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Frances Peter: A Loyal Woman of Kentucky

Abstract

Frances Peter, a young epileptic woman, supported the Union in her divided town of Lexington, Kentucky. Although her family owned several slaves, she came to support the federal government's emancipation policy and clearly distinguished her middle class Unionist family from the elite secessionist Southerners. She fiercely attacked the secessionist women in her community, criticizing them as hypocritical and unchristian. She took a more sympathetic tone in her view of Confederate troops, believing them to be uneducated, lower class men who had been duped by wealthy Southern politicians. Nevertheless, she condemned both groups for turning their backs on the Constitution, as she assumed an air of moral superiority in affirming her loyalty to the Union.

Keywords

Frances Peter, Kentucky, Women of the civil war era

Frances Peter: A Loyal Woman of Kentucky

Erica Uszak

As a young woman in divided Lexington, Kentucky, Frances Peter staunchly defended her position as a Unionist, believing secession to be a foolish act which violated the Constitution. She tried to distinguish emancipation and Union as two separate issues but eventually came to accept emancipation, even though she came from a middle class slaveholding family, and she reproached former Unionists who switched allegiances because of it.¹ In her diary, she attacked those disloyal to the Union, as she destroyed the idea of the “honorable” Confederate soldier and the “proper” secessionist lady. Arguing that the Confederates had no honor because they had rebelled against the federal government, she claimed that Southern politicians had misled the poor Confederate soldiers, who were too ignorant to know that they, not the federal government, had crushed the Constitution under their feet. While Peter seemed to view the Confederate soldiers with some pity, she reserved her harshest words for the secessionist women in her town. She condemned the women as hypocrites who were only

¹Ancestry.com, “Robt. [Robert] Peter,” *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedule, Lexington, Fayette County, Kentucky* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

pretending to be Christians and who were too aggressive in defending their political allegiances. Peter rejected the idea that these obscene, hypocritical women should be treated with the same respect as other “ladies” of Lexington, the Unionist women. An epileptic, Peter seldom left the house and relied on information from newspapers and her family and neighbors for her diary entries.² Since her epilepsy largely kept her from speaking publicly, she turned to the diary to express her political opinions. While her diary entries showed a greater sympathy for the suffering of Confederate soldiers, she expressed scorn for all secessionists, as they had no true concept of loyalty, honor or piety. To Peter, honor meant standing by the Union.

Peter insisted that Kentucky Unionists were truly loyal to the Constitution and the federal government, and she criticized Kentuckians whose support of the Union wavered because of emancipation. Peter opposed the formation of a political party against Lincoln, insisting on March 14, 1863, that such a divisive move would wrongly weaken the federal government and the war effort. Peter argued that if Kentuckians aligned themselves with a party opposed to Lincoln, the Lincoln

²Frances Peter, *A Union Woman in Civil War Kentucky: The Diary of Frances Peter*, eds. John David Smith and William Cooper Jr. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), xxiv-xxv.

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administration could turn a deaf ear to their needs for protection when Confederates invaded Kentucky.³ When the federal government shifted its national policy to include emancipation, Peter criticized the idea of permitting blacks to fight in the Union army. In February 1863, she claimed that arming blacks went “against the Constitution,” a document she valued most because its connection to the founding fathers.⁴ In November 1863, Peter declared that she had “always understood that this war was undertaken merely to put down rebellion” and insisted that the Confederates had to be defeated first before emancipation could be decided upon.⁵ However, a month earlier, Peter had admitted that she held little opposition to emancipation, remarking, “I for one would not be at all disgusted at having Ky slaves emancipated” and added that others were growing to accept emancipation, especially as the cost of slaves skyrocketed.⁶ In March 1864, a Kentucky Union officer faced backlash when he encouraged a public assembly to rebel against the federal government in response to the enlistment of black soldiers. Unionists called him a Copperhead and a traitor, and Peter, in agreement, vowed that Kentuckians would not “resist the Government on account of the

³ Ibid., 110.

⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁶ Ibid., 167-168.

negro.”⁷ Even as former Unionists around her turned their backs on the federal government, Peter resolved to stand by the Union and slowly supported emancipation as part of the federal government’s policy.

Peter condemned the Southern elite for misleading the ignorant common Confederates. According to Peter (in an undated diary entry), the Southern elite told the common soldiers that they had seceded because of the federal government’s violation of their constitutional rights. Peter claimed that their rebellion against the federal government was the true violation of the Constitution.⁸ Claiming to have seen the Confederates’ ignorance, Peter explained that she understood how “a few designing men” turned “so many thousands against the Union of their fathers.”⁹ The “few designing men” belonged to the elite plantation class and they controlled politics, looking to protect their financial interest in slavery. Peter argued that the uneducated Confederate soldiers had been deliberately misled into the fight by the Southern elite, insisting, “How could men who had never read the Constitution or heard it read by a faithful interpreter know whether what they did was constitutional or not?”¹⁰ As Aaron

⁷ Ibid., 195.

⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁹ Ibid., 53-54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

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Astor noted, conservative Unionists accused secessionists of attacking the nation that their ancestors had bled for.¹¹ Unionists dismissed the idea of secession as an honorable and legal act and held Confederate leaders responsible for misleading the people into rebellion.¹² Peter referred several times to the unranked Confederate soldiers as “poor deluded people.”¹³ As Elizabeth Varon pointed out, President Lincoln also made a similar statement concerning Southerners’ ignorance about secession, and it is likely Peter was echoing him and other Northern leaders.¹⁴ Peter believed the common Confederate soldiers had nothing to gain and much to lose. Looking with pity on the sick Confederates in the hospital, she remarked in October 1862, “Poor wretches! The Confederacy hasn’t done much for them!”¹⁵ By describing the Confederates as “poor, dirty, ragged, barefooted” who cried like “a pack of whipped hounds” while “straggling along like a flock of sheep,” Peter compared the march of the soldiers to the herding along of animals.¹⁶ She saw them not

¹¹ Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 48-49.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹³ Peter, *Union Woman*, 54.

¹⁴ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4-5.

¹⁵ Peter, *Union Woman*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

as men capable of independent thought, but as a herd of mindless animals. They, in their ignorance, had been duped by the Southern elite. By depicting the soldiers as dirty and uneducated, Peter remained convinced by November 1863 that the Confederate soldier “is one of the most abused creatures I ever heard of, a perfect slave to his officers, and too ignorant to know how much he is imposed upon.”¹⁷

Peter denied the Confederate soldier the cultural notion of honor, demonstrating that loyalty to the Union was the only honorable path. Aaron Astor noted that “Like border state Confederates, Unionists employed a language of faith, fidelity, and honor.”¹⁸ However, Unionists had a very different definition of loyalty and honor than the Confederates, a definition that meant standing by the Union. Bertram Wyatt-Brown emphasized the connection between slavery and the Confederate notion of honor. Wyatt-Brown argued that in defending their honor and right to form their own government, Confederates defended their right to slavery and their racial superiority.¹⁹ In light of recent European revolutions, Unionists contended that the Southern elite slaveholder class shared the

¹⁷ Ibid., 170-171.

¹⁸ Astor, *Rebels on the Border*, 82.

¹⁹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 208-209.

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oppressive qualities of the European aristocracies.²⁰ Even though her family owned six slaves in 1860, Peter, as a member of the Unionist middle-class, despised the pretentiousness of the elite Southern aristocracy and their fierce defense of secession and slavery.²¹ Thus, she set herself and her family apart from the Southern elite, as Peter sneered at the so-called chivalry of upper-class Confederate soldiers and contemptuously noted in October 1862 that those soldiers expected slaves to wait upon all of their needs and preferred to go “without washing & every thing else rather than help themselves.”²² Another Kentucky Unionist, Benjamin Buckner, upon witnessing the cruelties Confederates committed against his fellow Union soldiers at the battle of Shiloh, also concluded that the “*chivalry of the South*” was a myth. In a letter to a secessionist sympathizer, Buckner snapped, “I am sure that if you had seen as I have the Corpses of Federal soldiers bayoneted in their beds” that his secessionist friend

²⁰ Andre M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 3.

²¹ Ancestry.com, “Robt. [Robert] Peter,” *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedule, Lexington, Fayette County, Kentucky* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010; Peter, *Union Woman*, xiii.

²² Peter, *Union Woman*, 55.

would see that the Confederates had no honorable “gentlemen” among them.²³

Peter used her diary to express admiration for her family and neighbors’ acts of defiance in the face of enemy soldiers. Although she did not directly articulate it, she seemed frustrated that she was unable to show her defiance to Confederate soldiers and turned to her diary to express her beliefs. Historian Kimberly Harrison noted that outright expression of political opinions was considered improper behavior for women. “Within traditional codes of gendered conduct,” a woman’s occasional outburst of a political opinion would be dismissed as an overemotional reaction.²⁴ In March 1862, Peter’s mother declared “down with secession” in front of a Confederate officer. While the Confederate officer, who was under parole, made no remark, Peter commented, “How did he stare!”²⁵ While the Confederate officer may have interpreted her mother’s statement as an emotional outburst, Peter applauded her, appreciating that the political remark came from a well-educated Unionist woman. In October 1862, she recorded how a Unionist neighbor

²³Quoted in Patrick A. Lewis, *For Slavery and Union: Benjamin Buckner and Kentucky Loyalties in the Civil War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 81-82.

²⁴Kimberly Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 81.

²⁵Peter, *Union Woman*, 14.

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had pointed a pistol at Confederate soldiers trying to take away her wagon, vowing, “I intend to do it [shoot] & you can kill me afterward if you like. I will try on one of you first,” prompting them to run away.²⁶ Peter noted with admiration that the Confederates did not try to take her wagon ever again. Although Peter did not directly express frustration at being unable to confront Confederates, she implied that she wished to be able to defy them like her mother and her neighbor. Another Kentucky Unionist, Josie Underwood, resorted to her diary and interactions with her family and neighbors to express her political beliefs. Underwood used the diary to vent her frustration at her inability to act against the Confederates, exclaiming at one point, “I felt like shooting them!”²⁷ According to historian Steven Stowe, a women’s diary “became a story and habit, a confidant and a mirror.”²⁸ Peter’s diary acted as a mirror in which she reflected an admiration for Unionist women in her community and a frustration that she was unable to directly interact with the enemies in her town.

²⁶Ibid., 58.

²⁷Josie Underwood, *Josie Underwood’s Civil War Diary*, ed. Nancy Disher Baird (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 101.

²⁸Steven M. Stowe, *Keep the Days: Reading the Civil War Diaries of Southern Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 29.

Peter deemed many actions of the “secesh ladies” as socially unacceptable and indicated that their aggressive political displays took away their right to be treated and viewed as Christian ladies like the Unionist women in town. Peter recorded a conversation in June 1863 with a Union soldier who told of how secessionist women often spat on him and insulted him. The Union soldier told of how once at the cemetery, angered by a secessionist woman’s remarks, he retorted, “Do they allow *rebels* to have a place of burial in a Christian cemetery?”²⁹ The secessionist women’s rudeness made him suggest that their behavior and actions against the Union made them unchristian. Despite Southern women’s claims to piety, Peter saw no evidence of Christianity in their actions, portraying them as hypocrites. Peter noted, “Today all the secesh ladies belonging to that church went dressed in their finest. We wondered what was ‘in the wind’ for they are not in the habit of going on week days Lent or no Lent.”³⁰ Then she discovered that they had gone to church only because Jefferson Davis had declared a day of fasting. Emphasizing that the secessionist women did not go to church out of a spiritual commitment, she implied that the women were not true Christians. Peter noted that several “union ladies” gave some things out of pity to the sick Confederate soldiers, who

²⁹ Peter, *Union Woman*, 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

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complained that the secessionist women had ignored their suffering. By highlighting this incident, Peter emphasized the Union ladies' compassion to enemy soldiers and the secessionist women's indifference and neglect. The Union women's compassion demonstrated that they were truly respectable ladies. Looking scornfully upon the secessionist women, Peter scoffed that they "liked very well to flirt with the officers but they don't take any notice of the common" soldiers.³¹ She vilified the women, describing a time where secessionist women sang Confederate songs and whose "hisses were so distinctly heard that the crowd was with difficulty restrained from stoning the house." The secessionist women proved that they were not ladies to be respected but rather "creatures," as Peter called them.³²

While Peter rejected the idea that secessionist women were true ladies, Southern women believed their status as ladies would keep them safe from violent Union civilians and soldiers. As Drew Gilpin Faust noted, the "shared fundamental cultural assumptions" that deemed white women as "ladies" would prevent them from harm, even if they acted out-of-line with cultural expectations about

³¹ Ibid., 51.

³² Ibid., 122.

women.³³ Peter described “a secesh lady (or rather a rebel individual of the feminine gender, for she disgraced the name of lady)” who boldly approached Confederate prisoners and sang Confederate songs for them. When a Union soldier guarding the prisoners tried to stop her, she “abused him and used very insolent language,” something a lady would never do. Enraged Unionists had started throwing stones, angered by the bold political actions of the secessionist woman.³⁴ Over the border in Tennessee, another diarist, secessionist Nannie Williams, vowed action against Union soldiers. She promised herself that when she came across a Union soldier, she would “almost shake her fist at him, and then bite my lip involuntarily and turn away in disgust—God save us!”³⁵ Another Confederate Kentucky woman, Lizzie Hardin, was admired throughout her town when she exchanged harsh words with a Unionist. Although she had stepped out-of-line with society’s expectations of women’s behavior, she was widely

³³Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 198.

³⁴ Peter, *Union Woman*, 163.

³⁵Nannie Williams, *The Diary of Nannie Haskins Williams: A Southern Woman’s Story of Rebellion and Reconstruction, 1863-1890*, eds. Minoa D. Uffelman, Ellen Kanervo, Phyllis Smith, and Eleanor Williams (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 25.

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applauded for her action.³⁶ Secessionist women believed that they needed to strike against the Union soldiers on their land and tried to use their status as ladies to protect them from hostile Unionists. However, secessionist women were perceived as a threat to the Union army and were confronted with hostility for their political actions. In March 1863, Peter commented sarcastically that if the secessionists were “so fond of the rebels[,] why not send them south to their friends!”³⁷ Two months later, she noted that those secessionist women married to Confederate soldiers were forced to move further south.³⁸ Peter emphasized that the secessionist women’s political behavior demonstrated that they should not be treated like ladies, as shown by the crowd’s violent reaction to the secessionist woman and by the removal of several secessionist women from Lexington.

Peter, a middle-class slaveholding woman, remained a fierce supporter of the Union. While some of her neighbors pledged support to the Confederacy, she claimed that secession was a treasonous act against the Constitution. Although her

³⁶Elizabeth Hardin, *The Private War of Lizzie Hardin: A Kentucky Confederate Girl’s Diary of the Civil War in Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia*, ed. G. Glenn Clift. (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1963), 110.

³⁷ Peter, *Union Woman*, 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

family owned slaves, as she heard calls to turn her back on the Union because of the federal government's emancipation policy, she scoffed that to do so was treason and accepted emancipation. Peter remained convinced that the common Confederate soldier had been taken advantage of in his ignorance and dismissed the widely accepted notion of Southern chivalry. Although Peter admired bold acts by her mother and other women, she seemed to hint that she too wanted to directly defy the enemy. However, due to her struggles with epilepsy, she expressed her political voice in her diary. She maintained a strong contempt for the secessionist women, casting them to be weak supporters of the Confederacy and condemning them for their public expressions, vowing that they were not ladies like the Unionist women. Peter believed she was a truly loyal lady who stood by the Constitution and the Union within her divided town of Lexington.

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