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Abstract

Southern slaveholding women during the Civil War are usually portrayed as either Eve or the Virgin Mary. They are either depicted as staunch patriotic wives and mothers who out of love suffered and sacrificed most of their worldly goods for the Cause, or as weak-willed creatures who gave up on the war, asked their men to come home, and concerned themselves with getting pretty dresses from the blockade runners and dancing at elaborate balls and bazaars. This latter view, which seems cut so superficially from *Gone With the Wind*, is nevertheless one that is common in Civil War scholarship today. Confederate women are seen as individuals who whimsically stopped supporting the war the moment it inflicted a moment of consumer inconvenience on them, leading historians to suggest that women, with their slipping morale, symbolized the weak Confederate nationalism that helped erode the will of Southern citizens to continue the war. It is thus imperative to understand the role of women in the South and their relationship to the war in order to understand if their actions helped to contribute to the defeat of the Confederacy.

Keywords

Civil War, South Carolina, slaveholding women

**“OUR BLOOD WOULD RISE UP & DRIVE THEM AWAY:”
SLAVEHOLDING WOMEN OF SOUTH CAROLINA IN THE CIVIL WAR**



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Southern slaveholding women during the Civil War are usually portrayed as either Eve or the Virgin Mary. They are either depicted as staunch patriotic wives and mothers who out of love suffered and sacrificed most of their worldly goods for the Cause, or as weak-willed creatures who gave up on the war, asked their men to come home, and concerned themselves with getting pretty dresses from the blockade runners and dancing at elaborate balls and bazaars. This latter view, which seems cut so superficially from *Gone With the Wind*, is nevertheless one that is common in Civil War scholarship today. Confederate women are seen as individuals who whimsically stopped supporting the war the moment it inflicted a moment of consumer inconvenience on them, leading historians to suggest that women, with their slipping morale, symbolized the weak Confederate nationalism that helped erode the will of Southern citizens to continue the war. It is thus imperative to understand the role of women in the South and their relationship to the war in order to understand if their actions helped to contribute to the defeat of the Confederacy.

The place of these women must be reexamined closely. Because women often did wish the war to be over, it is easy to conclude that they simply stopped supporting the war. Expressions of fatigue and suffering during the war must not be interpreted as a desire for peace regardless of victory, and requests or hopes for brothers, sons, and husbands to return home can not be construed as a massive call for desertion and a complete renunciation of female support for the war. Therefore, one must look at the writings of these Southern women critically in order to discern whether statements about the war that seem to express eroding support may actually have been a desire for the war to end, but only with a Confederate victory.

As mentioned, it has become common for historians to propose that over time women began to reject the war and thus represented one of the numerous divisions in Confederate society that, coupled with military exhaustion, helped end the war. Drew Faust has been a major proponent of this theory. She argues that the war forced women, especially of the slave-holding planter class, into uncomfortable roles. For example, they had to take over jobs their husbands used to do, such as overseeing the planting and watching the slaves. They did not enjoy taking on these difficult tasks and felt overworked, as they not only had to take care of the household by themselves, but also were expected to show their commitment to the South by constantly donating their food, money, household goods, and time to the Confederate war effort. Over time, this expected patriotism eroded because the wealthy women did not want to continue taking the place

of men and longed for their easier lives before the war. Meanwhile, poorer women rejected the war because they could not adequately support their families without their husbands.

Therefore, by the end of 1863, most Confederate women wanted the war to be over. The lack of commitment to the war is seen, according to Faust, in writings in which women lamented the death and destruction of the war and complained about the overwhelming work that they faced, and in letters written by women of all social classes, asking their men to leave the army and return home to help plant crops or run the house.¹ George Rable, too, agrees with the theory of diminished morale on the part of women, believing that the war left women dispirited and caused tensions to mount between wealthy and poor women as they were unable to work together or support each other during this time of crisis.²

However, Anne Sarah Rubin in her book *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868*, interprets comments about the war made by Southern women in a different framework. She sees women becoming weary with the war because of the death and terrible shortages of food, but believes that this “war-weariness” did not necessarily mean that women denounced the war entirely or wanted the Confederacy to lose.³ Rubin strikes a key point—negative statements about an event do not necessarily symbolize one’s rejection.

A key group by which to test these rival views are the slave-holding women of South Carolina: Carolinian women were part of the most rabid, pro-secession political culture in the South, and therefore are ideal to measure the real fall of morale. Because the majority of the state did not see any major battles or engagements until late in the war when Sherman invaded in 1865, Carolinian women’s writings were not dependent on tactical blips in the military situation; if anything, they might have shown the most apprehension for provoking federal vengeance.

Most evidence suggests that the slaveholding women of South Carolina supported secession and expressed their commitment to the Confederacy from the very beginning of the war. They did so by urging men to enlist and by organizing themselves to support the oncoming conflict. Even before Fort Sumter was fired upon, Sarah Palmer, the daughter of plantation owner Dr. John Saunders Palmer, wrote to her brother and encouraged him to serve if war broke out. “Go!” she exclaimed, “I would not have you stay at home and be branded with The Cowards.”⁴ When Mary Chesnut’s husband turned down an offer for a commission in the army early in the war, she was “deeply mortified.”⁵ Emma Holmes, a young woman in Charleston, looked forward to the coming crisis, writing in February of 1861 that:

A revolution, wonderful in the rapidity in with which it has swept across the Country, from the Atlantic almost to the Pacific, convulsing the whole of what was once our

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 235, 238, 243-5.

² George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 200-201.

³ Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy: 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 53.

⁴ Louis P. Towles, ed., *A World Turned Upside Down: The Palmers of South Santee, 1818-1881* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 297.

⁵ C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 150.

pride and boast ‘The United States,’ now alas broken into fragments through the malignity and fanaticism of the Black Republicans.⁶

Adele Petigru Allston, the wife of rice planter Robert F. W. Allston, wrote to her friends who sided with the North expressing her disbelief that they would not understand the Southern point of view. “Every act of Lincoln’s administration has shewn [*sic*] the spirit of a usurper, a cunning plotting crafty usurper,” she argued, and went on to ask her friends to stay in the South longer and to understand why Southerners had to fight the North.⁷ Diaries attest to the fact that women supported the war from its infancy, supported by records of work that women did to immediately support the Confederacy. As early as January 1861, women were sending bandages to Charleston as a central location for war preparation and collecting money, making uniforms, flags, and mattresses.⁸

Once the war began, the women of South Carolina rushed to support it in appropriate and feminine ways, such as sewing and donating money and other items. The Soldier’s Relief Association was the major body that women organized in Charleston to help the war effort. The leaders divided Charleston into wards, with each ward headed by a woman who would oversee any relief measures in that area. The group met daily at a depository to collect a variety of items including sheets, food, underclothing, tea, and brandy.⁹ Towns throughout South Carolina had women’s organizations like the Soldier’s Relief Association that supported the war. Accounts of war work include women making flags to present to regiments, women nursing daily at hospitals, sewing circles composed of school-age girls, money collected from everyone from established ladies to children, and individual triumphs such as one woman who made three pairs of socks daily.¹⁰ The women often ran the meetings and formed different committees in these associations and imposed rules on themselves so that the organizations were run efficiently. For instance, The Young Ladies’ Hospital Association, composed solely of unmarried women in Columbia, met each Tuesday, and any absent member was charged ten cents unless she had a valid excuse.¹¹ *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, two celebratory volumes about women’s work in the state, lists at least 127 relief agencies in the state; this list does not include the work that women did with the South Carolina Hospital Aid Association, an organization ran by men, but supplied by women, and the countless acts of local charity women performed, such as taking in refugees.¹² In addition, the Free Market of Charleston was supported by women. This charity organization benefited the families of poorer soldiers

⁶ John F. Marszalek, ed., *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes: 1861-1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 1.

⁷ J.H. Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 175-6.

⁸ Mrs. A.T. Smythe, Miss M.B. Poppenheim, and Mrs. Thomas Taylor, eds., *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, vol. 1 (Columbia: The State Company, 1903), 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹² Smythe, Poppenheim, and Taylor, 21-25 & Mrs. James Conner and others, eds., *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, vol. 2 (Columbia: The State Company, 1907), 91-2.

by giving food to the underprivileged soldier's wife and children and relied on donations from civilians. As of 1863, the Market fed roughly 800 families.¹³

The abundance of charity work that was done by women in the first year of the war continued strongly into 1862. The *Charleston Mercury* usually recorded weekly donations that were received by the Soldier's Relief Association, by other organizations such as the Ladies' Christian Association, the Ladies' Clothing Association, or donations received at hospitals or to centralized depots in Charleston and Columbia. For example, on February 6, 1862, the Ladies' Christian Association listed monetary donations from both men and women, as well as contributions in the form of blankets, material, shirts, socks, jam, scarves, mattresses, sugar, and other materials.¹⁴ Throughout 1862, the lists of donations received from these associations were long. On July 14, 1862 alone, the *Charleston Mercury* listed over seventy monetary donations and numerous material donations to a hospital in Charleston.¹⁵

Besides the charity work mentioned above, the women of the state also donated money in order to partially fund the building of two gunboats, primarily the *Palmetto State* and to a lesser extent, the *Chicora*. Lists of donations for the boat appeared sometimes multiple times a week in the *Mercury*. Because most of the money from the state for this project came from women, the boats were affectionately termed the "Ladies' Gunboats." A large fair was organized in May of 1862 to sell items for the gunboats, and numerous private fundraisers were held throughout the state. As of October 3, 1862, the total amount collected for the *Palmetto State* was \$30,188.53. The celebration for the launching of the boat took place on October 11, 1862, and it was requested that ladies from the state come to Charleston and partake in the ceremony.¹⁶

While women enthusiastically showed their support for war through material contributions in 1861 and 1862, they also wrote of their commitment to the Confederacy and followed military events closely, cheering on the armies. Women were upset about the losses of the Sea Islands and Port Royal in their state and of the continuing struggle waged by the Union to gain islands in the area around Charleston. Leora Sims, a South Carolina schoolmate of Harriet Palmer, another daughter of Dr. John Saunders Palmer, wrote at the loss of Port Royal: "Our beloved Carolina is now an asylum for imps that even Hell cannot surpass, for I think that these are the days when the spirits from the bottomless pit are let out on the earth."¹⁷ Women expressed frustration and sadness over any Confederate loss immediately, especially if the defeat took place in their state. They laughed about military leaders whom they considered to be cowardly, and they expected their men to fight hard and win. Also referring to the loss of Port Royal and the defeat of two South Carolina regiments, Mary Chesnut wrote: "General Lee sent

¹³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁴ *Charleston Mercury*, 6 February 1862.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14 July, 1862.

¹⁶ *Charleston Mercury*, 3 October, 1862.

¹⁷ Towles, 317.

them, they say. Preux chevalier. Booted and bridled and gallant ride he. So far his bonnie face has only brought us ill luck.”¹⁸

Mary Maxcy Leverett, a woman who resided in McPhersonville after her family left their home in Beaufort due to Union occupation, and who sent three of her sons to the defense of the Confederacy wrote to her son Milton in May of 1862 expressing her disdain for defeat and hope for more victories: “I feel so incensed about the news nowadays that I can scarce write with patience—we are doing nothing but giving up men, forts, and towns. If half our public men were hanged or put in pillory, it would be good for the country.”¹⁹ Mary Leverett also did not fear war in her own land: “We, South Carolina, commenced this struggle, and it is our duty and ought to be our glory to bear the brunt of it,” she wrote to another son, Fred, in June of 1862.²⁰ Grace Brown Elmore, a twenty-two year old woman from Columbia, was willing to sacrifice her state for victory as well. Upon hearing the news that the town of Beaufort was to be shelled, she wrote: “Surely t’is for our good in the end. My God thou will not let devils come amongst thy people.”²¹ These women were angry with Confederate losses, but remained perfectly willing to sacrifice, and wanted the Confederate leaders and soldiers to fight for the South’s independence.

In February 1862, a letter from the “Daughters of Charleston” appeared in the *Mercury*. In it, the writers criticized men for suggesting that the women and children leave Charleston should an attack or siege occur. The letter not only chastised the men for not fighting hard enough for the Confederacy, but also portrayed women as more patriotic than men. The writers exhorted: “Sir, if the men of Charleston will only do their duty as faithfully as the women have done theirs, there will be no panic.” The women also expressed their contempt for men who refused to serve the Cause:

It is a disgrace for young men to skulk under the yellow flag, or seek official shelter, when Carolina, our beloved Carolina, whose name has ever been the symbol of honor and chivalry is calling to them to save her from the degradation of conquest, by a foe in whose track comes desolation and ruin, at the very thought of whose excesses your wives, mothers and sisters turn pale.

The letter further warned male citizens that the women would give the names of all men under sixty who were not enlisted to the army.²² South Carolina women expected their men to fight for their state and for the Confederacy, believed that they were the most dedicated citizens, and would not accept men who do not do their part in the war. The idea that women were

¹⁸ Woodward, 230.

¹⁹ Francis Wallace Taylor, Catherine Taylor Matthews, and J. Tracy Power, *The Leverett Letters: Correspondence of a South Carolina Family, 1851-1868* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 128-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

²¹ Marli F. Weiner, ed., *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Brown Elmore, 1861-1868* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 11.

²² Charleston Mercury, 26 February 1862.

the most loyal citizens to the Confederacy is frequently seen in their letters and journals at the time. Thus, women of South Carolina were not afraid to endure bloody battles and combat in order to secure victory.

As 1862 ended, and the war entered its second and third full years in 1863 and 1864, South Carolina women, while not bearing the brunt of the fighting like their sisters in Virginia, were forced to experience hardship due to runaway slaves, high prices, and the Union blockade. Yet, their commitment to the war and their determination to see the Confederacy win was still strong, as seen through their own words and actions. While Drew Faust believes that Confederate women gave up on the war by this time, South Carolina women were in fact ready to support the war until the end. Mrs. William Mason Smith, who traveled from her home in the Northern hills of South Carolina to Richmond to nurse her injured son, witnessed his long and painful death in August of 1864. Yet, in late 1864 when there were rumors of enemy troops near her home, Mrs. Smith wrote a letter to her mother-in-law saying: “ I will lose all we have here; but if I can give up the lives of my sons in the Cause, surely I can stand the rest.” Even though she had seen the death of her son before her eyes, Mrs. Smith did not reject the Confederacy when she realized she may lose her house, nor did she call for her other son who was in the army to come home.²³ Grace Brown Elmore wrote of her utter hatred for the North in November of 1864 and of her desire for the war to continue after the long and bloody battles in the summer and during Sherman’s campaign in Georgia, commenting: “Rather would I see every drop of my blood spilled upon the battlefeild [*sic*], my home among the things that were, every suffering the heart could feel be bourne [*sic*] by me than this Confederacy go back to the North.”²⁴

Women underwent a great deal of stress and suffering, yet managed to have hope. Meta Morris Grimball and her husband, who lived primarily in the Colleton District throughout the conflict, lost much of the comfort they had enjoyed in life during the war. Her husband sold most of their slaves, and she wrote that she felt terrible when she did not have enough food to give to a poor woman who came begging at her door. When her son, William, died in the army in 1864, she displayed no bitterness to the Confederacy or its armies, commenting only: “All this shews [*sic*] that his life, though short, was not without its use, his example may lead others to strive after good.”²⁵ Mary Leverett, in writing to her son who had been assigned to defend Fort Sumter, praised the work that he was doing in the army. She considered his new placement to be a great honor “equal in glory to the Battle Abby Roll of Honour of Old England.”²⁶ Adele Allston lost her husband in 1864, but when she wrote to her son in the Confederate army and informed him of his father’s death, she was quick to place the importance of his military service

²³ David E. Hunger Smith, Alice R. Hunger Smith, and Arney R. Childs, eds., *Mason Smith Family Letters, 1860-1868* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1950), 150.

²⁴ Weiner, 79.

²⁵ Meta Morris Grimball, *The Journal of Meta Morris Grimball*, in *First Person Narratives of the American South 1860-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001), Database online <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/ncuhtml/fpnashome.html>>.

²⁶ Taylor, Matthews, and Power, 303.

over his family: “You must not my beloved pine for home, or dwell too much upon it. Such a state of mind will unfit you for your duties there. Remember that the honour, the good name of our House now rests upon you.”²⁷ Women felt that having their men fight for their state and country was honorable even as the war progressed. These statements are quite contrary to the findings of historians who believe that most women did not want to sacrifice more and no longer cared about victory after 1863.²⁸

In the spring and summer of 1863, Charleston underwent bombardment as shells from Union troops attacking Fort Sumter and surrounding islands reached the city.²⁹ But again, women’s morale was not destroyed. Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward, a young woman who lived in Aiken, South Carolina, described the resolve of the citizens of Charleston during the bombardment in 1863 writing: “. . . The Charlestonians seem determined to sacrifice everything—life, property, friends, before giving up.”³⁰ Harriet Palmer, who had numerous friends in Charleston, echoed the sentiments of Pauline Heyward about the siege of Charleston saying that the city would never be taken because “no man, woman, or child of South Carolina would be spared” in its defense.³¹ Emma Holmes was in Charleston during the summer of 1863 working as a teacher, and heard the battle each day. She lived her life as best as she could, and although she noted that her days were “monotonous” as she and her sister had to do more work because her brothers were in the war, she never commented that she wanted the Confederacy to flounder. She did not mention the bombardment in her journal greatly, and in September of 1863, she rejoiced, like a loyal Confederate, at the victory at Chickamauga, even though she knew there were many casualties.³²

Another indication of the strong will of South Carolinian women in 1863 and 1864 was their continuing charity work that supported the soldiers and the hospitals. In September of 1864, a man who traveled from Virginia to South Carolina praised South Carolina women openly, writing that they were more generous than Virginia ladies. He claimed to have witnessed them feeding soldiers who were traveling through the state and noted that they took very good care of their wounded men at home.³³ This traveler was correct in commenting late in the war that the women of the state performed a good amount of charity work. Reports of donations appeared in the *Mercury* in 1864 about once per week, as they did in 1861. Although it is nearly impossible to count the number of contributions that were made due to the sheer number of relief organizations and missing records, from the material available, it is evident that women were active. As always, women donated money and goods, or held fundraisers in the form of

²⁷ Easterby, 199.

²⁸ Faust, 238-9.

²⁹ Daniel L. Morrill, *The Civil War in the Carolinas* (Charleston: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, Inc., 2002), 344.

³⁰ Mary D. Robertson, ed., *A Confederate Lady Comes of Age: The Journal of Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward, 1863-1888* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 21.

³¹ Towles, 363.

³² Marszalek, 289, 309.

³³ *Charleston Mercury*, 12 September, 1864.

concerts or performances of tableaux. Even in middle to late 1864, donations continued to pour in. Reports from various associations account for the continued generosity of women. In a June 1864 report of Spartanburg's Relief Association, over thirty donations were received.³⁴ In the *Mercury* on October 31, 1864, twenty-eight gifts were acknowledged, an average weekly figure for donations in 1863 and 1864.

While the number of contributions was not as great as in the early part of the war, women's support for the war must not have ended because these organizations existed and still commanded a fair number of donations per week. As shortages in food and other materials become more severe, it is not surprising that donations dwindled. This does not mean a rejection of the war by women. Women may have cheered for the Confederacy just as much as they always had, but simply could not be as generous.

Along with a drop in charity work, historians frequently depict Confederate women as selfish, as they complained about the amount of work that they had during the war. Yet, the women of the South valued duty as much as men and wanted to materially help the war effort so long as they were able. While it was a man's duty to fight in the war, it was the duty of women to support the men in all of their efforts. In fact, women may have held themselves up to higher standards of duty than their men did, and while historians see Confederate women becoming more selfish during the war, they most likely could not have done much more. Rubin notes that: "Confederates held women to almost impossible standards of patriotic self-sacrifice, and when women could not measure up to those ideals, they were subject to public chastising and complaints about their lack of spirit."³⁵ For instance, on July 31, 1863 in the *Charleston Mercury*, a letter from "Annie" urged women to do even more by drying fruits and vegetables for the troops. She said that: "Every one should now, and as long as the materials last, be making pickles, catsup, drying apples, peaches, figs, and any other fruits they may have."³⁶ Women pushed one another to do more because at the time, it was expected for women to be completely self-sacrificing. Thus, calls from men to women and from women to one another for more sacrifices have been looked upon as a lapse in morale, when in reality women were trying to cope with intense demands and encourage one another. Women knew what was expected of them, and they did their best.

For example, Mary Chesnut acknowledged that she had her own role in the war in August of 1864 when she volunteered as a nurse every day, getting up at five in the morning to go to the hospital in Columbia commenting: "There must be no dodging duty."³⁷ Although Mary Chesnut did enjoy her fair share of parties and balls during the war, as many historians have

³⁴ Conner and others, 66-7.

³⁵ Rubin, 60.

³⁶ *Charleston Mercury*, 31 July 1863.

³⁷ Woodward, 641.

commented, she knew women had duties too. Other women who never would have thought of working, such as Emma Holmes, found themselves earning a living as teachers, governesses, or clerks in the government. Malvina S. Waring, a young girl who came from a previously wealthy family, signed treasury bills day after day to earn money. She also performed charity work while employed, bringing gifts and food to the hospital in Columbia.³⁸ The work done by women is summarized by Mrs. Thomas Taylor in a speech given to the South Carolina Division of the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1900. Although she ignored that any dissent existed among women, she was correct in describing them as “organizers, manufacturers, moral government among hordes of negroes, overseers, lumber millers, land clearers, traders. . . . [they] ditched and drained fields, built storage barns, standing over their negro workmen, cheering, urging and checking.”³⁹ Despite the racist language, Mrs. Taylor effectively conveyed that women of all classes did much more work than they had before the war, and considering the adjustment that most had to make within their homes, the amount of work they did for the armies and hospitals was quite impressive. Southern women altered their lives for the Cause and supported the war as best they could.

At the end of 1864 and the beginning of 1865, the atmosphere in South Carolina abruptly changed by the fear of General Sherman’s invasion of the state. The first of Sherman’s troops to enter the state were under General William T. Ward, who arrived from Georgia in the first week of 1864. Prior to his invasion, Sherman had received letters and notes from residents of South Carolina taunting him, warning him that their state would never surrender. These threats only made Sherman more determined to hurt South Carolina residents and bring a war to them that he believed they had begun.⁴⁰ In January, Sherman sent General Oliver Otis Howard to Beaufort and then inland, while General Henry Slocum was sent across the Savannah River. Sherman purposefully separated his troops to spread Confederate resistance and to make South Carolinians believe that he was after Charleston.⁴¹ To meet the Federal troops, Confederate resistance was slim. Most of the state was defended by scattered cavalry or state militia, consisting of old and young men.⁴²

While the Confederates were planning for Sherman to go to Charleston first, his main objective was actually Columbia, where there were few Confederate defenders. Sherman arrived in Columbia on February 17, 1865. Before he arrived, the quartermaster’s shop was thrown open to the citizens, and as crowds gathered, kegs of powder were mistakenly ignited, killing about forty citizens.⁴³ That night, about one-third of Columbia was set afire, most likely by Union troops, although Sherman and others later claimed that the city caught fire when retreating

³⁸ Smythe, Poppenheim, and Taylor, 274-5.

³⁹ Taylor, Matthews, and Power, 317.

⁴⁰ John G. Barrett, *Sherman’s March Through the Carolinians* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 42-4.

⁴¹ Wallace, 548-9.

⁴² Barrett, 49.

⁴³ Wallace, 550.

Confederates burned cotton.⁴⁴ Like Columbia, many towns in South Carolina felt Sherman's wrath and were burned, including Gillsonville, Grahamville, McPhersonville, Orangeburg, Lexington, Barnwell, and Hardeeville.⁴⁵ Numerous plantations around the state were burned as well, and citizens everywhere lost their livestock, food, furniture, and personal belongings to Sherman's army.

However, despite the burnings and raids of Sherman's Army, South Carolina women were not dismayed by seeing the war on their land, and in some cases, in their homes. Sherman's men often commented on the bitter nature of the women of the state and of their utter hatred of the Northern troops. One New Jersey soldier with Sherman commented about the women: "There is not a particle of the craven fear in them—determined and resolute no giving in."⁴⁶ This resoluteness was manifested in many ways, such as in their calls for continued fighting and in promises of unwavering support. In the January 24, 1865 edition of the *Mercury*, "Many Wives and Mothers of Charleston" appealed to the men of the South, as they had done before, to fight and not to surrender, writing:

We, women of Charleston, not enthusiastic girls, but women whose hair has whitened through the anguish of this awful war, whose husbands sons, brothers, have died for South Carolina and Charleston, entreat to be heard. . . . We implore, as the greatest boon, fight for Charleston! At every point, fight for every inch, and if our men die, let them die amid the blazing ruins of our homes; their souls rising upwards on the flames which save our city from the pollution of the enemy. Send out the women and children yet in the city. Thousands of Charleston women scattered through the land will share with them their all. They shall not starve. But let there be no excuse for deserting the sacred homes of us and our ancestors."⁴⁷

By bringing this call for defense to the public arena of a newspaper, South Carolina women displayed that they were as committed to the Cause as ever. These women, as they mentioned, had already mourned the loss of loved ones in the war and struggled as prices rose higher and higher to feed and clothe their families, yet they begged the army to fight for their city.

Women throughout the state echoed similar calls for defense, signaling that they did not cower into submission upon encountering Sherman. Grace Brown Elmore wrote in January 1865 that she was appalled that Confederates let Sherman go through Georgia "unopposed and unimpeded" and hoped that from then on the Confederates would do a better job defending their land.⁴⁸ Emma LeConte, a Columbia resident, watched her city burn. But she, like other women, was not willing to see the war end even though she witnessed the destruction of Co-

⁴⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 143-145.

⁴⁵ Glatthaar, 142.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁷ Conner and others, 85-6.

⁴⁸ Weiner, 89.

lumbia first-hand. She wrote that the United States flag at the South Carolina statehouse was a “hateful symbol of despotism” and on February 21, after surveying the damage of her beloved city, and having nothing left to eat but rancid salt pork and meal concluded: “Before they came, I thought I hated them as much as was possible, now I know there are no limits to the feeling of hatred.”⁴⁹ Mrs. C.P. Poppenheim, who was residing on a plantation in Camden, witnessed the plundering of her house for five days. The troops took all food, animals, clothing, oil, and anything else they found of use. Mrs. Poppenheim responded to this destruction by loathing the North, calling the Yankees “wicked,” “vile,” and “brutal wretches.”⁵⁰ Emma Holmes claimed that she “taunted” the Yankees and told them: “We would never be subdued, for if every man, woman & child were murdered, our blood would rise up & drive them away.”⁵¹ One story, recounted by William Gilmore Simms in his 1865 book about the burning of Columbia, tells of a woman who boldly proclaimed to a Union soldier that the South would never fear Sherman or the Union troops. The soldier then held a gun to the woman, but she did not flinch and slowly lifted her head to meet his eyes. He responded: “You have pluck enough for a whole regiment.”⁵²

Whether or not this last story is true, it nevertheless symbolizes the courage displayed by many of the women of the state and the spirit that prevailed. Some women of South Carolina seemed to redouble their commitment to the South by witnessing the terrible acts of war. Mary Maxcy Leverett wrote to her son in late February 1865 after federal troops invaded her home. She said that the soldiers, as they ransacked the rooms, asked her if the South would give up. Mary responded defiantly: “No! It would make us more determined & drive every man into the field with feelings more embittered & intense than ever. It was a *good thing* for us.”⁵³ Anne Sarah Rubin echoes Mary Leverett in that she believes that as Confederate women suffered more and more deaths in their families and underwent increasing hardships. Instead of giving up, they looked for a higher cause, and for them, the Confederacy offered a purpose in life.⁵⁴

Of course, this is not to say that women did not want peace or wondered if the sacrifices being made were too great. It is true that many women questioned what was happening. Mary Chesnut asked in July 1864 after the death of a friend in the war: “Is anything worth it? This fearful sacrifice—this awful penalty we pay for war?”⁵⁵ Emma Holmes solemnly wrote that her journal was like a “catalogue of death” as she incessantly recorded the deaths of men she knew.⁵⁶ Women continually wrote of how they wished for peace. Emily Harris, a woman with seven children and ten slaves in Spartanburg, South Carolina, had so much work to do

⁴⁹ Earl Schenck Miers, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 41, 52, & 60.

⁵⁰ Smythe, Poppenheim, and Taylor, 260-1.

⁵¹ Marszalek, 402.

⁵² William Gilmore Simms, *Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia, South Carolina* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 49-50.

⁵³ Taylor, Matthews, and Power, 387.

⁵⁴ Rubin, 51.

⁵⁵ Woodward, 625.

⁵⁶ Marszalek, 326.

on her farm without her husband that she struggled daily to feed her children and wanted her husband to come home, although he never deserted.⁵⁷ Drew Faust believes that many Southern women encouraged their husbands to desert, and that many men left the armies because of requests from home.⁵⁸ However, it is impossible to know the number of men who did desert because calls from home were so pressing. Gary Gallagher notes that Confederate desertion was only a problem right at the end of the war, and that may have been because Southern soldiers knew that the North had the numerical and material advantage, recognized their defeats on the battlefield, and knew that the war was ending.⁵⁹

Moreover, the women who asked their men to come home did not necessarily do so because they no longer supported the Confederacy. For instance, Margaret A. Easterling, a widow from the Marlborough District of South Carolina located in the upcountry, asked the Confederate Secretary of War, James Seddon, to send home her more “feeble son,” even telling him that her older son could stay in the army. She explained: “I need not tell you of my devotion to my country, of the sacrifices I have made, and of the many more I am willing to make. Search history and you will see that woman is always true to her country and that there was never an Arnold in the Female World.”⁶⁰ This letter clearly demonstrates that even though she asked for her son to come home, Margaret did not denounce the Cause, and she displayed her support by stating that one of her sons could stay in the army. She needed help on her farm and had nobody left to turn to. In fact, many of the petitions received by Confederate officials offer evidence that women were willing to sacrifice and to negotiate with Confederate leaders, but simply needed a man’s help. Sometimes, men deserted to come home during planting season, but returned to the army when their job was done.⁶¹ Women who wrote asking for their husbands or sons to come home may not have thought what the loss of a number of men would do to the armies of the Confederacy; they wanted their men to come home, but the rest to stay. Thus, as Rubin concludes, “Even as they acted in ways that hurt their new nation, Confederates professed their love for it. They wanted the war to end, but they wanted it to end in victory, even as they did little to help it.”⁶² Maybe asking for help with the crops was just that, and not a larger call for the war to end.

Perhaps the extent to which Confederate women wanted their nation to be victorious is seen in their response to the Confederate surrender and prospect of Northern rule in the future. Any misgivings they had about the war seemed to pale in comparison for their sadness

⁵⁷ J. Edward Lee and Ron Chepesiuk, *South Carolina in the Civil War: The Confederate Experience in Letters and Diaries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2000), 35.

⁵⁸ Faust, 243.

⁵⁹ Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 53.

⁶⁰ Amy E. Murrell, “Of Necessity and Public Benefit: Southern Families and Their Appeals For Protection” in *Southern Families At War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*, ed. Catherine Clinton (New York: Oxford, 2000), 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶² Rubin, 79.

at defeat and utter hatred of the North. Emma LeConte was shocked and extremely upset when she learned about the surrender of Lee, exclaiming:

We give up to the Yankees! How can it be? How can they talk about it? Why does not the President call out the women if there are [not] enough men? We would go and fight, too—we would better all die together. Let us suffer still more, give up yet more—anything, anything that will help the cause, anything that will give us freedom and not force us to live with such people—to be ruled by such horrible and contemptible creatures—to submit to them when we hate them so bitterly.⁶³

LeConte thus echoed other women from around her state in placing the commitment of women to the Cause over men, and she decidedly wanted the conflict to continue until the South won. Harriet Palmer was so disgusted by word that Richmond had been surrendered and was so sure of Southern victory that she did not believe the news: “All Yankee lies. I don’t believe one word of it. Indeed I do not want to hear of such a peace as I know it would be if it were brought about in such a way.”⁶⁴

Ella Lorton, a woman from Pendleton, South Carolina, experienced the death of her brother in the war and the death of her father from illness in 1862. Her mother had to sell a number of their slaves, and they were in debt. Yet, she too was angry at the news of surrender, and she even wrote of “rejoicing over Lincoln’s death.”⁶⁵ Emma Holmes was equally appalled: “To go back into the Union!! No words can describe all the horrors contained in those few words. Our souls recoiled shuddering at the bare idea.”⁶⁶ Pauline DeCaradeuc Heyward lost two brothers in the service, and most of what was in her home was taken by Union troops. But she could not give up on the South: “All our brave Generals, unequalled soldiers, my own gallant Brothers, was it for this that you died? Subjugation! Never! God will raise us yet!”⁶⁷ Emmala Reed, who resided in the hilly country of Anderson and whose brother lost a hand in the war was disgusted at the idea of Northern rule after Lee’s surrender: “How awfully [*sic*] humiliating & deplorable—and what is to be the result? What our fate—are we ruined—subjugated?” She was so desperate for good news that she hoped that General Joseph Johnston would bring late victory.⁶⁸ And Mary Chesnut, who had continually written about the mounting number of deaths and wondered if the war was worth the sacrifice, was anything but relieved when she learned the result of the conflict: “We are scattered—stunned—the remnant of heart left alive with us filled with brotherly hate.”⁶⁹ The women of South Carolina seemed prepared to continue the fight.

⁶³ Miers, 90.

⁶⁴ Towles, 460.

⁶⁵ Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *The Life and Times of Ella Lorton, A Pendleton South Carolina Confederate* (Clemson: Clemson Printers, 1996), 72.

⁶⁶ Marszalek, 436.

⁶⁷ Robertson, 74.

⁶⁸ Robert T. Oliver, *A Faithful Heart: The Journals of Emmala Reed, 1865 and 1866* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 44.

⁶⁹ Woodward, 814.

By looking at the support of the war from South Carolina women in their words, in their work for the Confederacy, and in their reactions to defeat, it becomes clear that they were not ready to end the war on terms of Northern victory. They wanted to see the carnage of war end and of course have their husbands and sons return home, but wanted this with a Confederate victory. Southern women may have expected more from themselves than they could sacrifice during the war, but considering the hardships they faced under the most trying circumstances, they did what they could, even if they could not measure up to their own standards.

For four years, the slaveholding women of the South did their best by executing jobs they had never done before and by devoting themselves to supporting the war. They cheered secession, urged their men to enlist, organized bazaars and sewing circles, and donated what they could spare. They encouraged men to defend their homes, and expressed dissatisfaction when the armies did not seem to be fighting hard enough. While it was natural that what they could do for the Cause dwindled as their inflated currency could buy less and less and simple essentials of life became harder to come by, they still expressed hope for the Confederacy in their writings. Encountering the enemy caused them fright, but it also fanned their hatred for the North even more so that when the end arrived, although they may have been tired of war, they were not at all ready to go back into the Union. The unreconstructed Southern woman, with her dreams of the Lost Cause and antebellum life was thus born, and the loyal South Carolina lady in her heart forever glorified the short life of the Confederacy.

