Transforming Tara: The Civil War as a Catalyst of Change For the Planter-Class Southern Woman

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On the last day of the year 1863, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas penned in her journal, "We do not know the stuff of which we are made until adversity tries us. I have great faith in that innate courage which all women are said to possess when great trials come upon them . . ."[1] The Civil War tested the courage, strength, and determination of women in ways few situations in American history had previously done. Initially believing the War would be brief, most southern women gladly stood behind their men in the quest to uphold the freedoms which were essential to their way of life. Four years later, their social and economic structures had been destroyed. Often sad and wistful, sometimes angry at the loss of a more care-free existence, most plantation mistresses did not remain in a state of depression over the drastic changes in their lives. I would argue that these women used the Civil War as a period of grief and mourning for their former way of life, working through their anguish as they managed household and plantation, cared for the wounded, and met the daily struggle for survival. They would emerge on the other side of this period as changed women, ready to take on the challenges of

[1] Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889,* ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 221.

Reconstruction. In fact, this process often enabled them to be more prepared for the task before them than their husbands, who returned from war and prison to face an unfamiliar world.

Much has been written about the transformation of southern life and economics as a result of the Civil War, especially as it concerns the elimination of slavery and the resulting economic effect on white planters, but until recent years little has been said about the effects of the War on women, particularly those of the planter class. While their husbands and sons were battling to preserve the ideal of plantation life, states' rights, and slavery, the women were left behind to manage the crops, slaves, and livestock, as well as protect and provide for their families, often doing this while fighting took place on and around their property. This study of the determination and resiliency of those women will show how these traits resulted in the emergence of a new version of the Southern ideal.

To comprehend the changes in the role of planter class women as a result of the war requires a genuine understanding of antebellum society. Books and film have portrayed a soft-spoken, gentile woman, whose primary concern was fashion or parties, with little effort expended in the running of the plantation. In reality, elite white women were expected to oversee the varied activities under the roof of the "big

house," while caring for and managing the household help, centering the efforts of their daily lives on God, home, and family. No matter if her abilities lent themselves to interests away from home, expectations of southern planter mistresses in the years preceding the Civil War were clearly defined: she was to be pious and pure, submissive to her husband, compassionate, and benevolent.[2] According to Thomas Nelson Page, "her life was one long act of devotion, - devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children, devotion to her servants, to her friends, to the poor, to humanity."[3]

To aid in development of the quintessential qualities of southern womanhood, the daughters of wealthy planters often received some degree of formal education, usually consisting of several years at a women's institute. Here she would learn languages and music, receive religious training, and obtain instruction in other areas of education that would be beneficial in her future role as the wife of an elite southern white man. Her mother would give instruction at home in essential household duties and the management thereof, as well as social skills

[2] Rebecca J. Fraser, *Gender, Race and Family in Nineteenth Century America: From Northern Woman to Plantations Mistress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.
[3] Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1998), 38.

important to a woman of her class.[4] Unknown to young women at the time, their studies would also help them assimilate to the new southern world that emerged after the Civil War. The education these young women received is obvious in the eloquent and articulate journals and diaries that have survived and been published, which provide insight into the social history of the antebellum period.

Educated, trained in domestic arts, and socially prepared, young women were ready for courtship. While some young women followed their hearts and married the man they chose, most deferred to their parents' wishes, marrying within their social and economic stratus.[5] Going from their father's house to their husband's, women submitted, as challenged in the Bible and reinforced in society, to the patriarchal structure of the Antebellum South. Work was divided along gender lines. While the men supervised the plantation as a whole, women managed the household, which included overseeing the preparation of food and clothing for the family, caring for and training of children, and directing the household servants. Women had authority over slaves in their homes,

[4] Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* ed. Fletcher M. Green (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), xii-xiii.
[5] Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 20-21.

and men had authority over women.[6] While it is erroneous to ignore the privileges that were afforded by race and class which resulted in significant differences in the lives of slaves and upper class white women, there is a common thread of experience as subjects of their masters and husbands that surfaces too many times in Antebellum history to be ignored.[7] It has been argued that slavery was connected to the ideal of the southern lady. Women, children, and slaves were expected to recognize their proper place and be obedient to the master of the plantation. Any attempt by subordinates to challenge the leadership of the head of the family would not only threaten the family system, but slavery as well.[8] Thomas Ruffin, North Carolina Chief Justice from 1833 to 1852, believed there was a connection between marriage and slavery, that white women's place was in the household as wives, just as Negroes' place was in the household as slaves.[9] Mary Chesnut wrote in her diary in 1861. "There is no slave, after all, like a wife," and again in 1865, "All married women, all children and girls who live on in their

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[6] Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 6-7.
[7] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 16.
[8] Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 16-17.
[9] Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1997), 25-26.

father's houses are slaves!"[10] The Civil War proved to be a catalyst for emancipation of both groups.

While many women wrestled with the stereotypical constraints of their society, most were not expecting to be faced with the responsibility of making crucial decisions about their role during the war. Yankees and Confederates alike believed their side to be right, but southerners felt they had added inspiration to succeed. As Gertrude Thomas noted on November 10, 1861, "We 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."[11] Surely a cause so just would prevail, and do so quickly. But as the months turned into years, enthusiasm waned, especially as the battle sites moved deeper into the South. Kate Stone, a teenage girl living on a Louisiana plantation with her widowed mother and brothers, describes those days:

> 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 helpless to protect ourselves. It is a painful present and a dark future.[12]

Women already faced with assuming their husband's place in running the plantation, now had to decide what to do if the Yankees approached

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[10]Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* ed. Ben Ames Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 49, 486.
[11]Thomas, 195.
[12] Kate Stone, *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868* ed. John Q. Anderson (Baltimore: J.H. Furst, 1955), 185.

their property. Their very lives were at stake, as well as those of their children, slaves, and animals, their homes and possessions, land, barns, gins, and stored commodities. Not knowing the exact location or route of the enemy, women lived anxiously, evaluating each rumor of impending invasion, as they attempted to establish a plan of action.

Some women chose to stay on their property, praying Union soldiers would take another route, or at least show some mercy. Others fled with children, and sometimes slaves, in tow, to live as refugees in distant towns and states. Those who decided to take refuge a distance from home crowded into the homes of relatives or lived in hotels. Lacking the security of familiar surroundings, the companionship of group existence made the situation more tolerable. As Kate Stone noted, "all of us . . . have found even poverty in company more bearable than when suffered alone."[13] Many left their homes in haste, travelling on foot, by wagon, or sometimes by train, depending on urgency and finances. Quick decisions had to be made on what possessions to take along and what to leave, and whether valuables left behind should be hidden or buried. Even those possessions that were initially taken were often lost on the way, as they hastily travelled through deep woods and swamps, or were forced to sell belongings to buy food or shelter. For

[13] Stone, 349.

those who left on foot, the trip was not only physically challenging, but often proved disastrous to their clothing. Shoes, which were never designed for walking long distances, were frequently ruined by the time they reached their destination, and their clothing would be dirty and torn. The scant resources of relatives and friends now had to stretch to include the influx of evacuees.

For those who accepted the challenge of occupying the plantation under threat of siege, provisions had to meet not only the needs of the family and slaves who lived there, but sometimes the appetites of Union soldiers who demanded to be fed and then pillaged what was left. The women who remained on their plantations stepped into the difficult role of management in the absence of their husbands. As chaos unfolded around them, they operated with a dwindling number of slaves and white overseers, while coping with shortages of supplies, markets, and livestock, attacks by the enemy on stored cotton, and the constant threat of poverty.[14] They expanded the scope of plantation production to meet their needs, including employing slaves in the manufacture of cloth and shoes.[15] The production and management skills that southern women developed would prove useful as a quarter of a

[14] James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 174.
[15] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore,* 76-77.

million men died in the war, and the men who did return were often unable to provide for their families without assistance.

Regardless of whether they occupied their plantations or became refugees, feeding and clothing their families and slaves was a daily challenge for elite southern white women. After several years of war, and the ensuing disruptions to transportation and blockaded ports, supplies were scarce. Susan Dabney Smedes, in compiling her father, Thomas Dabney's wartime experiences, writes about the shortages and prices. Flour and sugar were either non-existent or priced beyond reach. Confederates improvised, making coffee out of sweet potatoes or peanuts. A beef roast was reported to have cost fifty dollars, and the price of a pound of tea doubled in just a couple days. As extensive pre-war wardrobes dwindled, women remade their dresses rather than replacing them, as the cost of fabric soared over fifteen dollars a yard. Some women even learned to weave their own cloth, and attempts were made to tan hides and produce leather shoes, rather than pay forty dollars or more for new ones.[16] In South Carolina, Emma LeConte wrote in her diary of making her own undergarments, knitting her stockings, and paying one hundred and fifty dollars for a pair of new shoes.[17] Mary

[16] Smedes, 212-213.
[17] Emma LeConte, *When the World Ended, The Diary of Emma Leconte* ed. Earl Schenck Miers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 16-17.

Chesnut described her Spartan living conditions, "… we camp on the landing, with our one table and six chairs. Beds are made on the dining-room floor. Otherwise there is no furniture. . . "[18] Deprivation was a common factor for women of all social and economic levels across the South. In the earlier years of the war, white women's enthusiasm for the cause and staunch support of their men made sacrifices at home easier to bear. But as the war went on, and Confederate currency became increasingly devalued, many families across the South faced starvation. In addition to the shortages resulting from rationing, poor crops, and blockades, supplies were further depleted by donations to the Confederate cause. Southern women sent food, bedding, and clothes to the army. Sallie Moore noted in her memoirs, "We had even cut up our carpets into lengths and sent them to camps for the soldiers to sleep on."[19]

As the War reached its' final months, the reality of the South's situation became disturbingly clear. Kate Stone realized that the end of the conflict was near when she wrote,

> Conquered, submission, subjugation are words that burn into my heart, and yet I feel that we are doomed to know them in all their bitterness. The war is rushing rapidly to a disastrous close.

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[18] Chesnut, 521.
[19] Sallie Alexander Moore, *Memories of a Long Life in Virginia* (Staunton, VA: McClure Company, 1920), 70.

> Another month and our Confederacy will be a Nation no longer, but we will be slaves, yes slaves, of the Yankee Government.[20]

Mary Chesnut reflected the anguish of many southern women over the waste of time and life that had gone into this losing battle, "I was blinded by tears of rage. Indeed I nearly wept myself away. In vain. Years, death, depopulation, bondage, fears; these have all been borne."[21] Returning to or surrounded by what was left of their homes, it was obvious that physically, socially, and economically life would never be the same. The desolation left in the aftermath of war had changed the landscape. Mary Chesnut describes the trip home to Mulberry Plantation, penning this in her diary on May 2, 1865:

> I am writing from the roadside…en route to Camden. Since we left Chester, solitude; nothing but tall, blackened chimneys to show that any man has ever trod this road before us. This is Sherman's track: it is hard not to curse him. I wept incessantly at first…then I made a vow. If we are a crushed people, I will never be a whimpering, pining slave.[22]

This entry captures the essence of what many white women were feeling at the time: anger and frustration, but also a firm determination to rise above the situation. The Confederacy may have been defeated, but the spirit of its people was not completely broken. Journal entries at the end of the war began to reflect feelings of acceptance and determination,

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[20] Stone, 339-340.
[21] Chesnut, 487.
[22] Ibid, 527.

with some optimism. Eliza Andrews had that optimistic tone when she noted in her journal on May 12, 1865, "It is dreadful to be so poor, but somehow, I can't suppress a forlorn hope that it won't last always, and that a time may come when we will laugh at all these troubles even more heartily than we do now."[23] Frances Andrews noted in her journal August 25, 1865, "It is more graceful and more sensible to accept poverty as it comes than to try to hide it under a flimsy covering of false appearances… for my part, I am prouder of my poverty than I ever was of my former prosperity."[24] Southern women's true strength of character was evident as they resolutely faced the changes wrought by defeat.

In the midst of the chaos, many women accepted the realities of war more easily than did their husbands. Southern women had been a part of the changes that had occurred over the course of the war, pouring physical, emotional, and spiritual energy into the mere act of survival. Men had been away defending their homes, and were often unprepared for the reality that faced them when they returned. Little remained of their former lives, and many men, desiring a safe haven after the horrors of war, struggled to adjust to the changes they found across the South. War had ravaged the countryside; buildings and land were laid waste,

[23] Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl 1864-1865* ed. Spencer Bidwell King, Jr., (Macon: The Ardivan Press, 1960), 250.
[24] Andrews, 380.

and by choice or default women had stepped into the role the masters had left behind. Mrs. Thomas writes of her husband's discouragement in May 1865:

> The fact is our Negroes are to be made free and a change, a very [great] change will be affected in our mode of living. The news was just communicated to us…the Negroes were to be subsisted, paid six months wages in advance and half the crop made to be divided among them. Contracts to [be] made between negro and Planter…A failure to plant will cause the land to be confiscated…Mr. T. appeared cast down, utterly spirit broken yesterday when the news first reached him and when I would hint at brighter sky would mock at such anticipations.[25]

Jane Pickett, on learning her home had been burned and their slaves freed by Union troops wrote, "Mr. Pickett cannot bear so large a loss of property. As I never was exalted by property, so I never could be debased by adversity."[26] The most life altering change, the loss of slaves, left Southerners searching for new identities to replace the ones tied to slave owning. Large plantations could not be operated if workers must be compensated, but without their land, planters had no means of providing for their families.

While men wrestled with how to earn a living, Southern women quickly realized that without slaves to do the physical labor of the plantation, it was up to them to either do their part physically or

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[25] Thomas, 264-265.
[26] Jane Pickett, *Bodie Family Papers* (Jackson: Mississippi State Archives) in Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 131.

financially. During the war, women had not been simply bemoaning a lost way of life while waiting for their men to come home and rescue them; they shouldered the responsibilities of wartime survival. Most of these efforts were voluntary, but there were a few planter women in desperate financial straits that worked for pay. Southern women joined together to sew uniforms for the Confederates, roll bandages, and raise money for the military. Some went even further, working in hospitals tending the sick and wounded. In spite of the conflict between patriotism and the expectation to remain a lady, women overcame their doubts, as well as opposition from doctors and military leaders, to become an essential part of the war effort. As the number of wounded men exceeded the capacity of existing facilities, women did not wait on government bureaucracy, but secured buildings and opened additional hospitals, often on state fairgrounds, as Mrs. Campbell Bruce and Mrs. George Howe did in September 1861 near Columbia, South Carolina.[27] Women took full control of some hospitals, even seeing to burial of the dead, and writing letters to the families of dying soldiers, both Yankee and Confederate. [28] Their efforts did not go unrecognized. In a letter to Sophia Gilmer Bibb, head of a hospital in Montgomery, Alabama,

[27] Clinton, *Tara Revisited,* 83.
[28] Ibid, 82-83.

Confederate president Jefferson Davis wrote, "The surgeon-general has informed me that the ladies' hospital is the best managed and most comfortable one in the Confederacy. . ."[29] Sallie Tompkins, a wealthy young woman from a Virginia plantation, ran Robertson Hospital in Richmond during the war so well that President Davis gave her the military rank of captain, but refused to accept the accompanying salary.[30]

According to Edwards, the end of the war signified a collapse of their societal structure, as women "actively sought new ways to define their own and their menfolk's status in a world without slavery, while bringing their version of the past into the present through various efforts to honor the Confederacy and the plantation south. In the process, they redefined their own role in southern society."[31] Stereotypical southern women's roles had changed during the war, and would not be reversed. In the absence of slaves, and with dependable help difficult to procure and expensive to keep, women took the skills gained during the war years and applied them to daily life. Elite southern white women took on household chores permanently, and actively participated in "men's work" in their new roles as widows or to assist their impecunious

[29] H.E. Sterkx, *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War* (Rutherford, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 115.
[30] Clinton, *Tara Revisited,* 85.
[31] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore,* 121.

husbands.[32] Some women used their education and experience in training their own children, to enter the workplace as teachers. Looking to the future, Mrs. Thomas wrote, "I have seen poverty staring me in the face…but even then I nerved myself and was prepared to do something if I could…I looked forward and asked myself, what can I do? Nothing, except teach school…"[33] Reconstruction plans included provision for public schools, producing what was called the "educational revival." This renewed interest in education provided many respectable opportunities for women who needed to supply income for their families.[34] Other women, drawing on their writing talents, became authors, journalists, and newspaper editors. This gave women a voice for the growing women's rights movement. Some formerly elite women defied tradition even further, seeking employment in factories and mills. This trend toward increased numbers of women working outside the home would continue, with the 1890 Census revealing that women in manufacturing jobs in Virginia had doubled since 1870, and professional women in Mississippi had increased fourfold during the same period,

[32] Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 212-213.
[33] Thomas, 257-258.
[34] Scott, 110-111.

even though the population of each state had increased by a third or less.[35]

Prior to the war, planter mistresses had focused their energies on their own domestic world, not venturing into the public realm as did their northern counterparts. The Civil War was transformational for elite southern white women, in that the proximity of war forced them beyond the private sphere of home, and thus brought them to an equal or advanced level of societal participation as compared with white women in the north. Since nearly all of the battles and destruction took place in the south, the "homefront became the battlefield for millions of Confederate women."[36] Southern women had diverse reactions to their altered roles and responsibilities. Some were despondent over their changed lives, such as Mary Custis Lee who stated in a letter to Mrs. Davis, "My heart yearns for the home and scenes of my past life. I feel as a stranger and exile, always looking forward to some change in my condition."[37] Others found the experience beneficial, as Kate Stone wrote, "It has taken trouble to teach me my faults. . . I will try always to

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[35] Bureau of the Census, *Special Census Report on the Occupations of the Population of the United States at the 11th Census,* Carroll D. Wright, Commissioner of Labor in charge of the eleventh census, Washington D.C.: GPO, 1896.
[36] Fraser, 118.
[37] "Mary Custis Lee to Mrs. Davis, 6 February, 1867," in *Ladies of Richmond, Confederate Capital compiled* by Katharine M. Jones (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), 332.

see the silver lining to the cloud . . . and I will try in the future to be more worthy of the blessings that brighten my pathway."[38] The war taking place around them provided planter women opportunities to work through their grief, and prepared them to function in a changed world during Reconstruction. It was a slow process, and sometimes painful, but societal and economic change of this magnitude could not have been accomplished in such a brief time period without the catalyst of war. As Scott aptly stated, "Southern women had begun to shake loose from the tyranny of a single monolithic image of woman and were now free, for better or worse, to struggle to be themselves."[39]

[38] Stone, 378.
[39] Scott, 231.

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