

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

Wars are damaging to all involved; yet, the women at home will sometimes suffer the most. The dominant narrative of national patriotism shows that women at home quietly endure their emotional pain and display the strength and resilience of the nation. In wartime, nations ask their women to put “public freedom above private devotion.”¹ In the past many women have accepted their role, and are supportive of their government. Yet a small vein of women choose to seek relief; even if that means going against their nation. These women will refuse to continue to sacrifice their own well-being for the needs of their nation, and national histories often leave their stories untold. The story of the few white women of the South who chose to put their needs and the needs of their families above their patriotism during the Civil War provides a powerful example of these “rebels.” Their negative actions in response to hardships faced during the Civil War problematize the dominant narrative.

This study asks what actions did these women take? How were they viewed by others? Mainly, how did hardships and 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 and as a result some women withdrew their support and stood up for themselves in different ways depending on their class.

Hardships and Food Shortages 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. Historian Bell

¹ Jean Bethke Elstain, *Women and War*. (1987; repr., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 93.

Wiley explains that 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.² In retrospect, the undue burden placed on women is clearly visible, but it was even 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.”³

Since hardships, though felt by nearly all in one way or another, were intensified among the lower classes, these women reacted in more obvious and forceful ways as they questioned their loyalty to the Confederate government.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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,⁶ which makes their study even more difficult.

² Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Plain People of the Confederacy*. (1943; repr., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 67-68.

³ J. C. Nisbet, *Four Years on the Firing Line*, ed. Bell Irvin Wiley, (Jackson, TN, 1963), 170, quoted in Bell Irvin Wiley, *Confederate Women*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 178.

⁴ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising: Cotton, Class, and Confederate Georgia’s Rioting Women.” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 86, 1 (Spring 2002): 49.

⁵ Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 112.

⁶ Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 169.

Due to the hardships these women had to face towards the end of the war, they began to “pour their woes into pitiful letters to state governors and other officials.”⁷ This marked the beginning of a slow weakening of their will to support a war in defense of the institution of slavery 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.⁸

Desperate women like this one threatened their state governors that they would encourage their husbands to desert if they did not receive some kind of relief. 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.”⁹ Like many others, Edward deserted the army and returned home to save his family. Desertion became widespread because of many similar letters written to soldiers.

These women were not devoid of a strong patriotism to their country; if the need for food were removed, perhaps they would not have asked their husbands to return. Yet, in the face of starvation, they found their lives and the lives of their children of greater importance than their obligations to the government. This shows that 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 undermine the government when they reached those limits.

⁷ Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 176.

⁸ “A Poor Woman and Children” to Governor Zebulon B. Vance, January 10, 1865. MS., North Carolina Archives, quoted in Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 176.

⁹ Mary to husband Edward, quoted in Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 177.

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.¹⁰ Extortion and speculation plagued these women as well. 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,¹¹ but at a time when soldiers were sending home eleven dollars a month, any purchases of food would have been nearly impossible for those without family wealth.¹² Some women wrote letters to their local and state governments asking for protection or some form of welfare. The government did not turn a deaf ear to these women and often tried to help. Unfortunately, “corruption and mismanagement plagued the relief system.”¹³ One woman, C.W. Walker complained to Governor Vance writing, “I her you cry out to these men to stop this extortion when they are the men that is doing the business.”¹⁴ These poor, farming women were enduring the heaviest brunt of the war, yet the very government that they were giving up so much for was not only not protecting them, but in some instances, actually taking from them.

These hungry, outraged, white women became more militant and began openly rioting as want and anger increased and appeals to the government continued to be ineffective. In North Carolina alone riots were scattered throughout various counties including, Granville, Orange, and Montgomery.¹⁵ Bread riots occurred in Richmond, Augusta, Macon, and Petersburg, among

¹⁰ Williams and Williams, 49.

¹¹ Charles W. Ramsdell, *Behind the Lines in the Southern Confederacy*, ed. Wendell H. Stephenson (1944; repr., Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 75.

¹² Wiley, *Plain People*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ C. W. Walker to Governor Vance, May 8, 1863, Governor's Papers, Vance, NCDAH. Quoted in Bynum, 126-128.

¹⁵ Bynum, 128.

other cities.¹⁶ Most well known, 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.¹⁷ 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. It is known, however, that governmental censorship of newspapers did occur during the Civil War. Therefore it can be surmised that the outbreak of these women was merely suppressed as a news story so as to protect the reputation of the Confederacy.¹⁸ Here we clearly see the desire of a nationalistic government to ignore the reality of subversive actions by its women.

Some papers did acknowledge this lawlessness and sympathized with the plight of these women. 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.¹⁹

Sympathy was also lowered 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 away their wool only to return the sheep later. He poured his anger and outrage into an article in the *Early County News* in which he declared that these

¹⁶Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 149.

¹⁷ John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, ed. Earl Schenck Miers (New York: Sagamore Press, 1958), quoted in Thomas Streissguth ed. *The Civil War: The South* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2001), 219-224.

¹⁸ Ted Tunnell, “A ‘Patriotic Press’: Virginia’s Confederate Newspapers, 1861-1865.” In *Virginia at War, 1864*, eds. William C. Davis and James I. Robertson. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 38-41.

¹⁹ Davis and Robertson, 128.

women were not needy but “they are now acting as they always would have done, had they the same opportunity.”²⁰ He does not recognize the fact that these women cannot obtain yarn, he tries instead to dismiss them as “bad” women. In making this distinction he invalidates their actions as abnormal and distinctly reflective of their characters, not the situation. 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, they had nowhere else to turn.²¹

Perhaps problems like scarcity of cloth could have been endured. They 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 were threatening many women’s lives and some were even willing to trade sex for food. One Confederate woman near Atlanta wrote to her husband saying that Northern soldiers told her “if I wod 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 food.²²

The Quiet Rebellion of the Women of the Slaveholding Elite

Impressionistic evidence is also the main source for information about the more affluent women because their actions received more attention and therefore they endured more social pressure. This pressure served as a barrier that few were willing to cross overtly. These higher class women typically owned a plantation which was worked by hundreds of slaves and therefore directly benefited from slavery.

²⁰ Williams and Williams, 49.

²¹ Bynum, 127.

²² Mrs. E. Jett to her husband, September 2, 1864. MS. In private possession, quoted in Wiley, *Confederate Women*, 163.

The riots of the lower classes were appalling to many planter-class women, and yet, they too began to question the importance of the war and their will began to weaken.²³ They endured more social pressure which perhaps held them back from voicing their concerns publicly about the worth and outcome of the war. They would have had to displace their anxiety because of this social pressure and also because their fate was braided in with that of the Confederacy. If they rejected it, they would be rejecting the very thing that upheld their way of life. They had so much invested in it that “abandoning the war meant abandoning what they had been.”²⁴ Even so, they still had limits as to how far they would support the war.

Many were supportive as long as the war did not affect them too greatly. Letters and diaries from many high-society women display a great loyalty to the Confederacy in many respects. 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 it would hurt the Confederate reputation if he were to die. She put forth the same argument after her husband announced that he wished to give up civil service and join the army.²⁵ These arguments are driven by feelings, and they completely disregard the sacrifices the lower-class women had to make as their men were conscripted. This reflects a shallow patriotism. Even though they proudly called out for the death of the “Yankees,” it appears that some did not truly believe in sacrificing everything for the Cause.

This type of patriotism was also displayed in the death of the Aid Societies. These support groups were strong at the beginning of the war, but by 1864 they were described by one

²³ Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton, *The Women of the Confederacy*, (Richmond and New York: Garrett and Massie Incorporated, 1936), 227.

²⁴ Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 71-84.

²⁵ Betty Herndon Maury, *The Diary of Betty Herndon Maury*, April 23, 1862, quoted in Simkins and Patton, 223.

woman as having “died away; they are name and nothing more.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸

Agnes—last name unknown—was a more affluent Southern woman who traveled in higher social circles. Living in Richmond, she attended President Davis’s receptions, so she was at least outwardly supportive of the Confederacy. Yet after having witnessed the Richmond Bread Riot and other tragedies, she wrote in a letter to a friend in August of 1864, “I am for a tidal wave of peace . . . we should consider the lives of the men left to us.”²⁹

Even though upper class women were generally able to avoid starvation from food shortages, 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.³⁰

Northern papers such as the *New York Herald* discussed the terrible conditions of the poor. In 1865 it described conditions in rail yards as the

²⁶ Woman to *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, July 16, 1864, quoted in Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. and Kym S. Rice, eds., *A Woman’s War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, (Richmond and Charlottesville: The Museum of the Confederacy and the University Press of Virginia, 1996), 12.

²⁷ Campbell and Rice, 3.

²⁸ L. Virginia French, *Diary of L. Virginia French*, March 26, 1863, quoted in Campbell and Rice 13.

²⁹ Agnes to Sara Rice Pryor, “I Am for a Tidal Wave of Peace” August 26, 1864, in *Heroines of Dixie: Winter of Desperation*, ed. Katharine M. Jones, Vol. II (1975; repr., Marietta: Mockingbird Books, 1993), 120.

³⁰ Simkins and Patton, 245.

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.³¹

Upper-class women such as Agnes and Cornelia Spencer had an unusual advantage in obtaining an overall picture of the war. 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. These women 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. After years of suffering, many simply wished for the war to be over.

Conclusion

As we look back on the actions of Southern women in the Civil War it is important to consider the hardships they faced. They had to say goodbye to their men, and welcome new tasks. Fear was a great factor that intensified their troubles, but nothing compared to the slow starvation that many endured.

The patriotism of many Southern women was affected by the hardships and specifically the food shortages they were forced to tolerate. Poor women showed their refusal to support the Confederate government through letters to officials and rioting while the upper class women quietly questioned the war effort in private letters and diaries. As George Rable has suggested, individual responses complicate our analysis³² and one can only generally categorize these women.

We can see then 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

³¹ *New York Herald* July 16, 1865. Quoted in Simkins and Patton, 245.

³² George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 202.

home, internal revolt and weakness will result and therefore it is much more difficult for that 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 led to the South's loss.

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 that 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 above their patriotism. They were supporting what the Confederacy supposedly stood for, the family.

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