Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War 2010

Abstract
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The Civil War Era Studies Department

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Cover image:
Schell, F.H., “The 130th Pennsylvania Regiment Burying the Dead at Antietam,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, October 19, 1862.
During the summer of 2009, I had a series of conversations with Dr. Michael J. Birkner, who was then commencing his tenure as Interim Director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College. One of our conversations dealt with the lack of an undergraduate journal focusing on the field of Civil War Era Studies. We agreed that this void could be easily addressed. Over the course of the subsequent months, we drew up a proposal for a journal, gathered a group of dedicated students to serve on the editorial board, drafted and disseminated a call for papers, and waited to observe the response. It is pleasing to note that we received about thirty submissions from students at different colleges and universities. With such a large field of submissions, we were able to cull out the best submissions. That is and will continue to be the goal of this journal: to solicit and showcase the most compelling work in the field of Civil War Era Studies by undergraduate and recently graduated students.

The four papers selected for this volume treat a variety of topics. Kristilyn Baldwin, in *The Visual Documentation of Antietam: Peaceful Settings, Morbid Curiosity, and a Profitable Business*, offers a thoughtful consideration of the how people documented war. By focusing on Alexander Gardner and the photographs he took in the wake of the battle of Antietam, Baldwin offers a critical perspective on the uses of photography and sketches to document the aftermath of the terrible and bloody battle of Antietam. Ashley Whitehead, in “A Debt of Honor”: The Hegemonic Benevolence of Richmond’s Female Elites at the “Last Confederate Christmas” of 1864, analyzes the 1864 Christmas celebration in Richmond. Whitehead considers the role of the social elites of Richmond and how they used the Christmas celebration to maintain their leadership positions. Annie Powers examines the conflict between Congressmen Francis Cutting and John C. Breckenridge in *An Altercation Full of Meaning*: The Duel between Francis B. Cutting and John C. Breckinridge. Powers also describes how the conflict between the two men was part of a culture of violence influenced by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Finally, in “The Fall of a Sparrow”: The (Un)timely Death of Elmer Ellsworth and the Coming of the Civil War, Adam Q. Stauffer offers his perspective on the life and death of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, his connections with Abraham Lincoln, and his death in the early weeks of the Civil War. Stauffer considers the reactions to Ellsworth’s death in the North and the South and connects Ellsworth to the culture of death during the Civil War.

It is my hope that this journal, in addition to being a vehicle to showcase the best student work concerning the Civil War Era, will also be a resource for both students and professors. With that, I now present the inaugural issue of *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*.

Evan Rothera
Gettysburg College
May 10, 2010
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Contents

1  The Visual Documentation of Antietam: Peaceful Settings, Morbid Curiosity, and a Profitable Business
Kristilyn Baldwin

22  “A Debt of Honor”: The Hegemonic Benevolence of Richmond’s Female Elites at the “Last Confederate Christmas” of 1864
Ashley Whitehead

32  “An Altercation Full of Meaning”: The Duel between Francis B. Cutting and John C. Breckinridge
Annie Powers

44  “The Fall of a Sparrow”: The (Un)timely Death of Elmer Ellsworth and the Coming of the Civil War
Adam Q. Stauffer
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Visual Documentation of Antietam: Peaceful Settings, Morbid Curiosity, and a Profitable Business</td>
<td>Kristilyn Baldwin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>“A Debt of Honor”: The Hegemonic Benevolence of Richmond’s Female Elites at the “Last Confederate Christmas” of 1864</td>
<td>Ashley Whitehead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>“An Altercation Full of Meaning”: The Duel between Francis B. Cutting and John C. Breckinridge</td>
<td>Annie Powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>“The Fall of a Sparrow”: The (Un)timely Death of Elmer Ellsworth and the Coming of the Civil War</td>
<td>Adam Q. Stauffer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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On September 17, 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee led the Army of Northern Virginia into Sharpsburg, Maryland to confront Federal General George McClellan and the Army of the Potomac. The battle that followed became the single bloodiest day in American history. There were approximately 25,000 American casualties and battlefields were left in desolation, strewn with corpses needing burial. The Battle of Antietam, or Sharpsburg, is a well-documented and important battle of the Civil War. Endless research has been done regarding its impact on the war, military strategies, and politics. However, there is a unique aspect of Antietam which merits closer attention: its visual documentation.

Artists have been creating battlefield paintings for centuries, making it an art form of its own. However, the mass production of such paintings was completely impractical and, unless displayed in public, they were rarely seen. Technological advances, like cameras and the printing press, made mass distribution of materials much more efficient. Such development came about in the mid-1800s, just before the Civil War, making it the first publicly visible war. The Battle of Antietam, and other Civil War battles, were visually documented using two basic forms: sketches and photographs. Sketches became widely accessible, giving sketch artists the chance to editorialize whatever aspect they deemed important. Some images depicted more realism than others, but oftentimes they reflected the artist’s opinion. Political cartoons, for example, which have been utilized in the United States since before the Revolution, were wildly popular during this time. Photography was simply the next step in war documentation. It gave sketch artists a new foundation to work from, and brought the curious public a new level of objectivity. Battlefield photos were frequently reproduced using wood carvings, enabling mass publication in newspapers like *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper’s Weekly*. These popular printed circulations made images of the war easily accessible.

Antietam was the first battle ever to be documented photographically. The resulting images allowed the public to see the devastation of war for the first time. Unlike a sketch, a photograph is sometimes considered a complete, accurate, and unbiased replica of the target. But is this true of Antietam photographs? Author Alison Devine Nordstrom says, “The illusion of reality and inclusiveness which
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1. I would like to thank Dr. Brooks D. Simpson, Foundation Professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies at Arizona State University, for his guidance and support.
photographs convey is a large part of their power and effectiveness . . . but their inevitable distortion of actuality encourages us to read them with care.”¹ It has been well documented that some photographs, like “A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep,” taken by photographer Alexander Gardner in 1863, were inaccurate, falsified images. It is believed that the body of the decedent was moved prior to the photograph being taken.² Although there is no evidence to suggest Antietam photographs were similarly staged, many of them reflect levels of subjectivity. Like sketches, they reveal interesting views of their creators, the war, and society of the time.

The visual documentation of Antietam and its popularity in the North reveals three interesting points. First, a majority of the photographs reflect only a peaceful and pastoral tone because the public needed to see the war through such lenses. It is important to remember that the people of the North had fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and all manner of loved ones fighting in these battles. Their only perception of the events came from the few letters they received and skewed newspaper articles. Second, some people simply had a morbid curiosity. Mathew Brady’s exhibit in New York, called The Dead of Antietam, created quite a response from the public and attracted hundreds of patrons. Accounts of these exhibits and sketches depicting battlefield onlookers demonstrate their curiosity. Lastly, creating and selling battlefield photographs became a profitable business. Brady’s exhibit not only attracted viewers, but also promoted his name and made him money. Although much

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of Brady’s profit came from portraiture photography, battle images catapulted photography into popularity.

Prior to the middle of the 1800s, capturing an image required hours for a single exposure, which inevitably would disappear over time. Such circumstances made it extremely impractical, if not impossible, to photograph anything that moved even the slightest. These obstacles meant images like the ones captured during the Civil War did not previously exist. A new method called daguerreotype allowed photographers to capture images which were previously impossible. In 1839, some twenty years prior to the Civil War, a French chemist named Louis Daguerre developed a way to capture permanent images in just minutes. His process directly exposed an image onto mirror-like silver, coated with silver halide. The pictures came out on small plates as negatives, allowing for reproduction of paper prints. This made the daguerreotype wildly popular in battlefield and portraiture settings. But it was the mobility of this process that made photography a commercially viable business and incredibly popular during the war.

While photography may have gained mobility, it was still difficult and dangerous. It required large, bulky equipment, which filled an entire wagon. Civil War photographers often lived in similar circumstances to soldiers. They carried their equipment, personal supplies, and food, camping alongside armies. This meant when soldiers started firing, the photographers were at great risk.


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example, historian Mark Katz writes that on Sunday, July 21, amongst the retreating Federal army at Bull Run, photographer Mathew Brady, accompanied by three men and two black-covered wagons, found himself, “Totally engulfed by the retreating army. Although his wagons were overturned, Brady managed to retrieve some of his wet plates before following the troops back to Washington. Later the next day, July 22, he arrived in Washington and immediately had a portrait of himself taken in his soiled linen duster.” Because of the dangers and the still photographic process, there are few images of battles in progress. Instead, the majority of the photos were taken afterwards.

Brady’s name became synonymous with Civil War images, including multiple portraits of President Abraham Lincoln. Although Brady began the Civil War taking battlefield photographs, his failing eyesight left him at a disadvantage and he increasingly delegated assignments. Using his name, Brady financed an enterprise, employing and capitalizing on other Civil War photographers, including Alexander Gardner, George Bernard, and Timothy O’Sullivan. However, Brady’s involvement was obscured by his fame. 

Mortgaging his successful New York studio, he was able to provide the necessary equipment, but often retained the rights to the photographs taken by his employees. It was these men who created the images we see today. Author Donald Kyes describes Civil War photos being, “Uncompromising images by Brady and his men forming a startling, moving record of the Civil War.”

The Battle of Antietam was photographed by Alexander Gardner, although Brady’s name was still attached through his exhibit, The Dead of Antietam. Gardner, a successful Scottish-born artist, journalist, and businessman, became interested in chemistry and began pursuing photography in 1855. The next year, he migrated to New York with his family. There, he initiated a meeting with Brady, who was already successful by this time, and, with Gardner’s excellent business background, they quickly became partners. Gardner photographed multiple battles during the war, but it was Antietam that jump-started his notability. It is unclear when Gardner originally arrived at Antietam, although some argue that he was already with McClellan at his headquarters in Rockville, Maryland, and there is some evidence suggesting he was on the battlefield as early as September 17, 1862. Even if this was the case, Gardner did not begin taking photos until the Union armies had control of the battlefield.

During the Civil War, burying the dead was a priority. Besides the emotional ties to deceased comrades, and sometimes enemies, decaying flesh was extremely difficult to stomach, and disease was a justified worry. Typhoid fever and cholera were highly infectious, lethal, and spread by corpses and the insects they attracted. Soldiers were often assigned to burial duty in efforts to contain an outbreak. Because of the magnitude of Antietam, the bodies of thousands of dead Confederate soldiers were left behind, awaiting burial. In a family letter, U.S. General Alpheus S. Williams described, “they [Confederate Army] sneaked out of ‘my Maryland’ at night leaving their dead and wounded on the field. Even dead generals were left within their lines unburied.” This left a daunting task for Union soldiers on burial detail. The dead who were buried first depended on who had control of the field. The losing side’s decedents were buried after fallen comrades, especially at large, high-casualty battles such as Antietam. The decedents of the opposing side were often times placed in long, mass graves in effort to save time. A New York Times correspondent for Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper reported that the task was so large the majority of the 130th Pennsylvania Regiment was assigned to bury the dead. He said, “Our own were taken care of first. . . our dead were buried in separate graves, with a headboard stating their names and regiment. The Confederates were laid in long trenches, from three to four feet deep, sometimes as many as 30 in a trench.” It is fair to say the majority of the evidence explains why Antietam photos only show dead Confederate soldiers. However, dated photos suggest that Gardner was in fact at Antietam on the day of the battle. This raises an interesting point that perhaps Gardner refrained from taking images of dead Union soldiers he possibly had access to. If so, perhaps this means that Gardner’s political ideals influenced his objectivity, or his good business sense led him to believe that the northern population may not want to see such photos. Without having Gardner’s feelings on the matter, it will remain a mystery.
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Illusions of Peace

After it was understood that the war would last longer than Lincoln’s ninety-day prediction, the rising death rate started to sink into the minds of everyone, taking a toll on both civilian and military populations. Also during this time there were multiple fractures, not only in political parties, but also within religious sects. Nature became a societal focus as Transcendentalism began to influence the population. Literature from Ralph Waldo Emerson and poet Walt Whitman grew in popularity, emphasizing the salience of nature. Gardner also had a self-conscious photographic artistry and impulse to control the graphic nature of images, transforming violence into sights of patriotism.

Dunker Church

Located on a ridge near Sharpsburg, Dunker Church was a small white building that was often mistaken for a schoolhouse. In fact, it was a Baptist church belonging to a group of German Brethren known as Dunkers. Because of its high geographic location, control of the church was a strategic advantage. Union General Joseph Hooker knew if he could seize the plateau area surrounding the church, he could destroy a good portion of the Confederate army, which he did. While its location made it a military commodity, it was the pastoral and beautiful setting that made it a visual icon of Antietam. In Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War he described the “terrible affect of the canister” and spoke of chaos and death, even quoting the shouts and discharge sounds. While Dunker Church may have in fact hosted such a graphic scene, the photographs taken of it show otherwise.

Dunker Church was picturesque. It sat on a plateau, against the clouds, surrounded by a thick green forest known as the West Woods. Besides its peaceful surroundings, it was a church, making it pastoral in nature. Figure 8 is Dunker Church photographed after the Confederate Army had withdrawn. Although there was some structural damage, it was significantly less than one may have expected. Most of the image’s frame is filled with the surrounding scenery, but is centered on the little church. Notice the partial view of the dead horse in the bottom right corner, making it appear as if the horse was simply asleep. The photos of Dunker Church became some of Gardner’s most well known. He briefly described the damage it sustained during the battle as being severe. However, when he photographed it, he showed something different. Instead of capturing severe damage, he created a pretty picture. Figure 9 is another post-battle image. This one, unlike the first, begins to show some of the reality of war. In the foreground, there are several dead Confederate soldiers waiting for burial. Notice two interesting aspects of this photograph. First, the soldiers are lined up, on their backs, and, like the horse, look as if they are sleeping. Second, even though they are the focus of the photograph, they are in the foreground of a church. The photograph portrays death pastorally.

20. Philosophical movement in the 1800s, linking the importance of nature to God.
22. Sears, Landscape Turned Red, 6-7.
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Figure 8: Dunker Church on the battlefield, photograph by Alexander Gardner, September 19, 1862, from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 9: Bodies in front of the Dunker church, photograph by Alexander Gardner, September 19, 1862, from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

20. Philosophical movement in the 1800s, linking the importance of nature to God.
22. Sears, Landscape Turned Red, 6-7.
Sleeping Death

Miller Farm is located north of Dunker Church and straddles Hagerstown Pike. In the early hours of the battle, it was occupied by U.S. Generals Meade and Ricketts. From there, the Union Army moved south to battle the Confederates occupying the West Woods surrounding Dunker Church. The farmland became a burial ground for the Confederate dead and a topic of interest for Gardner. Figure 10 is a photo taken on September 19, 1862. Like the images of Dunker Church, notice how the dead are all Confederate soldiers and are lined up on their backs as if asleep. The image includes the peaceful surrounding area, but is centered on the line of soldiers. Others, however, depict the scene much differently. Author and collector Bob Zeller described the photographs, saying the result of Antietam produced, “a number of graphic and gripping pictures of the casualties, of bloated bodies frozen stiff in death, that tore the mask of romance from the brutal face of war.” Another description came from Lieutenant Origen G. Bingham of the 137th Pennsylvania. He said, “Tongue cannot describe the horrible sight which we have witnessed . . . I would not describe to the appearance of the dead even if I could, it is too revolting . . . I was up for permission to buy some liquor for our boys to keep them from getting sick.” It is important to remember that Antietam photos were the first of their kind. They showed death in a way no one had ever seen before. However, comparing them to written descriptions of the carnage, the brutality is not accurately depicted. Like photographs of Dunker Church, the images collected at Miller Farm depict the battle in a peaceful and pastoral manner, instead of

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Figure 10: Bodies of Confederate dead gathered for burial, photograph by Alexander Gardner, September 1862, from Selected Civil War photographs, 1861-1865, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 11: Sketch of “Dead Confederates.” Harper’s Weekly, October 11, 1862.
showing the brutality. Even with the new aspect of realism, there are no photographs of Antietam which truly show the grotesque nature of war.

The public had access to the images through an exhibit in Brady’s studio and illustrated newspapers like *Harper’s Weekly* and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. Many times, photos were duplicated into woodcarvings, which allowed for mass reproduction. Figure 11 is a sketched replica of the Miller Farm photograph, published in the October 18, 1862 edition of *Harper’s Weekly*. Sketches were relatively accurate, but their lack of life-like qualities made them less accurate than photographs. Notice the third soldier from the bottom of the picture. Although his face is hidden, his right hand is visible and severely bloated. This is among the most graphic and realistic of all the Antietam photos. Note how the disfigured hand is not in the duplicated sketch. This meant, with photographs depicting the battle peacefully and sketches eliminating things like obvious signs of decomposition, the majority of people who saw such images were led to believe something unrealistic.

One photograph, while one of the lesser known, is a prime example of how peaceful the war could be represented. Figure 12 is a photograph taken by Gardner on September 20, 1862 at Miller’s Farm. The picture shows a light-colored dead horse, which may have belonged to a Confederate colonel. The body of the horse is positioned as if it was sleeping, and any injury it may have received during the battle is not noticeable. The horse is the focus of the image and, like Dunker Church, is in the foreground of large, full trees. Overall, the image portrays a sense of serenity as a beautiful white horse sleeps in a clearing, surrounded by nature. While riding over the battlefield, General Williams saw what is believed to be the same horse. He says, “One beautiful milk-white animal had died in so graceful a position that I wished for its photograph. Its legs were doubled under and its arched neck gracefully turned to one side, as if looking back to the ball-hold in its side. Until you got to it, it was hard to believe the horse was dead.”

Although his description is from September 18, two days prior to Gardner’s photograph, it is clear they both saw the same horse. This description and the fact that Gardner chose this particular horse to photograph out of the many that were killed show that this kind of sight was rare.

**Bloody Lane**

The last group of pastoral photos was taken “down the slope, over a sunken road strewn with dead and dying” said U.S. Lieutenant Josiah Marshall Favill as he looked over the carnage of Bloody Lane. Sunken Road, as it was once known, began as a rural shortcut that had been worn down two to three feet by wagon wheels and rainwater. It was located just south of Dunker Church, and went southeast from Hagerstown Pike, stopping halfway between Sharpsburg and where Boonsboro Pike met Antietam Creek. Following the battle, the blood-soaked lane, full of dead soldiers, was deemed Bloody Lane. Journalist David H. Strother wrote the following description:

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Figure 12: Dead Horse of a Confederate Colonel. Photograph by Alexander Gardner, September 20, 1862, Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

²⁹ Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth*, 13.
³² Frassanito, *Antietam*, 41.
I was astonished to observe our troops [Union] moving along the front and passing over what happened to be a long, heavy column of the enemy without paying it any attention whatever. I borrowed a glass from an officer, and discovered this to be actually a column of the enemy’s dead and wounded lying along a hollow road – afterward known as Bloody Lane. Among the prostrate mass I could easily distinguish the movements of those endeavoring to crawl away from the ground; hands waving as if calling for assistance, and others struggling as if in the agonies of death. 33

Figures 13-14 are images of Bloody Lane. Although they show the carnage more directly than the image of a sleeping horse, notice the similarities they share with images from Dunker Church and Miller Farm. The majority of the bodies are positioned on their backs, none are disfigured or decomposing, and they look as if they are asleep. Even the name “Bloody Lane” suggests there were hundreds dead, yet Gardner chose to photograph only those in relatively good condition.

There is enough evidence from countless written descriptions to conclude there were multiple mangled limbs and bodies littering the fields of Antietam. This would have surely carried the stench of death and horror. And yet the pictures show none. In contrast, later photographs of the war do show grotesque reality. Figures 15-16 were taken by John Reekie in 1865. Notice the differences evident in those taken at Antietam. They are much more graphic, one showing human skulls and the other showing a mangled body and a rib cage. Even one picture of an injured horse or a soldier who was missing a limb would have a more realistic depiction. This does not imply that the men from both sides who died during Antietam did so in vain, or should be regarded less honorably. But by analyzing photographs taken at Dunker Church, Miller Farm, and Bloody Lane, it is clear that Gardner chose to photograph mainly that which was peaceful and pastoral in nature. The civilian population was not ready to see the brutalities of battle. Death’s significance violated previous assumptions about life’s proper end, who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances. 34
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The Sight of Death

The magnitude of Antietam attracted attention in two waves. The first response was directed at the battlefield from local farmers living near Sharpsburg. Why was the civilian population attracted to the sight of death? It was a simple case of morbid curiosity. While burying the dead, the soldiers “were surprised by the appearance of a number of farmers from the adjacent parts, wandering about among the dead and dying; in several cases these farmers were attended by women,” reported Francis Schell, illustrator of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. Even more interesting is his description of their reactions. He said, “While some of their faces wore the semblance of profound sorrow, as though aware of the solemn horror of the scene, many seemed utterly indifferent to the appalling spectacle.”

There is a saying “like a bad car accident” used today in U.S. culture. The premise is the same. It was as if people were simply curious to see what the war in their backyard was like. Lieutenant Favill wrote in his journal, “The country people flocked to the battlefield like vultures, their curiosity and inquisitiveness most astonishing.”

Doctor Thomas T. Ellis, a Union surgeon saw, “a number of farmers came on the field to witness the sight, of which they had so often heard but never seen.” The families living in the area could not escape the sounds of muskets and cannons, and were curious. There was another, less acceptable occurrence that took place on the battlefield. There are accounts of both civilian and Union soldiers looting dead Confederate soldiers. There is one account of a Union officer who was horrified when he found his men “stealing a dead Confederate’s wedding ring with a knife.” Both Dr. Ellis and Lieutenant Favill noted similar experiences. Ellis described, “The [farmers] collected as relics every thing portable: cartridge-boxes, bayonet scabbards, old muskets, and even cannon-balls were carried away by them.”

Lieutenant Favill noted “hundreds were scattered over the field, eagerly searching for souvenirs in the shape of cannon balls, guns, bayonets, swords, canteens, etc.” But not all onlookers were interested in looting. While it was common for the winning side to bury their comrades first, it did not always mean they mistreated the wounded opposition. U.S. General Alpheus S. Williams said, “All over the ground we had advanced on, the Rebel dead and wounded lay thick . . . those we were obliged to leave begged so piteously to be carried away. Hundreds appealed to me and I confess that the age of battle had not hardened my heart so that I did not feel a pity for them. Our men gave them water and as far as I saw always treated them kindly.”

There is another account of a Union soldier on burial duty who saw a dead Confederate with a piece of paper strapped to his uniform, bearing his name and where he lived. The Union soldier buried him “as tenderly as could be under the circumstances [then] cut on a board, letter for letter what was on the paper and place it at the head of the grave.” There were both enemy soldiers and curious civilians who treated the dead with respect, while seeking satisfaction for their curiosity, despite those who stole from the dead.

36. Favill, *The Diary of a Young Officer*, 190.
38. Ibid.
40. Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth*, 126-27.
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16 The Sight of Death 17
The second wave of curiosity came afterwards, far from the battle. One month after Antietam, Mathew Brady opened The Dead of Antietam in his New York studio. The exhibit’s popularity led a stream of visitors to his door. The photographs were housed on the second floor of the studio, and captured the attention of morbidly curious spectators. Author Jennifer Armstrong describes how some patrons lingered by one or two photos, while others “averted their eyes in haste, only to return and then study the next.”

Three-dimensional images were created and viewed using special glasses, similar to those used today. This made the images even more real to the visitors.43 Among the many viewers was a reporter from The New York Times. His article was printed on October 20, 1862 and described the morbid curiosity which led people to the exhibit. Fascinated by this, the reporter says:

Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-filed . . . . It should bear away the palm of repulsiveness. But on the contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, chained by the strange spell that dwells in the dead men’s eyes.44

Other newspapers reported that dead soldiers in the photos could be identified, but there is no evidence to prove this was true. On the contrary, the soldiers were nameless, and oftentimes faceless, making them even more intriguing to viewers. With nameless soldiers, the viewer could replace the unknown with his or her family who was serving in the war.45 This made the exhibit both appealing and appalling.

Prior to photographic documentation, people only heard about the war in the newspapers. The accuracy, however, often depended on the political ideals of the newspaper. Northern reports claimed that General Lee retreated and Antietam was a northern victory.46 Southern newspapers expressed a different view. They reported that “the battle at Sharpsburg had resulted in one of the most complete victories that has yet immortalized the Confederate arms.”47 Both sides regarded Antietam as a dark day in American history.48 In a letter to his daughter, General Williams wrote, “The newspapers will give you further particulars, but as far as I have seen them, nothing reliable . . . other statements picked up by reporters from the principal headquarters are equally false and absurd. They are laughably canard.”49 Again, the truth lay with the dead on the battlefield, and people were curious.

One interesting problem war photographers faced was the challenge of satisfying civilian curiosity by making the horrors of war visible without undermining faith in the cause. One solution was to present the pictures in bound form, like a stereograph series. This gave the photographer an opportunity to narrate his thoughts and feelings for each image.50 Multiple series were produced, but one of them became a prominent collector’s item of the war.

In Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War, published in 1866, he was able to give detailed description of Antietam’s battle scenes and locations. His collection was widely accepted throughout the North and the included descriptions aided the population in understanding the story surrounding each picture. It also allowed Gardner to make his political views known.

The illustrated newspapers became wildly popular during this time. Sketch artists like V. H. Schell and Edwin Forbes duplicated photographs in sketch form, using woodcuts to reproduce the images for mass publication. Newspapers were numerous and written based on political affiliation. Illustrated newspapers allowed the population of the North and South to have an image to accompany written description. Although neither photographer nor sketch artist were ever completely objective, despite their efforts, visual representation gave the population its own ability to politicize how they wished. The papers also aided in the fulfillment of their curiosities. Morbid curiosity attracted local men and women of Sharpsburg and surrounding areas to the battlefields of Antietam. It also led people to Brady’s New York studio, where they could not help but look at countless unknown soldiers. Illustrated newspapers fulfilled the same curiosity along with Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the War.

### Money Makers

The development of the daguerreotype not only created art, it created artists. The desire to visually capture history was a sincere motivation of many Civil War photographers, including Gardner.50 But to put food on their tables, they exploited their vocation to make money. As technology advanced, commercial photography grew by leaps, although was not an immediately lucrative field. Like many new artists, early photographers struggled financially to make ends meet. Portraiture photography began making money during the middle of the 1850s, but it was not until the photos of the Civil War that it became a credible business. Brady in particular, with help from Gardner’s business skills, capitalized on war images. He created an empire where he “produced lavish galleries, produced imperial-sized portraits, and made beautiful the ugly.”51 But Brady differed from other photographers. He surely had his political ideals, although trying to understand his thoughts by simply looking at his images leads only to confusion. He had a wide variety of images, spanning from portraits of Lincoln, to Civil War battlefields, to a full-length portrait of Mrs. Davis, wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Although Brady did not produce images for the South during the Civil War, he did before and after it. This suggests Brady was more dedicated to monetary gain, and to the art itself, not the politics of the war.

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42. Armstrong and Brady, Photo by Brady, 63.
44. Armstrong and Brady, 65-66.
48. Williams, 131.
49. Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 93.
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War photography, beginning with Antietam, took on a more mercenary complexion. It was common for both northerners and southerners alike to collect images of their favorite generals, much like modern baseball cards. \(^{52}\) Similarly, the popularity of *carte-de-visite exploded.\(^ {53}\) Soldiers wanting to be photographed in their new uniforms, collected and sent them home to their families. They were easily and cheaply reproduced, making them both practical and affordable souvenirs for anyone. \(^ {54}\) Second, it completely modernized photojournalism, and created a demand for real-time photos. After Antietam, the public expected war images, which created a demand for additional photographers. Photos taken in field hospitals were also in demand, and were sold to doctors and surgeons, who used them as medical research.

Private collectors and the average public also created revenue. Exhibits like *The Dead of Antietam* helped to promote sales. The images for sale were available in many formats; however, they were all relatively expensive. Stereographs cost fifty cents, while larger folio-sized prints were $1.50, the equivalent of a day’s wage for the common laborer. This meant that most images were sold to middle to upper class collectors like author and physician Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was very outspoken about the dark magnetism such photographs carried. After seeing the carnage at Antietam, he wrote essays promoting the usage of cameras on the field. Interestingly, Dr. Holmes amassed a large private collection, but could not bring himself to view them. \(^ {55}\) Other collectors had large portraits of Lincoln or Grant hanging in their parlors. They were also very expensive. Working class citizens had access to these images, even if they were unaffordable. Reproducing the pictures in illustrated magazines allowed the layman to view images and boosted circulation sales. This indirectly helped the value of sketches rise, which brought revenue to sketch artists in demand. Another avenue for capital came with the selling of bound sketchbooks. They too were expensive, however, selling for more than $100 each. Artists justified the large expense by arguing the value of fine art and targeting a particular audience.

Other photographers began to find that “images of the dead could serve a significant ideological function.” \(^ {56}\) Interestingly, those who could afford high-priced Civil War art were usually of Republican persuasion. \(^ {57}\) This alludes to the political philosophies of the photographer, especially Gardner, who was an avid supporter of the North and had even worked for General McClellan. \(^ {58}\) Gardner, among others, imposed world views onto film (or plates), even if it not consciously choosing to do so. Unlike Brady, Gardner seemed to have a broader social concern, as well as an artistic focus. But even Gardner understood capital possibilities. He began to copyright his images and in time, broke away from Brady, whose popularity slowly diminished.

Antietam is not only remembered for being the bloodiest day in U.S. history, but also as the first battlefield visible to the world. The images collected at Antietam reveal that the public was not ready so see the bleakness of war. Gardner seemed to balance his political ideals, creativity, and business sense by editing the content of his Antietam photographs to make them peaceful. Despite his efforts, the images were still shocking to civilians who had never experienced war. And yet they could not seem to look away simply because of their morbid curiosity. This turned the field of photography into a profitable business. These photographs are a window into the Civil War and reveal more than who, what, when, and where.
War photography, beginning with Antietam, took on a more mercenary complexion. It was common for both northerners and southerners alike to collect images of their favorite generals, much like modern baseball cards. Similarly, the popularity of carte-de-visite exploded. Soldiers wanting to be photographed in their new uniforms, collected and sent them home to their families. They were easily and cheaply reproduced, making them both practical and affordable souvenirs for anyone.

Second, it completely modernized photojournalism, and created a demand for real-time photos. After Antietam, the public expected war images, which created a demand for additional photographers. Photos taken in field hospitals were also in demand, and were sold to doctors and surgeons, who used them as medical research.

Private collectors and the average public also created revenue. Exhibits like The Dead of Antietam helped to promote sales. The images for sale were available in many formats; however, they were all relatively expensive. Stereographs cost fifty cents, while larger folio-sized prints were $1.50, the equivalent of a day’s wage for the common laborer. This meant that most images were sold to middle to upper class collectors like author and physician Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was very outspoken about the dark magnetism such photographs carried. After seeing the carnage at Antietam, he wrote essays promoting the usage of cameras on the field. Interestingly, Dr. Holmes amassed a large private collection, but could not bring himself to view them. Other collectors had large portraits of Lincoln or Grant hanging in their parlors. They were also very expensive. Working class citizens had access to these images, even if they were unaffordable. Reproducing the pictures in illustrated magazines allowed the layman to view images and boosted circulation sales. This indirectly helped the value of sketches rise, which brought revenue to sketch artists in demand. Another avenue for capital came with the selling of bound sketchbooks. They too were expensive, however, selling for more than $100 each. Artists justified the large expense by arguing the value of fine art and targeting a particular audience.

Other photographers began to find that “images of the dead could serve a significant ideological function.” Interestingly, those who could afford high-priced Civil War art were usually of Republican persuasion. This alludes to the political philosophies of the photographer, especially Gardner, who was an avid supporter of the North and had even worked for General McClellan.

Gardner, among others, imposed world views onto film (or plates), even if it not consciously choosing to do so. Unlike Brady, Gardner seemed to have a broader social concern, as well as an artistic focus. But even Gardner understood capital possibilities. He began to copyright his images and in time, broke away from Brady, whose popularity slowly diminished.

Antietam is not only remembered for being the bloodiest day in U.S. history, but also as the first battlefield visible to the world. The images collected at Antietam reveal that the public was not ready so see the bleakness of war. Gardner seemed to balance his political ideals, creativity, and business sense by editing the content of his Antietam photographs to make them peaceful. Despite his efforts, the images were still shocking to civilians who had never experienced war. And yet they could not seem to look away simply because of their morbid curiosity. This turned the field of photography into a profitable business. These photographs are a window into the Civil War and reveal more than who, what, when, and where.

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52. Gardner, and Zeller, Incidents of the War, 8.
53. Small, cheap, images printed on cardboard and mass produced in the nineteenth century.
54. Sweet, Traces of War, 78-106.
56. Sweet, Traces of War, 85.
57. Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 95.
“A Debt of Honor”: The Hegemonic Benevolence of Richmond’s Female Elites at the “Last Confederate Christmas” of 1864

Ashley M. Whitehead

That Christmas season was ushered in under the thickest clouds; every one felt the cataclysm which impended, but the rosy, expectant faces of our little children were a constant reminder that self-sacrifice must be the personal offering of each mother of the family. How to satisfy the children that nothing better could be done than the little makeshifts attainable in the Confederacy was the problem of the older members of each household...A debt of honor due from them to the season’s exactions. These young people are gray-haired now, but the lessons of self-denial, industry and frugality to which they became past mistresses then, made of them the most dignified, self-reliant and tender women I have ever known—all honor to them. So, in the interchanges of the courtesies and charities of life, to which we could not add its comforts and pleasure, passed the last Christmas in the Confederate mansion.”

-Varina Davis, 1896

In poignant remembrance of the last Christmas in the Confederate White House, Varina Davis, First Lady of the Confederacy, reflected upon that special event in an extended article for the *New York Sunday World*, some thirty-two years after the Confederacy’s final Christmas. Davis recounted the event fondly and praised the transformation of her female peers into perfect models of Confederate endurance under the extreme duress of civil war. In re-creating the dramaturgy of the three-part event, which was organized and hosted in large part by the Confederacy’s First Lady, Davis opened a critical window into southern sensibilities and the cultural rituals which helped to sustain the Confederacy through four long years of civil war. Though Davis’s article was clearly a reflective and nostalgic piece concerning an event which occurred thirty-two years prior, it was not written merely as a glorification of southern society, but rather to demonstrate the perpetuation of cherished southern ideals and rituals during the closing months of the war.

With Richmond cut off to the South and West by Union forces and with the Union army firmly in control of the deep South and the West—Richmond’s only sources of supplies—the Confederate capital found itself in dire straits by December of 1864. The Confederate armies desperately needed food, clothing, and other vital supplies to sustain them during the long winter ahead. However, Richmond civilians, starved, anxious, and weary from years of seemingly relentless combat upon their doorsteps, also found themselves struggling for survival. Despite the inevitable despondency inherent in any war-beleaguered society, and despite the military and material strains placed on both soldiers and civilians in the Richmond area during the fourth winter of the war, holiday morale within the Confederate capital was surprisingly high that Christmas. Richmond’s elites strove to perpetuate their southern Christmas traditions in spite of, and indeed, in light of, the otherwise “solemn and despondent” mood of the starved-out city. Essential elements of southern culture—elite paternalism, benevolence and charity, honor, Christian ideals, communal sensibilities, and, most important, a hierarchical structure—continued to hold the Confederacy together, albeit through war-induced creative adaptation of many of those cultural practices. This order was maintained through fluid power negotiations between the elites and the lower classes that helped to protect class interests through dramaturgical displays of elite force that garnered the lower classes’ consent of the elites’ “right” to rule.

The South crafted a unique system of societal benevolence which was based largely on maintaining the socio-economic system of a slave-holding republic. This system, whose foundations lay in the paternalistic structure of the master-slave relationship, encouraged and, indeed, obligated southern elites to support and “protect” their subordinates, in return for the subordinates’ approval of the elites to rule politically, economically,


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and socially. While American war-time benevolence and charitable acts by the socially-elite have occurred, with pride, since the Revolutionary era, the South paired its own worldview with political and socio-economic necessity during the Civil War in unique ways which enabled elite domination to endure, come what may. Additionally, Christianity-based unity, communalism, and social responsibility, as well as the projection of the southern family onto southern society as a whole, strengthened the bonds between elites and the lower classes which otherwise might have been strained to the breaking point during the most trying periods of the war. When the war inevitably placed pressure upon the South’s socio-political structure, the Confederation was able to combat that pressure through its appeals to traditional cultural practices and communal obligations which comprised the core of “southern honor.”

The fluidity and circumstantial adaptability of southern culture to the spontaneous demands of civil war are illustrated in Varina Davis’s article on the Confederate Christmas celebration of 1864 in Richmond. In her article, Davis revealed how Richmond’s female elites, the wives of the Confederacy’s leading politicians and generals, adopted the traditional paternalistic and religiously-infused discourse of the elite ruling class to reinvigorate the spirit of the Confederacy, and reinforce the power of the elites, through a charitable Christmas celebration in the Confederate capital. Davis noted that the three-part celebration included a Christmas Eve “decoration party” at the Confederate White House, to which Davis invited numerous politically-elite women to prepare Christmas decorations, gifts, and a holiday feast for a group of orphans from Richmond’s St. Paul’s Episcopal Church Home for Orphans. Many of the supplies for the dinner and gifts were donated out of the personal assets of the elites, including preserved fruits, eggs, candles, and old toys which were fixed up for the orphans. Many of the elites spent precious remaining money on luxury items for the dinner, such as seasoning brandy “at one hundred dollars a bottle” and “suet at a dollar a pound.” Varina Davis herself also made an extra effort to procure egg-nog for the household slaves—a Christmas tradition which allowed domestic slaves to engage directly in holiday celebrations with their masters. The elites’ dramatic sacrifice of personal Christmas luxuries is an example of the ways in which the upper class displayed an image of dedication to the lower classes. This display seemingly was intended, at least partially, to help maintain the elites’ ruling status by demonstrating their ability and right to rule and, in doing so, to gain the consent of their social inferiors to do so. The sharing of egg-nog with the household slaves also served to strengthen and promote the paternalistic bond between master and slave within the presidential household. At the decoration party, Davis assembled various foodstuffs, including “rice, flour, molasses and tiny pieces of meat, most of them sent to the President’s wife anonymously to be dispensed to the poor.” While their “sacrifices” may seem trivial to the modern historian, or may have been perceived as “hypocritical” by some members of the lower classes, most of the elites—and many members of the lower classes—still recognized the “appropriate” self-deprivation to which the upper class were consciously subjecting themselves. Lower-class Richmonders revealed their continued reliance upon a traditional southern social order to ensure survival in the most difficult of times by granting the elites the power to dispense of their foodstuffs to the needier members of Richmond’s society. Admittedly, the recipients of those donations were desperate and had little choice but to depend upon the elites for their survival. However, by choosing to send donations to be dispersed more broadly to the needy, instead of hoarding such goods for themselves or relying strictly on a person-to-person charity system, lower classes showed some acceptance of the elites’ leadership abilities and right to rule. Without proper documentation from the lower classes that their actions were, in fact, true reflections of the consent that they granted to the elites to rule over them, this interpretation can never be verified absolutely. However, by relying on hegemonic theory and reading this interaction between the elites and the lower classes as a “performance” of such hegemony, it can be inferred that such is indeed the case.

The following afternoon, after a Christmas service at St. Paul’s which preached “Christian love” and reinforced the sacred nature of the day’s benevolence, Davis and her peers invited the orphans to a holiday feast for a group of orphans from Richmond’s society. The First Family received numerous small makeshift gifts from poorer families throughout the Virginia countryside and capital, in thanks for Davis’s services. These struggling families were certainly not forced to send gifts to the First Family. Their decision to do so suggests evidence of the lower classes’ commitment to inter-class reciprocal paternalism and a general consent to perpetuate a southern hegemonic social order.

Davis’s article reflects symbolic appeals to Confederate nationalism made by the elite women who helped to organize the Confederate Christmas celebration. These women, the so-called “Mothers of Invention,” contributed increasingly to the “re-gendering” of the discourse and the cultural dramaturgy of the Confederacy during the last few months of the war by making themselves indispensable to the morale and sustenance of the Confederate nation and southern honor. Though they had been a public force all throughout the war, these women, as illustrated through their Christmas celebration, played an increasingly significant role in perpetuating southern cultural rituals. As Davis noted, the Christmas celebration was a “debt of honor due from them to the season’s exactions.”

It is true that numerous war-induced tensions on the Confederate home-front existed throughout the life of the Confederacy, as the lower classes negotiated with their superiors for greater protection of their interests. Such tensions were famously illustrated by the numerous petitions for food, supplies, and pardons.
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The elites’ dramatic sacrifice of personal Christmas luxuries is an example of the ways in which the upper class displayed an image of dedication to the lower classes. This display seemingly was intended, at least partially, to help maintain the elites’ ruling status by demonstrating their ability and right to rule and, in doing so, to gain the consent of their social inferiors to do so. The sharing of egg-nog with the household slaves also served to strengthen and promote the paternalistic bond between master and slave within the presidential household. At the decoration party, Davis assembled various foodstuffs, including “rice, flour, molasses and tiny pieces of meat, most of them sent to the President’s wife anonymously to be dispensed to the poor.” While their “sacrifices” may seem trivial to the modern historian, or may have been perceived as “hypocritical” by some members of the lower classes, most of the elites—and many members of the lower classes—still recognized the appropriate self-deprivation to which the upper class were consciously subjecting themselves. Lower-class Richmonders revealed their continued reliance upon a traditional southern social order to ensure survival in the most difficult of times by granting the elites the power to dispense of their foodstuffs to the needier members of Richmond’s society.

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10. Ibid.
for their soldier-husbands that southern women sent to Jefferson Davis during the war. These tensions were also illustrated by the notorious Bread Riots which swept through several prominent southern cities, Richmond perhaps the most famous, in 1863. However, true to their ideology, both the Confederate government and the Confederate upper class responded to the needs of the lower classes by adjusting Confederate impressments and consignment laws, as well as by creating formal and informal charities and networks which helped to support the outlying poor. Protests from the poor, as well as critiques from the press, soldiers, and the husbands of Richmond’s female elites, forced Richmond’s ladies to adapt their practices of “maternalism” to meet the needs of the poor. However, poor Richmonders’ contributions towards Christmas gifts for the First Family in 1864 suggest that paternalistic rituals maintained and adapted by the ladies reinforced the traditional bond that they shared with the lower classes.

The third and final chapter of the 1864 Christmas celebration speaks most directly to the perpetuation of cultural hegemony. Modeled after traditional southern social rituals, this final component of the celebration reflected the war-time adaptation of those rituals into uniquely Confederate cultural practices. On Christmas night, the upper crust attended a “starvation party” at the residence of one of the Davis neighbors. Like previous starvation parties, no food or drink (other than water) was served at the Christmas celebration, which was intended to help reinforce the status of the under-class “rowdiness,” both on Christmas and throughout the year, were clearly visible. The Bread Riots of 1863 haunted the Richmond elite by late 1864, when starvation, poverty, general despondency, and war-weariness reached an all-time high and the poor struggled for their mere survival. Sallie Putnam noted the “worn and dilapidated” look of Richmond’s streets and those who roamed them by the end of 1864. The infamous “Cary Street women”—beggars, burglars, and prostitutes who roamed the city streets in desperate search of food and shelter—provided a daily reminder of the war’s tragic impact on the city’s poor population who might rise again and riot if not attended to by the upper classes. Additionally, the upper class was well aware of the lower classes’ traditions of excessive Christmas rowdiness. As Susan Davis and Ruth Coski have noted, Christmas revelry in the nineteenth century frequently had the tendency of disrupting public order and inciting violence, debauchery, and general acts of public resistance to authority, especially in impoverished urban environments. By providing a ritualized and ordered Christmas ceremony for a small sector of the poor community, elites helped to placate discontented or frustrated members of the lower classes, as well as set an example for how to “properly” celebrate the holiday with a balance of gaiety and solemn restraint.

Additionally, in conjoining their own Christmas celebrations with those of the orphans, and by willingly sacrificing so much of their own for the benefit of the orphans, the elites demonstrated that they understood the needs and sufferings of the lower classes. Such inter-class engagement in a “sensibility of suffering” allowed for the upper and lower classes to share, albeit spontaneously and fluidly, what Antonio Gramsci and T.J. Jackson Lears have referred to as an “historical bloc.” This shared understanding, and participation in, a culture of sacrifice allowed members of different classes to interact relatively freely with each other in the name of the Confederacy. The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.


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The entertain...dancing the night away with local belles. Davis described the belles as “bright-eyed girls, many of them fragile as fairies, but [who] worked like peasants for their home and country.” In doing so, Davis emphasized the belles’ role as “proper” southern “ladies” whose honorable and patriotic sacrifices for the Confederate nation made them simultaneously “partners in suffering” with, and yet rightfully distinct from and superior to, their lower class “sisters.” The fact that the attendees—who sacrificed daily use of their finest clothing long ago and had adopted the “absurdly simple” homespun dress of the under-classes—put forth a conscious effort to dress up for the starvation party reveals a critical piece of symbolism. Such “elite performance” was intended to promote a sense of solidarity among Richmond’s upper classes. LaSalle Corbell Pickett, Constance Cary Harrison, Sallie Putnam, and others spoke about the necessity of social gatherings and parties in sustaining the morale of the Confederacy. However, the donning of elite dress was undoubtedly intended to help reinforce the status of the southern elite, despite the drastic toll which the war had taken on their material lives.

The conscious decision to dress up for the occasion reflects the upper classes’ perpetuation of what Clifford Geertz has referred to as a “dramaturgical display” of elite cultural ritual. This “performance” helped to strengthen traditional southern social hierarchy and hegemonic control. Such displays conformed to what Karen Haltunnen calls the “sentimental” culture of nineteenth-century America, in which the donning of class-specific dress enabled one to reveal his or her true social identity. In this instance, the elites wore their finest outfits to the starvation party to “demonstrate their gentility” and to reaffirm (for themselves and others) that they were, indeed, “true ladies and gentlemen deserving of the higher social place” granted to them by the lower classes. Additionally, by dressing up, they distinguished themselves from the plain citizens of the Confederacy for whom they had sacrificed so much of their other remaining upper-class material that Christmas. In other words, though they took pride and pleasure in caring for and affiliating with the lower classes during the special Christmas celebration, they used the evening’s starvation party as a display through which they could reaffirm, among themselves, their distinction from them.

In the nature and form of the 1864 Christmas gaiety, elements of social control possibly derived from previous episodes of under-class “rowdiness,” both on Christmas and throughout the year, were clearly visible. The Bread Riots of 1863 haunted the Richmond elite by late 1864, when starvation, poverty, general despondency, and war-weariness reached an all-time high and the poor struggled for their mere survival. Sallie Putnam noted the “worn and dilapidated” look of Richmond’s streets and those who roamed them by the end of 1864. The infamous “Cary Street...
for their soldier-husbands that southern women sent to Jefferson Davis during the war. These tensions were also illustrated by the notorious Bread Riots which swept through several prominent southern cities, Richmond perhaps the most famous, in 1863. However, true to their ideology, both the Confederate government and the Confederate upper class responded to the needs of the lower classes by adjusting Confederate impressments and consignment laws, as well as by creating formal and informal charities and networks which helped to support the outlying poor. Protests from the poor, as well as critiques from the press, soldiers, and the husbands of Richmond's female elites, forced Richmond's ladies to adapt their practices of “maternalism” to meet the needs of the poor. However, poor Richmonders' contributions towards Christmas gifts for the First Family in 1864 suggest that paternalistic rituals maintained and adapted by the ladies reinforced the traditional bond that they shared with the lower classes.

The third and final chapter of the 1864 Christmas celebration speaks most directly to the perpetuation of cultural hegemony. Modeled after traditional southern social rituals, this final component of the celebration reflected the war-time adaptation of those rituals into uniquely Confederate cultural practices. On Christmas night, the upper crust attended a “starvation party” at the residence of Constance Cary Harrison, Sallie Putnam, and others spoke about the necessity of social gatherings and parties in sustaining the morale of the Confederacy. However, the donning of elite dress was undoubtedly intended to help reinforce the status of the southern elite, despite the drastic toll which the war had taken on their material lives. The conscious decision to dress up for the occasion reflects the upper classes' perpetuation of what Clifford Geertz has referred to as a “dramaturgical display” of elite cultural ritual. This “performance” helped to strengthen traditional southern social hierarchy and hegemonic control. Such displays conformed to what Karen Haltunnen calls the “sentimental” culture of nineteenth-century America, in which the donning of class-specific dress enabled one to reveal his or her true social identity. In this instance, the elites wore their finest outfits to the starvation party to “demonstrate their gentility” and to reaffirm (for themselves and others) that they were, indeed, “true ladies and gentlemen deserving of the higher social place” granted to them by the lower classes. Additionally, by dressing up, they distinguished themselves from the plain citizens of the Confederacy for whom they had sacrificed so much of their other remaining upper-class material that Christmas. In other words, though they took pride and pleasure in caring for and affiliating with the lower classes during the special Christmas celebration, they used the evening’s starvation party as a display through which they could reaffirm, among themselves, their distinction from them.

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By providing a ritualized and ordered Christmas ceremony for a small sector of the poor community, elites helped to placate discontented or frustrated members of the lower classes, as well as set an example for how to “properly” celebrate the holiday with a balance of gaiety and solemn restraint. Additionally, in enjoining their own Christmas celebrations with those of the orphans, and by willingly sacrificing so much of their own for the benefit of the orphans, the elites demonstrated that they understood the needs and sufferings of the lower classes. Such inter-class engagement in a “sensibility of suffering” allowed for the upper and lower classes to share, albeit spontaneously and fluidly, what Antonio Gramsci and T. J. Jackson Lears have referred to as an “historical bloc.” This shared understanding of, and participation in, a culture of sacrifice allowed members of different classes to interact relatively
peacefully with each other through a structured and reciprocal relationship. It is quite possible that many members of the lower classes were not entirely “pleased” with the rule of the elites, but that they may not have had the means to express their displeasure.

The exact perceptions of elites by the lower class will never be fully known. This is not to say that the elites’ participation in the 1864 Christmas celebration was entirely or merely a conscious and premeditated attempt to control or coerce the lower classes into maintaining their allegiance to the Confederacy and their trust in the Confederate leaders. Nor is this analysis meant to imply that the under-classes were “duped” by such rituals into plaction or complete submission. However, because elites made an effort to understand and respond to the plight of the lower classes, they were able to tap into what Daniel Wickberg has called a “shared sensibility” of traditional southern rituals and familiar paternalistic relationships. This enabled them to willingly and successfully enjoy the last Confederate Christmas on outwardly acceptable and relatively peaceful terms.

Both the elites and the lower classes helped, consciously and subconsciously, to sustain cherished and fundamental tenets of southern culture. Many historians—and even some Civil War contemporaries—heretofore have been unable to see this, and thus have dismissed these cultural tenets as having perished at the hands of loss of faith in, or even undermining of, the Confederate cause.

Drew Gilpin Faust, George Rable, and other Civil War scholars of Confederate women have argued that the actions of southern women in the final year of the war did more to undermine the Confederacy than they did to support it. Such historians cite as evidence for such claims the journals of Richmond women such as Judith McGuire and Phoebe Yates Pember, whose caustic words about “elite extravagance” directly linked the “selfish” behavior of Richmond’s elite with the Confederacy’s ultimate failure. These scholars argue that such actions by elite Confederate women, combined with the letters from southern women to their husbands on the front line who beseeched their men to “give up the fight” and come home to their helpless and needy families, “prove” that Confederate morale, especially among women, was virtually nonexistent by the fourth winter of the war. Furthermore, these historians write that low morale resulted in women actively seeking to undermine the war effort through selfish extravagance and refusal to sacrifice for the Confederate nation.

Richmond’s Confederate Christmas celebration of 1864 shows that southern morale and the Confederate “cultural spirit” was indeed very much still alive at this late phase of the war, and that rituals such as the Christmas celebration served to reinforce, rather than undermine, the tenets of Confederate nationalism. Professor Gary Gallagher wrote that, although the morale of the Confederate home-front was inevitably weakened by four years of brutal warfare, the fall of the Confederacy resulted from the military defeat of Lee’s army and the Union army’s physical decimation of civilian materiel and support, rather than from a complete loss of civilian faith in the Confederacy and resignation to failure. The approach to studying the late-war Confederacy in this paper, which is based largely upon the 1864 Confederate Christmas celebration, allows for an enriched understanding of Confederate culture. By analyzing this event through the lens of hegemony, as reinforced by paternalism, benevolence, and dramaturgical ritual, the cultural history and larger meaning of this event reveals itself. Through a broader cultural history-based interpretation of the final Christmas of the Confederacy, one can see that what previous more methodologically-traditional scholars, such as Faust and Rable, view as the death of the Confederacy. To these scholars the death of the Confederacy appears to be, rather, a remarkably affirmative Confederate spirit in spite of the Confederacy’s military and material condition.

Admittedly, few primary documents, and even fewer pieces of secondary scholarship, exist on the “Last Christmas in the Confederate White House.” To the knowledge of this writer, the event was never published in any major newspaper in December of 1864 or January of 1865. The lack of public comment about the event during the holiday season in which it was held might strike contemporary historians as odd, in light of the larger significance and power relationships which the event embodies. Some historians might argue that this “silence” in sources may have been an intentional oversight by members of the southern press who may have become disillusioned with elite women’s continued “indulgence” in social gatherings during this desperate time. After all, elite women certainly had their critics who routinely scorned the ladies’ social habits. However, one has to remember that newspaper coverage of even major military events was uneven during this extremely difficult time in Richmond’s history. Furthermore, although the Christmas celebration served to uphold the traditional social hierarchy, dramaturgical displays of paternalism and benevolence which stood at the core of southerners’ cherished culture, were not entirely premeditated, nor designed to “dupe” the under-classes into submission and loyalty through widespread advertisement of the event. In a society steeped in communal sensibilities, it is quite possible—and indeed probable—that such reinforcement of southern values and rituals was best illustrated and shared through spontaneous dramaturgical, rather than premeditated, forms. Through such dramaturgy, the Confederate elite and the under-classes were able to reaffirm their relationship with each other and the Confederate nation in positive and successful ways which helped to sustain the Confederacy through its final Christmas. Varina Davis’s re-creation of this microcosm of late-war Confederate culture serves to highlight the survival of the Confederate “spirit” and to praise southern elites for their sacrifices and benevolence.

For young girls like Alice West Allen, an eleven-year-old refugee from the Shenandoah Valley who spent Christmas of 1864 with the First Family, and for young lower-class females such as Richmond Clara Lynn Minor, the elite ladies who organized the elaborate Christmas celebration had “come to the rescue, as they had often done before.” On January 1, 1865, Reverend Charles Minnigerode
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Reverses have followed the Confederacy in many parts of our country, and the sky opens with dark and threatening clouds. But if we fall, let us fall with our faces upward, our hearts turned to God, our hands in the work, our wounds in the breast, with blessing—not curses—upon our lips; and all is not lost! We have retained our honor; we have done our duty to the last.31

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“An Altercation Full of Meaning”: The Duel between Francis B. Cutting and John C. Breckinridge

Annie Powers

“A Duel!!” In late March of 1854, the northern press burst with the news. A duel had allegedly taken place between two members of the House of Representatives—Francis B. Cutting of New York and John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. Confusion and anticipation reigned, and a flurry of rumors circulated. Had Breckinridge been shot in the neck? Was he killed or wounded? Did Cutting emerge victorious? Or was the entire affair a mere hoax? The situation became so dramatic that it even appeared in a theatrical advertisement, beckoning people to see a play that promised to be just as exciting as the alleged duel. By early April, it had become clear that despite the conflict between Cutting and Breckinridge, an actual duel had been averted. Although their misunderstanding had been amicably settled, the affair still left many questions unanswered. Why did these two Congressmen feel compelled to resort to arms? And how did Cutting, a northerner, nearly become embroiled in a duel—a violent ritual typically understood in the planters’ need to maintain absolute militancy and violence, which was rooted in southern society. Likewise, in Jack K. Williams’ Dueling in the Old South and Steven M. Stowe’s Intimacy and Power in the Old South, dueling is analyzed as “a facet of life [that existed] only in the Old South.” John Hope Franklin attributes this use of duels to a southern tradition of militancy and violence, which was rooted in the planters’ need to maintain absolute authority over their slaves. If this was the case, however, how could a duel have nearly occurred in which a northerner, Francis B. Cutting, challenged a southerner, John C. Breckinridge? Historians like Michael C. C. Adams have objected to the traditional belief that dueling was an exclusively southern political ritual, arguing that “the disparity in the amount of violence between North and South was grossly exaggerated” and most apparently southern traits could be applied to nineteenth century America at large. Mark E. Neely, Jr., also contends that political dueling was not confined to the South. Both Adams and Neely use the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict to demonstrate that dueling as political violence transcended sectional boundaries. Yet the confrontation between Cutting and Breckinridge cannot be fully explained by the existence of a national dueling culture; it also occurred within the context of the heated and increasingly sectionalized debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The Kansas-Nebraska bill was presented to the Senate in January 1854 after significant modification by Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas and with the support of President Franklin Pierce. The act proposed to organize the Kansas and Nebraska territories by applying the doctrine of “popular sovereignty,” which allowed the residents of these regions to determine the status of slavery there themselves. Douglas championed popular sovereignty and justified its use by explaining that the 1820 Missouri Compromise’s prohibition of slavery north of the 36º 30’ line had been “subsumed” by the provisions in the Compromise of 1850 dictating that the slavery issue would be decided in the territories of Utah and New Mexico by local choice. Douglas saw popular sovereignty as a “great contribution to freedom” and a way to end conflict over the slavery question. Instead, however, it prompted fresh and vehement sectional debate, with most southerners in favor of, and northerners split over, the bill. Southerners perceived that popular sovereignty would give them a greater opportunity to spread slavery compared to earlier compromises. Northerners were largely divided over the Kansas-Nebraska measure. A vocal group was opposed to it for reasons of economics or morality, but others supported the popular sovereignty doctrine on the basis of idealized white democracy or as a method of ending debate over slavery. These arguments and deliberations over the Kansas-Nebraska bill led to several amendments while it remained in the Senate. The so-called Badger Proviso, introduced by Senator George E. Badger of North Carolina, dictated that no law could be revived that had either excluded or protected slavery in the territories, referring particularly to old French and Spanish legal codes. Furthermore, the Clayton amendment, presented by Senator John M. Clayton of Delaware, restricted popular sovereignty by forbidding immigrants from voting in territorial elections. In the early hours of March 4, 1854, the bill passed in the Senate, 37 to 14. Among northerners, however, the margin of victory was much narrower: 14 to 12.2


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The Cutting-Breckinridge affair was part of the larger sociopolitical phenomenon of dueling that has been discussed by historians of early and nineteenth century America. In her critical study Affairs of Honor, Joanne B. Freeman explains that duels in early America stemmed from a commitment to “sacifice one’s life for one’s honor,” or a sense of self-worth tied up with manliness and, in some cases, ability as a political leader.

Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown similarly singles out this pre-modern cultural ideology of honor as the reason why political duels occurred during the nineteenth century. However, he contends that dueling in this period was almost exclusively a southern institution and links it with the prevalence of aggression in southern society. Likewise, in Jack K. Williams’ Dueling in the Old South and Steven M. Stowe’s Intimacy and Power in the Old South, dueling is analyzed as “a facet of life [that existed] only in the Old South.” John Hope Franklin attributes this use of duels to a southern tradition of militancy and violence, which was rooted in the planters’ need to maintain absolute authority over their slaves. If this was the case, however, how could a duel have nearly occurred in which a northerner, Francis B. Cutting, challenged a southerner, John C. Breckinridge? Historians like Michael C. C. Adams have objected to the traditional belief that dueling was an exclusively southern political ritual, arguing that “the disparity in the amount of violence between North and South was grossly exaggerated” and most apparently southern traits could be applied to nineteenth century America at large. Mark E. Neely, Jr., also contends that political dueling was not confined to the South. Both Adams and Neely use the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict to demonstrate that dueling as political violence transcended sectional boundaries.

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Although he supported the Kansas-Nebraska bill at large, New York Congressman Francis B. Cutting objected to both the Badger and Clayton amendments. Cutting was a “Hard” or “Hard-shell” Democrat, and as he explained in two speeches on January 17 and January 20, this meant that he wholly supported the doctrine of popular sovereignty and each state’s right to regulate its own affairs. Furthermore, Cutting condemned the Pierce administration for what the Hards believed was reliance on a coalition of disparate and sometimes contradictory interests, including a small group of “Free Soilers” who supported the unqualified exclusion of slavery from the West that rallied around the President for little but patronage and other benefits. Despite his frustration with Pierce, Cutting joined the president and other “Administration Democrats” like John C. Breckinridge in support of the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Cutting’s support of popular sovereignty motivated his proposal to refer the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole—meaning that the entirety of the House acted as if in committee and could thus fully discuss and amend the measure. This was Cutting’s alternative to allowing the bill to be relegated to the much smaller and less representative Committee on Territories. Douglas’ principal ally in the House, Congressman William Alexander Richardson from Illinois, condemned Cutting’s maneuver. According to Richardson, movement of the bill would “kill it by indirectness” due to the apparently large number of items in the Committee of the Whole that would be ahead of the Kansas-Nebraska measure for consideration. Cutting replied that he had no intention of destroying the bill’s prospects or ending discussion; rather, he believed wholly in the measure and the principles of state and territorial self-determination written into it. However, Cutting continued, both the Clayton and Badger amendments violated the doctrine of popular sovereignty—the former by withholding suffrage from residents of the territory who had declared their intention to become citizens and the latter by endorsing Congressional interference with slavery via the relocation of early Spanish and French law. With these provisions in the Kansas-Nebraska bill, Cutting maintained that he could not fully endorse it—and doubted whether the House would pass it. Furthermore, Cutting asserted that the entirety of the House must “fully discuss” the bill in order to give it legitimacy as law, because it deals “with a subject which enlists the sympathies and feelings of men so deeply.” Finally, Cutting reminded Richardson and the House at large that, by a two-thirds vote, the measures preceding the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the Committee of the Whole could be temporarily laid aside. After Cutting refused to withdraw his motion, the House twice voted to move the bill to the Committee of the Whole, 110 to 95.

Despite his clear explanation of his choice to refer the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole, most press coverage portrayed Cutting’s maneuver as intentionally damaging if not irreparably killing the measure. Newspapers representing interests opposed to the bill rejoiced. In describing Cutting’s speech, The Daily Cleveland Herald explained that “the monster is not killed dead, but he gasps for breath.” William Lloyd Garrison’s anti-slavery newspaper, The Liberator, described the movement of the measure to the Committee of the Whole as “encouraging” and the enemies of the bill as “exultant.” Some papers counseled readers to continue what Cutting had begun and thus destroy the bill. The New York Tribune remarked that “The monster has received a staggering blow, which can and must be followed up with energy till the last breath is beaten out of his carcass . . . . Let no muscle be relaxed till the last demagogue is convinced that to attempt to break compacts for the benefit of slavery, and turn over to bondage an empire long consecrated to freedom, is very far off.

By contrast, those northern Democrats who understood Cutting’s apparent intentions in favor of the bill commended his behavior by passing resolutions in his support. For example, the Young Men’s National Democratic Club stated that his speech “reflects a brilliant halo . . . and entitles him to the gratitude of the North” and the Democratic Republican General Committee “applaud[ed] the chivalric conduct of Mr. Cutting.” Even northern newspapers less jubilant about Cutting’s action similarly reported that the bill would likely not survive its transfer to the Committee of the Whole; the New York Courier and Enquirer remarked that the reference was “very unfavorable” to the prospects of the bill and the New York Weekly Herald likened it to “crucifixion.” The southern press agreed with northern newspapers that the referral of the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole had killed it; however, the largely Democratic, pro-slavery southerners disparaged Cutting in particular and northern Democrats in general for doing so. The Daily Morning News from Savannah, Georgia reported that Cutting’s “motion astonished everyone. The southern members [of Congress] denounced it as traitorous.” North Carolina’s Weekly Raleigh Register was more combative, explaining that Cutting and the fifty-four allegedly “national” Democrats who voted to “kill the bill” should be “kick[ed] out of the party—they have become abolitionized—they are a miserable faction!” and utterly “denationalized.” Therefore, despite Cutting’s apparent attempt to openly discuss the bill in the whole House and amend it to more fully fit the doctrine of popular sovereignty, he was portrayed throughout the nation as destroying the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Public reaction tracked, for the most part, along clearly delineated sectional lines.

Southern Congressman John C. Breckinridge’s virulent and insulting response to Cutting—and the ensuing debate between the two that nearly led to a duel—fits within this context of sectionalized response to what was perceived to be Cutting’s supposed attack on the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Breckinridge, a representative from Kentucky, was a pro-slavery, pro-Kansas-Nebraska, and pro-administration southern Democrat. On March 23, prior to a lengthy speech in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska bill delineating his faith in states’ rights, Breckinridge made a series of remarks sharply criticizing Cutting for moving to transfer the measure to the Committee of the Whole. Breckinridge accused Cutting of destroying the bill by moving it to the end of the House calendar and thus smothering it beneath “a mountain [of other bills] that is piled upon it.” Furthermore, Breckinridge explained that Cutting’s decision could have been based on little more than “pretexts” that


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Southern Congressman John C. Breckinridge’s virulent and insulting response to Cutting—and the ensuing debate between the two that nearly led to a duel—fits within this context of sectionalized response to what was perceived to be Cutting’s supposed attack on the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Breckinridge, a representative from Kentucky, was a pro-slavery, pro-Kansas-Nebraska, and pro-administration southern Democrat. On March 23, prior to a lengthy speech in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska bill delineating his faith in states’ rights, Breckinridge made a series of remarks sharply criticizing Cutting for moving to transfer the measure to the Committee of the Whole. Breckinridge accused Cutting of destroying the bill by moving it to the end of the House calendar and thus smothering it beneath “a mountain [of other bills] that is piled upon it.” Furthermore, Breckinridge explained that Cutting’s decision could have been based on little more than “pretexts” that

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appeared to support of the bill, because the Kansas-Nebraska measure would have ultimately been discussed in the Committee of the Whole after it had been modified in the Committee on Territories. To Breckinridge, the support given to him by the measure’s opponents in Congress and throughout the North made it clear that Cutting had damaged the bill. Southern Congressman had an appreciated alliance with Cutting heretofore, Breckinridge stated, but the New Yorker’s behavior of late had been that of an enemy. Breckinridge concluded that Cutting was a traitor to the Kansas-Nebraska measure and its supporters; moving to refer the bill to the Committee of the Whole “was the act of a man who throws his arm in apparently friendly embrace around another, saying, ‘How is it with thee, brother?’ and at the same time covertly stabs him to the heart.”

Cutting responded to these remarks on March 27. Cutting explained that he had made it clear that while he supported the doctrine of popular sovereignty behind the bill, he believed it required an amendment both to fulfill this principle and to successfully pass through the House. He accused Breckinridge of exaggerating the number of bills before the Kansas-Nebraska measure in the Committee of the Whole. Cutting maintained that if Breckinridge truly believed that moving it would defeat it, he would not have taken the time or the energy to defend it in his March 23 speech. Finally, Cutting questioned why Breckinridge would set out to insult and attack a supporter, rather than an opponent, of the bill. Cutting suggested that Breckinridge’s speech was “unbecoming of a Congressman,” a personal attack that was both “inflammatory in style, and exaggerated in facts.” Breckinridge responded by claiming that Cutting had missed the point of his March 23 speech; Breckinridge had not meant to insinuate that Cutting had intentionally killed the bill, but rather that this was the impact of the New Yorker’s actions. Furthermore, Congressman William H. English of Indiana, a pro-Nebraska Democrat, indicated that there were fifty bills in front of the Kansas-Nebraska measure in the Committee of the Whole. For his part, Breckinridge contended that it was hardly overstatement that there were an immense amount of other measures that the House would have to consider before reaching the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Breckinridge concluded by reiterating that he could not conceive of a reason that Cutting would refer the bill to the Committee of the Whole unless he intended to destroy it, because it would be discussed by the entire House after it moved through the Committee on Territories. Cutting escalated the pitch of the debate by remarking that Breckinridge was “the last person from whom I expected” such disrespect, because the New York Hards had contributed fifteen hundred dollars to Breckinridge’s Senate campaign when he was in danger of defeat. Cutting insisted, furthermore, that Breckinridge was doing little more than arguing over the number of measures in the Committee of the Whole, thus “skulking” behind the Kansas-Nebraska bill’s position at the end of the House calendar. Breckinridge, appalled, asked Cutting to withdraw his last statement. Cutting refused, stating that it was “in answer to the most violent and the most personal attack that has been witnessed” upon the floor of the House. Breckinridge countered that “if the gentleman [Cutting] says I skulk, he says what is false, and he knows it”—in effect accusing Cutting of intentionally lying on the floor of the House. Cutting replied that he would not answer Breckinridge’s remark, because “it was not here that I will desecrate my lips by undertaking to retort on it in the manner which it deserves.”

Later that day, Cutting sent Breckinridge a note through James Maurice requesting that Breckinridge retract his claim that what Cutting had said was false or else “make the explanation due from one gentleman to another.” This would have clearly implied a duel. Breckinridge refused to do so unless Cutting withdrew his insinuation that the Kentucky Congressman had been “skulking.” Cutting sent a reply on March 28 professing that he had not intended any personal insult during their debate the previous day, but Breckinridge’s representative, Kentuckian Colonel Hawkins, declined to receive the letter because he believed he could not do so due to Cutting’s potential challenge to a duel. Thus Breckinridge never received the message. As a result, he sent a note to Cutting that he intended to “embrace the alternative” that he believed the New York Congressman had offered: a duel. Over the course of the next several days, communication fell to their “seconds”: Hawkins and Kentucky Congressman William Preston for Breckinridge and the New York Colonel Monroe and Illinois Senator James Shields for Cutting.

Hawkins and Monroe were the correspondents primarily responsible for determining the precise arrangements of the duel. On March 29, Hawkins submitted the terms of the duel to Monroe, including the suggestion that the weapon would be the ordinary, or “Western,” rifle. Monroe responded that Cutting considered himself the challenged party and thus had the right to determine the terms of the duel. Cutting was unacquainted with the Western rifle, and instead chose “ordinary duelling pistols.” Confused, Hawkins explained to Monroe that Breckinridge thought that he had been challenged and thus maintained his rights as such. Monroe replied somewhat disingenuously that Cutting’s original note, asking for “the explanation due from one gentleman to another,” could not be construed as a challenge to a duel—it was nothing more than a demand for verbal clarification. On March 30, after hearing about the confusion and reading Cutting’s March 28 letter that Hawkins had previously rejected, Breckinridge withdrew his statements that commenced the overtures to a duel and expressed his regret for the misunderstanding. Cutting reciprocated the apology, and the matter was settled. On March 31, Preston rose in the House to explain that the conflict between Cutting and Breckinridge had been resolved amicably, “in a manner which is mutually satisfactory, and which is conceived alike honorable to both of the gentlemen who were engaged in the debate.”

What were the implications of this affair in the context of the era that produced it—that of the Kansas-Nebraska conflict specifically and nineteenth century America generally? As Mark Neely suggested, one near-duel instigated by a northerner does not necessarily imply that violence was part of a larger American political culture—and even if it can be conceded that dueling was not confined to the southern states, then why, with evidence of conflicts such as the one between Cutting and Breckinridge, have they been construed as a distinctly
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southern phenomenon? The reaction of the press to the Cutting and Breckinridge duel, particularly in the North, provides answers to both these problems. After a flurry of rumors that were printed with little discrimination, northern newspapers, and primarily those opposed to the spread of slavery, began to editorialize heavily. Many used coverage of the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as a way to indict dueling as a backward institution belonging to the violent, slave-holding South—and by arguing that dueling as it existed through the nation should not have a place in the North, the press proved that it held one. Furthermore, this group of northern newspapers overwhelmingly blamed Breckinridge—and southern culture by proxy—for the duel, overlooking Cutting’s culpability as the challenger. Thus these anti-slavery northern newspapers, in the increasingly sectionalized political climate of the Kansas-Nebraska debate, used the disagreement between Cutting and Breckinridge to assert that dueling was a southern problem, representative of the allegedly violent character of southern slaveholding society. In this way, the northern anti-slavery press was able to construe the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as an argument against the spread of slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.9

Immediately after word broke about a potentially violent conflict between the northerner Francis Cutting and the southerner John C. Breckinridge, the anti-slavery northern press in particular began to criticize dueling as a southern social phenomenon. The New York Independent criticized Cutting for lowering himself to the un-Christian and “assassin-like practice of sending a challenge,” blaming northern society for creating a political culture tolerant of duels by electing men of “violence and blood” to positions of power. This editorial maligned northern culture for accepting dueling, arguing that it was a tradition not endemic to—and that should not exist in—the northern states. Wisconsin’s Milwaukee Daily Sentinel was less implicit in its sectional indictments and associations of violence with the South. An editorial printed on April 19 explained that as a southerner raised in a society that explicitly condoned duels, Breckinridge took advantage of Cutting by forcing him “into a position in which he must submit to a most humiliating attack upon his character and motives, or fight.” Cutting could not be condemned for his choice to fight, because “public sentiment at the North is but half [against] the barbarous practices of dueling.” This proved a partial acceptance of dueling in the North and thus a national political culture at least somewhat tolerant of dueling. Moreover, this editorial condemned the practice of dueling by suggesting that southerners forced their violence on northerners and thereby manipulated northern society’s half-aversion to the practice. The New York Evangelist furthered this by offering a virulent criticism of what the New York Times had described as “the bloody code” of dueling, calling it “a barbarous and murderous business” in all cases, whether involving men North or South. However, the Evangelist urged northerners to repudiate the national toleration of duels as they were “immensely behind the times at the North” and belonged to the “land of slavery”—and concluded by criticizing southerners for using duels to violently “browbeat Northern Representatives” into submission to southern interests. Thus the Evangelist attested to and then rejected the presence of a dueling culture in the North while maintaining that it was representative of the evils of southern culture and extremely harmful to northern interests. In this way, the coverage of the Cutting-Breckinridge duel by the northern anti-slavery press proved the existence of a more national dueling culture while explicitly condemning it as a backward southern institution.10

In censuring dueling as a southern institution in general, northern anti-slavery newspapers specifically faulted Breckinridge for the conflict because he was a product of violent southern society. Writers for the northern press that supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act or were not staunchly anti-slavery, such as the New York Weekly Herald, similarly blamed the near-duel on Breckinridge. However, these newspapers did not perceive Breckinridge’s behavior as an expression of the evils of southern society at large. The Weekly Herald merely expressed its disappointment that the Kentucky Congressman had anomalously lowered his otherwise upstanding character by insulting Cutting and thereby almost causing the duel. However, the New York Daily Times, or what historian Mark Neely calls the Herald’s “anti-slavery Whig competitor,” indicted Breckinridge in more sectional terms. Emphasizing Breckinridge’s quick “loss of temper” and readiness to “charge Mr. Cutting with treachery” during their debate despite Cutting’s relatively inoffensive remarks, the column asserted that this was characteristic of the class of gentlemen to which Mr. Breckinridge belongs. Quick to take offence, they are far from being slow to give it. In dealing with Northern men especially, whose principles or laws they have reason to suppose fetter their hands in the matter of fighting, they are pretty apt to play the bully.

This perceived southern tendency for violence was made explicit in an April 7 editorial that assailed Breckinridge for being “more anxious to commit homicide than to vindicate his character.” Thus the Daily Times not only blamed Breckinridge’s irrational violence on his southern roots, but also implied that southerners in general used force to impose their own opinions on northerners. The Canadian African-American newspaper the Provincial Freeman explained that Cutting moved to refer the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole “greatly to the chagrin and irritation of Breckinridge and other slavemongers, who determined therefor to settle a personal quarrel upon Cutting” in the form of a duel. Using Breckinridge as a case study, the newspaper blamed the brutality inherent in slavery for the contretemps and exonerated Cutting entirely. Frederick Douglass made the relationship between slavery and violent dueling culture clear in his newspaper, stating that in his behavior during the March 27 debate, Breckinridge “showed himself to be possessed of all the claims of a genuine lord of the lash” as opposed to Cutting, who “bore himself like a MAN.” Here, Douglass entirely reversed responsibility for the duel by applauding Cutting’s honor and manliness, while maligning Breckinridge as a representative of the violent culture of the slaveryocracy. By vilifying Breckinridge as the instigator of the duel, northern anti-slavery newspapers were able to use the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as an example of the violence-prone slaveholding culture.11

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This indictment of southern society, stemming from criticism of duels in general and Breckinridge in particular, ultimately manifested itself in the northern anti-slavery press as an argument against the extension of slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Independent, after printing a transcript of the Cutting-Breckinridge debate in Congress, offered a brief editorial explaining that the “policy of the slaveholders for keeping Northern Congress-men in due subjection, is first to flatter them with tantalizing hopes; failing in that, to purchase them with offices or money; failing in that, to bully them down; and failing in that, to shoot them down.” The Independent censured Cutting for falling prey to “the overseers’ last resort” of dueling, but was much more critical of southerners by portraying them as intentionally oppressing northern Congressmen through corruption or violence. The column concluded that “nothing can stop it [southern subjection of northerners] but the absolute overthrow of the political power of slavery,” suggesting that northern political influence would increasingly diminish under the thumb of a spreading slave power that used the violence of dueling as a means of asserting its dominance. The New York Tribune continued this line of argumentation, explaining that the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict “teaches to the northern Members [of Congress] who rejoice in the title of ‘Democratic’ is substantially this: Support the Nebraska bill or submit to be bullied or shot.” Furthermore, the Tribune indicted Breckinridge as the “sole author” of the duel and explained that it was part of “a well considered plan” to coerce “through intimidation and violence . . . every independent northern Democrat who dares to defy the mandates of the Slavocracy” by opposing the Kansas-Nebraska bill. In this way, the Tribune unambiguously portrayed the Cutting-Breckinridge duel as an example of the southerners’ plan to suppress their opponents through unabashed violence in order to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act and thus extend slavery. The Daily Cleveland Herald was more specific, contending that Breckinridge and his second, Colonel Hawkins, intended to resort to the Southern custom of dueling as a means by which slaveholders like Breckinridge could extend their “peculiar institution” and, accordingly, political power—in this case, by passing the Kansas-Nebraska Act.12

When southern writers commented on the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict, they did not address it specifically—instead, they criticized anti-slavery coverage of the near-duel, proving the political salience of the arguments those northern newspapers made. The Mississippian and State Gazette suggested that northern coverage had been excessive, explaining that “much more has been said about this affair by the press than its importance or good taste either, admitted of.” North Carolina’s Daily Register expressed similar sentiments, explaining that an actual duel would have exacerbated the excitement of northern journalists “to an alarming extent.” This response suggests that the northern anti-slavery press may well have extrapolated from the duel to prove a political point that outstretched the relevance of the conflict.

The Richmond Examiner took this a step further, condemning “the demagogue press of Northern Abolitionism” for “railing out against southern ‘bullyism.’ Already are the passions of the populace invoked against southern hauteur and violence.” This extract from the Richmond Examiner indicates that southerners understood that the northern opponents of slavery had harnessed the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict in order to condemn the alleged prevalence of southern violence. The Daily Morning News from Savannah went furthest in its censure of the northern anti-slavery press, accusing “Greeley[,] and his collaborators in the cause of abolitionism” of “exhausting the English language in the search of epithets with which to denounce its [the Kansas-Nebraska Act’s] friends; and their tools, instigated by their intemperate language, are burning the effigies of Senator Douglas.” This editorial connected the anti-slavery tenor of the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as a method of formulating an argument against the Kansas-Nebraska Act specifically and the extension of slavery generally. Interestingly, however, the paper cited the New York Weekly Herald and the Sun as examples of anti-slavery agitation, associating these more conservative papers with Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune, which was explicitly opposed to slavery. By portraying the northern press—or at least that of New York—as almost monolithically opposed to slavery, the Daily Morning News fed into the sectionalism many southern newspapers criticized the anti-slavery press for fueling. Taken together, southern newspapers explained that opposition to dueling in the anti-slavery northern press was a way to condemn the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the extension of slavery; and these southern complaints and portrayals of the northern press proved the political staying power and salience of the anti-dueling and anti-slavery arguments advanced by these anti-slavery newspapers.13

The Cutting-Breckinridge conflict was a product of its era, a part of nineteenth century dueling culture and a result of the increasingly sectionalized political tensions that arose from debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Yet it was the appropriation of the near-duel by the northern anti-slavery press that proved more important than what had actually occurred. Although Cutting, a northerner, offered the challenge, these newspapers cast a national culture accepting of dueling as a product of southern slaveholding society and blamed Breckinridge for the conflict as representative of the violence of that southern culture. By portraying dueling as a function of the violence-prone southern slaveholding society, the northern anti-slavery press was able to advance an argument against the spread of slavery and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The argument held enough political salience to be noted and deployed by southern writers at the time. If the


This indictment of southern society, stemming from criticism of duels in general and Breckinridge in particular, ultimately manifested itself in the northern anti-slavery press as an argument against the extension of slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Independent, after printing a transcript of the Cutting-Breckinridge debate in Congress, offered a brief editorial explaining that the “policy of the slaveholders for keeping Northern Congress-men in due subjection, is first to flatter them with tantalizing hopes; failing in that, to purchase them with offices or money; failing in that, to bully them down; and failing in that, to shoot them down.” The Independent censured Cutting for falling prey to “the overseers’ last resort” of dueling, but was much more critical of southerners by portraying them as intentionally oppressing northern Congressmen through corruption or violence. The column concluded that “nothing can stop it [southern subjection of northerners] but the absolute overthrow of the political power of slavery,” suggesting that northern political influence would increasingly diminish under the thumb of a spreading slave power that used the violence of dueling as a means of asserting its dominance. The New York Tribune continued this line of argumentation, explaining that the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict “teaches to the northern Members [of Congress] who rejoice in the title of 'Democratic' is substantially this: Support the Nebraska bill or submit to be bullied or shot.” Furthermore, the Tribune indicted Breckinridge as the “sole author” of the duel and explained that it was part of “a well considered plan” to coerce “through intimidation and violence . . . every independent northern Democrat who dares to defy the mandates of the Slavocracy” by opposing the Kansas-Nebraska bill. In this way, the Tribune unambiguously portrayed the Cutting-Breckinridge duel as an example of the southerners’ plan to suppress their opponents through unabashed violence in order to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act and thus extend slavery. The Daily Cleveland Herald was more specific, contending that Breckinridge and his second, Colonel Hawkins

Evidently meant that Mr. Cutting should fall, and we are not too charitable to believe that the death of that man was one of the means to be used in forcing the passage of the iniquitous Nebraska measure. It is perhaps consistent that that “code,” which finds its advocates on slave soil, should be called in to back up a measure which was invented for the express purpose of extending slave territory. The Cleveland Herald focused on the southern custom of dueling as not simply part of a plot to force the Kansas-Nebraska bill through Congress, but also as thinly veiled murder that was used to spread slavery. Significantly, this expansion of slavery would ultimately lead to the augmentation of southern power—and the perpetuation of the South’s violent political oppression of the North. The violent southern ritual of dueling was thus portrayed by the northern anti-slavery press as a means by which slaveholders like Breckinridge could extend their “peculiar institution” and, accordingly, political power—in this case, by passing the Kansas-Nebraska Act.12

When southern writers commented on the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict, they did not address it specifically—instead, they criticized anti-slavery coverage of the near-duel, proving the political salience of the arguments those northern newspapers made. The Mississippian and State Gazette suggested that northern coverage had been excessive, explaining that “much more has been said about this affair by the press than its importance or good taste either, admitted of.” North Carolina’s Daily Register expressed similar sentiments, explaining that an actual duel would have exacerbated the excitement of northern journalists “to an alarming extent.” This response suggests that the northern anti-slavery press may well have extrapolated from the duel to prove a political point that outstretched the relevance of the conflict. The Richmond Examiner took this a step further, condemning “the demagoguery of Northern Abolitionism” for “railing out against southern ‘bullyism.’ Already are the passions of the populace invoked against southern hauteur and violence.” This extract from the Richmond Examiner indicates that southerners understood that the northern opponents of slavery had harnessed the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict in order to condemn the alleged prevalence of southern violence. The Daily Morning News from Savannah went furthest in its censure of the northern anti-slavery press, accusing “Greeley[,] and his co-laborers in the cause of abolitionism” of “exhausting the English language in the search of epithets with which to denounce its [the Kansas-Nebraska Act’s] friends; and their tools, instigated by their intemperate language, are burning the effigies of Senator Douglas.” This editorial connected the anti-slavery tenor of the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as a method of formulating an argument against the Kansas-Nebraska Act specifically and the extension of slavery generally. Interestingly, however, the paper cited the New York Weekly Herald and the Sun as examples of anti-slavery agitation, associating these more conservative papers with Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune, which was explicitly opposed to slavery. By portraying the northern press—or at least that of New York—as almost monolithically opposed to slavery, the Daily Morning News fed into the sectionalism many southern newspapers criticized the anti-slavery press for fueling. Taken together, southern newspapers explained that opposition to dueling in the anti-slavery northern press was a way to condemn the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the extension of slavery; and these southern complaints and portrayals of the northern press proved the political staying power and salience of the anti-dueling and anti-slavery arguments advanced by these anti-slavery newspapers.13

The Cutting-Breckinridge conflict was a product of its era, a part of nineteenth century dueling culture and a result of the increasingly sectionalized political tensions that arose from debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Yet it was the appropriation of the near-duel by the northern anti-slavery press that proved more important than what had actually occurred. Although Cutting, a northerner, offered the challenge, these newspapers cast a national culture accepting of dueling as a product of southern slaveholding society and blamed Breckinridge for the conflict as representative of the violence of that southern culture. By portraying dueling as a function of the violence-prone southern slaveholding society, the northern anti-slavery press was able to advance an argument against the spread of slavery and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The argument held enough political salience to be noted and deplored by southern writers at the time. If the

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“The Fall of a Sparrow”: The (Un)timely Death of Elmer Ellsworth and the Coming of the Civil War

Adam Q. Stauffer

On the morning of May 24, 1861, a group of Union cadets marched into the city of Alexandria, Virginia. The cohort looked peculiar in their flamboyant Zouave uniforms with bright blue shirts and flashy red sashes. They were led by a dashing young colonel named Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth and charged with occupying the city. Noticing a Confederate flag flying high on the roof of a hotel called the Marshall House, Ellsworth and a few of his men entered the building, determined to bring it down. The trip up the stairs was easygoing and the flag was quickly retrieved without incident. But on the way down everything went wrong. The innkeeper, a Confederate sympathizer named James W. Jackson, appeared with a shotgun and fired, piercing Ellsworth’s heart. As he stumbled backward he uttered his final words: “My God!”

Almost immediately, Corporal Francis Brownell aimed his rifle directly at Jackson’s forehead and shot his colonel’s murderer. In a more general sense, it was a grim scene at Alexandria in 1861 is rarely conjured up. Yet, in a more general sense, it was a scene that became all too familiar to countless numbers of soldiers and civilians during the conflict—when thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers marched gloriously off to war only to be cut down by an enemy’s bullet. The war, which many saw early on as a contest of duty and honor, all too often descended into a firestorm of death and destruction. Elmer Ellsworth became the first official battle fatality of the conflict. His death challenged the assumptions of an entire generation raised on the idea that to serve one’s country in war was a moral act which demonstrated one’s virtues as a citizen. “The patriotic past and the Biblical past were the two great historic memories by which Americans measured their present,” Reid Mitchell points out.4 Christianity promised heavenly rewards to the individual who led a life of selflessness and demonstrated his or her commitment to protecting established institutions. Furthermore, Americans looked to the past, in particular the Revolutionary War, for their definitions of heroism. The true hero, it was thought, was one who died for liberty and country. As a consequence many pictured warfare as a romantic venture designed to show one’s national commitment to the rest of the citizenry. This martial spirit, which placed a strong emphasis on personal valor and patriotism, saturated the early nineteenth century American’s perception of combat and human conflict. During the antebellum era and the early years of the Civil War violence was glorified in both the North and South. “Military service was a grand romantic adventure or a showcase for strutting masculinity as a practical duty of citizenship,” Orville Vernon Burton explains. “That was the sum of military service as most understood it: quite apart from saving their country or defending their principles, every recruit anticipated that a fellow in uniform would always stand in good stead with the ladies, and quite possibly with employers and customers too, once the little fighting was concluded.” When the war came, this romantic sentimentalism was shattered on the battlefields of Manassas, Shiloh, and Fredericksburg. Soldiers above and below the Mason-Dixon Line placed their self-perceived virtues on a pedestal and believed that these virtues alone would ensure victory over the morally inferior enemy. “Courage,” military historian Gerald F. Linderman states, “was the individual’s assurance of a favorable outcome in combat . . . The primacy of courage promised the soldier that no matter how immense the war . . . his fate would continue to rest on his inner qualities.” Elmer Ellsworth came to represent this pre-war mindset and his boyish features and upright moral conduct were seen as proof that he was ordained to become one of the North’s Civil War heroes.

While still a child, Ellsworth’s mother once remarked in her journal that he possessed a “military propensity.” She knew he was destined for greatness. Yet one would have been hard-pressed to believe his mother considering his origins. Born to a poor family, struck hard by the Panic of 1837, in Malta, New York, his future prospects were dim. Despite his humble beginnings, Ellsworth was a determined young man—he dreamed of going to West Point and becoming a great military general like his hero George Washington. Circumstances, however, provided that he choose a different career path and, like many young easterners during the early nineteenth century, he went west to seek his fortune. He spent some time in Chicago, struggling with many low-paying jobs, eking out a meager existence. In his spare time Ellsworth studied military strategy. It did not take long before he was able to put this training to good use. While still living in Chicago he met Charles A. DeVilliers, who had served in the Crimean War with the French Zouaves. DeVilliers was a significant influence in Ellsworth’s life and encouraged him in his pursuit of a career in the military.5 Ellsworth eventually became involved with Chicago’s National Guard Cadets and was soon propelled to the position of colonel. Suddenly, his future was no longer in doubt. He had found an outlet that soon propelled him into the national spotlight.

Military drilling was popular entertainment during the antebellum era. Crowds flocked to watch handsome young men in uniform perform various exercises and physical feats. “It was part of the romantic approach to warfare,” explains one historian, “war was glamorized and poetized with such trappings as sweeping plumes, flowing sashes, golden spurs, and flashing sabers.” Ellsworth soon transformed the Chicago Cadets into one of the premier drilling companies in the country. He introduced them to a new type of fighting style that

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came to define his career—the Zouave. Americans first became aware of the Zouave soldier during the Crimean War. After observing the troops in action, George B. McClellan wrote that the French Zouaves were the “beau-ideal of a soldier.” Their outfits—baggy red pantaloons, colorful sashes, tight-fitting jackets, and fez caps—made the cadets an exotic visual spectacle in the eyes of the nation. More importantly, however, the Zouave ideal emphasized physical fitness, free bodily movement, and the ability to hit targets in the most difficult positions. As one Chicago newspaper stated, “A fellow who can take a five shooting revolver in each hand and knock the spots out of the ten of diamonds at 80 paces, turning somersaults all the time and firing every shot in the air—that is a Zouave.” It is no wonder why Ellsworth’s troupe became one of the most celebrated entertainments of the antebellum era.

During the summer of 1860 the Chicago Cades traveled through the Midwest and Northeast on a nation-wide drilling tour. Ellsworth made sure that on the trip his company behaved itself according to the most puritanical of Victorian standards—no consumption of alcohol, no cavorting with prostitutes, no gambling, and no bulliard playing. It was to be a shining example of Christian piety and military discipline. However, the initial reaction to Ellsworth’s Zouave uniforms and drills was negative. As Henry H. Miller explains, “The company was much criticized by older and presumably better discipline. However, the initial reaction to Ellsworth’s Zouave uniforms and drills was negative. As Henry H. Miller explains, “The company was much criticized by older and presumably better discipline.”

Ellsworth met Lincoln while living in Springfield. Recognizing the potential of his young friend, Lincoln took Ellsworth under his wing. During the Election of 1860, Ellsworth made a number of public speeches in Illinois in order to rally the state’s citizens behind Lincoln. His addresses were widely praised and some even compared him to the great orator Stephen Douglas. “This was a flattering comparison for a man who just two years earlier could barely afford to feed himself. Those days of poverty, however, were long gone and Ellsworth was well on his way to becoming a noteworthy figure in American public life. Lincoln’s election to the executive office gave Ellsworth another major opportunity. He was asked by the new president to assist in providing security for the long train ride from Springfield to Washington. Ellsworth became part of a cohort of young up-and-comers who Lincoln invited to assist him in the White House. The group also included the Bavarian-born John G. Nicolay, and the handsome John Hay of Indiana, who both became Lincoln’s private secretaries and closest companions during the war.

Nicolay, Hay, and Ellsworth constituted the cream of the northern crop of promising young gentlemen. Many believed that, in time, they would become the major political and military leaders of the country—new heroes for a new generation.

Upon arrival, Ellsworth stayed in the capital and served as Lincoln’s personal body guard and confidant. “In truth,” historian Stephen B. Oates points out, “he was so much a part of the [Lincoln] family that he’d once caught the measles from Willie and Tad.” On April 15, a little over a month before Ellsworth’s death, Lincoln wrote a touching letter to his young friend which demonstrated the intimacy of their relationship:

Ever since the beginning of our acquaintance, I have valued you highly as a person[al] friend, and at the same time (without much capacity of judging) have had a very high estimate of your military talent . . . . Accordingly I have been, and still am anxious for you to have the best position in the military which can be given you, consistently with justice and proper courtesy towards the older officers of the army. I can not incur the risk of doing them injustice, or a discourtesy; but I do say they would personally oblige me, if they could, and would place you in some position, or in some service, satisfactory to yourself.\footnote{9}

It is not hard to see why Lincoln was so taken with Ellsworth. Both had been born into humble circumstances and had risen to the national spotlight during the 1850s. In many ways Lincoln considered Ellsworth a surrogate son. He looked out for his young comrade and hoped to appoint him to a high military position in the future. And when the call came Ellsworth answered.

The poor boy from Malta

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After the siege at Fort Sumter in April of 1861, war between the sections became only a matter of time. Lincoln quickly requested volunteers from each state that remained in the Union. Ellsworth, seeing an opportunity to put his skills to good use in the coming conflict, rushed to New York City to raise a Zouave regiment. He placed an advertisement in the Tribune on April 19, requesting the city’s firefighters to enlist: “I want the New York firemen, for there are no more effective men in the country, and none whom I can do so much. They are sleeping on a volcano in Washington, and I want men who can go into a fight.” Soon Ellsworth had enough soldiers to form a regiment and he set about training them in the Zouave style. The firefighters, coming from a vocation that required athleticism and agility, easily caught up to the rigorous exercises and drills. They ended up adopting the standard dark blue United States Army uniform, but kept the scarlet red of the Zouaves in their shirts.

Before embarking to the capital the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment paraded down Broadway before the citizens of Manhattan. The famous diarist George Templeton Strong was on hand to watch the spectacle. “They are a rugged set,” he wrote, “generally men and boys who belong to target companies and are great in a plug-mess.” These were all tough, working-class individuals raised on the mean streets of New York City. “These young fellows march badly,” Strong continued, “but they will fight hard if judiciously handled.”9 Ellsworth had the wherewithal to handle such a bunch. Arriving at the capital on May 2, the regiment found thousands of

soldiers milling around the city awaiting orders. The multitude of strange uniforms and colors that congregated at the capital in the spring of 1861 caused the city to look like an extravagant parade of soldiers from all over the country. Lincoln’s private secretary John Hay greeted the Fire Zouaves and later commented humorously about the scene in his diary:

Tonight Ellsworth & his stalwart troupe arrived. He was dressed like his men, red cap, red shirt, grey breeches grey jacket. In his belt, a sword, a very heavy revolver, and what was still more significant of the measures necessary with the turbulent spirits under his command, an enormously large and bloodthirsty looking bowie knife, more than a foot long in the blade, and with body enough to go through a man’s head from crown to chin as you would split an apple.

Hay went on to call Ellsworth’s troops “the largest sturdiest and physically the most magnificent men I ever saw collected together.” It did not take long for the Zouaves to attract attention. They were as entertaining as a festive carnival or a three-ringed circus, plaguing the city and its inhabitants with bizarre antics and outrageous behavior. On May 9, they even helped in saving Willard’s Hotel, which had caught fire and almost burned to the ground.

Ellsworth’s regiment was struck by the passing of its beloved colonel even to the point of considering violent retaliation against southern civilians. “As rage succeeded the first shock of grief,” says historian Margaret Leech, “the Fire Zouaves threatened to burn the town of Alexandria, it was thought prudent to confine them for the night on a steamer in the middle of the Potomac.” Meanwhile, Ellsworth’s body was transported back to the White House where the President and a few close friends held a private viewing. A funeral commenced the next day, garnering the attention of almost every newspaper and press outlet in the North. At this early stage in the conflict, death was a relatively new phenomenon, but later, when the body count numbered in the hundreds of thousands, Ellsworth’s untimely demise seemed less significant. After the funeral, Mary Todd Lincoln was given the Confederate flag, stained with Ellsworth’s blood, which only one day before flew high on the roof of the Marshall House. John Hay, who just a few weeks before had witnessed the Zouaves enter Washington, told his friend Hannah Angell that “when Ellsworth was murdered all my sunshine perished. I hope you may never know the dry, barren agony of soul that comes with the utter and hopeless loss of a great love.”

Lincoln wrote a letter to Ellsworth’s parents on May 25, giving his condolences. “So much of promised usefulness to one’s country, and of bright hopes for one’s self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall.” Lincoln asserted that Ellsworth had an overwhelming “power to command men . . . and a taste altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent, in that department, I ever knew.” In later years, when Lincoln was having ongoing strategic disagreements with his commanders, one wonders whether he thought of Ellsworth and what might have been. “My acquaintance with him began less than two years ago; yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engaging engagements, would permit.” He went on to praise Ellsworth’s virtues and character—something that Victorian America admired about its heroes. “To me, he appeared to have no indulgences or pastimes; and I never heard him utter a profane, or an intemperate word.” This was probably stretching the truth, but Ellsworth’s prudery became legendary and he was remembered as the shining example of a humble soldier serving and dying for his country. “In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow,” Lincoln concluded, “I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of your young friend, and your brave and early fallen child.”

No contemporary was touched more deeply by Ellsworth’s death than his friend John Hay. Hay wrote three articles (two in 1861 and one in 1896) highlighting his relationship with Ellsworth and praising the character and fortitude of the man. Writing in The Washington Chronicle on May 26, Hay argued that “no man could have died more deeply lamented than the young hero who is moving today in solemn grandeur towards the crushed hearts that sadly wait him in the North.” Hay painted Ellsworth as a nineteenth century medieval knight—a man who might have sat comfortably at King Arthur’s roundtable. “His dauntless and stainless life has renewed the bright possibilities of the antique chivalry, and in his death we may give him unblamed the grand cognizance of which the world has long been unworthy—‘Le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche.’” Later that summer he penned another piece which was published in The Atlantic. In it he described Ellsworth as a man who possessed “the bright enthusiasm of the youthful dreamer and the eminent practicality of the man of affairs.” Hay clearly saw that Ellsworth’s personality had great potential to excel in the national spotlight. Yet these grand expectations were cut down by buckshot from the gun of an angry Confederate sympathizer.

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Hay went on to call Ellsworth’s troops “the largest sturdiest and physically the most magnificent men I ever saw collected together.” It did not take long for the Zouaves to attract attention. They were as entertaining as a festive carnival or a three-ringed circus, plaguing the city and its inhabitants with bizarre antics and outrageous behavior. On May 9, they even helped in saving Willard’s Hotel, which had caught fire and almost burned to the ground. After hearing of the event Hay admitted, “They are utterly unapproachable in anything they attempt.”

The first battle fatality of the Civil War hit the White House hard. When Lincoln got word of the incident he was so overcome with grief that he was unable to hold back tears and had to excuse himself from a meeting, “I will make no apology, gentlemen, for my weakness,” Lincoln told his guests; “but I knew poor Ellsworth well, and held him in great regard.”

Ellsworth’s regiment was struck by the passing of its beloved colonel even to the point of considering violent retaliation against southern civilians. “As rage succeeded the first shock of grief,” states historian Margaret Leech, “the Fire Zouaves threatened to burn the town of Alexandria, it was thought prudent to confine them for the night on a steamer in the middle of the Potomac.” Meanwhile, Ellsworth’s body was transported back to the White House where the President and a few close friends held a private viewing. A funeral commenced the next day, garnering the attention of almost every newspaper and press outlet in the North. At this early stage in the conflict, death was a relatively new phenomenon, but later, when the body count numbered in the hundreds of thousands, Ellsworth’s untimely demise seemed less significant. After the funeral, Mary Todd Lincoln was given the Confederate flag, stained with Ellsworth’s blood, which only one day before flew high on the roof of the Marshall House. John Hay, who just a few weeks before had witnessed the Zouaves enter Washington, told his friend Hannah Angell that “when Ellsworth was murdered all my sunshine perished. I hope you may never know the dry, barren agony of soul that comes with the utter and hopeless loss of a great love.”

Lincoln wrote a letter to Ellsworth’s parents on May 25, giving his condolences. “So much of promised usefulness to one’s country, and of bright hopes for one’s self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall.” Lincoln asserted that Ellsworth had an overwhelming “power to command men . . . and a tact altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent, in that department, I ever knew.” In later years, when Lincoln was having ongoing strategic disagreements with his commanders, one wonders whether he thought of Ellsworth and what might have been. “My acquaintance with him began less than two years ago; yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engaging engagements, would permit.” He went on to praise Ellsworth’s virtues and character—something that Victorian America admired about his heroes. “To me, he appeared to have no indulgences or pastimes; and I never heard him utter a profane, or an intertemporal word.” This was probably stretching the truth, but Ellsworth’s prudery became legendary and he was remembered as the shining example of a humble soldier serving and dying for his country. “In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow,” Lincoln concluded, “I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of your young friend, and your brace and early fallen child.”

No contemporary was touched more deeply by Ellsworth’s death than his friend John Hay. Hay wrote three articles (two in 1861 and one in 1896) highlighting his relationship with Ellsworth and praising the character and fortitude of the man. Writing in The Washington Chronicle on May 26, Hay argued that “no man could have died more deeply lamented than the young hero who is moving today in solemn grandeur towards the crushed hearts that sadly wait him in the North.” Next Hay painted Ellsworth as a nineteenth century medieval knight—a man who might have sat comfortably at King Arthur’s roundtable. “His dauntless and stainless life has renewed the bright possibilities of the antique chivalry, and in his death we may give him unblamed the grand cognizance of which the world has long been unworthy—Le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche.” Later that summer he penned another piece which was published in The Atlantic. In it he described Ellsworth as a man who possessed “the bright enthusiasm of the youthful dreamer and the eminent practicality of the man of affairs.” Hay clearly saw that Ellsworth’s personality had great potential to excel in the national spotlight. Yet these grand expectations were cut down by buckshot from the gun of an angry Confederate sympathizer.

Predictably, the South’s response to the Marshall House incident was markedly different from that of the North’s. To many supporters of Dixie, Ellsworth was seen as a prime example of Yankee aggression, a blatant representation of northern arrogance and disregard for individual civil liberties. He did after all enter a man’s home without permission and confiscated a piece of private property. James Dawson, a lawyer from Selma, Alabama, referred to the Union occupation as “the invasion of Virginia by Alexandria” and believed Ellsworth’s actions had sealed his fate. “Providence seems to have cut him off, as soon as he touched our soil, and it will not surprise me, if the army, led on by [Winfield] Scott, does not meet the same fate.” One southern newspaper praised hotel owner James W. Jackson, who had “perished a mid the pack of wolves,” for defending his liberty against the tyranny of the Union Army. There was a large outpouring of sympathy for Jackson. Money was even donated by compassionate southerners and a small collection was given to his widow and children. Six months later southerners were still talking about the incident. Diarist Mary Chestnut recalled visiting with “A man repeating Manassas stories” who told her that after Ellsworth’s death Union soldiers seized many southern civilians living in Alexandria, including the eighty year old mother of Jackson, and marched them to Washington for imprisonment. Below the Mason-Dixon Line bitterness was the response to the Ellsworth incident. The death of Ellsworth sparked controversy that cut across sectional lines. Mary Todd Lincoln’s half-sister Elodie, a staunch Confederate supporter, had to answer many letters concerning her sister’s relationship with Ellsworth.

“[He] was only an acquaintance of Kitte’s, but one with whom she was thrown much last winter, and being agreeable I think they were excellent friends, nothing more, but had she then seen him in his true light, she could not surely have entertained even that feeling. Nothing but contempt and scorn would have been the emotion of woman for such a man.” Whereas the North praised Ellsworth for his virtues, the South cursed him for his tempestuous disregard for civil liberties. The sections had clearly split over the issue. One year after the incident the embers were still burning. Confederate Chief of Ordnance Josiah Gorgas wrote in his journal on June 12, 1862 that “a man by the name of Jackson killed Ellsworth, colonel of Zouaves, for entering his home, & attempting to haul down the Confederate flag on his home in Alexandria. Jackson was of course instantly butchered. His devotion had an ecletic effect, & was looked on as a happy omen of the spirit of the war.” According to Gorgas, Jackson represented something that the South stood for—honor, private property, and civil liberties—a physical manifestation of the Cause. Ellsworth was just another Yankee who wanted to impose his will on the good people of Dixie.

Perhaps the South should have thought twice about praising the death of Elmer Ellsworth. Almost immediately after the incident young men and boys filled with a spirit of anger and vengeance urgently headed to the nearest recruiting station and volunteered to fight for the Union. Ironically, the death of his good friend became a godsend for Lincoln who, before Ellsworth’s death, was struggling to find enough men to fill army regiments. In New York City, George Templeton Strong, who just days before witnessed the Zouaves parade down Broadway, wrote in his diary that “Colonel Ellsworth was a valuable man, but he could hardly have done such a service as his assassin has rendered the country. His murder will stir the fire in every western state, and shows all Christendom with what kind of enemy we are contending.” Strong was correct. Ellsworth’s death became the lightning rod for recruitment that Lincoln had been looking for. The 44th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment even nicknamed itself “The People’s Ellsworth Regiment” and the “Ellsworth Avengers.” “Ellsworth’s death rejuvenated martial enthusiasm,” William Marvel has stated, “bringing enough men into the camps to fill companies that even the prospective captains had given up any hope of completing.” Even in death Ellsworth contributed to the Union cause.

“Death’s significance for the Civil War generation arose as well from its violation of prevailing assumptions about life’s proper end – about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances,” Drew Gilpin Faust has recently stated in her book This Republic of Suffering. All too soon, Faust continues, “a military adventure undertaken as an occasion for heroics and glory turned into a costly struggle for suffering and loss.” The realities of modern warfare were difficult to accept. Many were flabbergasted that thousands of fathers, sons, and husbands were dying by horrific means that went against the prior expectation of what was considered an honorable death. Ellsworth represented the naïve assumption that many Americans had about war during the antebellum era. His death, therefore, is significant in that it punctured the romantic spirit that so pervaded the prewar mind. The general public was unsure of how to cope with the murder of such a dashing young man. As Faust explains, “the press, in this moment before casualties became commonplace, detailed every aspect of his death, from his heroic sacrifice of life, to the honoring of his body in state in the White House, to his lifelike corpse.” One soldier, as Luther E. Robinson recalls, “who went into the war at sixteen, as a drummer boy, (John Dalton, Monmouth, Illinois) told me . . . that he recalled the death of Ellsworth as clearly as that of Lincoln, four years later; that his community in Ohio mourned Ellsworth deeply and that all the people loved him.”

During the course of the war Ellsworth’s death lingered in the memory of many soldiers and civilians of the Union. Like John Brown, his legacy was immortalized in popular ballads that were sung on long marches and in comfy parlors alike. James D. Gray of Reading, Pennsylvania composed the most popular song, “The Death of Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth,” on the first Sunday after Ellsworth’s murder. The anthem emphasized the patriotism and sacrifice of the young Zouave and bears the stamp of the rampant nationalism that spread across the North after his death. A small excerpt demonstrates the Romanization of Ellsworth and the mystique that was built up around his short career:

Cut off in all the prime of youth, This noble Ellsworth fell, Slayn by a treacherous traitor’s hand, Hark! hear his funeral knell. I die, I die, he nobly said, But in a glorious cause,


17. Strong, Diary of the Civil War, 146; William Marvel, Mr. Lincoln Goes to War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 78.

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But in a glorious cause,
In exercise of freedom’s rights,  
My country and her laws,  
My country and her laws, my boys,  
My country and her laws. 
In exercise of freedom’s rights,  
My country and her laws.

Mary S. Robinson’s popular 1866 book, A Household History of the American Conflict, featured a striking frontispiece of Ellsworth in his prime. Chapter five reported a fictional account of a father recounting Ellsworth’s life and death to his children, telling them they would do well to emulate this soldier. “Remember that name, children. He was a true man; the youngest and greatest hero of the war, thus far.” But for the father it was Ellsworth’s virtues that stood out. “I can remember no truer specimen of a Christian American youth than Elmer Ellsworth.”

It is difficult to contemplate what might have been if Ellsworth had not been shot and killed in Alexandria. One commentator has stated that “on the roll-call of great captains, when this greatest of all wars closed, his name might have stood second to none.” Even Robert E. Lee, upon hearing about the Marshall House incident, is said to have remarked that Ellsworth would have become the commanding general of the Union Army had he lived. “The world can never compute,” John Hay wrote in 1896, “can hardly even guess, what was lost in his untimely end.” But this, of course, is all speculation. Ellsworth rose from poverty to the national spotlight in the span of just a few years. He captured the hearts of many patriotic citizens, eager soldiers, and young damsels. Yet there is no escaping the fact that in death he contributed more to the Union cause than in life. Ellsworth was himself aware of what his potential martyrdom might entail. As he wrote to his parents before that fateful day: “I am perfectly confident to accept whatever my fortune may be, and confident that He who noteth even the fall of a sparrow, will have some purpose even in the fate of one like me.”

Today, Ellsworth is a largely forgotten figure in the annals of American history. His legacy has been overshadowed by Civil War giants like Grant, Lee, and Sherman. During the early days of the conflict he was remembered as the first soldier to sacrifice his life for his section—but there were many more to come.

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