We Shall Never Be the Same
As We Have Been:
Northern and Southern Women in the Civil War

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For my grandmother,
Aya,
who broke the mold with style
and made it seem graceful and easy.
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INTRODUCTION

I Shall Tell the Story My Own Way

On August 18, 1856, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas confided in her journal that “I am as strong an advocate for purity, perfect purity in women as anyone can be and yet I think it is time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting.” At a time when women were generally expected to remain at home in their role as mothers and wives, Thomas complained that “It is a shame that what is considered a venial thing in man should in a worldly point of view damn a woman and shut her out from every avenue of employment.” As Thomas indicates, the traditional notion of womanhood began to break down in the years leading up to the Civil War. Indeed, northern women were some of the most avid abolitionists as the sectional conflict over slavery exploded, because they saw women and blacks as similarly oppressed and urged their southern sisters to reject the racial hierarchy that subordinated them to their white husbands. As such, northern and southern women ostensibly arrived on the eve of war with markedly divergent perceptions of themselves, as white middle class women in the North had already initiated efforts to destabilize the socially constructed and limiting assumptions of gender, while the white slaveholding women of the South remained committed to their biological understanding of womanhood.

Ella Thomas, however, was from Augusta, Georgia, who despite her privileged and protected status as a white slaveholding woman, asserted that the time had come for women to challenge the expectation that their role in society was maternal, dependent, and confined to the domestic sphere. Thomas’s prewar resentment of the antebellum social order was by no means representative of all southern women, or northern women for that matter, but her frustration
raises several questions about the general perception and understanding of the Civil War era that may contradict the reality of women’s experience. Popular memory paints two different pictures of women during this period, with Scarlett O’Hara southern belles on one end of the spectrum and Elizabeth Cady Stanton northern suffragists on the other. Those images and assumptions about the vastly different nature of northern and southern women hold up as accurate representations, until the Civil War itself. Before the war, white, middle and upper class women had a fundamentally different understanding of their female identity based on which side of the Mason-Dixon line they lived. After the war, however, northern and southern women began to see themselves as more alike than different, despite the reality that one side had officially triumphed over the other. What happened over the course of the war then, that allowed women’s experiences and perspectives to converge? Did the war simply accelerate trends and changing ideologies that were already afoot in the antebellum North, or was the war a watershed moment for the North and the South that permanently altered social relations and the understanding of gender? When women easily could have retreated into their familiar sectional identities, why did they choose to embrace change and destabilize the antebellum notions of womanhood that had once so deeply separated them? This coming together of northern and southern women is crucial to our understanding of the Civil War era, and it transforms our understanding of the push for women’s rights that followed the war and is still going on today.

To understand how the Civil War ultimately broke down the barriers that had divided northern and southern women requires a look back at the decades immediately leading up the war, during which sectional differences solidified and set the scene for conflict. Underlying the differing political and social ideologies that distinguished the North and South was a shift from a self-subsistent to capitalist economy that swept through the nation in the early 19th century.
Referred to as the Market Revolution, this phenomenon generally brought rapid and sweeping changes to antebellum American society, not only revolutionizing the economy but facilitating transportation, communication, and the exchange of ideas throughout the nation. While wars raged in Europe from 1793 to 1815, the American economy soared as the British and French turned to American producers for goods and trade. Increased opportunity for profit and consumption led to an unprecedented commercial boom that expanded American exports from $20.2 million in 1790 to $108.3 million in 1807. The effect of this economic surge created an integrated national market, but the shift to market-based capitalism had distinct impacts on the lifestyles and social configurations of the North and South.

Between 1780 and 1835, the Market Revolution transformed the North from its previously agricultural, house-hold based system of production to a commercial and eventually industrial economy. While traveling through Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1835, Frenchmen Michael Chevalier observed that “everything [there was] arranged to facilitate industry” and that “the manners and customs [were] altogether those of a working, busy society.” Chevalier’s impression of America reflects what historian Harry Watson refers to as the “stepped-up pace of urban America” that changed the nature of labor because “the capitalist could…break up each job into its component tasks, and assign each to a different, poorly skilled worker.” As historian Nancy Cott asserts, “the hallmarks of economic development in this period were functional specialization and division of labor,” moving work out of the home and into factories where time-discipline and machine regularity enabled greater efficiency and productivity. When Chevalier wrote that Northerners “facilitate[d] industry,” however, he did not mean industry as industrial, but rather he was highlighting the industrious nature of northern workers who became ever more efficient and hardworking in the new market-based economy.
Indeed, the fundamental shift that occurred in the North during the Market Revolution was not a sudden transition to a wholly industrial society, but it was the shift from a self-subsistent farming lifestyle to the production of goods for profit. A common misconception is that by the Civil War, the North was urban and industrial while the South remained strictly agricultural. The Market Revolution did not produce such a profound and immediate effect, but it did set important changes in motion in the North, as people stopped farming goods exclusively for their own family’s needs and began instead to sell their products for cash to buy items like factory-made clothes that had once been made from scratch at home.

This shift had especially profound consequences for northern women, as it simultaneously required some women to adopt industrial work patterns and others to remain at home “doing the housework [and] taking care of [the] children.”¹⁶ Young, unmarried women increasingly became wage-earners for their families, usually continuing their traditionally women’s work of weaving and spinning but in factories on a larger, industrial scale. Married women and mothers, on the other hand, were expected more than ever to assume the household responsibilities of domestic work and child care, with especial emphasis on educating their children and endowing them with a strong religious and moral character. Even while some women entered the industrial workforce, northern men coveted their role as primary breadwinner in the new market economy and as Nancy Cott argues, men increasingly “distinguish[ed] women’s work from their own, in the early nineteenth century, by calling it women’s ‘sphere,’ a ‘separate’ sphere.”¹⁷ Cott argues that with the Market Revolution, the home came “[t]o be idealized, yet rejected by men—the object of yearning, and yet of scorn,” because while it represented traditional life and values as well as “an alternative to the emerging pace and division of labor.”¹⁸ That distinction, that women were both necessary and unnecessary to the
success of the new economy, sent a conflicting message about northern women’s role and status that propelled them to start taking their own initiative in society by the 1850s.

In the Southern context, the Market Revolution produced a different set of social and economic implications with the shift to market capitalism because of the unique role of slavery in the development of the Southern agricultural economy. As their middle-class counterparts in the North did, the Southern slaveholding class enthusiastically embraced the opportunity for economic improvements. Their success “was merely a spur to still more enterprise,” historian James Oakes writes, but for these Southerners, the “phenomenal growth and prosperity of America” was inextricably linked “to the expansion and protection of slavery.” As the domestic and international demand for Southern cotton exploded with the advancement of technology and communication, the need for slaves only continued to grow. John Faragher reports that in the South, “one of the best indicators of the development of agriculture was…the increasing proportion of household heads who owned slaves.” Indeed, as Walter Johnson also writes on the subject, the slave market comprised a “significant portion” of the Southern economy between 1820 and 1860, and the ownership of slaves became one of the dominant symbols of material wellbeing.

Because Southerners linked their individual achievements to slavery, they considered the institution an economically justifiable and necessary component of their continued success. Oakes writes that the majority of white slaveholding families had “a direct material interest in the protection and perpetuation of slavery” and that “the most significant indication of a slaveholder’s growing wealth…was the increase in the number of slaves.” From their perspectives, slaves were the most productive and profitable labor force, thus establishing them as valuable commodities to be traded on the market. Furthermore, historian Thomas Hietala
Evans argues in his study on expansionism in the Jacksonian era that for Southerners, cotton and slave labor were vital to a sense of American security. Economically, a commitment to the development of the cotton industry was crucial for economic stability internationally, as Great Britain had become dependent on the United States for raw materials. Morally, Southerners argued that “freedom degenerated blacks, whereas slavery uplifted them” because “liberty allowed [them] to follow their innate propensity toward crime, poverty, and physical decay.” Socially, too, slavery provided the foundation for a specifically southern racial hierarchy and patriarchal social order that gave white males supreme authority and allowed southern white women “to be belles and matchmaking, flower-arranging ladies.” Southern slaveholders thus perceived slavery as essential to the nation’s commerce and continued progress and would stop at nothing to ensure its survival.

As the Market Revolution launched the North and South in divergent directions economically, the social and political landscape of the nation changed as well, pitting the two sections against each other over the single issue that distinguished them the most: slavery. As Michael Holt explains, two major camps exist among historians about how crucial the role of slavery was in causing the war. Fundamentalists, Holt writes, argue “that irreconcilable differences over Negro slavery inexorably ruptured one national institution after another between 1830 and 1860 until those differences produced war in 1861.” Revisionist historians, by contrast, “have minimized the internal solidarity of both the North and the South and the seriousness of the disputes between them…blam[ing] the war instead on the mistakes of political leaders and the efforts of agitators such as the abolitionists and Southern fire-eaters.” There is something to be said for the role the political crises of the 1850s played in the disruption of the Union, as the national two-system of Whigs and Democrats collapsed and a northern, anti-
slavery Republican party eventually took control in 1860 and spurred the onset of Southern secession. While there were other issues at stake in the realignment of voters and political ideology, however, historian David Potter confirms that “from the outset, slavery had been the most serious cause of sectional conflict.” Prominent historians of the fundamentalist camp like Eugene Genovese and Eric Foner have established “the reality and gravity of ideological, economic, and political conflict between the free labor society of the North and the slave-based plantation society of the South,” arguing that without a doubt, “the unwillingness of either section to tolerate the triumph of the other’s values produced the war.” There were certainly many factors that fueled the sectional hostility, but slavery was critical to the conflict, and as the North tried to limit its expansion and the South struggled to preserve and nationalize it, the women of both sections were at the center of the ideological clash.

Considering that the Civil War is one of the most exhaustively studied subjects in American history, women have been conspicuously absent from the story until recently. Traditional Civil War scholarship emphasized the military action and political dynamics of the era, but since the 1970s and 1980s, historians have shifted their focus to the social and cultural experience of the period as well. As a result, in the past thirty years, gender has emerged as an indispensable lens through which to view the social, political, racial and personal relations that shaped and distinguished the antebellum years through Reconstruction. In evaluating the experience of women in this period, one of the critical conversations that has emerged between historians is whether or not the Civil War changed anything for women. Northern and southern scholars alike question if the war served as a turning point in women’s experience, conclusively altering established gender roles and encouraging advancements in women’s status, or
conversely, if the war was merely a disruption in the status quo, after which women were fit snugly back into their subordinate, dependent positions in a patriarchal, male-dominated society.

Most historians, both of the North and South, agree that the war had deeper and more traumatic implications for white southern women because their antebellum identities were so firmly rooted in the racial hierarchy of slavery that the war destroyed. There is less consensus among historians, however, in how they interpret women’s responses to the war, as many assert that the war fundamentally changed women while others maintain that ultimately, the same social structures and assumptions persisted long after the fighting ceased. George Rable is of the latter camp, and he argues that although the war opened up new roles and opportunities for women, it failed to transform traditional gender roles. The war may have changed their way of living but it did not transform their status in society, since class, race and sex continued to uphold the antebellum social hierarchy. As Rable sees it, women chose to return to their traditional roles after the war, suggesting that their subordination to white male authority still existed and that they by and large remained “loyal to their class and race.” By contrast, historians like Drew Gilpin Faust and Leeann Whites convincingly argue that the war fundamentally transformed women’s roles, creating new identities for southern women that they did not necessarily welcome. As she interprets the war as a “crisis in gender,” Whites argues that while white men lost their political independence and their control over their slaves and households, white women gained a more prominent status by the end of the war, as their previously hidden domestic life and labor was central to the war effort. As the economic and social institutions of the antebellum order collapsed, women had no choice but to step into new roles to earn money and actively ensure their families’ survival in the changed postwar South. Drew Faust sees the same changed roles for women, and further underscores the transformation
by pointing to the internal, psychological changes in the way southern women viewed themselves. Faust argues that as defeat became imminent, elite Confederate women began to recognize their uselessness and questioned their identities and roles as the world that shielded them with privilege and protection deteriorated around them. Faust concludes, however, that while the war fundamentally altered women’s roles and identities, women neither welcomed nor accepted the changes but instead, sought ways to maintain their antebellum identities as the privileged and protected white elite. xxviii Thus, it remains up for debate whether or not southern women embraced their new roles after the war, because even if the war changed their way of living, women may have been too reluctant to accept those changes to see themselves as fundamentally new women.

Similar questions surround northern women’s experience—if the war was a watershed or if it only reinforced preexisting trends—but the meaning of continuity or change in the North is significantly different because northern women had already begun to question their traditional roles a generation earlier. For those who argue that change occurred, the war was an opportunity for northern women to alter attitudes and, as Elizabeth Leonard suggests, to challenge and manipulate traditional gender assumptions for their own benefit. xxix Not even twenty years after the war ended, activists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that the Civil War “created a revolution in women herself, as important in its results as the changed condition of the former slaves.” xxx From that perspective, the Civil War was a rousing force for female activism and because northern women seized the new economic and political opportunities that the war opened up, they are often imagined to be the “forebears of the Rosie the Riveters of World War II.” xxxi Certain historians challenge that idea, however, suggesting that the war was more complicated than simply either liberating or further oppressing women. Nina Silber argues
that there was “hardly a straight path from Civil War activism to the politically energized work of Progressive Era women.”

While women did gain new economic opportunities during the war, for instance, they also faced new burdens as they struggled to make do without their male breadwinners. Northern women, like their southern counterparts, faced obstacles that Silber argues “made them feel more like victims than crusaders,” and in many ways made them “more clearly aware of their second-class status outside the domestic realm.” Thus, although northern women had already been exposed to changing notions of womanhood before the war, they did not automatically have an easier adjustment to the expanding roles and expectations of women that the war created. As was the case in the South, women did not have a universal response to the changes the war set in motion, as their new roles presented as much uncertainty as they did power and independence.

Scholarship is growing so rapidly on the subject of women that it already may seem unnecessary or redundant to attempt an original contribution. While women have certainly become a field of their own, however, the trend appears to be to treat the women of the North and South separately rather than comparatively. This suggests the predominant assumption that regional differences outweighed the importance of gender as a factor in the formation of personal identity and loyalty for northern and southern women alike. Furthermore, the fact that there is more scholarship about southern women implies that there is more to study about the Confederate experience and that there was not enough significant change or transformation to analyze the northern side of the story. Indeed, sectional identity had an undeniable impact on women’s antebellum identities and subsequently, how they experienced the war. But in bringing them together in one study instead of dividing their stories, it becomes clear that the differences between northern and southern women were as important as the changes they underwent over the
course of the war that allowed their previously divergent experiences to converge. In her latest work, Nina Silber is one of the first to examine northern and southern women together, and to her, much credit is due for the inspiration and ambitions of this study. Many questions remain unanswered, however, about how the war impacted northern and southern women in relation to each other, not just within their own sectional contexts. This study seeks to determine what the implications of the Civil War were on female identity in general, not just on women as Northerners and Southerners.

The simple explanation and commonly held assumption is that the war dramatically changed the South while leaving the North largely the same. The war surely had different consequences for northern and southern women because they experienced the war from vastly different antebellum contexts. While the war had an undeniably disruptive effect on daily life, northern women were in certain ways better prepared to embrace the challenges the war presented because ideas had already begun to shift in the North about the roles and expectations of women. The realities of war for southern women, by contrast, forced women to acknowledge a radical departure in the traditional perceptions of gender that were so particular to the antebellum southern social order. From that perspective, the war reinforced and accelerated trends that already existed in the North, while the South struggled to reconcile new ideas of womanhood with their traditional notions that offered them comfort and protection.

While there is truth in that overarching understanding, however, there were many exceptions within that arch that complicate women’s experience in the North and South and demonstrate that the war did in fact have significant and life changing effects on all American women. To argue that dramatic change occurred in the South while the North remained largely unchanged would be a gross oversimplification. The reality of the Civil War experience in the
North and South is that there were many different, and often conflicting, realities for women. Many northern women did take on active roles as nurses, for example, to assertively demonstrate their commitment to the cause, but many also remained at home, anxiously awaiting the return of their husbands and sons. Many southern women embraced the challenge of running the family plantation and fulfilling their duty to the cause through home-based forms of patriotism, but many of the reputedly “bitter secessionists” expressed wavering loyalty and frustration at their wartime plight. Southern women had an especially complicated experience after the war, as some sought to preserve their antebellum lifestyle while others used the changing realities of war as momentum to expand opportunities for women, as their northern sisters had already begun to do before the war. Many common perceptions of women in the Civil War, therefore, do reflect real experience. But the story is more complex and the experiences more uneven than generally assumed, and this thesis attempts to iron out some of the details that have gotten lost in the folds of popular history.

Starting with the assumption that the North and South approached the war with vastly different mentalities, telling the two stories together reveals the convergence that occurred over the course of the war. In many ways, within the larger narrative of overarching transformation for all women, this is a story of continuity in the North and of change in the South. Naturally, change takes longer to explain and as such, what follows sometimes seems more like a southern story. This is largely a factor of time period, however. Were the focus of this study forty years earlier, the emphasis would be on the northern story, as the North began to reexamine and destabilize traditional gender assumptions during the Market Revolution in the decades leading up to the war. This does not undermine the northern experience during the war, but it helps explain why, when studying the Civil War era, the southern version often steals the spotlight.
Northern women may have emerged from the war less changed than their southern sisters overall, but to understand the whole story, it is necessary to find the exceptions to that trend and uncover not only how northern and southern women grew more alike by the end of the war, but how in many ways, women on both sides of the fight had similar stories throughout the war as well. Who they were and what they believed before the war was undoubtedly different, how they bore the burden of war varied, and the degree of change was uneven, but northern and southern women alike could agree that because of the war, they would never be the same as they had been.

Without proposing that their experience was representative of the entire population, white upper and middle class women are the focus of this study, as they reflect the dynamic combination of social, racial, and political ideologies that the Civil War era challenged. Through their letters and correspondence with husbands and family members, their reflections in diaries and personal papers, and in the content of the periodical magazines they read for leisure, upper and middle class women reveal the ideals and aspirations as well as the tensions and hardships that motivated and tried Americans from the beginning of the war to the Reconstruction and reconciliation period that followed. On a practical level, the writings of these upper-crust women offer the richest body of sources to explore because they were the most literate (and certainly had the most free time) and were thus most prolific in recording their experiences. Beyond matters of availability, however, these women were the most influential and telling of gender roles and assumptions during the era on which this study focuses. That is not to say they were the most typical, for there were of course many other women of lesser means than those who preserved themselves in writing who remain regrettably unnoticed and forgotten. But upper and middle class white women in the North and South defined and shaped the perceptions about
class, race, gender, and region because their presence was the most widely felt and revered on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. Whether it was on the arm of her husband or at the podium of a political rally, these were the women who society saw and heard, and thus we look to them to construct an understanding of the Civil War experience.

To understand the change over time that women underwent during the Civil War period, this study generally proceeds chronologically, but does not closely follow specific dates or turning points. For military buffs or political analysts, such detail is important for identifying concrete shifts in tactics and strategies that help illuminate why the war unfolded as it did. The nature of this study, however, because it examines the interplay between the overall continuity and change in women’s experiences, relies more on general trends and shifts in personal attitudes that occurred at an individual, uneven rate, not at the same time in the same way for everyone. With that in mind, chapter one sets the scene for the main act of the war, establishing the markedly divergent perceptions and understandings of womanhood that existed in the North and South before the war. Those differences led women to enter the war with their own set of expectations specific to their sections, and chapter two highlights the ways in which those sectional expectations affected both how women fit into their section’s idea of patriotism and how they in turn expressed their own patriotism. Chapter three uncovers the first major shifts for women, as their prewar expectations did not live up to the harsh wartime realities and forced them to start reconsidering the roles and assumptions that society had mandated for them. The final chapter unravels the complicated postwar experience and reveals that while some found it difficult to let go of the past, most women faced the reality of their changed world and embraced the new responsibilities and opportunities that world created.
Soon after the armed conflict began, before women could even imagine how long the fighting would last or how to pick up the pieces of their war-torn worlds, Lucy Buck of Front Royal, Virginia wrote “we shall never any one of us be the same as we have been.”\textsuperscript{xxxvi} I chose to use Lucy’s prescient words as the title of this thesis because the Civil War fundamentally challenged the traditional notion of womanhood and permanently altered women’s status in both the North and South. For Lucy and many others, women’s world changed during the Civil War, and after being divided by geography, politics, and social ideology, women were finally able to unite as a gender through the common experience that wartime struggles and disappointments fostered. In choosing my title, however, I was torn between Lucy Buck’s quotation and the words of Mary Boykin Chesnut, whose story appears frequently throughout this study. In November 1860, when she began her journal that is now a seminal document for our understanding of the Civil War period, Chesnut wrote, “I will tell the story in my own way.”\textsuperscript{xxxvii} As much as this thesis is an analysis of the overall change that the Civil War set in motion, it is also an attempt to uncover the individual stories and the exceptions to the long-held assumptions about northern and southern women that popular history has generated. For it is the personal details of the Civil War story where women’s experiences converge, as the general trends give way to the subtle shifts in mindset that quickly made the very different North and South suddenly seem not so different. While change was the result for both northern and southern women, that change was a unique and individual process for the women in this study. And as such, we should let them tell it in their own way.
CHAPTER ONE

The True Woman Versus The New Woman:
Antebellum Perceptions and Expectations of Womanhood

Understanding the transformation women underwent during the Civil War and, more importantly, identifying how the war allowed their experiences to converge, requires an explanation of the divergent ideologies and experiences that conspired to make northern and southern women so different during the antebellum period. A common notion of womanhood accompanied the Market Revolution as Americans universally tried to reconcile traditional values with progress and material wealth. Because the institution of slavery created markedly different social and political configurations in the two sections, however, the North and South disagreed over what constituted the best interests of the nation and as the sections increasingly divided, so too did northern and southern women develop distinct understandings of themselves as women and of their roles and obligations in society. This chapter seeks to identify and explain the various and complex factors that contributed to the divergence of female identity in the antebellum era, and as such, what follows is a rather lengthy account of women’s experience before the war even began. This discussion is necessary, however, because highlighting the sectional differences that previously divided women emphasizes the breakdown of those barriers during the war that allowed women to see commonality in their experiences and to come together as a gender once the hostilities ceased.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States experienced a complex transformation as a result of the Market Revolution. The shift from a previously agrarian society to a market-based world of capitalism created unprecedented opportunities for wealth and improvement. But the same processes that lifted many Americans to a higher quality of life also
pushed certain social groups down, making the nation increasingly stratified and divided. American women composed one such group, as they were deprived of the opportunity for political and economic equality that their male counterparts enjoyed. Specifically, white upper and middle class women assumed a role in society that reflected an emerging ideology of separate spheres for men and women. More and more, social norms dictated that men should embrace the changing economy to provide for their families, while women should guard the home and preserve the values of the republic. So it happened that a concept of “true womanhood” developed, influencing social interactions and infiltrating the mindset of the American public.

While it may not have affected the lives of every woman, the “cult of true womanhood” and the ideals it represented reflect not only the anxieties about the moral decay and corruption that the Market Revolution fomented, but it also signifies an attempt to justify the seemingly inferior status of women. By celebrating the natural qualities of her gender, society could continue its male-dominated pursuit of wealth and progress while still claiming to value the traditional virtues of the republic. The ideology of separate spheres asserted that men and women were not unequal but rather possessed different ordained roles to fulfill in order to guarantee a happy future for the nation. Thus, the image of the “true woman” left an indelible mark on American society, enabling the nation to embrace its aspirations for the future as well as establishing an order in gender roles that greatly impacted politics and society in the decades that followed.

Prevalent in the agenda of popular women’s magazines, the idea of the “true woman” was influential in establishing a socially accepted standard to which middle and upper class white women should strive. As Barbara Welter asserts in one of the earliest articles on the
subject, the “attributes of True Womanhood…could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” In “Ellen Campbell, A Tale of Domestic Life,” a story featured in *Godey’s Ladies’ Book* in 1841, the female protagonist embodied qualities of purity and piety that appear to correlate directly with and offer an antidote to the declining morality and virtue of the increasingly profit-driven American culture. This story and many others like it reveal that by celebrating a virtuous, domestic character like Ellen Campbell, Americans were able to maintain a sense of stability and moral rectitude while still embracing opportunities for self-improvement that the new market economy offered. Of course, it must be noted that these ladies’ magazines targeted a very specific audience and could be more prescriptive than descriptive of the role women actually played as the Market Revolution unfolded. Nonetheless, they serve to illuminate a powerful concept that appealed to many Americans who viewed the image of the “true woman” as crucial to reconciling the traditions of the past with the promise of the future.

As the shift from a self-subsistent to a market-based, profit-oriented economy generated an apparent decline in the character of working Americans, women were increasingly revered as the moral guardians of the nation and counted on to preserve the future of the republic. Ellen Campbell typified this notion that a vital purpose women served was to enhance the spirit and mind of those around her through her purity and natural moral superiority. In the story, Ellen’s husband described her as “not only fitted to bless with kind sympathy and love, but…to elevate the tone of his mind, correct and purify his taste, and ennoble his whole character.” Evidently, her husband held her in high esteem because she possessed the moral fortitude that he needed. He further praised her, saying “I knew the value of the prize I had gained…[and] how rich a gift, how invaluable a treasure I obtained in Ellen Campbell!” Her husband’s celebration of her
reveals that society valued women less (or not at all) for their financial or intellectual contributions than for their purity and enlightened moral judgment. Women were held responsible, therefore, for using their selfless, virtuous nature—their “shield of female purity”\textsuperscript{xlii}, as historian Elizabeth Varon calls it—to contain the passionate, selfish men who would potentially continue to exploit society to their own advantage if left unchecked.

In a similar line of reasoning, it appears women were expected to champion religion and possess a pious devotion to Christian values in order to suppress the materialistic spirit of capitalism. Ellen Campbell, the “true woman” she was, placed utmost importance on cultivating a strong relationship with God. For example, when the man she was in love with left her unexpectedly, she fought back her feelings of anguish and self-pity and chose instead to “persever[e], seeking not to do her own will, but the will of her ‘Father in heaven.’”\textsuperscript{xliii} Rather than become bitter, “her heart rose up continually in gratitude and love to the Almighty Disposer of her ways” for teaching her painful lessons that ultimately strengthened her affections for Him. Ellen’s character suggests that such a commitment to Christianity was a necessary component of a “true woman” because it encouraged her to avoid the influences of worldly concerns and thus set a pious, moral example for those around her. As Welter asserts in her article, “religion belonged to woman by divine right” for the purpose of casting her “beams [of piety] into the naughty world of men.”\textsuperscript{xliv} Hence, it seems a woman’s piety and her moral purity were mutually reinforcing, as they both served to permeate society with the values it needed to avoid slipping permanently into a state of moral decay.

This notion of “true womanhood” could be found not only in prescriptive literature, but in other cultural outlets of daily life. In 1851, Aldert Smedes preached a sermon in Raleigh, North Carolina entitled, “‘She Hath Done What She Could’” or the Duty and Responsibility of
Woman,” which as the title suggests, directly spoke to the ideal of moral and pious women. Smedes asserts that “it should be especially her effort to make [her home] the residence of purity and piety,” and that by showing “meekness, gentleness, resignation, forbearance, hope, peace and joy…the Christian wife [may] often become the minister to her husband’s salvation.” Just as Ellen Campbell corrected and purified her husband, Smedes suggests that it was a woman’s duty to use her “natural temperament, and the circumstances of her daily life” to serve as an example of faith and humility for her family. Because she was inherently “more sensitive than her husband to the appeals of religion, and less exposed to the dangers and temptations of the world,” a woman should be the moral guardian of the family and value her position in the home that allows her to exhibit her “heavenly influence of religion.”

In addition to upholding a commitment to morality and piety, the developing ideology of separate gender spheres also promoted the importance of a wholly domestic role for women as a tool for molding future generations into virtuous republicans. It was perhaps in this domain that Ellen Campbell most exemplified a “true woman”. As the title of the story, “A Tale of Domestic Life,” suggests, Ellen was a model of domesticity. Considering the well-being of her family and home to be of supreme importance, Ellen made “the object of [her studies] to render herself more useful, more capable of diffusing happiness around her” and she “early learned to value most highly those acquisitions which would fit her to be useful and happy at her own fireside.” As her mother believed before her, Ellen felt that “woman’s province [was] home” and thus, “to be esteemed and loved by the domestic circle [was] Ellen’s ardent wish.” Ellen relished her domestic role in making her home a happy one, which indicates the notion that the home was supposed to be a “cheerful place” so that the men of the family would want to be there. Welter also suggests that women felt it was their mission to reform society, and that necessarily
had to start with their own households.¹ Ellen Campbell seemed to possess that mentality in her role as a mother, as she “trained [her children’s] youthful minds, and imparted that knowledge which would make them most useful and happy in future years.”²iii Ellen welcomed the task of teaching and socializing her children, which reveals that she, as all women, “must do the inculcating of virtue since the fathers…were too busy chasing the dollar.”²iii This attitude clearly established that women necessarily should reside in the domestic sphere because in the fast-paced world of the Market Revolution, they needed to preserve the traditional values of the home and leave their husbands free to take advantage of the new opportunities of the growing market economy.

In his sermon, Smedes also highlights the importance of the domestic role of women in addition to her religious influence. Again underscoring what the story of Ellen Campbell exemplifies, Smedes insists that “It is in the relation of mother, that female influence is most powerfully felt, and may be most effectually exerted for the welfare of its immediate objects and of society.”³iii “As the clay is in the hands of the potter,” he writes, “[so] are the hearts of her children, under the, discipline of a pious and intelligent mother,” since their first and deepest impressions come from watching her example at home. Women had a great influence as mothers, since they were responsible for their children’s well-being and had every opportunity to mold their character since they spent the most time with them. Smedes assuredly claims that a mother, “amid all her other duties, yet considers every day as lost, of which a part is not devoted to the education of her children,”⁴iv emphasizing that women’s role was exclusively in the domestic sphere but it was undeniably valued, as the spiritual welfare of her entire family was in a woman’s hands.
Many historians have commented on the heightened role of women in the domestic sphere for the purpose of preserving republican character during this period. Harry Watson speculates that a “family structure began to emerge with fathers increasingly identified as the sole breadwinners, while women were …limited to…motherhood.” So too does Stuart Blumin argue that a middle class emerged with a “distinctive identity around domestic values” that created “an enhanced role for the mother in socializing and cultivating the sensibilities of the child”. And as Elizabeth Varon asserts, “the canon of domesticity…celebrated woman’s power and duty to mold the character of her sons, to instill in them civic virtue and a love for the Republic.” Thus, it seems clear that women were responsible for inculcating certain values and traits in their children that would allow them to become productive members of society. Because women were supposedly endowed by nature with moral superiority and purity of mind, society transformed the role of women into a vehicle for social uplift and cultivated an image of women that would theoretically preserve the virtue of the republic if women chose to aspire to it. As the story of Ellen Campbell and Aldert Smedes’ sermon confirm, the notion of true womanhood had traction in the North and the South in the mid-19th century and similarly informed the assumptions and expectations about gender roles in both sections. Those assumptions began to diverge, however, as the two sections expressed particular ideologies to accommodate both their own political and social institutions and their own sense of sectional identity amid the fast-paced changes of the years leading up to the Civil War.

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While the notion of “true womanhood” influenced the mindsets and behavior of Americans in both the North and the South, it was not the only trend that emerged as the Market Revolution unfolded. The “true woman” traditionally represented morality and piety throughout
the nation. In the North, however, an intense movement for moral reform developed that pulled many women out of their sacred private sphere and into a more outspoken role in the public domain. Northern women became involved in reform efforts at all levels of society, zealously committed to issues such as temperance, women’s rights to education and labor, better treatment for the insane, and especially, abolition, as reformers directed much of their criticism toward the South and its “peculiar institution” of slavery. As progressive thoughts began to circulate, northerners became increasingly hostile towards southern culture and in response, southerners launched a concerted effort to defend themselves and their institutions from the attacks of the fanatical northern reformers. Northern reformers themselves adamantly held that they were specifically anti-slavery, not against the South as a whole culture, but white Southerners interpreted their attacks to mean the latter and thus contributed to a deepening misunderstanding and hostility between the two sections. Women played essential but different roles in the North and South as each section sought to assert its dominance in this national conversation. In the North, women emerged as some of the main disseminators of the progressive agenda, whereas in the South, women were the objects at the center of the southern defense, celebrated and encouraged to remain the moral stronghold of the family and home.

This divergence of opinion over what was best for the nation helps explain why the North and South grew apart in the years leading up to the war. Of particular interest to this study, the varying influence of moral reform in the two sections reveals how the perceptions and expectations of women differed significantly by the start of the war and arguably contributed to the different experiences women had during the conflict. The ideal of the “true woman” did not entirely disappear in the North, nor did every southern woman accept her submission as the weaker sex. But the dominant trends in public opinion confirm that ideas were afoot in the North
that the South would not tolerate and that exacerbated the tensions that ultimately pulled the sections apart.

The impulse towards moral reform in the North provided an unprecedented opportunity for women to come together and show their support for each other and for other disadvantaged members of society. Sarah M. Grimké was one of the earliest leaders in the call for change, representing the discontent with the current state of society and the determination to improve it. A “‘notorious’ feminist and abolitionist,” Grimké asserted that “God had created woman the absolute equal of man,” contending not that women should surpass or dominate men but should become their equals. Originally from the South, she was forced to relocate to the North because of her opposition to slavery and her growing commitment to abolition. In a letter she wrote in 1836, Grimké appealed to the clergy of the southern states to put an end to slavery. She reached out to them both as a Christian and a southerner, writing that “A solemn sense of the duty which I owe as a Southerner to every class of the community of which I was once a part, likewise impels me to address you, especially, who are filling the important and responsible station of ministers of Jehovah.” She urged them that “If ever there was a time when the Church of Christ was called upon to make an aggressive movement on the kingdom of darkness, this is the time,” because “[t]he times of our ignorance on the subject of slavery which God may have winked at, have passed away [and] [w]e are no longer standing unconsciously and carelessly on the brink of a burning volcano.” In this passionate plea, Grimké demonstrates the growing sentiment that not only was slavery morally reprehensible, but that clearly people recognized the evil of the institution but no one was working to stop it. Grimké and her fellow reformers made it their mission to call attention to the wrongs and inequalities in society, attempting to raise the national conscience enough to promote action and change.
One of the vehicles by which the reformers conveyed their agenda was through the Advocate of Moral Reform, a semi-monthly periodical aimed at strengthening women’s role in society and, as an explicitly anti-prostitution organization, was especially geared toward women who were victims of moral corruption and injustice. As committed to women’s rights as she was to abolition, Sarah Grimké published an article in the Advocate in 1838 entitled “What are the Duties of Woman at the Present Time?” She wrote that “at this momentous crisis,” “we are living in such an artificial state of society…[and] are so little accustomed to think for ourselves, that we submit to the dictum of prejudice, and of usurped authority.” She claimed that “the rights and responsibilities of men and women as moral beings are identical,” and “nothing has enveloped the mind in more ignorance and uncertainty, than the false idea that the mere circumstance of sex…is to be the criterion of duty, intelligence, responsibility, superiority and inferiority.” She sardonically remarks that “men have at all times been inclined to allow to women peculiar privileges, while withholding from them ESSENTIAL RIGHTS,” implying her disdain for the notion that women were celebrated for their domestic and pious virtues in exchange for the suppression of their natural rights and duties as “rational and moral beings.” Thus, she argues, were women “induced to embrace the unpopular, unfashionable, obnoxious principles of the moral reform, or abolition societies,” because it was their current duty to assert their right to “think for themselves” and prove that they deserved respect from men, not simply “romantic gallantry.” Grimké, in this outspoken display, reveals the shift in mentality that was beginning to occur in the North, planting the seed in northerners’ minds that perhaps women were suited to play a more assertive, productive role in society than mothers and housewives.

In the two decades leading up the war, the Advocate consistently published articles that spoke to the growing sentiment in favor of better treatment for women, supporting them in their
suffering and encouraging them to exercise their influence in other places than the home. In an article featured in February 1848 entitled “Women Can’t Live by Plain Sewing in New York,” the *Advocate* called for reform in the prices paid for female labor, demanding, “[c]annot public sentiment and public sympathy be so aroused, that some plan shall be devised that will bring relief to thousands by bestowing the best of all charities, ‘the charity of wages’?” In December of that year, in “Insanity Among Females,” the editors reported that the majority of cases of people seeking treatment for insanity were women. They alleged that it was not because “the female sex are constitutionally weaker and more fragile than the male,” but rather, they “trace the fact to the great number of privations which females are called to endure.” They call attention to “how unequal a footing the two sexes in many respects stand, and with how much heavier and more frequent blows misfortune falls upon those called the weaker sex,” arguing that in trying to balance the burdens of childbearing, nursing, household duties, and pleasing her husband, “the poor heart broken and disappointed wife…is prostrated and sinking under her burden, she seeks refuge in a Lunatic Hospital.” The aim of this article, and many others in the same vein, was to highlight the “superior measure of fortitude and endurance” women had, giving them credit for their efforts and offering support and encouragement for the burdens they bore, even as they were supposed to be the more fragile, dependent sex.

The *Advocate* also encouraged women to assert themselves politically, using whatever influence they had to put pressure on the government to end slavery. In December 1848, in “An Appeal to the Women of the United States,” a group of female authors presented not only their objection to slavery, but the shared affliction of women and slaves:

> The system of oppression which has been tolerated in our country, despite its boasted republicanism and democracy, while it…has sunk man to the lowest depths of ignorance, degradation and wretchedness, nevertheless has found in this lowest depth a *lower deep*—and there it has plunged woman, bereft of every right,
of every hope, of every source of happiness. If ever woman was called upon to feel and act, it is in view of these her wretched sisters—more than a million and a half of whom are thus to-day enslaved. 

The authors draw the connection between women and slavery to underscore that in the current system, even free women were held in a specific form of oppression that prevented them from enjoying their rights to liberty and equality. They wrote that the question was no longer simply should the institution of slavery exist, “but shall we ourselves be free?” They ended the article with a petition to Congress, requesting on “behalf of the claims of a million and a half of their sex, who...are the doomed victims of a system that dwarfs the intellect, degrades the morals, and debases the entire being,” to enact measures that would prevent the continuance of slavery. As these women demonstrate, moral reformers combined the cause of abolition and women’s rights to effectively emphasize the significance and necessity of change. In 1854, another group wrote that “As women, we have no vote to give, but as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, teachers, writers, &c., we have a voice and an influence that may affect, for good or for evil, the votes of those that...decide the issue,” asserting that the moral responsibility of women was to “persuade [men] to the right” to end slavery. 

It is clear, then, that reform-oriented northern women were dedicated to the overall goal of ending oppression, and spreading the message of moral reform to improve the lives of any American who was disadvantaged by the current social order.

As the impetus toward progress and reform grew stronger in the North, a deepening attachment to tradition emerged in the South that emphasized the moral and political superiority of southern culture. Just as The Advocate of Moral Reform represented the growing northern commitment to progress and change, a popular southern periodical captured the sense of urgency in the South to defend its social institutions from the attacks of northern reformers. The Southern Literary Messenger was “devoted to the South, and to the maintenance of her literature and
In an article literally entitled “The Duty of Southern Authors,” the Messenger urges the establishment of “a Southern literature,” claiming that the “duty, more than all others incumbent upon the Southern people…is the duty of rewarding by their approbation and stimulating by their praise, the literary creations of the genius of their section.” The unique task of the southern author evidently stemmed from the existence of slavery, which created the specific incentive for southerners to promote in writing the belief that slavery was “a great social, moral and political blessing—beneficial alike to us and to the slave.” Because literature was “the most powerful weapon which the enemies of African slavery” used, southern authors must use literature “for the maintenance of our position, and our justification before the world.” The editors of the Messenger believed that the South owed their “superiority in morals, politics, religion, and obedience to the law” to slavery, and used the Messenger to defend the institution and to promote the southern ideals and customs that had grown out of it.

One of the ways in which the editors of the Messenger sought to justify the southern way of life was to contrast the moral excellence of southern women with the fanaticism and diminished purity of the women reformers in the North. In 1852, they chose to target one northern woman in particular, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose best-selling book Uncle Tom’s Cabin highlighted the horrors of slavery and its toxic effect on both northern and southern society. Uncle Tom’s Cabin was not an outright attack of the South, although many Southerners interpreted it as such. Rather, Stowe’s objective was to cast a critical light on the institution of slavery itself, the existence of which, in her view, corrupted moral people in an otherwise moral place. While Uncle Tom’s Cabin may have bolstered the anti-slavery sentiment in the North, some of Stowe’s least flattering characters were Northerners, proving that slavery made victims of everyone—white and black, northern and southern.
Nevertheless, the editors of the *Messenger* unsurprisingly came to the South’s defense, justifying the institution of slavery and claiming that the North was misinformed and did not understand the benefits of the system to both slave and master. Not only did the editors criticize the content of the work, but they lashed out against Stowe’s womanhood, claiming that a true woman would never have written as profane and ignorant a book as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In one review, the editors explain that normally they would “blunt the edge of their severity” in critiquing a lady writer, but they “hold that [Stowe] has forfeited the claim to be considered a lady, and with that claim all exemption from the utmost stringency of critical punishment.”

They go on to blame Stowe’s audacity on her “nativity—the pleasant land of New England…one which would place woman on a footing of political equality with man, and causing her to look beyond the office for which she was created—the high and holy office of maternity—would engage her in the administration of public affairs.” Thus, in defending the institution of slavery, the *Messenger* reveals the indubitable southern opinion that women were meant to remain at home in their maternal role, rather than asserting public roles for themselves or criticizing the existing social order. They even made a biblical reference to the subjection of women, as the First Epistle of Timothy declares “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”

Undoubtedly, this was a radically different message than the progressive, nearly feminist ideas that were circulating in the North.

In another review, the *Messenger* again emphasized that normally, women writers, “whose natural position entitles them to all forbearance and courtesy,” would be shielded from severe criticism. However, because Stowe “deliberately step[ped] beyond the hallowed precincts—the enchanted circle—which encompass her as with the halo of divinity…she has wantonly forfeited her privilege of immunity…by her own folly and impropriety.”

Here too,
the *Messenger* suggested the specific perceptions and expectations the South had of a true woman, and then juxtaposed those feminine virtues with Stowe to prove that the outspoken women of the North were to be reviled, not admired. This second review goes further to insult the North as a whole, suggesting that the “aptitude of the public mind” in the North must be inferior “to catch the contagion, and welcome the contamination” of Stowe’s writing. Clearly Stowe had struck a sensitive nerve with her work, and the *Messenger’s* reaction demonstrates the effort Southerners made to discredit her and to hopefully diminish her influence. The *Messenger*, ordinarily a non-political periodical, dedicated two lengthy reviews to a novel that was banned in the South and the possession of which was a crime. Southern readers could not even read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and yet the editors and contributors of the *Messenger* were exercised enough to bring it to the attention of their readers and explicitly condemn it. By vilifying Stowe, the *Messenger* further enshrined southern women in the paternalistic social order, affirming that men were the dominant masters and women were the gentle, refined moral influence in society. And just as reformers merged the issues of abolition and women’s rights in the North, southerners rejected the idea of new roles for women as they simultaneously attempted to defend the existence of slavery.

Beyond the blatant and pointed attack on Stowe, the *Messenger* promoted what it considered universally accepted truths about womanhood, publishing articles that suggested that women were meant to remain at home. From the *Messenger’s* perspective, the role of women was crucial to the functioning of society, but their duties were exclusively devoted to the care of their families. Many authors honored the “true woman” of the South and mocked her fanatical northern sisters in the same piece. For instance, in “Tennyson’s Portraiture of Woman,” published in 1856, the author wrote in reference to Alfred Tennyson’s poetry, that “in these days,
when there is so much fanaticism in regard to ‘woman’s rights,’ we read with peculiar pleasure any writer who gives the true idea of woman’s duty and mission. “Happy the day,” the author went on, “when she shall be satisfied with the sphere in which God has placed her,” spreading her influence that, “like the light of the moon, should be silent and soft.” In contrast to this celebration of feminine virtue, the Messenger featured a poem in 1853 ironically entitled “Woman’s Progress,” in which the author ridicules the female reformers of the North. Criticizing their “shrill voice, and rude disheveled locks,” the author implored southern women “stoop not thou to be a man,” but rather, “strive with silent effort in the Woman’s cause, perfecting in its destinies, our sex, and cast aside this foul attempt which clings to degradation as it were our pride.” This female author, ironically making public statements about how women should not make public statements, shamed the women who were attempting to break with tradition and thus encouraged southern women to embrace the “gentler duties” of their sex for fear of seeming like the “shrewish”, “fallen woman” of the poem. Another piece featured in 1853, “Woman’s True Mission,” took a similar approach, poking fun at the female reformers in England who “framed a pathetic petition” appealing to their American sisters to demand more rights for women. The author exclaimed that this is “strange wandering from woman’s sphere,” and that American women should set the better example for “the noble ladies of England” and “prove to the world that they at last understand the true object of Woman’s Mission” as “mother, wife, daughter and sister.” As this sample of articles reflects, many southerners seized opportunities to retaliate against the attacks of the northern reformers, insulting their efforts and thereby creating incentive for southern women to “keep within [the] bounds” of her proper sphere.
Interestingly, a frequent subject in the Messenger was the necessity of female education, but the authors had a distinctive interpretation of what the purpose of that education should be. In “Female Education,” published in September 1858, the author pointed out the errors with the current education system, one of the worst of which was sending young girls to boarding school. As he claimed, “sending very young girls to such institutions is detrimental and injurious to moral and intellectual development,” and “forever disqualify the woman from reaching that high moral and intellectual culture which fits her to be a wife and mother.” Instead, he argued that “the essential requisite for female education of a superior order, is to be found at home...to cultivate the heart as well as the mind.” This echoes the ideal espoused in the notion of true womanhood, that a woman’s rightful place is in the home so that she can be influenced to become the moral influence for her own family. Furthermore, the author goes on to suggest that female education was essential because it “influence[s] the destiny of men,” since “if women knew more, men must learn more—for ignorance would then be shameful.”

To support women’s education, therefore, did not mean advancing or changing women’s role in society, but rather the goal was to perpetuate the current social order. Indeed, in a fictional piece published in 1856 called “The Literary Wife,” the male protagonist who is married to a “literary,” educated woman, expresses that “No man can be more opposed than I to woman getting out of her proper sphere, or affecting to stand out by the side of the other sex.” He believes, however, that “literary abilities...are by no means incompatible with the right performance of all the appropriate duties that fall to the lot of woman.” In fact, her education was actually vital to her duties as a mother and wife, because “if her mental and moral culture has been neglected, will she not be likely to commit a thousand errors in the training of her children?”
As the character in that story suggests, while it is notable that they encouraged education for women, southerners not only promoted an education specifically directed within the home, but only insofar as it benefited the male population and southern society as a whole. For example, an article that appeared in 1859 entitled “The Intellectual Culture of Woman” highlights the responsibility that educated women had to southern society to promote the institution of slavery. The author implored women to “read and understand the argument urged in behalf of slavery, and to correct a false sentiment, which I fear is already too prevalent among females, that the institution is wrong.”xci Once again conflating the issues of women and slavery, the author asserted that an educated woman “may contribute to [the South’s] good order by promoting the growth of a proper popular sentiment on this subject and lend sympathy and encouragement to her home in its strife with Northern fanaticism and folly.”xc Thus, it is clear in both its defense of slavery and its belief that women should preserve the home and heart of society that the South felt threatened by the increasing pressure of moral reform, which evidently struck directly at the core of southern paternalism and white male supremacy.

The South was not mistaken in its concern that its social order was in a vulnerable position, not only due to abolition, but because the moral reform movement had undeniably changed northern women’s perceptions and expectations of themselves, emboldening them to become more useful and to demand credit where it was due. In August 1848, the Advocate of Moral Reform featured two articles back to back, both of which chided husbands for not showing their wives the appreciation they deserved. In “Husbands and Wives,” the author spoke directly to the husbands, writing “Do not suppose, when wearied with business, that you have all the trouble and your wife none;” and warning them not to “go home and there vent your ill-humor upon your unoffending spouse.”xci In the next piece, “Woman’s Cares,” the author recounted the
story of a woman who spends all day trying to make “[her] home happy to [her] husband,” only to be told that the pie would be “a little better warmed” and that the “noisy children” should be put to bed. At the end of the story, the author advises editors to be “more just, and now and then, exhort husbands to do their part toward making home more agreeable to their wives, when the latter have…borne a world of cares and vexations through the day.” As these two articles indicate, a trend emerged with the development of the moral reform movement that encouraged men and women to see themselves as more alike than different in their natures, duties and rights. Neither of those two pieces even suggested that women should leave their domestic sphere, but they revealed the northern belief that women should be recognized for the hard-work and care they put in to making life pleasant for their families. This was a crucial distinction from the understanding of gender in the South where, as the Messenger promoted, men and women were considered more different than alike by virtue of their gender and thus held disparate positions of respect in society.

While the demand for appreciation seems relatively mild, there were also more audacious attempts to sway the public’s sympathy in favor of widening women’s sphere. Many articles in the Advocate called upon women to embrace a new idea of womanhood that extended beyond her role in the home. In a piece published in 1854 entitled “The Wrongs of Woman,” the author boldly asserted that “[m]others need not teach their daughters that marriage is the only position of respectability; they need not grow up to womanhood with the idea that labor is degrading; and that they must be supported in order to be genteel.” In an explicit rejection of the “true womanhood” ideal, the author declared that “[i]t is not enough that women are taught housework,” but rather, every woman “should have a profession—a sufficient knowledge of some art or science to make it the means of independence, so that she may not have to resort to a
Thus, as this author reflects, a shift was beginning to occur in the northern mindset that suggested a more assertive, self-sufficient role for women. In calling attention to the depravity and moral degradation that existed throughout the nation, the moral reform movement introduced the notion that women were victims in the current system and that to lessen the injustices within society, women needed to be their own advocates for better treatment and respect. Two years into the Civil War, A.M. Hadley wrote to her sister while she was stationed as a nurse in Tennessee, expressing almost gleefully that in caring for the wounded soldiers, she “realized, (though not for the first time,) that women have a more glorious mission…and with all their wrongs a few rights perhaps.” It is impossible to know if Hadley had read the “Wrongs of Woman” article in the Advocate, but whether her sentiment was inspired by the article’s title or purely coincidental in its similarity, Hadley confirms that the changing ideas of womanhood circulating in the North before the war had a lasting and galvanizing impact on women. The dual notion that women were wrongfully considered secondary citizens and that women themselves were wrong to accept that status gained strength in the antebellum period and inspired women to make society right by claiming their natural rights as human beings.

It must be noted that as prevalent as these ideas were, northern women did not unanimously embrace the changes and the traditional notions of womanhood were certainly still present. In response to Sarah Grimké’s editorial in 1838, for instance, a reader wrote to the Advocate expressing her concern that in her attempt to awaken women to their natural rights, Grimké had falsely interpreted the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments, she wrote, “recognize the social inferiority of woman to man,” pointing out that “[t]hy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee,’ is not equivocal language.” She asserted that God
appointed “the supremacy of man in the social and domestic circle, but g[ave] to woman as an equivalent, an influence which is almost unbounded.” Therefore, in a similar vein as the southern opinions expressed in the Messenger, she argued that the important matter is the “duties of women, rather than their rights,” and that women should fulfill the important responsibilities they have within their “appropriate sphere.”

There are certainly other instances of northern women advocating for the maintenance of the “true woman” ideal, which indicates that the situation cannot be oversimplified as the North favored reform and the South did not. However, the fact that certain ideas were circulating in the North and that the possibility of progress and reform was even open to discussion was hugely significant. For the moral reform activists, and arguably also for women who did not participate but were simply exposed to the progressive ideas, the movement created a sense of purpose and dedication to causes larger than their individual homes and families that eventually influenced the mindset with which they embraced the war cause.

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Although the variables were many, one possible explanation of why the North and South cultivated regionally specific ideologies about gender had to do with their unique responses to the evangelical Second Great Awakening that accompanied the Market Revolution. As the economic effects of the Market Revolution unfolded throughout the nation, a religious revival emerged simultaneously as a way for Americans to wrestle with the cultural and moral implications of the rapidly changing society. This rise of evangelical Protestantism, known as the Second Great Awakening, “suffused most areas of the United States,” helping to ease the social anxiety surrounding the growing inequality and the internal ethical conflicts inherent in the expansion of a capitalist economy. Unsurprisingly, because the effects of the Market
Revolution manifested themselves differently in the North and the South, the Second Great Awakening elicited distinct intellectual responses from and resulted in contrary implementation of its doctrines in the two regions. The middle-class in both the North and the South accepted the movement wholeheartedly, but while the former used it to pinpoint society’s decline in moral standards and initiate reform to restore social cohesion, the latter manipulated it to justify and preserve the well-established but highly controversial southern institution of slavery.

When the Second Great Awakening swept through the nation, many white middle-class Northerners fully embraced the movement as a way to ameliorate the growing moral decay and social injustice that the shift to a market economy had generated, especially grasping onto the tenets of the perfectibility of the individual and the universality of salvation. As historian John Thomas describes it, perfectibility was the “essentially religious notion of the individual as a ‘reservoir’ of possibilities.” This idea, that anyone was capable of self-improvement, implied that even the most degraded individual could correct his immoral character and make a positive contribution to society. For Northerners who feared the negative consequences of the increasingly corrupt society, “the progress of the country…depend[ed] upon the regeneration of the individual and the contagion of example.” One of the essential virtues upheld in the northern “belief in the perfectibility of human beings” was the universality of salvation and the subsequent rejection of determinism. As Thomas writes, American theology shifted during the Second Great Awakening to adopt the notion that “sin was voluntary” and “could be reduced to the selfish preferences of individuals and social evils, in turn, to collective sins.” By choosing not to sin themselves, individuals could then uplift society and use their “potential powers for good.” Thus, perfectibility and the potential of the individual to eradicate sin were notions that won wide appeal in the North, as they clearly renewed Northerners’ hopes that they could avoid
the seemingly inevitable breakdown in the moral health of society. Evidently, by offering an apparent antidote to the growing moral decay inherent in the increasing economic disparities in society, the Second Great Awakening blunted the effects of the Market Revolution for white middle-class Northerners.

The enduring impact of the Second Great Awakening gave rise to a handful of reform movements in the North that all centered around the principal of perfectibility and the improvement of society. As John Thomas writes, “evangelicals…organized voluntary benevolent associations to strengthen the Christian character of Americans and save the country from…ruin.”\(^{\text{iv}}\)

Out of this “revival of piety and morals in the individual”\(^{\text{vii}}\) emerged the abolition movement, which “insisted that slavery constituted a flat denial of perfectibility to both Negroes and whites.”\(^{\text{viii}}\)

In line with the perfectionist ideology, abolitionists believed that in order to destroy slavery, Americans had to recognize it as sin, and then subsequently learn to stop sinning. William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of an abolitionist paper, The Liberator, wrote that “there can be no discrimination with God or man”\(^{\text{ix}}\) and that ending slavery “is not a mere question of political action but one of high moral duty.”\(^{\text{x}}\)

And as Harry Watson remarks on the subject, “reformers urged slaveholders to abandon the sin of bondage just as they urged alcoholics to abandon the sin of drink.”\(^{\text{xii}}\)

Clearly, evangelical Northerners found themselves unable and unwilling to reconcile the dehumanizing treatment of slaves with the ideals of the Second Great Awakening. As previously discussed in this chapter, abolition was only one cause that moral reform championed, but the overall impulse of perfectibility in the North inspired the belief that social injustice and oppression for all groups had to be eradicated to preserve the morality and virtue of the republic.
On a certain level, the Second Great Awakening greatly appealed to middle-class Southerners as well as their Northern counterparts, as evangelicalism “served the specific needs of a slave society” by providing a sense of security amid the contradictions of living as slaveholders. As James Oakes writes, the “slaveholding middle-class was strongly attracted to evangelical Protestantism” They upheld the principle of Divine Providence, believing that God controlled the world and that accepting Christ was the only way to escape the degradation caused by man’s sinfulness. They thus encouraged the moral and religious training of their children, and welcomed churches and camp meetings because they provided a sense of community for the often isolated plantation owners. According to Oakes, slaveholders used evangelicalism to “deny the world around them” and to show “evidence of their high moral virtue through public declarations of spiritual rebirth.” When faced with criticism that slavery was sinful and immoral, therefore, Southern slaveholders could advance their religious convictions in an attempt to prove that they had God on their side.

On the other hand, the Second Great Awakening generated an inescapable sense of ambivalence and inner-conflict in slaveholders because so many tenets of evangelicalism were fundamentally irreconcilable with the practice of slavery. As part of the “southern gospel of prosperity,” Oakes writes, the slaveholding middle-class placed great emphasis on material advancement, individual achievement, and the “avid pursuit of wealth.” Slaveholders also articulated a racist defense of slavery, perceiving blacks as animals, “inferior to the white man,” and in natural subordination to him. As a result, the “soothing message of evangelicalism came at great cost to the slaveholders’ psychological security” because “its implicit egalitarianism and explicit rejection of materialism” forced them to live in contradiction to the religious values they upheld. The personal and moral conflicts intrinsic to the daily lives of
many Southerners highlight that it was in fact exceedingly difficult to be both a successful slaveholder and an honest Christian.

By contrast to the reform movements in the North, the lasting effects of the Second Great Awakening on Southern slaveholders was to alter evangelicalism to suit their economic interests and assuage their internal anxiety by interpreting Christianity as a justification for slavery, rather than a condemnation of it. Harry Watson points out that unsurprisingly, “Southern slaveholders were instantly hostile to the new abolitionist movement,” and in line with their efforts to suppress it, they “view[ed] slavery as a providential institution for the conversion of the African race and the creation of a superior Christian civilization led by the master class.” In his work on religion in the South, Donald Mathews writes that slaveholders had a “Mission to Slaves,” the main objective of which was “to convince slaves that whites had the slaves’ best interests at heart.” Slaveholders believed that by teaching them the gospel, they were “helping servants to understand themselves better” and to receive God’s love by accepting their “station in life.” In order to legitimize this “slaveholding ethic,” Mathews argues that slaveholders embarked on a “back-to-the-Bible crusade” to diminish the perception of slavery as immoral and evil.

A so-called “crusade,” this specific form of biblical literalism grew out of the Second Great Awakening in the South and became a central component of the Southern defense of slavery. This interpretation of Christianity supported a literal reading of the Bible, holding that “God had sanctioned slavery among the ancient Hebrews and had permitted it among primitive Christians,” thus making it “the appropriate government for a degraded and inferior race.” Exemplifying this justification, Southerner James Henry Hammond wrote in a letter to an English abolitionist that “it is impossible to suppose that slavery is contrary to the will of God,”
and that it is “not only not a sin, but especially commanded by God.”\textsuperscript{xxv} This biblical proslavery argument, Mathews writes, was “a way for southern Evangelicals to escape the things which tormented them”\textsuperscript{xxvi} because it rendered slaveholding “not merely a permissible act, but a positive, Christian responsibility.”\textsuperscript{xxvii} For Southern evangelicals, this “deference to the Bible” provided overwhelming proof that slavery was a God-ordained, Christian obligation because the Bible itself justified the institution. Thus, Southern slaveholders embraced the initial impulse toward evangelicalism, but then manipulated it in order to maintain the appearance of a virtuous society while still preserving the lifestyle on which they were economically dependent.

Examining the impact of the Second Great Awakening in the differing contexts of the North and South reveals how significant the movement was in shaping the antebellum period and the turbulent years that followed. Perfectibility and the universality of salvation in the North contrasted the biblical literalism in the South, as the two regions extracted the particular elements of the movement’s ideology that would allow them to preserve their own cultural understandings of society. Harry Watson argues that “the evangelical impulse in the North and the South…pointed in opposite directions and fueled a tendency to sectional confrontation as the antebellum period continued.”\textsuperscript{xxviii} As Watson aptly suggests, the inevitable and enduring implication of the Second Great Awakening was to establish and hence help solidify the fundamental differences between the North and the South that ultimately led to sectional conflict and the crisis of the Civil War. In no way was this impact more clearly felt than in the consequences of the different social ideologies on women.

In the North, the notions of perfectibility and universal salvation gave women an individual sense of purpose that encouraged them to try to be useful and make a positive difference in society. Pennsylvanian Rachel Corman wrote repeatedly in her journal about her
religious calling and her inspiration to improve herself before God. In a series of entries in the spring of 1859, she declared, “I cannot bear the idea of being a mere blank in this world but if Christ help me not I shall not be able to accomplish anything,””xxxix “I desire to be of some use,””cxxx and “I often feel that I desire very much to be entirely given up to God. I want to do some good….,””cxxxi Corman’s religious inclinations clearly compelled her to want to do something “good” for society and have a meaningful, concrete impact during her lifetime. She appeared to feel a higher purpose than her own life and, hardly ever referring to her own family’s wants or needs, she focused more on making herself useful to the world at large. This attitude reflects the general response in the North to the Second Great Awakening and suggests that the message of individual perfectibility applied to both sexes, requiring both men and women to give of themselves to achieve salvation. Just over a year before the hostilities broke out and the war disrupted everything, Rachel found her calling as teacher. She confided in her journal that “My leaving home, and being brought here to teach this school seems to me truly providential and it seems to me that there must be some design in it all,” indicating that her “desire to be a true whole hearted christian” inspired her to leave her comfort zone at home to pursue her higher purpose.”cxxxii She felt that “[her] position as teacher [wa]s a very responsible one, and truly [she] need[ed] help from above to perform [her] duties rightly,””cxxxiii demonstrating again that the northern interpretation of Christianity filled women with the desire and obligation to seek opportunities to spread their Christian influence and to make a difference in society.

Not only did northern women express their “desire to be of some use,” but the North evidently accepted the idea that women could and should spread the notions of perfectibility and salvation, or else women likely would not have been propelled into moral reform activism to the extent that they were. In one example of northern women’s initiative, a group of New York
women formed the Ladies’ Christian Association in 1858 “for the purpose of encouraging the Christian women…in New-York to unite their efforts to do good among their own sex.”

The goals of the Association were twofold: “First, to provide, at a moderate price, a home for unprotected young women; and secondly, to throw around them a Christian influence” through family worship, Bible classes, prayer meetings, etc.… Through these efforts, the Ladies hoped to fulfill “their first duty to seek the advancement of active piety in their own hearts; and, secondly, they shall strive to interest others in religious duties.” As these statements in their 1860 Annual Report suggest, the women of the Ladies’ Christian Association sought to establish a society that would serve the need for moral reform by getting depraved and underprivileged women off the streets of New York while simultaneously fulfilling their own personal obligation to serve as Christian examples. Significantly, these women acknowledged that they had a specific responsibility to help other women, indicating that they first recognized the social injustice that women suffered and then took the initiative to actively do something about it rather than simply complaining about it, or worse, continuing to ignore it. There is a clear connection between the Second Great Awakening and this moral obligation and sense of purpose in the North, and because of the emphasis on perfectibility and personal accountability, northern women were able to step into more public roles as a means of fulfilling their Christian duties to society.

With this ideology in place before the war, northern women were arguably in a better position to embrace the wartime challenges that required them to rely more on themselves than ever before. Since they were integral to the moral reform movement, northern women had already begun to interact with society on a more personal, individual level and were thus able to start rethinking their traditional roles before the war even began. In this regard, viewing the
experience of northern women at the beginning and at the end of the war suggests an overall trend of continuity. In the details of individual experiences, the story of northern women becomes more complicated, as signs of change on a personal level were certainly evident. In general terms, however, northern women largely maintained the same attitudes and increasingly saw themselves as more assertive, independent citizens of the Union.

In stark contrast, southern women were crucial to the southern ideology but in a radically different way. As slavery became more critical to southerners' lifestyle and sense of wellbeing, women were increasingly entrenched in the social order as objects of the white male patriarchal system. Slaves and women alike were subordinate to their white masters and husbands, and consequently, the identity of southern women was largely defined by their submission and dependence. To understand the transformation that southern women underwent over the course of the Civil War, this connection to slavery must be explained.

To evaluate how the Civil War affected white southern women’s identity requires an understanding of its origins in both women’s subordinate relation to white men and their superior relation to slaves as members of the white ruling class. In her work *Within the Plantation Household*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that “southern culture reflected and reinforced [that] women were subordinate to men,” but “[i]n return [for certain limitations], they gained protection against their weakness…and an unchallenged status as ruling ladies.” Thus they accepted their subordination as a gender in exchange for privilege as a race and class. Their privilege as the ruling class was necessarily contingent on the institution of slavery, which expressed white male supremacy through the southern ideology of paternalism. In his work *Soul by Soul*, Walter Johnson examines what he views as the fantasies of paternalism, positing that “it was a way of imagining, describing, and justifying slavery rather than a direct reflection of
underlying social relations." For Johnson, the reality of the southern social order was ancillary to the imagined benevolent relationship between master and slave that paternalism generated, for the latter is what informed white southern identity. Furthermore, paternalism was central not only to white males’ identities but also to their female counterparts. Because paternalism served as both “the most important instrument of race control…and to institutionalize the subordination of white women,” one would assume that abolishing slavery would have liberated white women from the bonds of race and gender conventions. However, as will be discussed in the last chapter of this study, many women seemed to regret the end of slavery because it destroyed their privileged status and with it, their sense of womanhood. Thus, part of the crisis southern women faced over the course of the war was reconciling their past and future identities, because although their old notion of the social order subordinated them as a gender, it gave them a sense of security and certainty that they lost after the war.

Because “the self came wrapped in gender, and gender wrapped in class and race” as Fox-Genovese asserts, slaveholding women developed their identity within the framework of white gender conventions that, unlike in the North, encouraged southern women to remain at home and cultivate their roles as mothers and wives. In letters to her grandchildren, Mary Norcott Bryan described many memories of her youth that glorified the lifestyle of the plantation mistress and promoted “the ideal of the southern lady as gracious, fragile, and deferential to the men upon whose protection she depended.” Bryan reminisced that when “My school days ended, I became a young lady. I was so happy, the world was so beautiful…Life held nothing but roses and sunshine for me.” For her, the concept of happiness was necessarily linked to her status as a lady, privileged and comfortable in her social role. Belle Kearney wrote in her memoirs years after the war that for a woman of the Old South, “Marriage was the ultimatum of
her existence…When the holy estate had been entered, women glided gracefully into the position of the most honored occupant of the home and kept their trust faithfully, making devoted wives and worshipful mothers. As Southerner Louisa McCord believed similarly, “marriage constituted the bedrock of adult women’s natural and, especially, their social identities,” confirming that marriage and motherhood were essential to a woman’s happiness and to fulfilling her official role in society. Unlike in the North, where women internalized the responsibility of actively influencing society as champions of religion and moral reform, southern women were raised to believe that their demonstration of republican virtues and morality should be confined to their own homes. That is not to say that women did not have responsibilities in society, but their duties were grounded in the household and displayed “a restrained elegance that simultaneously betokened internalized self-control and solid male protection.”

It is important to acknowledge that there were some exceptions to this prevailing notion of southern womanhood, but even in their rejection of their subordination, southern women recognized that their identities were predicated on the existence of slavery and white male supremacy. Elizabeth Lyle Saxon confessed in her journal that “Southern in every vein and fiber of being though I was, I gloried in the unflinching courage shown by [abolitionists] Wendell Phillips and Henry Ward Beecher…for I saw slavery in its bearing upon my sex. I saw that it teemed with injustice and shame to all womankind, and I hated it.” In a similar display of resentment, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas wrote that “[a] woman myself, I can sympathise with my sex wether white or black,” and that “Southern women are I believe all at heart abolitionists.” Although they present an unusual exception to the typical beliefs southern women expressed (at least publicly), Saxon and Thomas underscore the degree to which gender
and slavery were inextricably linked in the antebellum southern social order. Their outspoken resentment of it may have been atypical, but their attitudes confirm that the oppressive bonds of slavery had a similar effect on southern women, as both women and slaves occupied a dependent, subordinate position in the patriarchal social order, under the ownership and dominion of their white male rulers.

Thus, because of their different understandings of religion and the unique effect of slavery on southern identity, the North and South were not only positioned to clash ideologically on the eve of the Civil War, but women were especially set up to experience the war differently because of their divergent antebellum perceptions and expectations of their role in society. While war wreaked universal havoc on people’s lives, northern women were arguably better prepared to embrace the challenges and increased demands of the conflict because they entered the war with the experience of moral reform and an interpretation of religion that held them personally accountable to a higher purpose and thus empowered them to take individual responsibility for themselves and the welfare of society. By contrast, as Drew Faust suggests, “[a]s the women who benefited most from the South’s class and racial arrangements, females in slaveholding families had the most to lose from warborn transformations.”Southern women, more so than their northern counterparts, were forced to reevaluate their fundamental understanding of womanhood when the war ruptured the gender and race conventions that had defined antebellum social relations and personal identity.

As the next three chapters reveal, southern women did in fact undergo more obvious and dramatic changes than their northern sisters because of their different perspectives and experiences before the war. Northern women faced their own obstacles but because they had already undergone a significant, progressive shift a few decades earlier, the result of their more
subtle wartime changes was a continuation of their desire to expand their roles and influence. Their differing antebellum experiences clearly separated northern and southern women on the eve of war. But through the processes of northern continuity and southern change, women’s experiences converged over the course of the war and women emerged from both sections with similarly emboldened and determined attitudes that eventually allowed them to unite as citizens and shape the course of American women’s history.
CHAPTER TWO

Beyond Southern Belles and Union Nurses: Wartime Enthusiasm and Expressions of Patriotism

Despite the significant differences in the lifestyle and attitudes that informed the North and the South before the war, women from both sides of the Mason-Dixon line displayed a similar enthusiasm at the onset of the war. They were on different sides of the fight, clearly, but the general attitude was the same: the nation was at war, and women had an obligation to support their section’s cause and their men who were fighting to defend it. In this chapter, women’s patriotic enthusiasm and wartime efforts reveal that Union and Confederate women similarly rose to the challenges and demands of the nation at war. Crucial to the understanding of their wartime participation, however, was the distinct way in which women factored into their own section’s conception of the war cause. As they were central to the Confederate cause but came in second (sometimes even third) in the Union ideology, women accepted their wartime duties from vastly different perspectives, the consequences of which would determine their responses when the initial wartime enthusiasm wore off and they were left with empty homes and unfulfilled expectations.

Early support for the war was evident in both sections, and although it was the men who geared up to fight, women rallied immediately and assertively displayed their patriotic commitment to the cause. As the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote that “the war spirit is waking us all up,”\textsuperscript{[11]} indicating the excitement that surrounded the idea of going to war to defend the Confederacy. Within the first few months of the conflict, that excitement only grew, most likely because no real suffering had begun. As Chesnut wrote at the beginning of that first summer, “no casualties yet, no real mourning,
nobody hurt. So it is all parade, fife, and fine feathers…There is no imagination here to forestall woe, and only the excitement and wild awakening form everyday stagnant life are felt.*ciii

Chesnut acknowledged that at least in the beginning, Southerners seemed nearly giddy to welcome the prospect of war as a thrilling change of pace from their normal routine. Almost frighteningly aware that the situation would likely deteriorate eventually, Chesnut wrote on July 4th, 1861, “we ought to be miserable and anxious and yet these are pleasant days. Perhaps we are unnaturally exhilarated and excited."ciii Indeed, although the realities of war would soon dash their optimism, southern women met the war as genuine patriots and with seemingly unwavering support. Kate Stone from Louisiana wrote in her journal that same July 4th that “[o]ur Cause is right and God will give us the victory;"clv firmly indicating the belief that this was the beginning of a valiant and worthy fight for Southern independence. And a few months later, Kate indicated that the initial enthusiasm was still as strong as ever, writing “[t]here is the greatest excitement throughout the country. Almost everyone is going and going at once…The whole country is awake and on the watch—think and talk only of war."clev

The same energy pervaded the North, as men prepared to leave home and Union women proved themselves ready to embrace the cause with them. Madison and Lizzie Bowler from Minnesota had just begun their courtship when the war began, and although the separation was difficult, neither questioned Madison’s eagerness to join the fight. In one of his first letters to Lizzie after joining the ranks, he wrote, “So many of my friends are going and the cause is so just, that I cannot resist going with them and for the cause,"clevi suggesting that everyone was jumping on the war bandwagon and he must as well. In the same letter, he went on to write, “The heart which prompted the words, ‘Go, if you think it your duty,’ has increased claims to my confidence and my love. I have thought of those words a thousand times since you spoke
them, revealing Lizzie’s consent and commitment to the cause as well. The fact that Lizzie shared his excitement “increased [his] confidence” and thus indicates not only that women supported the war efforts but that their excitement motivated the men and justified their leaving. Even two years into the conflict, many Union women still expressed their patriotic sentiments. Catherine Pierce wrote to her husband Taylor on numerous occasions throughout the war, emphasizing often that “I have no wish for thee to come home to stay until the work is all done that thee can do” and “I do not want thee to think I want thee to give up until the war is over unless thee gets sick so thee is not fit for duty.” Catherine’s strong opinion that Taylor must keep fighting did not necessarily mean she did not miss him or “want to see [him] and have [him] at home a little while to see to some things of [their]s. It does, however, reveal that women recognized the difference between their personal desires and their obligations, and as long as the war continued, their duty to the cause would surpass their own comforts.

Indeed, the first aspect of women’s duty in the North and South was the mere act of willingly letting their husbands and brothers leave home to fight. Ella Thomas, from Augusta, Georgia expressed the same sentiment as her northern counterpart, Catherine Pierce, writing in her journal that “Trusting to the God of Battles, I shall see my husband go, feeling that if one word of mine could keep him at home I would not utter it…” She actually questioned herself, asking “[s]hould I be willing for him to go?,” but decided “that it was his duty to go and commending him to the ‘God who maketh all things for the best,’ I determined that nothing I should say should cause him to falter.” Proving her resolve even further, when asked “if [she] was willing to allow [her] husband to go,” she replied, “Yes, since twas his duty.” Thomas clearly indicates that the notion of duty had been well inculcated into women’s minds and that at least in the beginning, they were determined to uphold that patriotic commitment. Apparently
feeling the need to reassure her husband that she had not faltered in her support, Catherine Pierce wrote “I do not want thee to be uneasy or troubled about us at home for we will get a long all right.” If women had any doubts about the duty of men to fight, they rarely expressed them openly during the first years of the conflict.

In fact, many women were proud to see their husbands go, as if their husband’s place on the battlefield bolstered their own reputations and sense of self at home. Ella Thomas wrote on July 13, 1861 “[a]nd to this company my husband belongs, holding the rank of first Lieutenant and I can write this without one wish to have him remain with me… My husband will go…I am proud to see them exhibit the noble, manly, spirit which prompts them to go.” Thomas felt her husband’s rank was impressive and by association, his position reflected well on her, which in turn may have increased her willingness to let him go. Kate Stone, when the time came for her brother to leave, wrote “we shall miss Joe greatly, but I am so glad he is going. It is his duty,” again indicating that despite the heartbreak, women were able to separate their personal attachments from the greater public interest in the war. Kate resented that “With all our relations going out to fight…other men should sit comfortably at home,” thus she felt a sense of pride and fulfillment to know that her men were doing their part.

In the most extreme cases of patriotic fervor, northern and southern women not only accepted their husband’s duty to fight, but regretted that they themselves were unable to show their commitment on the battlefield. Almost a year into the conflict, Stone wrote “How can a man rest quietly at home when battles are being fought and fields lost and won every day? I would eat my heart away were I a man at home these troublous times,” indicating her restlessness in being confined to the home front. Fellow Southerner, Frances Woolfolk Wallace, wrote indignantly in her journal that “if I were a man how quickly would I join the Southern
army and how savagely would I fight.” And in a letter to her brother, Adelaide Fowler from Massachusetts bitterly remarked that “[e]very man ought to feel willing to do something for this war and I wish it was so.” Thus both northern and southern women not only were willing to sacrifice their men on the altar of war, but they took offence at the notion that not all men were willing to rise to the challenge. This suggests that although they could not actively enlist as soldiers, women were not entirely passive in their support for the war. The feelings of restlessness and uselessness that began to emerge as women realized their relative incapacity to “fight” for their cause ultimately stirred them to patriotic action on the home front. Since they could not be on the frontlines, they chose to channel their enthusiasm for the cause within the familiar domestic sphere and in the public roles that were carefully defined for the “weaker sex.”

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Before examining the concrete ways in which women expressed their patriotic sentiments, a crucial detail must be discussed that greatly impacted and distinguished the experiences of northern and southern women. As just indicated, seemingly all women embraced the war cause with abundant enthusiasm and patriotic energy, albeit for very different causes. The different conceptions of the “cause” for the Union and the Confederacy, however, were precisely what differentiated the wartime experience for northern and southern women. In the North, the fight for the Union entailed a fight for the nation-state, to uphold the government and its Constitution and the abstract notions of democracy and liberty. For the South, however, the fight was a more personal, concrete defense of southern homes and families, because to defend the Confederate government was to defend the social order and ideals by which the Confederacy was defined. In effect, the Union was fighting for the nation, while the Confederacy was fighting to protect the home, and this difference had profound consequences on the way women
rationalized the war cause and how they responded to the realities and hardships of the war as they unfolded. The divergent notions of nation and home had an important effect on the way women thought about the war. Because southern women were at the center of the Confederate cause whereas northern women were an ancillary priority, they developed different expectations based on the attitudes of their respective men and governments, which ultimately shaped how their own attitudes evolved over the course of the war.

For northern women, arguably the greatest challenge they faced during the Civil War was accepting that they were the last priority behind God and country, and yet they were still expected to willingly make sacrifices to uphold the Union. In consenting to let their men go to war, northern women essentially had to acknowledge that they were of lesser value than the Union was to their loved ones. From the first stages of the war, Union men wrote home to their families emphasizing above all else, the importance of their duty to the country. Madison Bowler wrote to his wife, “Lizzie, you must not “scold” or think that, because I did not get to see you “I did not care to”; …Lizzie, you know that I love you; but…I believe that next to my duty to God comes my duty to my country and its suffering…” Similarly, Rhode Islander Isaac Austin Brooks wrote to his children in October of 1861, “My life here, is not very pleasant, but I submit to it because I think it is best and it is the duty of us all, to do what we can for our country…It is a glorious country, and must be preserved to our children…Remember your country is next to your God, in love, and never see it injured, or disgraced, if you have a hand, or a mind, to put forth in its defense.” As Brooks suggests, Union soldiers had an awareness of the long-term goals of the fight, defending the nation against the Confederacy now to preserve it for generations to come. Taylor Pierce wrote to his sister, Mary, in September 1864 that he would gladly keep fighting and endure the “privations” of a soldier’s life “if by so doing I could
bring peace to this unhappy country and establish a government that would protect the rights of
my children. The idea that there was a greater common interest in going to war certainly
motivated northern men, and that enthusiastic commitment to the abstract notion of the “country”
seemingly diminished their immediate sense of obligation to their own families.

That is not to say, however, that northern men did not love their families or felt no duty to
them, but rather, their duty to the nation was so powerful that it transcended even such an
important duty as husband and father. In a moving letter to his wife Sarah, Sullivan Ballou
expressed the conflict that many northern men felt, that the only thing stronger than their love for
their wives and family was their duty to their country. He wrote, “I have no misgivings about, or
lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged…I know how strongly American
Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government. Echoing the sentiments of Isaac
Brooks above, Ballou suggests that in fulfilling his duty to his nation (albeit an abstract duty), he
was fulfilling his duty to his family, by ensuring his loved ones and future generations would
have a politically stable country to live in and that their material needs would be met. He went
on to stress his love for Sarah describing it as “deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables
that nothing but Omnipotence could break.” “And yet,” he confessed, “my love of Country
comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battle
field.” Ballou expressed his love for Sarah as nearly overpowering, but his duty to his country
was strong enough to leave his loved ones behind and “lay down all [his] joys in this life, to help
maintain this Government.” Far from indicating that northern men willingly went to war without
any thought of or regret about leaving their families, Ballou confirms that it was often
devastating to leave their home and loved ones. Because the war took place hundreds of miles
away for most northern men, it required them to physically leave home but that did not mean
they were able to emotionally detach from what they left behind. As Ballou wrote to Sarah,
“never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it
will whisper your name,” indicating that while his duty was to fight for the nation, he never
wavered in his love for his wife which stayed with him until the end.

Sullivan Ballou’s now famous letter reveals in passionate and moving words how
difficult it was to separate the duty to the nation from the duty to one’s family, but many men did
not articulate their regret in such affectionate tones. Perhaps in an effort to convince themselves
they had made the right choice, northern men often justified their decision to leave home rather
than convincing their wives, as Ballou did, that they still loved them. Samuel Cormany, who left
his wife and daughter in Pennsylvania to become a soldier, wrote in his journal on June 24, 1862
that he was prepared to enlist because “our country needed me—as a loyal son—to step out in
her defence, and for her perpetuation—and so the protection of what is nearest and dearest to
Every Man.” He acknowledged a few months into fighting that “I do think so much about
my Rachel—and pussy (Cora) meseems I must see her soon, but I don’t must…I am trying to
become a more devoted Christian, a better Man—and the best Soldier I am capable of becoming,
and to become and be either and all does not depend on seeing my wife and baby very often just
now.” Despite missing his wife and daughter, Samuel’s priorities were clear and he was not
willing to undermine his efforts for his country simply to spend time with his family. Similarly,
Madison Bowler recognized in the middle of the war that “…my duty to my country requir[es]
me to neglect my duty toward my family,” but that did not change his feelings that his
present duty was as a soldier, not as a husband or father.

The correspondence between Taylor and Catherine Pierce especially demonstrates the
lengths to which Union men went to make it clear to their wives that their commitment to the
country surpassed their obligation to their families without necessarily undermining their love for them. In his letters, Taylor routinely expressed his love for Catherine before ultimately declaring that his duty to fight took priority. In August 1862, he wrote “although you know that I love you and the children as well a man can and will probably have more concern for your present welfare than most men yet your future prosperity is of greater importance than anything else in this world. And if I had any choice I would not come back now...”  He appears genuine in his concern for her and their children, which suggests that as with many other Union men, Taylor considered leaving his family to fight for the country to be in his wife’s best interest. Similarly, he wrote one month later that “It seems to me that my love for you all has increased since I left you but I know it is my duty to stay here and try and be one of the many that God has raised to put down this rebellion.” Taylor’s sentiments reveal that northern men loved their wives and families, but they were committed to the belief that their duty to the nation came first because preserving the abstract notion of the Union was the ultimate way to secure the physical and material wellbeing of their families. Women put up with coming second, then, not because they were loved less, but rather because the duty to the nation transcended and encompassed love and duty to family.

As citizens of the Union that their men were fighting to protect, northern women were expected to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the fight, which almost always meant sacrificing their men as soldiers. Not only did they have to give them up, but they were supposed to accept the fact that their men consciously and willingly chose to leave them. How were northern women supposed to support the Union cause then, when the “cause” did not support them? Northern women struggled with that question and how to reconcile their new patriotic identity with their familiar identity as mothers and wives. They were expected to make
sacrifices, and yet they were made to feel unneeded and secondary by their own loved ones. As the war progressed, that identity crisis informed the way they thought about themselves and the role they should play in the nation, motivating some to take control while greatly discouraging others.

Southern women approached the war from a radically different perspective, as the Confederate cause was essentially as much a fight for southern women as it was for an independent Confederate government. Unlike their northern sisters, who had to accept coming second (or even third after God in some cases) to the nation, southern women were celebrated as a crucial tenet of the Confederate ideology, as they always had been, and were explicitly the focus of what southern men were defending. Ella Thomas recognized the important difference between the Union and Confederacy ideologies, writing in her journal in November 1861 that “[w]e lack arms & ammunition. In that respect they have the advantage over us but our men are fighting for liberty and Homes, the Federalists fighting for a name. The Union can never exist again.”\textsuperscript{clxxix} Thomas reveals that southern women were fully aware that the Confederacy placed the “home” at the center of their fight, which in effect meant that they were at the center of the fight as the moral guardians of the home. Kate Stone wrote in May 1861 that “[w]e should make a stand for our rights—and a nation fighting for its own homes and liberty cannot be overwhelmed. Our Cause is just and must prevail.”\textsuperscript{clxx} Stone further demonstrates the awareness of southern women that protecting the home was of critical importance to the Confederacy, and by extension, so was protecting southern women. At the time Stone and Thomas wrote those words, however, they were as far removed from the physical fighting as Northerners like Catherine Pierce and Rachel Corman. Although by the end of the war southern women could say that they were more physically threatened by the Union soldiers literally in their backyards,
that was not the case when the war began, which underscores the genuine ideological difference that distinguished northern and southern women as they entered the war. Southern women did not write about their homes in 1861 because they already felt a material threat to their wellbeing; rather, they believed in the home because the Confederate ideology revered the home and the women who ran it as proof of the South’s moral and social superiority. A strikingly different mentality informed southern women’s wartime attitude, therefore, as they knew they were their soldier’s top priority whereas their northern counterparts explicitly were not.

The tone of the letters Confederate men wrote to their wives often reveals a more appreciative and protective attitude towards women than many Union men seemed to express, likely because the former did not have to separate their love of home and country or make excuses for choosing one over the other. Winston Stephens, from North Florida, was especially affectionate in his letters to his wife Tivie, always underscoring that despite his obligation to fight, he longed to be at home with her. After a few months of fighting, he wrote to her, “[y]ou may think I love this life better than my quiet home with those dearer than life itself, but you are sadly mistaken it is only two things that induces me to make the sacrifices I am making. One is a duty I owe to you and the other is a duty I owe my Country…. ”\textsuperscript{cclxxi} Winston acknowledges his duty to his country, but he prioritizes his duty to her first. Although this word ordering could have been unintentional, it seems likely that it was deliberate, just as it would have been deliberate for a Union soldier to reverse the order. In a more sentimental vein, Winston wrote that “I want to get home and see you and be with you as much as possible.”\textsuperscript{cclxxii} Again, compared to the many Union men who explicitly told their wives they did not want to come home, Winston affirmed Tivie’s importance rather than belittling her. Southern men left home to defend the social order that had celebrated and protected women for generations, and although it
created hardship, southern women could appreciate the benefits of that protection and sacrifice. Indeed, Tivie’s brother, Davis Bryant, wrote to Winston while they were both soldiers, declaring “[y]ou may be sure that in any event I shall not forget that I have a Mother and sister under my protection (the boys I have no fear for) and I shall make any sacrifice for their benefit.” Southern men were not necessarily more affectionate or devoted to their women because they loved them more, but the relationship between family and home, the nation, and the war was clearly configured differently in the North and the South and subsequently informed how men interacted with their loved ones. As soldiers rationalized their reasons for joining the fight, it became clear that the Confederate objectives were more personal and immediate than the abstract and long-term goals of the Union, and the women in both sections were well aware of how they figured in the fight.

Unsurprisingly, the psychological impact of this distinction was tremendous. In a way, this distinction reflected the fundamental differences in social attitudes before the war that had already allowed northern women to step into more assertive roles while southern women for the most part had remained dependently rooted in the home. Although the more progressive perspective in the North had begun to empower women to experiment in new roles before the war, it was arguably more difficult for them to accept the Union’s wartime ideology because it diminished their value and function. Southern women, on the other hand, reached new levels of appreciation and significance within southern culture because the Confederate cause reinforced the value of women in the home. As with their northern sisters, however, southern prewar expectations and attitudes set them up for their own identity crisis, because it was one thing to feel abandoned when they were the objects worth fighting for, but it was another matter entirely
when the efforts turned out to be for naught and they were left with nothing. In many ways, then, southern women were set up to be more let down.

As the next section reveals, both northern and southern women engaged in patriotic activities, but different attitudes and motivations informed their action. Furthermore, the different conceptions of the “cause” and women’s function within them ultimately determined how women responded to the harsh realities of war and how they began to readjust their own attitudes when those realities did not match their prewar perceptions and expectations.

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During the several generations since the war, certain images of and ideas about Civil War women appeared in popular memory and have remained a common assumption in American history. For the South, Scarlett O’Hara represents the quintessential southern belle, who when faced with the trials of war, shed her dainty petticoats and took control of her family’s plantation for the sake of preserving the social order and customs that had always placed her on a pedestal. For the North, the intimidating Dorothea Dix represents the classic Union nurse, who chose work over home and family, discipline and self-sacrifice over femininity and comfort. As with any stereotype, those popular characters and their qualities are based in some fact. As always, however, the reality of Civil War women was more complicated than the contrast between the southern belles and the Union nurses. Those assumptions have taken hold for a reason, but there were many different opportunities for women during the war, many of which overlapped between the North and South, and it is crucial to recognize these nuances in women’s experiences to understand the full effect the war had on them.

For the most part, the work that women performed during the war remained recognizably female. In that regard, the Civil War did not radically change the nature of women’s work or
immediately launch them into a new era of opportunities that had previously been reserved for their male counterparts. Because so many women were left alone without any adult male relatives, however, the war gave them an unprecedented ability to interact with each other and with the state without the controlling influence of their men. On their own, they could contribute to the war efforts on a personal, individual level, without having to look to their husbands for support or approval. In this way, the Civil War began to change the way all women viewed themselves, and laid the foundation for the development of new, more independent identities that were defined by more than their roles as mothers and wives.

As a gender, women universally experienced change since they were left alone and got a taste of what it was like to be more independent. Within that broad shift in women’s own perceptions of themselves, however, northern and southern women experienced that change to a different degree. In the North, the shift was more of a continuing trend rather than a radical change. For northern women, active participation in the war efforts was a logical extension of the increasingly assertive role and influence that they had begun to embrace in the antebellum period. Southern women, on the other hand, underwent a more extreme change, as their participation as active, patriotic citizens marked a departure from their antebellum tendencies. While northern women had already begun to organize themselves within the moral reform movement before the war, southern women had remained largely disengaged from civic life. To be sure, southern women were not completely idle or isolated before the war, as the life of a Confederate woman was full of domestic and farm labor, as well as social gatherings and visits to friends and family that occupied much of her time. But with the onset of the war, southern women recognized the need for everyone to contribute to the war efforts and readily stepped into
new roles that drew them out of their own homes for the purpose of serving the greater Confederate interests.

Northern and southern women alike heard the call to duty and not only let their men go off to battle, but they responded with determination and resolve to make significant contributions to the effort. Kate Stone wrote soon after the conflict broke out, “Oh! to see and be in it all. I hate weary days of inaction. Yet what can women do but wait and suffer?” This feeling of restlessness seemed to motivate southerners like Kate as well as their northern sisters to find a way to help. Louisa May Alcott, in the first sentences of her autobiographical account of life as a Union nurse, wrote “I want to do something...Here was the will—now for the way.” With that, Alcott left home, determined to become a nurse if she could not actually join the fight. Cornelia Hancock, another northern nurse, expressed that after two years of “anxiety, woe, and endless waiting...I deliberately came to the conclusion that I, too, would go and serve my country,” underscoring again the feeling of restlessness that propelled women to actively contribute to the war efforts. Describing the state of affairs in August 1861, Mary Boykin Chesnut indicated the same desire in Richmond, Virginia, explaining “[t]hey want money, clothes, and nurses. So, as I am writing, right and left the letters fly, calling for help from the sister societies at home. Good and patriotic women at home are easily stirred to their work.” Throughout both sections, then, women not only felt an urge to make themselves useful, but they began to come together to make their impact stronger and deliver as much support to the soldiers as possible. As Chesnut wrote a year into the fight, “women will not stay at home.”

Even as the war dragged on far longer than anyone expected, many women still encouraged each other to keep up their patriotic efforts. In the North, the Advocate and Family
Guardian often published articles that directly spoke to the significance of women’s wartime engagements. In a piece entitled “A Letter to the Girls” in April 1864, the author appealed to women’s sympathies by reminding them of the hardships their “noble boys” had to suffer, and that even though “there came no call from the President for fifty or a hundred thousand girls” to fight, there was “another war waging? A fierce war with gnawing hunger and pinching want." Women must “respond nobly to the call” and “keep back the cold and hunger from many a home” by joining sewing societies and filling boxes of supplies to send to the soldiers. The unequivocal message of the article was that women must “practice self-denial,” for “[i]f [soldiers] deny themselves everything, shame on us if we cannot deny ourselves a little!” By comparing their efforts on the home front to the physical suffering of the male soldiers, the author risks undermining the importance of women’s work. This was likely a reflection, however, of the desire women had to feel needed and important, and to prove that although they performed different duties, both men and women were capable of making sacrifices and devoting themselves to the cause.

As alluded to in the Advocate, one of the most common and effective ways in which women could make themselves useful was through soldiers’ aid work. With the primary objective of providing food, clothing, and other material supplies for the soldiers, women formed aid societies that allowed them to come together to show their support for and interest in the war while simultaneously supporting each other through the anxiety and uncertainty of everyday life. As Cornelia Hancock’s cousin wrote to her midway through the war, “If I do not go myself I feel it my duty to do at home,” and the aid societies were where many women found their opportunity “to do.” Kate Stone recorded many instances of soldiers’ relief work in her journal. In July 1861, she wrote “And it is almost incredible the number of garments they have
made for the soldiers. They have been sewing only three months. She was horrified when we all acknowledged that we had not taken a stitch in the Cause. From the very beginning of the war, then, there was an element of shame in not lending one’s “busy fingers” to the efforts. Two months later, Kate and her family had taken the hint, as she wrote, “the family all were sewing and knitting all day.” Fellow southerner Elizabeth Lyle Saxon wrote that “Money had now to be raised for the soldiers, and, as usual, women had to raise a good share of it,” affirming that women quickly became a critical element in supporting the troops. “Every household,” she explained, “became a workshop and women congregated by hundreds in halls to sew for the soldiers…women that never touched a needle before knit far into the night with eyes so dim with tears they could scarcely see their needles.” Evidently, women were determined to make a positive difference during the war and would not be accused of sitting idly by while the men had to fight.

These societies existed in the North as well, and many Union soldiers acknowledged the women’s efforts in their letters home. In a letter to Lizzie in May 1862, Madison Bowler wrote, “…I forgot to refer to your new society for the relief of sick soldiers. It gives me pleasure to hear of the patriotic efforts which the ladies of the north are every where putting forth to alleviate the afflictions of those who have become prostrated by sickness while so far from home and friends, fighting for the Union. You could not, to my mind, engage in a better cause.” Similarly, Josiah B. Corban wrote to his wife in June 1863, praising her for being “the most Patriotic of women and willing to make any sacrifice in [her] power to save [their] Government from ruin.” He went on to tell her she “deserve[d] a great deal of Credit and praise for [her] courage in trying to get along with so much hard labor and extra care…since [he] left.” As these two letters reveal, the efforts women made to provide relief for the soldiers were greatly needed and rightly
appreciated. Although many women seemed motivated by their own initiative and individual resolve, it must have been somewhat validating to realize that they had successfully found a way to make themselves useful.

While the soldiers’ relief work was important in both sections, Union women took it one step further than their southern sisters with the creation of the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC). Historian Nina Silber asserts that the USSC “aimed to fill some of the gaps in the Union’s relatively weak federal apparatus,” creating a “centralized system of relief and unquestioning loyalty” to the Union. Cornelia Hancock affirmed that the USSC was a valuable organization, writing home to her mother, “[y]ou could not do better than send your box to the Sanitary Commission people for they do business just right.” As the USSC president Henry Bellows explained, the USSC was “a great scheme of practical service, which united men and women, cities and villages, distant States and Territories…animated by love for the national cause, the national soldier, and not merely by personal affection or solicitude for their own particular flesh and blood.” True to Union form, the USSC emphasized the nation over the individual family, underscoring that all efforts were to benefit the national cause, not to alleviate personal hardships. The USSC, as the large-scale version of the homegrown relief efforts around the country, highlights the shift in mentality that women had to embrace throughout the war. While northern women more explicitly owed allegiance to the nation over the home, all women found a higher purpose than their own homes and families through the relief work they did. Their overwhelming participation in aid societies reveals that women were willing to move beyond their own private spheres and enter the public domain. The sacrifices they made, regardless of how they compared to the soldiering men, encouraged them to see themselves as significant and engaged citizens, as well as devoted mothers and wives.
Another especially frequent display of women’s sacrifices during the war was practicing self-denial and avoiding material excess. “…[E]mulating the example of our Revolutionary mothers,” Ella Thomas wrote, northern and southern women deliberately denied themselves any excess and directed their wealth and resources toward the war efforts. Not to be confused with the necessary and often reluctant sale of personal luxuries once hardship struck, many women willingly gave up their material comforts to prove their commitment to the cause. Thomas wrote in her journal in the summer of 1861 that “[w]e read of one lady giving her jewels valued at 1200 dollars, of another giving her diamonds worth 600 dollars, and Susan Ravenel Jervey wrote of a fellow southern woman, “[n]o one can say she is not patriotic; she gave her three horses to the government; has burnt her five bales of cotton, worth about $7,500, and tomorrow sends off six or seven of her mules to the army.” Elizabeth Lyle Saxon referred to this display of patriotism as the “‘non-consumption’ craze, going back to homespun jeans, lye soap, etc., long before the necessity was upon us.” As Saxon suggests, women not only gave away their personal possessions, but they began making their own clothes, which as Drew Faust argues, was an effort to create economically independent southern households to strengthen the independence of the Confederate government.

This trend was not exclusively southern, as northern women also felt the need to practice self-denial. In “The Call to Loyal Women” featured in the July 1864 issue of the Advocate, the author appealed to the periodical’s primarily northern readers, writing to the “many loyal women, of influence…we are called upon to retrench, and abstain from all imported articles of luxury and adornment, that our means may be frugally husbanded for our country’s life.” The author went on to implore women to, “with enthusiasm, haste to pledge ourselves to abstain from wearing gold, and pearls, and costly attire, inspired with loyalty to the government of the United
States.” As southern women turned to homespun, northern women chose to forfeit any material indulgences to demonstrate their serious commitment to the cause. In both sections, this act of self-denial was another way by which women reevaluated their priorities during the war, expanding their perspective to include not only their own families, but the larger community to which they belonged. Furthermore, denying themselves their familiar material comforts was a conscious, personal decision that affected themselves more than any one else (as opposed to the soldiers’ relief work which directly benefited others). Thus, in so doing, northern and southern women both took another step toward a more individual, independent identity, demonstrating a level of personal accountability that had been less apparent in the male-dominated antebellum family structure.

Of course, no discussion of women’s service during the Civil War would be complete without a mention of nurses. Louisa May Alcott recorded her short but rewarding experience as a nurse, writing “I liked [nurse life], and found many things to amuse, instruct, and interest me.” She explained that “in these war times the hum drum life of Yankeedom has vanished, and the most prosaic feel some thrill of that excitement which stirs the nation’s heart, and makes its capital a camp of hospitals.” For Alcott, as many others, nursing provided a “thrill” and a more direct, visceral connection to the war. Cornelia Hancock was especially adamant in her calling to be a nurse, writing frequently to her mother and sister about how much happier she was on duty as a nurse than at home. Throughout her experience, she emphatically wrote, “I am better than I am at home,” “I feel like a new person…feel life and vigor which you well know I never felt at home,” and “I never was better in my life: certain I am in my right place.” Clearly, if Hancock and Alcott are any indication of the typical nurse’s experience, women felt
drawn to nursing because they felt “right” in an active role where they could connect to the soldiers they were helping rather than organizing relief efforts from miles away.

The effect of the nursing experience proved to be especially profound for northern women, as it clearly made them feel needed and appreciated. Cornelia Hancock, in a letter to her sister in 1864, wrote “[w]ho would not help a soldier? Everything within me does honor to them,” indicating the commitment nurses had to their soldiers. Since their own loved ones chose the nation over them, it is unsurprising that Union women found tremendous satisfaction in being with needy soldiers and seeing the grateful looks on their faces as they cared for them. Alcott revealed such feelings, writing “…more grateful than the most admiring glance, was the sight of those rows of faces, all strange to me a little while ago, now lighting up, with smiles of welcome, as I came among them, enjoying that moment heartily, with a womanly pride in their regard, a motherly affection for them all.” Quite literally, Alcott expressed a devotion to her soldiers that was akin to the love she would have for her own family. She wrote further that, “…to him, as to so many, I was the poor substitute for mother, wife, or sister, and in his eyes no stranger, but a friend.” Clearly, the role nurses played was crucial for both men and women on many levels. Men needed their female nurses to be reminded of the love and comforts of home that they missed in their lives as soldiers. Women needed to be nurses, not only to feel like they were contributing to the greater war cause, but because on a personal level, they were able to fulfill the role of mother and wife that had defined their identities for so long before the war shook them up. Especially for northerners, nursing provided a way for women to try to reconcile their former, predominantly family-oriented roles with the new, more assertive public roles that the war had fostered. They could demonstrate their commitment to the nation while simultaneously maintaining their familiar, and for many the still more natural, role as nurturer.
Although popular history seems to exclusively remember Union women in nursing roles, some southern women also chose to make their contribution by becoming nurses. Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote in her journal, “I am so glad to be a hospital nurse once more. I had excuses enough, but at heart I felt a coward and a skulker. I think I know how men feel who hire a substitute and shirk the fight. There must be no dodging of duty.” As in the North, many southern women eagerly offered to care for wounded soldiers as an opportunity for action and a means of contributing to the Confederate cause. Within the Confederacy, however, nursing was a contentious issue among public officials and medical authorities, who by and large resisted the idea of southern women becoming the new generation of Florence Nightingales. On the one hand, nursing was a natural role for women and a logical extension of what one hospital matron described as “woman’s true sphere.” On the other hand, many expressed the concern that women would assume “undue power on the wards” and that hospital work was incompatible with women’s “delicacy,” “modesty,” and “refinement.” Drew Gilpin Faust argues that this stigma attached to nursing remained in the South far longer than it did in the North, which explains why fewer southern women became nurses and if they did, why they waited until later in the war effort. Faust’s assessment is certainly well founded, as many white, well-to-do southern ladies considered the idea of becoming a hospital matron “too laborious, too indelicate for women of their social standing.” Ada Bacot, for example, declined becoming the matron of a hospital in Charlottesville after working for a year as a volunteer because, as she explained, “I was not born in the same station of life that Mrs. Rion [the departing matron] was[,] that I had never been accustomed to labour, therefore I could not undergo what she did except at the expense of comfort, pleasure & health.”
While many privileged southern ladies were willing to forego the privilege of being hospital matrons, they nevertheless assumed certain nursing duties that included many more activities than the structured role of matron. As Faust explains, “what southern women called ‘nursing,’ we might better designate as ‘hospital work,’ for it encompassed a wide variation in activities and levels of commitment.” The most widespread of these activities was hospital visiting, which included bringing soldiers delicacies, writing letters for incapacitated men and washing their faces, all informal tasks but nonetheless important in raising the morale of the wounded soldiers and allowing Confederate women to feel as though they had contributed to the cause. Thus, in spite of the resistance to it and the sometimes ambivalent feelings among women themselves about whether or not they were cut out for the job, nursing was a significant way for southern women to include themselves in the war effort and demonstrate that they were willing and eager to lend their womanly skills to the cause (even if it was to a lesser extent than their northern counterparts in this regard).

Evidently, women did not simply abandon their identities as mother and wife as a result of their patriotic efforts, but throughout the war, the expanding roles and duties of women cultivated the idea that women had the potential to exert more influence in society and consequently, could demand more respect. While southern women may have had similar thoughts, northern women explicitly and publicly articulated their increasing confidence in their periodicals. The *Advocate* featured an article in October 1864, directed “To Young Husbands,” that asked, “[b]ut I do wonder if you ever thought how much she gave up, when she became your wife? And whether you understand the responsibilities which you assumed when you became her protector?” Apparently concerned with men’s attitudes and behavior toward their wives, the author suggested that men took their women for granted and should be more aware of the
sacrifices they made as mothers and wives. *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, which had a larger readership that included many southerners, also featured empowering articles for women during the war. In October 1862, *Godey’s* ran a piece that suggested women were not only capable nurses, but should be able to become doctors, since “a woman doctor, educated after our fashion, would be about as competent as most of our modern high-pressure M.D.’s, and therefore as much entitled to the degree.” A few months later, in a more fiery appeal to female readers, *Godey’s* published an article about the need to correct the inferior education of women. The author, herself a female, wrote, “[t]here is a vast deal which women have taught men, and men have then taught the world, and which the men alone have had the credit for…But, cry some of our modern ladies, this is exactly what we wish to avoid; we can teach the world directly, and we *insist* on being allowed to do so.” The author went on to assert, “[e]ducate us like yourselves, and we shall be competent to fill the same place as you do, and discharge the same duties.”

These articles, as two examples of many, clearly illustrate the growing opinion during the war that women deserved more recognition and respect for the role they play in society. The fact that both the *Advocate* and *Godey’s* targeted mostly northern audiences confirms that for northern women, the war accelerated trends that had already emerged in the North during the antebellum period. In contrast to their southern counterparts, northern women were already prepared to embrace the expanding opportunities that the war presented and thus, their increasing assertiveness suggests continuity within the overarching change that women experienced as a result of the war.

Ultimately, both northern and southern women experienced a shift in mentality during the war because of the simple fact that they were on their own. Without the presence of their male relatives, Union and Confederate women were both able to experiment with more independent
roles, free from the limiting effect of the antebellum family structure in which the males inevitably controlled the decision-making. Where the experiences of women during the war differed significantly, however, were the perspectives with which they entered the war. Not only had progressive ideas been circulating in the North before the war, but Union women were forced to subordinate themselves to the nation once the war broke out. That combination created a specifically northern mentality that encouraged women to pursue a more assertive status in the Union that did not depend on their male relatives. Southern women, on the other hand, had been largely shielded from the idea before the war that women belonged anywhere except at home as mother and wife, so to have the protection and security of their men taken away from them forced southern women to look outside their homes for a sense of purpose. Thus, southern women embraced wartime changes out of necessity, while northern women welcomed them as the catalyst they needed to continue the progress they had already made, but the result in both sections was to broaden women’s perception of what they were capable of contributing to society. In this distinction, it becomes clear that while northern and southern women started in radically different places before the war, their experiences and, importantly, their mentalities began to converge as the war progressed. As wartime expectations and early enthusiasm gave way to harsh realities and hardships, this convergence became even more apparent, as women felt increasingly abandoned and realized they had to rely on themselves more than ever before.
CHAPTER THREE

No, No, No, a thousand times No!
Wartime Disillusionment and Reevaluations

This chapter sets out to discuss the second phase of the wartime experience, uncovering the various factors and circumstances that continued to transform the perspectives and attitudes of both northern and southern women over the course of the war. At the onset of war, southern women framed their sacrifice and struggle through the lens of their own protection, but as the reality of war ravaged their homes and lifestyles, they began to question whether or not the Confederate cause was worth losing their loved ones for. Alone on the home front, they faced extreme hardships that undermined their traditional southern notions of race and gender and thus forced them to reevaluate their own identities as individuals. For northern women, the shift was more subtle but nonetheless important for understanding the effect of the war on women in general. Northern women rallied behind the Union cause because it seemed their own value was contingent on their support of the nation. But as northern men became further entrenched in the Union ideology, women continued to lose influence and seemed to become even less appreciated. They were held more accountable to the nation as individuals, but did not receive the respect or even the acknowledgement they were due for their efforts.

This increasing disillusionment with the realities of war arguably fueled both northern and southern women to embrace more assertive roles. Women in both sections had their own, regionally specific reasons to abandon their early wartime enthusiasm, but Union and Confederate women alike seemed to grow bitter and resentful toward the expectations their respective governments had of them. As wartime realities quickly destroyed their hopes and perceptions of the useful roles they assumed during the war, women took another step closer
toward cultivating independent, individual identities that would no longer depend on or be defined by the men who had disappointed them.

From their disillusionment during the war to their coping mechanisms after defeat, southern women faced extreme physical hardships that undeniably changed their lifestyles, social attitudes, and sense of identity. Even at the beginning of the conflict, as Kate Stone wrote in May 1861, “Times [we]re already dreadfully hard” for the South and immediately, “strict economy” became “the order of the day.”\cite{Evans2023}

A year later, as conditions had already worsened, Stone remarked that “a year ago we would have considered it impossible to get on for a day without the things that we have been doing without for months.”\cite{Stone1862}

Indeed, southern women quickly learned to adapt to the realities of war for the sake of their own survival. With their men off at war and their slaves beginning to defect, southern women had to take control and rely on themselves, often for the first time in their lives, to work and provide for their families. Stone referred to her new wartime routine as the “weary treadmill of work, work, work,”\cite{Stone1863}

and reflected that “as we have been a race of haughty, indolent, and waited-on people, so now are we ready to do away with all forms and work and wait on ourselves.”\cite{Stone1864}

Julia Fisher echoed these sentiments in a slightly more bitter tone, writing in her journal, “we feel quite uncomfortable to be obliged to cook and run about in the cold.”\cite{Fisher1865}

Clearly, southern women were acutely aware of the new demands that were placed on them, not only to offer their services to the war efforts, but to take on greater responsibilities of household management than had previously been expected of them. The privileged pedestal on which white southern women were held was slowly but surely getting knocked down.

Of the many readjustments southerners had to make, the possibility of physically starving to death was unsurprisingly at the forefront of the anxieties that women harbored. Mary Boykin
Chesnut sometimes mentioned the food shortages that abounded in the South, including one occasion when they had to reuse a turkey that already been served, “pil[ing] fried oysters over [it] so skillfully that no one would ever have known that the huge bird was making his second appearance on the board.”

Julia Fisher also commented on these new but not improved conditions during the war, snidely remarking “[h]ow rich we should feel now if we had plenty of bacon—once a despised dish. Now the greatest luxury,” indicating how the war required southern women to radically lower the standards of what they were accustomed to. By the last year of the war, Chesnut conceded that “[w]ell-nigh beggars are we, for I do not know where my next meal is to come from.”

Winston Stephens illustrated this reality in a letter to his wife, Tivie, reporting to her that “Ladies… come out and beg for something to eat, and…I have to refuse them, as my men barely get enough.”

For women who were used to literally having their meals served on a silver platter, the fact that they had become beggars nearly overnight clearly jolted them out of their egocentric, privileged mentalities. On a more somber note, Elizabeth Lyle Saxon wrote that “[t]housands of children died during their second summer of actual starvation, owing to the coarseness of fare,” and she knew more than one mother who recounted with the most agonizing grief the long days of illness and the death of their darlings, for whom they were powerless to procure either medicine or suitable food.

The shortage of food went beyond simple hunger, therefore, as the inability to provide for their families when they were in desperate need made southern women feel helpless and insecure. It was one thing to personally suffer, but to see her children literally dying from starvation and illness was enough to motivate any woman to take more control.

One of the ways in which they took control was making their own clothes, because they recognized that if they did not have the money to buy anything, they would have to make do with
the resources they already had. In contrast to the willing act of selling or donating their material possessions to soldiers’ relief funds, many southern women faced the daunting prospect of forfeiting their luxuries and material comforts when the economic hardships hit. Kate Stone recorded in January 1862 that “[w]e have spent less this year than ever before. Have bought only absolute necessaries—no frills and furbelows for us. Affairs are too grave to think of dress.” By the end of that year, she wrote “[n]o one’s dresses are ever considered worn out these days—as long as they can hold together,” indicating again that southern women were forced to abandon their old standards and accept the hard realities of war, whether they liked it or not. Likewise, Mary Chesnutt called attention to the desperate measures women took to literally make the ends of clothes meet, as she writes “We had come to the end of our good clothes in three years, and now our only resource was to turn them upside down, or inside out, and in mending, darning, patching, etc.” Evidently, if southern slaveholding women had been considered privileged and materially spoiled during the antebellum period, the war surely taught them a harsh lesson that forced them to start reprioritizing what was important to them.

Beyond the physical and material strains the war placed on them, southern women underwent the psychological trauma of living in fear and isolation throughout the war. Mostly fearful of the freed slaves and Yankee raiders, Kate Stone wrote in March 1863, “the life we are leading now is a miserable, frightened one—living in constant dread of great danger, not knowing what form it may take, and utterly hopeless to protect ourselves.” When much of the antebellum southern culture had been defined by the community and protection that the patriarchal social order provided, it came as a shock to southern women when they no longer felt the close security of their male relatives or even their neighbors and friends. Many women were forced to leave their homes as refugees to less threatened parts of the South, an “exile from
friends” that Julia Fisher described as “[their] greatest trial at present.” She wrote of “feeling lonely and discouraged” since they were “so far away from Everybody and everything,” confirming that since southern women had defined their own identity in terms of protection within the southern social order, being cutoff from those social bonds deeply shook their sense of self.

Even some Northerners recognized how unprepared southern women were to have to negotiate their wartime worlds on their own. At the close of the war, Taylor Pierce acknowledged to his wife “[h]ow different their lot is from ours,” writing “[t]heir wives and mothers who have been instrumental in keeping up their hostility to the government have not only the degrading sensation of having to welcoming home a defeated traitor but have the prospect of loosing the elegant and luxurious homes and the further prospect of a life of toil and poverty for which the past education and customs has illy prepared them.” Clearly it was no secret that the war had wreaked havoc on southern women’s lives to a degree that northern women could not comprehend. They suffered from material shortages and physical burdens, as well as the psychological effects of losing everything when they had been used to always receiving everything they wanted.

All of these factors contributed to a growing feeling of disillusionment that indicated not only how much they had already changed during the war, but that the harsh realities of war would make it nearly impossible to reverse the transformation. After displaying unquestioning loyalty to and enthusiasm for the Confederate cause at the onset of the war, southern women lost faith and withdrew their support for the fight as they realized how futile their sacrifices were. Mary Chesnut’s confessions in her journal reveal the gradual decline in Confederate women’s patriotic commitments, beginning as early as July 1861 when she wrote, “[n]ow every day we
grow weaker and they grow stronger. The next summer, she reflected on the disheartening effect the war had already had on her fellow women, lamenting that “[g]rief constant anxiety kill nearly as many women at home as men are killed on the battlefield. By the summer of 1865, Chesnutt had given up completely, imploring in her journal, “[i]s anything worth it—this fearful sacrifice, this awful penalty we pay for war? Susan Ravenel Jervey even lost “the heart to write” in her journal by the end, as she had “hoped against hope” but realized “all [wa]s over!” Clearly over the course of the war, the harsh realities quickly outweighed the optimistic expectations southern women had of the Confederate cause.

Feelings of frustration with the Confederacy resulted in a striking change of heart in southern women, as they began to see the disconnect between the ideal of protecting the Confederate social order and the reality of suffering and insecurity. Women who found it shameful when men tried to shirk their duty as soldiers in the beginning of the war eventually became unwilling to sacrifice their husbands to the cause, adamant that their efforts were useless and should be redirected to protecting their own homes and families. Ella Thomas clearly exemplified this shift in mentality, writing that “[w]hile [her husband] was contented, and satisfied with camp life and soldier’s fare [she] never should have been the woman to have urged him to come home,” but after several months of “injustice”, she told him to come home, saying “that I would most heartily oppose his joining again unless the enemy were at our doors.” When the war still waged on two years later, Thomas emphatically exclaimed, “Am I willing to give my husband to gain Atlanta for the Confederacy? No, No, No, a thousand times No!” As Thomas unequivocally suggests, southern women did not remain loyal patriots with unswerving commitment to the Confederate cause that affirmed their antebellum sense of identity. Rather, the hardships of war led women to realize that their patriotism was meaningless
in fulfilling the Confederate promise of protection. “Country glory and patriotism are great things,” Thomas wrote in 1865, “but to the bereaved hearts of [southern mothers], each moaning for the death of their first born, what bitter mockery there must be in the words.” Suffering and grief had replaced hope and patriotism, and it forced southern women to reevaluate their own priorities.

Many women openly expressed their disillusionment with the Confederacy, not only waning in their patriotism, but explicitly giving up on the idea of southern independence. Writing in a clear defeatist voice, Tivie Stephens told her husband Winston “do give up, come home… the State will be conquered any how, so give up now as many others have had to do.” She continued in a berating tone, “[y]ou need not talk of the defence of your home and country for you cannot defend them, they are too far gone now, so give up before it is too late… I have tried to write in good spirits to you, for I had some hopes of our State’s being saved, but now all that hope is gone, I tell you I am miserable, and I say come to me, and let us bear what comes together.” Tivie, as did many other women in her position, stopped encouraging her husband to fight and demanded he “give up.” Before the hostilities began, southern women could easily commit to the idea of letting their husbands go because in the prewar Confederate rhetoric, women felt confident that the fight for the government was ultimately a fight for their own protection. Once it became clear that the government could not protect them, however, southern women began to reveal an increasing sense of self-interest and the need to ensure their own protection since their men had failed at what they promised. Indeed, Tivie wrote to Winston repeatedly with the same message that his duty should be to her and her alone. She asserted that it “seems to me we had as well live together under Lincoln’s Government than to live separate most of the time under this Government,” and a few months later, “I think we had better
give up, and have our husbands with us...[since it] will be much harder when we are subdued after our husbands are killed." Focusing on her own personal security and well-being, Tivie reflects the shift in southern women’s mentalities as they realized that since their support of the Confederacy was in vain, they needed to start making demands that would actually guarantee their protection.

In addition to rejecting the idea of continued fighting at the expense of their own safety and comforts, southern women may have become discouraged by their own patriotic efforts which continued to conflict with the notion of womanhood that southerners glorified. Elizabeth Lyle Saxon recounts a story during the war, when several southern girls had to wear homespun dresses to a ball instead of the satin and lace they were used to. After dancing with the girls, a young man pulled Saxon aside and asked, “Miss Lizzie, what in heaven’s name is it that smells so awfully about those girls?” In a clever response, Saxon replied, “Why, it is a new perfume they are using,” I said. “They call it patriotism; I call it indigo dye.” To that, the man said “Oh...it is the dresses; why didn’t they wash them? It is a horrid smell.” Saxon told the girls what he had said, and mortified (not to mention blue around the necks from the leaking dye of the homespun creations), the girls “hardly allowed the word homespun ever to be uttered to them until we really had to make it at home and wear it.” It is easy to imagine how moments of humiliation such as the one Saxon described would have disheartened southern women. Clearly, it was hardly proper for elite southern ladies to appear at a public event wearing smelly, stained, homemade clothes. But in the context of war, homespun clothing was not only a patriotic gesture, but an economic necessity that southern women could not avoid. This contradiction further illustrates the difficulty southern women faced in reconciling their antebellum notions of womanhood with their new wartime demands as individuals. In having to adjust to harsh
physical and economic realities, southern women were forced to reevaluate their own identities and what they were willing to give up in exchange for their continued privileged position in southern society. Whether or not they were conscious of the shift, they began to prioritize themselves over the interests of their men and government, which had lasting consequences on the ways in which they attempted to reconstruct their lives after the final defeat.

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While southern women struggled to make sense of their new roles and attitudes the war had fostered, northern women seemed miles away from the conflict, both physically and psychologically. It is certainly true that northern women did not endure the same physical suffering during the war since, with the exception of women in a few border-states, they were removed from the actual fighting. This fact has led to the assumption that overall, the burden of northern women was easier to bear than their southern counterparts, who were cold, starving, and literally viewing death in their backyards. Catherine Pierce reassured her husband Taylor periodically that she “g[o]t along finely” at home, telling him “[w]e have all we want or that we really need but thy presents to make us perfectly happy.”\(^{celi}\) She wrote to him in July 1863 that they were having “a very pleasant summer so far,” complaining only about “a few very warm days,” and told him about “a very nice celebration on the fairground” she had attended.\(^{celi}\) This quick glimpse into northern life on the home front reveals an immediate contrast between the northern and southern experience. While southern women were starving and destitute, northern women seemed to go about their daily routines materially unaffected by the war. Indeed, Catherine and Taylor agreed that they “could not help but feel thankful to the giver of all good that [they had] pleny”\(^{celi\text{III}}\) in the North, “for where there is plenty there must be some comfort.”\(^{celi\text{IV}}\)
Southern women were bitterly aware of the relatively comfortable situation of their northern counterparts. As Kate Stone wrote, “[t]he North is more prosperous than ever before. Traveling through the states, one would hardly know there was a war going on. How different from our own suffering country.” From all outward appearances, Northerners did not feel “the horrors of war” nor did they “know the bitterness of defeat,” which arguably could have enabled them to continue smoothly along the same trend toward independence while their southern sisters considered more assertive roles only as a product of tumultuous change.

Yes, northern and southern women suffered from different physical trials during the war as a factor of geography, but to claim that northern women’s lives were relatively uninterrupted during the war grossly undermines and trivializes their experience. The common assumption is that northern women emerged relatively unscathed from the war and were able to transition smoothly from their wartime independence to their increasing activism in the years that followed. The untold story, however, reveals that although they may have been a safe distance away from the fighting, many northern women underwent their own period of disillusionment as the war dragged on. While some vocal and assertive women captured the public’s attention, many women privately expressed the anxieties and distress that wartime separation caused. Moreover, while northern women were expected to make sacrifices for the nation, they received minimal appreciation and gratitude for their efforts. Not only did Union men keep rejecting their homes in support of the nation, but as northern women succeeded in developing the more autonomous identities they needed to survive without their men, they received criticism for their lack of patriotic enthusiasm.

These several blows to northern women’s egos arguably increased their motivation to become more independent. The overarching trend of continuity in the North would not have
been possible without the setbacks and discouragement that women encountered during the war. In a different way than in the South, the war changed northern women by revealing the limitations that gender conventions still placed on them. Their wartime frustrations reinforced the unfair treatment and ingratitude women felt, propelling northern women to demand more respect and control.

Although they experienced the war from a different vantage point than their southern counterparts, northern women suffered from similar anxieties about the separation that made them acutely aware of how much their sense of well-being depended on their male loved ones. A.C. Hinckley from Boston wrote to her son Henry in May 1861, lamenting “[w]e have distress & suffering on every side here. Mothers & sisters haunting the neighboring towns & the State & common for their sons & brothers who have enlisted.” Similarly, Diana Phillips from Maine wrote to her husband that “I cant help thinking about your being sick, I am afraid you dont let me know how sick your are be sure and come home before you are sick you cant, for I dont know what I should do if you did not.” As both of these women reveal, northern women experienced their own suffering from the uncertainty and fear that the war generated. Moreover, for all the talk of northern women becoming more assertive and independent before the war even began, statements like those of Diana Phillips suggest that many northern women had not separated their own sense of identity from their husbands. Although progressive ideas existed in the North and had begun to pull women out of their traditional roles, northern women had not universally become zealous feminists and overthrown the male-dominated social order over night.

Rather, when faced with the reality of not having male support, some northern women found themselves questioning their ability to actually support themselves. Rachel Cormany, who
confessed in her journal when her husband enlisted that “[i]t went hard to see him go. for he is
more than life to me,”

was never able to come to terms with her husband’s absence and
came almost dysfunctional without him. As she wrote in April 1864, “I feel so worried about
my husband—I feel like sitting & weeping all the time. I cannot work.” Apparently debilitated
by her anxiety for Samuel, Rachel also attributed feeling “depressed” to the fact that she was
“out of money—flour—wood—potatoes--& in fact out of nearly everything.” She exclaimed,
“[j]ust now I am tired of living” and “[i]f I only know that my husbands life would be spared I
could rest easy.”

In several ways, Rachel’s sentiments complicate the typical understanding
of northern women’s wartime experience by revealing certain similarities to their southern
sisters’. First, as the Corman’y’s situation suggests, northern families did not escape untouched
from the economic burdens of war. Perhaps not to the same extent as in the South, but people
felt the financial pinch in the North as well, and it did not help matters that the principle
breadwinners were fighting battles instead of going to work. Secondly, if Rachel Corman’y is
any indication of other northerner’s experience, some Union women expressed the same
helplessness that Confederate women felt when their men enlisted and left sole responsibility of
the family and household in women’s hands. Margaret Ball of New York confessed in
November 1862 that she felt “quite inadequate to the task” of “superintending the affairs of a
family.”

These observations are crucial to take into account, as they indicate that the
experience of women during the Civil War was neither universal nor easily divided along
sectional lines. The fact that some northern women felt equally discouraged and hopeless during
the war demonstrates that even within the Union, experiences of women differed and the rate of
change was uneven and often based on individual circumstance.
Unlike southern women, however, who could rationalize their feelings of helplessness and abandonment in terms of their own protection and wellbeing, northern women’s anxieties were compounded by the fact that their men expressed little recognition of their suffering or appreciation for their sacrifices. Madison Bowler made it excessively clear to his wife Lizzie that he had no desire to return to her so long as he could serve his country. In April 1862, he wrote “Lizzie, I am sorry you are so lonely without me…I do not wish, however, to leave the army while I am of service to the country.”\footnote{eckii} A year later, responding to increased insistence from Lizzie that he return whether the war ends or not, he wrote, “[y]ou must not set your heart on anything of that kind. I don’t want to go home until the war is over.”\footnote{eckiii} Again in September 1864, he told Lizzie, “I do not wish to be compelled to leave the army until I can see fully and clearly that we have a country in which we can live in peace and security—an undivided country and a good government.”\footnote{eckiv} Whether or not it was his intention to be insensitive to Lizzie’s desires to have him at home, Madison reinforced the common trend in Union ideology that the home and family were meaningless without “a good government” to live under.

Madison also made it clear that even though he refused to come home, he did not have full faith in Lizzie to make responsible decisions without him. In March 1862, he wrote “i sent that money for you to use for yourself, and if you do not do it I guess I will keep it here and spend it for some useless thing or other, so you had better do as I desired you to.”\footnote{eckv} Madison not only repeatedly rejected Lizzie in favor of the Union, but to add insult to injury, he ordered her around from miles away, implying that she could not be trusted to make decisions on her own. This indicates that in addition to feeling helpless and alone, northern women received conflicting messages about what their wartime role should be. On the one hand, they were expected to subordinate themselves to the nation while simultaneously assuming greater
responsibilities at home and proving themselves devoted patriots on the national level. On the other hand, although they refused to remain at home, Union men seemed to assume that women were not capable of being independent in their absence, thus reinforcing notions of a male-dominated social order even while women were being held more accountable to the nation as individual citizens.

This contradiction created a crisis of confidence in northern women that was rooted in the fact that it was seemingly impossible to reconcile both the commitment to defend the nation and to preserve the home and family. Unlike women in the South, who believed (at least initially) that the defense of the Confederacy and the home was one and the same, northern women realized increasingly during the war that their role at home was less important and not the main focus of obligation for their men or the national government. This harsh perspective evidently knocked them down and may have contributed to the sense of anxiety and loneliness that they felt throughout the war. But more importantly, the rejection northern women felt ultimately galvanized many of them and emboldened them to prove ever more assuredly that they were capable of being independent and deserved credit for the contributions they made to society.

For instance, rather than lose confidence because of her husband’s insensitivity and scrutiny, Lizzie Bowler responded to her husband’s claims and demands with equal aggression and certainty. In September 1864, she decided she had had enough of supporting his soldierly ambitions. In a passionate plea, she wrote,

I have always said that I would never try to hinder you from doing what you think is your duty, but…I want you to really think the matter over whether it is your duty to spend all the best of your life away from those who love you best and sighs for your presence ever[y] moment of her life time or to come home & get a good little house & live happy as we should while others who have had the comforts of home take their turn in the battle field.
Clearly tired of coming second, Lizzie insisted that Madison reevaluate his priorities and decide if he truly cared more about fighting for the idea of the nation than creating a life and home with the woman he loved. When he still insisted on staying in the army even after the hostilities had ended, Lizzie gave him an ultimatum: “You know you talk a great deal about ‘patriotic sons.’ While you remain in the Army I do not want to hear anything more about sons or daughters. When you leave it, then I will talk to you.”

Try as he might, Madison clearly could not control the way Lizzie felt. Northern women may have felt abandoned and rejected, anxious and helpless, but as Lizzie Bowler suggests, many women channeled that frustration into new, more assertive identities that demanded credit for burdens they had to bear quietly at home.

In the same vein, when northern women were accused of being unpatriotic, they redoubled their efforts to show their commitment rather than passively accepting the criticism. As the unpatriotic charges mounted, certain outspoken figures responded in women’s defense, including familiar women’s rights activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. At a gathering of abolitionist women in 1863, Stanton addressed the crowd, saying “we have heard many complaints of the lack of enthusiasm among Northern women,” but that was not for lack of trying. Stanton went on to accuse the Union government of not “fully engag[ing] their sympathies” and failing to mobilize women behind the Union platform. Clearly, northern men were the center of the government’s focus as the physical manpower behind its agenda. But northern women were not included in the explicit ideology of the war efforts and thus seemed less involved and committed to the cause. Furthermore, returning to the different concepts of patriotism, northern women were asked to rally around an abstract, intangible notion of the nation, whereas southern women directed their support at their own personal, physical homes. Thus, it seems plausible that northern women had more difficulty displaying their patriotism.
because the nature of their cause was less concrete and thus it was less obvious what their patriotic efforts should look like.

Determined to prove themselves as equally devoted and capable citizens, northern women decided to take action. Even though women in both sections began to lose enthusiasm as the war progressed, northern women faced a critique of their patriotism for failing to show the same level of courage, energy and zeal that their southern counterparts displayed.\textsuperscript{cclxix} One of the key aspects of this critique was the accusation that northern women continued to live too extravagantly, without any regard for the suffering of the soldiers or the self-sacrificing southern women. A widely circulating image was the character “Mrs. Shoddy,” the fictional wife of a wealth wartime manufacturer, who appeared in \textit{Harper’s Weekly} stories displaying an “appalling lack of patriotism by ‘dancing and making merry, and throwing away fortunes on diamonds’ while ‘our brothers and sons are dying on battle-fields.’”\textsuperscript{cclxx} In May 1864, in seemingly direct response to the assumption that all northern women were “Mrs. Shoddy’s”, the Ladies’ National Covenant association called for a consumer boycott, pledging “for three years, or for the war…to each other and the country to purchase no imported article of apparel.”\textsuperscript{cclxxi} Borrowing from the practices of their Revolutionary War predecessors, these women chose to demonstrate their patriotism in a traditionally domestic, female way. Forfeiting material luxuries, as southern women had effectively proven, was a form of patriotism that everyone could recognize as a sacrifice for women. Thus, in this one example of patriotic “enthusiasm,” northern women used the consumer boycott to prove that they were committed to the Union and should not be accused otherwise. Northern women were held accountable to the state as citizens during the war, so when they realized they were not receiving the credit they deserved, they pushed back against the
limitations that had been placed on them and as such, reclaimed the independent, more assertive attitudes they had begun to embrace before the war.

In their own ways, northern and southern women both shifted their mentalities over the course of the war to reflect their newly configured independent roles and their changing perception of themselves in relation to the nation and their own loved ones. They faced their own obstacles that challenged their commitments to the war cause, but women in both sections experienced similar disappointment and psychological defeat that set them up to change and reevaluate themselves after the fighting ceased. Even as one side claimed victory and the other defeat in political and military terms, all women suffered from setbacks during the war that initially knocked them down but eventually galvanized them to take control of their situations. With conflicting emotions of disillusionment and resolve, northern and southern women emerged from the war with a transformed sense of self that made them more similar to each other than different, and that continued to evolve as they faced the challenges of reconciliation and attempted to negotiate their future in the changed postwar world.
CHAPTER FOUR
From Homemaker to Breadwinner: Postwar Realities and Reconstructing Identity

The Civil War unquestionably changed the women of the Union and the Confederacy in profound ways, but their story did not end when the armed conflict subsided. The years that followed the war proved to be essential in solidifying the transformations that women underwent, because in the aftermath of the hostilities, northern and southern women had to decide whether or not to advance their new, more independent identities, or to ease back into the prewar, male-dominated social order. The choice was relatively easy for northern women, as their experience during the war served to confirm the growing belief that women could (and should) assume a more assertive role in society. For southern women, however, the answer was not as obvious, because it was in the aftermath of the war that southern women confronted the greatest challenge to their identities. Southern women had to choose between preserving their old antebellum identities that had offered them privilege and security, or embracing the changes that the war had wrought and seizing the opportunity to become more independent. Their northern sisters faced their own obstacles, but most of the variables in the North during and after the war combined to perpetuate the trend toward expanding roles for women. By contrast, southern women found themselves at a crossroads after the war, and the southern identity crisis of the postwar years warrants special attention in the explanation of how the Civil War fundamentally redefined the notion of womanhood in America.

The most effective way to understand the postwar years is to examine how the war was remembered, because there were significant differences between the northern and southern approach to memory that underscore the deepening trends that had emerged over the course of
the war. In memorializing the war, the North and South returned to their original Union and Confederate ideologies, glorifying the idea of the nation and the home respectively. As such, women were once again affected differently since they served distinct functions in the commemoration efforts. Southern women returned as the main focus of the Confederate ideology, as the majority of Southerners sought to reinvigorate the romantic notion of the Old South that at once celebrated and subjugated women. Northern women also resumed their familiar role within the Union ideology, taking a clearly secondary role behind the nation and the men who had fought for it. As it was before the war, the South used women to legitimize its cause while the North unapologetically relegated them to the background.

This different emphasis within wartime memory is the final piece to understanding the Civil War women puzzle, as it confirms the continuity and change within each section that ultimately allowed northern and southern women to converge as a unified gender. Popular history remembers southern women as the heroic Scarlett O’Hara’s who fought back adversity, but it does not acknowledge a northern equivalent. By not also remembering a prototypical northern woman, that perception underscores the reality that the wartime experience was indeed varied for women, and that although the South perpetuated a certain image of itself in the southern belle, there was no such thing as one type of woman or experience during the war in the North or South. In fact, the perception and common understanding of both northern and southern women after the war does not match the reality. In its remembrance of the war, the Union put its focus on citizens regardless of gender, which meant rather than getting any special treatment, women were considered citizens like anyone else and thus were empowered to claim the rights and credit they felt they deserved as patriotic members of the Union. The Confederacy on the other hand, continued to celebrate women for being women, the result of which however
was not to reinforce their dependent status but to empower them, because it allowed southern women to see themselves as crucial to the South’s survival.

While the North and South sought to preserve different ideals in the wake of the war, then, the experience and attitudes of women themselves reveals that northern and southern women alike were assertive and emboldened in the postwar years. To say their experiences converged is not to suggest that northern and southern women immediately forgot their antebellum differences and joined forces in one unified quest for women’s rights. The emotional and psychological wounds of war took years to heal, and many southern women initially sought a return to the comfort and privilege of their Old South identities rather than accepting their empowered but insecure postwar roles. Nevertheless, the war brought northern and southern women closer in attitude and in the way they perceived themselves within society, and although physically they remained divided, the postwar years helped finalize their transition toward independence.

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Union women often get short shrift in the popular memory of the Civil War, largely because their experience reflected more continuity from beginning to end than the remarkable changes that Confederate women underwent. In the North, women encountered personal changes in the process of war but generally returned full circle after the conflict with renewed energy for advancing women’s rights. This does not make their story any less significant, however, because the example they set serves as an important point of comparison between how different northern and southern women were before the war and how gradually they merged in the same direction. Northern women had already changed before the war, which may make their wartime transformations less exciting. But the trend they set by continuing to assert themselves
arguably enabled southern women to accept the changes when it was their time to choose between the old and the new.

Fittingly, to return full circle to an earlier discussion, northern women’s efforts in moral reform effectively demonstrate the continuity of northern women’s attitudes and experiences before and after the war. Groups such as the Ladies’ Christian Union (referred to in Chapter one by its prewar title, the Ladies’ Christian Association) flourished after the war, persistent in their mission to help society’s unfortunate members. Northern women worked for the Ladies’ Christian Union throughout the war, and by the end, membership had grown substantially and they were showing high success rates in getting underprivileged women the support they needed. In their 1867 Annual Report, the Union wrote that in the past year, “one hundred and forty-eight persons have enjoyed the comforts and privileges” of living in the “Home for Young Women,” compared with the sixty-five who had lived there in 1863, thus indicating that “[w]ith each succeeding year proofs accumulate that the “Home” supplies a pressing want in our community.”

Not only had the demand remained steady for organizations like the Ladies’ Christian Union, but northern women clearly devoted themselves to meeting that demand and succeeded in garnering support and resources for expanding their outreach.

Another important aspect of the Ladies’ Christian Union was their efforts in getting women into the workforce after the war. In 1867, the Union reported that their boarders were either pupils in the School of Design or the ward schools of the city, or supported themselves as teachers in private families or schools, or as dressmakers, seamstresses, telegraph-operators, bookbinders, copyists, etc. By 1875, the list of occupations had expanded to include “clerks, milliners, dressmakers, teachers in mission, and other schools, students at Cooper Institute, in phonography, telegraphy, and School of Design, contributors to the press, copyists, artists,
students of the Academy of Design, medical students, editors, bible-readers, city missionaries, engravers, machine-operators, and teachers, lace and feather-makers, workers in crape, employees of paper-pattern establishments, &c. Not only did they serve as rehabilitation networks for underprivileged women, but organizations like the Ladies’ Christian Union clearly considered it a priority to encourage women to work and become self-supporting, productive members of society. Furthermore, by not promoting women’s work as specifically female, these organizations reflected the notion that the obligation to work was women’s duty as citizens, regardless of their gender, and that there was no reason why women could not make the same contributions as citizens that men could.

The growth and success of women-led organizations throughout the postwar years underscores the increasing acceptance in the North of more expansive roles for women. The ideas had been planted and the efforts had begun in the antebellum years, but the war accelerated the trend of women taking initiative, especially to help other women. These organizations offered women a way to feel useful, which as discussed in relation to their expressions of patriotism, was crucial for allowing northern women to maintain their growing sense of confidence while their men neglected them during the war. Furthermore, these empowered women not only made themselves useful but they encouraged other women to support themselves, promoting the idea that women no longer needed men but could instead rely on themselves and each other. In this regard, there is a clear connection between the setbacks northern women faced during the war and their continued efforts to contribute to society. The rejection they felt as women of the Union arguably increased the pressure to prove themselves worthy of respect and appreciation. Because they had already begun to have a positive effect through moral reform before the war, they could recognize the injustice of not being taken
seriously during the war and thus redoubled their efforts to show how much the nation needed their help. Their wartime disappointments could have discouraged them, but instead they empowered northern women and allowed them to continue on the path toward greater opportunities.

Northern women also chose not to turn their backs on the government, despite the ingratitude they received, as they lent their efforts to veterans’ support groups and helped glorify the memory of the men who had fought for the Union. Initially participating in auxiliary groups attached to veteran societies such as the Grand Army of the Republic, Union women eventually formed their own female auxiliary, the Woman’s Relief Corps (WRC). The women of the WRC were exclusively devoted to promoting Union veterans and memorializing the efforts they made to defend the nation. Among their various activities, they organized Memorial Day ceremonies, taught lessons of Union patriotism in schools, and distributed American flags, all to encourage national loyalty for future generations.\textsuperscript{ecxv} Even after the war, then, northern women refused to be accused of not doing their part to support the cause and continued to demonstrate their own loyalty to the Union.

In their efforts to help preserve the Union’s victory in history, however, northern women ultimately contributed to their own hidden place in popular memory. While their work with the WRC was certainly commendable and likely appreciated by the veterans they supported, northern women downplayed their own role in the war by only paying tribute to the male soldiers. All of their funds were directed to “the needy veteran and his family” and to memorializing fallen soldiers, at the expense of any symbolic tributes to the women of the Union.\textsuperscript{ecxvi} As Nina Silber argues, it was widely suggested that “women would best be served by downplaying their wartime contributions, by remaining anonymous in the celebratory
memorials of the postwar era. Henry Bellows, the former Sanitary Commission leader, asserted in relation to women’s wartime efforts that “[t]here is a character ‘of no reputation,’” underscoring that women’s function was not to draw attention to their own contributions but rather to focus their energy on celebrating the heroics of the Union and its soldiers. In line with its prewar ideology, the Union thus continued to view its women as ancillary rather than central to the national identity by privileging the defense of the nation over the home and family, both during the fight and in the commemoration that followed.

Ultimately, the reason why northern women are often left on the periphery of the Civil War story actually underscores why their story is significant to the overall transformation that women experienced during the second half of the 19th century. The fact that northern women had already begun to change before the war might suggest that the unique demands and increased opportunities during the war would have been conducive to women’s expanding notion of womanhood. If that were the case, then the Union women’s story would not be as interesting or insightful and it would make sense to leave them out of the discussion. Looking past the assumptions and expectations about northern women and focusing on the reality of their experience reveals that in fact, the Civil War did not make life easier for northern women. It was in overcoming the obstacles that their own government posed to them that Union women were able to challenge the traditional gender molds and enter a new phase of women’s rights activism. The northern experience does reflect more continuity than change in comparison to the radical shift that occurred in the South. The northern story was not a straight line from beginning to end, however, and the setbacks women faced in the process were crucial in triggering important psychological changes that encouraged them to remain on the path of expanding opportunities.

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The women of the South had a dramatically different postwar experience than their northern sisters which, based on the unique contexts in which they faced the war, should come as no surprise. A crucial distinction between the North and the South that weighed heavily on southern women was the unique psychological effect of defeat. Having to reconcile their prewar hopes with their postwar despair challenged southern women in many ways more than the war itself. In response, two divergent attitudes emerged among southern women themselves, as some desperately clung to their prewar identities while others bitterly forged new ones.

The memory of Confederate women is thus complicated because of the difference between the perception of the Old South and the reality of the new. Southern women are remembered partly because one faction was at the center of commemoration efforts to preserve the antebellum status quo, and partly because another equally determined group of women departed from the norm and pulled southern women into a new era of independence and activism. For those who accept that the Civil War fundamentally changed gender relations in America, it is easy to assume that the proactive Union nurses boldly led the way while the Scarlets in the South eventually but unwillingly followed when they realized they had no better option. The reality of the southern experience, however, reveals that many women took their own initiative, acknowledging the changes the war had thrust upon them and adopting a new, more self-sufficient identity to help them cope with the burdens and readjustments of their postwar world.

It bears repeating that although southern women receive more attention in the discussion of how the Civil War changed women, it is merely a factor of time and circumstance, not their overall importance to women’s history. From beginning to end, southern women did indeed undergo more obvious transformations than their northern counterparts, which demands a more
extensive explanation of their postwar experience. Had the war occurred a generation earlier, the attitudes and mindsets of northern and southern women may have been more similarly in line with the traditional notions of gender that still defined the South at the onset of the conflict. Because northern women began to shift their perspectives during the Second Great Awakening while southern women remained tied to their subordinate roles, the war jilted southern women to a much greater extent and thus their response and adjustments to the challenges of war take longer to explain. As this study has hopefully made clear, northern and southern women experienced the war differently but in uniquely profound ways. The details of their stories are all significant; the southern version just has few more wrinkles to iron out.

Regardless of the different responses they had to the postwar changes, the agony of defeat affected all southern women in deeply traumatic ways and ensured that they would never truly be able to return to their antebellum way of life. As Lucy Buck from Front Royal Virginia expressed in her diary, “[w]e shall never any of us be the same as we have been,” confirming the harsh reality that the war had ravaged the South both physically and psychologically. Belle Kearney expressed in her memoirs years later that “All Southern hearts were smitten with desolation and gripped with the horror of despair. Lovely homes had been destroyed. Thousands of persons were on the verge of starvation, and many others had fled to foreign lands, in voluntary exile.” Frances Woolfolk Wallace and Ella Thomas both expressed their feelings of hopelessness as victims of Yankee destruction, lamenting that “[t]he Yankees have destroyed all I had,” and “[n]ow that we have surrendered—are in a great degree powerless we can count with certainty upon nothing.” And writing even before the fighting had ceased Kate Stone perhaps best captured the despair that consumed southern women, “[o]ur glorious struggle of the last four years, our hardships, our sacrifices, and worst of all, the torrents of noble blood
that have been shed for our loved Country—all, all in vain. The best and bravest of the South sacrificed—and for nothing. As Stone reveals, southern women came to the devastating realization that all of their efforts and the energy they devoted to the Confederate cause were for naught. They had been willing to make sacrifices because they believed they were contributing to the protection of their homes and loved ones, but by the end of the war, they had lost everything, and realized that the “race of lordly planters who ruled this Southern world, [was] now a splendid wreck.”

Beyond the horrific loss of life they witnessed, southern women were crushed by the financial devastation the South incurred, which inevitably contributed to their anxiety and fear that although their lives had been spared, life as they knew it was over. Kate Stone wrote in 1865 that “Our future is appalling—no money, no credit, heavily in debt,” indicating the insecure situation in which many southern families found themselves after four years of war. As “[a]ffairs were growing desperate,” Belle Kearney remembered, “it seemed impossible for father and mother to realize the terrible change that had come into their fortunes. They continued to live extravagantly for the first few years after the war…[But] [a]fter awhile the last dollar was spent and the last servant dismissed…The struggle for bread became hard both for the laborer and the land-owner.”

Southerners who had only ever known a life of luxury and comfort clearly experienced a rude awakening that shook their sense of identity to its very core. The antebellum southern social order was largely predicated on the existence of rigid class divisions and the social and racial hierarchy that placed white slaveholding families in a position of unquestioned power and security. With the abolition of slavery and the collapse of the Confederate government, the slaveholding families who had once controlled the South lost the financial and institutional benchmarks that had justified their social superiority.
Southern women quickly learned new lessons of humility and shame, as they realized how dependent they were on the patriarchal system of slavery that had shielded them from the burdens of work and financial concerns. Belle Kearney reflected that, “[n]ext to the destruction of caste, the most radical change...[was] that young Southern men and women have learned that work is honorable. Idleness has grown to be a shame. No boy and girl can now hope to realize their highest destiny except through hard, earnest toil or hands or brain.” This observation underscores the extreme shift that occurred with the abolition of slavery, as Southerners struggled to adjust to the unfamiliar necessity of work that arose when they no longer had slaves to support them in their daily routines. As important as slavery was to cultivating the privileged, secure identities of white Southerners before the war, losing slavery was equally critical in redefining how they perceived themselves after the war. Women felt especially lost, since they not only missed the benefits of slavery, but many also realized they could no longer rely on their husbands to support them. Horrified at her family’s impending financial crisis in 1969, Ella Thomas confided in her journal that “the crash has come at last” when her husband’s store was repossessed. She explained that she knew they had been living beyond their means but that she was “utterly powerless to avert the blow which [she] knew was coming.” Wondering what she had done that she “should be so punished,” she confessed that “[m]y life, my glory, my honour have been so intimately blended with that of my husband” that she did not know what to do now that he was “broken in fortune, health and spirits.” As Thomas suggests, the Confederate defeat emasculated and impoverished southern men, which immediately put the lives of southern women into harsh perspective as they struggled to accept the reality that their men had failed to defend them during the war and now were helpless to provide for them in the future. Fifteen years after the war, Thomas wrote that at the thought of her children’s future, she “cried because
[she] could not give to [her] children the advantages of society and comforts which money alone could procure for them, indicating that the initial shock and disappointment still had not faded but continued to challenge southern women for years.

Beyond the material and social adjustments it necessitated, abolition introduced an element of physical fear and insecurity to southern life, as women no longer felt safe and protected by the white male supremacy that upheld the system of slavery. Without the institution of slavery, white men no longer held the naturally dominant position in society, which in turn meant that women, as well as slaves, were no longer under their dominion. In theory, white women should have felt a certain freedom as a result of abolition, for if they had been subordinate to men when society was racially ordered, then their confinement should have ended when society no longer confirmed white male supremacy. However, rather than liberating them, this shift caused anxiety for white women. For although liberty and equality were finally moving in their favor, they no longer benefited from the protection and privilege of white male domination for which they had bargained.

When the emancipation of the slaves destroyed the basis of that authority, southern women not only had to develop their own work ethic, but they were left feeling vulnerable and threatened in their own homes. Belle Kearney described “a feeling of insecurity in the South wherever there are many negroes,” and Kate Stone explicitly wrote that she was “deadly afraid of them.” Kearney and Charlotte Ravenel both expressed their fear in “walking outside of the gate” or lingering “unprotected anywhere at any hour for any length of time.” As freed slaves rebelled against their former oppressors, “destroying and burning everything,” southern women felt “at their mercy” and, as Susan Ravenel Jervey confessed, many thought the “fried negroes...seem[ed] worse than the Yankees.” Ella Thomas even...
“doubted God” when slavery ended, for if “the Bible was right then slavery must be,” not realizing “until then how intimately [her] faith in revelations and [her] faith in the institution of slavery had been woven together.” Their responses to abolition clearly indicate how important slavery was to southern women’s identities and how dramatically their lives changed when slavery no longer defined them. In addition to death and financial insecurity, abolition struck down southern women’s fundamental understanding of themselves. As Drew Faust argues, “the social order that had shaped [southern women] was not the one in which [they] now lived,” which presented the daunting challenge of carving out a new place for themselves in the unfamiliar postwar world.

The psychological and physical effects of defeat undeniably changed the South with particular consequences for women, but in response to their dismal circumstances, many Southerners chose to preserve and highlight the memory of the Old South rather than allow history to write their failures. In an effort to prove that their struggle had not been in vain, Southerners developed a Lost Cause ideology, which was a combination of ideas and images that portrayed the causes and outcomes of the war in the way the South wanted to be remembered. As in the North, women played a specific role in the commemoration of the war that mirrored the role they played in the Confederate war cause. Unlike their northern sisters, however, who perpetuated the Union memory but were not the focus of its story, southern women were at the center of the Lost Cause efforts. Nina Silber argues that the South’s focus on women in the Lost Cause agenda signifies its “desire to portray the southern cause as moral, virtuous, and righteous, to signal that the Confederate commitment had always placed time-honored concerns for women and families central.” In this way, the South hoped, the Lost Cause emphasized the southern defense of the home and the protection of women and families as
the Confederacy’s primary cause, therefore downplaying the controversial political issues of
slavery and secession that had damaged the South’s reputation.

Many southern women eagerly assumed their role in the commemoration efforts,
promoting the Lost Cause ideology to “recapture the patriarchal world of the old South.” Beyond showing their continued commitment to the Confederate cause, women arguably had
their own interests in mind, as preserving the memory of the antebellum South potentially helped
them regain their privileged status as members of the ruling class at least in memory if not in
reality. Southern women also may have felt more compelled to participate in memorializing the
Confederacy because they witnessed the death and suffering of the war firsthand. The issue of
burying fallen soldiers was “something immediate, pressing, and local” for southern women,
whereas northern women were removed from that sense of urgency. Women formed memorial
societies that, as the secretary of the Columbus Ladies Memorial Association explained, paid
“honor to those who died defending the life, honor and happiness of the Southern women.” The women of these societies made it their mission after the war to commemorate Confederate
soldiers because those men had made it their mission during the war to fight for southern
women. So it happened that women became so central to the Lost Cause ideology and
Confederate commemoration, because in preserving the antebellum memory of the South and
creating the myth of the Lost Cause, Southerners could ignore slavery and class conflict and
perpetuate their interpretation of the war as a defense of home and family instead. The Lost
Cause ideal, as Nina Silber articulates, “insisted that the Confederate objective was, once again
[as it had been in 1860], not about politics, or slavery, or even constitutional principles, but about
women and the home.” By emphasizing that southern men had fought to defend their homes
and not the political causes of the war, southern women helped redefine the meaning of the Civil
War and created a romanticized version of the South’s history that glorified Scarlet O’Hara’s luxurious, southern belle lifestyle rather than her turbulent wartime transformation. As Kearney indicates, many southern women recognized that it was not entirely reflective of postwar realities, and specifically ignores the fact that many southern women actually embraced the changes and increasing demands of their new world order rather than clinging to the perception of the old. A significant number of southern women exhibited bold, assertive attitudes in response to the Confederate defeat, taking the initiative to improve their own situations rather than waiting helplessly for their impoverished and humiliated men to pick up the pieces. While they seem like exceptions to the postwar southern experience that the Lost Cause perpetuated, enough women responded as active citizens rather than passive victims to suggest that the war had permanently changed southern women. Certain concrete changes occurred in the South, like the appearance of a women’s suffrage movement, which conclusively show a shift in women’s history from before to after the war. As important, however, was the change that occurred in southern women’s mentality and attitudes, as their wartime crisis motivated them to assume more independent identities to help them cope with the realities of postwar destruction and reconstruction.

As alluded to earlier, one of the most significant adjustments southern women made was learning the discipline of work. Belle Kearney wrote extensively in her memoirs of adapting to the new idea that, without slaves or inherited family fortunes, women would have to support themselves in the postwar world. She wrote about her mother, who “never recovered” from the loss of her wealth, but “[l]ike thousands of other heroic women of the South, however, she did not fold her hands in idleness nor weep her eyes blind over the inexorable, but, with admirable courage, went to work.” As Kearney indicates, many southern women recognized that it was
useless to hope for a return to their antebellum way of life, for if they had any chance of regaining some semblance of a comfortable life, they would have to work for it because no one else was going to provide it. Highlighting the determination and “undreamed of strength” that southern women displayed, she reflected that “[w]hen, after the war, the men were dying all about them from the hardships that they had endured in the field of battle, the mother-heart of the South said, ‘[s]omebody must live for the sake of our children’ – and the women lived and worked.” Kearney’s attitude clearly demonstrates a newly emboldened attitude that consumed many southern women. During the war, they had shown similar displays of confidence as they embraced the opportunity to make themselves useful to the Confederate cause. But the mindset was not quite the same, because during the war, they still believed that their men were coming home and that eventually, they would return to their privileged and relatively uncomplicated lives. In other words, their expanded wartime roles were bearable because they assumed they were only temporary. It is thus significant, then, that when the Union victory dashed their hopes, many southern women did not retreat into their former selves but rather focused their energy on rebuilding what they had lost. They realized that they could no longer rely on men to support them and by accepting that reality, they officially embraced the transition to the new notion of womanhood that had already taken hold in the North.

For the first time, southern women were compelled to work outside the home, widening their roles as mother and caregiver to include supporting the family financially. In fact, Belle Kearney referred to this “evolution of women” as their “developed power of bread-winning.” She acknowledges that she did work during the war, “in a pitiless tread-mill, but it was at home; the world did not know of it; and money, that degrading substance, had not been received for my labor.” As she phrased it, “[h]ousehold drudgery and public work were very different
questions,” and the challenge southern women faced was accepting the necessity of public work as well as receiving credit for it. For as Kearney explained, public work was considered “monstrous and impossible,” and despite her “deep-rooted desire to do something definite…every undertaking that suggested itself seemed walled off by insurmountable barriers” of conventionality and “lack of a precedent.” Specifically, as she entertained the possibility of becoming a lawyer, her father adamantly rejected the idea, as “no woman had ever attempted such an absurdity, and any effort on [her] part…would subject [her] to ridicule and ostracism.” Kearney did not back down however. In a demonstration of southern women’s newfound determination and initiative, Kearney declared that she “must go to work, that an occupation uplifting and strengthening must be secured if every family tradition was shattered and if [her] life were forfeited in the attempt.” Thus, despite the firmly established assumptions about appropriate roles for women, some southern women like Kearney pushed through the gender divide and demonstrated not only that change was inevitable, but that some women were actually eager to embrace it.

In addition to carving out new, productive roles for themselves, some women had to cope with the added stress of taking over their husbands’ financial responsibilities as well, which clearly reinforced the need for women to take more control. As mentioned earlier, Ella Thomas’s world came crashing down a second time after the initial defeat of the war when her husband went into exceeding debt, lost possession of his store and with it, the family’s source of income. She confided in her journal that her husband was more “liberal than he can afford to be” with their finances, adding that she did “not think he appreciate[d her] puny efforts at trying to stop the floodgates of debt” they faced. In a show of confidence, she wrote that “[h]e may do as he pleases & will of course, but I have an individuality of my own,” and with that attitude, she
went to work to support her family. Over the next decade, she came to be in charge of the country school, making her grateful and content for the “opportunity of adding to the comfort of [her] family.” She took great pride in the income she received for her work, and when her motivation began to wane after some time working, she wrote that “[i]t is absolutely necessary for me to remember how much I can buy for the family to give me courage to take charge of the school for another year.” Clearly the experience of working for an income transformed women’s attitudes and gave them a sense of purpose and usefulness that helped them rebuild a future for themselves and their children. It was undoubtedly frustrating at times, as Thomas confessed she wished she was “not burdened with [her] husband’s confidence in money matters,” but they accepted their new working roles as an unavoidable duty.

In addition to incorporating the “breadwinning” element to their postwar identities, southern women opened up to the notions of female suffrage and greater political equality, revealing again that although they were a few decades behind, southern women had caught up with their northern sisters in their quest for increased opportunities and rights. Belle Kearney credits the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, which originated in the North after the war, as the “golden key that unlocked...doors of pent-up possibilities” and “made it possible for women to occupy the advanced and continually advancing position they now hold...leading steadily to...the political emancipation of women.” She explained that the women’s suffrage movement “advanced slowly in the South,” and that “[e]xactly as there are opponents among men, so are...there are multitudes of [women] who are still in a deep sleep regarding the necessity of having the ballot, and are continuing to drone the old song in their slumbers: ‘I have all the rights I want.’ Acknowledging that not every southern woman had met the postwar world with the same independent attitude, Kearney persisted in her opinion...
that she “was a human being and a citizen, and a self-supporting, producing citizen, yet [her] government took no cognizance of [her] except to set [her] aside with the unworthy and the incapable for whom the state was forced to provide.” Evidently, for those who were required to assume new, breadwinning roles for their families, it did not go unnoticed that the government failed to acknowledge their contributions to rebuilding the postwar economy. That neglect made Kearney “a woman suffragist, avowed and uncompromising,” as she wrote that “never should satisfaction come to me until by personal effort I had helped to put the ballot into the hands of woman.” Suffrage “became a mastering purpose of [her] life,” underscoring that for women like Belle Kearney, the postwar period invigorated them with a new concept of what it meant to be a woman in the South. Even as the Confederacy continued to view and celebrate them as women first and citizens second, southern women began to see themselves as citizens first and women second which inspired them, as it did their northern counterparts, to expand their expectations and demands for rights and opportunities.

As they were forced to embrace new roles and fulfill obligations beyond those of mother and wife, southern women recognized that despite traditional assumptions, they were capable of supporting themselves and serving a higher purpose than when they were confined to the home. As Kearney expressed, southern women began to face the same obstacles that their northern counterparts had encountered during the war, as their male-dominated governments refused to acknowledge the contributions women made in the multiple functions they served in society. Women in both the North and South were increasingly held accountable for their actions and expected to be useful members of society and yet they hardly received any recognition for their efforts. The frustration and increased motivation women felt to demand respect became a common experience between northern and southern women, and although they were still
physically separated, they seemed to be closing the sectional divide as more and more women embraced their new and expanding roles.

Northern and southern women faced different obstacles and went through their own regionally specific processes, but by the postwar era, the trends of continuity and change ultimately resulted in the convergence of northern and southern women’s experience. In the immediate aftermath, the similarities of experience were evidently blurred by the very real memories of devastation and defeat, as some southern women feared the loss of their antebellum identities. But in examining their seemingly divergent circumstances, it becomes clear that by the end of the war, women were no longer as different as when the conflict broke out. Their original differences had been deeply rooted in the distinct ideologies of the North and South. But as the war broke down the antebellum institutions and ideals that had driven the two sections apart, women on both sides were able to gradually remove themselves from the sectional identities that distinguished them and move closer together as one unified gender.
EPILOGUE

Divided We Fell, United We Shall Stand

On August 18, 1920, the 19th amendment was ratified and women gained the right to vote in the United States. Congress had proposed the amendment over a year earlier, but the process of ratification was slow as each state decided how to cast its vote. On August 18th, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the amendment, allowing it to pass into law and give women the political status many had been fighting for since before the Civil War. The Tennessee State Legislature was in a deadlock—the vote was 48 to 48—until one young state senator, Harry Burn, broke the tie in favor of ratifying the amendment. Burn was an anti-suffragist Republican who planned on opposing the amendment (and made many enemies by not doing so). When asked why he changed his mind, he had a simple answer: my mother told me to. Phoebe Burn wrote a letter to her son in 1920, urging him, “Hurrah, and vote for suffrage!....Don’t forget to be a good boy and help…put the “rat” in ratification.” Taking his mother’s words to heart, Harry Burn explained, “I know a mother’s advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification.” In a move that could have cost him his political career, Harry Burn supported women’s right to vote, solidifying their political equality, and making his mother proud.

Although women have always had a special influence on their male loved ones, it would have been unimaginable for an antebellum woman to convince a man that she should have the right to vote. Before the war, the roots of feminism had certainly been planted, as women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott issued women’s first formal demand for equal rights in their Declaration of Sentiments at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, rallying a small but passionate contingent of northern women to seek the right to vote. Before the war, however,
women’s sense of identity was so profoundly tied to their sectional identity that the ideological divide between the women of the North and South was as deep as the geographical one, and prevented northern and southern women from coming together on the basis of a shared female identity strong enough to transcend divisions of region, race, and class, and to warrant political power.

The Civil War changed that, and thus changed women forever. As it broke down the ideological and institutional barriers that divided women, the war caused the beliefs and experiences of women to converge and allowed women to recognize themselves in their sisters across the Mason-Dixon line who had formerly been as strangers in thought and lifestyle. The war was the boost women needed to enter a new phase of independence and activism that inspired future generations to continue the fight for political rights and equality. That convergence, that coming together of women in shared experience and perspective, permanently altered the understanding of gender in America and launched a new phase of history. Although it is counterintuitive, the war that made one group of women the victor and the other the loser actually served to make women more alike than different, and inspired them to create a cohesive female identity, independent of regional influence and male prerogative.

When I first undertook this project, I did not know what I would find that someone had not already discovered about women in the Civil War. Looking at the North and South together was initially more indecisive than deliberate of me, but as a result of making this a comparative study, I realized that what makes the story of women in the Civil War significant is that they were separate and divided by section but the war helped change that, allowing women to focus more on their similarities than their differences and to help each other rather than perpetuate the social and political ideologies that had confined them.
During a recent dinner conversation, I attempted to explain to my friend’s mother why these women and their stories matter to history, and her immediate response was, “Oh, so you’re arguing that the Civil War caused feminism.” Close, but it is not quite that simple. She reminded me that any discussion of Civil War women, especially among those who have not studied the topic extensively, naturally leads to a discussion of feminism. In many ways, it is true that the women of this study paved the way for their daughters and granddaughters to fight for political equality and social justice, and my thesis does indicate that the war galvanized women to claim the independence and confidence they needed specifically as women to form a movement.

This study shows women entering a new phase but it is by no means a complete picture, which is why I chose not to directly engage the history of American feminism, which is loaded with gendered terminology and conflicting theories about what women's rights and equality even mean and what the best strategies are for achieving them. Nevertheless, without drawing sweeping conclusions or establishing a simple cause-and-effect argument, the long-term consequences that these civil war women had on women today is undeniable.

If this study has shown anything, it is that the path from dependent housewife to bra-burning breadwinner was hardly continuous or inevitable. Women changed over the course of the war, but there was no single “ta-da!” moment when Union and Confederate women pushed aside their long-held differences and decided to turn against their oppressive men in swift and effective solidarity. The uneven experiences and individual transformations of northern and southern women are all equally important to our understanding of how and why the traditional gender roles and the notion of womanhood broke down and allowed women to embrace the more assertive, independent roles they have today, but also why the breakdown of those roles is
somehow never really complete. While this study posits the Civil War as the catalyst women needed to embrace change, its scope is limited to the early snapshot of a transition and transformation that occurred over several generations and that is very much still going on today.

In my last semester at Georgetown, I chose to take a History of U.S. Labor class at the recommendation of my advisor, who suggested the themes and issues of the course might be useful to me while I was writing this thesis. Women factored prominently into nearly every discussion, as the history of the labor movement coincided with the women’s rights movement, both intertwined in their struggle for social justice and political and economic equality.

Considering the perspective with which I approached the course, it was easy to draw the connection between the assertive women of the 20th century labor movement with the post-Civil War women of my study. It occurred to me, however, that while we speak of “women” as a whole group now, Americans at the time of the Civil War perceived women as northern and southern as much as they did as female. That distinction is seemingly obvious and perhaps unremarkable, since American men identified themselves as southern and northern as well until the war eroded their differences. The distinction is significant for women, however, because before the war, as Northerners and Southerners, women were divided and lacked a common purpose, but after the war, although it was not an immediate or easy transition for everyone, women began to understand that together, they could make demands that would help them universally, not just regionally. And as women succeeded in their general push for rights and equality, their movement was able to become even more specialized, as subgroups like working class and African American women formed to identify specific needs and demands that not only concerned them as women, but as women of a particular class and race.
As is true with any oppressed group, unity is necessary to gain power and effect change. The Civil War allowed American women to find that unity and use it to increase women’s power politically, economically, socially, and professionally. Power itself can breed unity, which in turn breeds more power, which explains why women have remained assertive and independent and continued to seek ever more respect and influence in today’s world. The Civil War was not just a blip in the normal ordering of society and the changes that followed were not just a phase. Women would never be the same again after the Civil War, as Lucy Buck predicted, and they continue to evolve and transform their roles and the meaning of womanhood as they tell their story in their own way.
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**SECONDARY**


Notes

In an effort to remain true to the voices and thoughts of the subjects in this study, I preserved the original spelling and punctuation of all primary sources.

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ii Ibid.
v Ibid., 283.
vii Ibid., 30.
ix Cott, 233.
xi Ibid., 235.
xii Ibid.
xiv Ibid., 149.
xvii Oakes, 41.
xviii Ibid., 66.
xxi Ibid., 28.

xxiii Ibid., 384.


xxv Holt, 385.

xxvi George Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 228.


xxix See Elizabeth Leonard, Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).


xxi Ibid.

xxii Ibid., 283.

xxiii Ibid., 11.

xxiv Ibid., 12.


xxvi As quoted in Faust, Mothers of Invention, 3.


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xxix Ibid., 152.


xi Ibid., 167.


xiii “Ellen Campbell,” 164.

xiv Welter, 152.

xv Aldert Smedes, “She Hath Done What She Could, or the Duty and Responsibility of Woman; a Sermon, Preached in the Chapel of St. Mary's School, by the Rector, and Printed for the Pupils at Their Request,” in Documenting the American South. Raleigh: Printed by Seaton Gales, 1851.
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