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Rebellion Against the Rebels: An Exploration of White Southern Women's Patriotism

Jessica Stollenmaier

Abstract: This paper examines how hardships and food shortages shaped the experience of white Southern women and their support for the Civil War. Evidence is presented that shows these women did not receive adequate protection and food from the Confederate government; as a result, some women withdrew their support and stood up against the government in different ways depending on their class. The rebellious white women of the South are used as an example of what can happen when a government fails to care for the needs of its female population. The hardships these women faced are discussed and emphasis is placed on their food shortages. The general strength shown by many women who truly believed in the "Southern Cause" is given proper acknowledgment, but this is followed by the more surprising revelation of the Southern women who rebelled against the Confederacy. The poor, white women rebelled against the Confederate government by writing letters to their government, encouraging desertion, and raiding businesses. The elite white women disapproved of these actions, yet when their diaries are examined, a form of quiet rebellion can be observed. These upper-class women saw the desolation and suffering of the poor and questioned the war, and some attempted to withdraw their support while maintaining a public front of patriotism. The evidence presented shows how the Civil War can serve as a case study in the exploration of the limits of female patriotism.

Wars are damaging to all involved; yet, the women at home sometimes suffer the most. Often, men are expected to give up their lives while women at home are expected to give up the lives of their sons.¹ Government asks women to put "public freedom above private devotion."² Women are expected to sacrifice their sons to their country and their needs tend to be overlooked by their government as the army's needs are put first. Many women have accepted their role and are supportive of their government. Yet some women choose to seek relief — even if that means going against the needs of their nation. When the female civilian population of a nation is not cared for, some women will withdraw their support and stand up for themselves.

The reactions of some whiteⁱ women of the South during the Civil War are a great example of women's negative actions in response to hardships faced during war.

* i Black women are not discussed because, as a subjugated people, they were not expected to support the Confederacy but merely obey their masters.

The image of the strong Southern woman who faced many hardships during the war and stood up to invaders is pervasive. Women of the South are sometimes presented in pop culture as figures of patriotism and strength in the face of adversity and this was true for some. However, the story is rarely told of a small group of women who stopped believing in the war as a means to peace and lessened their support when the war hit their personal limits. Perhaps this is because countries tend to overlook embarrassing or unsuccessful revolts when writing a history. The South would like to remember its women as having been supportive of the war and patriotic. However, some women chose to put their family's needs above those of their nation.

This study focuses on the white women of the South and how their hardships, especially food shortages, affected their devotion to the Confederacy. When the author began her study she asked how shortages and other hardships affected these women. As she learned more about raids and riots, she wondered why she had heard so little and what the hardships meant for women's patriotism. What kinds of difficulties could drive Southern women to such extreme measures? What kinds of action did these women take? Did this loss of patriotism affect the outcome of the war? How were they viewed by others? How did hardships, especially food shortages, shape the experience of Southern women with regards to their support for the war?

Evidence shows that the white women of the South did not receive adequate protection and food from the Confederate government; as a result, some women withdrew their support and stood up for themselves in different ways which depended on their class.

Previous Studies

According to Wiley Sword, shortages, coupled with home destruction and dangerous battlefield conditions, lowered the morale of the Confederate soldiers, and the belief in their invincibility was shaken.³ To raise their spirits, food was diverted from the home front to the military. Author Michael J. Varhola explains that this caused new problems, beginning with increased prices on commodities for civilians.⁴ Charles Ramsdell, a historian who presented lectures on the Confederacy in 1937, asserted that there was actually enough food to supply the whole South but that the Confederate government was too weak to properly collect and distribute the food. Many men and women even wrote letters to their governors requesting that food be distributed more evenly.⁵ In her book *Ersatz in the Confederacy*, Mary Elizabeth Massey discusses the many shortages that affected the South during the Civil War. Writing in the 1950s, Massey stated that while Jefferson Davis was aware of the hardships on the home front, he never set a hard position, and therefore nothing was accomplished.⁶

In the South, shortages led to a lowered morale both in the army and on the home front. A Confederate cavalryman, William G. Stevenson, published a book of his wartime experience. In this work he describes the dangers in raiding for spoils, or marauding. He said that such theft from the civilian population "displaces patriotism from the breast of the fighter, (it) will utterly demoralize all engaged in it," and it is a danger to females.⁷ Bell Wiley, an early writer on Confederate women, asserted that the "failure of the Confederacy to alleviate the sufferings of soldier's families may have contributed more to Southern defeat than any one single factor." He believed that as conditions worsened at home, men became more likely to desert.⁸ A prominent historian on Southern women's nationalism, George C. Rable, recently wrote an essay from a viewpoint that denounces the common belief that a Northern victory was inevitable after 1864. He disagrees with Wiley, stating that morale only broadly rose and fell with military action or home front conditions. He believes that morale was an individual factor and that it did not suddenly "collapse in 1865 as has been commonly asserted."⁹

Other historians have examined Southern morale from different angles than Rable. Notably, James M. McPherson discusses the effects of wives' letters on soldiers' morale. Many wives wrote to their husbands about the perils they were facing at home; some even pleaded with their husbands to return. Soldiers often encouraged their wives and asked for their support, their fulfillment of their womanly duties, or for them to uphold the family's honor. Some men believed that by defending their nation they were protecting their families; others believed that their family's welfare was subordinate to their nation's need.¹⁰ William C. Davis believes that the problems at home undermined the support for the war, or the Confederate Cause. He said that in the minds of some women at home and men on the battlefield, "national defeat... was preferable to personal ruin."¹¹

John V. Berlin also saw the problems at home leading to Southern destruction because the wives and homes formed the base of Southern society. He saw this as the South's fatal flaw, visible from the beginning, but apparent in the political and military situation in late 1864 and 1865.¹² In his history of the Civil War, Charles C. Royster, said that even "Among Northerners, Southern women gained a reputation for being the most devoted supporters of the Confederacy."¹³ Some women had incredibly strong patriotism throughout the war, while others' devotion dwindled as conditions worsened. Berlin asserts that conditions became the worst for poor, white women. When faced with starvation, their patriotism became second to their need for food, and the Confederate government lost control of them. This greatly weakened the war effort and led to women's rioting. Due to their hunger, even some strongly patriotic Southern women asked Sherman for help. Berlin believes that this was "a streak of practical, self-preserving behavior that indicated there were indeed limits to their support for the Confederacy and foreshadowed their nation's demise."¹⁴ According to Royster, some Southern women came to Sherman's camp "crying and begging" and some even "exchanged sexual intercourse for food."¹⁵

Hardships that Southern Women Faced

During the Civil War, Southern women were forced to endure many hardships. These hardships varied in degree, but they all seemed to lower the morale of the women left at home. It was "the crushing weight of the Confederacy" that these women could not uphold. They endured "mental harassment which tormented them — the fear of being unable to provide adequate food and clothing for their children; the dread of disease; anxiety for the safety and welfare of husbands, sons, and other loved ones in the army; the fear of visitation by enemy raiders, or by native marauders," plus worry over farm operations, "negro uprisings," and the loneliness of being without male company.¹⁶ In retrospect, the undue burden placed on women is clearly visible, and it was recognized during the war. Confederate Colonel James C. Nisbet, realized that "it was upon the women that the greatest burden of this horrid war fell While the men were carried away with the drunkenness of the war, she dwelt in the stillness of her desolate home."¹⁷

These women were left behind to not only care for their homes but also to guard them, and they would have much to fear. "The terrible dread with which most women anticipated the coming of the Federals" would have been incredibly taxing on their mental health. While her husband was away, a woman named J.B. Jett ran the family farm near Atlanta, Georgia. As the Northern soldiers came through, they "ransacked her house, killed her hogs, and took all her corn and wheat." She was then left with nothing and narrowly survived the war.¹⁸ Eliza Francis Andrews wrote of the destruction she saw near Sparta, Georgia, after Sherman's March. She said

“fields were trampled down and the road was lined with carcasses of horses, hogs, and cattle that the invaders, unable to consume or carry away with them, had wantonly shot down to starve out the people and prevent them from making their crops.”¹⁹ The dreadful fear that these women lived with constantly chipped away at their support for the war.

Women were not just afraid of the Union soldiers stealing all their food; they feared rape and physical abuse from these men as well. However, both were rare, and marauding by the very soldiers these women were supporting happened more frequently.²⁰ⁱⁱ As Confederate soldiers stole the livestock from Eliza J. Mountcastle’s home, she wrote a letter to an unknown colonel asking him to send a guard. She said, “it is unlawful for ladys to be treated so by a parcel of scamps they are worse than Yankees . . . the[y] have destroyed every thing I hav[e] but my pig.”²¹ Eliza was one of many women who suffered from pillagers who were looking for their next meal and unconcerned by who they were taking from. The barbarities of war desensitized the men, allowing them to commit acts which would lead to the starvation of women and children. One sergeant explained, “it was the only way we had of living . . . even if it left poor women and children to starve as I fear it did in some cases.”²²ⁱⁱⁱ

Food Shortages

The fear of starvation was the greatest concern of many women. The women suddenly became the immediate providers for their families. Even if their husband or father was sending home money, women faced the day-to-day rigors of taking care of their family. The traditional job of preparing a family meal often became the most challenging aspect of a woman’s life. Though focused most heavily on the poor, food shortages affected many. According to Berlin, “all households faced shortages of coffee, tea, and salt.” The lack of salt was a huge concern because without it women could not preserve meat as well. As a result of food shortages, many women in the South were starving. Cornelia McDonald, for example, lived as a refugee in Lexington, Virginia, and recorded her personal struggle. She explained that she somehow gained sustenance from a daily meal of a roll and a cup of coffee. She also remarked how difficult it was to be a mother and be unable to provide for her starving children.²³

* ii The women of South Carolina knew that Sherman would rape their countryside like in Georgia, but some also feared the rape of their person. Embellished stories of what Sherman’s army would do were rampant, and although it was rare, rape by Union soldiers did occur. As Sherman marched to the sea, the women of South Carolina were filled with fear. They knew he would soon be headed north and into the state that was considered the instigator of the war and in need of punishment. Black women were more often the victims of rape, but so were white women. Court records reveal that Privates Chas Billingsley and William Cutsinger of the Seventh Indiana Battery were convicted of raping Louisa Smith of Burnt Hickory, Georgia. Similarly, Private Thomas Dawson of the Massachusetts Volunteers was also convicted of the rape of Frances West. Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell: Sex in the Civil War*, (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1994), 123-131. May 28, 1864. MS., Court Martial Proceedings, National Archives, quoted in Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 190. RG 153, GCMO #101, March 15, 1864. Quoted in Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell: Sex in the Civil War*, 125. This work also contains many similar stories.

* iii Perhaps these soldiers had no sympathy for the women they were stealing from because the “hardships of war could contribute to a tough or ‘Aristocratic’ attitude toward the ordinary sufferings of humanity.” Seeing so much bloodshed and having to endure shortages of food and supplies, the soldiers may have become immune to the suffering of others. One private wrote home saying that he “saw a man catch a large rat and eat it about a week ago. What is it that a dirty soldier won’t do?” George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 87. Private Luther Mills, Letter, January 31, 1865. Quoted in *Sword*, 241.

An influential factor leading to the scarcity of food was the shortage of manpower.²⁴ With the men off at war by conscription or their own free will, “there were few left behind to attend to the daily rigors of family life and farming except women, children, and perhaps a few slaves, and the aged and infirm.”²⁵ Like many resilient Southern women of the time, Margaret McCalla would not let the war and the absence of her husband stop her from feeding her children. As the Union army approached, she left her home in Tennessee and went to South Carolina as a refugee. There she bought a farm and worked it for two years, providing not only for herself, but her children and her mother as well.²⁶ Without her husband, McCalla was forced to rely on her own abilities to care for herself and her family.

When they were able to find food to buy, Southern women still faced the problems of inflation and speculation.²⁷ Noting outrageous food prices, Charles Blackford wrote home to his wife about his concern that starvation would ensue. “How are our people to live? The soldier’s wives and families? How are you and Nannie to live? It is a fearful question . . . You and mother are suffering from this now.”²⁸ Prices varied from place to place; for example in 1864 in Richmond, flour was \$225 to \$250 a barrel, and corn was \$28 to \$30 a bushel. In Columbia, South Carolina, prices were about one-fifth the cost,²⁹ but at a time when soldiers were sending home \$11 a month, any purchases of food would have been nearly impossible for those without family wealth.³⁰

Strong Women in the Face of Adversity

One must recognize and celebrate the strength shown by some Southern women. In the face of extreme hardship, many women were resilient. As Sherman marched through on his attempt to lower the morale on the home front, his men were often surprised at the strength of the women they encountered. They “expressed astonishment at the intensity with which Confederate women fought to maintain both their dignity and their property.”³¹

Fannie A. Beers was a Northern observer of Confederate female strength. She spent the war in the South and characterized Southern women as strong and loyal to their government. In her memoir, she says that “Their patriotism was not the outcome of mere sentiment, but a pure steady flame which from the beginning of the war to the end burned brightly upon the altars of sacrifice, which they set up all over the land.”³²

She records the account of a Southern woman who came to visit her husband while he recovered from an illness. Their daughter came as well, and while visiting, she was attacked by a dog and nearly died. The girl recovered after surgery but was permanently disfigured. The father was shortly called back to duty, but he was filled with a longing to stay with his poor, recovering child. Beers recounts that the family proceeded to the train depot and the mother gathered her strength and “waved to the soldier a smiling farewell, and afterwards (I) witnessed her vain efforts to suppress the short, sharp screams of agony which had been kept under as long as her husband needed to be upheld, but which after his departure convulsed her at intervals for hours.”³³ This woman’s strength is evident as she holds herself together so that her husband can be strong and do his duty without thinking of her and their child’s needs.

Robert E. Lee witnessed this strength as well. He met a woman with three children who was traveling to deliver a handmade suit to her husband whom she had not seen in two years. He noted that she said she “was willing to give up everything in the world she had to attain our independence.”³⁴ This woman showed incredible fortitude. After having been alone and taken care of her children for two years, she was still willing to sacrifice for the Confederacy.

Many women were able to maintain their support through “character and spiritual stamina.” Yet, toward the end of the war, faith was lost in the ability of the Confederacy to win, and some turned to religious faith to find consolation. Some women attended prayer groups, and when church attendance was impossible, they would worship at home. Judith Brockenbrough McGuire said that her “trust is first in God.”³⁵ When faced with military losses, many reasoned that God was testing them.³⁶ There was, however, a general lessening of religious faith.³⁷ Having been so sure in their cause at the onset, many citizens could not now equate loss with their God’s will. Susan Caldwell of Virginia noted that it was nearly impossible to “gain power over my own rebellious heart to say God’s will be done. Oh! how hard to be submissive.”³⁸ As interest in spiritual activities and church attendance declined, “religion declined [as] immorality increased.”³⁹ At this time prostitution flourished. Union soldiers would offer provisions in return for sex. Even in their desperation, some women remained loyal to their government and their husbands. A Confederate woman near Atlanta wrote to her husband saying that Northern soldiers told her “if I woud comedate them I never shold suffe[r] for . . . the[y] wod [fe[tc]h] me anything to eat I wanted.” She refused them but explained that other married women did comply in exchange for flour, meat, sugar, crackers, and coffee.⁴⁰

When the women of the South hit their individual limits, they reacted in different ways. A pattern of reactions among Southern women’s expressions emerged along class lines. Though hardships were felt by nearly all in one way or another, the hardships were intensified among the lower classes. These women reacted in more obvious and forceful ways as they questioned their loyalty to the Confederate government.⁴¹ They were hit particularly hard, and in the face of this adversity, many of them exchanged the Southern Cause for survival. Their revolt began with letters to their state officials but led to raiding and rioting.

The Rebellion of the Poor, White Women of the Confederacy

Victoria Bynum suggests that “evidence about poor women’s struggle to survive the war is more impressionistic than quantifiable.”⁴² One is often forced to rely on information that is implied from letters and diaries. Many of these poor, white women were unable to write,⁴³ which makes studying their plight even more difficult. These non-slaveholding farming women, often considered yeoman, were usually needed to help on the farm even before the war. They were not wealthy and their husbands were often conscripted into the war.

The poor farmwomen would have been more accustomed to hardships than the elite women. In the beginning they could have faced food shortages with resiliency, but due to the hardships they had to face toward the end of the war, they began to “pour their woes into pitiful letters to state governors and other officials.”⁴⁴ This marked the beginning of a slow weakening of their will to support a war in defense of an institution that did not benefit them directly. One woman wrote a letter to Governor Zebulon B. Vance of North Carolina begging him to do what he could to end the war.

For the sake of suffering humanity . . . and especially for the sake of suff[er]ing women and children try and stop this cruel war, her[e] I am without one mouthful to eat for myself and five children and God only knows where I will get som[e] thing now you know as well as you have a head that it is impossible to whip the Yankees . . . my husband has been kil[l]ed, and if they all stay till they are dead what in the name of God will become of us poor women.⁴⁵

Desperate women threatened their state governors that they would encourage their husbands to desert if they did not receive relief. Nancy Mangum wrote to Governor Vance saying, “We wimen will write for our husbands to come home and help us we cant stand it.”⁴⁶ For example one woman told her husband, “I would not have you do anything wrong for the world, but before God, Edward, unless you come home we must die.”⁴⁷ Like many others, Edward deserted the army and returned home to save his family. Desertion became widespread because of similar letters written to soldiers.

Another desperate letter to a husband includes similar sentiments about conditions at home:

We haven't got nothing in the house to eat but a little bit o' meal...I don't want you to stop fighten them Yankees till you kill the last one of them, but try and get off and come home and fix us all up some and then you can go back and fight them a heep harder then you ever fought them before. We can't none of us hold out much longer down here...if you put off a-comin' twon't be no use to come, for we'll all hands of us be out there in the garden in the old graveyard with your ma and mine.⁴⁸

This woman was not devoid of a strong patriotism to her country; if the need for food were removed, she may not have asked her husband to return. Like so many others in the face of starvation, she found her life and the lives of her children of greater importance than her obligations to her government. Southern women's patriotism often had limits, and just as they were driven to show incredible amounts of support for the war, they could be driven by starvation to steal and riot when they reached those limits.

Starvation began to hit many places with intensity around 1863. At this time the Confederate Congress began collecting 10 percent of certain farm products such as corn, livestock, cotton, and beans. The officials often took more than the required amount, thereby increasing discontentment.⁴⁹ Extortion and speculation plagued families as well. Some wrote letters to their local and state governments asking for protection or some form of welfare. The government did not turn a deaf ear and often tried to help. Unfortunately, “corruption and mismanagement plagued the relief system.”⁵⁰ One woman, C.W. Walker complained to Governor Vance in a letter, “I her you cry out to these men to stop this extortion when they are the men that is doing the business.”⁵¹ These poor, farming women were enduring the heaviest brunt of the war, yet the government that they were giving up so much for was not protecting them but actually taking from them.

With rampant speculation going on, many women had no choice but to steal if they wanted to stay alive. North Carolina's leaders were unable to stop the speculators, and this led to an increase in the number of thieves.⁵² In Georgia, particularly in the last months of war, stealing was a necessity for survival.⁵³ Many women hit the poverty level as the war developed. One such woman was Mary Canaday of North Carolina; she went so far as to steal and butcher a cow from another poor woman.⁵⁴

Some women stole from private farms; more often, however, women organized into bands and raided small businesses. In March 1863, an Atlanta store was raided by one such group. The women were outraged that the price of bacon was a dollar a pound, and after lecturing the man about their inability to afford it, they proceeded to take about \$200 worth of bacon home.⁵⁵ In Bladenboro, North Carolina, five women were convicted of stealing corn and

rice from the grain depot. Similarly in Salisbury, North Carolina, a group of women threatened the government depot agent with axes and hatchets and left with ten barrels of flour.⁵⁶

These hungry, outraged women became more militant and began openly rioting as want and anger increased, and their appeals to the government continued to be ineffective. Looting and riots began in many places. In Savannah, Georgia, a large group of women went through multiple stores taking whatever they wanted. Two stores asked for reimbursement of about \$460 combined.⁵⁷ In North Carolina, riots were scattered throughout various counties including Granville, Orange, and Montgomery.⁵⁸ Bread riots occurred in Richmond, Augusta, Macon, and Petersburg, among other cities.⁵⁹ The Richmond bread riot began as hungry women and children walked through the streets ransacking stores for food and other necessary objects. The end came when President Davis consoled the rioters by saying that he understood their condition and would even be willing to share what he had with them.⁶⁰ These women had taken around \$13,000 in supplies. The government tried to deny that this was a food riot, and area newspapers such as the *Richmond Daily Whig* wrote it off as being “a throng of courtezans and thieves,” even implying that Unionists began it. However, governmental censorship of newspapers did occur during the Civil War. Therefore, some surmise that the outbreak of these women was merely suppressed as a news story so as to protect the reputation of the Confederacy.⁶¹

Such lawless acts by women received varied responses. Some sympathized with the plight of these women. While some women were arrested, few were prosecuted. The *Greensborough Patriot* went so far as to praise one riot in Johnston County. However, when a raid occurred on the outskirts of Greensborough itself, the paper began to show disapproval. This newspaper tried to convince the rioting women that the war was “being fought to preserve their safety and honor,” and they should not be revolting.⁶²

Sympathy also decreased when some women raided for supplies such as cloth and wool. In Miller County, Georgia, local women began taking the sheep of the well-off slaveholder John Davis and shearing their wool, only to return them later. Davis poured his anger and outrage into an article in the *Early County News* in which he declared that these women were not needy but “they are now acting as they always would have done, had they the same opportunity.”⁶³ However, since these women were suffering so heavily from speculation and places like the Orange County cotton mill would not accept Confederate money for yarn, the women had nowhere else to turn.⁶⁴

Perhaps problems like scarcity of cloth could have been endured. The women could have continued on with holes in their clothes and the clothes of their children. This was not a matter of life and death. However, food shortages did threaten these women’s lives and led them to complain. If this war was being fought for them, then should all of the supplies not have gone to these women first? Should their needs not have been above the soldiers’?

The Quiet Rebellion of the Women of the Slaveholding Elite

Impressionistic evidence is the main source for information about the more affluent women as well. The higher class women were often plantation holders; they typically owned a plantation which was worked by slaves. Most were married with children, and their husbands often volunteered for the war.

These planting-class women viewed the reaction of the poor women as despicable. The riots were appalling to them, and yet, they too began to question the importance of the war. They wondered how this war could be for their benefit if they were enduring so much pain and misery.⁶⁵ As pain and tragedy increased, their will began to weaken.⁶⁶

The high-class women could not voice their concerns about the worth and outcome of the war. They had to displace their anxiety because their fate was braided with that of the Confederacy. If they rejected it, they would be rejecting their way of life. They had so much invested in it that “abandoning the war meant abandoning what they had been.”⁶⁷ Even so, the women still had limits as to how long they would support this war.

Many were supportive as long as the war did not affect them greatly. Letters and diaries from many high-society women display a great loyalty to the Confederacy. Yet when the realization set in that their fathers, brothers, and husbands would be doing the actual fighting, their support wavered. Betty Herndon Maury was one such woman. She was a great supporter of the war, yet she believed that her father, a great oceanographer, should not risk his life in military service because the Confederate reputation would be hurt if he died. She put forth the same argument after her husband announced that he wished to give up civil service and join the army. Maury explains that “if he goes, he will make a greater sacrifice of tastes and feelings and worldly prospects than anybody I know.”⁶⁸ There is perhaps truth and logic to these arguments; however, they seem to be driven by feelings, and they completely disregard the sacrifices the lower-class women had to make as their men were conscripted.

These women did not rebel against the Confederacy as overtly as the lower-class rioters, but often their support for the war was significantly lowered in the face of hardship. One way in which their political sway was changed was in the case of the Aid Societies, groups of women that worked together to further the cause of the war. These support groups were strong at the beginning of the war, but by 1864 they were described by one woman as having “died away; they are name and nothing more.”⁶⁹ Early on, women were willing to spin their own wool and sew their own clothes. They were willing to sacrifice for the Cause, but “as the death toll mounted and victory proved elusive, many women considered such sacrifices unreasonable.”⁷⁰ They were beginning to sense their limits. Virginia French wrote in her diary, “I fear that I am giving way under this long, long pressure of anxiety and tension upon the nerves.”⁷¹

Agnes was a more affluent Southern woman. Living in Richmond, Virginia, she attended President Davis’s receptions and was at least outwardly supportive of the Confederacy and traveled within the higher social circles. Yet her patriotism flagged toward the end of the war, and in a letter to a friend in August of 1864 she wrote, “I am for a tidal wave of peace . . . we should consider the lives of the men left to us.”⁷² She was concerned about the number of lives lost in a hopeless war.

Even in cases where the upper-class women were able to avoid starvation, they were still affected by viewing those suffering around them. Cornelia Phillips Spencer recorded the sad condition existing in North Carolina after Sherman had come through with his army. She said that

it was most heart-rending, to see daily crowds of country people, from threescore and ten down to the unconscious infant carried in its mother’s arms, coming into town to beg for food and shelter, to ask alms from those who had despoiled them.⁷³

Judith Brockenbrough McGuire was also touched by the sufferings of the lower classes. She sympathized greatly with those who did not have enough food because of outrageous speculation prices.⁷⁴ These upper-class women would have been likely to read the New York Herald which discussed the terrible conditions of the poor. In 1865 it described

the gaunt figures of these wasted women moving like clothed skeletons around the cars to gather up any corn which perchance may escape from the sack, or to scrape up the infusion of sugar and filth which crusted on the floor of a car where saccharine casks had been.⁷⁵

In an earlier letter to a friend, Agnes discussed the Richmond Bread Riot and how sad it was for her to see how badly many women were affected by food shortages.⁷⁶

Upper-class women such as Agnes had an unusual advantage in obtaining an overall picture of the war. They often had a better view than the men fighting in the war. They were able to accomplish this by synthesizing information from letters from relatives enlisted in different regiments and newspaper reports. Their view included the frontline conditions as well as the suffering being endured at home and led many of these women to adopt a negative sentiment. After years of suffering, they simply wished for the war to be over, whether the South was victorious or not.

Conclusion

Southern women were clearly subject to many hardships during the Civil War. They had to say goodbye to their men and welcome new tasks. Fear was a great factor that intensified their troubles, but that was nothing compared to the slow starvation that many endured. Some women retained their resilient spirit throughout their troubles, and these women remained shining beacons of hope as the darkness began to enshroud others.

The patriotism of many Southern women was affected by the hardships and specifically the food shortages they were forced to tolerate. As Rable has suggested, “civilian morale did not rise, level off, and decline like lines on a chart,” because individual responses complicate our analysis.⁷⁷ Therefore one can only generally categorize these women. It cannot be said definitively that poor, white women were less supportive of the war because their revolts were more overt. They were undoubtedly subject to worse hardships than the women of the slaveholding elite.

Many of these elite lowered their support for the war when its effects were felt in their own lives. Unlike the women who rioted, these women quietly questioned the war effort in private. They stepped back and surveyed what the war was doing in their lives and in the lives of others, and many began to withdraw their support.

We can see that white Southern women in the Civil War serve as a case study of female patriotism. As evidenced by the Civil War, when a nation fails to care for its civilians at home, internal revolt and weakness will result and it is much more difficult for a nation to protect itself against outside invaders. Bell Wiley and John Berlin both indicate that the failure of the South to care for its women greatly contributed to the South’s loss. Many reasons have been suggested for the South’s defeat – most likely their defeat was a combination of contributing factors.

The rebellion of Southern women is important in its immediate context because the image of the strong Southern woman who faced many hardships during the war is so pervasive. The women who stood up for their needs are often marginalized and not praised for the strength they showed in standing up against unjust situations. We should attempt to look at their actions through their eyes as many recognized their needs and the needs of their starving children as being a higher priority than patriotism. They were supporting what the Confederacy supposedly stood for — the family.

This exploration of women's patriotism during the Civil War should increase understanding and be used to guide future action. We see that suffering is endured just as much, if not more, on the home front as in the military service. Some women will withdraw their support when they consider their needs superior to the needs of their nation. This study also implies that class plays a role in shaping the form in which women will lobby for governmental change. The higher classes may have the same opinions but hold back from overt protests because of social restraints.

There is still much room for exploration. There is more primary evidence to be sifted through and many questions to be answered. How did the husbands view their wives who participated in the revolts? How did children affect their mothers' patriotism? How did the experience of women who lived in occupied cities compare with the experience of women who lived in the countryside? More investigation of the patriotism of the women of the South should be done to add to our understanding of their story as well as our understanding of patriotic limits and class differences at work today.

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