the Confederacy's demise. But the pages that follow demonstrate that many women of the wartime South invented new selves designed in large measure to resist change, to fashion the new out of as much of the old as could survive in the altered postwar world of defeated Confederates, regional poverty, and black freedom.

CHAPTER ONE

What Shall We Do?

WOMEN CONFRONT THE CRISIS

As the nation passed anxiously through the long and uncertain months of the "secession winter" of 1861-62, Lucy Wood wrote from her home in Charlottesville, Virginia, to her fiancé, Waddy Butler. His native South Carolina had seceded just before Christmas, declaring itself sovereign and independent, but Virginia had not yet acted. Just a week before Lucy Wood's letter of January 21, her state's legislature had voted to call a secession convention, and Wood thought disunion was "fast becoming the order of the day." Yet these momentous events had already changed Lucy's life. Waddy Butler, preoccupied with new military obligations in service of what Wood pointedly called "your country," had been neglecting his intended bride, failing to write as frequently as she had come to expect. Affianced
they still might be, but, Wood noted, they had become citizens of different nations, officially "foreigners to each other now."  

In January 1861 Lucy Wood was more bemused than genuinely troubled by this intrusion of grave public matters into her personal affairs, and she fully expected Virginia's prompt secession to reunite her with Butler in "common cause." But beneath the playful language of her letter lay an incisive perception. Waddy Butler's new life as a soldier would ultimately not just deprive his future wife of "hearing from you as often as I otherwise should," but would divide the young couple as he marched off to war and she remained home in a world of women. By removing men to the battlefield, the war that followed secession threatened to make the men and women of the South foreigners to one another, separating them into quite different wartime lives. As the sense of crisis mounted through the early months of 1861 and as political conflict turned into full-scale war, southern ladies struggled to make the Confederacy a common cause with their men, to find a place for themselves in a culture increasingly preoccupied with the quintessentially male concerns of politics and of battle. Confederate women were determined that the South's crisis must be "certainly ours as well as that of the men."

**Public Affairs Absorb Our Interest**

Like most southern women of her class, Lucy Wood was knowledgeable about political affairs, and her letter revealed that she had thought carefully about the implications of secession. Her objections to disunion, she explained to Waddy Butler, arose from her fears that an independent southern nation would reopen the African slave trade, a policy she found "extremely revolting." Yet as she elaborated her position, detailing her disagreements with the man she intended to wed, Wood abruptly and revealingly interrupted the flow of her argument. "But I have no political opinion and have a peculiar dislike to all females who discuss such matters."

However compelling the unfolding drama in which they found themselves, southern ladies knew well that in nineteenth-century America, politics was regarded as the privilege and responsibility of men. As one South Carolina lady decisively remarked, "woman has not business with such matters." Men voted; men spoke in public; ladies appropriately remained within the sphere of home and family. Yet the secession crisis would see these prescriptions honored in the breach as much as the observance. In this moment of national upheaval, the lure of politics seemed all but irresistible. "Politics engrosses my every thought," Amanda Sims confided to her friend Harriet Palmer. "Public affairs absorb all our interest," confirmed Catherine Edmondston of North Carolina. In Richmond, Lucy Bagby crowded into the ladies' gallery to hear the Virginia Convention's electrifying secession debates, and women began customarily to arrive an hour before the proceedings opened each morning in order to procure good seats. Aging South Carolina widow Keziah Brevard confessed that she was so caught up in the stirring events that when she awoke in the night, "My first thought is: 'my state is out of the union.'"

Like Lucy Wood, however, many women thought this preoccupation not entirely fitting, even if irresistible. Few were as adamant in their opposition to women's growing political interest and assertiveness as Louisianian Sarah Morgan, who longed "for a place where I would never hear a woman talk politics" and baldly declared, "I hate to hear women on political subjects." But most ladies were troubled by feeling so strongly about matters they could only defensively claim as their rightful concern. "I wonder sometimes," wrote Ada Baco, a young widow, "if people think it strange I should be so warm a secessionist, but," she continued more confidently, "why should they, has not every woman a right to express her opinions upon such subjects, in private if not in public?"

The "Ladies of Broward's Neck" Florida demonstrated a similar mixture of engagement and self-doubt when they united to address the "politicians" of their state in a letter to the *Jacksonville Standard*. Their positive views on secession, they assured their readers, were not frivolous or ill-founded but were supported in fact and argument. "And if any person is desirous to know how we come by the information to which we allude, we tell them in advance, by reading the newspapers and public journals for the ten years past and when we read we do so with inquiring minds peculiar to our sex." Rather than accepting their womanhood as prohibiting political activism or undermining the legitimacy of their political views, these Florida ladies insisted on the special advantages of their female identity, boldly and innovatively claiming politics as peculiarly appropriate to woman's sphere.

Catherine Edmondston worried about the vehemence of her secessionist views because of the divisions they were causing in her own family. Before Lincoln's call for troops in April 1861, Edmondston's parents and sister remained staunch Unionists, although Catherine and her husband of fifteen years strongly supported the new southern nation. Edmondston found the resulting conflict very "painful" and was particularly distressed at having to
disagree with her father. "It is the first time in my life that my judgment & feelings did not yield to him." It was a "pity," she observed, that politics had become so heated as to "intrude into private life." Boundaries between what she had regarded as public and private domains were being undermined, as were previously unquestioned definitions of women's place within them. As war consumed the South, Edmondston would find that little space was left to what she called "private life." The private, the domestic, would become part of the homefront, another battlefield in what was by 1865 to become total war. 

In 1861, however, southern women still largely accepted the legitimacy of divisions between the private and the public, the domestic and the political, the sphere of women and the sphere of men. Yet they nevertheless resisted being excluded from the ever more heated and ever more engrossing political conflict that surrounded them. Women's politics in the secession crisis was necessarily a politics of ambivalence. Often women, like men, were torn about their decision to support or oppose secession. Few white southerners of either sex left the Union without a pang of regret for the great American experiment, and just as few rejected the newly independent South without a parallel sense of loss. "It is like uprooting some of our holiest sentiments to feel that to love [the Union] longer is to be treacherous to ourselves and our country," remarked Susan Cornwall of Georgia. As Catherine Edmondston explained, it seemed to her perfectly acceptable for a Confederate to "mourn over" the United States "as for a lost friend."

But women's political ambivalence in the secession crisis arose from a deeper source as well: their uncertainty about their relationship to politics altogether. Admitting that they as women had no place in the public sphere, they nevertheless asserted their claims within it. Yet they acted with considerable doubt, with reluctance and apology, longing to behave as ladies but declining to stand aside while history unfolded around them. War had not yet begun, but southern women had already inaugurated their effort to claim a place and an interest in the national crisis.

Your Country Calls

What one Alabama lady called the "unexpected proportions" of the Civil War would take most Americans North and South by surprise. Many southerners anticipated that the Union would not contest southern secession, and James Chesnut, former United States senator from South Carolina, confidently promised that he would drink all the blood spilled in the movement for independence. Yet as soon as their states seceded, southern men began to arm and drill, and expectations of military conflict at once thrilled and frightened the region's women. Looking back on those early days, one Virginia lady remarked that war had at first seemed like "a pageant and a tournament," but others wrote of "foreboding for the future" or of a "trembling fear" of what might be in store. Disunion troubled Julia Davidson for reasons entirely apart from divisions of politics. "I study about it sometimes," she wrote her husband, John, "and get The blues so bad I do not know what to do. God grant That all things may yet be settled without bloodshed." As an elderly widow living alone on a large plantation, Keziah Brevard feared not just military bloodshed but worried too about what she called the "enemies in our midst," the vulnerability of the South to slave uprisings.

White southern women felt far freer than their men to admit—and even no doubt to feel—fears that, however unnaturally, were entirely justified by the perilous circumstances facing the South. Women voiced apprehensions about war and anxieties about loss of particular loved ones, fears that masculine conventions of honor and courage would not permit men to express. From the outset this touch of realism tempered women's politics and women's patriotism: the culturally accepted legitimacy of women's private feelings and everyday obligations posed a counterweight to the romantic masculine ideology of war. Soon after the passage of the Ordinance of Secession, a South Carolina lady offered her womanly resolution of the inconsistency between these imperatives, explicitly privileging the personal over the political, loyalty to family over obligation to the state. "I do not approve of this thing," she declared. "What do I care for patriotism? My husband is my country. What is country to me if he be killed?" Kate Rowland of Georgia admitted that her "patriotism is at a very low ebb when Charlie comes in competition." When her husband joined the army, she had no ambition for him to garner fame and glory; instead she wished him to secure a post as far as possible from all fighting. "Charlie is dearer to me than my country, & I cannot willingly give him up," she confessed.

The conflict between women's emergent patriotism and their devotion to the lives and welfare of their families became clear as southern men prepared for war. Very precise expectations of men's appropriate behavior in wartime enhanced many women's enthusiasm for the Confederacy. The romance of the military and the close association of manhood with honor, courage, and glory outweighed the reluctance many women felt to give up their loved
ones, for they had come to believe that the very value of these men was inseparable from their willingness to sacrifice their lives in battle. A "man did not deserve the name of man if he did not fight for his country," Kate Cumming concluded. One lady of the Shenandoah Valley sent her son off to camp with a triumphant proclamation in the columns of the *Winchester Virginian*: "Your country calls. I am ready to offer you in defense of your country's rights and honor; and I now offer you, a bearded boy of 17 summers,—not with grief, but thanking God that I have a son to offer." Sarah Lawton of Georgia celebrated the opportunities she thought war would provide to make men more manly and to arrest what she regarded as men's failure to fulfill her expectations of them. "I think something was needed to wake them from their effeminate habits and [I] welcome war for that." Mary Vaught ceased speaking to those of her gentleman friends who had not enlisted, and a group of young women in Texas presented hoop-skirts and bonnets to all the men in the neighborhood who did not volunteer.

But the call for soldiers deeply troubled many women, who anticipated that their husbands and sons might well meet death rather than glory on the battlefield. Alabama widow Sarah Espy was distressed by her son's determination to enlist. "I do not like it much," she wrote, "but will have to submit." Lizzie Ozburn of Georgia endured just a few weeks of army service by her husband, Jimmie, before herself arranging for a substitute to complete his term of enlistment. "Then if you don't come," she warned him, "you won't have any lady to come to when you do come."

The conflicting imperatives of patriotism and protectiveness played themselves out dramatically in the ritualized moment of troop departures. Communities gathered en masse to wish the soldiers farewell and often to present them with uniforms or flags sewn by local ladies. Patriotic addresses were the order of the day, and the soldiers marched off, as one young member of the elite Washington Artillery described it, "pelting with fruit, flowers, cards & notes" from throngs of ladies. Ceremonies of colorful uniforms, waving banners, patriotic speeches, and martial music displayed all the romance of war as well as unbounded expectations of personal courage and glorious victory.

The ebullience of the crowd, however, often came at the expense of considerable repression of feeling. Gertrude Thomas spoke of the "speechless agony" with which she bade her husband good-bye, and Emily Harris seemed almost resentful that "It has always been my lot to be obliged to shut up my griefs in my own breast." When one woman burst into tears before two young soldiers, their mother chastised her, "How could you, let them see you crying? It will unman them." Men could evidently be men only with considerable female assistance.

But often enough, women, especially younger ones, did break down. Sixteen-year-old Louisiana Burge described the reactions of her boarding school friends to the departure of a regiment from their Georgia town. Almost all the girls were weeping, "Em Bellamy spent nearly the whole evening in my room crying about the war and John T. Burr who leaves tonight. . . . Between her and cousin Emma Ward crying about Ed Gwinn I..."

have had a taste of it. . . Ginnie Godley's feelings have overcome her; she has gone to bed, sick with crying about Bush Lumsonden who don't care a snap for her. Ridiculous! I can hear Susie Clayton screaming way down in her room."

A seventeen-year-old bride loudly voiced her rejection of the masculine ethos of war for the feminine ideal of domestic love. "Oh Dan! Dan!" she sobbed, "I don't want to be proud of you. I just don't want you to get hurt! . . . I don't want fame or glory! I want you!" Catherine Edmondston, more mature as well as considerably invested in her new claims to a political identity and new sense of public responsibility, contrasted her behavior with the likes of this young bride. As her husband, Patrick, departed with his men, "The women, many of them wept, sobbed, nay even shrieked aloud, but I had no tears to shed then. With a calm, stern, determined feeling I saw them depart. The sentiment of exalted Patriotism which filled my heart found no echo in Lamentations, no vent in tears. He is gone, gone in the highest exercise of man's highest & holiest duty! . . . I would not have him here, would not have him fail in one duty, falter in one step."

Catherine Edmondston's posture embodied the prescriptions of an emergent ideology of wartime womanhood. Confederate females could not privilege their personal needs above the demands of the nation. In the moment of crisis, country had to come before husband or son. If the South was to survive, women had to become patriotic, had to assume some of the political interests of men, and had to repress certain womanly feelings and expectations for the good of the Cause. Woman should cultivate a spirit of "self-reliance," should practice "self-denial," wrote Leila W. in a piece for the Southern Monthly that she entitled "Woman A Patriot." But, the essayist was careful to add, "we do not mean to say that she should become masculine."

By the summer of 1861 the effort to create a new Confederate woman was well under way in the South's public press. Military manpower needs required a rationalization of female sacrifice and a silencing of women's direct interest in protecting husbands and sons. The nineteenth-century creed of domesticity had long urged self-denial and service to others as central to woman's mission, but war necessitated significant alterations—even perversions—for this ideology of behavior and identity. Women's self-sacrifice for personally significant others—husbands, brothers, sons, or family—was transformed into sacrifice of those individuals to an abstract and intangible cause.

Redefining women's sacrifice in this manner created both logical and emotional difficulties for southerners, who endeavored to address and resolve these contradictions in extensive public discussion. Gender thus became an explicit subject of widespread debate. Songs, plays, poems, even official presidential pronouncements sought to enlist women of all classes in the work of filling the ranks. One popular theme urged young women to bestow their favors only on men in uniform. In a much reprinted song, a male songwriter assumed a female voice to proclaim, "I Would Like to Change My Name." This fictionalized heroine was searching for a husband,

But he must be a soldier
A veteran from the wars,
One who has fought for "Southern Rights"
Beneath the Bars and Stars.

A letter from "Many Ladies" to the Charleston Daily Courier in August 1861 warned cowards and slackers, "None but the brave deserve the fair." Even Jefferson Davis addressed the question of women's appropriate marital choice, declaring the empty sleeve of the mutilated veteran preferable to the "muscular arm" of "him who staid at home and grew fat."

One song published early in the war acknowledged the clash between woman's traditional role and the conflict's new demands. From "stately hall" to "cottage fair," every woman rich or poor was confronted by her own "stormy battle" raging within her breast.
There Love, the true, the brave,
The beautiful, the strong,
Wrestles with Duty, gaunt and stern—
Wrestles and struggles long.\textsuperscript{19}

Like male songwriters who addressed that theme, the “Soldiers Wife” who had penned the lyrics was certain that, like soldiers, women themselves would win “heart victories” over their emotions and in their “proudest triumphs”send their menfolk off to war. Stirring marches commemorated the scene of parting, with men striding nobly into the horizon while women such as Catherine Edmondston just as nobly waved handkerchiefs and cheered their departure. “Go fight for us, we’ll pray for you. Our mothers did so before us.” Popular songs and poems deplored the very behavior Edmondston had found so upsetting, urging women to repress their grief, lest they weaken soldiers’ resolve. “The maid who binds her warrior’s sash / And smiling all her pain dissembles” or “The mother who conceals her grief” accomplished woman’s highest duty, a poem in the \textit{Richmond Record} affirmed. Women, one newspaper proclaimed, had been offered a “glorious privilege” in the opportunity to contribute to the Cause by offering up their men. Yet popular expression acknowledged that women often harbored lingering doubt. A newspaper poem, “I’ve Kissed Him and Let Him Go,” was among the frankest of such treatments.\textsuperscript{20}

There is some, I know, who feel a strange pride
In giving their country their all,
Who count it a glory that boys from their side
In the strife are ready to fall,
But I sitting here have no pride in my heart
(God forgive that this should be so!)
For the boy that I love the tears still will start.
Yet I’ve kissed him and let him go.

Best was to feel right, so dedicated to the Cause that personal interest all but disappeared. Next best was to stifle lingering personal feeling. But the minimal requirement was to silence doubt and behave properly, even if right feeling proved unattainable. Catherine Edmondston and Gertrude Thomas both knew how they were expected to act, as did the Louisiana woman who confided to her diary, “How I do hate to give him up, but I suppose I have to be a martyr during this war.”\textsuperscript{21}

Women prepare their men for war. Equipment, 1861, watercolor by William Ludwell Sheppard. Sheppard made sketches during the war but did not complete his watercolors until the turn of the century. Courtesy of the Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia.
Some Womanly Occupation

Only months into the conflict, women's behavior and identities had already become a matter for public discussion and private scrutiny. In considerable measure this debate arose from the needs of a state and a culture endeavoring to enlist women in its defense, and these imperatives would become ever more powerful as military struggle intensified during the next four years. But women themselves had very strong personal motives in undertaking this examination of female roles and opportunities in the new wartime world.22

From the start, war seemed to belong to the men. They, "more privileged," as Julia Le Grand explained, "are abroad and at war, making name and fortune and helping to make a nation." Women remained at home, seemingly useless, marginal to the stirring events of the day. "I am like a pent-up volcano," complained Le Grand. "I wish I had a field for my energies. I hate common life, a life of visiting, dressing and tatting, which seems to devolve on women, and now that there is better work to do, real tragedy and real romance and history weaving every day, I suffer, I suffer, leading the life I do." A young girl despaired of a friend that she was a "cipher," a zero, in the "great conflict. I am miserable when I think of it." "If I could only be of some use to our poor stricken country," she lamented.23 In these painful feelings of uselessness lay the seeds of women's wartime transformation, a transformation grounded in demeaning sentiments of self-loathing directed against both their individual selves and the female sex.

"What is the use of all these worthless women, in war times?" Sarah Morgan scornfully demanded.24

Numbers of women translated this contempt into a fantasy of becoming men, a desire to escape from a gender identity that had in peacetime seemed entirely acceptable. Being unable to fight made Sarah Morgan regret being a woman "for the first time in my life." Alice Ready, a young Tennessean, confessed to her diary, "I never before wished I was a man—now I feel so keenly my weakness and dependence. I cannot do or say anything—for it would be unbecoming in a young lady—How I should love to fight and even die for my country...."

Anger, in fact, became an emotional staple among females of the wartime South. Most often women identified it as a by-product of legitimate patriotism and self-consciously directed their fury against Yankee invaders and oppressors. But the true and unacknowledged sources of women's wartime rage were far more complex and diffuse. Ready's anger in the early months of conflict arose from frustration and resentment at the way in which war's exaltation of men and masculine virtues established a compelling logic of female inferiority. Numbers of other southern ladies turned newly discovered feelings of anger and futility against themselves as useless women. Sarah Morgan exemplified just such bitter self-loathing in her explanation of why she feared war's outcome. "The men... who are worth something," she wrote, "will die off in their prime; while we worthless women, of no value or importance to ourselves or the rest of the world, will live on, useless trash in creation."25

Inactivity and consequent feelings of unimportance were debilitating, yet few women knew where to turn. "I don't know how to be useful often times," Caroline Davis of Virginia remarked. "Oh! to see and be in it all," Kate Stone yearned. "I hate weary days of inaction. Yet what can women do but wait and suffer?" As Stone understood clearly after the departure of her brothers for the front, "We who stay behind may find it harder than they who go." Action was more than a matter of self-esteem, as, increasingly, it served as a means of managing anxiety. "How much heavier is the pressure of grief," Catherine Edmondston observed, "when there is nothing to be done but to look at the dreadful fact steadily in the face, than when there is a need for action, for exertion, for thought of some kind." A Louisiana mother spoke a different tongue, but shared the same sentiments: "Les occupations sont... un grand remède."26

In the early months of 1861 Ada Baco turned to a traditional outlet for women's energies as a remedy for her feelings of unworthiness. "Another day has passed & what have I accomplished?... I am too unworthy... There is nothing left me but prayer," she resolved. Baco began to see her religious devotions not as an end but as a means to a larger usefulness. Widowed in her twenties, she had in addition lost her only child, and she found herself in 1861 without any clear purpose in life. Yet as she contemplated the national crisis, she believed herself peculiarly equipped to deal with its demands. Her loss, she thought, had imbued her with emotional suffering and privation, even though, she conceded, she had experienced no material hardship. She looked to war and upheaval as a divinely sent opportunity. "Now I can give myself up to my state, the very thought elevates me.
These long years I have prayed for something to do, perhaps my prayer is now being answered.  

"Something to do," "a field for my energies," "to live to some purpose," "to be in the heat and turmoil of it all"—women longed for a part in the crisis. A May 1861 letter from Vernon, Louisiana, to the New Orleans Daily Picayune expressed in a public forum the sentiments women across the South had been confiding to their diaries. The author, careful to write anonymously so as not to claim public attention unbekowing to her sex, explained that "the universal cry is 'what shall we do?'" "We wish merely," she explained, "some womanly occupation in which to vent our patriotism, in which to render real and substantial aid . . . in which we can work and act without," she reassured her readers, "moving from our feminine sphere." Could not, she entreated, some "inventive genius" define an appropriate role for southern women in wartime?29

It would not be an inventive genius, but thousands of southerners, male and female, who would in both deeds and words respond to the query posed by this "Daughter of the South." Newspapers and periodicals, sharing the letter writer's concern about the boundaries of the "feminine sphere," stressed the wartime relevance of woman's customary moral and spiritual role. "Can you imagine," asked the editors of the Southern Field and Fireside, "what would be the moral condition of the Confederate Army in six months without woman's influence?" The Augusta Weekly Constitutionalist confirmed in July 1861, "Great indeed is the task assigned to woman . . . Not," the paper observed pointedly—and a bit defensively—"to make laws, not to lead armies, not to govern empires; but to form those by whom laws are made, armies led . . . to soften firmness into mercy, and chasten honor into refinement." John B. Minor echoed these public statements in an April 1861 letter to his cousin Mary Blackford. "It is the province of your sex," he declared, "in its weakness and its fears, vastly to influence ours in times like these. You women . . . possess so much generosity and magnanimous unselfishness that you can and do assist in inspiring a high-souled, self-sacrificing patriotism, which diffuses an aroma of virtue through Society."295

While these assurances may have partially relieved women's sense of exclusion and irrelevance, they did not speak to the need for action and occupation; flattery did not provide women much to do. Unlike white women of the lesser orders, for whom husbands' departures meant dramatically increased burdens of physical toil in household and farm, women in more prosperous slaveholding families did not need immediately to devote themselves to achieving a subsistence. The greater financial resources and resiliency of their households as well as the presence of slaves to undertake most physical labor left many privileged white women without pressing responsibilities. Diffusing what John Minor called an aroma of virtue did not fill lonely days and anxious nights. Yet, as Virginian Sara Pryor remembered in her later Reminiscences, "To be idle in war is torture." Describing what she recognized in retrospect as almost ridiculous busyness—embroidering razor cases or decorating soldiers' sewing kits—she at the same time affirmed its larger purpose: "Nothing is ridiculous that helps anxious women to bear their lot—cheats them with the hope that they are doing good." In the spring and summer of 1861 many articulate middle- and upper-class southern women began to seek opportunities to participate in the mounting conflict, active means of expressing their commitment to the Cause. Women began to unite to define the female purpose they all so eagerly sought. For the most part they were careful to heed admonitions to remain within their appropriate sphere. But in the course of their actions they would also redefine themselves.31

A Part to Perform

For most of these southern ladies, the very act of binding together as women marked a new departure. Women's associations and organizations had not blossomed in the antebellum South as they had in the northern states. In considerable measure this difference derived from factors of geography and demography; the southern population was far more scattered and far less urbanized than that of the North, so that women tended to see less of one another and to have fewer opportunities to come together simply because of the logistics of travel. In fact, such prewar women's societies as did exist were generally located within the South's cities, and in these situations antebellum organization provided a solid basis for wartime activity.32

The comparative paucity of women's organizations in the prewar South cannot simply be attributed to its overwhelmingly rural character, however. Social factors played a role in these regional differences as well. Slaveholding southern women thought of themselves primarily as part of a hierarchical family or household, with their most significant connections tying them in relationships of dominance and dependence to their husbands, children, and slaves rather than to other white women. With its disruption of southern households, war would alter these relationships profoundly, and with them

Women Confront the Crisis

[22] Women Confront the Crisis

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Assigning the heavy task of the tents to seven of her female slaves laboring on the piazza at home, Edmondston herself joined the white ladies of the area at a nearby plantation, where together they stitched uniforms. “Never was known such unanimity of action amongst all classes,” Edmondston remarked.35

Many such gatherings soon evolved into formal organizations with constitutions, dues, and women officers. But the unanimity of classes Edmondston described was not always present, for the associations remained the preserve and social outlet of the elite. When Mary Ann Cobb of Georgia canvassed her neighborhood to secure support for the soldiers, she was greeted with many refusals, especially from the less-privileged Athens inhabitants. One woman told her bluntly, “The whole Southern Confederacy was not worth a thimble full of blood.” Cobb herself later resigned because of what she identified as dissension and inefficiency in the Athens society.36

By midsummer many organizations had shifted from sewing to knitting, with socks a high priority for the coming winter months. Kate Stone had never knitted before and so began with crewel comforters but was confident she would soon “advance to socks and gloves.” Women began as well to collect donations to provide not just flags and uniforms but a wide variety of soldiers’ necessities—from Bibles to lint for bandages to scissors to underwear. By the beginning of 1862 the Greenville, South Carolina, Ladies’ Aid Association had supplied twenty boxes and three bales of contributions for soldiers’ welfare. In Floyd County, Georgia, 300 members enlisted through a door-to-door canvass in August paid a dollar each in dues and by the end of the year had shipped five train carloads of provisions to the front.37

Many needed supplies had to be purchased rather than made, and even sewing and knitting required cloth and yarn. As a result, ladies’ societies turned to money-raising efforts, from concerts and fairs to dramatic performances. Lizzie Osburn suspected these efforts were primarily designed to provide occasions for women’s socializing and thought citizens should just donate directly to the Cause. “I dont enjoy any thing of the kind,” she wrote her husband after taking her contributions—a cooked tongue and some homemade wine—to be sold at a ladies’ association fair in Georgia. “I think if the people were just right they would not have to be worked so many ways to get what they ought to do out of them they ought to go or give to their last dollar and to the last day of the battle.” But few shared Lizzie’s clear-sighted perspective, and benefits proliferated across the South. On September 29, 1861, the Ladies Relief Association of Spartanburg presented an “Amateur Concert” of twenty-one pieces. In Charleston an afternoon of music and
recitations culminated with an original poem, "The Soldier's Dream in His Blanket on the Ground," by a lady of the city. The subject, the Mercury assured its readers, "at this time, will interest our community at large." After mistakenly reporting it to be the composition of a man, the paper apologized for its error and printed the eleven stanzas of the poem in its entirety. The concluding lines offer a sense of how relief societies served not just to raise funds but to provide occasions for patriotic expression and national solidarity.

Then God bless him, bless the soldier,
And God nerve him for the fight,
May he lend his arm new prowess
To do battle for the right;
Let him feel that while he's dreaming
In his fitful slumber bound,
That we're praying—God watch o'er him
In his blanket on the ground.

In this afternoon's entertainment, Charleston's women combined their accustomed spiritual influence with more material goals to benefit the soldiers. The occasion provided as well an unusual opportunity for a female author to gain a voice.58

The most popular benefit performances throughout the South, however, were not concerts or recitations but tableaux vivants, staged representations of familiar themes enacted by costumed women posing as in a still life during a musical interlude. "Very much in fashion," tableaux appealed for their inspiration to literature and history as well as current events. Ada Bacot especially enjoyed the death scene from Romeo and Juliet and the presentation of a "Turkish Slave Market" by the ladies' association to which she belonged. Mary Legg wrote to a friend of a performance with more immediate relevance. "There was one tableau I think you would have liked it was the 'Southern Confederacy' each state was represented by one of the girls dressed in white with a scarf of the State Colors, and the States were all united by a wreath of flowers, while Kentucky stood with folded arms, face rather averted from the southern Confederacy and looking towards the US flag; poor Maryland was dressed in black kneeling as though supplicating and bound by chains." Mary had at first felt reluctant to appear before an audience, but her friends had prevailed upon her, insisting that in service of so noble a cause, participation could not be unseemly. "They could not get enough girls to form the one I have just mentioned so I consented to be

Florida. Clemie was Texas." Maria Hubard of Virginia was less troubled than triumphant at her new dramatic accomplishments. "This day," she wrote on December 16, 1861, "will long be remembered by me, as one of the most remarkable of my life, as I made my first appearance in public..."

day for the first time in my life I appeared upon a stage." Clara MacLean of Columbia, South Carolina, was astonished at her sense of pride in her first theatrical effort. "I feel quite important," she confided to her diary. In the theater of war, Confederate women had quite literally found a part to perform.59

Participation in benefit dramas and tableaux marked a significant departure from women's customary place. Delicacy and propriety enjoined ladies from speaking in public, from signing their names in print, and even from permitting their names to be mentioned in the public press. To appear on a stage—even though a performer in a tableau neither moved nor spoke—represented an important challenge to these expectations. In uneasily consenting to be Florida, Mary Legg acknowledged her sense of transgressing gender boundaries, and while Clara MacLean expressed no such reluctance about her participation in theatrical benefits, she noted a new sense of self emerging from her unaccustomed activities.

The novelty of such behavior did not escape wider notice; it was not simply in private diaries and letters of women like Legg and MacLean that the Confederacy negotiated this troublesome dilemma. An indignant correspondent to the Charleston Mercury objected to the use of ladies' names in the newspaper's account of recent tableaux at Pineville; he thought the actresses should be silent, immobile, and anonymous. In Milledgeville, Georgia, a soldier signing himself "Hope" wrote to the Confederate Union to ask the paper's readers, "Is it right for young ladies to appear in public on the stage?" The excuse that such actions were undertaken in a good cause was not sufficient justification, he believed, for public appearances threatened to destroy "true modesty, delicate sensibility in our women." In an editorial the same day and a rash of letters in the next issue, the citizens of Milledgeville took up the debate. A second soldier pointed out that the seeming departure from custom was in reality no departure at all, for ladies had long appeared on stage at the end of school term for debate and examination. An editorial asserted that the problem lay not with the women but, rather, with the men who jeered and whistled. What, the editor demanded, did Hope think about public appearances that were not on the stage—as, for example, singing in parlor benefits or presiding over booths at fundraising bazaars? The majority of correspondents agreed with one anon-
ymous author who insisted, “There certainly can be no immodesty in a young lady doing that which a whole community approves.” Hope was dismissed as behind the times and told that he “must revolutionize society before his notions can prevail.”

Emma Crutcher had other objections to the tableaux she attended in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in December 1861. The performance, she found, made “a very poor entertainment for an intelligent audience through an evening...Amateurs on the stage only show their inferiority.” Perhaps as a nonparticipant she could not share Legg’s and Hubard’s enthusiasm—or the consequent dulling of their critical faculties. Whatever their artistic merits, tableaux succeeded in attracting crowds. Hubard’s two performances netted $1,700, and Lise Mitchell noted that in Tuscaloosa “hundreds were turned back at the door.” Ladies of Notusula, Alabama, sent the governor $68 as proceeds from an evening’s theatricals, and a group in Eutaw requested that their $82 be dedicated to helping needy soldiers’ families. The young ladies of Shelby, North Carolina, presented an evening of tableaux that raised $200, which they sent to Governor Vance for the “comfort of the soldiers either at the Hospitals or Regiments.”

Women were often very explicit about how they wished their contributions to be used, and in at least one instance their choice of a philanthetic goal represented a genuine political and military intervention. Ladies in coastal cities had by early 1862 become anxious about the weakness of the Confederate navy and the consequent vulnerability of the South’s ports to Yankee attack. As more and more men were mustered for service in Virginia, this issue of “home defense” attracted increasing concern from the women left behind. In early March the dramatic encounter between the Monitor and the Merrimac, or Virginia, at Hampton Roads drew attention to the technological miracle of the ironclad warship. Recognizing a possible solution to the crisis of coastal defense, groups of women in Charleston, Mobile, Norfolk, Savannah, and several inland Mississippi River ports organized to raise funds for the purchase of ships to protect their cities. Gunboat societies, gunboat concerts, gunboat raffles, and gunboat fairs became, as the Charleston Mercury described it, “all the rage.” Here women’s benevolence became public policy as defense spending followed the dictates of female organizations; here, for almost the first time, women expressed implicit displeasure with the Confederacy’s failure adequately to ensure their welfare; here women acted together in advancing the interests not just of sons, husbands, brothers, but their own. “I am glad,” Mrs. C. Love wrote with satisfaction in the Mercury, “that our people and especially the ladies, have at last aroused themselves to some practical demonstration in the defence of our coast, other than brave soldiers and weak batteries. I trust that it is not too late to redeem what we have lost by our too sanguine expectations of success.”

By fall the Georgia was in the water, and the Palmetto State, built with more than $30,000 in contributions, was ready for its ceremonial baptism. In full uniform, the orator of the day, Col. Richard Yeadon, paid homage to the “matrons and maidens” of South Carolina. “He alluded,” the Mercury reported, “to the inaction of the Government in the construction of naval defenses, and showed how the suggestion and example of one patriotic lady had stirred in the bosoms of the daughters of South Carolina the project of building these very boats...This spirited action of our women had raised the Governments, State and Confederate, from their torpor.” Philanthropy had been transformed into politics and policy. And in at least some of the language justifying their actions, women included implicit rebuke of Confederate failures to provide adequate coastal defenses. Charlestonians suggested that prompter action might have saved Port Royal from falling to the Yankees, and the Carolina coast might have remained “free from invaders.”

Women of Columbus, Mississippi, speculated in a similar manner on Grant’s victories at Forts Henry and Donelson early in 1862 and wondered if “untold miseries might have been avoided if the waters of the Cumberland and Tennessee had been sufficiently guarded during the last summer, by the building of a number of ironclad gunboats.” In their effort to equip a vessel to patrol the Mississippi River, however, the ladies were careful to assure their strong Confederates that they did not presume “to interfere with the legitimate actions of Congress or the heads of department, appointed to superintend works of defense.”

The ladies of the Confederacy had in the early months of national emergency confronted a crisis of their own. Committed to providing “real and substantial aid” to their new country and determined to play a part in the events of the day, they also desired to make their contributions “without moving from the feminine sphere.” These pledges of conventionality were no doubt welcome and reassuring—to the women themselves no less than their men. But women would almost immediately find themselves behaving in unconventional ways—banding together in new women’s organizations, performing in public, and even shaping government defense policy. War thus inaugurated a process of exploration and negotiation. “What Shall We Do?” women asked, one another, and themselves. As the soldiers of the South set forth to prove themselves men, females undertook the far less clearcut task of defining what it meant to be women within the new world of war.
With the departure of so many men to the battlefield, the Confederate homefront became a world of white women and of slaves. Louisa Walton reported to her friend Isabella Woodruff that Chester, South Carolina, had by 1862 been "thinned out of men"; Margaret Junkin Preston wrote that in Lexington, Virginia, there were by mid-1862 "no men left." Hers was, she described, "a world of femininity with a thin line of boys and octogenarians." When Nettie Fondren recounted a friend's wedding plans in December of the same year, she explained that there would be no ushers, "for there is not enough young men around . . . to answer the purpose." But it was not just the composition of wedding parties that was revolutionized. As Mary Greenhow Lee of Winchester watched Confederate and Yankee men alternate control of the town full of women, then abandon it altogether in June 1862, she commented wryly in her diary, "I propose that we shall declare ourselves a separate & independent sovereignty, & elect a Queen to reign over us."1

In several states the male exodus was sufficiently dramatic to prompt citizens to write in alarmed tones to the governor, reporting in circumstantial detail the transformations of their communities. A group of women living near New Bern, North Carolina, for example, informed Governor Zebulon Vance that only 20 of the 250 white people remaining in their town were men. Of these, 11 were old and 3 were likely to be conscripted in the near future, so the women regarded less than 5 percent of the population as male and able-bodied. In Alabama, citizens reported similar reductions in male numbers: 2,016 of 3,000 voters in Randolph County and 1,600 of 1,800 in Shelby County had gone to the army. A resident of Carrollton, Alabama, wrote Governor John Shorter that the spring 1862 militia call "almost literally depopulates the county of men."2

As these worried citizens recognized, the impact of this level of mobilization was profound and probably represented the most significant single factor shaping the wartime experience of white southern women. On a personal and emotional level, repeated hundreds of thousands of times across the region, departures of loved ones brought loneliness and anxiety. "There is a vacant chair in every house," wrote Lizzie Hardin. But the scale of these departures gave them wider political and economic significance as well.9

In the overwhelmingly agricultural South the individual household was the fundamental unit of what scholars have called "production and reproduction"—the place where the most important economic as well as social and cultural work of civilization took place. The farm or plantation was the
central economic institution of the Old South, the locus of productive activity, whether dedicated primarily toward independence and self-sufficiency, as in the case of smaller nonslaveholding units, or toward commercial staple crop production of cotton, rice, sugar, and tobacco by large gangs of slaves. But the farm or plantation also served as the primary site of social and political organization. The plantation embodied the hierarchical structures of southern paternalism. It functioned as the most important instrument of race control, and it similarly worked to institutionalize the subordination of white women, for the master was the designated head of what he frequently characterized as his “family white and black.” Within this social order men and women, boys and girls, slave and free learned the roles appropriate to their age, gender, and race. Nonslaveholding households embodied analogous arrangements of male dominance within exclusively white families. Male prerogative and male responsibility thus served as the organizing principle of southern households and southern society; white men stood at the apex of a domestic pyramid of power and obligation that represented a microcosm of the southern social order. As John C. Calhoun, the South’s most powerful antebellum defender, explained, “The Southern States are an aggregate . . . of communities, not of individuals. Every plantation is a little community, with the master at its head . . . These small communities aggregated make the State in all . . . Hence the harmony, the Union and the stability of that section.”

The removal of white men from households across the region thus inflicted a devastating blow to the most fundamental structures of the South’s society and economy. In nonslaveholding families, the departure of breadwinners caused immediate hardship, requiring many white women to turn for the first time to demanding physical labor in the fields. The Confederate Congress passed the first conscription legislation in April 1862, during spring planting, when manpower needs were at their height, and so many farm families felt its impact at once. A correspondent from a “poor County” in Alabama wrote Governor John Gill Shorter that within days, hundreds of “Females” would be seen for the first time “between the handles of the plow.”

For women of more prosperous and, particularly, of slaveholding families, however, the effects of mass mobilization were more delayed and less direct. Middle- and upper-class southern families possessed capital and investments—as well as slaves to work behind the plow—and were not tied so directly to the seasonal cycles of planting and harvesting. Unlike land, slave property was movable, prompting many masters to transport their slave forces to safer areas where they could be resettled or hired out for cash. Texas, remote from military action, was a favorite destination, and one Confederate general estimated that some 150,000 bondmen were transported to the state during the war years. But whatever strategies they had chosen to preserve their assets, most families had by the last months of the war exhausted wealth and resources. Even many of the South’s most privileged women would, with homes and property destroyed, find themselves in the direst of financial straits. This transformation tended to be gradual, though, a process of evolution toward changed status that often began with a transformation in the structures of the household itself.

Endowed with financial resources, regionwide networks of family and kin, and access to information and transportation, elite women possessed an opportunity to experiment with new domestic forms denied their poorer sisters. Women of the South’s master class found themselves in a variety of new family and household arrangements as they were to adjust to the departure of their men. Many moved—sometimes long distances—to live with their parents or in-laws or even friends and acquaintances. Others packed themselves and perhaps their children and followed their officer husbands from camp to camp, seeking appropriate accommodations in nearby towns or living at times in tents on the field. Still others traveled to the city in search of rooms and remunerative employment. Confronted with the uncertainty of the times, some left home with wagons full of valued possessions but no clear idea of a destination, convinced that their children and their property, human and inanimate, would be safer anywhere else. In the course of the war these families might move three, four, even a half-dozen times, retreating like the Confederate army before the Union advance and the steadily diminishing supply of life’s necessities behind Confederate lines. Other women decided to take their chances where they were and to make necessary changes in existing arrangements rather than seek solutions through relocation. Many hired overseers or imported male neighbors to assist them in directing and maintaining newly female-headed plantations; some invited their nieces, sisters, or sisters-in-law to join them in housekeeping, to stave off loneliness and to pool resources. Ladies who had dispatched their sons and husbands to the front lines often sent their daughters in the opposite direction, to boarding schools or relatives in remote areas regarded as safe from military conflict. But whether they moved or stayed at home, kept their children together or dispersed them to schools or kin, most Confederate women confronted dramatic changes in their domestic environment.
changed constantly during the war years as individuals responded to ever shifting military circumstances. But the widespread alterations in household form can certainly be described in a manner that illuminates the sorts of choices and dilemmas confronting the inhabitants of this new female world: altered families required new structures of domestic power and responsibility. Nearly every woman who kept a diary or corresponded with family and friends had necessarily to discuss such questions, for even if she herself did not face decisions about where and with whom to live, her neighbors and kin were confronting these difficulties. Adjusting to the demands of reconfigured households was a major issue for white women of the Confederate South, and these new domestic circumstances brought other transformations in Confederate women’s lives. From early in the war the very foundations of the South’s paternalistic social order were necessarily imperiled by the departure of the men who served as its organizing principle.

The Best Way for Me to Do

Many women were uncertain where or how they wished to live after their husbands’ entry into the army. Laetitia Lafon Ashmore Nutt refused to accept a separation when her husband departed at the head of a company of partisan rangers he had raised in Louisiana. With three daughters in tow, she followed him across the Deep South, searching out lodgings close to his changing areas of operation. By 1864 she was exhausted and wished she had “left the children with my Mother and devoted all my time and energies to our sick and wounded.”

Sarah Jane Estes did leave her children to follow her husband, but her presence with him reflected his desire rather than her own. He was, she reported, “ordering me to Mississippi” in the summer of 1863. “Knowing my husband’s disposition, I determined to leave all and follow him... I must leave husband or children and I felt that they could do better without me than he could.” She tried to dismiss thoughts of how she would do without them but was brokenhearted, fearing her one-year-old would forget her altogether before they were reunited. “My own happiness I have never consulted since leaving home,” she wrote with both pride and some anger, “for there was little choice.” Her understanding of woman’s obligations had always dictated her path. “As a mother and wife I hope I do not consider my own comfort, but live and work for those whom God has given, receiving my reward by making them happy.” But here her duties to children and to


Confederacy didn’t make a census

Had the Confederacy ever taken the census required of it by its constitution, the results would have been startling, for the sorts of households it would have described would have confounded those expecting to see the patriarchally structured families associated with the Old South. Instead, such a survey, taken any time after the very first months of war, would have reflected the attributes of this new world of women, reporting high numbers of households headed by white females in all classes across the South. Among the slaveholders such a survey would have shown an extraordinary diversity of domestic forms, of makeshift “families” that in their departure from custom provided new environments in which women had necessarily to redefine themselves—accepting new responsibility for basic economic survival, experiencing changed configurations of emotional attachments, and finding themselves in dramatically altered relationship to the South’s “domestic institution” of African slavery. But such a survey never did take place; we will never know with statistical certainty the precise dimensions of change in household structures in the Civil War South. We cannot say how many white women lived alone on large plantations or how many moved to urban areas or how many moved in with kin. And, of course, these arrangements

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husband were at cross-purposes, and Estes could not reconcile herself to failing as either wife or mother. Despite her obvious pain at her dilemma, she received little sympathy from her husband. “Mr. E reproved me for my desperate sorrow and bid me look to God for comfort, that I was acting very wickedly. I knew that but I was too wretched to think. But I have prayed for strength and now feel more able to bear up under my trials, but I may be deceived. I will still pray to be able to say, ‘Thy will be done.’” The need to choose between husband and children seemed almost too much to bear, and Sarah Estes turned for resolution and consolation to God. After months trailing after her husband through Mississippi and Tennessee, she anticipated no end to her exile. But she could no longer torment herself with thoughts of her absent children; she would act as if they were dead. “I will try and give my children to the Lord as if he had taken them home to him, and try and pray to be resigned never to see them again.” Sarah Estes felt she had lost not her husband but her infant children to the war.8

Unlike Laetitia Nutt and Sarah Estes, most women did not follow their men to the front but instead tried to carry on at home or adjust to wherever the fortunes of war might take them. A North Carolina woman wrote her sister soon after her husband left in May 1862, explaining, “I have been trying how to study out how it is the best way for me to do.” Her mother had urged her to come home, but she was reluctant to close her own house and leave her slaves to work the place without direct supervision. But she certainly did not want to remain alone. Perhaps, she entreated, her sister could stay with her, at least for a few months. Lila Chunn of Georgia was pleased that, after her husband, Willie, left in the fall of 1861, her sisters took turns sleeping at her house, so “I do not often stay by myself at night.” This proved only a temporary solution, though, and Lila spent many nights alone before the deteriorating military situation in Georgia in the fall of 1864 finally displaced her. Recognizing that she and her children must move from the path of Sherman’s advancing troops, she still had to decide whether to join her own parents or her in-laws. Her uncertainty arose from her desire to remain as close as possible to her husband’s regiment, and she worried as well about being forced to sell her “negro property” at low rates because of her decision to move.9

Emma Crutcher of Mississippi shared some of Chunn’s concerns. She had moved in with her in-laws in Vicksburg soon after the departure of her husband, Will, but by March 1862 Emma’s own parents were discussing “our debut on the political stage as refugees.” They had rented a large house in a remote and safe area, and Emma was torn about whether to remain where she was or join her own family. Her major concern was to be near a post office or railroad in order to communicate with Will. Lizzie Ozburn’s father urged her to abandon housekeeping and move in with him if Jimmie was not released from service in late 1861, but, grown and married, Lizzie was determined not “to ever be dependant on him” again. Ellen Moore of Virginia felt quite differently about independence and sought to persuade her husband, Sam, that her decision to move herself and their children to her parents’ house was wise. At home without him, she explained, “my spirits would suffer in so many lonely hours night & day there.” She hoped Sam would be “convinced that as you cannot take care of me that with Pa is the best place.”10

Many young women found living in the households of relatives very stressful. Jorantha Semmes and her five children moved in with her husband’s cousins in Canton, Mississippi, crowding the house with seventeen occupants who grated on each other’s nerves. Semmes believed they regarded her as an unwelcome “nuisance” but was herself angry at her hostess’s “hyper-criticisms” and her host’s presumption in daring to whip her children along with his own.11

Even in an era in which family conflict became commonplace, the experience of Ann Marie Stewart Turner may have been especially difficult. During her husband’s army service she and her children lived with his family in North Carolina, where her mother-in-law’s “unruly tongue” and “unhappy temper” made Turner’s life miserable. The older woman accused Ann not only of stealing her son but of luring her husband away. She “said I had fondled around her husband till he cared more for me than any man might for any woman but his wife—that he had a passion for me & I encouraged by combing his hair &c.” Ann reported in despair to her own mother, who was thousands of miles away in Texas. But Turner’s trials were only to increase. When her husband was killed at the Battle of the Crater in 1864, she regarded the blow as just retribution for her vengeful anger against her mother-in-law as well as an appropriate punishment to Mrs. Turner for her own “unkindness.” Under the pressure of her domestic arrangements, Ann’s grief expressed itself as a combination of self-loathing and rage. Separated from home by enormous distance and wartime upheaval, Ann remained trapped in the unhappy household of her in-laws, even though her strongest tie to them was gone.12

Often women left by themselves simply joined together both to provide companionship and to save on household expenses. A Tennessee woman recalled, “as I was alone in my home and my sister in law and two small
pany of the other young ladies and the crowds of male admirers thronging Chesnut's wartime salon. As wife of a prominent aide to Jefferson Davis, Chesnut moved in the innermost circles of Confederate power. Residence in her household thus placed the Preston girls in the comparative safety of well-garrisoned Richmond and provided them access to the highest echelons of Confederate society.¹⁴

The safety and purity of young white girls was a particular concern in the wartime South, for they were seen as especially vulnerable in case of enemy invasion or slave uprising. Many families exerted considerable effort to keep them away from areas of military action and upheaval. "It was thought safer for a young girl just grown up to be well out of the reach of Yankee soldiers," one South Carolina mother remarked. Boarding schools offered one solution to this difficulty. Male colleges and academies closed their doors as men left the classroom for the battlefield, but many women's schools thrived. Hollins College enrolled 83 students in 1861-62 but had grown to 160 by 1864-65. J. F. Dagg, president of the Baptist Female College of Southwest Georgia, faced continual wartime disruptions—a smallpox epidemic in 1863, the donation of the school's tin roof to the Confederate government, and finally the transformation of the school building into a soldiers' hospital. But the school expanded nonetheless, from 36 pupils in 1861 to 82 by 1865 to 103 who in 1864 met in Dagg's residence because of the therapeutic purposes to which the schoolhouse had been put.

Boarding school left Sarepta Gregory homesick for Camden, South Carolina, but she knew she should be grateful to be at the Chown Female Institute. "I thank my God that he has given me a place to stay and not to get hurt," she wrote her aunt. Robert De Schweiniz, the principal of Old Salem Academy in North Carolina, found running a school in wartime fraught with difficulty, for supplies were elusive, tuitions never kept up with inflation, and pupils often faced extraordinary emotional strains because of extended separations from loved ones. Yet De Schweiniz felt he had to keep the institution open almost as a public service: "We have so many scholars who either have no other homes or whose homes are within the enemy's lines, that we are in a manner compelled to keep on with the school." Old Salem was known as one of several institutions especially welcoming to refugees from eastern Carolina, and many schools explicitly presented themselves as havens for displaced young women. Farmville Female College, which pointedly advertised itself as "easily accessible from all parts of the State, and at the same time so remote from the seat of war as to be both safe and quiet," attracted one young Virginia girl whose family was convinced by the Seven

children were left alone in my brother's home, I went to live with them." Clusters of adolescent girls in families other than their own were especially common. Many parents were eager to provide the young women with some diversion, for life behind the lines was often very tedious. Away from the concentrations of men at the front, courtship, the compelling occupation of privileged young women in their late teens and early twenties, all but came to a halt. Though the fate of nations may have been hanging in the balance, one young Confederate woman regarded life as unbearably dull. "There is nothing to mark one day from another now... always the same. Sew, knit, read, spin, weave. Oh, I get so sick and tired of it." Twenty-two-year-old Malkina Gist was either bold or foolish enough to complain, almost on the eve of the burning of her hometown of Columbia in 1865, "it is frightfully monotonous, just because you are a woman, to be always tucked away in the safe places."²³

But the Preston sisters of South Carolina, who joined Mary Chesnut's household in Richmond, found the times more than exciting. Both girls soon fell in love with dashing Confederate officers, and when their beaux were occupied with military matters, they amused themselves in the com-


³³ Changing Lives

³³ Changing Lives
Days battles that it was no longer “wise to let a young girl stay” at their plantation outside of Richmond.¹⁵

But many young women had of necessity to remain close to enemy lines. In Winchester, Mary Lee presided over an establishment of five females—two of her dead husband’s teenaged sisters and two of his nieces—who found comfort and some protection together while opposing armies moved back and forth through the town. Lee preferred the risks of enemy troops to those of displacement from home and friends. She and her young kin left Winchester only when expelled into Confederate lines by a Union general in February 1865. Even then she “indignantly denied” the name of refugee, threatening to shoot the next person who applied it to her.¹⁶

*The Bitterness of Exile*

Lee’s hostility to this term suggests unexplored complexities in the movements of people that so changed households in the Civil War South. The word *refugee* began to appear frequently in private and public writings in the South early in the war, and it acquired a somewhat different connotation from the more general notion of displaced persons with which it has since frequently been confused. *Refugee* was probably first applied to the low-country magnates who evacuated families and slave property from the Carolina coast when Yankee invasion threatened in the fall of 1861. The arrival of these aristocrats with their enormous populations of slaves in the more egalitarian Piedmont aroused much resentment, for upcountry Carolinians deplored their flight as cowardice, feared the increased numbers of potentially rebellious slaves in their midst, and worried about providing food and shelter for so many new residents. The term *refugee* soon came to be used most often for wealthy individuals who had chosen to abandon their customary place of residence, frequently with an eye to keeping property, especially slave property, out of Union hands. Smaller slaveholders and poorer farmers often felt this choice unavailable to them, and many regarded “refugeeing” as evidence of lack of patriotism. Inevitably, too, the presence of refugees imposed a considerable burden on the areas expected to provide for the wanderers. As more and more men left for the battlefield, the refugee population became overwhelmingly female, thus assuming a characteristic gender as well as class identity. There were, especially in the later stages of the war, families and even whole communities forced from home by military action, as, for example, when Sherman compelled all civilians to leave Ar-

lanta in the fall of 1864, but these individuals are more properly considered displaced persons, not refugees, at least in terms of the particular Civil War usage, with its frequently pejorative connotations of privilege and self-interest. The power of these connotations is evident, for example, in Mary Lee’s aversion to the label. She had not chosen her course of action; she had not abandoned her home; she was not going away, expecting others to take responsibility for her. She had been sent against her will, and this, she believed, gave her a morally superior status to those who could rightfully be called refugees.¹⁷

As Nancy Mae Jett anticipated the arrival of the Yankees in Georgia, she described her options to her husband, Richard, who was in the army. “I haint got the money to take us if [f] so we will hafter stand the test.” She and her seven children lacked the wherewithal to move out of harm’s way. Sarah Espy, a widow and small slaveholder from Alabama, observed that many of her wealthy neighbors were preparing to take their slaves and leave as the Yankees approached in the summer of 1865. But Espy knew she would have “to stay at home and take whatever Providence may send,” for she did not know “where I could go or how.” On an evening’s visit to her rich friend Mrs. Finley, she discovered that her neighbor was planning to depart to North Carolina. Espy could not contain her resentment. “They are well off and are going to wealthy friends whereas I, and many others, have no friends and our children, even beardless boys, are taken from us and put into the service.” Even though as a slaveholder Espy ranked among the most affluent southern families, she was, under the pressures of war, growing newly aware of class differences in the South, differences here marked by access to the option to seek refuge elsewhere. Mrs. Finley’s freedom to leave wartime Alabama provoked Sarah Espy’s bitter complaint. “There is a great wrong somewhere, and if our Confederacy should fall, it will be no wonder to me for the brunt is thrown upon the working classes while the rich live in ease and pleasure.”¹¹⁸

For those aristocratic women who prided themselves on their inherent social superiority, the refugee experience could similarly reinforce class perceptions and identity. When at the end of the war Mary Chesnut found herself fleeing Yankee invaders, she took advantage of the hospitality of a North Carolina woman. Yet scorn rather than gratitude marked her response to this generosity. “Mine hostess is young & handsome, very well educated, talks well, seems so ladylike & kind. . . . N.C. aristocracy as far as it will go—but does not brush her teeth—the first evidence of civilization—and lives amidst dirt in a way that would shame the poorest overseer’s wife. . . . A
Refugees themselves often felt the direct heat of this resentment. Kate Stone’s family had removed to Texas, that favored destination for planters hoping to locate slaves out of reach of Union armies. But Stone found “strange the prejudice that exists all through the state against refugees. We think it is envy, just pure envy. The refugees,” she explained, “are a nicer and more refined people than most of those they meet, and they see and resent the difference.”

Refugees’ presumptions of superiority did little to diminish the hostility they encountered. The Daily Southern Guardian of Columbia, South Carolina, tried to excuse this arrogance in the spring of 1864. “They know not how to beg; for being accustomed, during all their previous lives, to abundance at their former homes, they have been in the habit of giving of their plenty, rather than receiving anything at the hand of charity. This terrible discipline many of them are now passing through. It is a hard lesson to learn, which many of them cannot comprehend.” Without wealth most southerners, like Jett or Espy, felt they could not choose to become refugees, yet, paradoxically, the refugee experience itself usually consumed assets rather rapidly, leaving many of the most aristocratic southern women without the afuence that had defined their identities. Yet these were identities, as the Guardian pointed out, they could not easily abandon. Confederate humorist Bill Arp summed up the wanderers’ plight, observing that although Job suffered much and “stood the test of all the severe afflictions his Maker visited upon him,” he was spared the ultimate challenge, “for from a careful examination of his sacred record, I do not find that he was ever a refugee.”

Women wrote despairingly of their experiences, and indeed, objective conditions of refugee life were often most unpleasant. Transportation facilities grew increasingly inadequate in the wartime South, and traveling women found themselves on crowded trains that broke down with growing frequency, in dilapidated wagons, or even astride intractable mules. Temporary accommodations were dirty and overtaxed—and often infested with fleas and bedbugs as well as those whom genteel ladies regarded as human undesirables, both black and white. Sarah Morgan was astonished to be “actually sleeping under the same bed clothes with our black, shiny negro nurse!” Camping out was a novelty, and Sarah Wadley found her corsets an uncomfortable nuisance when she tried sleeping on the ground. Permanent dwellings were difficult to locate, especially in cities, so families accustomed to spacious mansions crowded into one or two rooms. Some of the most desperate displaced southerners lived in boxcars outside Atlanta or in a tent city near Petersburg, not to mention the inhabitants of Vicksburg who
during the siege took up residence in hillside caves, complete with rugs and elaborate furnishings. War forced many southerners in less urgent circumstances to turn to whatever shelter was available. All struggled to find food for the table, especially as inflation sent prices skyrocketing. Living with her parents in rural Georgia in the last months of the war, Lila Chunn succeeded in procuring adequate nourishment for her children but complained that it was all of the coarsest type—a tedium of “meat & bread and bread & meat.” The children, she mused, “are glad to get a biscuit now than they were cake in former days.” In Richmond in March 1865, Malvina Gist was not so fortunate and proclaimed herself hungry enough to “eat a tallow candle if I had a good one.”

Yet conditions were increasingly hard for all southerners, not just for those who had lost their homes. Whatever bodily discomforts they experienced, refugees would readily have agreed that their psychological deprivations and displacements were far greater. Sarah Morgan, searching with her mother and sisters for a place to settle after the Yankee invasion of Louisiana in 1864, complained that she felt like a “homeless beggar.” Margaret Beckwith was ashamed when after three years of war she left Virginia for North Carolina. She assumed the language of a soldier, echoing one of General Grant’s famous statements of determination when she reported her “disgust at leaving the front. I felt like a deserter. I had wished to fight it out along this line.” Grant had firmly resolved “to fight it out on this line, if it takes all summer,” but Beckwith had abandoned Virginia by late spring. Lise Mitchell moved from Louisiana across the Deep South with her grandfather and the family’s slaves, stopping and erecting new slave quarters near Vicksburg, Mississippi, before relocating again in Alabama. “Home,” she remarked bitterly, “what a mockery to call this home, we have no home, we are poor refugees, how suggestive that word, refugee to my poor heart, of sorrows past, present anxieties, and future misery.” Her new dwellings brought with them dramatically changed responsibilities, which young Lise did not entirely welcome. “I think it a pity for me to have undertaken for the first time, the duties of a housekeeper in such hard times for I fear I will soon be discouraged.”

Complaining of “l’amertume de l’exil qui pèse si lourdement sur nous,” the women of the Grima family of New Orleans regarded themselves less as refugees than as exiles. Augusta, Georgia, was cold both physically and metaphorically, and, of course, they found few who spoke their native French. Young Louise seemed, her mother reported, to have fallen into a severe depression, refusing to eat and manifesting little energy. “Elle est tellement attristée de l’exil qu’elle ne sort presque jamais et se laisse trop abattre.”

When Sherman menaced Georgia in 1864, George West’s sons had already departed with the army, so he sent his daughter Josephine to accompany the family slaves to Mississippi. To her father she wrote of her uncertainties about slave management—how to tell if complaining laborers were really sick, how to respond to the overseer’s declaration that “the negroes don’t work,” and how to deal with the homesickness of the slaves themselves. But to her mother she opened her “sad and desponding heart.” “I have felt utterly forlorn. I feel like I can never be satisfied until I get home again. . . . There is no ray of light in the future visible to me. Dear good Mother pray for my absent daughter that I may have more fortitude and be more resigned to my fate.” Living as refugees may have begun as a choice, but it came to seem like a sentence, one that the wanderers shared in large measure with the other, less-mobile southern households buffeted by war. For ultimately, the itinerant nature of refugee families proved to be just one among the many disruptive forces transforming the customary patterns of southern domestic life.

Home Manufacture

As the northern blockade and the requirements of full-scale military mobilization continued to exert unrelenting economic pressure on the Confederacy, southern households began to reflect the impact of changes that extended beyond war’s manpower demands. The outbreak of conflict with the North had resulted in a dramatically diminished availability of manufactured goods in the South, both because of the blockade’s restriction of external trade and because of the increasing concentration of the South’s limited industrial capacities on the production of war material. In the face of these domestic shortages, Confederate leaders began to call for economically independent southern households as essential to the political independence of the nation.

In the South, as in the United States more generally, household manufactures had declined steadily in importance during the early 1800s until, by mid-century, most southern white families purchased significant portions of the items required for daily life. Wealthier households and particularly those, such as staple-producing plantations, that were embedded in the market economy were especially likely to have shifted to factory-made goods. With the outbreak of military conflict, however, such commodities suddenly became difficult, if not impossible, to procure, and Confederate discourse and public policy soon addressed this consumer crisis.
Newspapers urged white women of the South to revive home production, particularly in textiles, depicting such action as both patriotic and moral. Elite women, however, demonstrated a tenacious aversion to wearing a fabric associated with the lower classes. “Not five out of five hundred ladies,” the Southern Illustrated News proclaimed in 1862, “would be caught in the street in a homespun dress.” Jefferson Davis spoke out about the desirability and attractiveness of homespun, and in summing up his remarks the Milledgeville Confederate Union endeavored at once to quiet lingering qualms of vanity and appeal to women’s loftier motives. “It is not only honorable to our women to weave and wear their dresses, but really homespun is becoming to them.” Yet the paper’s next exhortation seemed to belie this enthusiasm about the appearance of home-produced goods. To “rig themselves in material made of the great Southern staple,” the article continued, would “prove to the world that the Southern woman’s principle and patriotism are not subordinate to the pride of the eye.” The Richmond Enquirer appealed more exclusively to women’s idealism. “Away,” the paper cried, “with running the blockade for Yankee goods. Let it be a point of honor to provide and wear our own homespun.” Another newspaper tried both to inspire and to shame those “who loll on a sofa or carriage cushions and complain,” by relating the tale of an Arkansas woman who not only wove eight yards of cloth a day but had taken up ax, saw, chisel, and auger to build the loom that made her achievement possible. Popular poetry extolled the “noble work” of weaving and spinning and urged God “to speed the shuttle and bless the hands that ply it.” War ballads translated such sentiments into song, emphasizing not the scarcity but the unfashionableness of northern fabrics:

Three cheers for the homespun dress
The Southern ladies wear.
Now Northern goods are out of date,
And since old Abe’s blockade
We Southern girls can be content
With goods that’s Southern made

We scorn to wear a bit of silk
A bit of Northern lace,
But make our homespun dresses up
And wear them with a grace.20

Rhetoric combined with necessity to encourage domestic cloth production. As early as February 1862 Mary Speight observed that “there is not a yard of domestics to be bo’t in G[eorgia].” “Thrown,” as Sarah Eaply put it, “on their own resources,” ladies began to bring wheels and looms down from their attics and to learn to spin and weave. “This ancient work,” Kate Cumming noted, “is all the fashion now as we are blockaded and can get no other kind of goods.” Martha Jane Crossley found herself in 1862 spinning for the first time “since my childhood.” Mary Legg of South Carolina expressed her admiration for her friend Hattie Palmer’s new abilities at weaving and spinning and regretted that “my knowledge does not extend beyond knitting.” In Florida, Octavia Stephens searched for a loom and for a neighbor who might teach her to weave, less out of absolute need than from the widely shared desire to feel useful. “I want something to do of some consequence and see if I can rouse myself to some energy,” she explained to her absent husband. Sarah Wadley resisted cloth making until 1865 and then was ashamed at how inept she proved to be. “I have commenced to learn to card and spin, and I never tried anything so difficult to me, or so tiring.”

Even though Jefferson Davis celebrated homespun, many southern men were deeply disturbed when they learned that their wives had taken up textile production. Much spinning and weaving as had persisted in plantation households had been mostly the work of slave women and was thus not considered appropriate for privileged white females. Will Neblett was distressed by Lizzie’s account of her new efforts at the loom. “I do not like the idea of your weaving. It is mortifying to me. I wish you not that you do it,” he wrote in June 1864. Lizzie herself was not very happy about this new responsibility but explained to Will that she was “forced” to it in order to clothe her children and eleven slaves. George Peddy worried about the hard physical labor involved in working a loom, labor to which his wife was entirely unaccustomed. “I do not want you to do anything,” he wrote his wife, Kate. “I did not espouse you for no such purposes. I done so for my high esteem of your intrinsic worth; also that you might remain handsome; also for the love I had for you[ ...] soft and pliant hands and loving face. I do not wish the latter to be fulfilled by physical labor. Honey you must not weave the cloth you have the thread spun for,” Amanda Bullock shared these views of the dangers of textile labor, explaining to her husband, “I am sorry to know that I cannot work hard, but experience teaches me that I cannot, for if I spin all day, the next day I look as if I had just got up out of a spell of sickness.” Weaving seemed to threaten not just white women’s health but their status, for it blurred the all-important lines of differentiation between them and their female slaves. Privileged white women’s traditional identities conflicted with the campaign for home textile production.21
The propaganda effort surrounding homespun was designed to combat this resistance, but succeeded only partially in overcoming the identification of weaving and spinning as degrading physical labor. Yet ideological issues were only one factor limiting the extent of the wartime revival in home textile manufacture. The difficulty in finding wheels and looms, the paucity of white women with necessary skill, and the absence of adequate instruction for aspiring spinners and weavers also played an important part. Perhaps even more significant, however, was the serious shortage of cotton cards in the South throughout the war, a situation that created a bottleneck in the textile production process. The first step in the process of transforming seed cotton or raw wool into cloth was carding, combing the fiber through wire teeth mounted on two wooden boards. Before the war all cotton cards were manufactured outside the South, and as they began to wear out, the Confederacy could not replenish the region’s supply. Desperate women called on Confederate officials for assistance, and eight state governors did attempt to respond to the crisis by passing legislation to encourage card production. John Shorter of Alabama, for example, appropriated $60,000 to bring cotton cards through the blockade and designated state funds for a card manufacturing establishment in Selma that proved less than successful. Confederate women recognized both the scarcity and the importance of cotton cards and tried to make them last as long as possible. When Lizzie Nebblett found that a slave woman had ruined the household’s last pair of cards by using them to comb her children’s hair, she was reduced to tears. Lizzie feared the incident might mean the end of her spinning efforts, and indeed, the difficulty in procuring cards led many households to abandon their efforts at cloth production.32

The homespun revolution so heralded in the postwar accounts of white southern women’s wartime achievements seems to have been actually of very limited scope. A recent study and museum exhibition entitled Mississippi Homespun: Nineteenth Century Textiles and the Women Who Made Them came to a conclusion that might be generalized to the entire South: “the oft-reported surge in spinning and weaving by women on the homefront during the Civil War was not reflected” in the surviving evidence from Mississippi. Women who had actively engaged in textile production before the war continued to do so; households where slaves had produced cloth before the war maintained or even increased their output; some women who had never spun or woven made efforts to produce fabrics, but their contributions did not have a significant impact in meeting the demand for textiles in the Confederacy. The most privileged households coped by importing cloth through the blockade or purchasing it behind enemy lines in trips to occupied areas such as New Orleans. Less fortunate southerners made do by recycling bed or table linens, curtains, and discarded garments. Economic pressures on Confederate households did not result in profound or widespread alterations in white women’s relationship to home textile production. Women’s resistance combined with more pragmatic considerations to limit the scope of change.33

If there was no homespun revolution, however, there were other areas of household labor and production in which white women, with varying levels of reluctance or enthusiasm, skill or incompetence, undertook new sorts of domestic work. As Mary Lee wrote in 1865 of her changed household responsibilities, “I find myself, every day, doing something I never did before.” Even if they did not weave or spin, women took up knitting and sewing—both for soldiers and for their own families. For the most privileged southern women, who had concentrated their prewar efforts on fancywork or embroidery, knitting and dressmaking often represented a new departure. “Many of us who had never learned to sew,” Mary Gay remembered, “became expert handlers of the needle, and vied with each other in producing well-made garments; and I became a veritable knitting machine.” A South Carolina woman remembered that her enthusiasm almost overrode her usefulness, for she had never knit socks before and produced a pair so enormous that an equally large soldier had to be located to wear them. Young women may have found learning these new skills easier than did their older
White southern women took enormous pride, especially in retrospective memoirs and reminiscences, in their ingenuity and inventiveness in finding or making replacements for unavailable items—berry juices for inks and dyes, hats woven of straw, coffee made from okra seed or rye, shoes constructed of cloth or paper, twisted rags instead of wax candles that had been imported from New England, and of course, homespun. The pressure exerted by war to transform the southern household from a site of domestic consumption into what one Alabama woman recalled as a “miniature factory in itself” encouraged even the most elite southern women to undertake unfamiliar tasks and assume a new productive role.

We must recognize the limits of this change, however. Southern households did not become factories; women were more likely to sacrifice, to live with deprivation and shortage, and to hope for a swift end to the war or for the arrival of goods smuggled through the blockade than to become self-sufficient home manufacturers. The strains of war made most southern families poorer; it rarely made them significantly more productive. Shifts in the economic functions of southern households were far less dramatic than the alterations in their structures and composition introduced by conscription and the manpower demands of modern war. And white women’s new responsibilities as slave managers would be of far greater social, political, and economic import than any war-induced changes in their relationship to domestic manufactures.35

The Civil War exerted a powerful impact on every southern household. Each family may have been unique in the particular way it experienced war’s burdens, yet certain patterns of stress and change recurred, reshaping the structures and functions of southern domestic life. Perhaps most important, the departure of men presented a crisis and a challenge to which every white woman, rich or poor, had to respond. The internal re-alignment and often the geographical relocation of families changed the most fundamental aspects of domestic existence. The absence of men often combined with the arrival of female friends or kin to alter the character of women’s emotional lives and interactions. Husbands and wives found themselves in changed relationships, as women came necessarily to rely more on themselves or other women than upon their mates.

But women on the homefront had to deal with more than physical and emotional dislocation. Shortages and economic pressures compelled them to undertake new sorts of labor in order to ensure both their own survival and that of the Confederacy. And, as we shall see, in households with sizable

\[50\] Changing Lives

\[51\] Changing Lives
holdings of black slaves, managing human property became a central component of the wartime work that now devolved upon white southern females.

In mid-1864 Lila Chunn wrote her husband, Willie, describing the transformation of her domestic world and her new life as a refugee. “I will never,” she concluded, “feel like myself again.” Changed circumstances were creating a new self or, at least, undermining the old. Women’s new surroundings confronted them with altered sets of expectations, with new obligations, and with new standards by which to measure themselves and their worth. In the middle of the war Susan Middleton, a young woman from the lowcountry aristocracy of South Carolina, wrote in some bewilderment and uncertainty to her friend Harriott Cheves: “The realities of my life and the situations in which I have been placed have been so strangely different from what my character and the early promise of my life would have led one to expect. Anxiety, responsibility, and independence of thought or action are what are peculiarly abhorrent to my nature, and what has been so often required of me.” Susan Middleton would not be alone in discovering that war’s requirements would not necessarily comport well with her character, her nature, or her expectations. The social order that had shaped her was not the one in which she now had to live.56

CHAPTER THREE

Enemies in Our Households

CONFEDERATE WOMEN AND SLAVERY

When slaveholding men departed for battle, white women on farms and plantations across the South assumed direction of the region’s “peculiar institution.” In the antebellum years white men had borne overwhelming responsibility for slavery’s daily management and perpetuation. But as war changed the shape of southern households, it necessarily transformed the structures of domestic authority, requiring white women to exercise unaccustomed—and unsought—power in defense of public as well as private order. Slavery was, as Confederate vice-president Alexander Stephens proclaimed, the “cornerstone” of the region’s society, economy, and politics. Yet slavery’s survival depended less on sweeping dictates of state policy than on tens of thousands of individual acts of personal domination exercised by
particular masters over particular slaves. As wartime opportunity encouraged slaves openly to assert their desire for freedom, the daily struggle over coercion and control on hundreds of plantations and farms became just as crucial to defense of the southern way of life as any military encounter. Women called to manage increasingly restive and even rebellious slaves were in a significant sense garrisoning a second front in the South’s war against Yankee domination.\(^1\)

Nineteenth-century southerners often called slavery “the domestic institution.” Such a designation is curious, however, for the term seems to imply a contrast with the public or the political. The very domesticity of slavery in the Old South, its embeddedness in the social relations of the master’s household, made those households central to the most public aspects of regional life. The direct exercise of control over slaves was the most fundamental and essential political act in the Old South. With the departure of white men, this transcendent public duty fell to Confederate women.\(^2\)

Although white southerners—both male and female—might insist that politics was not, even in the changed circumstances of wartime, an appropriate part of woman’s sphere, the female slave manager necessarily served as a pillar of the South’s political order. White women’s actions as slave mistresses were crucial to Confederate destinies, for the viability of the southern agricultural economy and the stability of the social order as well as the continuing loyalty of the civilian population all depended on successful slave control.

Public discourse and government policy in the Confederacy explicitly recognized the gendered foundation of the Old South’s system of mastery. Indeed the very meaning of mastery itself was rooted in the concepts of masculinity and male power. From the outset, Confederate leaders were uneasy about the transfer of such responsibility to women. After the passage of the first conscription act in April 1863, critics challenged the wisdom of drafting overseers and other white male supervisors, especially from areas with heavily concentrated black populations. In part this concern was economic, for agricultural productivity and efficiency seemed to depend on effective management. The “truth stares us in the face,” declared one correspondent to a Georgia newspaper, “slave labor must support this war.” There was, the writer continued, “but one way to do this, and that is, to place the negro under the immediate control and direction of the white man.” An Alabama man warned Confederate authorities in March 1863 that there already existed “in the negro population . . . a disposition to misrule and insubordination occasioned no doubt from the withdrawal of our male population from their midst.” The prospect of even fewer men at home generated profound fears of slave revolt, which combined with a sense of the particular vulnerability of white women. These issues went beyond questions of gender; they represented deep-seated worries about sex.\(^3\)

As support grew in the fall of 1862 for some official draft exemption for slave managers, the Macon Daily Telegraph demanded, “Is it possible that Congress thinks . . . our women can control the slaves and oversee the farms? Do they suppose that our patriotic mothers, sisters and daughters can assume and discharge the active duties and drudgery of an overseer? Certainly not. They know better.” In October Congress demonstrated that it did indeed know better, passing a law exempting from service one white man on each plantation of twenty or more slaves. But the soon infamous “Twenty-Nigger Law” triggered enormous popular resentment, both from nonslaveholders who regarded it as valuing the lives of the elite over their own and from smaller slaveholders who were not included in its scope.\(^4\)

In an effort to silence this threatening outburst of class hostility and at the same time meet the South’s ever increasing manpower needs, the Confederate Congress repeatedly amended conscription policy, both broadening the age of eligibility and limiting exemptions. Although a proposal offered by the House early in 1863 would have repealed the so-called Twenty-Nigger provision altogether, resistance from the Senate resulted instead in a compromise, a gradual restriction of the scope of the exemption through laws passed in May 1863 and February of the next year. This erosion of the statutory foundation for overseer exemptions greatly increased the difficulty of finding men not subject to military duty who could, as the original bill had phrased it, “secure the proper police of the country.” Women across the Confederacy would find themselves unable to obtain the assistance of white men on their plantations and farms.

Conscription policy reveals fundamental Confederate assumptions, for it represents significant choices made by the Confederate leadership, choices that in important ways defined issues of class as more central to Confederate survival than those of gender. The initial acknowledgment by Congress that a white woman could not effectively “discharge the active duties” of an overseer was all but forgotten amidst the storm of protest over the exemption law. In order to promote at least an appearance of equitability in the draft, the Confederacy retreated from its concern about women left alone to manage slaves. White women in slaveowning households found their needs relegated to a position of secondary importance in comparison with the
demands of nonslaveholding men. These men could vote, and the Confederacy required their service on the battlefield; retaining their loyalty was a priority. Minimizing class divisions within the Confederacy was imperative—even if ultimately unsuccessful. Addressing emerging gender divisions seemed less critical, because women—even the “privileged” ladies of the slaveowning elite—neither voted nor wrote editorials nor bore arms.³

With ever escalating military manpower demands, however, white women came to assume responsibility for directing the slave system that was so central a cause and purpose of the war. Yet they could not forget the promises of male protection and obligation that they believed their due. Women’s troubling experiences as slave managers generated a growing fear and resentment of the burdens imposed by the disintegrating institution. Ultimately these tensions did much to undermine women’s active support for both slavery and the Confederate cause. And throughout the South eroding slave control and diminishing plantation efficiency directly contributed to failures of morale and productivity on the homefront.

Unprotected and Afraid

Women agreed with the Georgia newspaper that had proclaimed them unfit masters. “Where there are so many negroes upon places as upon ours,” wrote an Alabama woman to the governor, “it is quite necessary that there should be men who can and will control them, especially at this time.” Faced with the prospect of being left with sixty slaves, a Mississippi planter’s wife expressed similar sentiments. “Do you think,” she demanded of Governor John Pettus, “that this woman’s hand can keep them in check?” Women compelled to assume responsibility over slaves tended to regard their new role more as a duty than an opportunity. Like many southern soldiers, they were conscripts rather than volunteers. As Lizzie Neblett explained to her husband, Will, when he enlisted in the 20th Texas Infantry, her impending service as agricultural and slave manager was “a coercive one.”⁶

Women’s reluctance derived in no small part from a profound sense of their own incapacities. One Mississippi woman complained that she lacked sufficient “moral courage” to govern slaves; another believed “managing negroes . . . beyond my power.” “Master’s eye and voice,” Catherine Edmondston remarked, “are much more potent than mistress.” An Alabamian with two slaves pronounced herself “incompetent” to direct them; Martha Fort of Georgia sought a solution in renting out her slave property. “I shall not

farm myself. I can get along with negro men.” Another Georgia lady sniffed that a woman was simply not “a fit and proper person” to supervise slaves. Even in anticipation the responsibility seemed daunting, and actual experience often bore out these anxieties. Slaves themselves frequently seemed to share their mistresses’ views of their own incapacities. Ellen Moore of Virginia complained that her laborers “all think I am a kind of usurper & have no authority over them.” As war and the promise of freedom encouraged increasing black assertiveness, white women discovered themselves in charge of an institution quite different from the one their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons had managed before military conflict commenced.⁷

Female apprehensions about slave mastery arose from fears of this very rebelliousness and from a sense of the special threat slave violence might pose to white women. Keziah Brevard, a fifty-eight-year-old South Carolina widow, lived in almost constant fear of her sizable slave force. “It is dreadful to dwell on insurrections,” she acknowledged. Yet “many an hour have I laid awake in my life thinking of our danger.” Long accustomed to being alone with her slaves, Brevard grew more fearful as sectional conflict turned to Civil War. In the spring of 1861 she worried that “we know not what moment we may be hacked to death in the most cruel manner by our slaves.” When her coffee tasted salty and her dinner rancid, she could not decide if her servants were attempting to poison her or just lodging a protest against their continued subjection.⁸

Early in the war, Mary Chesnut, who professed never to have had any fear of her slaves, felt compelled to reconsider her own safety when her cousin Betsey Witherspoon was smothered by her servants. An elderly widow who lived alone with her slaves, Witherspoon was well known as an ineffective and indulgent manager. Her murder underlined both the inadequacies and vulnerabilities of white women as slave masters; her fate was exactly what her South Carolina neighbor Keziah Brevard most feared. Another Carolina widow, Ada Baco, contemplated Witherspoon’s death and the prospects of her own slaves’ loyalty with similar dismay. “I fear twould take very little to make them put me out of the way,” she wrote.⁹

Rumors of slave insurrections abounded, and stories of individual outrages seized women’s attention. On July 11, 1861, Sarah Eddy of Alabama recorded news of “a most atrocious murder—that of an old lady . . . by her negro woman—the negro to be hung tomorrow.” Just two days later she noted the report of “an insurrectionary movement among the negroes of Wills Valley, which was suppressed, however.” At the Glenn Anna Female Seminary in North Carolina, the girls were in the weeks after secession
“dreadfully frightened” by stories about “negroes rising and killing,” especially “as there were no men at the Seminary.” Even though it was all but impossible to separate rumor from reality, a slave conspiracy near Natchez in the spring of 1861 was particularly terrifying. The captured insurgents seemed to confirm women’s profoundest fears, indicating, at least as white men recorded their rather elegantly phrased testimony, an intention to “ravish” “Miss Mary . . . Miss Sarah . . . and Miss Anna,” wives and daughters of prominent slaveholders. Although secession and the outbreak of military conflict greatly aggravated both fears and rumors of such uprisings, reports of insurrections continued throughout the war, increasing in number when Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, when Union troops made significant advances, and ultimately when Confederate power was obviously disintegrating in late 1864 and 1865.10

Reports of individual acts of violence proliferated as well. Ada Bacot was certain the fire in her neighbors’ house was set by their slave Abel; Laura Lee was horrified when occupying troops released a Winchester slave convicted of murdering her mistress. In September 1862 the Mobile Advertiser and Register noted that a slave had succeeded in poisoning his master; the same month the Richmond Enquirer recorded the conviction of one Lavinia for torching her mistress’s house. Abbie Brooks of Georgia described the terrible scars on her face from a woman neighbor who had been shoved into the fire by a slave. “All that saved her life was the negro taking fire and had to let go of her mistress to extinguish herself.”11

By the middle years of the war, women had begun publicly to voice their fears, writing hundreds of letters to state and Confederate officials imploring that men be detailed from military service to control the slaves. Hattie Motley of Alabama begged the secretary of war for the discharge of her husband, supporting her request with a description of how the previous week only a few miles away “in the night, a monster in the shape of a negro man” entered the house and then the bedroom of a young girl. “Such occurrences,” Motley declared, “make woman’s blood run cold, when they think of being left defenseless.” Mrs. M. K. Smith was living as a lone white woman with an infant child on an Alabama plantation with forty-three slaves “in the enjoyment of their unrestrained freedom so far as they choose . . . to exercise it by reason of their being no white male person on said plantation.” Her situation, she believed, rendered her “liable to be murdered by negroes at any time they may feel disposed to do so.” Smith did not make clear which fate—death or dishonor—she regarded as worse, but other southern women were more direct. A group of women living near New Bern petitioned North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance for exceptions for the few men who still remained at home. “We pray your Excellency to consider that in the absence of all protection the female portion of this community may be subjected to a system of outrage that may be justly denominated the harrow of harrows more terrible to the contemplation of the virtuous maiden and matron than death.” A petition to the Confederate secretary of war from a similar collection of “Ladies of the N.E. beat of Jas[per] County, Miss.” sought male protection against an anticipated slave insurrection. If that was impossible, they requested arms and ammunition to defend themselves from “the demoniac invasion” so that “we die with honor & innocence sustained.”12

These women chose different euphemisms to express their anxieties—insult, outrage, “harrow of harrows,” dishonor, stain, and molestation—but the theme was undeniably sexual. The Old South had justified white woman’s subordination in terms of her biological difference, emphasizing an essential female weakness that rested ultimately in sexual vulnerability. In a society based on the oppression of a potentially hostile population of 4 million black slaves, such vulnerability assumed special significance. On this foundation of race, the white South erected its particular—and particularly compelling—logic of female dependence. Only the white man’s strength could provide adequate and necessary protection. The very word protection was invoked again and again by Confederate women petitioning for what they believed the fundamental right guaranteed them by the paternalistic social order of the South: “I feel unprotected and afraid,” “unable to protect myself,” “unable to stand up under her burden without the assistance of some white male to protect her.” Denied such assurances of safety, many women would be impelled to question—even if implicitly—the logic of their willing acceptance of their own inferiority. In seeking, like the ladies of Jasper County, Mississippi, to protect themselves, Confederate women profoundly undermined the legitimacy of their subordination, demonstrating that they did not—indeed could not—depend on the supposed superior strength of white men.13

Significantly, the “demonic” invaders these Mississippi women most feared were not Yankees but rebellious slaves. In their terror of an insurgent black population, white southern women advanced their own definition of wartime priorities, one seemingly not shared by the Confederate leadership and government. “I fear the blacks more than I do the Yankees,” confessed Mrs. A. Ingraham of besieged Vicksburg. In Virginia, Betty Maury agreed. “I am afraid of the lawless Yankee soldiers, but that is nothing to my fear of
the negroes if they should rise against us." Confronted with news of a conspiracy in her own Mississippi county, Susan Sillers Darden found it "dreadful to think of it as a matter of our lives, and all the time by the Servants besides the Abolitionists." Living with slavery in wartime was, one Virginia woman observed, living with "enemies in our own households."14

The arrival of black soldiers in parts of the South represented the conjunction and culmination of these fears. Mary Lee of Winchester, Virginia, came "near fainting" when the troops appeared; she felt "more unnerved than by any sight I have seen since the war [began]." These soldiers were at once men, blacks, and national enemies—her gender, racial, and political opposites, the quintessential powerful and hostile Other. Their occupying presence in Winchester reminded her so forcefully of her weakness and vulnerability that she responded with a swoon, an unwanted and unwonted display of the feminine impotence and delicacy she had struggled to overcome during long years of her own as well as Confederate independence.15

Yet women often denied or repressed these profound fears of racial violence, confronting them only in the darkest hours of anxious, sleepless nights. Constance Cary Harrison remembered that in the daytime, apprehensions about slave violence seemed "preposterous," but at night, "there was the fear... dark, boding, oppressive and altogether hateful... the ghost that refused to be laid." Women sometimes questioned why they did not constantly feel overwhelmed by a terror that seemed all too appropriate and rational. Even as Kehia Brevard contemplated the hours she had lain awake wondering if she would be "hacked to death," she asked, "Why is it at times I feel safe as if no dangers were in the distance? I wish I could feel as free from it at all times." Catherine Edmondston marveled that with "eighty-eight negroes immediately around me" and "not a white soul within five miles," she felt "not a sensation of fear."16

Some women in fact regarded their slaves as protectors, hoping for the loyalty that the many tales of "faithful servants" would enshrine in Confederate popular culture and, later, within the myth of the Lost Cause. Elizabeth Saxon, in a typically rose-colored remembrance of slavery during the war, recalled in 1905 that "not an outrage was perpetrated, no house was burned... in lonely farms many of us were as tender and helpless." The discrepancy between this portrait and the anxieties of everyday life on Confederate plantations underscores how white southerners, both during the war and afterward, struggled to retain a view of slavery as a benevolent institution, appreciated by blacks as well as whites.

During the war such "faithful servant" stories served to calm white fears. But examples of persisting white trust and confidence in slaves cannot be discounted entirely, nor can the stories themselves be uniformly dismissed as white inventions. There were in fact slaves who buried the master's silver to hide it from the enemy; there were slaves, like one Catherine Edmondston described, who drew knives to defend mistresses against Yankee troops. Such incidents reinforced white southerners' desire not to believe that men and women they thought they had known intimately—sometimes all their lives—had suddenly become murderers and revolutionaries.17

Much of the complexity of wartime relationships between white women and slaves arose because women increasingly relied on slaves' labor, competence, and even companionship at a time when slaves saw diminishing motivation for work or obedience. White women's dependence on their slaves grew simultaneously with slaves' independence of their owners, creating a troubling situation of confusion and ambivalence for mistresses compelled constantly to reassess, to interrogate, and to revise their assumptions as they struggled to reconcile need with fear. Although many agreed with Catherine Broun, who declared she was by 1863 "beginning to lose confidence in the whole race," other white women turned hopefully to their slaves as the only remaining allies in a dangerous wartime world. Some slave mistresses, especially in isolated plantation settings, found that in changed wartime households, their closest adult connections were with female slaves. When Rhoda died in April 1862, her owner Anna Green wrote in despair to her sister. "I feel like I have lost my only friend and I do believe she was the most faithful friend I had... if she was a servant." Leila Callaway described the death from smallpox of her slave Susanna in almost identical terms. "Next to my own dear family Susanna was my warmest best friend." "I have no one now in your absence," she informed her husband, "to look to for protection." In the disruptions of the South's hierarchies of gender and race, Leila Callaway had invested a black woman with some of the responsibilities—emotional and otherwise—of the absent white man.18

Kate McClure of South Carolina preferred her slave Jeff to the white men her husband had deputized to help manage plantation affairs during his military service. McClure believed Jeff to be more trustworthy and more knowledgeable, as well as more likely to accept her viewpoint and direction, than the two male neighbors. Maria Hawkins keenly felt the absence of her slave protector Moses and wrote to Governor Vance with a variation of the hundreds of letters to southern officials seeking discharge of husbands and sons. Hawkins requested Moses' release from impressment as a laborer on
coastal fortifications. "He slept in the house, every night while at home, & protected everything in the house & yard & at these perilous times when deserters are committing depredations, on plantations every day, I am really so much frightened every night, that I am up nearly all night." In Hawkins's particular configuration of gender and racial anxieties, a black male protector was far preferable to no male at all.10

**The Fruits of the War**

Within the context of everyday life in the Confederacy, most women slaveholders confronted neither murderous revolutionaries nor the unfailingly loyal retainers of "moonlight and magnolias" tradition. Instead they faced complex human beings whose desires for freedom expressed themselves in ways that varied with changing means and opportunities as slavery weakened steadily under unrelenting northern military pressure.

Often opportunity was greatest in areas close to Union lines, and slaveowners in these locations confronted the greatest challenges of discipline. "This must," wrote Catherine Edmondston of her increasingly unmanageable slaves, "be one of the fruits of the War, as we never had such a thing before." Ada Bacot, widowed South Carolina plantation owner, believed her "orders disregarded more & more every day. I can do nothing so must submit, which is anything but pleasant." When she left Carolina for a nursing post at the Monticello Hospital in Charlottesville, however, she soon discovered "Virginia Negroes are not so servile as those of S.C." Even the chambermaid she had brought from home became insubordinate under the influence of her new environment. Slave intractability made Bacot's housekeeping duties "anything but pleasant." When an adolescent slave named William defied her order to clean up the dinner table in the house where she and the other nurses and doctors lodged, she called him to task. But the young slave was "so impertinent that I slapped him in the mouth before I knew what I did." His mother rushed from the kitchen to his defense, provoking Bacot to threaten both slaves with punishment. Unlike many Confederate slave managers, though, Bacot did not live in a world comprised exclusively of women. She turned for aid to the white male doctors who were also residents of the household, and they whipped both irate mother and insolent child.80

For many white women this physical dimension of slave control proved most troubling. In the prewar South the threat—and often the reality—of physical force had combined with the coercive manipulations of planter paternalism to serve as fundamental instruments of oppression and thus of race control. The white South had justified its "peculiar institution" as a beneficent system of reciprocal obligations between master and slave, defining slave labor as a legitimate return for masters' protection and support. But in the very notion of mutual duties, the ideology of paternalism concealed the essential humanity of the bondpeople, who turned paternalism to their own uses, manipulating it as an empowering doctrine of intrinsic rights.

Desiring to see themselves as decent Christian men, most southern slaveholders of the prewar years preferred the negotiated power of reciprocity to the almost unchecked exercise of force that was in fact permitted them by law. The paternalistic ideal regarded whipping as a last, not a first, resort, and as a breakdown in control that was more properly exerted over minds than bodies. Yet violence was implicit in the system, and both planters' records and slaves' reminiscences demonstrate how often it was explicit as well.

Just as "paternalism" and "mastery" were rooted in concepts of masculinity, so violence was similarly gendered as male within the ideology of the Old South. Recourse to physical force in support of male honor and white supremacy was regarded as the right, even the responsibility, of each white man—within his household, on his plantation, in his community, and with the outbreak of war, for his nation. Women slave managers inherited a social order that depended on the threat and often the use of violence. Throughout the history of the peculiar institution, slave mistresses had in fact slapped, hit, and even brutally whipped their slaves—particularly slave women or children. But their relationship to this exercise of physical power was significantly different from that of their men. No gendered code of honor celebrated women's physical power or dominance. A contrasting yet parallel ideology exalted female sensitivity, weakness, and vulnerability. In the prewar years, exercise of the violence fundamental to slavery was overwhelmingly the responsibility and prerogative of white men. A white woman disciplined and punished as the master's subordinate and surrogate. Rationalized, systematic, autonomous, and instrumental use of violence belonged to men.

Ada Bacot surprised herself when she lashed out and slapped young William, and it was in just such moments of rage that many Confederate women embraced physical force. But for the kind of rationalized punishment intended to function as the mainstay of slave discipline, Bacot turned to men. Women alone customarily sought overseers, male relatives, or neighbors to undertake physical coercion of slaves, especially slave men. As white
men disappeared to war, however, finding such help became increasingly difficult. Sarah Espy had depended on her neighbor Finley to carry out necessary whippings, but when he departed to Carolina, she was without recourse. Yet Espy would have agreed with the woman who declared that “the idea of a lady doing such a thing” was “repugnant.”

In the exigency of war, however, many mistresses did inflict violence with their own hands, but more often than not rage had to override deep-seated feelings of conflict and ambivalence to make such actions possible. Susan Scott of Texas seemed close to the limits of sanity when she stood in the midst of a poorly cultivated cornfield shouting fearful curses at her slaves in language “equal to any man.” Then she “whipped one . . . awfully, and said she would be damned if she didn’t have every d— negro on the place whipped about the stand of corn.” Emily Perkins of Tennessee was so infuriated at a slave woman who had announced she would never be whipped again that she hit her over the head with what she thought was a shovel. When it turned out to be just a broom, which broke instead of knocking the woman over, Perkins sent for a male slave to tie her down. Then Perkins “laid it on.” Instead of an effective effort to exert dominance, white women’s recourse to violence often represented a loss of control—over both themselves and their slaves.

As slaves grew more assertive in anticipation of their freedom, their female managers regarded physical coercion as at once more essential and more impossible. Some white women began to bargain with violence, trying to make slavery seem benign in hopes of retaining their slaves’ service, if not their loyalty. Avoiding physical punishment even in the face of insolence or poor work, they endeavored to keep their slaves from departing altogether. Leila Callaway wrote her husband, Morgan, of her efforts to appear a benevolent—and thus desirable—mistress: “I never was half as sweet tempered in my life as I have been this year.” Catherine Browne, on the border of slavery and freedom in northern Virginia, confessed she was “afraid . . . to correct one of them least they should all leave.” At the opposite end of the Confederacy, Texan Lizzie Neblett urged her part-time overseer not to beat a slave in response to his insubordination. “Told him not to whip Joe, as long as he done his work well . . . that he might run away & we might never get him & if he never done me any good he might my children.” Lizzie worried as well that whipping might provoke violent retaliation against managers who possessed the obvious vulnerability of the Confederacy’s white females. Many had, she noted, become “actually afraid to whip the negroes.”

The Old South’s social hierarchies had created a spectrum of legitimate access to violence, so that social empowerment was inextricably bound up with the right to employ physical force. Violence was all but required of white men of all classes, a cultural principle rendered explicit by the coming of war and conscription. Black slaves, by contrast, were forbidden the use of violence entirely, except within their own communities, where the dominant society chose to regard it as essentially invisible. White women stood upon an ill-defined middle ground, where behavior and ideology often diverged.

The Civil War exacerbated this very tension, compelling women in slave-owning households to become the reluctant agents of a power they could not embrace as rightfully their own. The centrality of violence in the Old South had reflected and reinforced white women’s inferior status in that society. With Civil War, military conflict made organized violence the South’s defining purpose and instrument of survival, marginalizing women once again. But even away from “the tented field,” even on the homefront, women felt inadequate; their understanding of their gender undermined their effectiveness. Just as their inability to bear arms left Confederate women feeling “useless,” so their inhibitions about violence made many females regard themselves as failures at slave management. As Lizzie Neblett wrote of her frustration in the effort to control eleven recalcitrant slaves, “I am so sick of trying to do a man’s business when I am nothing but a poor contemptible piece of multiplying human flesh tied to the house by a crying young one, looked upon as belonging to a race of inferior beings.” The language she chose to describe her self-loathing is significant, for she borrowed it from the vocabulary of race as well as gender. Invoking the objective constraints of biology—“multiplying flesh”—as well as the socially constructed limitations of status—“looked upon as belonging to a race of inferior beings”—she identified herself not with the white elite, not with those in whose interest the war was being fought, but with the South’s oppressed and disadvantaged. Increasingly, even though self-indulgently, she came to regard herself as the victim rather than the beneficiary of her region’s slave society. Lizzie Neblett’s uniquely documented experience with violence and slavery deserves exploration in some detail, for it illustrates not simply the contradictions inherent in female management, but the profound personal crisis of identity generated by her new and unaccustomed role.

Troubled in Mind

When her husband departed for war in the spring of 1863, Lizzie had set about the task of management committed to “doing my best” but was
apprehensive both about her ignorance of agriculture and about the behavior she might expect from her eleven slaves. Their initial response to her direction, however, seemed promising. “The negroes,” she wrote Will in late April, “seem to be mightily stirred up about making a good crop.”

By harvest, however, the situation had already changed. “The negroes are doing nothing,” Lizzie wrote Will at the height of first cotton picking in mid-August. “But ours are not doing that job alone[,] near all the negroes around here are at it, some of them are getting so high in anticipation of their glorious freedom by the Yankees I suppose, that they resist a whipping.” Lizzie harbored few illusions about the long-term loyalty of her own black family. “I dont think we have one who will stay with us.”

After a harvest that fell well below the previous year’s achievement, Lizzie saw the need for new managerial arrangements. Will had provided for a male neighbor to keep a general supervisory eye over the Nebbitt slave force, but Lizzie wrote Will in the fall of 1863 that she had contracted to pay a Mr. Meyers to spend three half-days a week with her slaves. “He will be right tight on the negroes I think, but they need it. Meyers will lay down the law and enforce it.” But Lizzie emphasized that she would not permit cruelty or abuse.

Controlling Meyers would prove in some ways more difficult than controlling the slaves. His second day on the plantation Meyers whipped three young male slaves for idleness, and on his next visit, as Lizzie put it, “he undertook old Sam.” Gossip had spread among slaves in the neighborhood—and from them to their masters—that Sam intended to take a whipping from no man. Will Nebbitt had, in fact, been a harsh disciplinarian, tending more to threatening and grumbling than whipping. But Meyers regarded Sam’s challenge as quite “enough.” When Sam refused to come to Meyers to receive a whipping he felt he did deserve, Meyers cornered and threatened to shoot him. Enraged, Meyers beat Sam so severely that Lizzie feared he might die. She anxiously called the doctor, who assured her that Sam had no internal injuries and that he had seen slaves beaten far worse.

Lizzie was torn over how to respond—to Meyers or to Sam. “Tho I pity the poor wretch,” she confided to Will, “I don’t want him to know it.” To the other slaves she insisted that “Meyers would not have whipped him if he had not deserved it,” and to Will she defensively maintained, “somebody must take them in hand[,] they grow worse all the time[,] I could not begin to write you... how little they mind me.” She saw Meyers’s actions as part of a plan to establish control at the outset: “he lets them know what he is... & then has no more trouble.” But Lizzie’s very insistence and defensiveness suggest that this was not, even in her mind, slave management in its ideal form.

Over the next few days, Lizzie’s doubts about Meyers and his course of action grew. Instead of eliminating trouble at the outset, as he had intended, the incident seemed to have created an uproar. Sarah, a cook and house slave, reported to Lizzie that Sam suspected the whipping had been his mistress’s idea, and that, when well enough, he would run away until Will came home.

To resolve the volatile situation and to salvage her reputation as slave mistress, Lizzie now enlisted another white man, Coleman, to talk reasonably with Sam. Coleman had been her dead father’s overseer and continued to manage her mother’s property. In the absence of Will and Lizzie’s brothers at the front, he was an obvious family deputy, and he had undoubtedly known Sam before Lizzie had inherited him from her father’s estate. Coleman agreed to “try to show Sam the error he had been guilty of.” At last Sam spoke the words Coleman sought, admitting he had done wrong and promising no further insubordination.

Two weeks after the incident, Lizzie and Sam finally had a direct and, in Lizzie’s view at least, comforting exchange. Meyers had ordered Sam back to work, but Lizzie had interceded in response to Sam’s complaints of persisting weakness. Taking his cue from Lizzie’s conciliatory gesture and acting as well in accordance with Coleman’s advice, Sam apologized for disappointing Lizzie’s expectations, acknowledging that as the oldest slave he had special responsibilities in Will’s absence. Henceforth, he promised Lizzie, he was “going to do his work faithfully & be as much service to me as he could: I could not help,” Lizzie confessed to Will, “feeling sorry for the old fellow[,]... he talked so humbly & seemed so hurt that I should have had him whipped so.”

Sam’s adroit transformation from rebel into Sambo helped resolve Lizzie’s uncertainties about the appropriate course of slave management. Abandoning her defense of Meyers’s severity, even interceding on Sam’s behalf against her own manager, Lizzie assured Sam she had not been responsible for his punishment, had indeed been “astonished” by it. Meyers, she reported to Will with newfound assurance, “did wrong” and “knows nothing” about the management of slaves. He “don’t,” she noted revealingly, “treat them as moral beings but manages by brute force.” Henceforth, Lizzie concluded, she would not feel impelled by her sense of helplessness to countenance extreme severity. Instead, she promised Sam, if he remained
Lizzie Neblett. Courtesy of the Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

"humble and submissive," she would ensure "he would not get another lick."

The incident of Sam’s whipping served as the occasion for an extended negotiation between Lizzie and her slaves about the terms of her power. In calling upon Meyers and Coleman, she demonstrated that, despite appearances, she was not in fact a woman alone, dependent entirely on her own resources. Although the ultimate responsibility might be hers, slave manage-

ment was a community concern. Pushed toward sanctioning Meyers’s cruelty by fear of her own impotence, Lizzie then stepped back from the extreme position in which Meyers had placed her. But at the same time she dissociated herself from Meyers’s action, she also reaped its benefit: Sam’s abandonment of a posture of overt defiance for one of apparent submission. Sam and Lizzie were ultimately able to join forces in an agreement that Meyers must be at once deposed and tolerated as a necessary evil whom both mistress and slave would strive ceaselessly to manipulate. Abandoning their brief tryouts as Simon Legree and Nat Turner, Lizzie and Sam returned to the more accustomed and comfortable roles of concerned paternalist and loyal slave. Each recognized at last that his or her own performance depended in large measure on a complementary performance by the other.

Lizzie’s behavior throughout the crisis demonstrated the essential part gender identities and assumptions played in master-slave relations. As a female manager, Lizzie exploited her apparently close ties to Sarah, a house slave, in order to secure information about the remainder of her force. “Sarah is worth a team of negro’s with her tongue,” Lizzie reported to Will. Yet Lizzie’s gender more often represented a constraint than an opportunity. Just before the confrontation between Meyers and Sam, Lizzie had written revealingly to Will about the physical coercion of slaves. Acknowledging Will’s reluctance to whip, she confessed to feeling the aversion even more forcefully than he. “It has got to be such a disagreeable matter with me to whip, that I haven’t even dressed Kate but once since you left, & then only a few cuts—I am too troubled in mind to get stirred up enough to whip. I made Thornton whip Tom once.”

Accustomed to occasional strikes against female slaves, Lizzie called on a male slave to whip the adolescent Tom, then, later, she enlisted a male neighbor to dominate the venerable Sam. Yet even this structured hierarchy of violence was becoming increasingly “disagreeable” to her as she acted out her new wartime role as “chief of affairs.” In part, Lizzie knew she was objectively physically weaker than both black and white men around her. But she confessed as well to a “troubled . . . mind,” to uncertainties about her appropriate relationship to the ultimate exertion of force upon which slavery rested. As wartime pressures weakened the foundations for the “moral” management that Lizzie preferred, what she referred to as “brute force” became simultaneously more attractive and more dangerous as an instrument of coercion.

Forbidden the physical severity that served as the fundamental prop of his system of slave management, Meyers requested to be released from his
contract with Lizzie at the end of the crop year. Early in the agreement, Meyers had told Lizzie that he could “conquer” her slaves, “but may have to kill some one of them.” It remained with Lizzie, he explained, to make the decision. In her moments of greatest exasperation, Lizzie was willing to consent to such extreme measures. “I say do it.” But with calm reflection, tempered by Will’s measured advice, considerations of humanity reasserted their claim. Repeatedly she interceded between Meyers and the slaves, protecting them from whippings or condemning Meyers when he disobeyed her orders and punished them severely. Yet despite her difficulties in managing Meyers and despite her belief that he was “deficient in judgment,” Lizzie recognized her dependence on him and the threat of force he represented. She was determined to “hold him on as long as I can.” If he quit and the slaves found that no one was coming to replace him, she wrote revealingly, “the jig will be up.” The game, the trick, the sham of her slave management would be over. Without a man—or a man part time for three half-days a week—without the recourse to violence that Meyers embodied, slavery was unworkable. The velvet glove of paternalism required its iron hand. 35

Violence was the ultimate foundation of power in the slave South, but gender prescriptions carefully barred white women—especially those elite women most likely to find themselves responsible for controlling slaves—from purposeful exercise of physical dominance. Even when circumstances had shifted to make female authority socially desirable, it remained for many plantation mistresses personally unachievable. Lizzie’s struggle with her attraction to violence and her simultaneous abhorrence of it embodied the contradictions that the necessary wartime paradox of female slave management imposed. Lizzie begged Will to hire out his slaves or even to “give your negroes away and, I’ll... work with my hands, as hard as I can, but my mind will rest.” Lizzie wished repeatedly to die, to be a man, or to give up the slaves altogether—except, tellingly, for “one good negro to wait upon me.” White women had reaped slavery’s benefits throughout its existence in the colonial and antebellum South. But they could not be its everyday managers without in some measure failing to be what they understood as female. The authority of their class and race could not overcome the dependence they had learned to identify as the essence of their womanhood. 36

More Expense Than Profit

Many women who feared experiences like Lizzie’s hired out or sold their slaves rather than attempting to manage the troublesome property them- selves. As food and clothing became scarcer in the ever more desperate South, simply finding someone else to assume responsibility for feeding slaves was often almost as important as securing cash income for their sale or rent. Lila Chunn’s brother-in-law advised her to dispose of two slaves, Ann and Sandy. “He says,” reported Lila’s sister, “they ought to bring 4 or 5000 & you’ve been supporting her instead of her you.” In areas of the South where large numbers of slaves had been taken by refugees, there emerged by the last years of the war a glut on the market. In Texas, for example, one estate executor complained that in 1864 he was unable to hire out slaves of a deceased owner for any price. 37

For some white families, these changes in slave markets and availability represented an opportunity too great to ignore, for war’s disruptions had made slave ownership possible for the first time. Women acting as heads of such households often welcomed new slaveholding duties as a warborn chance for upward mobility. Mary Bell of Franklin, North Carolina, took full advantage of the new fluidity of the South’s labor force to acquire in 1864 a family of three slaves moved from the Carolina coast to her mountain community. 38

After the departure of her husband, Alfred, for war in 1861, Mary had depended on two hired slaves nominally supervised by a white tenant to work her land. Tom and Liza were a constant aggravation, however, and by 1862 Tom had been discovered stealing meat as well as poisoning her brother-in-law’s dog. Liza disappeared for days at a time, and Mary chafed with frustration at her inability to control her workers. Mary believed the situation resulted in part from the failure of the white men on whom she depended—her tenant and her father and brother-in-law—to offer adequate assistance. “Your Pa does not control Tom as he ought to,” she wrote Al in May 1862. “He lets him have his own way too much. I wish I could be man and woman both until this war ends.” As the white men upon whom she depended failed her, Mary wished for what she knew was impossible: the ability to exercise male power and male control herself. Mary was so exasperated, she was ready to give her hired slaves up altogether. “Tom never came back,” she wrote to Al a week later. “I am very well satisfied to do without him, he is too lazy to pay for his victuals and clothes and was always in some fuss.” 39

But Mary identified the source of her discontent as a slave manager as not so much her gender—though she saw that as part of the problem—or the wartime disruptions of master-slave relations, but the legal tenuousness of her hold on her workers. She was not their owner; her connection with them
was defined as temporary rather than permanent. Perhaps in full ownership, she thought, lay the resolution of her difficulties.

With the assistance and advice of a brother-in-law, Mary therefore executed her "nigger trade" in March 1864, acquiring Trim, his wife, Patsy, and their daughter, Rosa. At first she was ebullient about her new property and pronounced herself "so well pleased with my darkies." But her enthusiasm soon waned. In November she wrote Alf that when he came home from the army and saw how bad everything was, he would want to return to camp. Patsy had proven to be in poor health, plagued by fits that would make her "a burden on our hands as long as she lives." Moreover, it turned out that Mary had been deceived in the sale and that Patsy was in fact a free woman. This meant that Mary had actually purchased one slave, not three, for Rosa's status would follow that of her mother. Trim's usefulness in the fields was proving limited as well. "Unless you could be at home I fear we will not make much farming," she wrote Alf in December.40

Mary began thinking of exchanging these slaves for others, but her expectations of what slavery might bring her had been scaled down considerably from her earlier hopes of upward mobility and increasing wealth. Burdened with a new baby of her own, Mary Bell, like Lizzie Neblett, came to regard slavery's greatest benefit as residing in the availability of someone to relieve her of household labor. Mary Bell's overwhelming desire by late 1864 was simply for a "woman that can get up and get breakfast. I am getting tired of having to rise these cold mornings."41

On balance, Mary Bell's experience as manager and fledgling slaveowner had been trying. In November 1864 she had written to Alf, "these negroes are going to be more expense than profit unless you were at home[.] I think then Trim would be of service to us." With an inadequate corn crop and potatoes rotting in the field, Mary proclaimed, "this year has put me completely out of heart." Beginning her duties as slave manager with optimism and enthusiasm, Mary Bell came ultimately to share with Lizzie Neblett a profound sense of failure and personal inadequacy. As she repeatedly told Alf, "unless you could be at home," "unless you were at home," the system would not work. "You say," Mary Bell wrote her husband in December 1864, "you think I am a good farmer if I only had confidence in myself. I confess I have very little confidence in my own judgment and management. wish I had more. perhaps if I had I would not get so out of heart. Sometimes I am almost ready to give up and think that surely my lot is harder than anyone else."42

A growing disillusionment with slavery among many elite white women arose from this very desire to "give up"—to be freed from burdens of management and fear of black reprisal that often outweighed any tangible benefits from the labor of increasingly recalcitrant slaves. Few slaveowning women had seriously questioned the moral or political legitimacy of the system, although many admitted to the profound evils associated with the institution. Gertrude Thomas noted its "terribly demonizing influence upon our men and boys," and Mary Chesnut's vehement criticisms similarly fixed on the most unrestricted sexual access slavery gave white men to black women. Yet her concerns, like those of Gertrude Thomas, lay with the impact of these social arrangements on whites and their families rather than on exploited slaves. White southern women readily embraced the racism of their era. Blacks were, Chesnut remarked, "dirty—slatternly—idle—ill smelling by nature." Slaves were unquestionably inferior beings "blest," as one North Carolina woman wrote, "in having a home among Anglo Saxons." Jane Howison Beale of Virginia had no doubt that blacks "were ordained of High Heaven to serve the white man and it is only in that capacity they can be happy useful and respected."43

Southern slave mistresses began to convince themselves, however, that an institution they were certain worked in the interest of blacks did not necessarily advance their own. Confederate women could afford little contempt of slavery's merits "in the abstract," as its prewar defenders had urged. Slavery's meaning did not rest in the detached and intellectualized realms of politics or moral philosophy. The growing emotional and physical cost of the system to slaveholding women made its own forceful appeal, and many slave mistresses began to persuade themselves that the institution had become a greater inconvenience than benefit.

In 1863, still anticipating Confederate victory, Lila Chunn urged her husband to consider a line of work after the war that did not involve slaves. "I sometimes think that the fewer a person owns the better off he is." Sarah Kennedy of Tennessee decided in 1863 that she "would rather do all the work than be worried with a house full of servants that do what, how and when they please....[I]f we could be compensated for their value [we] are better off without them." Keziah Brevard agreed: "I am heartily tired of managing them—could I cast them off without scruples of conscience I would do so.... What is the use of so much property when I can't get one thing cooked to eat[?]" In 1862 Mrs. W. W. Boyce wrote her husband, a South Carolina congressman, "I tell you all this attention to farming is uphill work with me. I can give orders first-rate, but when I am not obeyed, I can't keep my temper.... I am ever ready to give you a helping hand, but I must
say I am heartily tired of trying to manage free negroes.” Gertrude Thomas noted in 1864 that she had “become convinced that the Negro as a race is better off with us... than if he were made free, but I am by no means so sure that we would not gain by having his freedom given him... If we had the same invested in something else as a means of support I would willingly, nay gladly, have the responsibility of them taken off my shoulders.”

Like Lizzie Neblett, many white women focused on slavery’s trials and yearned for the peculiar institution—and all the troublesome blacks constrained within its bonds—magically to disappear. “I wish,” wrote Keziah Brevard, “the Abolitionists & the negroes had a country to themselves & we who are desirous to practice truth & love to God were to ourselves—yes Lord Jesus—separate us in the world to come, let us not be together.”

But like Neblett, many women who entertained such fantasies at the same time longed for just “one good negro to wait upon me.” For white women, this would be emancipation’s greatest cost.

**An Entire Rupture of Our Domestic Relations**

In the summer of 1862 a Confederate woman overheard two small girls “playing ladies.” “Good morning, ma’am,” said little Sally to her friend. “How are you today?” “I don't feel very well this morning,” four-year-old Nannie Belle replied. “All my niggers have run away and left me.”

From the first months of the war, white women confronted yet another change in their households, one that a Virginia woman described as “an entire disruption of our domestic relations”: the departure of their slaves. Sometimes, especially when Yankee troops swept through an area, the loss was total and immediate. Sarah Hughes of Alabama stood as a roadside spectator at the triumphant procession of hundreds of her slaves toward freedom. Her niece, Eliza Walker, on route to visit her aunt, described the scene that greeted her as she approached the Hughes plantation.

Down the road [the Bluecoats]... came, and with them all the slaves... journeying, as they thought, to the promised land. I saw them as they trudged the main road; many of the women with babes in their arms... old and young, men, women and children. Some of them fared better than the others. A negro woman, Laura, my aunt’s fancy seamstress, rode Mrs. Hughes' beautiful white pony, sitting [on] the red plush saddle of her mistress. The Hughes' family carriage, driven by Taliaferro, the old coachman, and filled with blue coated soldiers and negroes, passed in state, and this was followed by other vehicles.

Sarah Hughes, Alabama plantation mistress. Courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

With the trusted domestics leading the way, Sarah Hughes’s slaves had turned her world upside down.

Usually the departure of slaves was less dramatic and more secretive, as blacks simply stole away one by one or in groups of two or three when they heard of opportunities to reach Union armies and freedom. In Middleburg, Virginia, Catherine Cochran reported, “Scarcely a morning dawned that
some stampede was not announced—sometimes persons would awake to find every servant gone & we never went to bed without anticipating such an occurrence." In nearby Winchester, Mary Lee presided over a more extended dissolution of her slave force. Her male slaves were the first to leave in the spring of 1862. Emily and Betty threatened to follow, and Lee considered sending them off to a more secure location away from Federal lines in order to keep from losing them altogether. Having regular help in the house seemed imperative, though, even if it was risky. "I despise menial work," Lee confessed. But she had no confidence she would retain her property. "It is an uncomfortable thought, in waking in the morning, to be uncertain as to whether you will have any servants to bring in water and prepare breakfast. . . . I dread our house servants going and having to do their work." When Betty talked again of leaving in June 1863, Laura Lee, Mary's sister-in-law, locked up the clothes the black woman had packed in anticipation of departure. Laura was determined "not to lose them too, if I could help it." Temporarily thwarted, Betty left for good the next summer, and the Lees lost slave and clothing after all.48

By the time of her exile from Winchester in February 1865, Mary Lee was surprised that her household still enjoyed the services of a mother and daughter, Sarah and Emily, who, despite repeated threats and stormy confrontations, had not yet fled to freedom. Mary Lee entertained few illusions about the continuing loyalty of her slaves. Early in the war, she made it clear that "I have never had the least confidence in the fidelity of any negro." Her grief at their gradual disappearance was highly pragmatic; she mourned their lost labor but did not seem to cherish an ideal of master-slave harmony to be shaken by the slaves' choice of freedom over loyalty.49

A South Carolina woman, by contrast, became "miserably depressed" when her three most dependable house slaves fled. "If they felt as I do," she explained, "they could not possibly leave me." The Jones family of Georgia, devout Presbyterians, reflected the tenacity of their evangelical proslavery vision in their indignant feelings of betrayal at the departure of their human property. Eva Jones was distraught when three female slaves seized their freedom "without bidding any of us an affectionate adieu." Mary Jones felt deeply wounded by what she regarded as slaves' "ingratitude." Committed to a conception of slavery as a Christian institution founded in reciprocal rights and duties, she could understand blacks' desire for freedom only as an unjust failure to appreciate her dedicated performance of her obligations within the system. "My life long . . . I have been laboring and caring for them, and since the war have labored with all my might to supply their wants, and expended everything I had upon their support, directly or indirectly; and this is their return." Even the shock of the blacks' behavior did not help Mary Jones to understand that her construction of slavery as an institution of mutual benevolence was not shared by her slaves. With their sights set on freedom, the blacks felt no duty to abide by the terms of the system as the white South had defined them.50

Pressed by the exigencies of the war and by the unrelenting demands of household labor, most white women soon focused, like Mary Lee, on the practical rather than the ideological significance of the departure of their slaves. When Catherine Broun lost a servant of nineteen years in December 1861, she complained that her husband did not understand her distress. "He does not know how much a woman's happiness depends on having good servants." In truth, it was more than simply a woman's happiness. The elite southerner's fundamental sense of identity depended on having others to perform life's menial tasks. South Carolina aristocrat Charlotte Ravenel had been compelled to do her own cooking for almost ten days when she located a slave to assume the work. "Newport has taken the cooking," she wrote tellingly in March 1865, "and we are all ladies again." A Georgia woman succeeded in avoiding the fate Ravenel so narrowly escaped. "The first & only meal my Mother ever cooked," her daughter Emma Prescott remembered, was the "day after the negroes all left. Mother went into the kitchen to cook breakfast. She sifted some flour into the tray and stood, thinking what to do next—when an old negro man appeared at the window & said 'lady mistress is you cooking breakfast.' "No I am not come in here and get it for me which he did."51

In their reactions to slaves' departures, women revealed—to themselves as well as to posterity—the extent of their dependence on their servants. In our day of automated housework and prepared foods, it is easy to forget how much skill nineteenth-century housekeeping required. Many slave mistresses lacked this basic competence, having left to their slaves responsibility for execution of a wide range of essential domestic tasks. A generation ago historian Anne Firor Scott revolutionized prevailing wisdom about the southern lady. She was not, Scott insisted, the idle and pampered belle of myth and romance. Rather, Scott asserted, she was a worker, whose many contributions were essential to plantation efficiency and order. White women's reactions to the loss of their slaves offer a striking perspective on this argument. If plantation mistresses were indeed working hard, many of them, especially on larger farms and plantations, must have been devoting themselves overwhelmingly to organizational or managerial tasks—ordering food
and clothing or planning and assigning work within the house—for war and emancipation revealed that many white women felt themselves entirely ignorant about how to perform basic functions of everyday life.52

A Louisiana lady who had “never even so much as washed out a pocket handkerchief with my own hands” suddenly had to learn to do laundry for her entire family. Kate Foster found that when her house servants left and she took on the washing, she “came near ruining myself for life as I was too delicately raised for such hard work.” Mississippi planter Thomas Dabney was so horrified at the idea of ladies doing laundry that when his slaves departed, he insisted on his daughters that he himself would take on the washing. Lizzie Carter of Petersburg gained a new understanding of motherhood when she was left without a nurse. “I never knew before the trouble of children,” she complained to her sister. Martha Horne of Missouri remembered after the war that “I had never cooked a meal when the negro women left, and had a hard time learning.” Amanda Worthington reported her difficulties in learning to boil water and concluded she “never was cut out to be a cook.” Malvina Gist wished in March 1865 that “I had been taught to cook instead of how to play on the piano. A practical knowledge of the preparation of food products would stand me in better stead at this juncture.” When Henrietta Barr’s cook departed, she assumed her place in the kitchen. “(Although a confession is humiliating),” she confided to her diary, “I must say I do not in the smallest particular fill the situation as creditably as she did. I certainly do not think my forte lies in cooking.”53

The forte of the southern lady did not seem to lie in slave management either. These women were beginning to feel they could live neither with slaves nor without them. “To be without them is a misery & to have them is just as bad,” confessed Amelia Barr of Galveston. Women already frustrated “trying to do a man’s business” and direct slaves now discovered that they often felt equally incompetent executing the tasks that had belonged to their supposed racial inferiors. Like Henrietta Barr, many regarded the situation as “humiliating.” “It is such a degradation,” Mathella Page Harrison of Virginia wrote as she anticipated the imminent flight of her slaves, “to be so dependent upon the servants as we are.”54

The concept of female dependence and weakness was not simply a prop of southern gender ideology, in the context of war, white ladies were finding it to be all too painful a reality. Socialized to believe in their own weakness and sheltered from the necessity of performing even life’s basic tasks, many white women felt almost crippled by their unpreparedness for the new lives war had brought. Yet as they struggled to cope with change, their dedication to the old order faltered as well. Slavery, the “cornerstone” of the civilization for which their nation fought, increasingly seemed a burden rather than a benefit. White women regarded it as a threat as well. In failing to guarantee what white women believed to be their most fundamental right, in failing to protect women or to exert control over insolent and even rebellious slaves, Confederate men undermined not only the foundations of the South’s peculiar institution but the legitimacy of their power as white males, as masters of families of white women and black slaves.