along with other white elite women of Williamsburg clearly identified with this sentiment.\(^2\) Their homes had been invaded by their most hated and detested foe—the Yankees. Faced with Union rule, the white elite women of Williamsburg, in theory, were left helpless without the protection of their men. Antebellum southern culture placed prescriptively rigid restrictions on the actions of members of the "weaker sex."\(^3\) In order to comply with the gender norms of their community, women were initially left with no conventional means to protect themselves or fight back against the Union enemy. The four-year war would, however, alter the lives for many of the Southerners that it touched, including the white women of the Confederacy.\(^4\)

Historians Drew Faust and Anne Firor Scott, among others, have suggested that the actual demands of fighting the war in the South went right to the core of the

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\(^2\) For the purpose of this thesis "elite" will be defined as a person of greater than average financial means, particularly involving land and property, as well as the respect of his or her community. Often times this "elite" status was passed down from generation to generation and was closely associated with a family name and the respect and honor that went along with being a member of that family.


antebellum quid pro quo between white men and women, in which, men promised to
"protect" and women had agreed to "obey." However, while southerners believed a
victory against the Union would help to solidify southern gender norms, the implications
that resulted from the conflict actually ripped apart this antebellum basis for gender
relations and many of the ideals of antebellum womanhood. This can be seen by
southern white elite women leaving their homes to nurse male combatants, running their
plantations, working in the fields, and performing other very public roles.

It appears that with the outbreak of the war white Confederate women’s
identification with their men strengthened. At first gender role difference intensified.
While Confederate white men set forth to fight and to aggressively defend their
"manhood," Confederate white women increased their dutiful support for the cause. But
it was not long before these same women began to realize that sending their husbands,
fathers, brothers, and sons off to war to fight for southern empowerment and honor might
not be enough to win the war or protect their way of life. Some Confederate women
confronted this situation head on and subsequently defied the very gender roles they were
looking to protect. Southern women depended on each other for support and used the
personal experiences of their life to guide them in performing these new public roles.

Honor

Southern honor proved to be one of the greatest motivating factors for both
Confederate men and women during the Civil War. One of the foremost scholars on
Southern honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, has focused his studies on Southern men and

\[\text{References}\]


6 For the purpose of this thesis whenever I use the term "Confederate men and women" and "Southern men and women," I am referring to white men and women only.

honor. Wyatt-Brown defines honor as "essentially the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus." According to Wyatt-Brown, honor had three basic components, none of which may exist wholly independent of the other. Honor is first "the inner conviction of self-worth" or individuality. The second aspect of honor is "the claim of the self-assessment before the public." The third element is the assessment of the claim by the public, a judgment based upon the behavior of the claimant. In other words honor is reputation according to Wyatt-Brown. Honor was the foundation of who a Southern man was. Honor provided an understanding of a man's place in society and motivated his behavior. A Southern man needed his actions to be socially approved, and honor served as the social mediator between the individual and the community by which he was assessed and in which he also located himself in relation to others.

White southerners reared their children to value honor. Honor was woven into the lives of very small children, male and female. It was a source of "familial and personal strengthening." According to Brown honor allowed parents and children to fully express their love to each other. Both felt compelled to spontaneously show their emotions openly. Unlike their Northern counterparts who tended to distance themselves and act reserved toward their children, parents in the south were almost "too devoted to their children." Honor served as an integral part of white southern children's everyday lives. From an early age southern girls and boys were taught about the tenets of honor.
and its importance in their homes and school.

In his study, Wyatt-Brown characterizes white elite Southern women as peripheral to the world of male honor. Men and women “lived separate lives—one in the world, the other in the home, one in exterior circumstances, the other in the inner sanctuary that required vigilant safeguarding.”\textsuperscript{15} While Southern women lived in a world dictated by the tenets of honor and each and every one of their actions could influence the honor of the men in their lives, Wyatt-Brown failed to consider whether Southern women could also possess their own distinct honor or to focus his attention on the relationship between Southern white women and honor.

Similarly historian James McPherson argues that defending one's honor was one reason white Southern men went to war. However, McPherson did not research women, honor, and the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{16} Historian Giselle Roberts highlights this problem when she notes that scholars have “yet to examine the importance of Southern honor in shaping wartime lives of Confederate women.”\textsuperscript{17} Yet Roberts also left the topic and its significance unaddressed in her recent book \textit{The Confederate Belle}. According to Roberts and other historians, men and women in the antebellum South lived-- and sometimes died-- by the code of honor. Nevertheless, the abstract and elusive concept of honor has not been defined with any precision by historians. Roberts argues that was the case “because its meaning was so inextricably linked to an individual's status and to the context of specific events, people, and places. Honor, and the importance of protecting it, was bound up in the web of Southern social relations and, more specifically, in that set of

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 54.
\textsuperscript{17}Giselle Roberts, \textit{The Confederate Belle} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 2.
beliefs in which a person has exactly as much worth as others confer upon them.\textsuperscript{18}

The connection between Southern white male honor and the role of Confederate white women during this nineteenth century national crisis is a crucial piece of Civil War history that is overlooked. An explanation of Confederate women's relationship to Union troops, especially elite white women's resistance to Federal soldiers, may provide a more comprehensive picture of why the war was fought and why civilians supported it.

\textit{Resistance and Honor}

This thesis focuses on how white elite women on Southern soil broke with dominant gender conventions by actively resisting Union occupation. For one of the first times in their lives, white elite women acted “aggressively” in public. They defied their captors’ orders, shamed Union soldiers, smuggled goods across lines, refused to obey Federal law, and engaged in other acts of defiance. Confederate women, like their male counterparts, were fighting to protect a way of life. Southern elite women possessed a “willingness” to go beyond their once very domestic roles, “to transcend their own privatized domestic place in the name of the basic patriarchal principle that animated it.”\textsuperscript{19} Circumstances forced white Confederate women to step outside their prescriptive gender roles in order to win the war and protect the very way of life they were straying from. As the war progressed some white women left their private spheres realizing that only by bending gender norms could the Confederacy win the war and could the antebellum way of life return. As a result Southern elite women became the surrogate patriarchs of their families and took on many of the duties and responsibilities such a position required.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 40.
I will look at how the resistance to Union occupying troops by Cynthia Coleman and other elite white women of Williamsburg is an example of defending female honor. As this study will describe, while fundamentally based on the tenets of male honor, female honor was distinct from male honor. With their men off fighting a distant war, Confederate women took it upon themselves to defend their homes, their honor, and their way of life in a manner that resembled their male counterparts but was not quite the same. It is this difference, based on gender, and in particular how Confederate white elite women fought their own battle against the Union—for honor, for the South, and for their way of the life that the following chapters focus on.
CHAPTER I

BEFORE THE WAR

Southern elite white women lived in a society and were taught by a community that valued honor above all else. By watching the example of their men, these white Southern women learned the importance of personal and family honor and the importance of protecting it at all costs. With the coming of the Civil War and Union occupation Southern white women found themselves caught in a conflict that directly challenged their honor. With their towns and cities occupied by enemy troops many white elite Confederate women viewed their homes as prisons and their communities as their battlefields. In their situation, some Confederate women, like Cynthia Coleman of Williamsburg, also “fought” to protect their own female honor. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, one of the foremost scholars on Southern honor, has argued that honor was “the keystone of the slaveholding South's morality.”

For a southern white man, one's honor meant everything. Some might say that the South was built on the foundation of honor, and was also destroyed because of it.

In this thesis I argue that female honor did in fact exist and played a critical part in the Civil War. This distinct female honor partially depended on a woman's public appearance, separate from her husband or father, by which she was judged by her community. A woman's honor was also measured by how she viewed her own self-worth. How an elite white woman would understand her own self-worth was closely linked to or even a product of how others, especially her peers, saw her. As a result an elite Confederate white woman would go about her daily life in public knowing that

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20Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, vii.
every action she made would consequently produce a reaction by her community that would ultimately create her reputation. Therefore, she could not separate how her peers saw and judged her and how she viewed and judged herself. Only once her southern brothers and sisters considered her an honorable woman could a Confederate lady see herself as honorable. Both of these factors define female honor.

Unlike male honor, which needed to be protected by using any means necessary, female honor had restrictions. While women took on a much greater public role during the war and in their pursuit to defend their honor their means were still more limited than their fathers and husbands. Women, except in rare cases, did not pick up a rifle and defend their honor in battle, but rather they used other more “ladylike” and suitable means of defense. Women could verbally or deceptively defend their honor but could not physically engage a Union man in combat.

The desire to be respected and considered an honorable Confederate woman led many elite Southern women to resist Yankee rule in occupied territories. In doing so a number of white, elite women protected their homes, their way of life, and also their honor.

Antebellum Ideals

To generalize about the South and Southern white elite women prior to the Civil War is nearly impossible. While the prescriptive nature of the “antebellum feminine ideal” allows us to understand the “ideals” that framed elite white women's lives and the expectations of how a proper Southern lady should look and behave it does not necessarily reflect the reality of most white women's lives.

White elite women's lives in the South were supposed to revolve around family
and home— the private sphere. Historians, such as Stephanie McCurry have found that “a key spatial dimension of class and gender relations in the slave South” revolved around the “virtually unlimited right of an independent man to mastery over his own household and the property that lay within its boundaries.” A Southern woman, especially an elite white “lady,” belonged in the home, which was clearly defined as a space controlled by the man of the house.

Scholar Anne Firor Scott argues that while these domestic ideals were only prescriptive in nature, many white elite women's lives nevertheless centered on their homes, possibly because of geographic necessity or the dictates of their community. According to Scott, “No matter how large or wealthy the establishment, the mistress was expected to understand not only the skills of spinning, weaving, and sewing but also gardening, care of poultry, care of the sick, and all aspects of food preparation from the sowing of seed to the appearance of the final product on the table.” For most Southern white women the domestic circle was a world they should master and embrace.

According to Scott, a woman’s entire being centered on her home and family. Prescriptively, most tasks for women were tied to caring for children, preparing food, and maintaining the household. As a child a girl was to obey her father, and when she married she was to be submissive to the wishes of her husband. A woman, in many cases, accepted obedience as her “lot in life;” it was not something she chose. For a wife, her reason for being “was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage the household.” Despite these gender ideals antebellum southern white elite women's mindsets and the actual inner workings of elite

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23 Ibid, 4.
women's homes were probably not entirely the same as the prescriptions of the time. While antebellum elite southern society's ideals help historians begin to understand gender norms, they do not necessarily describe the complete reality for many Southern white elite women. As with prescriptive literature of the present, what women are told or advised to do does not necessarily cause women to follow any or all of these guidelines. One must therefore study all historic documentation keeping these thoughts in mind. As long as a historian understands these restrictions the predominant prescriptive literature of the nineteenth century can be a useful tool. This literature reveals dominant ideals for white women and how they were expected to act.

The prescriptive Southern "ideal," for example, emphasized a woman's softer nature. Confederate men, at least in theory, viewed white women as innocent, vulnerable, passive, and tender. Male protectors advocated that woman's "weakness" should be cherished, with one man arguing: "So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness."24 According to historian Catherine Clinton, a woman's "weakness" signified her vulnerability to men; only by emphasizing a woman's physical limitations could men legitimize their own strength and superiority.25

The ideals of white Southern womanhood in the nineteenth century bolstered presumptions of female inferiority. Both biological and theological evidence presented by white antebellum doctors and preachers supported the belief that women were dependent domestic creatures destined to lead protected lives. Thought to be passive

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24Ibid, 147.
members of their community Southern elite white women faced living in a male-
dominated world with little ability to change their station in life. “Few people ever asked
her,” a southern white elite woman, “if she thought life was as it ought to be” remarks
Anne Firor Scott, “usually only in indirect and private ways did she raise the question
herself.” Elite Southern white women, in comparison to their male counterparts, were
ideally to have very little power or control over their lives.

Historian Catherine Clinton agreed with some of Scott's points. As Clinton
notes, “Ideologues harped on theological and biological tenets to bolster claims of female
inferiority: women were dependent domestic creatures destined to lead sheltered lives
revolving around family responsibilities.” In Clinton's study, those women who chose
to accept their prescribed position saw themselves as a force operating within the limits
dictated by male authority. While Anne Firor Scott argued that white elite Southern
women's power was limited because of prescriptive southern gender ideals, Catherine
Clinton has concluded that some of these same women often embraced what little power
they held and used it to its fullest advantage. According to Clinton, often times “women
who were willing to forge their own networks, to stake their own claims within the
culture, were considered by the male establishment as no serious threat to the existing
order.” Women could gain strength and power as long they worked within the
established boundaries established by men. Clinton found that “their movement did not
undermine patriarchal authority but demonstrated dissatisfaction with the extent of male
dominance. Thus, some elite white women took their segregated status not as a badge of
inferiority, but seized the opportunity to use their separate position as a base on which to

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26 Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 44.
27 Catherine Clinton, The Other Civil War, 147.
28 Ibid.
Consistent with Clinton's arguments, I argue that women used the established guidelines of male and family honor to structure their own distinct honor. In this way women separated themselves from their male counterparts but also continued to be closely linked to patriarchal authority. Women worked within, perhaps sometimes stretching but not breaking, the established boundaries of the male-dominated world. Southern white elite women did not disrespect their male counterparts by practicing their own form of honor, but rather they were protecting their families' reputation and station in life on the home front. At the same time these women's husbands, brothers, and fathers did the same thing on the battlefield. Female honor did not undermine male honor, instead, it reinforced the Southern way of life during a time of crisis.

Although white Southern women's lives were in many ways theoretically controlled by the male population, their domain was, despite such constraints, expansive even before the Civil War. Because a Southern lady "was charged with the moral, spiritual, and physical well-being of her entire family," Clinton concluded that a Southern elite white woman actually held a great deal of power. Even more ironically, Clinton found that Southern women's reproductive role superseded all other cultural concerns at a time when the birth rate was declining: "She was supervisor of the education of her children, tender of the hearth, and the symbol of the home. These indispensable functions, although primarily carried within the home, were not restricted to it." According to Clinton, even before the Civil War the dominant cultural prescriptive gender ideals of the South afforded elite Southern white women opportunities to expand their lot in life. Antebellum women perceived that they might extend female jurisdiction

29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
into the public and hitherto exclusively male realm by using their “domestic” role as a lever--wedging themselves into positions of power, however limited, through the language of domesticity.\textsuperscript{32} Prior to the war Southern white women found elasticity in what many believed to be a rigid social structure. One might conclude that during a time of war and chaos these same women had even greater opportunity to expand their social power by whatever means necessary. Perhaps these southern white elite women even looked at protecting their family, their homes, and their Southern way of life in terms of honor, just as their husbands, brothers and fathers did.

\textit{Northern and Southern Women}

The North also had prescriptive gender ideals for women. Northern middle-class women were supposed to adhere to the “Cult of True Womanhood.” Northern women were to be virtuous, pure, and resigned to their lot in life. These women should also passively obey their fathers, brothers, husbands and confessors. In contrast, the elite white women of the antebellum South were to follow the tenets of the “Cult of the Lady.”\textsuperscript{33} This gendered ideology also dictated the necessity for women to be pious, submissive, pure, and obedient. Prescriptive literature, such as magazines, cookbooks, sermons, books, etc. described the ideal upper- and middle-class white woman living within the confines of the domestic sphere. A Northern woman was supposed to lead a pious life, work primarily for others, and give of herself. Creating a safe and cheerful atmosphere at home, she should also focus on the emotional well-being of family

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\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 8.
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members, tempering her anger, and comforting the sick.\textsuperscript{34}

Although both the ideology of the gender sphere and “Cult of True Womanhood” have been included in the historiography of the antebellum South, neither principle was universal in the North or South. For the most part these feminine attributes have been identified as more common in the Northeast than in the South, in urban rather than rural areas, and for the middle and upper classes more than poor, artisan, or yeoman households. Historian George C. Rable has argued that white Southern women’s lives displayed a delicate balance between these more conservative prescriptive ideals and more flexible gender practices. According to Rable, “Even in the minds of conservative Southern intellectuals, women occupied a precariously balanced social position: domestic duties were vital to their families and society but should not reduce them to drudges. This delicate combination of sometimes competing and contradictory characteristics formed the basis of an ideal definition of womanhood that seemed to especially flourish in the South.”\textsuperscript{35} While there might not be any consensus in the historiography of elite white women’s status and power in the antebellum South, many of the characteristics allotted to the private and public spheres of men and women and “The Cult of True Womanhood” in general can be applied to aspects of white, elite, Southern families.

\textit{Honor and the Civil War}

As the Civil War progressed the lives of some white elite Southern women began to change. According to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, at the most heated and tumultuous


times prior to the firing at Fort Sumter, white Southern women still largely accepted the separation between the private and public, the domestic and political, the sphere of women and the sphere of men. However, the hardships the war placed on the Confederacy enabled the transformation of many of these prescriptive norms. These changes resulted in more public and independent roles for white women in Southern communities. These modifications occurred primarily out of necessity, but also for many women from a sense of duty and patriotism.

Many Confederate men left their wives, sisters, and daughters alone on the home front. As a result these women were forced to defend themselves, perhaps not from death but humiliation, against the Union enemy. Both the struggle itself as well as their sense of pride and honor pushed these white elite women to stand up to their captors. Some white elite Confederate women were even willing to go beyond their prescriptive domestic space itself if it became necessary to defend the underlying basis of that place—to support the position of the male household head. As LeeAnn Whites argues, “the immediate impact of secession and war was to intensify white gender roles, the ultimate recognition of the patriarchy actually lay in the willingness of Confederate women to go one step beyond these very domestic roles, to transcend their own privatized domestic place in the name of the basic patriarchal principle that animated it.”

During the Civil War the most prevalent and critical individual duty for Southern white men was military service. At the beginning of the war many men answered the call of the newly formed Confederate nation and enlisted in the ranks of gray. What drove these men into uniform also explains the motivation of some white women on the home front—honour. Historian James McPherson has concluded that “duty and honor were

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37 LeeAnn Whites, The Civil War As A Crisis of Gender, 40.
indeed powerful motivating forces” that influenced Southern white men to enlist in the Confederate Army. Duty and honor are closely linked to concepts of masculinity, but there is an important distinction between the two. This difference helps distinguish Union and Confederate soldiers' reasons for fighting. According to McPherson, the idea of “duty” was the driving force for Federal soldiers during the war. Duty represented an “inner” motivation to enlist, fight, and even die for the Union; a conscience or “a private compact with God” compelled Yankees into combat.

In contrast, Confederate soldiers and officers enlisted out of a sense of “honor.” Honor reflected a public pressure, as opposed to the sense of duty, which came from within the person who enlisted. White Southern men responded to the demand of their Confederate brothers and sisters to prove themselves to their community by fighting to protect it on the battlefield. McPherson claims this personal honor rested on a man's public reputation, “one’s image in the eyes of his peers, to shirk this duty is a violation of conscience; to suffer dishonor is to be disgraced by public shame.” Honor and dishonor proved to be the greatest form of inspiration for white Southerners to fight.

Manhood and honor were deeply embedded in the culture of the old South well before the call for volunteers. Nineteenth-century white Southern elites in particular believed their honor and personal bravery made them stand apart from all others. These Southern, elite, white men believed that only they lived by this specific code of honor, which they thought made them braver, more masculine, and more courageous than other human beings. Duty, honor, liberty, and home were anything but hollow rhetoric. They were the cornerstones that grounded elite white men's position and power in the southern

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40 Ibid, 23.
41 Ibid, 24.
social structure.

Nevertheless the Southern honor that drove thousands of Confederate men, not only elites, to fight, was, “essentially the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus,” and resulted in rooted principles of “family integrity, clearly understood hierarchies of leadership and subordinates and ascriptive features of individuals and groups.” Honor’s three basic components—self-worth, public perception, and a person’s understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of society—are all very public reasons that white Confederate men joined the war effort.

The pressures of duty and honor paralleled each other. Honor and duty were not incompatible according to McPherson, even “some Confederate volunteers mentioned both in the same breath.” However, the main distinction between a sense of Northern “duty” and the drive of Southern “honor” remains clear. A male sense of duty in the North was inwardly motivated. In contrast the defense of one’s honor in the South was intended to be much more outwardly perceived. Southern men not only needed to protect their own honor, but also the honor of their family. It was not just a pact between man and God, as many Northerners believed, but rather an obligation to one’s family, one’s community, and one’s state.

Antebellum Southern honor dictated the lives and actions of elite white men in more profound and direct ways than their female counterparts. Honor for antebellum men was affirmed through business and politics. A man’s house, his control over his

42 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, xv.
43 Ibid, 14.
46 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, xv.
slaves, and family reflected his honor. As head of their households, white men, whether elite or yeoman farmers, had the duty to protect and provide for their legal dependents—wives, children, and slaves. That position also gave them liberty, in the form of legally recognized civil and political rights, to fulfill these duties. Honor came from the performance of duty and the exercise of liberty. Conversely, the dereliction of duty or the surrender of liberty meant dishonor and shame. From the outset many elite white Southern women saw the war in terms of their husbands’ and fathers’ social, economic, and political position. By extension, white women's place in the social hierarchy was also at stake, because their fortunes and status rose and fell with those of their men.47

When a Southern white man’s honor was contested, he would do anything he could to defend it. At times such a defense might even lead men to violence. Dueling was one way men “violently” defended their honor. Historian Kenneth S. Greenberg argues that “although some men dueled in order to kill a hated adversary, the vast majority dueled in order to demonstrate that they possessed the central virtue of men of honor: they did not fear death.”48 Greenberg contends that “the central purpose of a duel was not to kill, but to be threatened with death.”49

Although duels rarely ended in death, every time Southern white elite men exchanged harsh words, they were involved in a confrontation that demonstrated male adherence to these values.50 Characterized by masculinity and physical courage, honor by definition was a world that excluded women. White elite women, however, could observe and comment upon the honor in which they were socially barred from participating. Constructions of ideal femininity also prohibited women from engaging in

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid, xii.
Even though Southern elite white women could not challenge each other or members of the opposite sex to a physical duel to defend their own honor or their husbands' or families' women observed and learned from the examples of men. The importance of male honor in the antebellum period would ultimately affect the way in which elite white women handled themselves during the Civil War.

Even though Southern customs prescribed that women keep their opinions and ideas to themselves, antebellum elite white Southern women has been characterized by Wyatt-Brown as hardworking, prudent in household management and even politically minded. How a Southern white woman presented herself in public was extremely important, as women were "to fulfill duties commensurate with male prestige." In other words, a woman's actions and life reflected on and influenced the reputation of her husband and family. His honor meant her honor, and her actions were seen as extensions of his own. In this respect, women actually held the power to boost or destroy their familial honor. White women could control how they behaved and how they were subsequently viewed by others in their communities. Southern white elite women understood how important their actions were for their husbands' reputations. Mary Chesnut, a prominent Southern elite woman, wrote about this principle in her Civil War diary. While she revised many of her entries and added to her journal years after the war, her observations concerning Southern honor and gender are still worthy of mention. In some ways Chesnut's diary entries reinforce the conclusions many twentieth-century historians have reached concerning Southern culture. Referencing honor Chesnut wrote, "A man is supposed to confide his honor to his wife. If she misbehaves herself, his honor

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51 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, 50.
52 Ibid, 51.
is tarnished.” In some extreme cases women could single-handedly damage or destroy a man's reputation with their actions. If a white woman wanted to ruin her husband's reputation and standing in the community, she had the power to do so. Her actions however, also had serious consequences. Her husband's reputation might be ruined; the elite woman who committed a dishonorable act would most likely fall from respectability and be shunned by her community.

While white women had some authority in the antebellum South, elite men could limit women's ability to use this power by separating the lives of men and women and in turn each gender's responsibilities. The majority of an elite Southern woman's life would likely be spent in the private arena. Yet, in her domestic refuge, she did have some limited authority and prestige. A white elite Southern woman, for example, had a great deal of control over how her house and family functioned. Although not all the power was in her hands, she still had the ability to control her domestic surroundings.

In order for elite white men to maintain their honor and their dominant position in Southern society, they often minimized women's contributions. "Southern male honor," according to historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "required that women be burdened with a multitude of negatives, a not very subtle way to preserve male initiative in the never-ending battle of the sexes." In essence, male honor showed women how to empower themselves in their own homes, while at the same time segregating them from the culture of male honor and the public sphere. Wyatt-Brown found that men desired to maintain distinct spheres "of labor for men and women" and "the sharp division between work and home." Wyatt-Brown characterized this rigid separation of the sexes as a pervasive part of the culture of the antebellum South. The enforcement of these principles and

54 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, 227.  
55 Ibid, 200.
values became a community's business in the old South.

Honor was also an important element of Southern nationalism prior to the Civil War. Honor had always been a part of the antebellum female world. From a young age girls learned that personal honor was cherished and something for which one might even die. Even though honor was a primarily masculine concept, according to James McPherson, men “found it necessary to lecture their wives and daughters on the finer points of the male code of honor.”

Southern white women understood the importance of honor and saw the lengths men would go to in order to defend one’s personal and family honor. Therefore, in the same ways that honor influenced Southern men's actions during the Civil War, it is not unrealistic to believe that honor would also play a part in Confederate women's lives. The greater story pertains to exactly what relevance honor had on Confederate women and their decisions regarding their lives.

The mobilization of the majority of the white male population for war greatly affected the lives of white women and their families. Life for many Southern white women would become substantially more difficult without a male presence. Many women, even if supportive of the Confederate cause, questioned why their husbands, fathers, and sons did not remain at home. In order to justify their departure and the hardships it would bring, men needed to explain why serving in the army meant more than performing a patriotic duty, more than adventure, more than risking just their lives. Confederate men justified their abandonment of their families in terms of honor.

White male soldiers reasoned that fighting for the Confederacy meant protecting not just one's own honor, but also the honor of one's entire family. In this way, honor, even dishonor, was not exclusively masculine; women would share the opprobrium if

56 James McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War, 23.
their men did not wear Confederate gray. Honor, defined in this manner, made the failure of either sex to behave “appropriately” during the crisis an opportunity to disgrace the family. If men felt pressure to enlist, women felt equal pressure not only to agree to but also welcome and support men’s decisions.

“While their duty as citizens now called upon them to take up arms in defense of the Confederacy,” honorable Southern men, according to LeeAnn Whites, “were still expected to provide for the members of their own households on the home front.” White Southern men found this task nearly impossible. They experienced “increasing difficulty” holding together both their public and private roles as “free men” under wartime conditions. Over the course of the war this manifested most immediately by the rising levels of destitution among soldiers’ wives and children. The ideas of honor and gender norms would have to be altered if Southerners were to survive the war, let alone win it.

Thus, as the war progressed and difficulties both on and off the battlefield intensified, the prescribed ideals for white women in the Confederacy changed. Male Confederate leaders realized that in order to wage a successful campaign against the Union, Southern women would need to take on new and unconventional roles. The official inclusion and general acceptance, although reluctant, of female nurses in the Confederacy marked one way in which gender restrictions were altered. Due to the heavy casualties and widespread illnesses throughout the army camps, Confederate officials saw the need for more medical care. As the war continued to be hard fought most able-bodied men were needed to fight and could not also serve as nurses and medics

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57 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, 227.
59 Ibid.
for soldiers. Confederate officers made the “radical” decision that Southern women could be used as nurses.  

Southern women's efforts in the war no longer lay only in the home, standing by their husbands' and fathers' as they went off to war. This new position gave women the opportunity and even encouragement to make their central role in the war move outside the private sphere and into a very public and dangerous terrain.

Before the Civil War many women gained experience in nursing by tending to their families and friends at home. Public opinion, however, did not support the idea of women nursing in army hospitals. Critics argued that “Refined, modest ladies had no business caring for strange men and certainly not rough, crude soldiers from all walks of life.” Working in such an environment, many white Southerners believed, would expose white women to embarrassing and appalling situations. Women in hospitals would be surrounded by undressed men, gore, profanity, and many other “unladylike” conditions and practices. While the danger of impropriety became the most compelling argument against employing white women as nurses, opponents also stressed the demands of the work itself, contending that it was too exhausting and the pressures too great for delicate women to endure.

In turn some Confederate women, who saw it as their duty to serve the cause in whatever way necessary, nevertheless felt reluctant to work in a mixed-sex or mixed-race environment. According to Catherine Clinton's account of plantation mistresses during the Civil War, “Army nursing primarily entailed caring for strangers of the opposite sex, a situation that created an artificial barrier to plantation mistresses' rapid assimilation into wartime hospitals.” Clinton argues, however, that “despite conflicting loyalties-- to

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60 Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Women in the Civil War*, 2.
61 Ibid, 44.
62 Ibid.
serve patriotically without regard to the consequences, or to remain a lady—many women
overcame their doubts and joined the campaign to supply and staff hospitals for wounded
and dying solders."\textsuperscript{64} Both women and men would have to change their perspectives
concerning gender norms if the war was going to succeed.

Twenty-nine-year-old Ada White Bacot, a white Confederate woman from South
Carolina, yearned to become a nurse for the men "who are to fight for the deliverance of
my beloved country."\textsuperscript{65} Enabling Bacot's dream however proved difficult. Bacot had
nearly given up hope on joining the rakes of the "Florence Nightingales" of the
Confederacy when her Pa "met with Dr. Chisolm who told him to try and dissuade me
from going, that twas scarcely a place for a lady."\textsuperscript{66} But Bacot did not give up her wish
to venture to Virginia to become a nurse. Her strong devotion to South Carolina and the
Confederate States of America impelled her to overcome the trials and tribulations she
encountered early on in her quest to aid Confederate solders. Bacot "hoped to be able to
do something for [her] country" she could not "give up hope to be able to do something
for [her] own state may need [her]."\textsuperscript{67} While Bacot understood that a single white
woman nursing male soldiers was not a proper role for a Southern lady she also strongly
felt that it was her duty to aid the Confederate cause in whatever way possible. South
Carolina was her home and like her male counterparts she was at war with those who
wanted to invade it. As a woman her outlets for contributing to the Southern cause were
greatly limited. Nursing while not accepted by all still proved to be one outlet many
women felt they could perform that would actually greatly benefit the Confederacy.

Regardless of the uncertainty concerning the proper role of women in the war

\textsuperscript{64}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Diary of Ada White Bacot, 3 September 1861. \textit{A Confederate Nurse}, ed. Jean Berlin, Columbia:
University of South Carolina Press, 1994, 49.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 11 November 1861, 156.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 10 August 1861, 47.
effort, the Confederate government formalized women's entrance into the medical world. In September 1862, the Confederate Congress passed “The Hospital Bill of 1862” that allotted for each hospital two matrons and two assistant matrons for each ward, “giving preference in all cases to females where their service may best serve the purpose.” Even though the Confederate government officially opened its doors to the presence of women in hospitals not all women were welcomed to join. Initially the Confederacy, like the Union, tried to recruit, white, middle-class and elite “mother figures,” who were older and plain looking. According to the committee that designed the hospital bill, a woman's

sympathies not only soothe the afflicted, but her tenderness and kindness often afford relief. With the physical courage to resist, she yet has higher moral courage to endure, and hence, never falters or grows weary in doing good. With more heart she is necessarily more constant, more generous, more devoted and patient. - Always responsive when her humanity is appealed to, she has sympathies warmer, more religious, more earnest and refined. Her very presence is a rebuke to every impropriety, and when permanently introduced into your hospitals, will shed a gleam of neatness, cheerfulness, comfort and moral excellence around and about them not yet realized. - To the sick soldier surely nothing could be more grateful than this. In this manner, during hours of suffering, he will, to some extent, realize those pure joys, which make home and wife so dear to every manly heart, while the brave boy, separated from friends, and prostrate upon a bed disease, will again be reminded of her whose motherly love was the first recollection of his childhood, and whose earnest prayers were the first to direct his young heart to the throne of Grace. In all the hospitals visited by your Committee it required no effort to detect evidences of her presence, where from the unselfish motive of doing good, she had voluntarily gone. In all such hospitals there was an air of neatness, cheerfulness and comfort no where else to be seen.

Many high-ranking Confederate officials believed that by having older, mature women as nurses, men would feel more comfortable in such vulnerable positions. For most men, the only woman they had ever been subservient to was their mother. Therefore, Confederate leaders reasoned that men would only be comfortable under the care of a woman who reminded them of their mother. Nevertheless women of all ages

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68 Richmond Enquirer, September 29, 1862
70 Ibid.
71 Richmond Enquirer, September 29, 1862
answered the call to nursing.

As a result of the Confederacy’s new policy toward nursing Ada White Bacot finally traveled to Virginia and fulfilled her wish. Bacot believed that her position in no way threatened her own well-being but instead greatly aided in Confederate soldiers recovery. One morning Bacot went with “Dr. Rembert to visit the upper hospitals, found several poor men very sick, but perfectly in their minds, they seemed very much gratified to see a lady and received what I said to them very kindly.”73 This instance shows that fear of improper treatment, especially at the outbreak of the rebellion, was unwarranted. Rather than feel embarrassed or harassed by working with men in extremely vulnerable positions women like Bacot “found gratification to be able to do anything for the poor men” who were “so greatful.”74 By leaving their assigned sphere Southern women and men both benefited. Women were able to do something important for their state and country while men found devoted people to care for them in their time of distress.

Southern white women, young and old, wealthy and poor, came to nurse and care for wounded soldiers. According to one such woman,

The women of the South had been openly and violently rebellious from the moment they thought their state’s rights touched. They incited the men to struggle in support of their views, and weather right or wrong, sustained them nobly to the end. They were the first to rebel- the last to succumb. Taking an active part in all that came within their sphere, and often compelled to go beyond this.75

White women’s participation in nursing represented one profound way the Victorian notions of the South transformed during the years of fighting as a direct result of war. This example of one challenge to Southern gender norms suggests that other gender prescriptions might also be affected by the war.

73 Ada White Bacot, 17 December 1861, 66.
74 Ibid, 25 December 1861, 68.
Southern White Women and Honor on the Home Front

On the home front, where the majority of Southern women remained during the war, many white privileged women had greater independence and freedom than ever before. But this autonomy was not always liberating. Left alone, wives faced economic and emotional crises. Prior to the war white women had depended on the men in their communities. Now without men, Southern white women, rich and poor, had two choices--either to crumble and self-destruct or to rise to the occasion. Some Confederate women felt they could not manage without their husbands and many of these women wrote to both their husbands and the Confederate government pleading for their return. But some white women did more than just write to their husbands asking to be rescued. Some women took matters into their own hands, and their actions represent an alteration in Southern gender conventions. According to historian Laura F. Edwards, Confederate women attempted to separate their unconventional actions during the war, for example, nursing, running their plantations, living without their husbands' and fathers', and their antebellum way of life. Many thought they could not be proper devoted Southern white mothers, wives, and daughters that they were taught to be during the antebellum period if they took part in such unladylike activities. Southern white women could not have protected their way of life, their womanhood, without taking part in unconventional social practice. The demands of war forced patriotic womanhood to supersede the antebellum southern feminine ideal. Confederate women sacrificed for the cause in order to ensure the establishment of a new nation that would preserve elite ideas and hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Once the war ended, white women believed elite

white men would rule the home and the state again. With the rightful leaders in power and society back to “normal,” women, poor men, and blacks would once again find themselves in the subservient roles they had been subjected to prior to the war.

As historian LeeAnn White argues, “In supporting their men's drive for independence, these women had initially found a new autonomy and authoritative significance for their domestic concerns.”77 With men gone women became independent in their domestic role. Women were left to make their own decisions concerning their homes and families. The demands of war enabled elite white Southern women to redefine their roles as mistresses and wives. While the task was challenging, and at times overwhelming, most women were able to adapt their antebellum roles and responsibilities to embrace the patriotic ideal. As historian Giselle Roberts contends, “The management skills they had acquired through years of supervising slaves and running households were now used to organize sewing societies or benefits to raise money for the Confederacy. The countless hours they had devoted to maintaining their families’ genteel attire or assisting with the production of slave clothing was, in wartime, extended to include soldiers’ uniforms, socks, gloves, and knapsacks.”78 While clinging to the past, white Southern women nevertheless were forced to move into the future: taking on new roles in order to protect their way of life and their husbands’ and families’ position of privilege and honor. The fact that gender restrictions began to alter because of the war, in combination with the redefinition of honor as “family honor,” might explain why some elite Southern women resisted Union occupation.

77 LeeAnn Whites, The Civil War As A Crisis of Gender, 94.
CHAPTER II  
THE WOMEN OF WILLIAMSBURG

Williamsburg, Virginia, was occupied by Yankee soldiers for nearly three years, from May 1862 to the end of the war. The Confederate citizens who remained in the city could not escape the Yankee presence. Bluecoats blanketed the city and set up camp across the Palace and Courthouse greens. Almost immediately, many white women of Williamsburg began to challenge their captors. One of the most outspoken women of the community was Cynthia Beverly Tucker Washington Coleman. On May 5, 1862, when the battle of Williamsburg took place, Coleman was thirty-years-old and lived in her family’s home. She was married to Dr. Charles Coleman, her second husband, a surgeon in the Confederate medical corps. With her husband off to war, Cynthia sent her daughter, the only surviving child of her first marriage to Richmond to live with relatives. She stayed in Williamsburg to care for her mother, and most importantly, the wounded and sick soldiers forced to remain after the battle.\(^7\)

Cynthia Coleman’s upbringing fostered the strict social convictions of antebellum womanhood. Her father, Nathanial Beverly Tucker, was a lawyer and taught his profession to students at the College of William and Mary. He provided for his family, which lived an elite life in Williamsburg. Nathanial Beverly Tucker, in particular, stressed the virtues of passivity, domesticity, and piety for his daughter and his presence and teachings dominated Cynthia’s most impressionable years.\(^8\)

Cynthia was taught rudimentary reading, writing, and domestic skills at home before being sent to a boarding school in 1847. According to historian Christine Anne

Farnham, “Southerners developed a vibrant student culture that mirrored the hierarchical society from which they came.”\textsuperscript{81} This meant that elite white men received the best education, followed by limited education for elite women and other white men, and nearly no education for the lowly poor woman or black. Coleman's education away from her home and the teachings provided to her by her family were based on a society that was deeply conservative in its practices of the gender conventions of the old South.\textsuperscript{82} Everyone in society had his or her proper place and corresponding roles and responsibilities. Elite white women like Coleman, therefore, were formally and informally taught their station in life, and they where expected to abide by these teachings.

Education for elite white women in the antebellum era was only intended for a select few. “Higher education, for the most part, was affordable only to the wealthier ranks of Southern white women.”\textsuperscript{83} Consequently, these students did not threaten the status quo. Coleman's education, for example, was meant to help her maintain her class distinction, not to provide her with the skills needed to find a profession.

In a slave society, argued Farnham, “gentility was an important means of rationalizing the social structure by claiming the natural elevation of some over others.”\textsuperscript{84} The elite southern white society saw higher education in the South as a mark of gentility signifying the highest type of refinement. Farnham concluded that there were few efforts to oppose the education of white elite women and therefore most probably did not see it as a threat to the status quo. Instead of criticizing or attacking these institutions, white

\textsuperscript{82} Doris C. Sturzenberger. \textit{A Southern Lady Ideal in the Life of Cynthia Beverly Tucker, 1840-1870}, 31.
\textsuperscript{83} Christie Anne Farnham, \textit{The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South}, 28.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
Southerners, called for the improvement of female education so that it included more than just social and household etiquette. Even some white Southern men believed that educating a woman was beneficial. According to historian Anne Firor Scott, Southern men felt that “women had undeveloped intellectual capacities, that educated women made better wives and better mothers (and hence a better society), and that educated women were better companions.” Educating women, however, did pose some serious consequences. Southern men had already created laws forbidding slaves to be taught to read and write and should have understood that it was risky to educate anyone whom they wished to keep in a degree of subjection. If enough women had an opportunity for the significant intellectual development they were advocating, would they then be satisfied to remain in the sphere into which men and society cast them? Perhaps Coleman’s education helped prepare her to stretch the gender boundaries of the antebellum South when the opportunity presented itself.

*Female Honor and Resistance to Union Occupation*

Because of the Civil War, Cynthia Coleman found herself in an unfamiliar environment. To a devoted Confederate patriot, who loved her home and her Southern community, there was nothing worse than Yankee occupation. But what could Coleman possibly do to counteract the Union presence that had wreaked havoc in her community? She was merely a woman.

What she did, along with countless other Confederate women in both Williamsburg and across the South, was actively resist Yankee occupation. Cynthia

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86 Ibid.
87 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 5.
Coleman had observed the changes that war brought to Southern society, especially in regard to women, and along with many of her elite peers, realized that they were “capable of forming their own independent and even critical judgments” especially “when the course of the war caused men to violate their domestic trust.” Some Southern elite women understood that they could no longer hide behind the shield of their male protectors.

According to historian Drew Faust, “The harsh realities of military conflict and social upheaval pushed women toward new understandings of themselves and toward reconstructions of the meanings of southern womanhood.” LeeAnn Whites concurs, arguing that “gender relations played a critical role in the initial outbreak of the war, as well as in its course, its conduct, and its eventual outcome...for individual men and women, this moment of gender transformation in the social order at large created a crisis in the every way that they perceived their appropriate gender roles.” Consequently it was not only manhood for which white Southerners were fighting; in the process they redefined gender ideals, even if this transformation was not their intent. To protect their own inner conviction of self-worth and continue to be viewed as respectable by their community, white women actively and publicly resisted Union control of Williamsburg.

The white women of Williamsburg’s actions were certainly motivated by an impulse to protect their homes, their way of life, their own well-being, and of course their family’s honor. Similar to their husbands, fathers, and sons, women felt the need to defend their family honor. Unlike their male counterparts, however, women did not fight battles on the battleground. Instead they were forced to fight their own war on their own battlefield—in their homes, on the streets, and other public places in the city of

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88 LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War As a Crisis of Gender*, 62.
Williamsburg. White men quickly came to realize that they could not be heroes on the battlefield without the aid of women on the home front. The circumstances of the Civil War, however, allowed women for one of the first times to openly and with community approval to break free of the gendered constraints placed on them in Confederate society.

Their actions and the way in which they spoke of their active, public resistance to Yankee rule were manifestations of a distinct female idea of honor. Their endeavors no longer influenced or affected only the honor of their husbands or their family. Instead women's bravery and defiance were directly related to their own self-worth and how their peers viewed and valued them as members of the community. LeeAnn Whites concluded that as the war lingered on “Confederate women found themselves positioned more like their men.” They experienced a new autonomy, which might have threatened the very basis of social construction of white manhood, but provided white Southern women with more freedom and opportunities than ever before. “Women entered the war, Whites argues, “to protect their position as dependents, as mothers, wives, and daughters.”

Because of Southern white women's sheer ability and dedication to the cause “their patriotic acts of service to the nation came to mean for them the externalization not only of the domestic labor, but of the domestic attachments that this implied.” The women of Williamsburg’s actions can therefore be characterized in the same way soldiers described the markers of male honor-- as courageous, brave, and valorous.

From the moment the Yankees moved into Williamsburg, many of the town's women were displeased by Union presence and resisted Union authority by Southern women openly showing their feelings for the occupation and defying Yankee orders. Historian Giselle Roberts claims that “as Yankee forces edged closer to their homes and

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91 Ibid, 53.
92 Ibid.
93 James McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War, 77.
communities, young ladies focused their anger on the barbarity of the invading enemy—not on the failure of Confederate men to protect their women."94 Confederate white women rarely obeyed the rules set down by Union officers and in the few instances they did listen to their captors, these women usually responded with indifference or disrespect.

The Union soldiers, undaunted by the unfriendly reception, began to make themselves comfortable in their newly acquired territory. Officers set up headquarters in the William and Mary college building and the Vest Mansion. “Polite” Yankee soldiers searched all the homes of Williamsburg, and left citizens unharmed.

The Vest Mansion was one of the finest homes in Williamsburg. This large brick, two-story home located on the Duke of Gloucester street served as the central site for compiling and signing the majority of Union orders, memos, and other documentation. As a result of the home’s importance, David Edward Cronin, a Union soldier stationed in Williamsburg, compiled a collection of first-hand accounts of the occupation, along with military government documents issued by Union officers concerning their rule over the city. After the war Cronin published his collection, appropriately titled the Vest Mansion papers.

According to the Vest Mansion papers “one of the first orders issued from McClellan” regarding the occupation of Williamsburg was the prohibition of all Union soldiers from “the molestation of the inhabitants of the town or their property.”95 While the written order does not speak to the order’s implementation some historians have found that for most occupied territories throughout the South, it was rare for Union troops to injure citizens. According to historian Stephan Ash, “Even where Yankees were at their worst, they rarely went beyond vituperation and plundering: physical violence

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against peaceful citizens was almost unheard of.”

Nevertheless Bell Irvin Wiley argues that the fear of harm still weighed heavily on Confederate women’s minds. “As a general rule women living in invaded areas suffered greater hardship than those residing in localities not penetrated by Federal forces. A part of the hardship was the terrible dread with which most women anticipated the coming of the Federals.” However, fear of physical harm and actual molestation are different. Since white Southern women did not know for certain what a Union presence would mean, they imagined the worst case scenario. Many white elite Southerners believed that a Federal invasion would destroy their Southern way of life, and possibly even cause them physical harm, which explains why Confederate women feared the presence of Union soldiers. Both Ash and Wiley conclude that normally the anticipation of invasion, in particular for white elite women, was worse than the reality. In the heat of the moment, however, many of the citizens of Williamsburg, like Coleman, detested the presence of these Yankee invaders and feared what harm their occupation might cause.

Even when Union soldiers were on their best behavior elite white women in Williamsburg found their presence profoundly repugnant. One such woman, Harriette Cary, described the Yankee soldiers stationed in her home town as “vandals” whom she regarded with “utter detestation” and “a disgust which I would not feel for the vilest man on our Southern Soil.” Cary clearly embodied hatred for the enemy soldiers that occupied her home city, yet there seems to be no particular event where she was harmed by these men. Perhaps for Cary and her likeminded counterparts it was not only because Northern soldiers had invaded Southerners homes so much as the fact that Confederates

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98 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 1.
99 Harriette Cary Diary, 6 May 1862, MR-CWM
believed Northerners were part of a corrupting civilization that led to such hatred. Many white Confederate women believed that Yankees did not live by the same code of honor that Southerners cherished.

Many white elite Southern women found the idea of a Northern gentleman preposterous. Coleman often questioned whether or not there “was such a thing as a gentleman in the Yankee army.”¹⁰⁰ Enemy occupation by a people that had no honor violated the principles of Southern personal honor. Subjection to military rule was the ultimate form of shame and dishonor for all Southerners, male and female.¹⁰¹ Many citizens in the occupied South, especially white elites, ranked honor above all else. Such deeply rooted principles compelled Confederates to react to Union invasion. In occupied cities, like Williamsburg, this meant numerous women would wage a battle for their own honor against a people whom they believed had none.

The first way in which Cynthia Coleman and other white women of Williamsburg worked to combat Yankee rule was by nursing and aiding Confederate soldiers. Throughout the battle, the citizens of Williamsburg, including Cynthia Coleman and her family, cared for wounded Southerners. As Coleman recalled, “That night the Battle was over the old city opened its doors for the last time to give shelter and comfort to Southern soldiers. My mother’s house was full.”¹⁰² Each home contained as many soldiers as it could fit inside.

The possibility for elite white women to help Confederate soldiers became more difficult once the men in blue laid their claim to the city. Nevertheless on May 6 many women left their homes to nurse the Confederate soldiers that remained in town. Even though, according to historians’ analysis most Southern white women probably had little

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
¹⁰² Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 1.
to fear from Yankee soldiers, Coleman noted that “anxious hearts beat that day in women’s breast.”

Although these women were under extreme mental and emotional anguish, something motivated women to leave their homes and care for these helpless men. As Coleman relates, “They roused themselves...remember the duty that lies before them, for even now the hospitals and Churches occupied by wounded soldiers who are alike prisoners of war, needing the ministering care and sympathy of women.”

White elite women were also motivated by a sense of duty. Duty and honor have been linked together in many cases for Civil War soldiers, and perhaps this relationship might also be the case for those Confederate women left their homes to nurse soldiers. Although white elite women clearly saw their aid as an opportunity to help their fellow man, their attitudes toward Yankee soldiers while nursing Confederate wounded exhibited a subtle defiance as well.

Coleman resisted Union rule with her work as a nurse throughout Federal occupation. She had already transcended gender stereotypes by working in the public sphere caring for men. But this Confederate took her actions one step further by defying the orders of her male superior. Coleman and other women found it difficult to obey the commands of Dr. Rogers, who they more typically referred to as “Head Devil.” Coleman characterized him as a “depraved, drunken, heartless, Yankee.”

Although the surgeon was in charge, Coleman, even as a woman who had been taught to obey men, had no problem defying his instructions.

One extreme case of disobedience occurred when Cynthia Coleman “found a poor Irish boy pale with apprehension.” The young man told Coleman “the ‘Head Devil’ had ordered him to report that morning that he might amputate his arm.”

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103 Ibid, 6.
104 Ibid, 1.
105 Ibid, 2.
had seen “many harrowing scenes” including countless amputations. She believed her experience made her qualified to overrule Dr. Rogers’s assessment. After examining the Irish boy’s arm, Coleman “thought it much swollen and inflamed no bones were broken, as it was only a flesh wound.” She once again decided to take matters in her own hands. Not only would she save this boy’s arm, but she also relished the fact that in doing so she would be defying the Union doctor. Her actions would dishonor the surgeon and bring honor to herself. Coleman subsequently told the injured boy to follow her. “I took him to a sort of closet and told him to lock himself in and answer to no tap but mine. I gave him a signal. Then he went off and made a poultice according to my lights and applied it to his arm.” Cynthia Coleman watched the boy and cared for him without the help of a man, especially a Yankee doctor. She kept him “locked up until the old drunken wretch forgets him.”

Coleman felt determined to “save his arm.” Since Coleman never wrote of being caught it is likely she was successful in her mission.

Coleman’s language and actions show her contempt for the Union surgeon.

According to Coleman, “many harrowing were the scenes enacted in the Federal Hospital filled with Confederate wounded, where the victims suffered everything of mutilation and ignominy from brutal drunken surgeon, who will carry with him in life and death the execrations of the sufferers and those who witnessed his heartless deeds.” But Confederate women could not let their captors get the better of the white elite. Southern women who were likeminded to Coleman resisted Union rule in various ways. For most women this meant verbal defiance. During a conversation with the “Head Devil,” Cynthia Coleman again asserted her honor and self-worth in front of the public “forum” of the hospital. The Union surgeon told Coleman “that he was not a Commissioned Officer,

106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
but a Volunteer, receiving no pay for his services, that he was working for eternity and hoped to get his reward there.” Even as a pious Southern woman, Cynthia Coleman saw little hope of salvation for any of the Yankee invaders of her community, and responded, “I trust you might get what you richly deserve, but it will not be in Heaven.” The doctor was Coleman's superior and her comments could have put her in danger.

Coleman and countless other white women of Williamsburg administered to Confederate wounded soldiers during the Union occupation. Describing the aftermath of the battle Coleman noted in her diary, “As the day advanced we were not [intimidated] we decided to go out and look after our dear soldiers who had been wounded in the Battle and had been carried to the Episcopal and Baptist Churches previously used as Confederate hospitals.” As women walked along the streets, with baskets in arms, they ignored their captors. According to Union accounts, “as a general thing the expression on the faces of the people, particularly of the women, whenever they happened to come into view of Union officials, was one of undisguised hatred and contempt.” The white women of Williamsburg, young and old, appeared to disrespect their captors regardless of rank. Cronin, a Union soldier, witnessed and took account of “the always disdainful...manner of ridicule” Confederate women had “in the presence of commissioned officers whom they seemed to hold responsible for the humiliating occupation of the place.” Hence, one way women resisted Yankee rule was by visibly displaying their disgust for the invading Northerners on their face and in the way they walked.

Confederate women were expected to have a capacity to bear burdens with grace,

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109 Ibid.
110 Ibid, 1.
111 David Edward Cronin, The Vest Mansion, 23.
112 Ibid, 51.
courage, and silence.\textsuperscript{113} Coleman’s actions did not correspond with the conventional idea of a Southern lady. Instead Coleman took a very active role outside of her home and in doing so showed emotion in a very public spotlight. She came from a world dependent on honor and she would not acknowledge the rule of a people she believed had none.

Historian Giselle Roberts concurs that Confederate white elite women expressed “their patriotism and honor” as well as their hatred for Federal soldiers in unconventional ways.\textsuperscript{114} According to Roberts even the most “proper” Southern lady abandoned her antebellum socialization to engage in small yet symbolic acts of political resistance. Meeting invaders on their doorsteps and in the streets, young women sang “Dixie” thereby taunting Federal soldiers, and waved Confederate flags. While this behavior would have been regarded as shocking, “unladylike,” and “political” in the antebellum South, white Confederate women now embraced such actions to affirm their patriotism and support for the cause. Although these flagrant acts of defiance shifted boundaries of public behavior, Confederate elite women legitimized their actions by pointing to the “barbarity” and social inferiority of their captors.\textsuperscript{115}

Like Coleman, Harriette Cary, an elite Southern white woman, also believed that women needed to take action to protect themselves from Yankee rule and bring honor to their families as their male counterparts did by going off to war. While women, for the most part, did not have the opportunity to go off to fight as soldiers, Cary argued that “women too had a chance to be courageous” to rival the boldness of their men, at least within the sphere of verbal warfare.\textsuperscript{116} Cary believed that women possessed a powerful weapon that they should use to fight their captors-- verbal defiance. Cary along with her

\textsuperscript{113}Bertram Wyatt-Brown, \textit{Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South}, 235.
\textsuperscript{114}Giselle Roberts, \textit{The Confederate Belle}, 135.
\textsuperscript{115}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116}Harriette Cary Diary, 6 May 1862, MR-CWM
peers often used this tool to resist Yankee rule.

Elite women in Williamsburg, like Cynthia Coleman, also defended their own honor and the honor of their family by shaming their Yankee captors. The women of Williamsburg shamed Union soldiers by paying no deference to the American flag, the symbol of the Northern cause. In June of 1862 the Federals installed a new fifty-foot flagpole with a large American flag flying from it. The women of Williamsburg felt dishonored by this display and decided to shame and disrespect the Yankees by refusing to walk underneath the flag. The *Cavalier*, the Williamsburg local newspaper, reported that one young lady “approached the banner” and unwilling to tread beneath the stars and stripes “gently stepped off of the beautiful sidewalk, her fairy foot lightly pressing the mud six inches deep.”117 This Southern paper sympathized with the Confederate cause and clearly portrayed this honorable white Southern lady’s actions in heroic fashion.

While the Confederate account of this event might be biased, Union records lack specific mention of this event. However, since similar events were recorded by Union soldiers, it is likely that these other acts of Confederate defiance infuriated Union troops who were supposed to be treated with deference by the members of the occupied territory. Confederate women continued to defend their Southern honor and heritage by refusing to show any reverence or respect for the Union soldiers, officers, or the American flag.

The language used by the *Cavalier* to describe this defiant act tells a great deal about how Southerners viewed the actions of elite Southern women. Described as delicate with “fairy” feet, the women of Williamsburg, even during time of war, were still considered the same precious and fragile mothers and daughters of the antebellum period.

However, these delicate creatures were no longer protected by just their fathers’ and husbands’ but rather they were willing and able to defend themselves, even get dirty, in order to resist their captors. While the ideals of women as sweet and fragile might have remained a consistent element of Southerner elite gender ideals, the reality of elite Confederate women taking action to protect themselves and especially their honor was not ignored by those around them. Members of their community took notice and valued their actions. Such a positive response probably drove many Confederate women to continue and possibly even elevate their defiant acts against the enemy.

The actions of the elite women of Williamsburg influenced both their Southern brethren and their Federal captors’. Angry and insulted by displays of disrespect, the Union army fought back. The men in blue placed another large American flag in the front of the Courthouse. To avoid walking under it, “the girls of Williamsburg…used to walk out in the road.”¹¹⁸ Not to be outdone or embarrassed by the Southern women of Williamsburg once again, the United States troops “got a long flag and stretched it completely across the Main Street.”¹¹⁹ Confederate women could not avoid walking underneath the flag. Lincoln’s soldiers went to extreme measures to avoid humiliation by mere women.

This open disdain for men in blue uniforms was universally resented by its victims, who were at a loss to understand the reasons for it. One Federal officer complained that Williamsburg “ladies took advantage of the uniform courtesy of the 'Yankees,' whom they despised and hated.” The “ladies compressed their dresses whenever they met an officer or enlisted man,” he complained, “so that the garment would not touch the persons they passed. They pulled their hats over their faces to

¹¹⁸ (Williamsburg) Cavalier, 25 June 1862.
¹¹⁹ Ibid.
The women of Williamsburg noticed the effect their actions had on their Yankee captors and this effect served as both motivation and a catalyst to continue their defiant acts.

One year after the Yankees first took hold of the colonial capital Sally Galt, a woman from a very prominent Williamsburg family, wrote to her cousin that the Yankees knew “that we had no sympathy with them and in all Virginia there is not a more loyal place than this old city.” Elite Confederate women's challenges to Yankee rule probably helped to dishearten an already tired and scared bunch of Union soldiers. Perhaps the immense physical and emotional difficulty of controlling and containing the women of Williamsburg during those early years of occupation helps explain why the Union troops stationed in Williamsburg never attempted to attack the Confederate capital lying only fifty miles. While their were many reasons, mostly military, for the Union's abandonment of the Richmond campaign, maybe a small piece of the puzzle includes the extreme hardships Union soldiers faced during enemy occupation. If they could not even control the Confederate women in Williamsburg how could they organize and successfully launch an attack from that post?

As the occupation continued Cynthia Coleman experienced many run-ins with Yankee officials who showed her and her Southern family little respect. She described the officers who “infested” her house as the “lowest rank and file who seemed to try to provoke me by using the most violent oaths, abusing the Confederates whom in every instance they called rebels.” Coleman could not tolerate Northerners dishonoring

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120 Carol Kettenburg Dubbs, *Defend This Old Town*, 242.
121 Sally Galt to Cousin, 15 April, 1863, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary, 5.
123 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary. Tucker-Coleman Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department,
herself and her family. Coleman did not challenge Federal officers to a duel or partake in any of the other traditional forms of defending one’s honor, but she did actively fight back with her words and actions. Coleman recounts, in her diary, noting that, “a Yankee taunted me by saying we might well boast of giving up everything to the Cause, but he ‘guessed’ if we had to go ourselves into battle we would find it quite different thing from fighting in proxy. I replied ‘I do not know how that would be, but I can assure you no woman would be found shot in the back.” In this exchange Coleman might be implying that Union soldiers were cowards, by suggesting that they ran from the front lines of battle and thus were shot in their backs. In her mind Confederate women were braver than Union soldiers asserting white Confederate women’s honor. They could even stand their ground in battle. Because of Coleman's belief that Southerners were superior to Northerners, both on and off the battlefield, she had no problem speaking back to Yankee officials. She showed them no veneration even though she was an “inferior” woman, as well as a captive.

Southern white women also found their sex could be used to their advantage. Victorian ideals and the male-dominated culture of the military fostered the assumption among Union soldiers and officers, especially early in the war, that white women were harmless. As a result, white women assertive enough to stand up to their invaders encountered few deterrents, although occasionally their honor could be tested by the Union soldiers. However, white elite women could virtually do or say anything to Union soldiers and officers without facing severe physical punishment. Some female spies were put in prison, but it appears that few women faced the possibility of death in their acts of resistance. Cynthia Coleman believed most Yankee threats of imprisonment were

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Swem Library, The College of William and Mary, 9-10.

124 Ibid, 4.
nothing more than that—threats, and seemed not to fear the possibility of being put in prison for her actions. "Know you not that I have power to send you as a prisoner to Fortress Monroe?" said a Union official Coleman provoked more than usual. She responded, "I desire nothing better... Send away, it is what I most desire."  

In all likelihood Coleman's comments were probably not heartfelt. While Williamsburg might have been under Union occupation and "prison-like" an elite woman like Coleman clearly would have found an actual prison even more confining. Coleman knew full well the unlikelihood of prison for her offenses. As a result she felt confident enough to make these very brave and defiant comments to a Union officer without having to actually follow through on them.

Even though no women of Williamsburg were arrested, and, according to one Union official, "ladies were absolutely safe from molestation," there were limits to the occupiers' tolerance. Women needed to learn just how far they could go before they pushed Yankees beyond their threshold. According to Coleman, "some of the citizens had made themselves peculiarly obnoxious to the Yankees, and on these their wrath was visited." Cynthia Coleman related the story of an "old grey-haired women, frightened nearly to death" that she "scurried through the streets pursued by Yankees on horseback with drawn sabers to kill." According to Coleman this one lady had been out-spoken to Union soldiers and was very "decided in her views and in expressing them without fear." On the day she was attacked she had "twice spat at, once on the street and once while quietly sitting by the window of her own house" Yankee soldiers. The Union soldiers apparently no longer would take abuse from this Confederate woman and decided to take

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125 Ibid, 8.
126 David Edward Cronin, The Vest Mansion, 191.
These accounts suggest that women’s resistance could have some serious consequences. Maybe death or imprisonment was unlikely but the Yankees could scare Confederate women or embarrass them in public-- a fate, for some, according to Coleman, far worse than death.128

Because women usually faced little more than a paternalistic scolding for their outspoken actions, some became bolder in their resistance. Smuggling goods, for instance, as well as spying, became a fairly common practice by Confederate women in occupied territories. Cynthia Coleman was no exception.

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. I am almost afraid to put on record, (though I do hide this journal in my bustle) how often I have sent letters into the Confederacy while buying meat and meal at their lines. Even while the Yankees were watching me and I knew it, I have shipped off news of any increase of their numbers, the conditions of Fort Magruder and many other items- enough to ensure my being scalped, or sent away while our poor wounded need me.129

Coleman’s written account of her actions brings many of her motivations and fears to light. First, she obviously wanted to outsmart and outwit the Yankees. She did not want them to get “the better” of her. Coleman prided herself on her ability to anger and shame her enemy. She “enjoyed their hatred” even though she might have to “suffer for it.” Coleman found honor in smuggling goods right under the watchful eye of the Yankees. Her actions not only benefited her directly-- for she was able to correspond with her family, and purchase much needed goods- but they also aided the Confederate cause. Her actions and sacrifice were also noticed by her peers, which helped her reputation in the community and subsequently her honor. She resisted Union rule while in the market place in front of all the other Confederate women buying goods. If the Yankees were watching her actions then surely her peers were as well. Finally, by keeping her personal

127 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 6-7.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid, 8.
journal and listing all of her defiant acts and illegal practices, she was resisting. If that
diary was ever found or confiscated by a Union soldier, Coleman would have surely
faced some type of punishment. Yet Coleman did not care. Keeping the diary on her
body at all times, she was shunning the Yankees right in front of their faces. Coleman
could defy, resist and even document her actions, and the Yankees could not and did not
do anything to actually stop her.

Union officials did know about and documented female practices of smuggling.
According to The Vest Mansion papers, “It was known that outside ladies smuggled
letters through in jars of butter and jam and inside of dressed poultry.” Other entries take
note of “females carrying letters of correspondence and contraband in their bonnets.”

Since Coleman believed Yankee soldiers saw her “treasonous” deeds, it is likely they did
have some idea of the resistance taking place. Coleman’s actions in the face of danger
show bravery similar to that of the Confederate men fighting on the front. Although
bullets might not have flown passed her, she risked her well-being for the cause. Her
actions were done in public, for all to see and assess and she believed that her
unconventional activities brought more honor upon herself and her family.

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According to historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southerners in the old South evaluated a man's conduct according to five unwritten tenets: 1) immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies, 2) opinion of others as indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth, 3) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances, 4) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit, 5) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of women. This belief system consumed elite white male lives. Southern, white, elite, antebellum women understood these principles and although they did not live their lives by them per se, they certainly valued honor in the Southern society. The public actions of resistance in which Cynthia Coleman and her Confederate sisters of Williamsburg took part, in many ways paralleled the tenets of Southern male honor they had grown up with. Women could not mirror male honor because they were not men, the first criteria for honor. Instead white elite women created a female honor, in which they would use male honor as a foundation for their own actions.

The first tenet of male honor, according to Wyatt-Brown, proclaims honor as “immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies.” Cynthia Coleman’s acts of resistance certainly fit this principle. She was brave and courageous in seeking revenge against the greatest enemy of her white Southern family, community, and nation-- the Union army. Coleman often referred to her struggle and the difficulties the women of Williamsburg encountered with the

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131 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, 34
132 Ibid.
Yankees as a “battle” or “fight.” Coleman wrote in her diary how “Women laughed and wept, wrung the hands of strangers, imploring Heaven’s blessing upon them and the Cause for which they fought.” The Federal army had commandeered their town, forced them to live in “prison”-like conditions and destroyed their tight-knit community. Women could not freely leave their homes and walk within their community as they once had. Union soldiers had taken over public and private buildings and in general had made the occupants of Williamsburg feel disconnected to the city that was their home.

Homes were torn down and buildings were burned, including the College of William and Mary. When they occupied Williamsburg the Yankees became not only the enemy of the Confederacy, but the immediate adversary of this small Virginia town. The presence and actions of Union soldiers and officers humiliated the people of Williamsburg—Coleman's responses signaled a battle for revenge against the ultimate enemy of the community.

The second traditional principle of honor involved the “opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth.” The citizens of Williamsburg did look to other community members for affirmation of their actions. Without the opinions of their peers, for both men and women, an individual could not truly understand his or her own value. A person’s self-worth was determined by this ideology. Cynthia Coleman often wrote of how she viewed other members of the town based on their actions. In one case she even used the word honor to describe one of her sister patriots. “Among those whose narrow means bound them to the spot was Miss Emily Morrison a name ever to be held in reverence and honour.” Coleman evaluated her peers based on how honorable their actions were. In return other members of the elite

133 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 5-6.
134 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, 34.
135 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 11.
might have formulated their views of Coleman based on her public actions.

Coleman’s assessment of Morrison reflects another important tenet of male honor women tried to emulate—“Reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances.” A great many women in Williamsburg, including Morrison, refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Union when a proclamation was issued that “all citizens in the city of Williamsburg and vicinity who are not willing to take the oath of allegiance to the government of the United States” were “to be placed beyond the lines now occupied by the armed forces.”

Oath taking was not a trivial issue for the Confederate women of Williamsburg. Many did not want to leave their homes or their community, but they could not bear taking an oath to a dishonorable people. This was the case for Morrison, who had an “aged and ill mother,” which forced her to remain in Williamsburg. She could not find it inside herself to turn against her way of life and take an oath to the Union even if this meant exile from her mother.

When the Officer arrived to put the test she was in an agony of distress. In vain was the pen placed in her trembling fingers; they had no power to hold it. Her mother from her seemingly dying bed exhorted her not to perjure herself. Let me go into presence of my Maker believing you true to yourself and your Country. The Officer was melted by this scene and left these two noble women in peace.

Morrison’s story was not unique. Scores of Williamsburg women refused to pledge allegiance to the Union, even under the most trying of conditions. Sally Galt, for instance, was a member of a prominent Williamsburg family. She led the women of Williamsburg in the fight against the Union oath. Galt wrote scores of letters to Union officials for herself and on her behalf and the “Ladies of Williamsburg,” and used various arguments to plead her case and the case of her fellow patriots to her captors.

In the letters she composed to General Wirter during February and March of 1864,

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136 David Edward Cronin, The Vest Mansion, 37.
137 Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, 11.
Galt attempted to play to the compassion of the Union leader. As the spokesperson for the other “Ladies of Williamsburg” Galt wrote, “we earnestly, tearfully, prayfully, entreat that you will remove from us, the requirement of taking the oath.”\textsuperscript{138} Galt invoked women’s perceived sweet and innocent nature, even after two years of resistance, to get out of taking an oath in which they did not believe. Galt also hoped to show the General the “evil nature” of such an oath.\textsuperscript{139} While Northerners used the oath as a means to gain control, Southerners believed in the sacred bond of an oath and the weight of personal honor they would put behind it. If they signed, according to Galt, “taking an oath may be to us a temptation to [afrist] the Confederates; for Satan is aware of the weak points of human nature, and like an experienced General knows when and where to attack.”\textsuperscript{140}

Once more a Confederate woman compared a Northern man to the devil. Galt believed that the Union oath was nothing more than a scare tactic. She wanted the General to know that the women of Williamsburg understood the meaning of such an oath and to make it clear to the General that even if they were afraid of banishment, to declare allegiance to the Union would have dishonored them.

Finally, Galt used the General’s own ego to help her case. Galt felt if she could show General Wirter that allowing herself and the other women of Williamsburg to remain in the city without taking the oath could benefit him directly, she could help her cause. In the letter, she wrote, “now General please grant our request and when the present has become the past; the record of the war is written and your name entrenched with the history of your country; that name shall go down in all time, all lands, all languages inseparably connected with a kind act and surely a generous deed in the most

\textsuperscript{138}Sally Galt and Ladies of Williamsburg letter to General Wirter. 2 February 1864.
\textsuperscript{139}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140}Ibid.
grateful tribute, we can offer to heaven.\textsuperscript{141} Sally Galt promised the General a reputation as a generous and pious man if he spared the "Ladies of Williamsburg" from dishonoring themselves by taking an oath to a nation they felt had no honor.

While Sally Galt wrote letters on the behalf of white women in Williamsburg, she also pleaded her own case to Union officials. In a July 13, 1864 letter to Colonel West, Galt tried to dissuade her captor from forcing her to take the oath by detailing what a respectful and subservient woman she had been during occupation. According to Galt she thought that West "might publicly mitigate the sentence of taking the oath to me, so that I might remain. I have never given information in any to the enemy (Confederate), indeed I have no temptation to write to any of them because I have not a violation of the army or in the wide world nearer than a distant cousin."\textsuperscript{142} Galt felt that because she had never participated in any treasonous activities that she was entitled to remain in occupied Williamsburg. "Never were laws more strictly kept," wrote Galt, "than I have kept those made by the Federals."\textsuperscript{143} An official oath would not change the respect she gave to Union officers and the Union cause, but it would bring dishonor to herself and her family name. Not taking part in violent or disrespectful acts against the Union was one thing in the eyes of Southerners but willingly taking an oath to the enemy was going too far. That was why Galt worked so hard to persuade Union officials to allow her to stay in Williamsburg without taking an oath. She felt that a Federal officer had the power to find an exception to the rule and if anyone was worthy of this exception it was her. In her letter to Colonel West, Galt wrote that "there never was the war began a rule without an exception I can't but think I might be made this exception because there is no one in the

\textsuperscript{141}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142}Sally Galt to Colonel West. 13 July 1864.
\textsuperscript{143}Ibid.
world more friendly and desolate than myself.”144 Galt understood the way the system worked and played to it. Galt's persistence eventually paid off. By the end of July 1864 General Wirter had “let Miss Galt remain without taking the oath and all others like her.”145 Sally Galt had won. She resisted Union rule and as a result defended her own honor, the honor of her family, and the honor of her fellow elite women of Williamsburg who refused to take an oath of allegiance.

Another important pillar of honor by which the women of Williamsburg structured their wartime lives was “physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit.”146 According to historian Stephanie McCurry, “Every aspect of ladyhood was displayed on the body: leisure, luxury, wealth, and refinement.”147 A Southern woman therefore could not embody honor without looking the part. Appearance was closely tied to class. “Not even yeoman women's Sunday-best calico dress, hair comb, ribbon, bonnet, and store-bought shoes could disguise untiring labor and limited means.”148 Only an elite Southern lady, especially during the war, had the ability to care about her physical appearance. It was a pillar of honor as well as a sign of one's place in society.

Coleman’s resistance to Yankee rule, while in occupied Williamsburg, also reflected her desire to always appear strong-willed and outspoken. Coleman saw the horrors of war but never backed down from her obligation to her Confederate brethren and community. Coleman nursed in the hospitals around Williamsburg without ever showing any fear and her actions were done in public, for all to see and evaluate. She appeared strong even if inwardly she felt “horror,” for her honor depended on it.

144Ibid.
145General Wirter to Sally Galt. July 1864.
146Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, 34.
148Ibid.
The final tenet of male honor—"defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman," is the most difficult to tie to female honor.\(^{149}\) Cynthia Coleman and other elite women of Williamsburg were devoted to their families and especially their husbands. One of the reasons women resisted Yankee rule was to defend their men and their own integrity. Since most Confederate men were defending their own honor on the battlefield they could not also protect their family on the home front. Coleman described the actions of one woman's protection of the integrity of "her men."

One lady vowed no Yankee should cross the threshold of her Father. Her consternation may be imagined when she saw three Federal Officers approaching her house and pass the guard unchallenged. She confronted them and boldly denied them admission. One of them swearing a wicked oath said, "this woman ought to be arrested," receiving the reply from one of his companions, "Let's go do it." They seemed to have thought better of it for no arrest was made.\(^{150}\)

While it was still her father's home she was the only one physically there to guard it from harm. She would stop at nothing to protect her home and her integrity, which were still linked in some ways to "her men" but in other ways were left entirely on her shoulders.

Southern white women felt their actions toward Union soldiers were justified because they were defending their honor against an enemy that had none. Cynthia Coleman did find one Yankee officer who she considered a gentleman because during one interaction Coleman had with a Union officer she uncovered his gentle nature.

Some of these Yanks are human after all. This morning Lieut. Dissosway called and requested to see me. I found him a very genteel young fellow of twenty-four. He told me he had heard I wished to go into the Confederacy and that he had called to offer his services to produce a passport for me, as he was that day going to York Town. I thanked him, and as he seemed a gentleman we fell into some other conversation... I liked him as well as I could one of his hated race.\(^{151}\)

Cynthia Coleman described this Yankee exception as a "human" and a "gentleman" but nevertheless remarked that he was still a member of a "hated race." Therefore even if a Confederate elite white woman could find a gentleman amongst her captors it did not

\(^{149}\) Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, 34.

\(^{150}\) Cynthia B.T. Coleman, Diary, May 5, 1862.

\(^{151}\) Ibid, 9-10.
mean she thought he was worthy of her compliance or respect, especially if her own honor was at stake.

Despite Harriette Cary's low opinion of the Federal troops she also attempted at times to treat Yankee soldiers civilly. On rare occasions, as with Cynthia Coleman, Cary found that some Federals were even respectful. She would “chat a little with our sentinels, who seem rather hard cases, yet treat my sentiments with respect. They seem faithful to their trust, which we endeavored to encourage by a little attention, so completely do we feel at their mercy.”152 But those instances were few.

The concept of honor presumed the existence of a legitimate ruling authority that would recognize and validate the system of honor and values for the entire community. According to Cynthia Coleman, Yankees, with the exception of a few, were not men of honor, not even human beings. Their authority over the people of the occupied South, therefore, was illegitimate. This mentality allowed white Southern women to justify their disobedience and resistance to Federal authority.153

The American Civil War brought an entire nation into a state of crisis. Those of different regions, classes, races, genders, and ages experienced the war in different ways. Some faced severe hardships while others witnessed newfound freedoms and liberties, but even more encountered both. Some Confederate women, especially in occupied territories, found their lives challenged in new and unimaginable ways. Yet the chaos of the war empowered many. The strict ideas concerning the proper role of women in the South lessened both because of necessity and Confederate women’s own agency.

For those elite white women in Williamsburg, Virginia, like Cynthia Coleman, their one true enemy, the Yankees-- had invaded their community. One initial mode of

152 HC Diary, 6 May 1862
defense against this invasion was to dehumanize their enemies; these soldiers were certainly not gentlemen nor even human beings. They were an “evil” race, with no honor, and certainly no remorse for their actions. Someone needed to stand up to these wretched invaders. With Confederate men away fighting on distant battlefields, the women of Williamsburg answered the call. Before the war it would have been unheard of for a “proper” lady to commit defiant acts in public. Because of the crisis women found themselves having fewer constraints in their public lives. They were motivated to act not only because of fear but also from a desire to defend their honor and reputation and their families. These women stood between the Union army and the Southern way of life they cherished; their men could not defend them, so they had to defend themselves. It was their honor at stake along with their families. Confederate women certainly were still obedient to their husbands and fathers, but the war gave them more opportunities. Honor was one important factor that drove women into action. But it was not the same exact honor that motivated their men into uniform. Although based on male principles of honor, women manipulated their code of honor to fit their lives, their abilities, and the Southern gender structure already in place.
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