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A Changing Force: The American Civil War, Women, and Victorian Culture

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A Changing Force: The American Civil War, Women, and Victorian Culture

Abstract

The American Civil War thrust Victorian society into a maelstrom. The war disrupted a culture that was based on polite behavior and repression of desires. The emphasis on fulfilling duties sent hundreds of thousands of men into the ranks of Union and Confederate armies. Without the patriarchs of their families, women took up previously unexplored roles for the majority of their sex. In both the North and the South, females were compelled to do physical labor in the fields, run shops, and manage slaves, all jobs which previously would have been occupied almost exclusively by men. These shifts in society, though not experienced by all families, shook the very foundation of Victorian culture. In this sense, as men left to preserve their lifestyles, women were forced to move outside of their typical socially normative roles, which exposed their society to alteration during the war. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Civil War, Women, Gender, Slaves, Victorian

Disciplines

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Comments

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It was also the recipient of the Greninger Prize, 2014.

A Changing Force: The American Civil War, Women, & Victorian Culture

**Megan McNish
Historical Methods
April 28, 2014**

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Megan McNish

The American Civil War thrust Victorian society into a maelstrom. The war disrupted a culture that was based on polite behavior and repression of desires. The emphasis on fulfilling duties sent hundreds of thousands of men into the ranks of Union and Confederate armies. Without the patriarchs of their families, women took up previously unexplored roles for the majority of their sex. In both the North and the South, females were compelled to do physical labor in the fields, run shops, and manage slaves, all jobs which previously would have been occupied almost exclusively by men. These shifts in society, though not experienced by all families, shook the very foundation of Victorian culture. In this sense, as men left to preserve their lifestyles, women were forced to move outside of their typical socially normative roles, which exposed their society to alteration during the war.

Antebellum Society

It is not hard to imagine women moving into roles vacated by men as a result of war. This is something women have done since men began leaving their homes to fight in wars. It may be difficult, however, for modern society to conceptualize how very different life was in Victorian America. Antebellum society in which the Civil War developed was one marked by the virtue of suffering.¹ Men and women alike were expected to repress longings and internalize stronger emotions. This concept also extended to physical suffering. At the dawn of the Civil War, modern medicine was in its infancy and germ theory had not yet taken hold. As a result, mortality rates were very high and medical care was often more guesswork than diagnosis.² In this time period, childbirth was particularly dangerous and the death of young children was quite

¹Frances M. Clarke, *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 8.

²Clarke, *War Stories*, 10-11.

common.³

Despite the suffering they endured, privileged women were raised to be genteel ladies and to lead lives of quiet leisure. More specifically, due to the cult of domesticity that had developed in the antebellum period, women were expected to be tender, passive, innocent, vulnerable, nervous, and delicate. These expectations meant that women were almost entirely dependent on the men in their lives.⁴ As a result of this dependence and societal expectations, women did not work in fields, thereby making them economically insignificant to the household.⁵ Victorians were taught that a woman's place was in the home, doing housework and raising children.⁶

As “guardians of the family,”⁷ women often attempted to keep the realities of politics from their children.⁸ As they grew older, however, women of the upper and middle classes were expected to become more politically astute, particularly in the South.⁹ Though they were to be silent observers, women needed to have, at the very least, a nominal understanding of the political atmosphere in which they lived, as they were expected to be participants in private dealings.¹⁰ Though they played a small role, women's interactions in the private sphere of

³ Clarke, *War Stories*, 8.

⁴ Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1984), 147.

⁵ Mary Collins, “Mollie: A Romping Child,” in *The Essential Daughter: Changing Expectations for Girls at Home, 1797 to Present* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 57; Judith Geisberg, “From Harvest to Battlefield: Rural Women and the War,” in *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Homefront* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 22.

⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 50-51.

⁷ Clinton, *The Other Civil War* 148.

⁸ Collins, “Mollie,” in *The Essential Daughter*, 58.

⁹ Drew Gilpin, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 10, EBSCO ebook.

¹⁰ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 50. Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 12.

politics was an important part of Victorian life.¹¹ Female influence in the political sphere did not extend to the legal sphere, as they had very little power in that area. Men retained power in this facet of life; only men served as jurors, judges, and lawyers and were less likely to break the confines of what society considered normal in formal settings.¹² In addition, when women married they, for the most part, disappeared legally which meant they could not own property such as land and slaves.¹³

Slaves posed a particularly difficult problem for white women in the South. Some women in the South went so far as to view slaves as their enemy.¹⁴ Their reasoning was that, although the control and management of slaves in the antebellum South was left to men, the institution undermined the role of women in the Southern household in the sense that female slaves, who performed tasks similar to the white women they served, diluted the importance of the Southern mother.¹⁵ If slaves could perform the same duties as white women, then, Southern women felt, they were less essential in the household. In some instances, women were left to manage their husbands' estates when they were away for short periods of time, but these intermittent experiences in roles of power were neither agreeable to women, nor did they further their role in society.¹⁶ Another complaint women had against slavery was that they, along with children and slaves, were expected to submit, without question, to the authority of their husbands and fathers.¹⁷ This relegated them, in some ways, to a status similar to the slaves their families owned, even though family members did not experience the degree of suffering of slaves. In

¹¹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 12.

¹² Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 246, 254.

¹³ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 246.

¹⁴ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 38.

¹⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 69; Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 39.

¹⁶ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 38-39.

¹⁷ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 38-39.

many senses women and children were also prisoners, as, particularly in the Old South, the man was quite literally the master of the house.¹⁸ The over arching control that men retained over women left many females, in both the North and the South, without significant power other than that which they retain over the management of their households.

When war broke out in 1861, the society that men left behind and went off to war to protect was male dominated. In the South, the war took a particularly large portion of the male population from their homes and, before the war was over, three of every four white men in the South would serve in a Confederate army.¹⁹ Though the loss was not as pronounced in the North in proportion to the overall population, women still felt the loss of the men that provided for them. Females were forced into roles they previously had never, or had rarely ever, inhabited. In this sense, men were exposing the society which they had gone to war to preserve to fundamental alteration.

Women as Field Workers

One of the many ways women were forced out of their traditional roles in society was through work on farms. For middle class families, more often than not, husbands and sons were the ones that worked in the fields to plant and harvest the crops. When they went off to war, women were forced to fill their roles or starve.²⁰ Mary Livermore, a Sanitary Commission of Chicago worker, related her experiences as she traveled through Wisconsin and Iowa. In these states, Livermore saw that “women were in the field everywhere...until then an unusual sight.”²¹

¹⁸ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 32.

¹⁹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 30-31.

²⁰ Geiseberg, *Army at Home*, 17-18.

²¹ Mary A. Livermore, “Northern Women on Farms,” in *Early American Women: A Documentary History*, ed. Nancy Woloch (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2002), 262. This particular source is a small excerpt from Mary Livermore’s longer memoir, *My Story of the War: A Woman’s Narrative of Four Years Personal Experience*.

Livermore spent a period of time speaking with the women she observed in the fields and was quickly exposed to one particular family's condition. "The men have all gone to the war, so that my man can't hire help at any price, and I told my girls we must turn to and give him a lift with the harvestin'." ²² In this woman's case, her husband was still at home. However, because of the labor shortage created by both her sons and other men in the area leaving for war, she and her daughters were compelled to lend assistance in the fields. ²³ Instances like this one were not isolated. These scenes were "multiplied thousands of times" to maintain production of materials in the North. ²⁴

A woman working in the fields was not something exclusive to Northern agriculture during the Civil War. Southern women from families of many classes were forced into similar predicaments. Ann Smith Mew, a South Carolina widow, and her family were obligated to cultivate their own fields after their slaves ran away. Mew was too old to aid in the cultivation of the fields herself, so her married daughters completed the project so that the family could continue to survive. ²⁵ This meant that her daughters were likely doing work Mew's sons and slaves had done before the war. In addition to performing physical labor to which they were formerly unaccustomed, the Mew women were working in the fields alongside Hannah, the single slave who had not run away from the plantation. ²⁶ Women of the upper and middle classes working alongside slaves was unthinkable before the war, but was necessary in order for families like the Mews to survive. In Southern homes that did not own slaves, women were forced into

²² Livermore, "Northern Women on Farms," in *Early American Women*, 262.

²³ Livermore, "Northern Women on Farms," in *Early American Women*, 262-263.

²⁴ Livermore, "Northern Women on Farms," in *Early American Women*, 263.

²⁵ Joan E. Cashin, "Widow in a Swamp: Gender, Unionism, and Literacy in the Occupied South During the Civil War," in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Alicia P. Long (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 171, 179.

²⁶ Cashin, "Widow in a Swamp," in *Occupied Women*, 182.

the fields much sooner than Mrs. Mew's family. These women were often compensating for the loss of the primary providers of their families.²⁷

Both Southern and Northern women were bound to work in fields performing manual and physical labor so their families could subsist on their farms and plantations. In the antebellum period, it was only women of lower classes that were forced to work in the fields, rather than women of privilege.²⁸ However, with men gone off to war, incentives for women of higher classes to perform field labor were greatly increased. In many cases, in order to put food on the table, these women had to plant and harvest the fields themselves.

Southern Women and New Interactions with Slaves

Though relationships with slaves only existed for some women in the South, the interactions between slaves and their mistresses are critical to understand just how much Victorian society changed when men went off to war. As Catherine Clinton mentions in *The Other Civil War*, women were sometimes left in charge of their husbands' plantations while they were away, but being compelled to manage the plantation for four years was an entirely different proposition. However, it was not only slave interactions in the fields and discipline that caused Southern women discomfort. Women experienced new types of interactions with slaves that they had never imagined before the war.

Disciplining slaves was a particularly difficult prospect for women whose male head of house was no longer in residence. Louticia Jackson, a Southern plantation mistress, expressed the difficulty she had in controlling a particular slave, Willes, in a letter to her eldest son, Ashbury,

²⁷ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 32.

²⁸ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 22.

who had joined the Confederate army.²⁹ Willes took advantage of Mrs. Jackson on many occasions, but in one particular instance, he distressed her so greatly she “went in the room, and lay down with the back ache.”³⁰ Mrs. Jackson was not the only woman to experience problems with slaves. Drew Faust recounts the experiences of Ada Bacot, another Southern woman who lived and grew up on a plantation, who complained that on her family’s plantation her “orders were disregarded more and more every day.”³¹ Joe Mobley described a similar moment recorded by Mary Boykin Chestnut, one of the most famous Civil War diarists. “Dick, the butler...looks over my head –he scents freedom in the air.”³² As Northern troops drew closer, slaves became more conscious of the opportunity they had for freedom. Despite the challenges, it was essential that women retain control over slavery on the homefront, as it was a crucial aspect of the Southern lifestyle.³³

Women themselves acknowledged their shortcomings as slave mistresses. One Southern female questioned, “do you think that this woman’s hand can keep [the slaves] in check?”³⁴ As

²⁹ Nancy Woloch, *Early American Women: A Documentary History, 1600-1900* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2002), 264. Louticia Jackson, “A Wartime Mistress,” in *Early American Women: A Documentary History, 1600-1900*, ed. Nancy Woloch (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2002), 264. “A Wartime Mistress” is an excerpt from Mrs. Jackson’s August 23, 1863 letter to her son Ashbury Jackson who was away from home serving in the Confederate army.

³⁰ Jackson, “A Wartime Mistress,” in *Early American Women*, 265.

³¹ Ada Bacot, *Ada Bacot Diary*, May 3, December 25, 1861, March 17, September 8, 1862, South Carolinian Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 62, EBSCO ebook. It is not clear which date Faust is quoting from in this instance. See Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 272.

³² Mary Chestnut, *Mary Chestnut’s Civil War*, ed. C. Van Woodward (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981) quoted in Joe A. Mobley, *Weary of War: Life on the Confederate Home Front* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 66, EBSCO ebook.

³³ Kimberly Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 104.

³⁴ A Planter’s Wife to Governor John J. Pettus, May 1, 1862, John J. Pettus Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS, quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: THE

the additional stresses to the slave/mistress relationship multiplied, this concern became more pronounced and it became increasingly difficult for Southern women to retain control over the already strained relationship they had with their slaves.³⁵ What Southern women lacked was the fear and respect of their family slaves, which was extremely difficult for them to gain. “I am so sick of trying to do a man’s business,”³⁶ wrote one Confederate woman. Yet, these were roles that women had to undertake or watch the lives they knew literally walk away from them.

Men on the front lines understood the predicament their wives and mothers faced. In a letter to his wife Maggie, Charles Roberts, a Confederate soldier, expressed regret that he was not at home to take care of the family’s slaves. “[The slaves] certainly want someone to look after them.”³⁷ This suggests that Roberts fully comprehended his wife’s quandary. Though the letters Maggie, Charles’ wife, do not survive, if the troubles she had with the Roberts’ family slaves were anything like that experienced by Mrs. Jackson, Ada Bacot, or Mary Chestnut, it is not difficult to see why Roberts wished he could be home to help his wife. Southern women struggled to control the slaves on their families’ plantations and no matter how their husbands and sons wished they could help, the war had taken them far away. This made them almost entirely useless to their families at home.

Though discipline became more and more difficult as the war progressed, it was not the only problem that Southern women faced with the slaves they encountered. Sarah Morgan, a young woman of some privileged from a slaveholding family and one of the Civil War’s more

University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 56, EBSCO ebook. Quoting a Mississippi planters’ wife.

³⁵ Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women*, 105.

³⁶ Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, August 28, 1863, letter, quoted in Kimberly Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 13.

³⁷ Roberts, Charles to Maggie Roberts, letter, June 23, 1864, Civil War Archive, University of Mississippi Libraries and Digital Collections, University, MS, 4.

famous diarist, upon her arrival in Baton Rouge, had not eaten for hours and had no inkling of where she could obtain food. The “fact that the old negro was giving me part of her supper made me rather sparing,”³⁸ Morgan admitted. This sort of interaction with a slave would have been unthinkable before the war, especially for someone of upper middle class privilege like Sarah Morgan. In April of 1863, Morgan was forced to breach society even further. Out of necessity, Morgan slept “under the same bedclothes with our black, shiny negro nurse!”³⁹ What is even more surprising was her reaction to the situation. Rather than feeling shock and utter disgust, as would have been expressed by many Southern women of the period, the only thing Sarah expressed was gratefulness that she had a place to sleep.⁴⁰ Sarah Morgan Dawson’s interactions are peculiar in light of the fact that she was an ardent supporter of slavery. In 1873, almost ten years after the war ended, she published editorial pieces in the *Charleston News and Courier* outlining just how much she still believed in slavery.⁴¹ Despite Sarah’s ardent belief in the slave system both during and after the war, she was more concerned with having a place to sleep, rather than who was her bedmate. This is what the war had brought to Southern women, a need to survive despite a breach of social convention.

Despite everyday interactions with slaves before the war, Southern women were not slave masters, nor were they prepared for these duties. In addition, slaves lacked respect for the

³⁸ Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl’s Diary* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2014), 49, Nook.

³⁹ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl’s Diary*, 242.

⁴⁰ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl’s Diary*, 242.

⁴¹ Sarah Morgan Dawson, “Paradox,” *Charleston News and Courier*, April 25, 1873 in *The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson: with Selected Editorials by Sarah Morgan for the Charleston News and Courier*, ed. Giselle Roberts (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), 200. Sarah Morgan Dawson, “Whites and Blacks,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 12, 1873 in *The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson: with Selected Editorials by Sarah Morgan for the Charleston News and Courier*, ed. Giselle Roberts (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), 200-201.

authority of Confederate women. Despite the difficulties they faced managing slaves, their frustrations with the work did not signify that they were any less patriotic to the cause for which their men had gone off to fight.⁴² Rather, women remained ardently supportive of the Confederate agenda, even after the war.⁴³ Their complaints signified, however, that society had been altered since their husbands and sons left for war.

Retaining Possessions: Powerlessness in Confronting the Army

Women on the homefront were particularly vulnerable without the presence of their family patriarchs, to the wills of invading armies. Though more prevalent in the South because of the war's theaters of operation, women in the North, primarily in the Southern Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg, also were exposed to potential treachery of both armies. Women were sometimes forced to let material possessions slip through their fingers in exchange for the safety of their families.⁴⁴ These material possessions ranged from family heirlooms to clothing and essential foodstuffs. No matter what was taken from them, these experiences highlighted just how vulnerable women on the homefront were to the continuously moving armies.

Charles Roberts wrote to his wife Maggie, "I am sorry the Yankees took off our cow and calf, not so much for her value in money, as the inconvenience to you in housekeeping."⁴⁵ As members of various armies made off with possessions of civilians, they invariably made life more difficult for those families. Though the loss of the cow did not significantly deplete the family's food stock, the Roberts' loss made their everyday occurrence of getting milk that much more difficult for the family. While perhaps not an essential part of the Victorian diet, milk was

⁴² Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women*, 13.

⁴³ Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women*, 13.

⁴⁴ It was thought that permitting possessions to be taken from their homes would keep the family safe from harm by the invading soldiers.

⁴⁵ Charles Roberts to Maggie Roberts, letter, January 30, 1863, Civil War Archive, University of Mississippi Libraries and Digital Collections, University, MS, 1.

important for the Roberts family and, after the cow was taken, became something that would have to be sought elsewhere. Charles Roberts mentioned another woman in the community, Mrs. Lees, as a source from whom his wife could obtain milk. However, this was an extra, previously unnecessary step that would have to be taken in order to secure a staple in the family diet. It is unclear whether Mrs. Roberts obtained milk from Mrs. Lees, as her letters do not survive. This instance makes it easy to see how the taking of the family's cow by the Union soldiers affected many aspects of the Roberts' lives.⁴⁶

As much as historians may wish it were so, the example of the Roberts family is not isolated. The Mew family also experienced loss due to the Union army. In their case, the Union soldiers took several of the Mew's livestock, and also entered the Mew house and took food.⁴⁷ The soldiers proceeded to take bedding and clothes from the bedrooms. At one point, Mrs. Mew, despite being sick in bed, protested to the commanding officer, who seemed to have little control over his men.⁴⁸ Though he prevented the soldiers from taking clothing and bedding from Mrs. Mew's room, he could not prevent the loss of these items from other rooms in the house.⁴⁹ Not only could these encounters severely damage a family's ability to survive, it also taught them to fear the presence of either army.⁵⁰

Still, in the previously mentioned situations families were present to experience loss of a particular object, loss could still be felt when families were far from home. On August 13, 1862 Sarah Morgan described the looting, sacking, and shelling of homes near her own in Baton

⁴⁶ Roberts, January 30, 1863, 1.

⁴⁷ Cashin, "Widow in a Swamp," *Occupied Women*, 180-181.

⁴⁸ Cashin, "Widow in a Swamp," *Occupied Women*, 180.

⁴⁹ Cashin, "Widow in a Swamp," *Occupied Women*, 181.

⁵⁰ Cashin, "Widow in a Swamp," *Occupied Women*, 181.

Rouge by Union soldiers.⁵¹ What remained in the home when her family left represented most, if not all, of young Sarah Morgan's worldly possessions.⁵² “[The Union] may clothe their negro women with my clothes...but to take things so sacred to me! Oh my God, teach me to forgive them!”⁵³ Despite her frustration with the situation, Sarah could not take any action to change it. Not only was she many miles from Baton Rouge, but she also lacked the power to alter the loss of prized objects that were memories of her deceased father and brother.⁵⁴

Encroachment and looting by soldiers also occurred, though to a lesser extent, in the North due to the location of the majority of Civil War battles. During the battle of Gettysburg, the Northern and Southern armies converged on the small Pennsylvania town and overwhelmed its population. As the armies moved through town, the women of Gettysburg had to be creative in their attempts to preserve their valuables. Women of higher classes used their foodstuffs and cooking skills to coerce soldiers, particularly Southern soldiers into eating a meal but not taking more valuable livestock.⁵⁵

Food was not always willingly given, as some Confederate soldiers forcefully entered homes and demanded meals.⁵⁶ Mary McAllister, a spinster of 41 who ran a general store, was not as fortunate as other women.⁵⁷ On July 2, Confederate soldiers entered her store, took crocks

⁵¹ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, 119. It is important to note that Morgan did not witness these events herself, rather, they were described to her by a Miss Jones.

⁵² Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, 119.

⁵³ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, 119.

⁵⁴ Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, 119-120.

⁵⁵ Margaret Creighton, “Gettysburg Out of Bounds: Women and Soldiers in the Embattled Borough, 1863,” in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 75.

⁵⁶ Creighton, “Gettysburg Out of Bounds,” in *Occupied Women*, 77.

⁵⁷ Mary McAllister, *Mary McAllister*, ed. Robert L. Brake, Gettysburg College Special Collections Civil War Manuscripts, Gettysburg, 1. This account was copied by Brake from newspaper articles published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* between June 26 and June 29, 1938.

off the shelves and used them to take molasses from barrels Mary had in the basement.⁵⁸ Later that same evening, more Confederate soldiers entered the home and stole all of the tea in the store, except for what she had hidden. Even the surgeons that were forcefully residing with her demanded she cook for them.⁵⁹ Before long, the Confederate soldiers had taken so much from Mary that she barely had enough left to feed herself and her sister Martha, with whom she lived.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, more violent Confederate actions occurred in the town. As the battle raged on around the heights south of town, Confederate soldiers in town found ways to terrorize the citizens of Gettysburg. In one such instance, soldiers burst into a home and vandalized the building and furniture. In a particularly awful offence, soldiers took a jar of black cherries and poured them down the stairs of the home. The cherries were so dark that they resembled blood and to make the mess worse, the soldiers poured chaff on top.⁶¹

Experiences of violence and theft left women feeling unsafe in their own homes. Tillie Pierce, a citizen of Gettysburg, recounted in her memoir the feelings of her neighbor Mrs. Shriver. Mrs. Shriver's husband was serving in the Union army at the time of the Battle of Gettysburg and, because she felt unsafe remaining in her home in town, Mrs. Shriver fled to the Little Round Top to the home of her father Mr. Weikert.⁶² Tillie accompanied Mrs. Shriver and

Though the articles were published over thirty years after her death, it appears that the account was recorded by Mary herself and then posthumously published in the newspaper.

⁵⁸ McAllister, *Mary McAllister*, 5.

⁵⁹ McAllister, *Mary McAllister*, 5.

⁶⁰ McAllister, *Mary McAllister*, 6. Christiana Lynn Ericson, "The World Will Little Note nor Long Remember": Women and Gender in the Battle of Gettysburg" (master's thesis, University of Maryland College Park, 1996), 10. Ericson provides the clarification that Mary was living with her sister and brother-in-law, which Brake does not provide.

⁶¹ Creighton, "Gettysburg Out of Bounds," in *Occupied Women*, 77.

⁶² Tillie Pierce Alleman, *At Gettysburg, or What a Girl Saw and Heard of the Battle* (Baltimore, MD: Butternut and Blue, 1994), 35.

her two children and experienced a great deal while at Mr. Weikert's home.⁶³ During Tillie's stay, the house became a field hospital, thereby exposing the young girl to the sights and sounds of severely wounded men. She expressed horror not only about the wounds the soldiers endured, but the number of wounded that were brought into the home.⁶⁴ Though Victorians were familiar with death, such gruesome sights were far beyond what they ever could have imagined or what was appropriate for women to see. One young woman, Nellie Aughinbaugh, nearly fainted while helping a surgeon with an operation. The sights of the operation for a lung wound caused everything "to get black before [her] eyes."⁶⁵ Yet, there was Tillie Pierce in the Weikert house, watching as Union soldiers were brought into the home with horrific wounds, despite society dictating that she should be shielded from such horrors.

Though many of the actions committed by soldiers were simply petty theft and vandalism, it taught civilian women that they had to fear the armies. Women were afraid of not only the loss of essential food items and livestock, but also the potential physical violence that soldiers could inflict upon them.⁶⁶ Antebellum Victorian society had not prepared women for experiences like these. The emphasis on gentility and reserve had created women who were, more often than not, forced to cower in corners while soldiers took what they wanted from their homes. Few women, Mrs. Mew and Mary McAllister being the exceptions, had the courage to

⁶³ Alleman, *At Gettysburg*, 36.

⁶⁴ Alleman, *At Gettysburg*, 58.

⁶⁵ Louie Dale Leeds, *Personal Experiences of a Young Girl during the Battle of Gettysburg* (Washington, D.C.), Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, 14. This source is quite different from many other sources. Louie Dale Leeds was the daughter of Nellie Aughinbaugh Leeds and recorded her mother's recollections of the Battle of Gettysburg. It is not clear when or how these recollections were recorded.

⁶⁶ Creighton, "Gettysburg Out of Bounds," in *Occupied Women*, 77.

stand up to those soldiers who confiscated their property and involved their homes.⁶⁷

Conclusions

Although not every woman living in the United States during the Civil War was exposed to the horrors of invading troops or lack of male presence, those that did had many common experiences. From working in the field to being terrorized by soldiers, such experiences highlighted that the women and the society in which they were raised was fundamentally changed. Societal changes, although a result of the war, were primarily caused by the lack of men at home to protect their women, something society had always expected of them. The absence of men forced women into roles which they had not previously considered part of their womanly duties. Drew Faust, in *Mothers of Invention*, goes so far to say that the loss of men on the homefront fundamentally challenged domestic life.⁶⁸ Faust poignantly quotes Susan Middleton from a letter she wrote to a friend. “The realities of my life...[are] so strangely different from what my character and early promise of my life would have led one to expect. Anxiety, responsibility, and independence of thought or action are what are particularly abhorrent to my nature.”⁶⁹ Middleton’s words reflect what women across the North and the South were experiencing, a new life for which society had not prepared them.

An unforeseen effect of the loss of male presence on the homefront was that civilians’ interactions with soldiers fundamentally challenged the commonly held Victorian precepts of

⁶⁷ This is, of course, not a judgment of Victorian women and their actions in response to soldiers. The soldiers were armed when they entered homes and took food from civilians who were, for the most part, unarmed. It is not hard to conceive why civilians accepted the loss of supplies, rather than fight for them and risk their lives.

⁶⁸ Susan Middleton to Harriott Cheves, February 22, 1862, Cheves Family Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC, quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 51, EBSCO ebook.

⁶⁹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 52.

polite society. Without men to shield them, women were exposed to a world from which they had been safeguarded for most of their lives. The realities of war proved to be beyond the bounds of polite society, which Victorian culture had created. Men barged into domestic spaces and destroyed them, took food, and terrorized families. For some women, this had become an unfortunate reality. Other women were forced to work on farms or manage family plantations, slaves and other family assets. These roles, which women assumed during the war, were far from anything society had imagined for them. Though many women did not relish in their new roles, as is clear from the writings of Susan Middleton, some women, like Clara Barton, the famous founder of the American Red Cross, continued to pursue the work they started during the war.⁷⁰

In her thesis, Christiana Ericson examined various accounts of women during the Battle of Gettysburg. In all of these accounts she found “a sense of ambiguity of who was in control.”⁷¹ This, according to Ericson, highlighted just how much the prescribed societal roles of woman had begun to deteriorate.⁷² This is seen not only in the accounts from Gettysburg, but is also seen, in some form or another, in all of the accounts discussed herein. Whether it was Sarah Morgan’s interaction with the slave woman who gave her supper or Mary Livermore’s encounter with women in the fields in the mid-west, women had moved beyond their antebellum roles in the home. Without their heads of household, women began to take charge of duties that were formerly not their own. As a result of women taking charge, a shift in gender roles for both males

⁷⁰ Clara Barton spearheaded a number of projects after the Civil War ended. Directly after the war, she began a project to confirm the identities of missing soldiers who had died during the war and inform their families of the whereabouts of their sons and husbands. See *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Clara Barton,” accessed April 24, 2014, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?sid=4d021593-4a75-472b-ac9b-9897738d6e0c%40sessionmgr111&vid=9&hid=109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#db=ers&AN=88806959>.

⁷¹ Ericson, ““The World Will Little Note nor Long Remember,”” 17.

⁷² Ericson, ““The World Will Little Note nor Long Remember,”” 18.

and females occurred, particularly a rebellion against submissiveness, as can be seen in the case of Mary McAllister.⁷³ The experiences women undertook fundamentally challenged the roles of women in Victorian society and in the Victorian home. As a result of leaving for war, Victorian men pushed women out of their traditional roles as homemakers and genteel ladies and into jobs which gave them greater independence and autonomy during the war. Although many women returned to their former roles after the war, society was forever changed.

⁷³ Ericson, “The World Will Little Note nor Long Remember,” 22, 24.

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