

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Civil War Widows

By **Angela Esco Elder**, University of Georgia

Hetty Cary was pretty, so pretty that one soldier believed her to be “the most beautiful woman of her day and generation...altogether the most beautiful woman I ever saw in any land.” On Thursday, January 19, 1865, “Richmond’s belle” walked down the aisle and married a Confederate brigadier general, John Pegram. In spite of the raging Civil War “all was bright and beautiful” at their wedding, which took place in Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church. John soon returned to duty and on February 5 he received a shot above his lower rib and died almost instantly in the snow. Exactly three weeks from the date of her wedding, Hetty found herself in the same church, with the same people, the same minister, walking down the same aisle, for the funeral. “Again has St. Paul’s, his own beloved church,” wrote one female diarist, “receive[d] the soldier and his bride—the one coffined for a hero’s grave, the other, pale and trembling, though still by his side, in widow’s garb.” After the ceremony, the attendees took a “slow pilgrimage” up a steep bluff to the Pegram plot in the Hollywood Cemetery. Hetty “was like a flower broken in the stalk,” so heartbroken that earlier she had to be torn from the body “almost by force.” John’s family gathered behind the widow, just 29 years old. Three weeks a wife, Hetty would remain a widow for over 15 years.¹

The American Civil War created an unprecedented number of young white widows, many married for a short amount of time, like Hetty Cary. Between 1861 and 1865, approximately three million husbands, fathers, sons, uncles, and brothers left for war. Approximately 750,000 American families would never see their loved one’s face again as the men died, often far from home. As a result, some 200,000 white women became widows within these four years. For many Confederate widows, like many women in the South, the war was an extremely close and personal experience, as battles and armies brought death, destruction, and shortages into their states, their communities, and, for some, their backyards. Many Confederate widows played an important role in

¹ This essay also keeps all spelling and phrasing quoted from documents in its original form without including the intrusive [sic] notation. On some occasions, punctuation has been converted to modern-day notations for clarity. Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall: The War Experiences of the Youngest Member of Jackson’s Staff* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 271, 325; Judith W. McGuire, 12 March 1865, in *Diary of a Southern Refugee during the War by A Lady of Virginia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 341; Burton Harrison, *Recollections Grace and Gay* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 203, 205; Jane Cary to Mr. Riccards, as quoted in Walter S. Griggs, Jr., *General John Pegram, C.S.A.* (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, Inc., 1993), 118.

supporting the Confederacy during the war and memorializing it after the conflict. Union widows, on the other hand, received the honor and respect of a nation at the close of the war, for they had sacrificed their husbands to a winning cause. And yet, in spite of their political differences, the grieving process and emotional journeys of Union and Confederate white widows contained many similarities. The loss of a husband and the struggle to live within the societal expectations affected all widows, regardless of geographic location.²

When men left for war, the ways in which they could meet their demise were nearly innumerable—disease, prisons, and bullets took men both slowly and suddenly. Many widows, and society as a whole for that matter, angrily came to believe “the roll of death is fearful—the cruel monster is insatiable.” Before the war, a wife expected to sit beside a bed, hold her husband’s hand, and watch him die after a long, fulfilling life. This type of death, the “Good Death,” changed during the Civil War as men died away from home. Most wives wanted to know the circumstances and details surrounding their spouses’ deaths before beginning the grieving process. A well-written condolence letter allowed a widow to place herself next to her husband’s deathbed mentally. For instance, a letter informed Louisa that her husband David was stricken “with yellow fever Monday evening, suddenly, and from the commencement was a very ill man.” The author described the “most alarming symptoms” of her husband, the “human aid” which David received, the fluctuations of his health, who visited him, who was with him when he died, who held his hand, and the final messages David wished to be repeated to his family members. These details would bring comfort to wives like Louisa. She now knew that her husband did not die abruptly on a cold battlefield or in a bustling hospital surrounded by strangers. As historian Drew Gilpin Faust emphasized, chaplains, nurses, doctors, and soldiers tried to keep “as many of the elements of the conventional Good Death as possible” alive in their letters, aiming to soothe faraway wives. The comfort these letters provided, however, was often fleeting, for no letter could bring a husband back to life again.³

² The number of women widowed by the Civil War is difficult to determine. J. David Hacker provides the most recent number, suggesting that approximately 750,000 men lost their lives in the Civil War, and that if 28% of the men who died in the war were married at the time of their death, 200,000 widows would be created. There are no statistics currently available for African American widowhood, and little research has been completed on the experience of these widows. J. David Hacker, “A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead,” *Civil War History*, Vol. LVII No. 4. (2011), 311. A map illustrating the tremendous number of widows created by the Civil War can be found in J. David Hacker, Libra Hilde, and James Holland Jones, “The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. LXXVI, no. 1 (February 2010), 65. Other sources which include detailed discussions of mortality statistics include Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2008) and Maris A. Vinovskis, “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations,” in *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays*, edited by Maris A. Vinovskis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³ Emma Holmes, October 8, 1864, in *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 375; F. Lay, to E. L. Harris, 11 October 1864, David Bullock Harris Papers, 1789-1894, Manuscript Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University; For an excellent book on death in the Civil War which includes a lengthy discussion of this

Because casualty reporting was inconsistent, a woman was often at the mercy of the men who fought alongside her husband to learn not only the details of his death, but even that the death had occurred. The arrival of a crumpled envelope addressed with unfamiliar handwriting might contain a message from a man like William Fields, who wrote “as you in all probability have not heard of the death of your husband and as I was a witness to his death I consider it my duty to write you although I am a stranger to you.” Likewise, Rosa Delony learned of her husband’s death not from the hospital or even from a letter addressed to her. Instead, Rosa learned of Will’s passing from a telegram written to her friend. “On account of her condition break the news to Mrs. Delony as best you can...William Gaston Delony...died on Friday afternoon from the effects of gunshot wounds he received on the left leg. His funeral took place on Saturday afternoon about four o’clock at Stanton Hospital where he died,” the soldier wrote.⁴

Widows’ responses to the news of death were as diverse as the widows themselves. From shock to denial, depression to acceptance, inconsolable wives came to terms with their new identity as widows in different ways. The amount of time this process took varied tremendously. Some women felt disoriented by the news, like Octavia “Tivie” Stephens, who wrote her brother “I know not how to write I am so bewildered.” Though she had been told numerous times that her husband was dead, she felt, “I can not realize the whole truth, it seems dark and mysterious.” For others, shock brought silence, such as the widow who responded “unnaturally calm and has not shed a tear...poor girl, I fear the reaction when his body arrives—she had a sad and heavy responsibility left upon her and so young.” For this type of widow, shock served as a temporary defense, sheltering the mind from the overwhelming and besieging emotions.⁵

Not all widows reacted calmly. One young wife created such a scene of “frantic grief” that a Pennsylvania nurse, Anna Holstein, felt the event was “graven as with an iron pen” upon her memory. According to Holstein, this particular wife “came hurriedly, as soon as she knew her husband was in a battle, only to find him dead and buried two days before her arrival.” The young woman refused to believe that her husband had been laid “beside his comrades in the orchard” and insisted that she see him. The widow could not contain herself as the shovels of earth slowly uncovered the grave. Consumed with “agonizing grief,” the woman “clutched the earth by handfuls” unable to “wait the slow

notion of a Good Death, see Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 6-11. In addition to Faust, in 2008 Mark S. Schantz published a vital book on religion, death, and the American Civil War. Like Faust, he refers only to widows tangentially. Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁴ William Fields to Mrs. Fitzpatrick, June 8, 1865, Maria Clopton Papers, Medical and Hospital Collection, Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Va as quoted in Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 15; The Southern Telegraphy Company, telegram from W. L. Church to Pleasant Stovall, 6 October 1863, Deloney Papers, Hargrett; John F. Stegeman, *These Men She Gave: Civil War Diary of Athens, Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964), 99, 149-50.

⁵ Octavia Stephens to Davis Bryant, April 4, 1864, in *Rose Cottage Chronicles: Civil War Letter of the Bryant-Stephens Families of North Florida*, eds. Arch Fredric Blakey, Ann Smith Lainhart, and Winston Bryant Stephens, Jr. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 334; Emma Holmes, July 4, 1862, in *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 179.

process of removing the body.” When the “slight covering was removed, and the blanket thrown from off the face, she needed but one glance to assure her it was all too true.” He was dead. She went back to the hospital, “passive and quiet beneath the stern reality of this crushing sorrow.” This widow was not the only one who desired irrefutable proof. Another penned sorrowfully that “the last lingering hopes have all been crushed. None of us could mistake those pieces of cloth. I thank God that he had on clothes that we knew. Otherwise we never would have felt sure that they were his precious remains.” Likewise, Barbara Ellen Huff only accepted the death of her husband when her brother-in-law sent her a lock of her husband’s hair. Such evidence provided a confirmation that the wife was now widow.⁶

Observers often felt unsure of how to handle the reactions of widows, writing things like “I cannot describe the grief of his widow & with sorrow I write these few lines.” Some men struggled with the possibility of denying wives one last look at their husbands. One deceased husband was so “dreadfully mangled in the face” that even though the widow had the body, “it was impossible to allow the family a last look...how harrowing to their feelings to think those loved forms so near and yet unable to obtain one last agonizing look.” While some widows knew where their husbands were buried, many women did not even know where their husband’s body lay. For Annie O’Hear, the arrival of letters only added to “her overwhelming grief for her husband, whom there can be little doubt was killed in the fatal battle [in Virginia] which left desolation in so many other Charleston homes.” Emma Holmes believed that a grieving widow was “the saddest of sights” and hated to see “a young girl of beauty, talents, refinement & wealth, whose mind is so clouded by melancholy as to be oblivious of the realities of the present.” But this sight was the reality, and it was everywhere.⁷

No matter the response, one thing was certain: the husband was dead, and now, the work of mourning would begin. The Civil War altered antebellum mourning rituals tremendously, impacting both clothing customs and condolence letters. One contributing factor to this change was that the war created widows in higher numbers than ever before in American history. Judith McGuire felt “it is melancholy to see how many wear

⁶ The widow in this story is not identified as either a Union or a Confederate sympathizer, but this is not particularly important. Raw, initial, searing emotions are human, not Union or Confederate. Mrs. H [Anna Morris Ellis Holstein], *Three Years in Field Hospitals of the Army of the Potomac* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1867), v, 13; Louis P. Towles, ed., *World Turned Upside Down: The Palmers of South Santee, 1818-1881* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 404, quoted in Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 146; Robert Kenzer, “The Uncertainty of Life: A Profile of Virginia’s Civil War Widows,” in *The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War*, ed. Joan E. Cashin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 120.

⁷ David Todd to Emilie Todd Helm, April 15, 1862, Helm Papers, Kentucky Historical Society, quoted in Stephen Berry, *House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided By War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2007), 116; Emma Holmes, 26 July 1861, in *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 70; Augustina Stephens to Octavia Stephens, Welka, March 21, 1864, in *Rose Cottage Chronicles*, 330; Emma Holmes, June 22, 1864, in *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 356; Emma Holmes, June 22, 1864, *Diary of Miss Emma Holmes*, 356.

mourning” clothes. Widowhood was more prevalent and more visible in towns, especially Southern towns, which had not one widow, but many. On December 18, 1862, Lucy Breckinridge found herself surrounded by “14 ladies dressed in black” and remarked “there were so many ladies there, all dressed in deep mourning, that we felt as if we were at a convent and formed a sisterhood.” Unlike the antebellum period, during the Civil War so many women wore black that it often seemed that the entire nation was cloaked in nighttime shadows.⁸

The inability to purchase proper mourning garb plagued women of lower classes. Especially during the economic hardships of the Civil War, mourning was a luxury that these women could not afford. McGuire described “one sad girl” who was “too poor to buy mourning” due to “fallen fortunes.” Another who could not afford to buy a mourning wardrobe dyed all of her clothes black in order “to make them suitable.” Silk black dresses, heavy veils, and other features of antebellum mourning were expensive. With supply shortages and greater demands, the materials became even more expensive and harder to find. Though they were priced-out of respectable mourning rituals, it seems lower class women often did the best they could to mimic these customs, even if it meant dyeing the only clothes they owned in a gloomy ink.⁹

The increase of widows in their twenties and thirties also affected mourning rituals and expectations. While premature and sudden death certainly occurred in the antebellum period, the extent to which the Civil War killed young men astounded communities. The suddenness of this death led to a phenomenon of many young, pregnant widows, for example. In a time when the average woman gave birth to eight to ten children in her lifetime, it is perhaps not so surprising that the Civil War created so many pregnant widows. When William Gaston Delony died, his wife was eight months pregnant with a little girl. The baby was born just a month after her father’s death, leaving Rosa with four children under the age of seven. Confederate officer Stephen Dodson Ramseur was ecstatic to hear the news of his young wife’s first pregnancy but felt it was “the greatest trial of my life to be separated from you *now!*” When his wife gave birth, he claimed “the news relieved me of the greatest anxiety of my life” and immediately wrote her to ask whether he had a son or a daughter, signing the letter “with love inexpressible.” This would be the last letter he would ever send. Shot in battle, he died just days after his child’s birth, still unaware of his baby’s gender. As Ramseur’s story shows, even if the child had been born, there was a chance a soldiering father would

⁸ McGuire, 3 January 1864, 250; Lucy Breckinridge, *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864*, ed. Mary D. Robertson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 18 December 1862, 88-89.

⁹ Historian Stephanie McCurry contends that the Confederacy became answerable to poor whites and women in ways the old South never had been. My research leads me to believe the Confederacy is in fact even more answerable to its widows, even those of lower classes. Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); McGuire, 3 January 1864, 250; Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 150.

not meet the bundle of joy. Unlike most antebellum widows, the war widow not only had to worry about herself, but also her young children.¹⁰

While the younger age of widows would change many aspects of their mourning experience, it did not impact every aspect of widowhood. Religious sentiments continued to appear in nearly every letter written to a woman widowed during the Civil War. Like antebellum condolence letters, some correspondents genuinely attempted to comfort a widow with the notion of reunion in the hereafter. Dallas Wood, after learning about the death of his brother-in-law, reminded his sister that “we all have the cheering assurance of a blissful home in Heaven where there will be no war and no parting again.” Before his death, a different husband wrote “I want to meet you all in haven whear woers and fightings will be ore, whear wives and husbands part no more, whear parance and children each other greete, wheare all is joy and pleasure sweat.” For strength, one sympathizer encouraged a recent widow to “lean you[r] head upon the bosom of your sympathizing Savior” and remember that “our Father reigns and in mercy remembers us.” Like the sentiments expressed in antebellum letters, the sympathetic thought that “God alone can sustain you while passing thru’ these deep, deep waters” and assurances that “God will help you thro’ your troubles” continued the religious consolation of the pre-war era.¹¹

American society became increasingly convinced that it was essential for war widows to remember their late husbands both honorably and often and thus the notion became prevalent in condolence letters. The foundations for this idea came from the antebellum period, like the etiquette book which insisted widows “affections are in heaven, with the companions, whom, on earth they shall see no more.” Etiquette required women to mourn for two and a half years. A war widow did not just have a dead husband, but a “brave, gallant husband.” A soldiering husband did not just die, but died “whilst gallantly fighting for his country.” “Bless God that you had such a husband whose memory is honored and whose children will feel proud” wrote one condoler to a new widow. The pressure placed on widows to remember husbands stemmed from a fear that amidst soaring death tolls, soldiers would be forgotten. In a letter to his sister, one soldier wrote that while he hoped she “may enjoy yourself this day and have a merry Christmas,” there was “no doubt you could enjoy your self much more if dear Jimmy was

¹⁰ The baby was a girl; Jan Lewis and Kenneth A. Lockridge, “‘Sally Has Been Sick’: Pregnancy and Family Limitation Among Virginia Gentry Women, 1780-1830,” in *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Autumn, 1988, 5-19; Stephen Dodson Ramseur, *The Bravest of the Brave: The Correspondence of Stephen Dodson Ramseur*, ed. George G. Kundahl (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 287, 289, 290.

¹¹ Dallas Wood, Dalton, Georgia, to Louisa A Nixon, Mt. Pleasant Florida, 25 December 1861, Nixon Letters, University of Florida (UF); John F. Davenport to Mary Jane Davenport, 7 September 1862, John F. Davenport Civil War Letters, 1862-1864, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; Martha D. D. to Rosa Delony, Athens, Georgia, October 13, 1863, November 6, 1863, Deloney Papers, University of Georgia.

alive.” The death of a husband should not cause a widow to be any less committed to the man. Ideally, her devotion would not only continue, but increase.¹²

Wartime condolence letters also urged widows to remain loyal to the cause that their husbands died defending, especially in the South. The cause he died for was important, for nothing could be worse than to be remembered as “a hero in a broken cause” who was “pouring out his wasted life,” and leaving “the land he loved to darkness and defeat.” After the war, the South wanted and needed someone to “strew the early flowers upon the soldiers’ graves” and make sure that “no grave has been forgotten.” But during the war, the Confederacy needed the support of widows to carry on. Condolence letters urged widows to remember both the husband and the cause that put him in an early grave.¹³

Because the Civil War produced younger widows with children, letter writers felt the need to advise a widow on the care of her children. In the antebellum era, when it was more likely widows would be well beyond their childrearing years, this additional advice was irrelevant. However, a young widow should “take care of yourself for your dear children. Who can fill a Mother’s place?” Letters repeatedly echoed this reaction, reminding a woman that while she may be upset, she must fulfill her primary duty as a mother. One mother-in-law scolded her late son’s wife, saying she “must not give up on your feelings my dear child, but think of those precious little ones whose sole dependence is upon you, strive to cheer up.” To the same widow, a cousin penned “for the sake of the little ones depending upon you...be calm and trustful.” Even poems bestowed advice on grieving mothers, to “not be by passion’s tempest driven.” Children needed to be fed, clothed, and watched. A mother too consumed with her own grief to care for her husband’s prodigy was not desired.¹⁴

Unlike the antebellum period, Civil War correspondents were not usually a widow’s similarly-aged peers or younger family members. Instead, many writers were older than the widows themselves, likely contributing to the more advisory aspect of these letters. Condolence letters began to encourage widows to mimic older widows—often their mothers or aunts. For Eliza Walker, the model was her own mother. Her father, while “examining a strange horse, he received a kick in the breast, and died instantly.” As a widow, Eliza’s mother represented the ideal in her eyes. “I know that no braver or more wonderful woman ever lived,” she wrote. Likewise, when William Delony’s father died in 1832, Will’s mother Martha successfully raised four children on

¹² Lizzie Torrey, *The Ideal of Womanhood, or, Words to the Women of America* (Boston: Wentworth, Hewes & Co., 1859), 130-2; Martha D. D., 13 October 1863; Maria Delony, 11 August 1864, Deloney Papers, UGA; Sam Adams to Amanda Moore, 27 September 1863, Sydenham Moore Family Papers, 1833-1373, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

¹³ Mary E. Flemming to Octavia “Tivy” Bryant Stephens, Stephens-Bryant Family Papers, George A. Smathers Special and Area Studies Collections, University of Florida; Ellen Long Daniel’s Scrapbook, Daniel Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC).

¹⁴ M. D. D. to Rosa Delony, 6 November 1863; Maria Delony to Rosa Delony, 11 August 1864, Deloney Papers, UGA; Martha D. Duncan, to Rosa Delony 25 November 1863, Deloney Papers, UGA; Ellen Long Daniel’s Scrapbook, Daniel Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

her own. With this precedence, Martha expected her daughter-in-law to be able to do the same for her grandchildren. “You have great work, Rosa,” penned one loved one, noticing the tremendous amount of strain placed upon the young widow. And indeed she, and many others, did.¹⁵

Beyond condolence letters, the Civil War gave a woman a new advisor: her husband. Soldiering husbands, recognizing the chance of premature deaths, began to give their wives mourning instructions on how to live, should they die. Asa V. Ladd, the soldier shot in retaliation for the Union men killed by a Confederate guerrilla leader, provided his wife with detailed instructions. “You need have no uneasiness about my future state, for my faith is well founded and I fear no evil. God is my refuge and hiding place,” he assured her. As such, “I want you to teach the children piety, so they can meet me at the right hand of God” he penned, echoing the sentiment of condolence letters in their religious instruction. He also wanted his wife to devote herself to her children by going “back to the old place and try to make support.” “You are now left to take care of my dear children. Tell them to remember their dear father,” he stressed. He did not want to be forgotten. Asa also included directions about closing up his business affairs and information to tell his friends. But to his wife, he only had assurances of love and a wish, that “I dont want you to let this bear on your mind anymore than you can help...I want you to meet me in heaven,” Asa wrote.¹⁶

Like those who wrote condolence letters encouraging widows to remember their husbands, husbands themselves held a deep fear that they would be forgotten. “Dear Linda,” penned one husband a month before his untimely death, “let nothing change you from the path of faithfulness to me and the children,” he cautioned. A soldier who performed his duty by fighting to the death hoped his family would do their duty by remaining proud and loyal to his memory. John F. Davenport wrote his wife that “I feal like I will return home to the sweat imbrace of you and our sweat Little Children,” but added “if I should fall remember I am fighting for the rites of Liberty for you and our Little ones.” Not only did he want Mary Jane to remember that he was fighting for liberty, his letters are also haunted by the fear that she would not remember him. “Oh my dearest earthlay Jewel...if we should never live to see each other again in this life oh let us live so we will be sure to meet in haven thare we will never never parte again,” he penned. He craved an everlasting love. At the bottom of the letter, he wrote “forget me never” and circled the sentiment. A minié ball ended John’s life on July 9, 1864.¹⁷

¹⁵ Eliza Jane Kendrick Walker, *Other Days: Reminiscences, 1924*, pg 94-95, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, 63; Martha D. Duncan, to Rosa Delony 25 November 1863, Deloney Papers, UGA.

¹⁶ Asa V. Ladd, Gratiot St. Prison in St. Louise, MO, to wife, 29 October 1864, Ladd Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

¹⁷ Harris Hardin Averett, Camp near Pollard, to Malinda Waller Averett, Reeltown, Alabama, 10 September 1863, Harris Hardin Averett Papers, 1854-1863, Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH); Dallas Wood, Dalton, Georgia, to Louisa A Nixon, Mt. Pleasant Florida, 25 December 1861, Nixon Letters, UF.

The Civil War also gave widows an entirely new task to complete: get their husbands' bodies home. The idea of a body resting far from home, or worse, in enemy soil, was unacceptable. A woman's mourning work began once she had a place to mourn. If a widow could manage to determine the location of the body, she should "seek a grave for the dead" at home, "close by those he loved, among kindred and friends in the fair sunny land he died to defend." Union husbands, like William F. Vermilion, also informed their wives that they would like to make it home-whether dead or alive. On June 30, 1863, William wrote: "You have often asked what I want you to do if I should not get home." After thinking on the idea, he had come to a conclusion. "Get me home if you can," he penned, "bury me on some nice loyal spot of ground, plant flowers over the grave." Most importantly, "don't forget to go to that spot Dollie," he concluded. The last thing that soldier wanted was to be left far from home. "I don't want to sleep in the land of traitors," he explained, "I couldn't rest well."¹⁸

In sum, the ideal widow wore black, mourned for a minimum of two and a half years, resigned herself to God's will, focused on her children, modeled herself after older widows, followed her husband's wishes, devoted herself to his memory, and if she were Confederate, to his cause, and got his body home for burial. These messages of ideal wartime widowhood, coming from condolence letters, husbands, literature, and newspapers permeated all of American society. But in the end, it was up to the widow to interpret all of these messages, live within the pressure, and navigate her way through mourning. The Civil War changed the prescription of widowhood, but she could decide which elements to perform. As a lived experience, widowhood changed. It had to. Advice on paper was one thing, real emotion was another. The widow was the one living through widowhood and she would choose how it would look in her life.

Some widows did try to live up to the ideals their communities stressed. Soldiers often recorded stories and encounters that reinforced this image of the saintly and dedicated widow. Robert Stiles, while in Virginia, sat on the porch of a farm house with "a soldier's widow." The young widow noticed that "my coat was badly torn." The widow, "kindly offering to mend it," took the jacket and immediately sat down to fix the tear. No soldier in her late husband's army would appear in a torn jacket if she could help it. The widow could no longer fix her own husband's clothing, so she now fixed that of other Confederate soldiers, supporting the cause her husband gave his life for.¹⁹

M. D. D. to Rosa Delony, 14 January 1864, Deloney Papers, UGA; John F. Davenport to Mary Jane Davenport, 20 August 1862, John F. Davenport Civil War Letters, 1862-1864, ADAH; John F. Davenport to Mary Jane Davenport, 1 June 1864, *ibid*.

¹⁸ An excellent article on the topic of women retrieving bodies is Judith Giesberg's "The Work the Remains," in *The Civil War Monitor: A New Look at America's Greatest Conflict*. Vol. 1, No. 1, 38-45; McGuire, 28 October 1864, 310-313; William Vermilion, Helena, Arkansas, to Mary Vermilion, 30 June 1863 in *Love Amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* ed. Donald C. Elder III (Iowa City: Iowa Press, 2005), 150.

¹⁹ Robert Stiles, *Four Years Under Marse Robert 3rd* ed. (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1904), 322-323.

But for some widows, it was harder to achieve the ideal even if they chose to try. Grief plagued widows in different degrees and at different times. Some were younger than others and some had barely tasted marriage before it was over. Grief-stricken widows sometimes struggled with resignation to their situation. Ellen Long Daniel managed to maintain her immense grief in a way that many would have appreciated—privately. She lost her husband in 1864 and filled a scrapbook with poems, pictures, and newspaper clippings related to war and loss. Through this scrapbook, readers gain a tremendous insight into her grief. Early in the book appears the poem entitled “Gone,” which included lines like “life is blank to a girl broken hearted.” For a Confederate widow especially, she should embody peace and acceptance, both during and after the war. True feelings of grief and heartbreak in their often loud and ugly form would shatter this fragile image of the supportive Confederate lady. Widows could mourn, but mourn silently, filling scrapbooks with their grief, as Ellen did. In addition to the poetry, her scrapbook also included a huge picture of Mary Anna Jackson, the widow of Stonewall Jackson. She was a woman Ellen could understand. When looking through the book in private, Ellen could let passion reign. But in public, she would not do so. She would play the role of an accepting widow.²⁰

And yet, while this ideal was crafted, molded, and accepted by some, another stock character emerged within the realm of widowhood—one which rejected the model. This stereotype of the flirty widow, was at best comical. At her worst, she could bring about the destruction of American morality. Of course, not all of American society believed that young widows must remain single forever. Most sanctioned remarriage after the respectable amount of time had passed. Nor was the idea of a flirtatious widow new. One New York etiquette book, published in 1846, conceded that “there is a peculiar fascination about widows...whether it by sympathy for the weeds of mourning, the interest excited by a lady in distress, or a certain air acquired by experience in matrimony, widows are very commonly the objects of a tender passion.” And yet, at a time of war, a hasty remarriage suggested that the loss of the husband was unimportant. Southern society especially could not and would not accept the idea that “all our sacrifices, all the blood shed has been for nothing.” They believed moving on should not be an easy, painless process. Happy, hurried marriages suggested otherwise and were thus discouraged.²¹

The idea of the flirty widow prevailed in jokes, books, and letters. The stereotype became so prevalent that the idea of the flirty widow permeated both northern and southern camps alike. Asking his wife in Pennsylvania to “excuse the lewdness of the joke,” Charles Johnson proceeded to inform her that the poetic line “Oh! for a lodge in some vast wilderness, amidst a contiguity of shade” had been paraphrased to “Oh! for a

²⁰ Ellen Long Daniel’s Scrapbook, Daniel Papers, UNC.

²¹ *The Art of Good Behavior; and Letter Writing on Love, Courtship, and Marriage: A complete guide for ladies and gentlemen, particularly those who have not enjoyed the advantages of fashionable life* (New York: Published by C. P. Huestis, 1846), 108-110; “Despair, Hope, and Delusion: The Collapse of Confederate Morale Reexamined” in *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, eds. Mark Grimsley and Brooks D. Simpson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 154.

lodge in some vast widow's nest, amidst a contiguity of hair." He then explained that he had merely been trying to remember the poem, but "the two slipped into my idle brain together." He was not alone, for the joke appears in other wartime journals and letters of other soldiers, such as New Yorker Willoughby Babcock, who recorded in a letter that a friend of his "tantalizingly" asked: "How would you like a lodge in some vast widow's nest?"²²

A modicum of truth fueled the fun, and the fears, in the character of the flirty widow. For some men, young widows seemed to take on a certain peculiar attractiveness. In September 1863, Mary Bell believed she had discovered "the secret attraction that widows seemed to possess." She supposed that their allure blossomed from their grief. "How much more the heart is touched by the tender beauty of a woman who has loved and suffered than by the gay shallow pink & white prettiness of a girl," she remarked to her husband. While remarking upon the physical attractiveness of a widow was not so scandalous, the supposed irresistibility proved to be more worrisome. James T. Ayers, a chaplain with the 104th Regiment of Colored Troops, struggled to resist the allure of a Tennessee widow. He described her in his diary as a "Little bewitching yong Blue Eyed fairskined widow tidy Enough for one to eat." "Seldom do I meet her Equals anywhere," he continued, "God bless the Little widow, them Blue Eyes that Little plump Rosy Cheek them Delicate Lilly white hands that Lady Like Smile." Ayers had visited her with the intention to recruit her slave into his regiment. As he rode away however, he realized "that Little woman had Caused me to forget" his purpose. Ayers shrugged off the loss, concluding that a "man would be A monster Could he Deny such an Angel as this" anyway.²³

Flirting could lead to an even greater impertinence: an early remarriage. Although some saw nothing wrong with a widow finding love once more—provided she fell head over heels after mourning her soldier husband for thirty months—some young widows were unable or unwilling to wait that long. Upon seeing a flirty widow on the train, one stranger commented to Mary Boykin Chesnut: "Well, look yonder. As soon as she began whining about her dead beaux I knew she was after another one...It won't be her fault if she don't have another one soon." The stranger watched a minute more and then remarked again, "she won't lose any time." Likewise, Naomi Hayes believed widows were even more impatient for marriage than maidens, for "those who already knew the pleasures of married life were less willing to live outside it." In a case study of Virginia, historian Robert Kenzer compiled statistical data suggesting that the younger a

²² Charles F. Johnson to Mary Johnson, 19 June 1864, in Charles F. Johnson, *The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson: Invalid Corps*, ed. Fred Pelka (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 256; Willoughby Babcock, *Selections from the Letters and Diaries of Brevet-Brigadier General Willoughby Babcock of the Seventy-Fifth New York Volunteers* (New York: The University of the State of New York, 1922), 94.

²³ Mary W. M. Bell to her husband, September 1, 1863, The Civil War Microfilm Collection, #824, Reel 4, Tennessee Library and State Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; James T. Ayers Journal, May 6th, 1864, in *The Blue and the Gray: The Story of the Civil War as Told by Participants (Volume One: The Nomination of Lincoln to the Eve of Gettysburg)*, edited by Henry Steele Commager (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973), 82.

widow was, the greater the likelihood that she would remarry. Through an analysis of pension records and census data, Kenzer determined that 1866 was the most common year for remarriage and that widows who remarried had a median age of twenty-four years in 1860. He concluded that “given the tremendous shortage of men after the conflict, the opportunity to remarry was quite restricted except for the youngest and wealthiest southern women.” This shortage helps to explain why some young widows, when presented with an opportunity for marriage, refused to wait for two and a half years.²⁴

Despite these exceptions, the majority of white widows did attempt to live within the strengthened regulations of mourning closely. Many wives found themselves heartbroken and grasping to cope with their loss. In a time wracked with uncertainty, a prescribed manner for grieving was one consistency upon which widows could depend. The traditions relieved suffering by giving clear expectations in a time of emotional chaos. An ideal war widow honored her husband and his cause with her every action. The ideal widow would certainly not flirt, dance, attend parties, or remarry. In the abstract she could serve as the epitome of all the nation was and could be. If she was southern, she poured her power, her support, and her emotions into the Confederacy. But some women, usually of a younger age and a higher social class, challenged the restrictive war prescriptions with their actions. In doing so, they threatened the virtue the nation was attempting to maintain. In reality, widows would always be a mere replica of the ideal and some women reflected the vision better than others. The eternally devoted widow and the promiscuous widow are but two extremes in a range of experiences. War was chaotic and grief was messy. To be sure, many were watching to discover if a widow proved worthy of her “Noble husband.” Some women lost husbands they loved and some women lost husbands they did not. Bullets pierced the lungs, legs, and livers of breathing, thriving men. The dead were gone. But for their wives, their widows, life continued. Widows had a world to face, a life to live, and a future to shape. And so, in a manner reminiscent of their husbands, they marched on.²⁵

²⁴ Mary Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 489-90; Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 150; Kenzer, 125.

²⁵For the post-war experience of Civil War widows, especially the pension system, see: Amy E. Holmes, “‘Such is the Price We Pay’: American Widows and the Civil War Pension System,” in *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Maris A. Vinovskis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Megan J. McClintock, “Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (September 1996); Jennifer L. Gross, “The United Daughters of the Confederacy, Confederate Widows, and the Lost Cause: ‘We Must Not Forget or Neglect the Widows,’” in *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, eds. Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); M. D. D. to Rosa Delony, 6 November 1863, Deloney Papers, UGA.