

Reconstructing the Confederate Widow: An Analysis of the Wives of Fallen Confederate
Soldiers and their Response to Reconstruction and the Post War Era.

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HIST-497-A

December 17, 2021

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Introduction

When asked to name the bloodiest war in American history, many Americans may claim the World Wars, Vietnam, or even the Gulf War. Although the fatalities involved with these wars are significant, they do not equate to the number of casualties Americans experienced in the American Civil War. Strikingly, the American Civil War resulted in the death of 620,000 male soldiers, a number that exceeds the American deaths in World War II by over 200,000. While the exact numbers remain unknown, most Confederate soldiers were married, and in their deaths, left behind their wives and families to rebuild their lives by themselves. These women faced intense challenges during the Reconstruction and post-war era, especially with economic recovery and social inclusion.¹

Historiography

One of the books related to the Confederate widows and their response to the Reconstruction is Southern and Reconstruction historian, Walter L. Fleming's *Documentary History in Reconstruction*. This book, along with Fleming's *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* follows the ideals of the Dunning School of Thought. The Dunning School of Thought taught that Reconstruction should be seen as a disaster for the United States and advocated racial supremacy of white peoples. The books by Fleming utilize these concepts, as he argues in favor of the former Confederates and notes how death and sufferings in the South were caused by Union forces, drought, and Freedmen. Despite this background, the books offer insight into the responses Confederate Widows had to Reconstruction and the Post-war era. Although these

¹ "Civil War Casualties: The Cost of War: Killed, Wounded, Captured, and Missing." Battlefields.org, American Battlefield Trust. Accessed 04 September 2021.

books do not center on widows, Fleming makes mention of Confederate widows and their unfortunate circumstances, especially in the farming and education arena.^{2 3}

Another scholarly piece that follows the Dunning School method is *Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, authored by the Museum of the Confederacy and the University Press of Virginia. This book highlights the achievements women gained after the war and offers a sympathetic perspective regarding widows. The tone of this book replicates that of Flemming and argues that Reconstruction crippled widows and other vulnerable peoples due to oppressive Union forces. Concerning the survival of widows, this book mentions how certain widows received support from various organizations including the Daughters of the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan.⁴

While Fleming's writing coincides with the ideals of the Dunning School of Thought, other scholars aligned themselves with a revisionist perspective on Reconstruction in the South. This view directly contrasts the conservative Dunning approach and advocates the socio-political success of Reconstruction. One author's essay, Jack B. Scroggs, follows this approach by detailing the benefits of "Carpetbagger Constitutional Reform" and its impact on Confederate widows. He notes that some of the difficulties widows faced during Reconstruction came from "Carpetbaggers" and "missionaries" from the North challenging widows for jobs as teachers at "negro schools." Yet, he advocates that the Northerners saved the Freedmen in the South from

²Walter L. Fleming. *Documentary History in Reconstruction* (London & Gloucester, Mass: J.S. Cushing & Co., Berwick & Smith Co, 1907)

³Walter L. Fleming. *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*. (London & Gloucester, Mass: J.S. Cushing & Co., Berwick & Smith Co, 1905).

⁴The Museum of the Confederacy and the University Press of Virginia. *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

the racial injustice exemplified by the white supremacist mentality of the Confederate widows in education.⁵

Another work that advocates a revisionist perspective on Reconstruction and 19th century southern women's history is *Blood & Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War 1861-1937*, by Sarah E. Gardner, who argues that the widows of prominent Confederate veterans attempted to rewrite the motives of the Confederacy through touching writings about the war. She also argues that these famous widows did this to compensate for the lack of financial opportunities that their late husbands provided. Gardner's writing contradicts the Dunning School ideology and argues that these rewritten histories contributed to the idea of the "lost cause" of the Confederacy.⁶

In contrast to the Dunning School and the revisionist approach, modern scholars utilize a post-revisionist view on Reconstruction, claiming the social and political reform could have flourished in the South if Reconstruction continued beyond 1870. Famed American Historian Eric Foner echoes this post-revisionist view on Reconstruction in his book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*. Instead of criticizing Reconstruction as a disaster like Fleming, or praising it as a success, like Scroggs, Foner notes how Reconstruction had potential, but could not manifest substantial change due to Radical Republicans pulling out of the South too early. In this book, Foner presents the farming struggles widows faced due to Freedmen leaving the South and reflects on how one widow struggled to survive due to failed

⁵ Jack B. Scroggs. "Carpetbagger Constitutional Reform in the South Atlantic States, 1867-1868" in *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Irwin Unger (United States of America: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Inc., 1970).

⁶ Sarah E. Gardner. *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

crop yields. Another crucial idea presented by Foner claims that some states, like Georgia employed widows in small-scale cotton textile factories to provide work for them.⁷

Another work on Reconstruction, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* by John Hope Franklin utilizes the post-revisionist perspective while offering an interesting analysis on the financial and political strains of the post-war economy of the American South. In this essay, Franklin argues that Reconstruction could have been more successful if the Union forces continued to press its influence over the South after 1870. Despite this, Franklin does point out the successes of Reconstruction policies while showing how certain groups, like the KKK rose to power. Concerning the KKK, John Hope Franklin argues that this terrorist group formed with the pretense that they would do anything to “protect the widows of Civil War veterans.” He also notes how the widows needed aid from the United Confederate Veterans to survive the economic turmoil of Reconstruction.⁸

Author Catherine Clinton followed the post-revisionist ideas on Reconstruction and contributed two major books that address the lives of widows in the post war period. The first book, *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* mentions the financial struggles that widows endured and the government aid that was issued to these women. Clinton notes how before the government issued pensions, states would issue their own versions of aid and pensions that covered some financial needs widows had.⁹ In her other book, *Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*, Clinton uncovers the remarriage issues widows struggled with, and the emotional support widows received from their families.

⁷ Eric Foner. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988).

⁸ John Hope Franklin. *Reconstruction after the Civil War*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁹ Catherine Clinton. *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*. (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Clinton also writes about the different jobs widows took after the war including teaching, weaving, and nursing.¹⁰

Continuing in this school of thought, J David Hacker, a demographic historian, wrote his article, “The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns,” from a post-revisionist mindset. In this article, he notes that Southern widows endured different circumstances with remarrying after the war. He and his coauthors, sociologist Libra Hilde and biological anthropologist James Holland Jones, detail the different journeys widows took as they sought marriage or refrained from remarrying. Using census data & demography, they argue that the war limited the available suitors for widows. Additionally, their argument details that the abundance of marriable men revoked opportunities for widows to remarry as men did not have to settle for a widow to be their wives.¹¹

Similarly, Robert Kenzer’s article, “The Uncertainty of Life: A Profile of Virginia’s Civil War Widows” provides a small analysis on the lives of Virginia Civil War widows during Reconstruction. In this article, Kenzer notes how Virginia widows had to choose to remarry after the war or choose to remain single. Kenzer also shows how widows struggled to financially survive during Reconstruction in Virginia and had to turn to family or friends to house them.¹²

Despite the sporadic sources on the widows of Confederate soldiers, there are nearly no studies directed towards Southern Widows and the challenges they faced during Reconstruction and the Post-War Era. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the post-civil war era and

¹⁰ Catherine Clinton. *Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*. (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹¹ J David Hacker, Libra Hilde, & James Holland Jones. “The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns.” *PubMed Central*. 76,1: (2010).

¹² Robert Kenzer. *The Uncertainty of Life: A Profile of Virginia’s Civil War Widows*. Joan E. Cashin. *The War was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War*. (Princeton University Press, 2020.)

Reconstruction affected the wives of fallen Confederate soldiers and evaluate how these women responded to social, financial, and political difficulties.¹³

Financial Needs

The Civil War resulted in 258,000 Confederate soldiers losing their lives due to mortal wounds, infectious disease, captured executions, etc. Notably, Virginia, North Carolina, and Alabama were the states that experienced the highest casualty rates. Although the exact numbers are unknown, many of these soldiers were married and left behind their wives and families to financially recover without them. Because southern men typically defined themselves as the breadwinners, the financial recovery of widows proved extremely difficult as many failed to fill the monetary shoes of their fallen husbands.¹⁴

Without the help of a husband to provide for her, Confederate widows were subjugated to severe economic depressions. Ultimately, the amount of wealth a family had before the war impacted the survivability of a widow after the war ended. At this time, land and real estate proved to decide the value of a family. Therefore, widows who inherited land often had an easier time adjusting to the financial requirements of widowhood. Yet, the legal system in certain states challenged widows for their land inheritance. In Virginia, unless a will explicitly called for a soldier's wife to inherit his land, widows could only inherit a "dower" or one-third of their husbands' property. With this dower, legally, widows were not permitted to buy or give the inherited property away. Furthermore, widows could not alter the land due to "wasting" another person's property, opening the door for lawsuits from family members and other heirs. If a widow had children, each child received another third of the property.¹⁵

¹³ Hacker, 17.

¹⁴ "Civil War Casualties...., 2; Cashin, 112

¹⁵ Carole Shammass et al., *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 37, 64-65; Joan Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice: A Legal History of U.S. Women*

Because of this financial unrest, some widows took to prostitution to find monetary security. Such is the case of Sarah Gibbs and Lucy Fletcher, who got arrested in Richmond, Virginia, for being women of "loose morals." In the investigation, Sarah admitted that her husband fought for the 17th Georgia and perished in a skirmish outside of Richmond. Similarly, Lucy claimed her husband died in Gettysburg. To justify their role as prostitutes, both widows claimed the death of their husbands drove them to find any means of financial assurance. Because of their background and economic instability, the court released Sarah and Lucy claiming, "I see no reason why they, more than any other. . . be confined." Like Sarah and Lucy, many widows economically suffered to the point of giving up their bodies for money. Similar instances of widows turning to prostitution due to financial strain can be found in Nashville, Tennessee, and New Orleans, Louisiana.¹⁶

One significant way that widows sought to provide for themselves, and their families were through farming. Over half of the soldiers who served for the Confederate Army were farmers or owned land. Therefore, after their deaths, their wives and children inherited the land to farm. Although some of the farmers used their land for cash crops in order to generate revenue, many farmers utilized their farms to raise crops for consumption. Because the former slaves had been important to the agriculture before the war, some widows and their families could not cultivate crops in the same successful manner due to the Freedmen leaving the South.¹⁷

(New York: New York University Press, 1991), 107; A widow's portion of the personal estate varied according to the number of children; Linda E. Speth, "More than Her Thirds: Wives and Widows in Colonial Virginia" *Women and History*, 1983; of the five will-writers, three owned property worth more than \$8,000 Will Book 18, 4 July 1861: 565, 634, 677; Will Book 8, 3 March 1862: 461.

¹⁶ *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, May 18, 1862.; National Archives Records Group 153, Records of the Judge Advocate General's Office (Army), Court Martial Case File, file number MM2388.; Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1994), 71

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 114-118; Will Book 18, 27 January 1863: 568, 661, 702; Will Book 19, 10 February 1863: 45, 100.

Without the means of labor, widows from the Deep South had to farm for themselves. Although widows farming was not uncommon in the 19th Century South, men, children, and slaves would often work together to keep a farm running. Unfortunately, most Confederate widows did not have children old enough to help them on their farms as their sons were drafted by the Confederate Army. Those who did have children or help of other kinds found farming to be taxing work. After the war, widespread access to edible seeds like corn was rare. Thus, even Confederate widows who had manual labor available could not produce many crops.¹⁸

Additionally, the crops farmed by these widows in the Spring of 1865 produced very little yield as a massive drought overtook the South. Although it is unknown the exact quantity of crops the Confederate widows produced, according to historian Walter Flemming, the overall crop of the yield of 1865 was only one-tenth of the yield taken from 1860. Because of this statistic, one can infer that the crop yield of Confederate widows must have also been negatively affected by the poor conditions.¹⁹

Because of the poor farming conditions, suffering Confederate widows struggled to find vital resources needed for survival. In 1865, Governor Patton of Alabama, in regard to the conditions of his state, claimed that out of “20,000 widows and 60,000 orphans, three-fourths were in need of the necessaries of life, that they had been able to do very little for themselves, even those who had land being unable to work it to any advantage, and that their corn crop of the previous year had failed.” Here, Governor Patton acknowledges that the widows and orphans in Alabama had little access to necessities like food due to the devastating drought that crippled

¹⁸ Cashin, 115; Kenzer, 114.

¹⁹ Fleming, 278-281

crop yields. Furthermore, meats were also scarce due to the demand for meats to supply soldiers in wartime.²⁰

Because of this lack of food, widows turned to drastic measures to ensure their survival. Notably, there have been documented cases of widows in North Alabama walking up to forty miles searching for food for themselves and their families. One widow from Coosa County, Alabama, walked seventeen miles only to find a measly meal to bring home to her family. On her way back, however, she fell dead due to starvation. Another story from Coosa County details a widow who died after fasting for three days and embarking on a sixteen-mile trip to obtain supplies and food. Although local and oral history suggest large number of casualties due to starvation, there are little known written records of the list of those who died from starvation.²¹

Without the support of a man to bring financial security, Confederate widows struggled to fend off starvation. While some widows had their complete inheritance denied, the court system granted farms to widows to cultivate. Yet, most, if not all, Confederate widows faced the hardship of avoiding starvation. The effects of the lack of consistent cash inflow and crude farming conditions accelerated the effects of a depressive economy. Without financial security, widows struggled to fit into society due to focusing on finding food for themselves. In a society structured on progress, these women had to meet their basic survival needs through social regression.²²

Work Options

Because of the drought of 1865, farming proved difficult causing women to turn farming into a business. Some Confederate widows, like Mary Hubbard of Richmond, turned to growing

²⁰ Fleming, 277, 281

²¹ Fleming, 279-282.

²² Ibid, Kenzer, 114.

strawberries to sell at the Richmond market.²³ Despite the inclination to farm, these widows refused to be hired out to work other peoples' lands. Albeit these widows would cultivate their lands, or the lands of family members, for consumable produce, they refused to work for nonfamilial farms to earn money. As Confederate widow, Cornelia Peake McDonald wrote regarding laboring on farms, "How often I wished then that of all the land their father had owned, I had only a few acres on which I could live with my children and try to make a living. That would have been independence, and none of us would have shrunk from labour." Even though McDonald and other widows were desperate for money and food, they never considered laboring for other farms despite many farms offering substantial wages, white widows saw these job offers as insults because, for years, farming and cultivation relied on the work of African American slaves. Additionally, domestic work remained associated with slavery causing white Confederate widows to reject working as full-time domestic laborers. Due to these views that saw African Americans as less human than white folk, white widows had to find other means of work unassociated with African Americans.²⁴

Following the Civil War, southern widows of fallen Civil War soldiers faced impending hardships of abandonment and starvation. Without a man to generate revenue, widows who did not marry had to find ways to make money on their own. Although some widows had older children and families to depend on after the war, because of the drought, all people had to adapt to different sources of revenue. In some parts of the South, widows took up farming. However, with farming, widows would not farm for other people. Instead, they would cultivate cash crops to sell at local markets. Even though farming was somewhat successful, widows had to find other

²³ Maria Mason Tabb Hubard Diary, 1860-62, VHS.

²⁴ Cornelia Peake McDonald Diary, "Narrative of Our Refugee Life," in *A Woman's Civil War* ed by Minrose C. Gwin. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 238; Clinton. *Southern Families*, 151; (Ninth Census, 1870; Tenth Census, 1880)

jobs that fit traditional women's roles from the Antebellum South. Though many small-scale businesses in the South were in desperate need of laborers, businesses relucted to give widows jobs. This rejection of widows did not purposefully target women without a husband; rather, people in the South preferred to hire male workers than women. Because of the economic disarray of the South, businesses would primarily hire able-bodied men to work and would pay them 75% higher wages than women. This wage gap and hesitation of hiring women resulted in the opportunities for widows of fallen Civil War soldiers to dwindle.²⁵

With these dwindling opportunities to find work, the wives of fallen Confederate soldiers turned to domestic forms of work in hopes of selling their services for a profit. These domestic services included cleaning, cooking, and washing. The selling of domestic services by widows to local peoples who needed work proved common in most southern states. However, many peoples refrained from hiring these widows because of the negative connotation associated with domestic work. Similar to farming as a hired hand, laboring as a paid domestic worker was associated with black slaves. During slavery, some black individuals would cook, clean, and wash clothes for their white masters. After the war, the Freedmen who chose to stay in the South continued these practices. Employees opted to hire these former slaves to do domestic work over Confederate widows due to the ability to pay low wages without fear of public reprimands.²⁶

Because Southern culture frowned upon Confederate widow's domestic work as an occupation, Southern Civil War widows had to turn to traditional jobs to survive. Before the war, in the Antebellum Period, women did not hold many permanent jobs; however, one common way women earned money was selling goods at local markets. After the war, this tradition of

²⁵ Clarence D. Long, *Wages and Earnings in the United States, 1860-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 79

²⁶ McDonald, "Narrative of Our Refugee Life," 238.; Maria Mason Tabb Hubard Diary, VHS.; Additional details on widow's unclaimed domestic occupations comes from the Ninth Census, 1870 and the Tenth Census, 1880.

selling goods at markets continued as women would cook different cuisines to sell there. Additionally, widows after the war would make homemade products to also sell at these markets. The goods sold by Civil War widows at local markets included small produce cultivated in gardens by the widows. Mary Hubbard of Richmond, VA, who lost her husband in the war, noted in her diary that she turned to sell strawberries cultivated in her garden at the Richmond market in the Summer of 1865 and 1866 to gain profit.²⁷

During the post-war period in the South, some women expanded their work options by taking non-traditional jobs for women. Possibly inspired by women's rights advocates from the North who were successfully pursuing better privileges concerning labor, Confederate widows sought to better their lives by becoming teachers and nurses. These occupations were common before and after the war, yet, men primarily held these positions. With teaching, many black-only schools employed both crippled Confederate veterans and Confederate widows to educate the children of Freedmen. Before the war, slave masters refused to educate their slaves and required them to be illiterate. After the war, when the Union freed the slaves, and Freedmen gained opportunities to become educated through the lessons of literate Freedmen and schools established by Northern missionaries with funding from the Freedman's Bureau. As Freedmen crowded schools to earn an education, the Bureau erected more schools throughout the South. To find teachers for these "negro schools," the Bureau hired out educated Civil War widows desperate for a job.²⁸

²⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 185-86.; Maria Mason Tabb Diary, VHS.

²⁸ Fleming, *Civil War*, 465; Buckley's Report for March 15, 1867; Semiannual Report on Schools for Freedmen, July 4, 1867; General Clanton in Ku Klux Rept. Ala. Test. Narrative of Confederate Widow, Mary Thomas and her occupation changing from mattress-maker to teacher in 1880. Her job change is recorded in the Ninth Census, 1870; Tenth Census, 1880; Twelfth Census, 1900; Brunswick County, Va., Schedule I, LV). Information regarding the transition to teaching in Virginia is seen in *Brunswick County, Virginia, 1720-1975: The History of a Southside Virginia County* (Richmond, Va.:Whittet & Sheperdson, 1975). 53~54.

As Confederate widows pushed to find jobs in education, they met opposition through the rival efforts of Northern missionaries bent on obtaining teaching positions in "negro schools." After learning of the uneducated Freedmen of the South, over a thousand educated white Northerners flocked to the South to be missionaries to Freedmen and inform them of the injustices the South placed upon black peoples. During their lessons, these Northerners would teach Freedmen about the racism of the South and portray the South as a godless region. As southerners heard about this "indoctrination," opposition arose against the Freedmen schools, partially because of the broken racial traditions and partially because of the North's role in the schools. As Northerners casually left their positions as educators in the South, Confederate widows took their place. These widows met less opposition by their communities.²⁹

Despite encountering less opposition, Confederate widow teachers still faced scrutiny for associating themselves with "negroes." In some cases, these widow-teachers endured death threats and public scrutiny for their jobs. Still, the drive for economic security pushed widows to apply for teaching positions, as one application to American Missionary Associate Director, J.W. Alvord, pleaded that she was a "poor widow with eight little children." Later, the 1870 Alabama Census reported that one-third of all teachers in the state were widows of fallen Confederate soldiers. Even though Confederate widows left their homes to teach in Freedmen's schools, many other Confederate widows sought to teach white children, like Mary Thomas who documented that she worked as a teacher in the Virginia public school system following the conclusion of the war.³⁰

²⁹ Fleming, *Civil War*, 463-467.

³⁰ Thomas Hart to Charles Haughn, 28 April 1869, LR, Texas BRFAL, M822:6; Thomas Hart, "Report of School for Freedmen," June 1870, SR, Texas BRFAL, M822:16; F. Meir to E. C. Bartholomew, 7 October 1869, LR, Texas BRFAL, M822:6; "Treasurer's Office. Payments to School Teachers, 1871-1872," 71, and "Register of Teacher Certificates 1871-1873," 282-83, Texas State Department of Public Instruction Collection, TSLA.; J.

Another occupation that Confederate widows undertook was nursing. Prior to the Civil War, men primarily held positions as nurses and doctors. However, field hospitals had to accept and train female nurses because of the high quantity of men fighting and dying on the battlefields. Although many women who were not *femmes soles* extinguished their positions as nurses to fit into the social order of the "New South," *femmes soles*, including Confederate widows, maintained their positions as nurses. With the nursing positions newly open to women, Confederate widows resorted to operating at diverse locations like small hospitals and sanitariums. Through the influence of these widows, as well as other women, hospitals and sanitariums produced better health conditions for their patients. Drawn by higher wages in a failing economy and the prize of respectable work, widows of fallen Confederate soldiers left their jobs and unemployment to become nurses. One Confederate widow, Sarah Maitland, who lost her husband, James, in the war, resigned from her job as a teacher to become a nurse in the Brunswick, Virginia, area.³¹

Work options amongst Confederate widows proved tumultuous and demanding. Some widows prevailed through farming and selling goods at markets. Others opened doors to social rights through nursing and teaching. Despite these social advancements, these widows faced scrutiny from their neighbors and towns for being too progressive or helping "inferior" racial

McMahon to Joseph Welch, 5 May 1869, LR, Texas BRFal, M822:6; Charles Haughn to [Welch], 24 March 1869, *ibid.*; Stacy Mayfield to Joseph Welch, 13 August 1869, LR, Texas BRFal, M822:6; on her ownership of slaves and need for work, see Haughn to [Welch], 24 March 1869, as seen in Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling The Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 68, 218.; Miss Alice M. Bacon, in the Slater Fund Trustees, Occasional Papers, No. 7, p. 6. Armstrong, at Hampton, Va.; Information regarding the establishment of schools can be seen in the Freedmen's Bureau Reports, 1867-1870.

³¹ Clinton. *Southern Families*, 14; Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," 185-186.; Tenth Census, 1880. For information on *Femmes Soles*, see page 25.

groups. The inconsistency and competition involved with Confederate widows finding work provides insight to the challenge of reintegrating into a war-torn society.³²

Remarriage

Instead of remarrying during the Civil War, widows of fallen Confederate soldiers often opted to remarry immediately following the conclusion of the War (see Table 1). Although there are not many surviving records indicating the number of widows remarrying after the War, the State of Virginia has managed to maintain its record of death claims and remarriages. According to the Virginia State Index, 156 widows who had filed for death claims chose to remarry.

Additionally, 163 widows who had filed death claims did not choose to remarry.³³

Table 1.
Year of Remarriage of Virginia Civil War Widows.³⁴

YEARS REMARRIED	Number of Remarriages	Percent of Remarriages
1863	8	5%
1864	5	3
1865	26	17
1866	39	25
1867	24	15
1868	14	9
1869	11	7
1870-74	21	13
1875-79	4	3
1880-85	4	3
TOTAL:	156	100%
MEDIAN YEAR	1866/67	

As Table 1 indicates, the most popular years that widows remarried were 1866 and 1867, in which a combined 63 marriages occurred. Furthermore, in those years, a combined 40% of those widows remarried. Outside of the end of Reconstruction, which ended in 1877, a little less

³² Ibid.

³³ Kenzer, 112-114

³⁴ Confederate Death Claim Records, vols. 13-20, 22, 34, Office of the Second Auditor, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Confederate Pension Rolls, 1888-1899*, microfilm copy, Library of Virginia; *Marriage Records*, Virginia Vital Records, microfilm copy, Library of Virginia.

than 6% of widows chose to remarry. In addition, during the War from 1863 to 1864, 8% of widows chose to remarry. Despite 1865 being included in the Table, it is unknown whether the rate of marriages increased after the war ended in April. However, based on the trend of rising remarriage rates, one can clearly identify that widows from Virginia chose to remarry immediately after the war ended.³⁵

Although many widows chose not to remarry following the death of their husbands, because of the lack of specific marriage documents, it is unknown the exact number of those who did remarry. According to Robert Kenzer, less than fifty percent of Civil War widows from Virginia remarried. Another statistic from a study on the Civil War's effect on marriage patterns by J. David Hacker and his associates claims that one in five Southern-born women aged 40-49 were widows, and one in three southern widows remained unmarried in 1880. This statistic indicates that these widows chose to remain unmarried during the fifteen years from the end of the war to 1880. Although these widows could remarry after 1880, no documents note their remarriage. Also, the census where these statistics come from, taken from 1880, and its analysis assumes that the widows remarried after the war ended; however, other studies indicate that most widows remarried during the war or immediately after it ended.³⁶

Remarkably, age is the most important indicator of the probability of widows remarrying. The end of the war resulted with nearly 300,000 dead Southern soldiers. Unsurprisingly, the age range of these dead soldiers varied with the average age of these soldiers settling at 26. The average age range of Confederate soldiers who served in the war was 18 to 39 years of age. Because so many men from the South died during the Civil War, the South experienced a deficit of marriable men. Because of this, the ability to find a husband that was financially able to take

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Kenzer, 112-114; Hacker, 39-70.

care of the family was slim. As a result of this shortage, many middle-aged and older women elected to not remarry. However, younger-aged widows eagerly remarried men that were vastly older or younger than themselves.³⁷

Strikingly, three-fourths of women under the age of twenty were able to remarry after the death of their husbands. In Virginia, there were twice as many marriages between younger widows and men ten years older than themselves before the war. Pointedly, the number of widows marrying men five or more years younger than themselves was three times higher than what it was at the beginning of the war. According to the *U.S. Census from 1850-1880*, the average percentage of married Southern females 20-24 dropped by 2.4% from 1860 to 1870. The average percentage of married females aged 30-34 dropped by 4.4%. Although the remarriage rates are not enclosed in this document, the averages for males under 34 and their marriages increased significantly. The average percentage of married men aged 20-24 increased by 5.3% from 1860 to 1870. The average percentage for married men 25-29 increased by 3.9%. These changes in marriage percentages correlate with the idea that because of the short supply of suitable men for marriage, men who were aged close to the younger widows would remarry them. However, due to this high demand for 20-29-year-old males, and the low supply for it, males could pick and choose the women they wanted to marry. These statistics coincide with the claim that widows aged 20-29 had the opportunity to remarry men their age but often had to settle for men above or below their age range.³⁸

Although many widows under the age of 30 had the opportunity and possible desire to remarry, they were not always selected for marriage. Because of the short supply and high

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Civil War Widows," 2; U.S. Census Bureau. *Nuptiality Measures for the White Population of the United States, 1850-1880*. Prepared by Social Explorer. Accessed 29 September 2021. 48-70.

demand of men, able-bodied or financially independent men got to choose which women they wanted to be their wives. Unfortunately for the younger widows, one of the major deciding factors on who to marry depended on land or fortune. Compared to younger widows, more older women inherited land while most younger widows did not inherit any land. Older widows had a clear advantage to remarriage as they had the land, but these widows did not have the desire to remarry as it was unnecessary. Even though all widows struggled through the closing years of the 1860s, older widows had land to farm and could survive independently without a man. Many younger widows needed men to remain financially successful, but with all the open options of women available, many returning veterans or “prime” men could choose the wife they wanted. Such is the case of the younger Confederate widows of Brunswick County, Virginia, including Mary Jane Wilmoth, a twenty-five-year-old widow who struggled to find a husband for years. However, a few years after the end of the war, Mary Jane married Charles Thompson, a 48-year-old farmer, who was past his “prime.”³⁹

Even with the seemingly unlimited choice in wives, Southern men married young widows who lost their husbands in the war. One widow, Fannie Franklin Carson, lost her first husband in 1864 to an ambush attack on troops purchasing supplies in Cedartown, Georgia. After losing her husband to the war, Fannie lost her baby boy nine months after the death of her husband. Fueled by grief and the quest for security, in 1865, Fannie remarried her late husband's business partner, Hiram King Brannan. This marriage received some controversy because Fannie was still in her period of mourning for her first husband. Fannie, aware of the potential scrutiny from her family, wrote to her sister saying, "now don't go scolding because I didn't tell in my other letter for I didn't think then it would come off so soon." Later, Fannie questioned this

³⁹ Hacker, 39-42; “Prime” men refers to men aged between 18 and 40; Clinton, *Southern Families*... 138.

decision to remarry early claiming "hope I made my choice with considerable deliberation."

Despite the scrutiny and uncertainty of an immediate remarriage, it seems that Brennan chose to marry the widow for her, as his sister calls it, being "Young, rich, and beautiful."⁴⁰

Even if men had the ultimate choice in who they could pick as a suitor, widows who had financial security could resist the advancement of single men. Because some men who served were somewhat wealthy, their wives could inherit a large fortune. Although wills were rare during this time period, some wealthy Southerners managed to make wills so their widow could inherit their wealth.⁴¹ This large fortune that widows inherited helped these women resist the idea of remarriage. If women who inherited a fortune chose to remarry, the husband to which she wed to would control her assets. In some cases, widows who chose to not remarry lost significant portions of their wealth due to depreciation and spending. One popular instance of this occurred in Virginia when Malinda Dodd inherited \$2,850 of personal and real estate wealth from her fallen soldier-husband. Instead of choosing to remarry, Malinda decided to remain single and depend on her older children to maintain her farm and financial security. However, by 1870, her wealth had depreciated to a measly \$500. Even though she and her sons suffered financially, Malinda managed to remain fiscally independent from external sources and depended on her sons to manage her farm. In fact, while Malinda kept the farm in her name, her sons James (24), Oliver (22), Samuel (19), and Benjamin (15) worked and maintained her farm.⁴²

⁴⁰ An unnamed sister to Fannie Hargrave Carson Brannan, 4 November 1865, Hargrave Family Papers, University of West Georgia (UWG). Mollie to Fannie Hargrave Carson Brannan, no date, Hargrave Family Papers, UWG; Bessie Lowe to Fannie Hargrave Carson Brannan, no date, Hargrave Family Papers, UWG; Meta to Fannie Hargrave Carson Brannan, 9 February 1866, Hargrave Family Papers, UWG, as cited in Angela Esco Elder. "MARRIED TO THE CONFEDERACY: THE EMOTIONAL POLITICS OF CONFEDERATE WIDOWHOOD" PhD, (University of Georgia, 2016).

⁴¹ Clinton, *Southern Families...* 60-72.

⁴² Kenzer, 112-115

Some men left conditions of inheritance if they perished, like that of Needham Cheely, who died in battle in 1863. As part of his death, Cheely left his entire estate worth \$11,965.35 to his wife under the condition that she never remarry. Under this condition, Julietta Cheely never remarried because she desired to retain the wealth. Interestingly, Needham Cheely never distinguished his will like a "life estate", resulting in Julietta receiving more than her dower claims. Because of this failure to establish a life estate, Julietta had free will over her estate and managed to reestablish the estate as an important farm for the Brunswick, VA, area.⁴³

Admittedly, some widows decided to remarry despite their large sums of inherited wealth. One case, also from Virginia details the widow Margaret Walton who inherited \$9,000 from her dead husband. After receiving the money, Walton immediately remarried a man 31 years older than her and retained control of her money while maintaining the probability of inheriting her new husband's wealth too. Another circumstance of widows opting to remarry despite their inherited wealth is that of Virginian Rachel Turner who inherited \$4,000 from her late husband. Upon her remarriage in 1867, Rachel owned \$100 more than the wealthy husband she remarried.⁴⁴

Remarriage among Confederate widows proved to be an intricate, selective process. Typically, older widows opted to remain single due to their financial independence or reliance on adult children. Younger widows tended to desire remarriage due to their state of need and tended to be lenient with expectations when choosing a suitor. This analysis notes that despite the possible drawbacks of remarriage if a Confederate widow was in need, they often turned to

⁴³ Will Book 18,4 August 1862: 563,630, 632; Land Taxes, 1865 and 1870. (Personal Property Taxes, 1870, 1880, 1890; Ninth Census, 1870; Tenth Census, 1880.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

remarriage as a means to an end. Other times, the remarriage of Confederate widows proved unnecessary in rebuilding their domestic lives.⁴⁵

Dependency

Aside from the inheritance of usable land, many widows chose to not remarry due to the ability to be tended to by friends, family, and freedmen, as in the case of Mary Jane Martin who lived with friends and did household chores as means of labor. Although many younger widows had to remarry to survive financially, older widows had access to children and relatives who could take care of them. In many cases, these widows had children that were old enough to cultivate and organize the inherited farms. Mary Epperson had seven children with two of them being adults. After the death of her husband in the war, Mary lived with her two adult children on their inherited 240-acre farm. Because of this living space with her family and inherited land, Mary did not have to remarry, but depended on her adult children to house her.⁴⁶

With these cases, when the drought of 1865 and 1866 plagued the South, the older children were able to save the failing farms due to their extra work and resources. In some circumstances, widows were under the influence of their children and had to rely on their children to welcome them into their homes. Similarly, many widows who did not have much to inherit had to move across city, county, and state lines to move in with their adult children or other relatives. An example of this would be Mary Jane Taylor who moved with her nine-year-old daughter, Pocahontas, to live with her in-laws. In 1880, when her in-laws died, Mary Jane moved to live with her brother, Bassett Rawlings on his 459-acre farm in Virginia.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Kenzer, 112-115; Clinton, *Southern Families*... 60-72.

⁴⁶ Ninth Census, 1870; Land Taxes, 1870 and 1875; Personal Property Taxes, 1870; Marriage Bonds). Clinton. *Southern Families*, 138, 150

⁴⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. *Ninth Census, 1870; Tenth Census, 1880; Twelfth Census, 1900; Thirteenth Census, 1910; Brunswick County, Va., Schedule I, LV; Fourteenth Census, 1920; Land Taxes, 1880; Personal Property Taxes, 1880. (Land Taxes, 1880; Tenth Census, 1880.); Hacker, 39-70.*

Following the conclusion of the Civil War, the wives of fallen Confederate soldiers struggled to survive. Because of failed farming ventures, a broken economy, and little support from the occupying Union forces, Southern widows had to rely on family and friends to rebuild. Even though most widows relied on the assistance of their inner circles, many resources from these circles ran dry due to the financial and infrastructural challenges that affected most of the Southern population. As a result, the development of community organizations took place intending to provide monetary aid, shelter, food, and other resources the widows needed. Many of these organizations were formed by the widows themselves or Confederate Veteran support groups.⁴⁸

With the end of the Civil War, thousands of wives of fallen Confederate soldiers found themselves on the brink of death due to starvation. Additionally, many of these widows lost their houses and farms to failed crop yields and destruction from the war. Desperate for food and shelter, widows, orphans, and poor white southerners had to turn to the government for aid, depending on their states to provide pension and fulfill their claims of war-pay from their fallen husbands. One organization the white widows turned to was the Freedman's Bureau. Although the Freedman's Bureau was conceived to assist former slaves, the organization aided poor whites with food and shelter. According to one account, the Bureau in Alabama supported 15,000 to 20,000 white individuals, alongside soup kitchens designed to assist the widows and orphans.⁴⁹

Social Reintegration & Political Usage

Following the death of their husbands in the war, many Confederate widows expressed antebellum mourning rituals, even after the war ended. As accustomed to the antebellum culture,

⁴⁸ Franklin, 329.

⁴⁹ Fleming, *Civil War*, 282-284

according to the 1856 *How to Behave: A Pocket Manual of Republican Etiquette, and Guide to Correct Personal Habits*, mourning women should dress in appropriate coloration and style to reflect their grief. Southern culture during the war and post-war required widows to wear the color black to reflect this grief to their friends and family. Additionally, “the bereaved wore solid black wool garments,” a “simple crapebonnet—never a hat—and a long, thick, black crape veil.” The mourning process required widows to mourn for 2.5 years, but communities viewed widows who mourned longer than this time with reverence and respect. Because of the high number of Confederate soldier deaths in 1864 and 1865, widows had to engage their mourning process throughout Reconstruction and the post-war era.⁵⁰

One widow, Octavia "Tivie" Stephens, lost her husband to a Union sniper in 1864, after four years and four months of marriage. Although she lost her husband a full year before the war ended, Tivie maintained her standard mourning rituals for the rest of her life. Even though she adhered to the traditional dress of a mourning widow during her assigned grieving period, Tivie ventured towards wearing normal clothes after her 2.5 years. Despite this outward transition, Tivie never forgot her husband and continued to grieve as she noted that Christmas 1866 was also “a quiet and sad one to me, though the children happy.” Later, in March of 1867, Tivie wrote that the day was the “third anniversary of my dear husbands death, a blue day for me.” Years later, in 1873, Tivie penned that “9th anniversary of Winston's death, I have a severe blind headache.” Tivie's grief continued throughout her life as she noted on November 1, 1904, that “this is the date of my marriage 45 years ago.” Even though her husband, Winston, perished in battle in 1864, Tivie never got over his death. She, like other Confederate widows, felt the

⁵⁰Angela Esco Elder, “MARRIED TO THE CONFEDERACY...” 36-41

Samuel Robert Wells. *How to Behave: A Pocket Manual of Republican Etiquette, and Guide to Correct Personal Habits*. (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1856).

emptiness of grief and the emotional strain of loss throughout Reconstruction and the following years.⁵¹

Aside from maintaining the mourning process past the war and into the post-war period, the wives of fallen Confederate soldiers publicly displayed their grief to comply with political pressures. With the defeat of the Civil War lingering in Southern communities, many former Confederate sympathizers turned their attention to the widows of the fallen soldiers to see how they would react to their circumstances. These Confederacy-sympathizing communities understood that the response of widows to the former government would determine the general perception of the Confederacy in Southern and Northern culture. If the women criticized the Confederacy, former political leaders, veterans, and sympathizers would lose their legacy in communities, and people would see the war as pointless. Confederate widows brought reassurance in the failed mission of the Confederacy by openly displaying pure grief in the traditional antebellum custom while maintaining reverence for their fallen husbands. Jefferson Davis, the former president of the Confederacy, makes mention of the social significance widows had post-war in his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy*, by dedicating the book to "The Women of the Confederacy. . .Whose fortitude sustained them under all the privations to which they were subjected; whose annual tribute expresses their enduring grief, love, and reverence for our sacred dead." By dedicating his famous work to the women, more indirectly, widows of the Confederacy, Davis advocated that widows deserve praise for their dedication to the Confederate cause, despite losing their loved ones.⁵²

⁵¹ Davis Bryant to Octavia Stephens, 10 April 1864, S-B Papers, UF; Octavia Stephens Diary, 21 October 1864, 25, December 1866, 1 March 1867, 1 March 1973, 1 November 1904, S-B Papers, UF, as cited in Angela Esco Elder, "MARRIED TO THE CONFEDERACY..." 36-41.

⁵² Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1881) Dedication.; Victoria E. Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 36-7.

In the Antebellum South, men controlled a household and all its affairs. However, when most of the Southern men deserted their homes to fight for the Confederate Army, women maintained the household and its affairs. Upon returning home, after the war, Southern men attempted to minimize the influence of Southern women in the South and retook their legal role as head of households. Yet, some wives never saw their husbands return from the war. These Confederate Widows, torn by grief, found themselves with the ground-breaking opportunity to maintain their newly found rights as independent "heads of households" while other women and wives conformed to the new social castes.⁵³

Because of their regularity as heads of households, many Confederate widows assumed their previous roles. In order to maintain the legality of their affairs and estates, Confederate widows had to be considered *femmes soles*. Under state law, like those in Virginia, *femmes soles* theoretically had the same legal rights as men. These legal rights included the ability to enter contracts, issue lawsuits, buy and sell property, and distribute property by wills. This ability to maintain legal and social independence contradicted the rights of women who lived with their husbands or family members. These women remained subjected to the legal superiority of the Southern patriarchy and failed to reestablish the social independence gained from the war. Therefore, widows stood out in local communities because of their legal liberation from the patriarchy.⁵⁴

Satisfied with these social privileges, Confederate widows, like Narcissa Faris of Brunswick, Virginia, continued to execute their rights. Unlike the standard Southern woman who

⁵³ Clinton. *Southern Families*, 134-135, 139; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of the Population of the United States, Ninth Census, 1870*, Compiled from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 1:68-70.

⁵⁴ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 85
Clinton. *Southern Families*, Ibid.

could not collect debts, Confederate Widows could sue debtors to regain lost funds with interest, such as case of Narcissa Faris, who inherited her fallen husband's property worth a measly \$100. With the inherited property, Narcissa filed a lawsuit against W.A. Faris, demanding the repayment of a \$325.60 bond with an additional \$97.68 in interest. Remarkably, even though Narcissa most likely had no legal experience and might have been discriminated against for being a respectable woman presenting a case in court, she managed to convince the court to grant her desired repayment. This example, along with others scattered around the South, shows the social progress the wives of fallen Confederate soldiers achieved following the Civil War.⁵⁵

Although many widows struggled to survive after the war, some organizations used widows as a unifying symbol to advance their own political agendas. One major organization that did this was the Ku Klux Klan. In Pulaski, Tennessee, on December 24, 1865, The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was created to resist Reconstruction policies by parading white supremacy through violent attacks on Freedmen and their white supporters. As mentioned in the 1868 *Organization and Principles of the Ku Klux Klan*, the KKK swore to protect widows and orphans from violent and brutal oppressors.⁵⁶ To justify their violence against Freedmen, the KKK claimed that freed blacks presented a violent threat to western society by assaulting younger white women and the widows of Confederate veterans. This claim worked well to inspire Klansmen as many original members were Confederate veterans who wanted to support the wives of their fallen comrades.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Clinton. *Southern Families*, Ibid.; Will Book 19, 22 September 1866: nine Brunswick widows executed wills.; This book details the narrative of Narcissa Faris and her lawsuit against W.A. Faris over unpaid bonds. It is unknown the relation of W.A. Faris to Narcissa, but it can be reasonably assumed that this man was related to the widow's late husband.

⁵⁶ An Exalted Cyclops of the Order. *Organization and Principles of the Ku Klux Klan*. Albany.edu. 1868. Accessed October 18, 2021.

⁵⁷ Franklin, 329, 330.

With Klan initiations, members would have to take an oath "promising that [f]emales, friends, widows, and their households, shall be the special object of my care and protection."⁵⁸ As part of this creed, the KKK took it upon themselves to protect the wives and children of fallen Confederate soldiers. Despite this creed, it seems that the KKK merely used widows as leverage to wreak their violence on black communities. As mentioned in a trial of a Klan sympathizer in Mecklenburgh County, North Carolina, no certain cases of rapes against Confederate widows were recorded even though the local Klan chapter terrorized local black men for allegedly raping a widow. These violent attacks on black communities continued until the disbandment of the Klan in 1870 by the U.S. government.⁵⁹

Conclusion

After the Civil War ended, and throughout the Reconstruction and post-war period, the wives of fallen Confederate widows endured economic, social, and political hardships with hopes of recovering from their emotional and cultural losses. Despite the desire to adapt to change in the domestic and work fronts, many widows struggled to regain the comforts of their former lives. Even though these Confederate widows competed to outlast Reconstruction and the post-war era, they never fully received the help they needed. In many instances, to receive any help, these widows had to depend on men through remarriage or their adult children to foster their survival. State legislation, private organizations, and federal institutions did the bare minimum to assist these women with their needs.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ 1 KLAN REPORT, supra note 44, at 25. An inferior race." "The Constitution and the Ritual of the Knights of the White Camelia," in DOCUMENTS RELATING TO RECONSTRUCTION, supra note 33, No. 1, at 24 (190).

⁵⁹ Cardyn, 694-699; Franklin, 331.

⁶⁰ Clinton. *Southern Families*, 134-135, 139, 141; Kenzer, 112-114; Hacker, 39-70.; Fleming, *Civil War*, 463-467; Franklin, 331.

The analysis of the lives of these widows expands the scholarship of the struggles Confederate Widows faced during Reconstruction and the post-war period. The experiences of these women indicate how Southern society functioned in the mid to late nineteenth century and how social structures changed through the economic and emotional turmoil the South faced. With the gained knowledge of these experiences, one can observe the difficulties widows had of reintegrating into a patriarchal society while maintaining the honor and legacy of their fallen loved ones. The struggles of Confederate widows expand the general field of history while deepening the understanding of women's history and Reconstruction in the South. Even though all the widows of the Confederate soldiers have passed on since the Reconstruction and post-war period, their lives can still be analyzed to generate a greater picture of the South after the Civil War.

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