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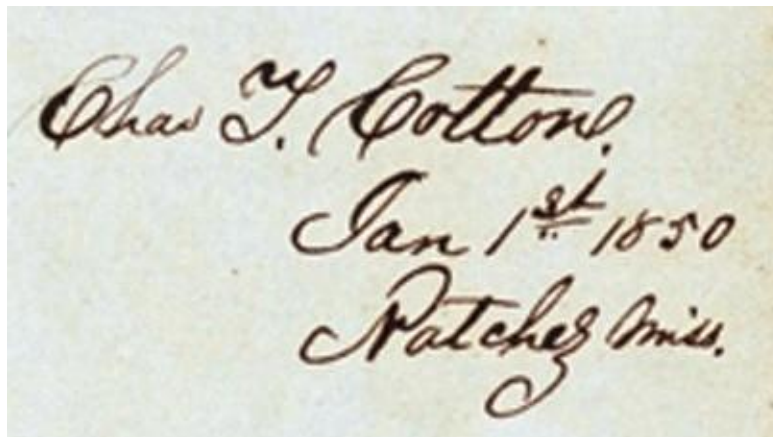
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**Charles T. Cotton's Civil War: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,
do it with thy might"**

Christopher M. Laico, Archivist at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University

Abstract

In 2008, the Columbia University Libraries EAD Working Group developed workflows for creating EAD finding aids for newly processed collections. These work flows utilized a robust technical infrastructure for managing the EAD files and designed an attractive web presentation for the finding aids. These goals were achieved in 2009. In 2010, the archives unit at the [Rare Book and Manuscript Library \(RBML\), Columbia University](#) decided to apply these workflows to the conversion of all paper based and scanned finding aids into EAD. The RBML project addressed inconsistent descriptive practices, corrected outdated information, ensured DACS compliance and provided enhanced search tools for researchers.¹ Converted in 2012, the "[Charles T. Cotton Diaries, 1850-1877](#)" finding aid represents a fine example from this program. Charles Cotton (1824-1877), a diarist and Washington, D.C. based federal clerk was born in Natchez, Mississippi. Although Cotton's 15 pocket diaries cover his experiences from 1850 to 1877, the most interesting entries concern the Civil War years, for example his description of the U.S. Capital's fear of Confederate invasion. Cotton also writes about his personal visit with President Abraham Lincoln, his presence at Lincoln's second inauguration, and the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation. He also portrays the District of Columbia's joy at Richmond's fall and the gloom over President Lincoln's assassination. Finally, Cotton depicts his attendance at the Lincoln Assassination Conspiracy Trial and communicates his thoughts about the accused plotters.



1 January 1850, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), RBML, Columbia University

It was 1850, a cold March morning – raw by Natchez standards.² As was his custom, Charles T. Cotton (1825-1877) a dedicated teacher, who lived by the exhortation from Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might;" arrived early, entered the Pine Ridge school house, laid his satchel down on his bureau, and cautiously kindled the wood stove.³ Charles returned to his desk, carefully unpacked

his bag filled with classical volumes and began leafing through the back of his pocket dairy. There, laid out in a precise hand were the names of his scholars each with a corresponding gift, books denoting the pursuit of a traditional antebellum education – Smyth’s Algebra, Folsom’s Cicero, and Felton’s Greek.⁴ Charles knew these works well.⁵ Through the beneficence of his beloved father Samuel, a merchant and by dint of hard work, Charles a Natchez native, had headed north, attended Bowdoin College and later graduated with honors from Yale College.⁶ After graduating in 1848, he had returned an educated gentleman devoted to teaching.⁷

Teaching, however, did not absorb all of Charles’ time. He maintained an active social life. Interspersed throughout the diaries are mentions of courtly social calls to young ladies and gracious visits with friends. Further, 1851 entries allude to Charles’ following the newspaper reports of a possible concert in Natchez by the world-renowned Jenny Lind the “Swedish Nightingale.” Throughout February 1851, the newspapers described the delicate diplomatic machinations of the Committee of Natchez Gentlemen with the tour’s hard bargaining manager the notorious P.T. Barnum.⁸ Finally, on March 1st, the Committee provided the exciting details. The fair songstress would perform on March 10th at the Methodist Church. Ticket prices would range from \$3 to \$12 and would be offered for noon sale at Isaac H. Macmichael’s Main Street store. Although the Methodist Church could accommodate as many as nine hundred concert goers, Charles’ March 1st notation indicated that he left nothing to chance: “Bought a Jenny Lind concert ticket. Paid \$4.00 for it. no. 637.”⁹

After a one day postponement due to unforeseen circumstances in New Orleans, Jenny Lind performed to an enthusiastic audience.¹⁰ Miss Lind opened the sold out concert with a deeply personal interpretation of George Frideric Handel’s “I Know That

My Redeemer Liveth". As was Miss Lind's custom, she always stressed the "know," attesting to the audience her own strong, personal declaration of faith.¹¹ Other crowd favorites included the "Bird Song" and the simple balled "Home Sweet Home".¹² Press accounts deemed the concert a great artistic and financial success. Charles Cotton echoed these sentiments: "Heard Jenny Lind sing last night in the Methodist Church. Many people disappointed. But not I. She is much prettier looking lady than I had thought."¹³ In the ensuing days, Miss Lind's innate beauty only rose in esteem when later reports indicated that her delayed arrival in Natchez was caused by a steadfast refusal to depart New Orleans and by travelling, break the Lord's Commandment to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."¹⁴

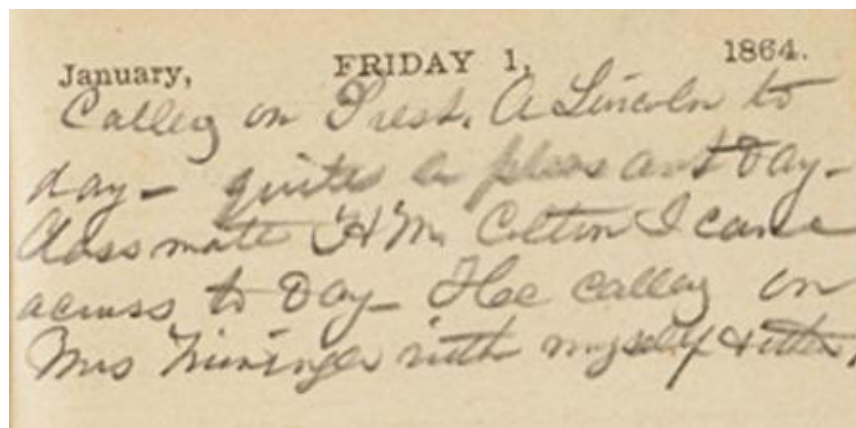
Although Charles did not record his motives, he also left Natchez and settled in Massachusetts. In 1852, he matriculated at Harvard Law School and withdrew the following year.¹⁵ Diaries pick up Charles' trail again as a legal apprentice in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he earned admission to the bar.¹⁶ Always politically active, by 1863 Charles Cotton had made his way to Washington, D.C. and secured employment at the U.S. Bureau of Pensions (Bureau) located in the Old Patent Office Building.



Patent Office, Washington, D.C. (circa, 1865), Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

On June 19th, Charles T. Cotton reported to the Bureau, which hired him as an Assistant Examiner at the handsome sum of \$98.50 per month.¹⁷ Charles' personnel records no longer exist.¹⁸ Other surviving historical reports, however, provide a glimpse into his appointment. The Bureau's Chief Clerk, a position first authorized by Congress in 1853, was given full authority over all personnel matters.¹⁹ However, a gentleman's tenure at the Bureau depended greatly upon political connections and the expansion of the Bureau's scope after 1862. In Charles Cotton's case, perhaps his political acquaintance with U.S. Senator Morton Wilkinson (1819-1894) (R., MN), opened the door to the Bureau. Charles, therefore, was fortunate to count himself among those gentlemen, who through their political contacts and top shelf educations had gained prized positions within the federal bureaucracy.²⁰

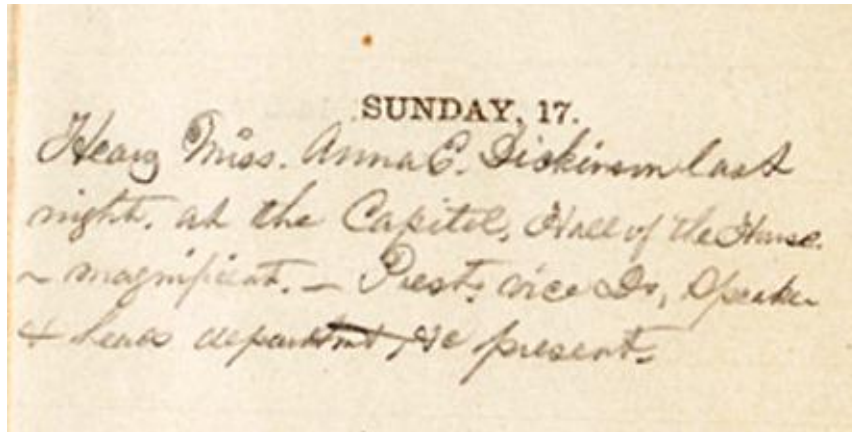
Although the nation was engaged in a bloody civil war, Charles ran his life pretty much as he had in Natchez, Mississippi. Throughout 1863-1864 diary entries not only record the emotional ups and downs of the conflict, but make full mention of attended public lectures and theatre performances at such cultural institutions as the Smithsonian and Ford's Theatre.²¹ Throughout the summer of 1863 however, Charles' mind remained preoccupied with the war. On June 30, 1863, he wrote: "... – rebels invading free states things dark & dreary – but there must be light ahead."²² This depressing entry is followed in succession by two celebratory accounts from July 4th and 7th indicating Lee's defeat at Gettysburg and the surrender of Vicksburg, Mississippi.²³



January, FRIDAY 1, 1864.
Called on Pres. A. Lincoln to
day - quite a pleasant day -
classmate Wm. Cotton I came
across to day - He called on
Mrs. Fingers with myself & others.

1 January 1864, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), RBML, Columbia University

By New Year's 1864, Charles was in fine spirits. He enjoyed quite a pleasant day and even made a personal call upon President Lincoln at the White House.²⁴ By the middle of January, in turn, he would witness history through the graces of one of America's most famous Abolitionist orators Anna E. Dickinson (1842-1932).

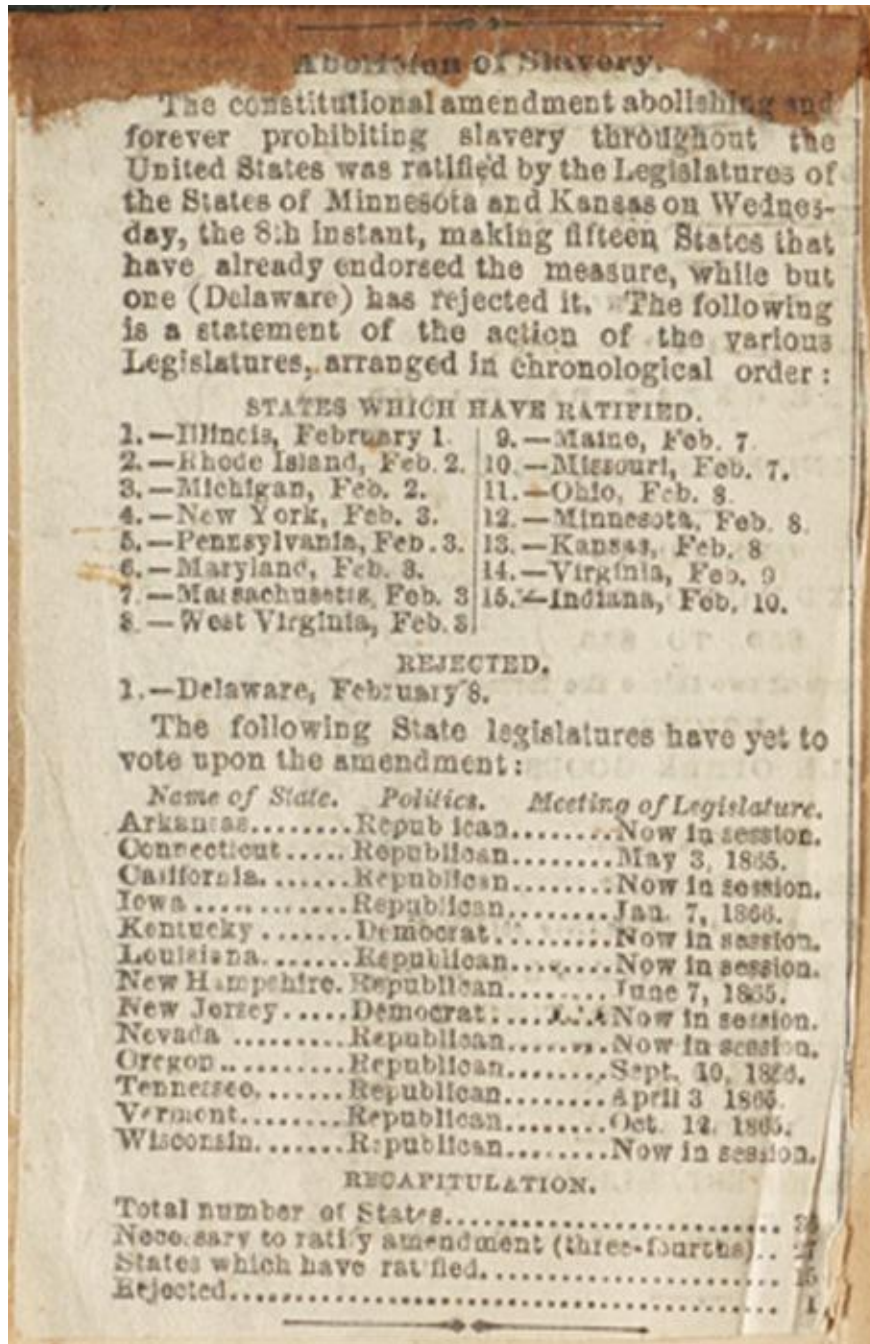


17 January 1864, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), RBML, Columbia University

In December 1863, as a reward for her valuable campaigning on behalf of the party, the Republicans invited Miss Anna E. Dickinson a leading Abolitionist speaker, to become the first woman to speak before the Hall of the House of Representatives. Miss Dickinson accepted Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin's (1809-1891) invitation with the proviso that all proceeds from her lecture be given to the needs of the Freedmen's Relief Association.²⁵ As Dickinson entered the chamber, she was met with loud cheers and proceeded to mesmerize all the attendees. In fact, Miss Dickinson lost neither the audience nor her composure even as the President and Mrs. Lincoln joined the audience halfway through the speech, just as she was sharply criticizing the President for his recently issued Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction. This proclamation offered generous terms to the southern states that rejoined the Union, but provided absolutely no protective provisions to the African American populace.²⁶ Echoing the glowing press reports, Charles wrote: "Heard Miss Anna E. Dickinson last night at the Capital, Hall of the House was magnificent."²⁷

By the summer 1864, Charles Cotton's thoughts returned to the war. In June, he made brief mention of his return by train from the Republican National Convention in Baltimore, where President Lincoln and Andrew Johnson gained the party's

nomination.²⁸ July entries, however, reveal the war's immediacy. On July 11th: "Rebels said to everywhere & destroy R.R. [railroad] between Baltimore & Phila. & capture two trains – troops arriving from below the 6th & 19th Army corpses [sic]."²⁹ On July 16th, Charles surveyed the handiwork of General Jubal Early's (1816-1894) Confederate Raiders, the smoldering ruins of U.S. Postmaster General Montgomery Blair's (1813-1883) home, the Falklands and the still glowing embers of their rebel encampment.³⁰ July would end with "rumors of a fight at Leesburg [Virginia] and the coming again in large numbers of rebel troops."³¹ As September arrived, tensions reached their zenith for Charles. On September 9th, Washington, D.C. residents awoke to the following newspaper headlines: "Cotton Not King" and "A Political Muss." Newspaper reports reveal that he had gotten into a heated argument with two Union officers in front of the National Hotel and had been arrested for disorderly conduct. After refusing to pay a fine, the court ordered Charles confined to the workhouse, where after an evening's accommodation; he changed his mind, paid the fine, and was released from custody.³² These published accounts and Charles' diary do not give a clear indication about the true subject of the argument. By December 1864, however, Charles Cotton, President Lincoln and most of Washington, D.C. would rejoice in receiving General William T. Sherman's (1820-1891) Christmas gift – the capture of Savannah, Georgia.³³



“Abolition of Slavery,” Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), RBML, Columbia University

On January 31st, 1865, Charles Cotton wrote: “Clear fine day – To day [sic] the House of Rep. passed amendment to [the U.S.] Constitution which [abolished slavery and] will make us a free nation. Thank God for liberty and justice.”³⁴ Charles was moved so deeply by this act of congressional courage that he affixed a report of the amendment’s

ratification to the flyleaf of his 1865 diary. Throughout the spring, Charles' diary continued to flow with good feelings and beautiful days. On February 20th, for example, Charles would exclaim: "News recd of Capture of Charleston, S.C. Glory! Beautiful day."³⁵ After attending President Lincoln's March 4th inauguration, he remarked: "... ceremony – very moving, but better half of day, clear & sun shining – auspicious skies!"³⁶ Monday, April 3rd, Charles announced the: "Glorious news of [the] capture of Richmond. All hands out of office – all the U.S. intoxicated – most wonderful excitement."³⁷ On April 12th, Charles Cotton mentioned what was to be President Lincoln's last public address of the previous evening. In it, Lincoln called for the preparation of a national day of thanksgiving upon the surrender of the principal insurgent army.³⁸ A scant two days later, the skies would darken for Charles Cotton: "our beloved President A. Lincoln assassinated at Ford's Theatre last night at 10 P.M. & died this morning at 7. o'clock & 22 minutes – A most gloomy dismal day – rainy – everybody weeping – houses hung in mourning."³⁹ Charles Cotton's personal sorrow over President Lincoln's assassination would seep into June. On June 3rd, he remarked: "visit[ed] the Military Court trying the assassins of the Presdt. Very bad looking set of felons."⁴⁰ Ten days later, he noted a second visit to the Military Tribunal, but withheld comment about the defendants.⁴¹

After the Civil War, Charles Cotton's diary entries became less dramatic and more common place. To illustrate, Charles recorded the everyday benchmarks of his household such as monies owed and paid. He also entered mundane accounts of workplace openings, closings and requested leaves of absences. By the early 1870s, Charles Cotton's position at the Bureau would be reduced to 1st Class Clerk.⁴² However, newspaper accounts report that his engagement in politics continued unabated. Charles,

for example, would be elected secretary of the Southern Republican Association. These newspaper reports identify Charles as a proud son of Mississippi. However, he had been driven out of Mississippi after a visit to Natchez at the onset of the Civil War by a vigilance committee, because of his loyalty to the U.S. Government.⁴³ Charles left this discrepancy without proper resolution. On March 15, 1877, Charles died after a long battle with consumption. He was buried two days later in an unmarked plot overlooking the beautiful expanse of The Oak Hill Cemetery, Washington, D.C.⁴⁴

And here rests the professional difficulty for archivists, who must contend everyday with what remains. In the case of the Charles T. Cotton, for example, the critical years 1860-1862 are missing from his diaries. Therefore, we learn nothing from Charles about his alleged flight from the Natchez vigilance committee, the 1861 Mississippi secession debate, and the unconfirmed death of his brother James B. Cotton (1829?-1862), who fought for the Confederate 29th Regiment, Mississippi Infantry.⁴⁵ Although Charles left these and many other questions unanswered, the retrospective conversion of paper finding aids into EAD by the archives unit of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library now enable researchers better access to his diaries and the opportunity to discover fuller answers to these unresolved queries by diligently doing “whatsoever our hands findeth to do and do it with all our might.”

¹ Carrie E. Hintz, Head of Archives Processing, “Retrospective Conversion of Paper and Scanned Finding Aids into EAD” memorandum to Rare Book and Manuscript Library Staff, Columbia University, January 8, 2014.

² 28 March 1850, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

³ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1850; 6 May 1851; 31 December 1855; Statistics of the Class of Yale, 1848 (New Haven, CT: J.H. Benham, 1852), 23; Miscellaneous Pamphlets, Yale College (1718-1887), Class of 1848, 264.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 March 1850.

⁵ *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Bowdoin College, and the Medical School of Maine 1845* (Boston: Samuel N. Dickinson Co., Printers, 1845), 3.

⁶ *General Catalogue of Bowdoin College and the Medical School of Maine: A Biographical Record of Alumni and Officers 1794-1950, Sesquicentennial Edition* (Brunswick, ME: 1950), 93; Office of Student

Records/Registrar, Transcripts (Official), Rankings and Academic Records, 1840-, Catalog Number: 2.1.3, George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, ME.

⁷ Ibid.; 3 June 1851, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; United States Seventh Census (1850), Natchez (North), Adams County, Mississippi, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Record Group 29 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

⁸ “Jenny Lind,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), February 18, 1851, Issue 16, col. A; “Jenny Lind Concert! at Natchez, Monday, March 10, 1851, at 7 P.M.,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), February 28, 1851, Issue 19, col. B.

⁹ “Jenny Lind’s Concert in Natchez,” *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette* (Natchez, MS) March 1, 1851, Issue 6, col. A; “Jenny Lind,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), February 18, 1851, Issue 16, col. A; “Jenny Lind Concert! at Natchez, Monday, March 10, 1851, at 7 P.M.,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), February 28, 1851, Issue 19, col. B; 1 March 1851, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹⁰ “The Lind Concert,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), March 11, 1851, Issue 22, col. A, “The Lind Concert,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), March 14, 1851, Issue 23, col. A.

¹¹ Ella, “Jenny Lind,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), March 14, 1851, Issue 23, col. D.; Gladys Denny Shultz, *Jenny Lind: The Swedish Nightingale* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1962), 161.

¹² Ella, “Jenny Lind,” *Natchez Courier* (Natchez, MS), March 14, 1851, Issue 23, col. D.

¹³ 12 March 1851, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹⁴ “The Observance of the Sabbath,” *Mississippi Free Trader* (Natchez, MS), March 19, 1851, 1.

¹⁵ *Quinquennial Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the Law School of Harvard University, 1817-1889* (Cambridge, MA: Charles W. Sever, 1888), 157.

¹⁶ “Supreme Court of Minnesota,” *The Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul, MN), January 17, 1856, 2.

¹⁷ 19 June 1863, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Ibid., Cash Accounts (1863).

¹⁸ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), telephone message to author, August 16, 2013.

¹⁹ Thayer M. Boardman, Myra R. Trever, and Louise W. Southwick, compilers, *Preliminary Inventory of the Administrative Records of the Bureau of Pensions and the Pension Service: (Record group 15)* (Washington, DC: National Archives, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1953), 1.

²⁰ Ibid., 9; 26 March 1863, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Lincoln’s Avengers: Justice, Revenge, and Reunion after the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 232; Thomas A. Broadus, “The South and the Pension Bureau,” *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, vol. 23, January-June, 1901, 204.

²¹ 16 January 1864, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Ibid., 10 March 1864.

²² Ibid., 30 June 1863.

²³ Ibid., 4 July 1863; 7 July 1863.

²⁴ Ibid., 1 January 1864.

²⁵ J. Matthew Gallman, *America’s Joan of Arc: the life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage, vol. II (1861-1876)* (Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1887), 47-48; “Words of the Hour,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), January 15, 1864, 3.

²⁶ J. Matthew Gallman, *America’s Joan of Arc: the life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3, 36; “Miss Anna Dickinson’s Lecture in Washington,” *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 29, 1864, 20.

²⁷ Ibid., 4; 17 January 1864, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; “Miss Anna Dickinson’s Lecture in Washington,” *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), January 29, 1864, 20.

²⁸ 8 June 1864, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²⁹ Ibid., 11 July 1864.

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- ³⁰ Ibid., 16 July 1864.
- ³¹ Ibid., 22 July 1864.
- ³² “Cotton Not King,” *Daily National Republican* (Washington, DC), September 9, 1864, 2; “A Political Muss,” *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), September 9, 1864, 2.
- ³³ 26 December 1864, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; Abraham Lincoln, *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 7 (1863-1865)* (New York and London, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), 273-74.
- ³⁴ 31 January 1865, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 20 February 1865.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 4 March 1865.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 3 April 1865.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 12 April 1865; Abraham Lincoln, *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 7 (1863-1865)* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), 362.
- ³⁹ 15 April 1865, Charles T. Cotton Diaries (1850-1877), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 3 June 1865.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 13 June 1865.
- ⁴² Ibid., 5 May 1873.
- ⁴³ “Letter from Washington: Southern Republican Association,” *The Baltimore Sun*, September 7, 1871, 4; “Southern Republicans,” *The Daily State Journal* (Alexandria, VA), March 14, 1872; Miscellaneous Pamphlets, Yale College (1718-1887), Class of 1848, 265.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 264; Burial Order: Lot 619, site 9, March 16, 1877 (The Oak Hill Cemetery, Washington, D.C.); Burial Order: Lot 619, site 9, March 17, 1877 (The Oak Hill Cemetery, Washington, D.C.).
- ⁴⁵ United States Seventh Census (1850), Natchez (North), Adams County, Mississippi, Schedule 1 (Free Inhabitants), Record Group 29 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.); *National Park Service. U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1861-1865* [database on-line, Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2007].