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Anna Leigh Todd

University of Southern Mississippi

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Spirited Belles and Selfless Mothers: A Generational Analysis of Women in the Civil War South

Anna Leigh Todd

The experiences of women in the Civil War South have fascinated historians for years. Catherine Clinton, Nina Silber, Drew Gilpin Faust, and a number of other scholars have carefully examined the lives and roles of Southern women and how their social and economic situations shaped their experiences. Most of these historians, however, cluster all ages together to represent Southern women as a whole.¹ While this approach has provided a detailed description of the collective lives of these women during the Civil War, it overlooks how different generations of women experienced the conflict. This paper will compare two separate generations of Southern women during the Civil War: young women of marriageable age and middle-aged women beyond childbearing years. The lives of six Southern women will be analyzed along with existing scholarship in order to explore the influence of age upon feminine wartime experience. Three of the women studied are of the younger generation: 16-year-old Alice Williamson of Tennessee, 22-year-old Emma Holmes of South Carolina, and 19-year-old Sarah Morgan Dawson of Louisiana (See Illustrations, Figure 1). The remaining women are middle aged and include 55-year-old Nancy Emerson of Virginia, 38-year-old Mary Boykin Chesnut of South Carolina (See Illustrations, Figure 2), and 48-year-old Judith McGuire of Virginia.² As I hope to show, attending to these generational differences will help to clarify how the war altered the range and nature of social responsibilities for women in the Southern U.S.

In the antebellum South, belles and plantation mistresses had drastically different responsibilities and expectations. Contrary to popular belief, plantation mistresses performed a substantial amount of daily work and were crucial to the operations of the home.³ The typical plantation mistress managed all domestic matters, especially those involving the subsistence of the family. Such tasks included the supervision of food distribution to the family and slaves, the purchasing of household goods, and the management of all food production not associated with the field.⁴ Most plantation mistresses also managed the budget of all things related to the household and kept their own monetary records of purchases to report to their husbands on the finances of the estate.⁵

Another significant portion of a plantation mistress's responsibilities centered on the care of the family. Wives were required to tend to the needs of their husband and children, and many times that involved purchasing or making clothing, overseeing medical care, acquiring household goods, and maintaining a comfortable home.⁶ In plantations with many slaves, the more labor-intensive work was removed from the plantation mistress, but she was still required to oversee all domestic tasks performed by those slaves. In fact, the planta-

spent a significant amount of her time concerned with the care of her husband's slaves, and in many in-

stances could override the authority of the overseer.⁷

Young Southern belles occupied their time with a drastically different set of tasks than their mothers. Whereas the sphere of influence of older women was primarily in the home, the average Southern belle led a distinctly public life. Flirtation and marriage occupied most aspects of a young woman's life, which was often filled with parties and other social events.⁸ The fact that most young women had significant control over the choosing of their mate meant that the time of their lives dedicated to courtship was the closest they were able to get to freedom.⁹ As a result, marriage was typically seen as the resignation of a young woman's liberty, and many older women often attempted to retrieve their own belle period.¹⁰

With respect to household responsibilities, many young women simply did not have the skills to perform the duties of their mothers. Despite being taught at an early age that they would need to be good homemakers, they were not told how to fulfill this expectation. Instead, young Southern women were mainly concerned with their formal education and the study of various arts. What sewing they did learn was confined to the decorative rather than the practical.¹¹ Belles were also raised with the idea that

they should avoid close contact with slaves, whereas the plantation mistress frequently interacted with the family's slaves.¹²

With the outbreak of the Civil War, these differing spheres of influence (public v. private) became increasingly pronounced. Wives were faced with the crisis of making important decisions about the estate alone as the war called their husbands to the front. Therefore, most of the new responsibilities for older women remained in the home, but to a greater degree.¹³ Judith McGuire and Mary Chesnut both felt intense anxiety when their husbands either became ill or were absent because they knew that the responsibilities of the estate and family would fall upon them.¹⁴ Over time, many older women began to feel a strong sense of inadequacy with their increased responsibilities.¹⁵ While her husband was away in Richmond, Mary Chesnut lamented, "I am always ill. The name of my disease is a longing to get away from here and go to Richmond."¹⁶ Throughout her diary, Chesnut often lamented the absence of her husband and her newly acquired responsibilities.¹⁷

In contrast, increased social opportunities outside of the home magnified the independence that young Southern women were already experiencing.¹⁸ The war intensified the Southern belle's preoccupation with the idea of marriage, although the position that these women took regarding the subject varied. Some belles became more determined than ever to find a mate, while others grew to accept and even embrace the idea that they might not find a husband.¹⁹ Emma Holmes brooded

over the romantic mayhem, claiming that, "...all the youths of 21 or 22 are crazy on the matrimonial question...willing to take any offer, without regard to suitability."²⁰ Despite the fact that Holmes never expected to marry, she was still painfully aware of the consequences that matrimony would have on her circle of friends.²¹ Ultimately, the fact still remained that young Southern women were expected to find a suitable mate and, as a result, many harbored secret fears of failing to do so.²² As historian Drew Gilpin Faust explained, "A married woman feared the loss of a particular husband; a single woman worried about forfeiting the more abstract possibility of any husband at all."²³

In keeping with the theme of courtship, young women became accustomed to frequent opportunities to interact with Confederate soldiers.²⁴ Many belles, Emma Holmes included, attended banquets and parties with their Confederate heroes during which they toasted the South's early victories.²⁵ Young women struggled with the conflict of using these new social opportunities to repel uncomfortable thoughts of war while also looking down on those that participated in what they deemed excessive gaiety.²⁶ Holmes was appalled that certain young women could attend balls with "heartlessness and frivolity," and yet, she occupied her time similarly throughout much of the war.²⁷ Many young women rationalized their behavior by concluding that it was the duty of the young Southern woman to remain cheerful for the sake of their Confederate heroes.²⁸

T h e gaiety of

the belles did cause some degree of tension with the women of the older generation. Judith McGuire mentioned that her age prevented her from enjoying skits performed by young women during such a troubling time, thereby drawing a distinct generational line.²⁹ She also noted that young girls were too eager to indulge in joyous festivities without realizing that tragedy could strike at any moment.³⁰ Furthermore, even though the formality of the previous generations eased during the war, many older women were horrified at the number of young women visiting Confederate camps without chaperones.³¹ In one such shocking circumstance, Emma Holmes accepted a late night escort from an absolute stranger with no hesitation whatsoever. Her description suggested that she felt herself bold and the situation quite thrilling, which led one to believe that she was aware that her actions were not commonplace.³² Also, despite the pressure that Southern society placed on young women to procure suitable husbands, older women in the community would often look down on the shameless flirtation demonstrated by the belles.³³ This increased social independence of young women was precisely what older Southern women, such as Mary Chesnut, regarded as the most dangerous change that the war brought to Southern women.³⁴ Therefore, as younger women increasingly felt pressure from society to find suitable husbands, they were also looked down upon for carrying out this expectation, leaving the belles precariously teetering on the edge of socially accepted behavior and a secure future.

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust notes that young women were more likely to develop strong bonds of friendship with other belles, whereas older women often felt isolated.³⁵ Young women were also more comfortable displaying feelings of passion and af-

fection for other women.³⁶ In her diary, Emma Holmes dotes on one close friend with whom she participated in a sleepover. She describes her as a "warm, tender, affectionate heart" and expresses her earnest desire to emulate the girl.³⁷ Nancy Emerson's diary, however, contains no mention of such a close relationship.³⁸ Given the absence of the South's young male population and evidence from the diaries, it seems that many of these young women turned to each other for an innocent form of companionship.

One of the major concerns of young Southern women was the need to feel useful, which led many to reveal a secret wish to be men.³⁹ Emma Holmes wished that she had been a man after hearing that a teacher had beaten her younger brother.⁴⁰ Sarah Morgan expressed frequent and powerful urges to reject her sex while claiming that women were the better choice to fight for the Confederacy. Frustrated over the restrictions of her sex, she cried, "What is the use of all these worthless women in war times?"⁴¹ Historian George Rable argues that some young women even expressed a desire to fight for the Confederacy alongside of men.⁴² Sarah Morgan shared this

sentiment and went so far as to consider dressing in men's clothing, but was too embarrassed.⁴³

As Morgan demonstrates, few

Flag presentation ceremonies were almost exclusively performed by young women.

young women could actually achieve this dream of combat. Instead, they turned to acts of service that society deemed more appropriate for their sex, such as making patriotic supplies.⁴⁴ When the war began, Emma Holmes immediately started making cartridge bags for the troops.⁴⁵ Sarah Morgan knew that despite the restrictions of her sex, she could knit and sew, provide encouragement to soldiers, and sacrifice her own comforts for the noble cause.⁴⁶ Early in the war, such efforts were quite common among young Confederate women.⁴⁷ Flag presentation ceremonies were almost exclusively performed by young women. One girl would present a flag to the troops and other young women performed skits about each of the Confederate States.⁴⁸ Such skits also became a popular form of fundraising for young women.⁴⁹

Knitting, a skill previously restricted to elderly women, was one of the most popular patriotic pastimes for belles.⁵⁰ Faust mentions that younger women were more likely to have an easier time acquiring such new skills than their older counterparts.⁵¹ After she completed her first pair of underwear, Emma Holmes marveled at how quickly she

was learning the craft.⁵² During the course of the war, Holmes became increasingly skilled at making clothes, and she embraced the new fashion of sewing by joining "soldier's societies" where young women could socialize.⁵³ While some belles were more concerned with fashion than frugality, many young Southern women did, in fact, so embrace this trend of knitting so as to adorn simple homespun clothing in a noble display of patriotism.⁵⁴

Rable suggests that older women were more likely to find it difficult to acquire new wartime skills, in part because such activities would distract them from their families, their first priorities.⁵⁵ However, McGuire, Chesnut, and Emerson collectively either had no children or had children that were grown. Even though they still had households to run, their responsibility toward family was not as great, a fact which gave them the time and the means necessary to provide some degree of service to the troops. McGuire affirmed this, arguing that when no household was to be provided for, one's energy must then go to the service of the troops.⁵⁶ She spent her time producing small amounts of clothing and visiting soldiers in local hospitals.⁵⁷ Mary Chesnut also contributed through knitting and hospital service; however, her aid was often interrupted by frequent illnesses.⁵⁸

Although hospital service was performed by all ages, it was typically divided along generational lines. Young Southern women were not allowed to fill the positions of hospital matrons due to

the inappropriate closeness the job required with the opposite sex.⁵⁹ The general understanding was that young women needed to be protected from the horrors of the hospital. They were, however, allowed to comfort injured soldiers and wash minor wounds.⁶⁰ Yet even this limited service was enough to embolden young Southern women toward their cause and their new public roles, for "endurance and perseverance were to characterize the actions of young girls who had been traditionally seen as weak and frivolous."⁶¹ This new independence also prompted more young women to accept positions as teachers or government workers than the South's older female generation.⁶² Emma Holmes was determined to become a teacher during the war so that she could ease the financial burden of her family and no longer be dependent.⁶³ Judith McGuire, on the other hand, only accepted a position as an accountant out of necessity during her husband's illness.⁶⁴

The simple fact was that young Southern women were eager to help the soldier whenever possible.⁶⁵ This desire was driven by strong patriotism stemming from the common belief that all Confederate soldiers were heroes to be romanticized.⁶⁶ Alice Williamson revealed this in her description of a poor Southern prisoner whom she was sure "was a noble Southeon [with] eyes bent toward the ground as pale as death" as he was taunted by Yankee soldiers.⁶⁷ This strong sense of patriotic duty in young women differs greatly from that of older women who were almost

exclusively focused on the needs of their families. Younger women benefited from the slackened social expectations of the time and were able to experience a heightened sense of freedom as they extended their reach into sectors of society that had previously been restricted to them.

The diaries of older women reveal a tendency to lend support to the Confederacy in less demonstrative ways, such as reaffirming the righteousness of their cause. Nancy Emerson insisted, "Never for one moment since this struggle commenced, has my mind wa-

"Peace on such terms, is war for the rising generation."

vered as to the final result. Nor could I for one moment believe that a righteous God would suffer us to be trodden down as the mud of the streets, whatever our cruel and insolent invaders might threaten."⁶⁸ When mentioning the absence of many young men, Judith McGuire insisted, "Their mother bears the separation from them, as women of the South invariably do, calmly and quietly, with a humble trust in God, and an unwavering confidence in the justice and righteousness of our cause."⁶⁹

Military occupation during the Civil War was mainly a Southern problem where the home front and the battlefield blended.⁷⁰ One of the tactics used by Northern troops was to violate the domestic world of Southern women by attacking the home.⁷¹ However, they were not prepared for the resistance and ferocity of some of the

occupied women of the South.⁷² Young women were generally the most strongly opposed to the enemy troops.⁷³ Alice Williamson referred to occupying Union General Eleazar Arthur Paine by a variety of sarcastic titles such as "His Lordship" and "Old Hurricane." Most of her brief diary is dedicated to her distaste for the Yankees.⁷⁴ She sarcastically feigns amazement at a particularly quiet episode during Paine's occupation with the following statement: "Well, well, was ever suh a time seen before since E.A. Payne has been here, they have neither burned any houses or killed anybody in three [whole]

days."⁷⁵ Emma Holmes frequently described President Abraham Lincoln as "stupid, ambiguous, vulgar and insolent"

and a "despotic tyrant."⁷⁶ The diaries of these young women are sprinkled with fiery phrases denouncing the Yankees and vows of open resistance in support of their fallen Confederacy, thereby suggesting a spirit and recklessness that accompanies their youth and which is largely absent in the writings of their matrons.

Older women, however, tended to be more cautious when interacting with Union troops. They were aware of the consequences that open resistance could elicit and instead favored self-control whenever possible.⁷⁷ The closest that Nancy Emerson came to opposing the Yankees was to proclaim her love of the Confederacy and its cause while soldiers were raiding her house.⁷⁸ Older women were also afraid that the war would corrupt the younger generation, a

fact which presented belles the challenge of resisting the Federals without appearing too masculine.⁷⁹ Sarah Morgan experienced this conflict after she blatantly flew her Confederate colors in front of Northern troops and received unwanted attention. "I hope it will be a lesson to me always to remember a lady can gain nothing by such display."⁸⁰

Despite their deeply ingrained distaste for the Northern invaders, some young Southern women experienced a conflict that was uniquely their own when they found themselves favoring some of the Yankees. Belles viewed Union troops as generally bad and were often unwilling to make exceptions. As a result, they were unsure of how to handle those they might approve of if the situation were different.⁸¹ As historian Cita Cook argues, "The more a young lady had expected the occupiers to be inhumane barbarians, the more ready she would be to label as an exception any man who surprised her with respect and polite manners."⁸² Therefore, young women were often more likely to associate with the enemy than their mothers.⁸³

The defeat of the Confederacy affected older and younger women in strikingly different ways. Older women had given up everything they had during the war and were no longer at an age that would allow them to rebuild their lives. They often saw the war as a personal as well as public tragedy.⁸⁴ Much of the language used by McGuire and Chesnut toward the end of the war suggests a deep depression over the state of the Confederacy. When the South began to

lose, Judith McGuire lamented, "I only feel that we have no country, no government, no future. I cannot, like some others, look with hope on Johnston's army."⁸⁵ Mary Chesnut vowed that she would rather abandon her beloved South than live under Yankee rule.⁸⁶

Younger women, however, had too many years ahead of them to give up and were inspired to find a way to survive after the war.⁸⁷ Some of them were able to return to their usual social activities rather quickly and were more than eager to throw off the garb of patriotic homespun in favor of the latest fashions.⁸⁸ For example, the last section of Sarah Morgan's diary is focused almost exclusively on her numerous social engagements following the war as she attempted to rebuild her life.⁸⁹ Many chose to channel their deeply felt sense of loss into preserving their Confederate pride. As Emma Holmes pledged, "Peace on such terms, is war for the rising generation."⁹⁰ Young women maintained their blatant support for the fallen Confederacy by waving their Southern flags in the faces of Yankee oppressors.⁹¹ They also occasionally displayed their sorrow by wearing mourning veils in public and avoiding the Union occupiers whenever possible.⁹²

Out of the defiance and pride of the South's rising generation of young women came two important organizations: the Ladies' Memorial Associations (LMA) and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). The LMA's were dedicated to maintaining the traditional role of women while also continuing the wartime trend of freedom by honoring

Confederate soldiers.⁹³ The women who formed these organizations were typically born between 1830 and 1850, and many of them experienced firsthand the hardships of the war and provided some form of aid to troops.⁹⁴

The UDC was an organization built upon the foundation of the LMA's. Members often idolized the women of the 1860's who combined traditional ideals of womanhood with extreme patriotism.⁹⁵ The oldest members of the UDC, including co-founder Caroline Meriwether Goodlett, experienced the war as young women, and had joined LMA's during the post-war era.⁹⁶ Younger UDC members, however, experienced the war and Reconstruction as children and were influenced by the sentiments of their parents as they sought to vindicate their families.⁹⁷ The UDC fought to preserve their beloved image of the Confederacy and to teach Southern values to future generations.⁹⁸

While all Southern women experienced the same hardships and sense of loss during the Civil War, their individual experiences were significantly influenced by their ages. Younger women were motivated by social opportunities and were more demonstrative in their volunteer efforts, whereas older women faced the anxiety of maintaining the survival of their families in the absence of their husbands. The outcome of the war also did not have the same meaning for each group, which affected how they responded to defeat and how they reassembled the pieces of their former lives. It follows, then, that the meaning of the war for Southern women cannot be

understood unless we keep in mind distinct generational differences, something I've tried to do throughout.

Illustrations

Figure 1:

Source: Anonymous. *Sarah Fowler Morgan*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/dawson/dawson.html>

Figure 2:

Source: Virginia Clay-Clopton,

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Endnotes

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- 44 Simpkins and Patton, 8-9.
- 45 Holmes, 23.
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