

# Crossing the Threshold: The Roles of Elite Southern White Women in the American Civil War

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There has never been a shortage of recorded history to expound upon the most tragic of wars, the American Civil War. Countless maps have been drawn which pinpointed locations of bloody battlefields, and volumes have been written in evidence of the heroic deeds of the brave men who fought for their beliefs. In the annals of history, the war has always been viewed as fraternal, brother against brother, but that concept has disregarded another battle that simultaneously raged. Elite Southern white women were the combatants and their battlefields were too often their own backyards. They faced conflicts during the Civil War, but the significance of their clashes has been seriously neglected. That flaw in the commemoration of American Civil War history was rectified when historians uncovered diaries, journals, and letters of women whose only outlet of expression was through paper and ink. Their personal recorded history not only documented their trials and efforts in support of the Confederacy, but also the burden they carried due to their status and placement inside the "women's sphere" <1> of the antebellum South. They lived in a patriarchal society that held them captive to a way of life. Gender manacled them as victims of Southern tradition and they might have remained that way if there had been no influential force to prompt them into action. There was such a force and it was of great magnitude. The Civil War presented elite Southern white women with a twofold cause: to fight the enemy in blue over the emancipation of slaves, and to face the enemy in gray over their own personal freedom. Geography determined that Southern white women take an active part in the war. Whether under the banner of patriotism, survival, independence, or a combination of all three, the women of the Confederacy bravely stepped over their thresholds and took on the roles of nurse, soldier, spy, teacher, and many others as their contribution to the Confederate Cause, and their own. The Civil War served elite Southern white women as an impetus to their transformation from invisible victims behind the shield of traditionalism to their emergence as women of identity; it altered them from a gender which was once held in bondage to one which became more independent.

To comprehend the bondage of upper-class white females in the South and compare it to the bondage of slaves, it is essential to first determine the basis for that comparison and their positions in society during the antebellum period. It was a complicated situation that offered well-born women wealth and class because of their race, but also oppression because of their gender. At birth, girls became the property of their fathers (mothers had no legal claim to their children). When they married, they became the property of their husbands, and so did any land or valuables they may have owned. Their position placed them in charge of their household that catered to the needs of their "white family and their husband's slaves." <2> They were allowed to carry the keys to the plantation, but those keys only served to keep them locked within their sphere.

While women in the North made advancements through such movements as the one at Seneca Falls, slaveholding women of the South were too constrained to organize similar movements. As the threat of war became more of a certainty, the restraints upon them were tightened. <3> The males of Southern households ruled alone. Although some elite white ladies may have been unaware of their status, or denied it, the fact remained that most of them had no personal identity. <4> As long as white women and slaves remained in their proper places and obeyed their masters, they were treated well. According to George Fitzhugh's *Sociology For the South*, a Southern woman's strength was her weakness. He expressed the opinion that a woman's only right was to be protected by her lord and master, but if she was strong and independent, her master had the right to abuse her within the law. <5> That firmly echoed a parallel to slavery. "There was no slave, after all, like a wife." <6> It did not, however, suggest that all upper-class men were abusive of their patriarchal position or of the women of their households; it merely pointed out that it was within their rights and prerogatives to have done so.

Other reasons for the Southern ladies to have been disgruntled were written into their diaries. Only there did many of them dare to proclaim their frustration and anger over male dominance that limited their boundaries. Education was given to young women, but no Southern woman had schooling equal to that of a man of her class. <7> Women were not expected to need more of an education because most married at a young age and spent the rest of their lives engaged in domestic work. <8> After marriage, the fear of continued pregnancy gave them cause for worry as many of them died in childbirth. One upper-class Georgian woman wrote, "Family on the increase continually, and every one added labor and responsibility. My heart almost sinks within me." <9> The added responsibility of a large family tightened the hold upon elite white women to their sphere of dependency.

Women who were plantation mistresses expressed their discontent in the area of slave relationships through their diaries but rarely in open, verbal complaint. Slaves depended upon them for all their needs, and it was a demanding job. Plantation mistresses existed in the gender role that their husbands prescribed to them. For example, their work on a plantation was totally acceptable, in fact, it was expected. The master of a plantation wanted his slaves to be dependent upon the mistress, but he also demanded that the mistress be dependent upon him. Running a household was not considered dirty work; therefore it did not tarnish the romantic notion of Southern belles and matrons who were protected from menial public labor. They were expected to be weak and dependent. They were not weak, but they remained dependent, and they resented it. One such woman wrote, "The negroes are a weight continually pulling us down! Will the time ever come for us to be free of them?" <10> That time arrived with the first shot of the Civil War; when the time for emancipation had begun. The irony of that woman's lament was that the patriarchs of her society expected women to help defend their right to keep slaves in bondage, and by so doing, women remained enslaved as well.

Not all upper-class white women in the South lived on a plantation and held slaves, but the fight for slavery affected them all. They all shared the same women's sphere and were

trapped within it because of the South's tradition and idealism. That idealism was questioned when the lords and masters marched off to war, and the answers were found in the diaries, letters, and journals of the "weak" and "protected" women of the South who gallantly performed "dirty work" through necessity and/or choice.

The experience of running a household was put to good use for those elite women who lived on plantations. The absence of fathers, husbands, and sons left them in charge of all decisions regarding crops, slaves, and food and clothing supplies, not only for their families and slaves but also for the Confederate soldiers. <11> Women actively participated and organized groups that made clothing, tents, flags, and food which supported their army. Mary Jones of Savannah, Georgia, held a fair in May 1861 through which she raised several thousand dollars. Thread and cloth were purchased so that she and her wealthy friends made three hundred uniforms in one week. <12> As the need for more assistance arose, Southern ladies abandoned their respectable sphere to meet the needs of the Rebel soldiers. Felicia G. Porter in Nashville, Tennessee founded the Women's Relief Society. She also served as president of the organization as it grew to encompass the entire Confederacy. Her relief work filled the need for a profusion of medical supplies, including artificial limbs for disabled veterans. Mrs. Porter was honored at her death with a burial in the shadow of the Confederate Monument in Nashville. <13>

Louisa McCord was a society matron who commandeered a college campus in Columbia, South Carolina for use as a hospital. Her friend, Mary Chestnut, wrote in her diary that Louisa was not afraid of the responsibility, but after McCord's only son was killed during battle, Chestnut added, "She is dedicating her grief for her son...by giving up her soul and body, her days and nights, to the wounded soldiers." <14>

Relief societies were greatly needed by Southern troops, but after the first battle there was a more demanding need for women to sacrifice body and soul in the role of nurse. It was a task formerly performed only by men because tending to wounded men was not a respected part of the woman's sphere." It was taboo for Southern white ladies because it broke two gender rules: handling the bodies of men and it certainly would have been considered "dirty work." Even when their help was desperately needed, they were met with male opposition. Phoebe Yates Pember of Savannah, Georgia, became the head matron of Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, Virginia but not without the objections of the chief surgeon. He was adamant that the invasion of women would cause a "petticoat government." <15> He should have been more concerned about the invasion of the Union Army! Mrs. Pember scorned the attitude of men who felt that women were too delicate and refined to fulfill nursing duties, for she saw no shame in healing or comforting men who had been wounded in duty for the Confederacy. Her belief was that women had to rise above conventional modesty and the sphere that enclosed them to tend the wounded and pray at the bedside of those too young to die. <16>

Phoebe Pember spent four years administering to the needs of the wounded and the hospital with such efficiency that all objections were dropped. Her ability and endurance served to make her respected in a man's domain. Other well-respected women also

served as nurses. Kate Cumming of Mobile, Alabama, rebelled against her parents who felt that nursing soldiers was not a proper role for a lady of her status. She arrived in Mississippi for her first day of duty while a battle was taking place at Shiloh. She performed a great deal of her duties at Newsome Hospital in Tennessee, in the later years of the war, and it was during that time, that the Confederate government officially acknowledged the role of women in hospitals. Her achievements as a nurse included fieldwork, which followed the path of Sherman's wrath. <17>

There were many diary entries and letters, which extolled the courageous efforts of upper-class Southern women. One such diary was The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes. She wrote of an upper-class woman named Sallie May Ford who nursed the soldiers in Augusta, Georgia. Miss Holmes used the words, "independent," "self-reliant," and "strong-minded" to describe Ford's character. <18> Susan Blackford was a very aristocratic member of one of Virginia's first families. She wrote in her diary of the hundreds of soldiers she had tended. <19> Sally Tompkins, also from a well-respected family, nursed thirteen hundred men at an infirmary she started in Richmond. President Jefferson Davis honored her with the rank of captain in the Confederate army. <20> He, along with many other men, showed their gratefulness to the Southern women who readily filled their new role in the field of medicine during the Civil War. Printed in the Charleston Chronicle was a verse, written anonymously, which paid tribute to those women:

Fold away all your bright-tinted dresses  
Turn the key on your jewels today,  
And the wealth of your tendril-like tresses  
Braid back, in a serious way.  
No more trifling in the boudoir or bower,  
But come with your soul in your faces  
To meet the stern needs of the hour! <21>

Those elite Confederate women, once protected and sheltered, took charge of caring for others through the strength of their convictions. It was because of their convictions and insistence that Southern ladies were able to carve a niche for themselves in nursing and medicine. Not even criticism from surgeons managed to keep them from using their skills. Kate Cumming recorded a story in her diary about the "triumph for us ladies." She added that one of the nurses developed a lotion to soothe inflammation, but the doctor on duty refused to use it simply because it had been made by a woman. She had confidence in her product and continued to apply it to her patients. It proved to be so effective that other doctors requested it. <22> She had very good reason to feel confident in her work, as did all the women who found a new identity through nursing. Through that role, they came to realize a new sense of self-worth. It was also a positive step toward equality for women as paid professionals in medicine. <23>

Juliet Hopkins was the daughter of a wealthy planter and wife of an Alabama judge. She also handled the medical needs of many Alabama troops with her take-charge attitude. Her labors became so valuable that one man remarked to her, "If you had been a man,

you would have been a commanding general." <24> The Confederacy could have used another general, along with legions of more soldiers to fight the battles. The enlistment of women was of course forbidden, but that did not deter some of the more adventurous females from taking the role of soldier. In LaGrange, Georgia, a group of women formed a military company known as the Nancy Harts, in honor of another bold woman who was a heroine in the Revolution. The Federal cavalry tested their drills in marksmanship as they rode upon them. The women were armed and ready, but no shots were fired. <25> Another serious group of women in Virginia went so far as to request the right to bear arms through a formal letter sent to the Confederate Secretary of War. Annie Samuels and Irene Bell were two of the ladies of Harrisonburg who bravely wrote that they were not provided with military protection. They were angry with the "incompetence of the Confederacy," and with their "lords" who left them. <26>

Sarah Fowler Morgan, diarist from Louisiana, anguished over the turmoil at the beginning of the war by writing, "If I was a man! O if I was only a man!" <27> Months later, she wrote, "Honestly, I believe the women of the South are as brave as the men who are fighting..." <28> They definitely were brave women, prompted into action because the battle zones were so near. The role of elite females as soldiers in the Confederacy was a role taken as a matter of self-defense in most instances. Emma Holmes made a reference in her diary to the significance of women who prepared for army duty when she stated that she was impressed by the "self-reliance and ambition." <29> In 1863, Mary Chestnut penned into her diary, "These timid Southern women! And under the guns they can be brave enough." <30>

The military eagerness of prominent Southern women held little consequence as to the outcome of the Civil War. There were far too few ladies in that role to insinuate the relevance of their fighting strength, but there was relevance in the fact that it changed their characterization as "frail, subordinate, and passive" women who were "not interested in the public realm." <31> Because women soldiers were willing to challenge the Yankees, they also mounted a challenge to their roles in society. Their ambition and bravery paved the way for women to enlarge their sphere. Eventually, women gained entry into all military branches of the armed services.

There was another type of soldier in the Confederacy whose role proved to have been more relevant and effective to the Cause. They wore hoop skirts for a uniform, and their arsenal included charm, grace, and guile. Female spies performed a very valuable service to the war effort. One of the most famous was Belle Boyd--beautiful, educated, and quite daring. She was the daughter of a Virginia tobacco plantation owner. One of the elite in Southern society, she became a war agent at the age of seventeen when she shot and killed a Northern soldier as he attacked her mother. <32> That daring act was followed by many others after she was appointed courier for Generals Beauregard and Jackson. Her autobiography, *Belle Boyd, in Camp and Prison*, recounted stories of her dangerous deeds which spanned a period of nearly three years. <33> She once rode thirty miles overnight with news of a Yankee attack, and her successful mission was responsible for saving many confederate lives, but not without a personal attack upon her character. The Northern press labeled her a "village courtesan" who gained her secrets through "sexual

conduct." <34> Belle was not discouraged but continued to gather vital information for the South. She used her feminine innocence to obtain the battle plan that allowed Jackson's troops to capture Front Royal, Virginia. A Union major complained that Belle Boyd had done more damage to the Union than half the men of the Confederacy. <35> Six times she had been captured, sometimes imprisoned for months but often released. She was certainly an example of a Southern lady who made a difference through her role in the Civil War.

Mary Chestnut entered into her diary, "All manner of things, they say, come over the border under the huge hoops now worn. Not legs but arms are looked for...." <36> Prominent Southern female spies sometimes carried weapons, but none were more important than messages of the North's war plans. Rose O'Neal Greenhow's first contribution as a spy was the sending of three such messages to General Beauregard, which warned of the Union plan to capture Southern forces. The result of her efforts was a Confederate victory at Manassas. <37> Mrs. Greenhow had influential connections in the Washington, D.C. area and used her sources as an advantage. <38> She was a true Southern woman who, through her own admission, was born with "Revolutionary blood in [her] veins." <39> As a widow she had four daughters to raise, but that responsibility did not prevent her from an even greater task of serving the Confederacy. Like Belle Boyd, Rose Greenhow was also arrested for espionage but continued to send information, even from her cell. She lived in the "midst of bloodshed and carnage...witness[ed] horrors of a sacked city...[slept] within sound of a canon's roar," but she deeply believed that "a true woman [had] her mission even in scenes like [those]." <40> She gave unselfishly of her time to aid the Cause and on her last official mission, she gave her life. She drowned at sea with a bag of dispatches around her neck. <41> Both she and Boyd had defied the traditions of their society and left the boundaries of their sphere. Indeed, they were not weak and defenseless women. Their courage led them straight into the center of the "male sphere" of the Civil War, <42> where they were recognized as heroines who protected the lives of many men. George Fitzhugh's statement that a woman's strength was her weakness proved to be essential to their work. They were assumed to have been harmless because of their femininity, but their physical identity only camouflaged the strength and power of their womanhood. There was no demand for women in the role of spies after the war, but the heroic deeds of those women did have merit. Boyd, Greenhow, and many other Confederate women who somehow managed to foil the Yankees, served to boost the confidence of other women to escape from the confines of their place in society. <43>

Eugenia Phillips, wife of a congressman, was another loyal Southern woman who defied not only her role as a fragile lady, but she also blatantly resisted Yankee domination. She was arrested as a spy shortly after the battle at Manassas and imprisoned along with Greenhow in Washington. Mrs. Phillips was released and sent to New Orleans, but she first stopped off in Richmond to deliver what she called "traitor notes" to Jefferson Davis. Her courage and insolence continued in New Orleans where she fell victim to the infamous General Benjamin "Beast" Butler. As Federal Military governor, Butler had her arrested for laughing as a Union soldier's funeral procession passed under her balcony. <44> She would not apologize for her action but defended herself by maintaining that

her laughter was not in disrespect to the dead man. Butler condemned her to confinement in a prison on Ship Island. <45> He was noted for his tyrannical acts in New Orleans, especially with regard to the elite women who showed bravado. Julia LeGrand wrote in her journal that only the women seemed not to fear the Yankee invasion, and that they intended to resist at any cost. <46> The cost was not long in making itself known as Butler issued Order 28 on May 15, 1862. It was an attempt to silence the "rebel spitfires" <47> and stated that any woman who voiced disrespect for Union officers was to be "treated as a woman of the town, plying her avocation." <48> The fact that he felt such an order was necessary gave political power to women <49> and incited them to emerge even further into the public sphere. <50>

There was an emergence of elite women as teachers during the war years, as once again they took the roles vacated by men. Their move was inspired for two reasons: the absence of men left children without educators, and teaching was a means of much needed monetary funds. The new profession was not easily accepted by Southern society and was met with opposition. Miss Emma Holmes entered into her journal, that her family scorned her decision to teach, but her desire to feel useful overruled their disapproval. <51> Teaching became more acceptable in Augusta, Georgia, after *The Augusta Daily Constitutional* printed an article in May 1863, which stated that women were "naturally adept at teaching children." <52> Gender became inconsequential as women became efficient in teaching, but they also found gratification in the liberty they derived from their new place in society. Hundreds of refined widows, daughters, and sisters of once distinguished Southern families took positions as teachers. <53> The daughter of one wealthy family had been teaching to help support her family whose fortune was lost during the war. After their finances were restored, she refused to return to her family and her place in society and announced that "independence was to be preferred to a dependent respectability." <54>

Education levels of Southern white females before the war were directed more to the cultivation of character and social graces, but the war hastened the metamorphosis of females in the area of education. Women replaced men as teachers, which initiated their transition into the field of education. It became clearly evident that women needed a better education for the proper instruction of their pupils, but it did not happen overnight. After the war, women's colleges were established, and the teaching profession became a respectable occupation outside the woman's sphere. The number of women teachers increased from almost 10,000 in 1870 to nearly 40,000 by 1890. <55>

Women of the South, who took an active part in the Civil War as nurses, soldiers, spies, and teachers, did so out of choice, but other women of prominence were forced to fight back. As the war stretched out in time, it also stretched its destructive hand across the boundary of the woman's sphere. Violence found a new battlefield when it reached out to the women who tried to protect their homes, families, and their lives. Union troops invaded the South and were met by hostile women. Union General William T. Sherman, who was responsible for a great deal of the pillage, wrote of the women he encountered. He witnessed a land left to women and children who had been "bred in luxury, beautiful and accomplished, begging in one breath for the soldier's ration and in another praying

that the Almighty... [would] come and kill us, the despoilers of their homes and all that is sacred." <56> Many diary entries recorded the decimation inflicted by Sherman's wrath. He and other Union men were responsible for the burning, looting, and depredation that drove many Southern white women from their homes; their safe sphere. Accounts were written of plantations burned and of food and valuables stolen or ruined. Sarah Morgan disclosed an instance of Yankees who shelled her home. Everything was gone and the Morgans were left with nothing. She called it "deviltry" on the part of the Yankees who tended to treat the ruination of their homes and goods as "sport" as they wasted the land. <57> Confederate ladies were not usually granted the "armor of gender." <58> Although upper-class women were rarely raped, seldom beaten or harmed, their children were not as fortunate. Union guerrillas terrorized Mary Hall and her family on their plantation. After setting fire to the room where her three younger children slept, Union soldiers shot and killed her eighteen year-old son in his bed. <59> Another plantation mistress in Virginia was forced to shelter Union officers in her home only to have them burn it in the morning as they left. She managed to save her small children, but all else was lost. <60> Plantations were not the only buildings burned. Sherman not only torched a cotton factory in Rosswell, Georgia, but he also took the four hundred women who worked there as prisoners of war and sent them to the North. <61> Sherman's "march to the sea" plagued the South and its women. The Confederate Congress formally complained about the acts of "cruelty and pain" that Union troops inflicted upon women and children. They characterized the ransacking, burning, theft and degradation as acts of "dishonor worse than death." <62>

Women were dishonored by the presence of the Yankees, but they also felt that their "privacy" and "dignity" had been "violated." <63> There were no lords or masters to protect them, so they reacted to the best of their abilities. Was it any wonder that women who were left homeless and penniless decided to tread away from a sphere that was no longer credible (in some instances it physically no longer existed) into a new sphere of their ravaged society? The spoliation of the South was a consequence of the Civil War, and was directly responsible for yet other active roles which women filled in the absence of men. <64> Casualties of the war had taken the lives of one out of every five white men under the age of forty-four. <65> Women were forced to depend upon no one but themselves for survival and therefore took positions for pay. They found themselves in new public roles such as writing for newspapers and periodicals. Constance Harrison, the wife of Jefferson Davis's secretary, wrote many articles for magazines. <66> Professional services provided livelihoods for seamstresses, textile workers, and women who managed boarding houses. The number of those who practiced law and medicine increased, and by 1890, the South was credited with 434 women who were physicians and surgeons. <67> In 1870, only 3.3% of office workers were women; however, that figure doubled in only one decade, and they later "dominated" the field. <68>

Of course there were some high-born women who preferred to be dominated as their men returned from the war, and they withdrew into the traditional woman's sphere, but the hold of patriarchal rule had lost his strength. "As their women had become more independent, Confederate men increasingly had to recognize their own dependence upon women." <69> After the war, men had a difficult time adjusting to their new

environment. Four years of war had resulted in the loss of much of their property; slaves had been freed, homes destroyed, and their women no longer wished to be considered "property." The fact that women assumed greater authority eventually led to a change in their legal rights. For that reason the Civil War has been labeled a "watershed in the history of the Southern household." <70>

Reconstruction was an obstacle that repressed the changes of women's gender role, but it was only a temporary barrier. The foundation of their new self-image had been formed with the blood and sweat of their efforts, and women never allowed that foundation to crumble. In fact, it was supported and perhaps expedited by the Women's Christian Temperance Union whose leaders from the North visited the women of the South in the 1880s. Organizations for women's suffrage were established in many Southern cities. Mrs. Caroline Merrick, President of the W.C.T.U. in New Orleans, defined the club's goals, which included "removing barriers of local prejudice...assisting intellectual growth and spiritual ambition in the community of which we are a dignified and effective body. <71> White women in the South became assertive and competitive, renounced old traditions, and left the "women's sphere" for a world of "women's rights." <72> where they dignified their cause of feminism and verified their cause of patriotism.

The patriotic efforts of elite Southern women played a very vital part in the Civil War. Perhaps the word "played" was a poor choice because the Civil War could never have been misconstrued as a game. It was not played on a board as in the game of chess, although it may have served as a good analogy in many aspects. They were both definitely based upon strategy and competition, and both included a feminine presence in the throes of war. In chess, the queen was placed in the background, protected by men until they marched off to war. Had she remained in her place, her sphere, she surely would have perished. But like bold Southern elite white women, the queen moved in any direction she deemed necessary for her own protection, as well as in defense of her men and her homeland. She had power, and the women of the South realized that they too had power when they moved from their allotted space.

The experience of having lived through the Civil War gave women confidence to move out of their assigned sphere and into their chosen role in society. A South Carolina woman penned her thoughts, "...I am glad to have lived through a period like this, and believed that what there is in me of womanliness and strength of character and endurance is greatly due to the lessons of self-confidence...taught me during the war." <73> Another wrote a poem that expressed her sentiments of a woman's role in the war. In part it read:

O Daughter of the South  
When our fair land is free,  
When peace her lovely mantle throws,  
Softly o'er land and sea,

History shall tell how thou  
Hast nobly borne thy part

And won the proudest triumph yet,  
The victory of the heart. <74>

The American Civil War has been called "an irrepressible conflict," <75> wherein the North and South were destined to collide on the issue of slavery. It was just as inevitable that the destiny of women would take them on a quest for freedom. Their quest pushed them along the bloody path of the Civil War, and at the end of four long years their position was well established. The North had conquered the South, but the elite white women of the Confederacy had been victorious in their battle for personal freedom; they were no longer bound to the women's sphere. They had earned the right to their own identity and had won a victory of the heart, but they did not receive the merit that they deserved. A century passed before the pages of their diaries and journals were recognized as the missing elements of the Civil War. Their personal trials and first hand accounts have been credited with the illumination of a more complete history of the nation's bitter fight over emancipation. It was a fitting tribute to the women who also fought for their own emancipation. The women of the Confederacy no longer need to be portrayed in the works of fiction because their deeds have earned them a place of honor. Their names now belong in recorded history, their rightful place.

#### Notes

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