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## Extending their usefulness: Women in mid-nineteenth-century Richmond

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EXTENDING THEIR USEFULNESS:  
WOMEN IN MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY RICHMOND

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by  
Rebecca M. Mitchell

1978

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines aspects of the lives of free women in Richmond, Virginia, in the period just prior to the Civil War. Focusing on women's occupations, education, and volunteer organizations, it analyzes the impact of urban life on southern women.

As a growing city Richmond created new roles and opportunities for women. City conditions altered attitudes toward women's occupational abilities, educational needs and capacities, and toward women's involvement in public welfare work. In this regard, free women in Richmond had much in common with northern women residing in cities of comparable size.

Through work, education, and organizational activities these Richmond women acquired experience and expertise that stood them in good stead during the difficult war years and served to prepare them for the challenges of the post-war period.

EXTENDING THEIR USEFULNESS:  
WOMEN IN MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY RICHMOND

## CHAPTER I

### THE TRUE WOMAN, THE SOUTHERN LADY, AND OTHERS

In antebellum America women were written about, dissected, preached to, and puzzled over to an extent not equaled even in the present decade. The complex theorizing that surrounded antebellum women and their varied responses to prescriptions for female behavior make these women a challenging subject of study. Both the writings directed at women and what we know of the thoughts and actions of antebellum women themselves seem particularly expressive of the tensions and concerns, the hopes and fears of antebellum society at large.

Before moving to the subject of this study--Richmond women in the period 1850-1860--the first part of this chapter reviews some of the literature on antebellum women. The first important recent study is Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood."<sup>1</sup> Welter focuses her attention on upper and middle class women, and her sources are women's magazines, gift annuals, religious tracts and sermons. She describes women as hostages in the home, praised or damned according to the degree to which they adhered to "four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."<sup>2</sup> To ensure that these hostages did not try to escape, the cult impressed upon them their responsibility for the

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 152.



future of society; frail and weak though they might be, they were the pillars keeping civilization from falling to destruction.

Welter points out that nineteenth-century women faced challenges--the social reform movement, industrialization, pioneer life, missionary activities--which called for responses at odds with the code of True Womanhood.<sup>3</sup> Some of the ramifications of the True Woman as a figure in a period of historical transition are explored by Gerda Lerner in "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson."<sup>4</sup> Drawing in part on the work of Elizabeth Dexter, particularly Career Women of America: 1776-1840,<sup>5</sup> Lerner shows that by 1840 changes in American society paved the way for the emergence of the cult of the True Woman. Women were excluded from "the new democracy," and women's work outside the home no longer met with approval.<sup>6</sup> Business and professions were closed to women because of increasing specialization and educational requirements. For instance, the professionalization of medicine and medical schools put an end to midwifery and doctoring by women. Concurrent with the closing of careers for women was the emergence of the factory girl. As large numbers of women obtained employment in factories, these low skill, low status, and low paying jobs

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 174

<sup>4</sup>Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," Midcontinent American Studies Journal 10 (Spring 1969): 5-15.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Anthony Dexter, Career Women in America: 1776-1840 (Francestown, N.H.: M. Jones Co., 1950).

<sup>6</sup>Lerner, p. 7. According to Lerner, teaching and nursing were the only two occupations remaining acceptable for women. However, nursing was not organized as a profession until after the Civil War. In the antebellum period nursing was a low status job, generally not requiring skill or education.

became the definition of women's work.<sup>7</sup>

Berner outlines a number of social and economic developments that led to the idea of a separate female sphere, to the domestication of American women. Anne Scott, however, concludes that restrictions on women's behavior "require no more complex explanation than that any ruling group can find a theory to justify its position."<sup>8</sup> While much antebellum literature on women is undoubtedly male supremacist apologia, Scott's explanation disregards the evidence that many men and women honestly regarded the new definition of women's roles as a positive step forward for women and a great benefit for society.

Another view of the origins of the cult of True Womanhood recognizes that it was a male invention, but suggests that the intent was not so much to protect male privileges as it was to provide stability and refuge in a society with expanding geographical and technological boundaries. "In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope" the True Woman provided a reassuring constant.<sup>9</sup> In Cavalier and Yankee William Taylor develops a similar theme of national identity crisis. The South, according to Taylor's interpretation, was caught in its own claims of superiority and found it increasingly difficult to live in peace with the rest of the nation. In the North social mobility and economic progress were the

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup>Welter, pp. 151-52. For more on the home as refuge, see Ronald W. Hogeland, "'The Female Appendage': Feminine Life-Styles in America, 1820-1860," Civil War History 17 (June 1971): 107.

cause not only of optimism, but also of "nostalgia and disquietude."<sup>10</sup> Introspection, in both sections, says Taylor, led to a propensity for myth-making, notably the creation of idealized womanhood. Upper and middle class white men increasingly shed their own social responsibilities, shifting to women the authority for moral guardianship.<sup>11</sup>

Women were not only the idealized "better half," they became a symbol of material and social success. An unproductive female, once an object of censure, became a status symbol. Of course, such symbolism applied only to women fortunate enough to be the dependents of men with substantial incomes.<sup>12</sup> A poor woman who tried to live like a lady was not only thought to be lazy, her morals were called into question. This division of the female population into two easily distinguishable groups --ladies and women--accentuated class differences and facilitated the exploitation of working women.<sup>13</sup> Working class women did not figure at all in the prescriptions for female behavior. Only later in the nineteenth century was any effort made to impress middle class values on the working class.

As a consequence of the primacy of the middle class standard of womanhood, historians have tended to generalize about all women based on their observations of exclusively middle and upper class women. "This

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<sup>10</sup>William R. Taylor, Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (New York: George Braziller, 1961), p. 18.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup>Lerner, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. The relationship between the ideal of domesticity and female labor is discussed more fully in Alice Kessler-Harris, "Women, Work and the Social Order," in Berenice A. Carroll, ed., Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 334-36.

distortion," Gerda Lerner points out, "has obscured the actual and continuous contributions of women to American life."<sup>14</sup> Historians recently examining American women have tried to deal with the problem of class bias, but have as yet found no satisfactory solution. It remains easier to work with the ample written and material records left by middle and upper class women than to search for the scattered traces of the poor and the inarticulate.

Many studies of antebellum women, reflecting feminist thinking, stress the repressive nature of women's roles. Women are seen as hostages, captives held in bondage. This interpretation has been modified by studies, still largely based on didactic literature, showing many variations on the theme of the idealized woman. Ronald W. Hogeland (who still views women as victims) identifies four distinctive female roles encompassed by the ideal of True Womanhood--the ornamental, the romanticized, the evangelical, and the radical.<sup>15</sup> Hogeland's role classification is helpful because it breaks down any notion of a single, monolithic idealized female role. It also indicates that the antebellum view of womanhood had meaning for society because of its social utility, not just because of its supposed sanction by God and Nature.

While the idealized woman was restricted to a separate (largely domestic) sphere, the boundaries of which were set by men, within her domain she was all-powerful. According to the myth, this domestic sphere governed by women was at the core of existence, while the male worlds of industry, commerce and government were mere footnotes. Some men were disturbed by the thought that they had "in effect made

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<sup>14</sup>Lerner, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>Hogeland, p. 103.

themselves nonessential to meaningful living."<sup>16</sup>

Understandably, most women seemed willing to accept their goddess-like role. Studies based primarily on fiction and poetry by women reveal a female view of a world in which men are inconsequential, flawed, and undependable while women, just by the unconscious exercise of their femininity, make the world turn. Helen Waite Papashvily in her study of nineteenth-century domestic novels finds a tendency in female authors to "maim the male" while glorifying womanhood.<sup>17</sup> According to Papashvily "these pretty tales reflected and encouraged a pattern of feminine behavior so quietly ruthless, so subtly vicious that by comparison the ladies at Seneca Falls appear angels of innocence."<sup>18</sup> More recently, Ann Douglas has observed latent aggression in many of the literary productions of nineteenth-century women. This aggression was deeply buried because of the taboo against women writers appearing as professionals in the literary market. Most of the "scribbling women" sought to give the impression that their works were unconscious effusions. They firmly protested that their literary excursions did not distract them from their true metier--home and hearth.<sup>19</sup> In fact, however, writing "provided for women a way out of the home, and a campaign, even a crusade, against the men who wanted to keep them there."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-9.

<sup>17</sup>Helen Waite Papashvily, All the Happy Endings (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 95.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. xvii.

<sup>19</sup>Ann Douglas Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," American Quarterly 23 (Spring 1971): 6-8.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 24. Douglas examines these issues further in her book The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Knopf, 1977).

Apart from its potentially anti-male consequences, the ideal of domesticated womanhood suffered from an internal contradiction. If women were morally superior to men, then why was their beneficence restricted to the domestic sphere? No doubt many women posed that very question (if only under their breaths), and men, too, were a little anxious about the degree of authority ceded to women. The masculine response was to redouble efforts to affirm the centrality of the home and to threaten women with dire consequences if they did try to exercise their abilities outside the proper sphere: they would be unsexed; they would lose their magical feminine powers. One newspaper wrote about the female role as if it were part of a bargain or treaty between the sexes:

When females buckle on the armor of strong men, and argue, and declaim, and dispute, they are only laughed at; but when they exercise their prerogatives in the circle of home, which is their true seat of empire, men love to recognize them as more than equal.<sup>21</sup>

The domestic "empire" of women opened the way for women to develop a group consciousness. Women saw each other as sharing a common lot, and their shared condition frequently overcame the individual differences among them. Their consciousness of definition by sex paved the way for the feminist movement by implying a "unique sexual solidarity."<sup>22</sup> Nancy Cott, in the concluding chapter of her study of women's sphere in New England, suggests that the idea of a separate female empire not only set up boundaries, but "provoked a minority of women to see and protest those boundaries."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 10 April 1857.

<sup>22</sup>Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 201.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

A number of recent studies of nineteenth-century women have tried to limit the intrusions of twentieth-century assumptions and "to judge domesticity on its own terms, as of its own time."<sup>24</sup> These studies have tried to find out what the women themselves felt about their lives, and have depended more on letters, diaries, and autobiographical materials than on didactic literature or fiction. Studies relying on personal documents have yielded a more positive view of nineteenth-century womanhood. Cott's statement of theory is suggestive of this more sophisticated treatment:

I have assumed all along that women were neither victims of social change--passive receivers of changing definitions of themselves--nor totally mistresses of their destinies. Women's role did not develop in a unilinear pattern. Social and economic change included alteration of family structure, functions, and values, which affected women's roles in manifold ways. These alterations could be turned to constrain women's autonomy and effect conservative intents, or women could grasp them as cause and opportunity for further change, even for assertion of new social power.<sup>25</sup>

Cott's perspective suggests an approach that goes beyond the woman-as-victim model. Nineteenth-century women, without being entirely duped by male propaganda, may indeed have looked upon their sphere with satisfaction and feelings of positive advancement. Whatever may have been the intent of enclosing women in the domestic world, perhaps it was their genius that they could create out of that situation a positive experience for themselves. Within bondage women were able to forge "the bond of womanhood."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>26</sup>Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29.

The great majority of studies of antebellum women are based on the experience of women in the northeastern states. Studies of southern women are fewer and much less sophisticated, and very little has been written comparing the northern and southern ideals of womanhood. Was the Southern Lady the same phenomenon as the cult of True Womanhood? There are three possible answers to this question. The Southern Lady and the True Woman may have both been expressions of the same female role; they may have been discrete phenomena yet similarly caused; or they may have been entirely distinct developments arising from their own unique origins.<sup>27</sup> Anne Scott, in her study of the Southern Lady, does not take up this question except to suggest that while the two shared some characteristics, conditions in the South made the Southern Lady a distinct type.<sup>28</sup>

The Southern Lady was patterned on the English aristocracy; "the typical Virginia woman of 1861 was a special development of the English gentlewoman of the last quarter of the seventeenth century."<sup>29</sup> The settlers of Virginia discovered that the patriarchal system they had known in England transplanted happily to the new world soil, adapting to the slave-owning plantation life as easily as Georgian architecture adapted to the Virginia landscape.

If indeed the Southern Lady represented a different tradition from the cult of True Womanhood, the many areas of similarity must be explained. In Cavalier and Yankee Taylor suggests that the Southern

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<sup>27</sup>Cott, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup>Scott, Southern Lady, p. xi.

<sup>29</sup>Rosamond M. Scott, The Women of Virginia: A Retrospect (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1893), p. 11.



Lady and the idealized woman of the North looked similar because northerners were borrowing a myth from the South, which they idealized as a genteel, agrarian society above distasteful money grubbing and speculation.<sup>30</sup> The North, then, adapted elements of the Southern Lady for its own purposes, attaching them to its own tradition of female roles. The Southern Lady, in turn, was influenced by northern thinking. Even as sectional feelings became intense, northern magazines and books were avidly read in the South. Godey's Lady's Book was popular as were northern writers such as Mrs. Sigourney and Fanny Fern. Ironically, northern radical thought may have also affected the Southern Lady image. The threat of the women's rights movement seemed to inspire lavish praise for the Southern Lady: her pedestal was elevated a bit higher, and her "right" to remain in the home more sharply stated.

The roots of the Southern Lady in an agricultural, aristocratic society contrast sharply with the origin of the domesticated woman of the North. The latter was the creation of an industrializing society and was designed to be the helpmate of the bourgeoisie. The domesticated woman was not only a bourgeois creation, she was a product of a society committed to progress. According to the domestic code, great social good could be gained from women's work in the home, especially through increased attention to child rearing. If the domesticated woman was essentially a progressive creation, then the Southern Lady expressed a conservative aim. She, too, was considered a positive force in society, but her role was not so much to change society as it was to preserve the status quo--or even to help recapture a more noble past.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Taylor, pp. 96-98.

<sup>31</sup>For a discussion of the different form the Romantic Movement took in the North and South see Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), pp. 247-248.

Antebellum women, North and South, were the moral guardians of society. In the North women were accorded that role in part because of general anxiety over an increasingly materialistic society. The task of the moral improvement of society was placed in the hands of women while the men attended to building factories and railroads. In the South, too, women's morality was paramount, but the goal was not so much the improvement of society as it was justification and preservation of what southerners considered a morally superior society. The Southern Lady on her pedestal was held up as one of the best arguments for the superiority of the slave-owning patriarchy. Criticism of slavery from outside the South resulted in not only more elaborate justifications of slavery but also a carefully worked out code of ladylike behavior. George Fitzhugh's Sociology for the South and Daniel Hundley's Social Relations in Our Southern States were works in that vein, that carefully pointed out women's role in keeping the social fabric from unravelling.

It is no coincidence that most arguments for slavery mentioned women. The delicately balanced patriarchal system depended on women and slaves knowing their place. Just as southerners became uneasy over what to do about slavery, they expressed similar concern over the moral power accorded to women. In the face of these superior beings men wondered if they were not hopelessly flawed and weak.<sup>32</sup> Southern men saw that if the women had a mind to, they could step off their pedestals, and southern society would go down with them. This fear helps explain why southerners virulently attacked the "strong-minded" women of the North who were making public their views on temperance, abolition, and

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<sup>32</sup>See for example John Washington's letter expressing antipathy to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association on pp. 94-95 below.

a host of reform questions including women's rights. In the face of these threats southern men worked out a carefully enunciated view of distinctly southern womanhood. Some men seemed to think that by simultaneously praising women and reminding them of their duty, they could keep women from being poisoned by ideas of change.

It is not clear to what extent southern women were convinced of their own virtues or of the virtues of the society in which they lived. Anne Scott has pointed out that many southern women saw through all the talk about the superiority of women and of the southern way of life, and expressed dissatisfaction, anger, and bewilderment. Scott finds that southern women were particularly disturbed about their inability to control their own fertility and the sexual lives of their husbands.<sup>33</sup> In spite of the extensive documentation she gathered of dissatisfaction among the ranks of Southern Ladies, Scott admits there was little actual rebellion. She suggests that while women had very definite complaints, they also "shared many of the assumptions of men, and, at least intermittently, enjoyed the role and status of the landholding aristocracy."<sup>34</sup>

There were other constraints built into the image of the Southern Lady and southern society that tended to limit the possibility of female rebellion. The domesticated woman in the North gained a degree of strength from her position by creating a bond of sisterhood that made possible not only feminism but simply a more positive, confident self-image for women. In the South, while deep, lasting friendships between women were not uncommon, the ties of family, class, and race were

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<sup>33</sup>Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850s," Journal of American History 61 (June 1974): 55.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

stronger than any bond of sisterhood.

An essential characteristic of the Southern Lady was her connection to the land, her place in the plantation hierarchy. Despite the hegemony of the plantation ideal, not all antebellum southerners lived in an agricultural setting. Nevertheless, antebellum southern women have been almost exclusively studied in the plantation context, whether as slaves, as hard-working wives of small farmers, or as the almost equally burdened lady of the plantation. This study, by examining some aspects of the lives of free women in Richmond in the decade before the Civil War, attempts not only to show the Southern Lady in an urban setting, but also to provide some insight into the lives of middle and working class women.

David Potter has stated that "the city was the frontier for American women."<sup>35</sup> While it is true that women found in the city a new degree of economic independence, Potter ignores the complex interaction of opportunity and oppression that faced women in the city. According to Potter, the urban opportunities for women were based on "the supple fingers and the ready adaptability" of young women.<sup>36</sup> This assertion sounds suspiciously like an argument for the exploitation of women workers based on a notion of supposedly innate female qualities. While perhaps employment opportunities for women did sweep away "the historical basis for their traditional subordination,"<sup>37</sup> they also opened the

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<sup>35</sup>David Potter, "American Women and American Character," Stetson University Bulletin 62 (January 1962): 6.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. For more critical analysis of Potter see Linda Gordon, et al., "Historical Phallicies: Sexism in American Historical Writing," in Carroll, ed., Liberating Women's History, pp. 64-66.

door for a new form of oppression. Urban life facilitated the exploitation of women by widening and solidifying class distinctions.

The complexity of the interaction of urban setting with women's roles suggests some of the difficulties of studying the activities of women in antebellum Richmond. A central problem is the difficulty of locating materials yielding information about the broadest possible range of women across lines of class and race. Diaries and letters are in short supply for Richmond in this period; there was no Mary Boykin Chesnut of Richmond. This relative dearth of personal papers contrasts with the Civil War period when many women wrote of life in the Confederate capital. Some reminiscences of school days in Richmond were useful, and correspondence relative to the work of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association in Richmond proved to be a very rich source. Newspapers were helpful, especially in uncovering the lives of poorer women. A major resource for this study was the manuscript returns of the Eighth Census taken in 1860. Use of the census was suggested not only by the lack of useful personal papers but also by the concern to get as accurate as possible a profile of Richmond's female population.<sup>38</sup> The 1860 census was chosen because it reported women by name and occupation, and because it should give the best measure of women in Richmond at the peak of its pre-Civil War development.

The remainder of this chapter examines Richmond's female population and the sometimes distressing effects of urban life upon women. One fact that is immediately apparent from looking at the census is the

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<sup>38</sup>The census returns for slaves were not used, and this study makes no attempt to look at slave women in Richmond.

large number of foreign-born women in Richmond, particularly immigrants from Ireland and various German states. In 1860, 13.07 percent of Richmond's total slave and free population was foreign-born while only 2.19 percent of the total Virginia population was of foreign origin.<sup>39</sup> Those immigrant Richmond women not only had no experience with the Southern Lady tradition, they brought with them their own assumptions about female roles and behavior. Richmond's 1,434 free black women<sup>40</sup> (3.8 percent of the total population) added to the number of women outside the Southern Lady tradition.

One of the most serious deficiencies of the census is in the area of marital and familial relations. Within each household family relationships are not identified. Simply by looking at names and ages it is in most cases impossible to tell the difference between husband/wife and brother/sister combinations or between parent/child and older/younger sibling groups. Thus any statements about family size or marital status are unreliable. The census does indicate that there were more white men (12,396) than women (11,239) in Richmond, and that the free black population was even more disproportionately divided (1,142 men; 1,434 women).<sup>41</sup> However, until more is known of marital relationships, it is impossible to tell whether these sex ratios contributed to stability or instability in their respective populations.

The antebellum South is generally seen as a family-centered society

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<sup>39</sup>Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Population in the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), pp. xxxi, xxxii.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 519

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

in which blood ties and dynastic traditions were extremely important.<sup>42</sup> Outside the South, however, the importance of family ties was "rapidly being modified in the commercial and organizational bustle of the free states."<sup>43</sup> The Richmond census suggests that there, too, the pressures of urban life had an impact on the family. Many of the households included individuals with different surnames, and many dwellings housed apparently unrelated families and individuals. In the shared dwellings the males often had a common trade or craft. Similarly, apparently unmarried women who shared the same occupation--seamstresses, milliners, teachers--sometimes lived together.

Wealthier Richmond women ran households similar to those of plantation women, but were more likely to have hired servants in addition to or in place of slaves. Lower class Richmonders living in shared dwellings and boarding houses were not likely to have had a strong sense of family-centered household. In multiple family dwellings childcare, while not necessarily deficient, would have been more informal than in the single family houses of the middle and upper classes. The code of women's domestic sphere was not easily transplanted to boarding house or tenement living.

Anne Scott suggests that many southern marriages of this time were troubled by women's lack of reproductive control.<sup>44</sup> The memoirs of a Richmond woman born in 1842 show that in one upper class family there

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<sup>42</sup>For a discussion of the importance of family tradition among all classes of southern whites see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Ideal Typology and Ante-bellum Southern History: A Testing of a New Approach," Societas 5 (Winter 1975): 1-20.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>44</sup>Scott, "Women's Perspective on Patriarchy," p. 55.

the wife had found no escape from the rigors of childbearing and rearing. Lucy Parke Chamberlayne recalled: "Our house was not very bright, my Mother was sorrow laden--besides having seven deaf children, she had already buried seven children when I was born."<sup>45</sup> Eventually this mother was left with three sons and a daughter. Further research into Richmond statistics, such as age at marriage, the number of children a woman bore, and the rate of infant mortality, would give us a fuller picture of family life and its stresses.

Advertisements which appeared in Richmond newspapers suggest some interest in birth control. Dr. Duponce's "Golden Pills" were said to relieve a variety of gynecological ills, and they could also "be used successfully as a Preventive."<sup>46</sup> "Sir James Clarke's Celebrated Female Pills" claimed to "bring on the monthly period with regularity," but warned that they could cause miscarriage if taken in the first three months of pregnancy.<sup>47</sup> In themselves these advertisements are no evidence of birth control practice, but they do suggest a concern for limiting pregnancies.

Child labor may have made bearing children more desirable for working class Richmond women. Even with child labor, however, one more child to care for was a burden for poor women. The extremity of this plight was expressed in a case of apparent infanticide in 1860. The body of an infant found in a trunk left in a culvert was traced to its mother, "a widow, and not only poor, but emaciated and feeble from her recent

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<sup>45</sup>Lucy Parke Chamberlayne, "Chronicles of the Life of Lucy Parke Chamberlayne," p. 11, Bagby Family Papers, Section 132, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>46</sup>Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 2 January 1857.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 30 March 1858.



sufferings."<sup>48</sup> Another burdened woman, deserted by her husband, asked the Mayor's Court to "make her husband provide the necessaries of life for herself and children." The court offered some advice, but was powerless to compel the husband to support his family.<sup>49</sup>

The newspapers attest to family and social strife that does not appear in the more mute census. Public drunkenness among both sexes was a constant problem, according to newspaper reports. The arrest of two female drunks stirred the Whig to comment on "Feminine Topers:"

It's of no use to moralize every time a white woman is arrested or arraigned for drunkenness. The ignominy has become too common to excite remark, but the frequency of such cases is more the result of the increase of population than of intemperance. Yesterday, Christiana Marks was brought before the Mayor for exhibiting herself in the street in a state of beastly intoxication. She was reprimanded and discharged. Mrs. Mary Sullivan was arraigned on a similar charge, and pleaded a 'sore head' as the cause of her deep potations. She was sent to jail, as an old offender. Both women are evidently low down on the social scale. They lack money, and, moreover, are 'poor indeed.'<sup>50</sup>

Wife beating was another crime that frequently appeared in the papers. One case reported the death of a woman in childbirth following a beating.<sup>51</sup> In a similar case the woman survived the premature birth of her child induced by her husband's beating. Though witnesses attested to her husband's brutality, she appeared in court "and begged most piteously for the relief of her husband, declaring that when sober he was kind and affectionate, and only treated her amiss when drunk."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Richmond Daily Whig, 26 April 1860.

<sup>49</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 1 February 1858.

<sup>50</sup>Richmond Daily Whig, 14 March 1860.

<sup>51</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 13 September 1855.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 12 February 1855.

Another woman, married for three months, was beaten by her husband, but rather than excuse his behavior she "left the courtroom declaring 'I won't live with him any longer.'"<sup>53</sup> It was not always easy, however, for a wife to escape an abusive husband. One woman told the court that "she had quit her husband in consequence of his cruelty, and had rented a room for herself, but that she found it impossible to avoid him."<sup>54</sup>

Cases of wife beating appeared in the newspapers with such frequency that it is impossible to dismiss them as freak incidents or the creations of journalistic sensationalism. Moreover, we have no way of knowing the frequency of wife beating among "respectable" Richmonders whose troubles were not reported in the press. Beatings, at least among the lower class, took place in a setting of more general domestic violence. In an unusual case in which a wife was charged with beating her husband, witnesses reported that "the elements of discord were in constant commotion at their domicile."<sup>55</sup> Women appeared frequently in court as victims and instigators of fights between in-laws and between neighbors. A typical case caused the Daily Whig to comment on the "excitability of the 'fair sex':"

Mrs. Matilda King was arraigned for throwing stones at the house of her next door neighbor, Mrs. Mary McDonald, at Rocketts. This was a case of Ireland vs. Holland. Mrs. King called Mrs. McD. a name, in her vernacular, which the latter interpreted into--we won't say what. Mrs. McD. threw a bucket of dirty water into Mrs. K.'s door, and Mrs. K. hurled a few brick bats at Mrs. McD.'s door.<sup>56</sup>

Sheer poverty and the struggle to survive were facts of life for

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<sup>53</sup>Richmond Daily Whig, 15 May 1860.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 14 May 1860.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 15 March 1860.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 12 April 1860.

many Richmond women. Oblique references to prostitution were made in the many cases of women charged with keeping "a disorderly house" or with being "persons of ill fame." When Ann Heath, a former housekeeper, was arrested for vagrancy, a newspaper noted that her plight was not unusual among poor whites and free blacks. Slaves, the paper moralized, were never found wandering the streets with no place to stay.<sup>57</sup> Commenting on the assault of two girls, the Whig observed that poverty made women especially vulnerable:

Poverty and personal pulchritude combined are very provocative of insult when they fall to the lot of women--their beauty exciting persecution, while poverty insures immunity to the offender.<sup>58</sup>

Poverty in Richmond caused such suffering that newspapers urged the creation of a workhouse:

The importance of having some place in which to employ pauper labor is so palpable to all, that even ladies who are cursed with drunken, worthless husbands, are praying for a work house, as the only remedy for producing reformation in their lords and masters, for whose support they are now forced to toil night and day with their needles.<sup>59</sup>

This view of Richmond is at odds with the South of George Fitzhugh who bemoaned the "sufferings of poor widowed needlewomen" in the North. "Woman there," he said, "is in a false position." However, "be she white, or be she black, she is treated with kindness and humanity in the slaveholding South."<sup>60</sup> In Richmond newspapers white women appeared more frequently than blacks as perpetrators and victims of crimes.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 16 October 1860.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 29 September 1860.

<sup>59</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 5 January 1855.

<sup>60</sup>George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), p. 213.

However, if poverty "insured immunity" to assaulters of poor white women, then poverty and skin color made black women doubly vulnerable.

These newspaper items testify not only to the difficulty many Richmond women had in simply surviving, but also to the wide gap between classes. For every case of wife beating or female drunkenness there were also newspaper articles on the latest fashions, goings on at the hot springs resorts, and numerous ladies' fairs. Some Richmond women were privileged not only as dependents; the census indicates that 6.5 percent held property amounting to \$4,590,030 (real and personal combined). While there were legal blocks to women's property rights in Virginia at this time, a sufficiently determined or wealthy woman could find a way to keep her property.<sup>61</sup> Examination of tax records would provide more clues to women's economic status, but is beyond the intended scope of this study.

A question guiding this investigation of women in antebellum Richmond is whether urban conditions there affected women's lives and attitudes toward female roles as they did in other American cities of comparable size. At the same time, it is recognized that in Richmond the tendency to an urban identity was tempered by slavery, by a sense of a separate southern identity, and by the persistence of the patriarchal ideal. This question of urban impact on southern women will be explored in three areas of women's activities--work, education, and benevolent organizations.

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<sup>61</sup>In June 1860 Edward Cooper, an elderly blacksmith, tried to kill his wife with an axe because she refused "to surrender her right and title to certain property which she held in her own name;" Richmond Daily Whig, 12 June 1860. See also Henry Moseley Sydnor, "Property Rights of Women in Virginia" (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1931).

An exploration of working women and their jobs provides the beginnings of a view of Richmond women that avoids the danger of over-emphasizing the Southern Lady role. This approach begins to shed some light on the previously obscure lives of working class women and the small group of working middle class women. It also provides an indication of the forces that were pushing Richmond to be a modern city of national importance.

Education can be used as a similar measure. Americans have typically looked to education to respond to social change and to provide leadership for change. Although this faith was less powerful in the South where the family was the prime communicator of social values, there were stirrings beginning in the 1830s to improve education for women, to give women an education more equal to men's that also prepared them for their special place in the domestic order. Given the poor state of public education, a study of female schools inevitably excludes all but a minority of Richmond women. However, the education these women received was indicative of assumptions about female intelligence and about the lives for which they were being prepared.

The final subject of study, women's volunteer or benevolent organizations, has a number of interesting facets. These organizations have traditionally been the arena in which middle and upper class women could acquire skills that men and a few rare women learned in their jobs. They were an area in which women could develop their talents for organization and leadership and gain the satisfaction of accomplishments outside the home. Also, the work of these organizations affected attitudes toward women and challenged some assumptions of women's capabilities and proper sphere.

An examination of these three areas of women's activities will help correct an inadequate view of antebellum southern women that has been fostered by concentration on the plantation models of the lady, the farmer's wife, and the slave. It is hoped this study of women in an urban setting will add a further dimension to Anne Scott's observation that women provide an essential clue to the "psychological climate" of the South on the brink of the Civil War.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Scott, "Women's Perspective on Patriarchy," p. 64.

## CHAPTER II

### HONEST EMPLOYMENT

An analysis of working women in antebellum Richmond raises questions about the nature of women's work and about the reliability of census-derived data. Work is most commonly defined as labor for pay or profit. Women's work in the home is not counted as true employment despite its demonstrable social and economic value. The census does not recognize women's work at home as gainful employment, though one 1860 Richmond census taker used the title "Domestic" to designate homemakers (not servants or housekeepers). This chapter concerns itself chiefly with women who worked for pay, unfortunately slighting thousands of slaves and "domestics."

The census remains a reliable measure of working women with the caveat that "because most women did not work regularly for pay, and because the Census instructions emphasized the circumstances under which women should not be counted as gainfully employed, Census takers were likely to be careless in recording women's work."<sup>1</sup> Also, given the prevailing view in 1860 of women's proper sphere and the census takers' lack of experience in recording women's occupations, it seems likely that working women were undercounted. A woman who was a housewife and did some sewing or laundry or had a few boarders was likely to report herself and be seen by the census recorder as simply a housewife with

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<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Smuts, Women and Work in America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 158.

no gainful occupation. Similarly, there were probably women who assisted their husbands in small businesses or crafts who were not recorded as working. The census also did not reflect women's multi-faceted occupations. Newspaper advertisements for this period indicate that employers sought cooks who also did washing, servants who were also skilled at nursing or making preserves and pickles. In Richmond racial factors must also be taken into consideration. Blacks, before and after slavery, have been notoriously under-represented in census counts. Given the threatened existence of free blacks, they were not likely to be eager to report to census takers, who themselves were probably not energetic in seeking out the free black population.

With these deficiencies in mind, the census remains a useful tool. The 1860 census returns from Richmond's three wards indicate that 12 percent of the entire free female population was gainfully employed. This figure was slightly above the national norm. In 1860 9.7 percent of all free females over age ten in the United States were working.<sup>2</sup> The presence of free black women in Richmond made a difference. While only 8 percent of all white females were working, among all free black females 42 percent were employed. Free black women in Richmond outnumbered their male counterparts, suggesting that many were household heads. Also, the income levels of free blacks often required that all family members who could worked.<sup>3</sup>

Though the majority of working women in Richmond were white, a

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<sup>2</sup>W. Elliot Brownlee and Mary M. Brownlee, Women in the American Economy: a Documentary History, 1675 to 1929 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Ira Berlin, Slaves Without Masters: the Free Negro in the Antebellum South (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 221.



free black woman could anticipate a life of labor while a working white woman was an exception. Foreign-born women in Richmond were also proportionately highly employed. Of all working white women 34 percent were foreign-born while they represented about 29 percent of the adult white female population. Women born outside Virginia were also found in all the major female occupations. In 1855 the Daily Dispatch noted:

For a day or two we have seen more young white women in search of employment, than ever came under our observation before at this season of the year. Many of them have but lately arrived from the North, and would be willing to engage in any honest employment.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently there were sufficient opportunities for women in Richmond to make it an attractive location for women seeking employment.

It is difficult to tell to what extent slave labor may have limited employment opportunities for free blacks and whites. Slaves were used extensively, especially in the tobacco factories. On the other hand, the institution of slavery was disintegrating in Richmond.<sup>5</sup> The fact that a majority of servant women were white suggests that employers who did not want or could not afford slave servants often preferred to hire white women. Advertisements in newspapers frequently specified that white women were desired for jobs as housekeepers, hotel washers and ironers, nurses, and cooks. Advertisers also often specified that they would like "two German girls" or "an Irish girl."<sup>6</sup>

Sewing, laundry, and domestic service were among the most common

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<sup>4</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 1 March 1855.

<sup>5</sup>Richard C. Wade, Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 35; Berlin, p. 232.

<sup>6</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 13 January, 9 May, 18 May, 25 September, 1 October 1855.

occupations open to women in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> According to the Richmond census, in 1860 55 percent of working women were employed as washwomen, servants, or seamstresses. Not surprisingly, these were all occupations most commonly practiced in a domestic setting. Washwomen in Richmond were overwhelmingly black, and washing was by far the most common occupation of free black women. The chief advantages of this work were that it required little skill or equipment and could be done at home. That made it suitable for black women who were heads of families or who sought to supplement family income. The large number of washwomen suggests that they performed their services so efficiently and inexpensively that they were widely patronized.

As many Richmond women in 1860 were employed as servants as were washwomen, but white women were a slight majority. White women working as servants were most often immigrants. Perhaps to foreign-born women domestic service represented opportunity and acceptable employment while southern-born white women likely regarded it as work for blacks and hence unacceptable. The relatively low average age of female servants suggests that it was employment open to young women and may have been preferred by them because it offered security to girls separated from their families. A typical advertisement read: "WANTED--A girl to do house work, German preferred. A Good girl can obtain a permanent home, none other need apply."<sup>8</sup>

The third most common occupation for women in Richmond in 1860 was seamstress, a field overwhelmingly dominated by white women. In fact, 25 percent of all working white women were seamstresses, and 44 percent

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<sup>7</sup>Smuts, pp. 15-17.

<sup>8</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 19 January 1858.

TABLE 1

## OCCUPATIONS OF RICHMOND WOMEN LISTED IN 1860 CENSUS

Occupation	Total	Black	White	Foreign- born*	Non-Va.*	Average Age
Washwoman, washer, washer woman, washing	291	269	22	12	1	35
Servant	291	122	169	138	10	25
Seamstress	245	23	222	27	13	32
Dressmaker	86	3	83	13	6	31
Milliner	58	---	58	12	7	27
Tailorist, tailoress	20	---	20	3	1	36
Mantua maker	9	3	6	1	1	30
Tobacco factory, tobacco hand	60	59	1	---	---	28
Factory, factory hand	80	77	3	1	---	29
Cotton factory	3	---	3	1	---	17
Woolen factory	2	---	2	2	---	25
Boarding, boarding house	49	---	49	4	6	43
Grocery store, grocer	23	1	22	15	2	43
Housekeeper	28	2	26	4	2	38
Teacher, school teacher	88	---	88	13	13	34
Confectioner, confectionary	16	---	16	10	1	38
Cook	18	16	2	---	1	37
Nurse	27	15	12	4	1	41

\*Foreign- and non-Virginia-born women are included in the total count of white women, but also listed separately for illustrative purposes.

TABLE 1--Continued

Occupation	Total	Black	White	Foreign- born*	Non-Va.*	Average Age
Laundry maid (hotel)	17	---	17	3	---	25
Maid (hotel)	10	2	8	8	---	27
Storekeeper, shopkeeper, shop	13	1	12	8	1	36
Laborer	4	1	3	3	---	28
Merchant	3	---	3	1	1	44
Waiter	4	4	---	---	---	30
Dry goods, dry goods merchant	2	---	2	2	---	50
Cook shop	2	1	1	---	---	45
Dealer in rags	2	---	2	1	1	39
Supt. of hosp. (Poor House)	2	---	2	---	1	36
Tobacconist	2	1	1	1	---	40
Shoe binder	2	---	2	2	---	42
Shoe maker	1	---	1	1	---	40
Book binder	2	---	2	---	---	30
Hatter	1	---	1	---	---	46
Wig maker	1	---	1	---	---	19
Mantilla maker	1	---	1	---	---	16
Hat trimer ( <u>sic</u> )	1	---	1	---	---	22
Box binder	1	---	1	---	---	18
Carder & spinner of wool	1	---	1	---	---	52
Greenary ( <u>sic</u> )	1	---	1	1	---	33
Regalia maker	1	---	1	1	---	30

TABLE 1--Continued

Occupation	Total	Black	White	Foreign- born*	Non-Va.*	Average Age
Bonnet maker	1	---	1	---	---	45
Salesman in store, sales lady	2	---	2	1	---	47
Clothing store	1	---	1	1	---	26
Clark ( <u>sic</u> )	1	---	1	---	---	17
Huckster	2	1	1	1	---	39
Stationer	1	---	1	---	---	58
Clothing dealer	1	---	1	1	---	50
Sewing machine operator	1	---	1	---	---	17
Attend in cake bakery	1	---	1	1	---	37
Eating saloon	1	---	1	---	---	32
Maid in tavern	1	1	---	---	---	25
Sells in market	1	---	1	---	---	45
Picks hair	1	1	---	---	---	59
Restaurant	1	---	1	1	---	30
Snack house	1	---	1	---	---	51
Actress	1	---	1	---	1	27
Governess	2	---	2	1	---	50
Physician	1	---	1	1	---	28
Matron--Male orphanage	1	---	1	---	---	53
Ladies' maid	1	1	---	---	---	35
Midwife	1	---	1	---	1	50
Steward at Masonic Lodge	1	---	1	---	1	48
TOTAL	1493	604	889	301	76	

worked in the major needle trades (seamstress, dressmaker, milliner, tailoress, and mantua maker). Seamstresses, like washwomen, often worked in their own homes, and had low skills relative to the other needle trades. Most seamstresses were Virginia-born white women, suggesting that of all the low-skill jobs open to women this was the most acceptable to southern-white women. Dressmakers, milliners, tailoresses and mantua makers were generally more highly skilled than seamstresses and were often in business for themselves, employing other women. There were also cases of successful husband and wife partnerships. N. C. and Jane Barton ran a large millinery establishment. The census listed twelve milliners and a sales lady at their address. Similarly, Mary Jacobs and her husband were both listed as "taylor's." Apprentices were used in the needle trades; the census listed apprentice milliners and mantua makers, and in 1858 a newspaper reported that "a free Negro girl, nine years old, named Parthenia Wills, who was apprenticed to Mr. Thomas Barham, to learn the trade of seamstress, some two years ago" had been beaten while in service.<sup>9</sup>

The sewing needle represented both opportunity and the last resort for white Richmond women. Needlewomen ranged from prosperous business women to the worst of the city's poor, barely managing to eke out a living. Milliners were perhaps the most active business women in Richmond; many advertised regularly in newspapers and business directories. At the Mechanics Institute Fair an annual prize was awarded to encourage local milliners, and in 1855 Mrs. Son was awarded the "first-class diploma, for two bonnets of superior workmanship, handsome design and rich materials." Richmond milliners competed to bring to the city the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 12 January 1858.

latest fashions from New York and abroad, and frequently went on buying trips to secure the newest fashions.<sup>10</sup>

After washwomen, servants, and seamstresses, factory workers were the next largest group in Richmond's female labor force. A total of 145 females were listed in the census as employed in tobacco, cotton, woolen, and other unspecified factories. Almost all of these women were black, though the five textile workers listed were white. White women apparently did work in tobacco factories,<sup>11</sup> but the census listed only one, a six year old girl. Perhaps the number of women employed in factories would have been larger but for the regular use of slave labor in Richmond factories. Also, at least one textile mill which employed chiefly women and children was in Manchester, and hence outside the Richmond census area.<sup>12</sup>

Factory work was the last of three occupations generally available to black women. Close to 90 percent of all free black women workers were washwomen, servants, and factory hands. The census listed free black women in only twenty different occupations, while white women were listed in fifty-nine. This limited choice of jobs indicated not only more limited opportunities for blacks, but also that blacks were considered unsuitable for all but the lowest skill and lowest paying jobs.

Widowed white women or those seeking extra income to meet family needs often took in boarders. Like women in the needle trades, women

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 14 November, 1 October 1855.

<sup>11</sup>Berlin, p. 232; Wade, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup>Richmond Daily Whig, 18 December 1860.

who ran boarding houses ranged from the very poor to successful business women whose establishments rivaled hotels. Six percent of working white women listed their occupation as boarding or boarding house, though more may have been peripherally in the boarding house business. Most boarding houses were simply known as Mrs. Abbott's or Mrs. Puckett's, but some women, perhaps seeking a more prestigious image, called their establishments Capitol House, Floyd House, or Everett House. Boarding house keepers were active advertisers, and according to an 1850 city directory establishments run by women were among the prominent hostelries in Richmond.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, a Richmond woman informed a friend planning a visit that "there are no first class boarding houses in Richmond such as you find in other large cities."<sup>14</sup>

First class or not, boarding house living was apparently common among single men and women, young couples, and even families. In Edith Allen, a popular novel of the 1850s, the heroine and her husband lived in Richmond where her intelligence and charm "made her quite a favorite in the quiet, pleasant boarding house to which her husband took her."<sup>15</sup> Catherine Hopley, an English woman, recorded this portrait after her stay in a Richmond boarding house:

The landlady was the widow of an F.F.V., as she never failed to inform every new comer; but it did not exalt her much in the estimation of her boarders; not because she was poor, but

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<sup>13</sup>William L. Montague, Montague's Richmond Directory and Business Advertiser for 1850-1851 (Richmond: By the author, 1850), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup>Susan L. Pellet to Ann Pamela Cunningham, 30 October 1857, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Library, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

<sup>15</sup>Laurence Neville, Edith Allen; or, Sketches of Life in Virginia (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1855), p. 166.



because she was very proud, and very wanting in common sense.<sup>16</sup>

Rather surprisingly, the census reported more Richmond women involved in commerce than were boarding house keepers. These included grocers, confectioners, merchants, miscellaneous shopkeepers, and women who ran eating establishments. If milliners and dressmakers who had shops of their own were also counted, the number of Richmond business women would be even greater. Judging from the census, a substantial number of these women involved in commerce were foreign-born. The census and the city directories reveal that many of these businesses were run in homes, a common practice at the time. Women also did a little illegal business in their homes. The newspapers reported frequent cases of women charged with illegally selling spirits. In June 1855 Elizabeth Connors was called into court "to answer for keeping a disorderly house of ill fame, and selling liquor to be drunken in it without a license."<sup>17</sup>

No doubt the majority of Richmond business women had no such tangles with the law, and conducted themselves as competently as this grocer:

Mrs. Catharine B. Clash has purchased of Mr. James Ward, his entire interest in the Grocery. . . . She hopes to merit a continuance of the patronage heretofore extended to Mr. Ward.<sup>18</sup>

Women also went into business on a small scale, like Miss Angel who "opened a neat [ice cream] saloon in her father's residence, by way of

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<sup>16</sup>[Catherine Cooper Hopley], Life in the South from the Commencement of the War by a Blockaded British Subject (London: Chapman & Hall, 1863; reprint ed. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), p. 136.

<sup>17</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 12 June 1855.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 23 August 1855.

aiding him to care for his helpless family."<sup>19</sup>

During this period Richmond women also worked in business as agents, bookkeepers, and salesmen. In 1855 Anton Beine advertised that he had appointed Mrs. H. Krutzer as his agent in the grocery business to buy and sell in his name.<sup>20</sup> The census listed only two women working as salesmen, but it seems likely the job was more common than that figure would indicate. One merchant advertised for a "YOUNG LADY to act as SALESMAN in his store" with the promise of "good wages."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it was a sign of women's increased involvement in business that in 1859 the Richmond Female Institute added bookkeeping to its curriculum.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of increasing specialization and professionalization of medical practice, some women were able to establish medically-related careers. Nursing, one such career, was open to black and white women alike. Unfortunately, the census made no distinction between children's nurses and nurses for the sick. Perhaps it was symptomatic of the low skill of sick nursing that the term was used inclusively. According to one account, sick nursing at this time was mostly done by black women. Nurses were largely untrained except by experience. At the hospital connected with the Medical College of Virginia, female patients were attended by the janitor's cook and washerwoman.<sup>23</sup> The nurse at the City Hospital similarly served several functions:

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 7 August 1855.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 31 August 1855.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 12 September 1855.

<sup>22</sup>Fifth Annual Circular and Catalogue of the Richmond Female Institute (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1859), p. 51.

<sup>23</sup>Wyndham B. Blanton, Medicine in Virginia in the Nineteenth Century (Richmond: Garrett & Massie, 1933), p. 186.

Mrs. Hudson, the lady who has attended the sick at the City Hospital whenever there were any, for two months past, deserves great credit for her untiring exertions to minister to their wants and add to their comfort. We are gratified to learn that she has nothing to do now but keep the building in order.<sup>24</sup>

In earlier days a plantation lady found medical knowledge almost a necessity. A profile of Mary W. Mosby (b. 1792), who was married to John Mosby of Richmond, mentions that she "had included in her studies, that of medicine, regarding that branch of knowledge, as a necessary part in the education of one residing in the country."<sup>25</sup> In 1855, however, Richmonders thought that medical education for women involved "great indelicacy and impropriety."<sup>26</sup> The census and city directory of 1860 both listed one woman doctor in Richmond. Jane Williams, age twenty-eight, was born in England and practiced medicine in her home on Clay Street. Her husband, Joseph, had a stone cutting business nearby. The household also included a nurse, but it is not clear whether her function was to assist the doctor or to care for the Williams' two children.

Most babies in Richmond were still delivered by midwives in spite of interest in obstetrics at the Medical College.<sup>27</sup> The census, however, recorded only one midwife--Mary Plume, the wife of Dr. George Plume.<sup>28</sup> As the wife of a doctor, Mrs. Plume probably took a professional attitude

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<sup>24</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 4 September 1855.

<sup>25</sup>"Mrs. Mary E. Mosby, of Curles," Southern Literary Messenger 16 (October 1850): 623.

<sup>26</sup>"Female Physicians," Richmond Daily Dispatch, 29 May 1855.

<sup>27</sup>Blanton, p. 158.

<sup>28</sup>Dr. Plume treated "all sorts of secret diseases" of "those who may have been unfortunate in their associations;" Richmond Daily Dispatch, 1 January 1855.

toward her work, while perhaps other midwives practiced their skill irregularly as occasion demanded and hence did not appear in the census. In 1858 Mrs. McVey, "lately arrived from New York," advertised her "readiness to wait on ladies in their lying in." "From past experience and extensive practice, she [felt] confident in giving satisfaction."<sup>29</sup>

The newspapers reported women engaged in other medically-related work. On several occasions the Daily Dispatch praised Mrs. Daws' Cough Elixer which

obtained just celebrity for its efficacy in colds, coughs & C. . . . It is a medicine which ought not at all to be ranked with quack medicines, being prepared from the prescription of eminent regular physicians, and it is compounded by a highly estimable lady of our own city, of whose capacity and fidelity in the preparation of the medicine there can be no doubt.<sup>30</sup>

One Mrs. Woolhouse won similar accolades for her leeching and cupping:

Mrs. W. is a most estimable lady, whose great energy and amiable qualities will render her invaluable in a sick room. A more gentle and assiduous attendant, and a more competent person, invalid ladies cannot often procure.<sup>31</sup>

Mrs. Woolhouse's advertisements stressed that she had the "best imported Leeches" and that a light burned all night over her door.

Mrs. Daws, Dr. Williams, and Mrs. Woolhouse notwithstanding, there were few jobs available to women with education and a desire to use it. For much of the nineteenth century teaching was virtually the only acceptable occupation for educated women, and Richmond was no exception. The census listed eighty-eight teachers including a few music instructors—

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<sup>29</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 4 February 1858.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 23 March 1855.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 20 March 1855.

10 percent of all white working women. The majority of these teachers were Virginia-born, reflecting perhaps both improved educational opportunities for women in the South and a preference for southern-born and educated teachers. Advertisers in Richmond newspapers frequently specified that they sought teachers "of Southern birth and education."

Southern women seeking teaching positions mentioned their local connections, as in this advertisement by Miss H.:

WANTED:--A situation as Teacher, either to take charge of a School, or as an Assistant, by a young Lady, a Virginian, and educated in Richmond, Va. She can furnish unexceptionable testimonials of her qualifications to teach all the branches of a thorough English education, the French language as well as the rudiments of Latin and Italian.<sup>32</sup>

The Richmond Female Institute, founded in 1853, announced that one of its purposes was teacher training:

Particular care will be exercised in training those who may be looking forward to the occupation of Teachers, and endeavoring to prepare themselves for this high and responsible office. A course of instruction in the Principles and Practice of Teaching is incorporated into the scheme of studies, and is given, without extra charge, to any who desire it. It is hoped that this Institute may send forth many instructors of youth, who shall take such a stand, as not only to extend the advantages of female education to a wider circle, but also to elevate its grade.<sup>33</sup>

Teaching was presumed to be an occupation peculiarly suited to females. In 1855 the Daily Dispatch noted with some distress that a move was afoot to hire male teachers for the city's free school. A few days later the paper reported that it was "gratified to learn that the present Commissioners prefer ladies." Males were considered unsuitable "because they have less patience, perseverance and tact in managing uneducated youth, and [perhaps most importantly] because their services

<sup>32</sup>Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, 2 January 1857.

<sup>33</sup>Circular and Catalogue of the Richmond Female Institute for 1856 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1856), pp. 25-26.

cannot be obtained on as reasonable terms."<sup>34</sup> In 1858 the city council appropriated one hundred dollars to pay Mrs. Boot "for teaching indigent children."<sup>35</sup> This was probably the same woman as Mrs. Bott at the same address in a list of free schools in the 1860 directory. Of eight free schools in that list, five bore the names of women.<sup>36</sup>

In antebellum America writing was considered an acceptable occupation for women, and "scribbling women" claimed a large part of the literary market. Most women, however, did not write for money, and even those who were commercial successes often affected the pose of dabblers. The woman writer's amateur status and feminine sensitivity were considered virtues, making her literary voice more akin to the angels. The purity of the female heart made every woman, at least potentially, a poet.

Many of the antebellum penwomen were from the South, and of the five works by southerners that were national best-sellers in this period, four were by women.<sup>37</sup> Richmond had its share of women writers, though individuals are difficult to identify because of the frequent use of pseudonyms. Richmond's literary life was dominated by the Southern Literary Messenger, and many Richmond women saw their "effusions" printed in its pages. Mrs. Julia Mayo Cabell, a member of the local elite,

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<sup>34</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 16 November, 26 November 1855.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 19 January 1858.

<sup>36</sup>W. Eugene Ferslew, Second Annual Directory for the City of Richmond, to Which is Added a Business Directory for 1860 (Richmond: By the author, 1860), p. 48.

<sup>37</sup>Helen Waite Papashvily, All the Happy Endings (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. xvi; Clement Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 320.

frequently wrote for the Messenger, and even caused a slight scandal when a satirical piece she had written appeared. Mrs. Cabell, the wife of Dr. R. H. Cabell and sister of Mrs. Winfield Scott, died in 1860. On her death the Daily Whig noted that "Mrs. C. had acquired some literary reputation."<sup>38</sup>

Another Richmond woman who frequently contributed to the Messenger was Susan Archer Talley. Born in Hanover County in 1835, Talley moved to Richmond with her family when she was eight years old. Benjamin Blake Minor, editor and owner of the Southern Literary Messenger from 1843 to 1847, wrote that Talley was "a very interesting young lady . . . from sickness almost a mute, who was well received in society and wrote very respectable verse."<sup>39</sup> Another account of Talley's life, however, says that she was stricken by almost total deafness at age eleven.<sup>40</sup> Given the scribbling women's preoccupation with feminine suffering, deaf or mute, Talley must have seemed eminently suited to the sublimated, other-worldly style many other women writers sought to approximate.<sup>41</sup>

Talley, encouraged by her family, began writing at an early age; she was sixteen when the Messenger first published her poems. In 1859 she published a collection of poems. Talley was a poet of the effusive mode:

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<sup>38</sup>Benjamin Blake Minor, The Southern Literary Messenger, 1834-1864 (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1905), pp. 158-59; Richmond Daily Whig, 25 April 1860.

<sup>39</sup>Minor, p. 152.

<sup>40</sup>Mary T. Tardy, Living Female Writers of the South (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872), p. 391.

<sup>41</sup>Ann Douglas Wood, "Mrs. Sigourney and the Sensibility of the Inner Space," The New England Quarterly 55 (June 1972): 175-76.

Poetry had been to her as the breath of life; and her poems had occurred to her almost as inspirations, conceived and written out on a moment's impulse, . . . and in several cases . . . without a word being altered.<sup>42</sup>

However, about the time her book was published Talley's pen ran dry; her "power seemed to desert her entirely."<sup>43</sup> Perhaps she was finally taking to heart some advice Poe had reportedly given her when she must have been about fourteen. Near the end of his life Poe conversed with her in the parlor at Talavera, the Talley family home:

He inquired at length what method I pursued in my writing. The idea was new to me, and on my replying that I wrote only on the impulse of a newly conceived idea, he proceeded to give me some needed advice. I must make a study of my poem, he said, line by line and word by word, and revise and correct it until it was as perfect as it could be made.<sup>44</sup>

The war served to unblock Talley's poetical powers; her "Battle of Manassas," written as soon as she heard of the victory, was immediately popular throughout the South. Talley later said of this poem: "It came upon me suddenly, & like an inspiration & in some parts I could not write fast enough for the ideas & words which came rushing into my mind."<sup>45</sup>

Shortly after the beginning of the war Talley must have been in the North, for she was imprisoned at Fort McHenry because she would not take an oath of allegiance to the federal government. During her incarceration she married Lieutenant Weiss, of the United States Army. The details of the remainder of her life are unclear, but she apparently

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<sup>42</sup>Tardy, p. 392.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Susan Archer Weiss, The Home Life of Poe (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1907), p. 184.

<sup>45</sup>Stuart A. Weiss, Commonplace Book, 1888-1936, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.



returned to Richmond and supported herself by writing, finding prose more profitable than poetry.<sup>46</sup>

Though Talley's approach to writing may have been unthinking and effusive, she worked hard to establish a career for herself. After her book of poems was published, she wrote to Hugh A. Grigsby in Norfolk, taking advantage of their slight acquaintance to solicit a favorable notice of her book. She said that her publisher had stressed "the necessity of getting the book 'well & thoroughly received--puffed by the Southern press.'"<sup>47</sup>

Like Susan Talley, Mary Virginia Hawes started to write as a school girl, and her efforts led to a long and successful career as a writer known as Marion Harland. Harland began her first novel in her teens; rejected by Richmond publishers, the manuscript was printed with her father's funds. When Alone received good reviews, a New York publisher brought out a new edition in 1856 and the same year published her second novel, The Hidden Path. At age twenty-five, already a successful author, she married Albert Payson Terhune, a Presbyterian minister, and spent most of her married life in the North. Never abandoning fiction, she began in the 1870s another career as a writer of domestic advice.<sup>48</sup> Harland also succeeded in establishing a happy family life. Her three surviving children all became authors--most notably, Albert Payson

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<sup>46</sup>Tardy, pp. 392-93.

<sup>47</sup>Susan Archer (Talley) Weiss to Hugh A. Grigsby, 19 October 1859, Grigsby Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>48</sup>Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, Paul S. Boyers, eds., "Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune," Notable American Women 1607-1950 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971), 3: 439-41. See also the profile in Julia Freeman Mary Forrest, Women of the South Distinguished in Literature (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1861; reprint ed., New York: Garrett Press, 1969), pp. 195-99.

Terhune, Jr., whose dog stories were very popular.

Starting out as a writer in Richmond, Harland experienced the dilemma of many educated women of her day--how to use their intelligence without betraying their sex. In the dedication of Alone Harland expressed her hope that she could "contribute her mite for the promotion of the happiness and usefulness of her kind" through writing. Ida, the heroine of Alone, similarly set out to improve the world. On occasion her efforts met with some criticism:

I do not court notoriety or responsibility although some will have it so. Constant stirring exercise is as indispensable to my mind as body. Forgive me, dear sir; but I have been distressed by an occasional misgiving that you thought me unfeminine. . . . I have no relish for masculine pursuits; I would have woman move in her God-appointed sphere; but if He has endowed me with talents and opportunity for extending my usefulness, I fear not to improve them. Do you understand me?<sup>49</sup>

But the ultimate message of Alone was that as busy as a woman might be with "the work of the world's reformation" her true happiness rested with finding a suitable husband. Ida's fate must have satisfied Harland's readers:

She is younger, in face and manner at twenty-seven, than she was at seventeen. Her husband's equal in many respects, and treated by him as such--she has never endured the servile subjection of soul, which transforms intelligent women into inane, mindless machines. In yielding to his superior judgment, when in contrariety to hers, her will has parted with none of its strength in the bend, which proved its pliancy. Submission is a pleasure not a cross.<sup>50</sup>

Especially as Alone was Harland's first novel, and because of her avowedly missionary goal, it may be assumed that Ida expressed much of Harland's own mentality, and that of other young Richmond women. The book's

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<sup>49</sup>Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune Marion Harland, Alone (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), p. 333.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 381.

popularity attests perhaps to the fact that many intelligent, educated young women were similarly perplexed about what to do with their lives, and hoped to find their happiness and life's mission in submitting to a suitable lord and master.

One of the most mysterious of Richmond's literary women was "Lille Linden." A woman using that name published in Richmond, several other Virginia cities, and Charleston a journal called the Ladies' Repository. She launched her effort in early 1855 with contributions solicited in Richmond:

Her jet-black eyes, her ruby lips, her musical (and beguiling?) tongue, her radiant smile, and an exquisite genius for solicitation, the whole combined with the utmost propriety of manner, achieved success for her applications wherever they were made.

Evidently Linden got her publication going, for in April she was in Georgia "on a tour through the Southern States." However, by July she was the center of a scandal which the Dispatch refused to explain though it published a letter from Martha Haines Butt of Norfolk announcing her break with Linden. Three days after the Butt letter appeared, Linden announced she had "returned to her editorial post," and would reply in her own publication to the charges made against her. Linden's true identity and the fate of her publication remain a mystery.<sup>51</sup>

In the same year another Richmond woman entered the field of editing. No taint of scandal, however, touched Mrs. E. P. Elam, editor of the Family Christian Album, the motto of which was "Attend to the Morals of Your Child." Mrs. Elam was praised as a lady "whose efforts in a good cause deserve the grateful appreciation of the community."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 27 April, 3 July, 6 July 1855.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 10 July 1855.

Much of the contents of the Album were predictable, urging women to charitable deeds, glorifying motherhood and home:

What is Life without a home--a sweet, a peaceful home? Woman, 'tis thine to make the sacred spot attractive--to keep its nice machinery in order--to arrange, design, correct--to make it all thy husband, brother, father could desire--an earthly paradise, thou its presiding angel.<sup>53</sup>

Mrs. Elam, however, urged the angels to be practical and emphasized the importance of a scientific, educated approach to "domestic economy." She was also interested in promoting female literary talent:

It affords us sincere pleasure, to see young ladies of our own city, thus nobly using the talents bestowed by Almighty Power. . . . We know there is talent with us,--talent of a high order, and ONE of the objects we have in view is its development. If the object is laudable, may HE prosper it.<sup>54</sup>

Later she urged contributors to submit their names. "Many really excellent articles," she lamented, "have been rejected by reason of the writer's failing to entrust US with the weighty secret--their NAMES."<sup>55</sup>

At the end of its first year of publication the Album announced that with volume two each issue would be increased from thirty-two to forty-eight pages, with no change in price. In January 1856, volume two, number one was published in forty-eight pages, but that is the last known issue.

Another Richmond woman of a slightly earlier period assisted her husband in his editorial duties. In 1837 Anna Mead and her husband, the Reverend Zacharia Mead, moved to Richmond where he commenced publishing the Southern Churchman. According to their son, Mrs. Mead helped out with the editorial work as well as "often contributing to its

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<sup>53</sup>"Woman's Mission," Family Christian Album 1 (August 1855): 236.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., (March 1855), p. 96.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., (September 1855), p. 288.

columns original sketches and poems from her ready pen." The Reverend Mr. Mead died three years later, and Mrs. Mead, left a widow with four children, continued the Churchman herself. The Episcopal diocese intervened and took over the journal, and urged Mrs. Mead to establish a school pledging the full support of the church. Mrs. Mead's school opened in 1841 and for the next twelve years was one of the most prominent female schools in Richmond.<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin Blake Minor was similarly aided by his wife during his years with the Southern Literary Messenger. Virginia Otey Minor was the daughter of Reverend James Otey, founder of the Columbia (Tennessee) Female Institute. Miss Otey was a "ready writer in both prose and verse," and much of her courtship and twelve month engagement with Minor was passed by literary exchanges between the two. In 1843, a year after their marriage, Minor took over the Messenger, and Mrs. Minor became a frequent contributor. Her story, "Stephano Colonna, of Love and Lore; a Tale of the 15th Century" won a twenty-five dollar prize offered by the Messenger in 1844. Her husband credited her with assisting his editorial chores, and when he was away from Richmond for several months in the winter of 1845-46, he left her in charge of the magazine.<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Minor was a highly educated woman who shared deep literary interests with her husband. Though she never depended on her writing for her livelihood, she took more than an amateur's interest in the craft. As a Richmond matron she was also active in "many worthy causes, charitable, aesthetic, religious, educational and patriotic."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Edward C. Mead, Anna Maria Mead Chalmers, a Biographical Sketch (n.p.: Everett Wadley Co., 1893), pp. 33-37.

<sup>57</sup>Minor, pp. 124-26, 128.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

These were but a few of the Richmond women who possessed literary talent and, like Marion Harland's Ida, were not afraid to use it. Although many of them certainly did not look upon writing or editing as a career, their dedication and productivity suggests seriousness of purpose above the amateur level. They took advantage of the nineteenth-century taste for sentimental literature, and in writing found a socially acceptable mode of self-expression, personal fulfillment, and, occasionally, financial support.

Perhaps the most important finding in the 1860 census data is that large numbers of Richmond women did succeed in a chosen occupation. The majority of working women in Richmond, as elsewhere, were found in low-skill, low-paying jobs, but a significant number of them found status in the community as shopkeepers, fashionable milliners and dressmakers, and respected teachers. No doubt the prevailing ideology in Richmond was that women's sphere was the home, but the reality of urban life created opportunities and often the necessity for women to work and succeed outside the domestic setting.

### CHAPTER III

#### "THAT OUR DAUGHTERS MAY BE AS THE POLISHED CORNERS OF THE TEMPLE"<sup>1</sup>

Just as the city provided women with opportunities to work outside the home, Richmond women enjoyed educational advantages superior to those available in the surrounding rural areas. The status of women's education, however, was tied to the general progress of education in the South. Though Virginia did not institute a system of free public education until after the Civil War, Virginians were not entirely indifferent to the agitation for educational reform in antebellum America. The Richmond Enquirer and Whig frequently spoke out against Virginia's deficient educational system, pointing out that the state had more illiterate whites than any other in the Union. Editorials and letters argued that Virginia's glorious past was being desecrated by the current generation's educational degeneration.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the greatest improvements in education in the South took place in the decade before the Civil War, for, as Clement Eaton observed, reform movements in the Old South developed at an almost "glacial pace."<sup>3</sup>

In Richmond in 1851 the city moved to provide a free primary school

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<sup>1</sup>Motto of the Richmond Female Institute.

<sup>2</sup>J. Stephen Knight, Jr., "Discontent, Disunity, and Dissent in the Antebellum South, Virginia as a Test Case, 1844-1846," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 81 (October 1973): 448-451.

<sup>3</sup>Clement Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 271.

in each ward. Inspired by the new state constitution which emphasized the importance of public education, the City Council appropriated one thousand dollars for the schools to be supplemented by two hundred dollars from the state Literary Fund.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the schools apparently operated on shaky financial footing. In early 1853 the teachers were using their meagre salaries to buy books and fuel and to hire badly needed assistants. Later that year, the City Council, perhaps realizing that to be effective the schools needed more security, decided to provide proper buildings for the ward schools.<sup>5</sup>

In this decade Catholic education in Richmond also grew rapidly. St. Joseph's Academy and Orphan Asylum, incorporated in 1848, almost tripled the number of students in its academy and free school in the period 1850-1857. In 1859 three nuns from Milwaukee established at St. Mary's German church a school for older girls and young girls and boys.<sup>6</sup> Richmond's Jewish population showed a similar interest in education. Temple Beth Ahabah sponsored the Richmond Hebrew, German and English Institute which opened its doors in 1847 to seventy pupils. In 1850 another temple, Beth Shalome, established its Hebrew and English Institute.<sup>7</sup>

Margaret Meagher's History of Education in Richmond, in spite of some errors and omissions, provides a useful list of Richmond schools. Meagher's book and additional evidence from newspaper advertisements and

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<sup>4</sup>Virginus Dabney, Richmond: the Story of a City (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 146.

<sup>5</sup>Margaret Meagher, History of Education in Richmond (Richmond: City School Board, 1939), p. 108.

<sup>6</sup>James Henry Bailey II, A History of the Diocese of Richmond (Richmond: Diocese of Richmond, 1956), pp. 129, 126.

<sup>7</sup>Meagher, p. 128.

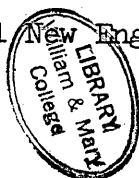


city directories indicate that Richmonders interested in educating their daughters had many schools from which to choose. Education in the city at least had the advantage of choice and variety. With the free schools and the numerous primary or dame schools throughout the city, rudimentary education was widely available. Even so, there does not seem to have been much improvement in literacy among Richmond women by 1860. In 1845 the Enquirer said that one out of every twelve and a half white men and women in Virginia were illiterate.<sup>8</sup> According to the 1860 census approximately one out of every 16.8 adult white females in Richmond was illiterate. It is difficult to know how much weight to attach to these figures, especially in light of Richmond's immigrant population. A woman who could read and write in German, but not English, may have been recorded as illiterate. The census indicated that slightly more than one out of every two adult free black women was illiterate. In spite of prohibitions against their education, it appears that many free blacks in the city were able to acquire at least rudimentary skills.

It is impossible to do more than speculate about the education of the average Richmond woman. It would appear that she started school at about age five and continued for about ten years or less, according to what the family could afford. (The census listed teachers as young as fifteen.) Mary Frances Green (b. ca. 1830), whose family was probably above average in wealth and social standing, recorded her recollections of her school years in Richmond. At age five she went to a school for "nicer boys & girls" kept by a woman left destitute when her artist husband deserted her. Two years later she went to Mr. Persico's school where she liked the teachers--"all New England Ladies, who did a faithful

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<sup>8</sup>Knight, p. 450.



part by their scholars." From there she went to a school kept by a woman who was "Irish by birthday--finely educated [and] very dignified." She finished school at age seventeen.<sup>9</sup>

Lucy Parke Chamberlayne (b. 1842) recorded her memories of school in a slightly later period. She first went to a dame school kept by Miss Mary Anderson and from there to a school taught by "Miss Harriet Hale, a northern woman who lived at Mr. James Macmurdo's taught his daughters & had a number of other pupils." Her next teacher was Mrs. Hackley, a widow whose small school supported herself and aided her daughter's family. Mrs. Hackley had kept a girls' school in Fredericksburg, and was an awe-inspiring figure who never forgot she was born a Randolph. Among the teachers assisting Mrs. Hackley was Jessie Gordon, "a very young girl then," who became a well-known teacher in her own right. Lucy, along with her best friend, then went to Mrs. Mead's school where they were the youngest scholars. Her education was interrupted for a year and a half by her father's illness and death. During this period her mother supervised her studies, and Lucy kept daily abstracts of her reading. For recreation she "read all of Scott's novels--Arabian Nights, Abbott's Histories--Life of Pizarro & c & . . . and delighted in Goldsmith's poems--& The Vicar of Wakefield--and in Byron & Moore." At age twelve she resumed her schooling at the Virginia Female Institute in Staunton. Two years later she returned to Richmond as a student at Powell's Southern Female Institute. Lucy was very happy at this school and especially treasured the "lasting friendships" formed

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<sup>9</sup>Mary Frances (Green) Stone, "Reminiscences of her childhood in Richmond, Va., in the 1830s and 1840s, written in 1907," Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

there.<sup>10</sup> Presumably her schooling ended at age seventeen or eighteen.

The reminiscences of these two women reflect the range of education available to Richmond girls. At the end of the antebellum period Richmond felt proud of its female schools:

If we were called upon to specify that in which Richmond surpasses herself and all other cities in the Union, we should point to her schools for young ladies. They are here of every proportion and at every rate of expenditure--of every creed, and of no creed. Some aspire to the capacious range of a University, and undertake to make the future mothers of the Commonwealth as learned as they are fair; others, less ambitious, are content with collegiate proportions; others again, still more humble, are contented with what is called a "home school". . . .<sup>11</sup>

There is ample evidence that interest in improved education for women was widespread in the antebellum South. Southerners did not often admit deficiencies in their system, but William Gilmore Simms lamented that in the "North the usual gift to a young lady is a book--in the South, a ring, a chain, or a bottle of Eau de Cologne."<sup>12</sup> Parents demonstrated a concern that their daughters have the same educational advantages as their sons. Elizabeth N. Ridley wrote in 1863 to her daughter at Miss Pegram's school to attend to her studies in spite of the distraction of war and the gay social life in Richmond. "You know," she wrote, "what a great ambition I have for intelligent children."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Lucy Parke (Chamberlayne) Bagby, "Chronicles of the Life of Lucy Parke Chamberlayne," pp. 9-77 passim, Bagby Family Papers, Section 132, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>11</sup>"Miss Pegram's School," Richmond Daily Whig, 12 September 1860.

<sup>12</sup>Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 264.

<sup>13</sup>Elizabeth Norfleet (Goodwyn) Ridley to Elizabeth Norfleet (Ridley) Neely, 2 June 1863, Ridley Family of Southampton Co., Va., Papers, Section 7, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

Female education was apparently an idea whose time had come, but even its most ardent advocates were surprised at the rate at which superior schools for women were being established throughout the South. Around 1850 Baptists in Richmond "became anxious about the education of their Daughters" and began to plan the Richmond Female Institute. They anticipated attracting young Baptist women from Virginia and the entire South, but the "Baptist host were taken suddenly with an unaccountable zeal for female education, and in every Town in Va., was set up a girls' boarding school of no common order."<sup>14</sup>

In 1860 the President of Hollins wrote:

The progress of Virginia sentiment on the subject of female education, within the last ten years, has been no less surprising than it is likely to prove productive of the most substantial benefits. In no way has this radical change been more strikingly evinced, than in the establishment of Female Institutes of high character. . . .<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the female institutes were established so quickly and were of such superior grade that primary schools often lagged behind. The Hollins president declared that from his experience primary schools needed to be vastly improved so that young women entering the female institutes would be prepared to take advantage of this new educational opportunity.

The Virginia constitution adopted in 1851 stressed the importance of public education and added fuel to the arguments in favor of improved education for women. "The New Constitution," an article which appeared in the February 1852 Southern Literary Messenger, summarized many of the arguments for female education. The anonymous author noted that women

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<sup>14</sup>J. C. Courtney to Rev. H. A. Tupper, 9 March 1891, in Emma Morehead Whitfield, comp., "A collection of original letters and papers, relative to the founding of the Richmond Female Institute . . ." (Type-written, title taken from introduction).

<sup>15</sup>"Female Education," Richmond Daily Whig, 22 May 1860.

had been excluded from state education in Virginia and argued that the goal of improved educational standards for the state could not be met unless women were included. More teachers would be needed and, the author argued, Virginia schools should set about training women teachers:

In our judgement, one thing more is wanted to perfect the system of popular education so happily begun, and that is, a competent provision for the instruction of females in Virginia, and particularly with reference to the supply of the existing demand for Southern Female Teachers.<sup>16</sup>

This interest in educating women for teaching careers was a new development inspired by the example of women from the North teaching in southern schools and by the heating up of southern sectional pride. Almost every argument for female education emphasized the importance of southern women being educated in the South. The Messenger author argued that: "The objections which are felt to the education of our young men at the North, have even greater force when applied to our young women." He feared that the "more ductile" female minds would be "infected with that sickly sentimentalism, which seems to be epidemical at the North; and which generates such monstors as the Abby Kellys and the Fanny Wrights. . . ."<sup>17</sup> Since the author was hardly free of "sickly sentimentalism" himself, presumably he was referring to the horrors of abolitionism and women's rights.

In the background of these arguments is the fear that Southern women were not properly pro-slavery. Alexander Sands of Richmond put it quite clearly in an address at the Hollins Female Institute commencement in 1859:

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<sup>16</sup>"The New Constitution. Female Education. The Southern Female Institute at Fredericksburg, Va.," Southern Literary Messenger 18 (February 1852): 121.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

I do ask you to look well to the surrounding of this question-- 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. . . . This is one of the duties (and but one) which an educated woman at the South owes to the State,--that she may contribute to its good order by promoting the growth of a proper sentiment on this subject. . . .<sup>18</sup>

When the Richmond Female Institute was founded, the editor of the Richmond Bulletin expressed the hope that it would reverse the trend of southerners patronizing "female colleges at the North." Keep the girls at home, he said, and imbue them "with proper sentiments in regard to our peculiar institutions."<sup>19</sup> Ironically, in at least one case this plan did not have the desired effect. Mrs. Burton Harrison recalled her days at Hubert Lefebvre's school in Richmond:

I will only say that the experience broadened my horizon in introducing to me types of girls from the higher class of society all over the South, and convincing me that the surrounding slave service was inspiring neither to the energy of body nor independence of ideas I had been taught to consider indispensable. Many of these pretty, languid creatures from the far Southern States had never put on a shoe or stocking for themselves; and the point of view of some about owning and chastising fellow-beings who might chance to offend them was abhorrent to me.<sup>20</sup>

A proper education, many southerners argued, would do away with any nonsense about women's rights. The system of female education which the Messenger author envisioned "would drive the whole generation of Blue-stockings from the land."<sup>21</sup> "F.G.R.D." of Charlottesville, also

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<sup>18</sup>Alexander Sands, "Intellectual Culture of Woman. An Address delivered before the Hollins Female Institute, at the Commencement on the 6th April, 1859," Southern Literary Messenger 28 (May 1859): 331.

<sup>19</sup>"Letters and papers of the Richmond Female Institute," p. 89.

<sup>20</sup>Mrs. Burton Harrison [Constance Cary], Recollections Grave and Gay (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 42.

<sup>21</sup>"The New Constitution," p. 117.

writing in the Messenger, wholeheartedly supported women's education, arguing that "it is not education, but the want of it, that has given rise to that monstrous absurdity in society, 'the women's rights woman.'"<sup>22</sup>

George Fitzhugh, ever the curmudgeon, believed that "women would do well to disguise strength of mind or body, if they possess it, if they would retain their empire."<sup>23</sup> Most supporters of female education, however, argued that education would not remove women from their proper sphere, that education was not "incompatible with the right performance of all the appropriate duties that fall to the lot of women."<sup>24</sup> Supporters of women's education, North and South, argued that education would prepare women to meet more responsibly and intelligently their female duties. Of course, their education would have to take into consideration women's domain so that the "harmony of nature may not be disturbed."<sup>25</sup> The Richmond Daily Whig put the argument simply: "Woman's province is within doors, and this consideration should never be disregarded in any scheme for her proper education."<sup>26</sup>

Education for women was urged because of their role as leaders of society and mothers of the future (male) generation. An educated woman, many argued, also made a better wife; education prepared her to be not just a companion but also her husband's "counsellor in the serious and

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<sup>22</sup>F.G.R.D., "The Literary Wife," Southern Literary Messenger 23 (December 1856): 408.

<sup>23</sup>George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), pp. 215-16.

<sup>24</sup>"The Literary Wife," p. 407.

<sup>25</sup>H. T. Tuckerman, "Mrs. Hemans," Southern Literary Messenger 7 (May/June 1841): 380.

<sup>26</sup>"Miss Pegram's School," Richmond Daily Whig, 12 September 1860.

vitally important interests and pursuits of life."<sup>27</sup> A. Judson Crane, a Richmond lawyer who was a frequent speaker at female institutes, argued that a good wife took care not to fall behind her husband in intellect:

In order to maintain the position after marriage which she held before it is needful to women to guard well not to fall behind in the intellectual pursuits and entertaining accomplishments which lent grace and added attraction to her maiden years. The notion so prevalent that need for all intellectual exertion ceases at marriage, is an ill-founded and mischievous mistake.<sup>28</sup>

Discussions of women's education also raised the question of women's intellectual capacity. The author of "Condition of Woman in Ancient Greece" declared that he suspected that the difference between male and female mental ability was "very much less than is generally supposed."<sup>29</sup> "E.T.," writing on "Female Education," believed that the differences between men and women resulted from their different "cultivation:"

That this difference does and ought to exist, we have no doubt; but that the disparity now existing is "right, proper and just" to women, we do not for a moment believe.<sup>30</sup>

The question of women's intellectual capacity required a deft balancing act of admitting female mental ability without relinquishing insistence upon male superiority. One solution was to hypothesize the existence of complementary male and female mentalities:

<sup>27</sup>"The Rights of Woman," Southern Literary Messenger 8 (August 1842): 530.

<sup>28</sup>A. Judson Crane, Zenobia. Anniversary Address Before the Zenobian Society of Fluvanna Female Institute, Delivered July 6, 1859 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1859), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup>"Condition of Woman in Ancient Greece," Southern Quarterly Review 16 (January 1850): 341.

<sup>30</sup>E.T., "Female Education," Southern Literary Messenger 27 (September 1858): 218.



To speak strictly and justly, we regard the minds of the sexes as equally important. They are necessary to each other. They are the complements of each other.<sup>31</sup>

Another element in the discussion of female education was the question of home versus school education. The South had a strong tradition of education at home, especially for girls. Virginia Hawes Terhune recalled in her autobiography that she and her sister were educated at home by a tutor. When they entered Miss Nottingham's school in Richmond in 1844, they were tested and put in a class with older girls "who had been regular attendants upon boarding and day schools of note."<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Anna Mead, who was educated at several very good Massachusetts schools, observed that most of her pupils had been "prepared at home, and this 'home culture' by such parents as the South had, was far superior to any mechanical training of Northern schools."<sup>33</sup> In the Southern Literary Messenger "E.T." urged home education:

We think the essential requisite for female education of a superior order, is to be found at home; let the education be obtained at home, under carefully selected and thoroughly prepared instructors.<sup>34</sup>

Certainly only a few families could afford the expense of hiring teachers in their homes or were willing to spend the time supervising home education. It is, however, a testimony to the popularity of home education that boarding schools commonly referred to their home-like atmosphere

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<sup>31</sup>Tiberius Gracchus Jones, Mind and Woman: An Address Delivered Before the Chowan Female Collegiate Institute, Murfreesboro', N.C., July 25th, 1855 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1855), pp. 15-16.

<sup>32</sup>Mary Virginia Terhune, Marion Harland's Autobiography (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), p. 150.

<sup>33</sup>Edward C. Mead, Anna Maria Mead Chalmers, a Biographical Sketch (n.p.: Everett Waddey Co., 1893), p. 70.

<sup>34</sup>"Female Education," p. 219.

and parental attention given to students.

It is difficult to judge the quality of Richmond's schools for women. Many, however, had notable teachers who were often revered by generations of Richmonders. One such individual was Miss Mary Pegram whose school appears to have been more fashionable than intellectually demanding. Elizabeth Ridley, whose two daughters were at Miss Pegram's, wrote: "Would that it were the fashion of your school to excell in learning & not in dress."<sup>35</sup> Miss Pegram, nevertheless, was a good teacher and successful administrator:

When, four years ago, she ventured to enter an arena occupied by such numbers of formidable competitors, her warmest friends trembled for the result. Under any circumstances, it was a great undertaking for a young lady. . . . It would be sufficient praise to say that, from the very first, her school took rank with the very best in the Metropolis. With each succeeding year, as it became better known, it grew in public favor, and excited the warmest and most enthusiastic interest of those who patronized it. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Beyond the primary level boys and girls apparently attended separate schools. One Miss M. E. Cone, however, had a school in part coordinated with her brother's. An advertisement for the reopening of Miss Cone's "Select School for Young Ladies" mentioned that pupils "pursuing the higher branches, will be permitted to be present at the experiments and illustrations before the classes studying similar branches in her brother's school." Miss Cone's students also had "the free use of globe, maps, charts, &c. of her brother's school, under her instruction."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Elizabeth Norfleet (Goodwyn) Ridley to Elizabeth Norfleet (Ridley) Neely, 15 April 1863, Ridley Family of Southampton Co., Va., Papers, Section 7, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>36</sup>"Miss Pegram's School," Richmond Daily Whig, 12 September 1860.

<sup>37</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 12 September 1855.

Miss Cone was seemingly convinced that girls were capable of pursuing the same course of study that was common in the boys' schools. D. Lee Powell and Robert J. Morrison founded the Southern Female Institute in 1850 upon the same premise. Their intention was to model their school after the University of Virginia and the Virginia Military Institute. According to local tradition, the Southern Female Institute made no attempt to dilute academic subjects to suit the "tender female mind," and some of Richmond's outstanding teachers of later years were products of this curriculum.<sup>38</sup>

Two Richmond schools from this period stand out as good examples of the better grade of education available to women. Mrs. Mead's school and the Richmond Female Institute were both considered outstanding schools of their time and left behind significant records of their educational programs. Both Mrs. Mead and the founders of the Richmond Female Institute consciously tried to create superior educational systems tailored to the needs and expectations of southern women. Both institutions made a deliberate effort to improve educational opportunities for women.

Anna (Hickman) Mead was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1809 but lived most of her childhood in Massachusetts. The first school she attended was taught by Lydia Maria Francis (later Mrs. Child), and Mrs. Mead credited her with "the first awakening of my thinking powers." Later she was sent to Boston Latin School with a male cousin. At age fifteen she was described by an aunt as having a mind "extremely well furnished for one her age." Her mother insisted she attend to some housework, but Anna loved "her books rather better than any pursuit of

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<sup>38</sup>Dabney, p. 147; Meagher, p. 73.

that kind." Following the death of her grandparents she went to live with an aunt and uncle in Georgia and finished her education there.<sup>39</sup>

Widowed, and with a family to support, Mrs. Mead opened her school in the fall of 1841, under the auspices of the Episcopal clergy in Richmond. She was the sole teacher of twenty-five pupils including six boarders, but within the first year the number of students increased, and Mrs. Mead hired a second teacher.<sup>40</sup> The school's catalogue for 1845-1846 lists thirteen teachers in addition to Mrs. Mead and one hundred and thirty students, the majority of whom were from Richmond.<sup>41</sup> The school's popularity continued, and pupils were even turned away.<sup>42</sup>

From the beginning Mrs. Mead had very definite ideas about the aims of her school. In her frequent talks to the students she tried to pass on to them her own love of study:

I wish to see more enthusiasm, more true love of study, more general interest in reading and writing for yourselves, and more thirst for that intellectual cultivation which, next to piety, is the most beautiful ornament of the female character.<sup>43</sup>

Mrs. Mead especially admired Dr. Arnold of Rugby, and often referred to him in her talks. In later years she wrote a former student: "If ever I have been in danger of 'hero worship,' it has been when contemplating the character and efforts of this good man." She edited in 1869 a portion of Tom Brown's School Days "to bring his peculiar mode

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<sup>39</sup>Mead, pp. 9-22 passim.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>41</sup>Mrs. Mead's School. Catalogue of the Teachers and Pupils for the Scholastic Year, 1845-46 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1846), pp. 3, 5-9.

<sup>42</sup>Mead, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

of moral discipline to the notice of the younger generation."<sup>44</sup>

Mrs. Mead's talks to students and printed remarks in the school's catalogues indicate that she put a great deal of thought into devising a system of education appropriate for young women. She thought the primary purpose of educating women was to prepare them to "act well their part as Christian daughters, wives and mothers."<sup>45</sup> With that goal in mind, Mrs. Mead hoped to devise a program of study in which knowledge was "valued not so much from its absolute importance or interest, as from its effects upon the character."<sup>46</sup>

Each department of study had a function. The study of literature, philosophy, and history served to enhance "that delicacy and refinement of thought which forms the fairest of womanly graces." The study of the "exact sciences," on the other hand, would "correct any over-refinement of mind, and render a certain support in the trials of after-life."<sup>47</sup>

The school's catalogue for 1845-1846 devoted six pages to lists of "Books Used in the School," and Mrs. Mead's own remarks indicate that she tried to secure for her school the best and most suitable texts. According to her son, Mrs. Mead "introduced many text-books of the New England colleges, as well as those of some foreign institutions, many of which were imported direct for her school."<sup>48</sup> She took care that the instruction in her school was up to date. In the French classes students

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<sup>44</sup>Anna Mead Chalmers to Sarah Seddon Bruce, 22 March 1869, Bruce Family Papers, Section 17, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>45</sup>Mead, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup>Catalogue for 1845-46, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>48</sup>Mead, p. 54.

studied "classical authors" as well as "some of the most remarkable examples of the new mode of thinking."<sup>49</sup> Science text books, she felt, lagged behind current thinking:

It is to be regretted that there is as yet no treatise on Natural Philosophy, which exhibits the recent results of scientific inquiry in a simple and attractive form, and none which is, in every respect, suitable as an introduction to Chemistry. This is, however, the less inconvenient, as the pupils of this School have the advantage of attending a special course of lectures by the Professor of Chemistry in the Medical College, and the deficiencies of the text books will be supplied by oral instruction.<sup>50</sup>

Mrs. Mead estimated that the education in her school "was up to that of Harvard College and other high institutions of the North. . . . Some few girls were taken as far as Conic Sections in Mathematics, and many graduated in Geometry and Trigonometry, and the higher branches in Literature and Languages." She felt the success of her school resulted from "the blessing of God," "the school's being conducted strictly upon Christian principles," the support of the Episcopal clergy and other friends, and "the fact that I paid the highest sums to my teachers . . . sparing no pains in procuring the best the country could afford." Salaries ranged from five hundred to a thousand dollars.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the greatest reason for the school's success was Mrs. Mead herself. Both affectionate and demanding, she inspired love and respect from her students. A former student who later became a teacher wrote:

Towards Mrs. Mead I look with feelings of love, esteem, and wonder, absolutely bordering upon awe. I never saw anyone so admirably adapted for the station she fills as she is.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Catalogue for 1845-46, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Mead, pp. 70-71.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

In spite of her great success, Mrs. Mead, in a letter thanking a former student for a gift, described her existence as a "life of busy loneliness."<sup>53</sup> Perhaps this loneliness explains why in 1853 she closed down the school and remarried. Mrs. Mead's school lasted only a decade. Other schools were similarly short-lived, closing when their founders or principals chose to end the endeavor. This lack of stable continuity was bound to have a detrimental effect on women's education.

The group of Richmond Baptists who founded the Richmond Female Institute aimed to establish a school for higher learning that would be permanent and independent of the continued interest of a single individual. In fact, their scheme was to sell shares and turn the school into a profit-making endeavor. Dr. Basil Manly, Jr., former pastor of the First Baptist Church, was the first president of the Richmond Female Institute. One of his initial chores was a tour of schools in the North for the purpose of exploring the feasibility of making the school a profitable concern. He also inspected the latest ideas in school buildings, teaching methods, and furnishings. His report included sketches of school buildings and notes on details such as blackboards and scientific apparatus.<sup>54</sup>

The Richmond Female Institute opened in 1854 in a large building with three floors, two basement levels, and studios and recreation rooms in the attic. Built and furnished at a cost of sixty thousand dollars, according to the first annual report, the school could accommodate three hundred students, including ninety boarders. Two thousand dollars was

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<sup>53</sup>Anna Maria Mead to Sarah Seddon Bruce, 26 July 1852(?), Bruce Family Papers, Section 17, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>54</sup>"Letters and papers of the Richmond Female Institute," p. 29.

spent for extensive scientific equipment and specimens, maps, and charts. "No similar enterprise," the report claimed, "has been commenced in this city on a scale of such magnitude; and it cannot fail, if successful, to reflect honor upon our city, as well as upon its founders."<sup>55</sup>

From its founding the Richmond Female Institute expressed its conviction that "the fairer sex ought to enjoy advantages for liberal culture, equal in grade to those afforded the other."<sup>56</sup> Like Mrs. Mead, the Institute felt that the greatest goal of education was "to train the pupil to think for herself, to think correctly, forcibly and usefully."<sup>57</sup> To that end extensive use was made in the classrooms of blackboards, illustrative materials, conversation, and recitation. The course of study was

designed to afford to young ladies opportunities for mental training corresponding to those which young men enjoyed in our best colleges; only such modifications being introduced as the different, though not less responsible sphere which a well educated woman must occupy, seems to demand.<sup>58</sup>

The school was divided into three departments--preparatory, collegiate, and ornamental. The collegiate department enrolled the most students. It was a four-year program encompassing English literature and "Belles Lettres," ancient and modern languages, mathematics, natural sciences (natural history, botany, physiology, natural philosophy, chemistry, geology and astronomy), moral philosophy, history, and

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 76, 91.

<sup>56</sup>Circular and Catalogue of the Richmond Female Institute for 1856 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1856), p. 17.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>58</sup>"Letters and papers of the Richmond Female Institute," p. 94.



political economy. Teacher training was part of the program, and later the useful subjects of bookkeeping and penmanship were also offered. Music, art, and embroidery were the province of the ornamental department.<sup>59</sup> In 1856 Dr. Manly proposed "a species of super-graduate course . . . for graduates of this or other Institutions which may embrace some higher learning in general Literature, in History, Belles Lettres, & Languages."<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps Richmonders, and Virginians in general, were not quite prepared for female education on this scale, for the Institute was criticized in the press for its allegedly high tuition. Manly replied to these charges, asserting that the fees were comparable to those of other schools in the city and were necessary to cover expenses. Further, he added, "we are not called upon in the Institute to pay more than we should, for the same things, have to pay for our sons in our best colleges." If some male colleges charged less, it was because they had endowments the Institute lacked.<sup>61</sup>

In 1862 the Richmond Female Institute building was taken over for a hospital, but the school survived the war and in 1894 was chartered as the Woman's College of Richmond. Ultimately it became part of the University of Richmond.<sup>62</sup> Richmonders had had high hopes for the Institute's future. A press account of its fourth commencement ended with the wish that the school would "continue to prosper and improve until it

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<sup>59</sup>Circular and Catalogue for 1856, pp. 23-25; Fifth Annual Circular and Catalogue of the Richmond Female Institute (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1859), p. 51.

<sup>60</sup>"Letters and papers of the Richmond Female Institute," p. 125.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., pp. 96-99.

<sup>62</sup>Meagher, p. 75.

becomes an University, for the education of the daughters of the South."<sup>63</sup>

The war and its aftermath disrupted the progress of women's education in the South, and perhaps for that reason little attention has been paid to the early attempts to provide southern women with an education equal to men's.<sup>64</sup> One of the founders of the Richmond Female Institute remarked that it "would have been a grand success, but for the war."<sup>65</sup> Even so, the Institute had an undoubted impact. Cassie Moncure Lyne, who entered the school in 1859, recorded a personal history of the Richmond Female Institute on the seventy-first anniversary of its founding. She praised the important role the Institute played "in developing the womanhood of the South, the pressing need it so ably fulfilled in civic advancement, and the quota of teachers it furnished the schools of Virginia." She also enumerated the many influential and distinguished men who were husbands or sons of Richmond Female Institute graduates.<sup>66</sup>

It is a tribute to the educational programs at Mrs. Mead's school and the Richmond Female Institute that both appear to have had a lasting influence on their students. One departing student wrote to Mrs. Mead: "When I go to my retired home, I shall study my character, and what you

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<sup>63</sup>"Letters and papers of the Richmond Female Institute," p. 155.

<sup>64</sup>I. M. E. Blandin's History of Higher Education of Women in the South Prior to 1860 (New York: Neal Publishing Co., 1909) is not particularly helpful. Amory Dwight Mayo is complimentary of many antebellum female schools, and suggests that their histories be recorded before they are lost: Southern Women in the Recent Educational Movement in the South, Bureau of Education Circular of Information, No. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892).

<sup>65</sup>J. C. Courtney to Rev. H. A. Tupper, 9 March 1891, "Letters and papers of the Richmond Female Institute," p. 13.

<sup>66</sup>Mrs. Cassie M. Lyne, Reminiscences of the Seventy-first Anniversary of the Founding of the Richmond Female Institute (Richmond: Alumnae Association of the Richmond Female Institute and Woman's College of Richmond, 1926), pp. 9-10.

have done for me will be more fully appreciated."<sup>67</sup> These two schools and similar institutes or seminaries in the South provided a very good education, "as the large class of intelligent and accomplished Southern women of that day, trained exclusively in them, attests." From this group of educated women emerged "a remarkable body of instructors" in response to the educational needs of the South following the Civil War.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Mead, p. 72.

<sup>68</sup>Mayo, pp. 41, 50.

## CHAPTER IV

### MRS. PRESIDENT AND MISS SECRETARY

The women who ran Richmond's female charitable organizations were from the same class as the young women who benefited from the improved educational opportunities. These relatively privileged women felt it was their duty to aid others less fortunate. By current standards Lady Bountiful is a somewhat comical figure, especially in her twentieth-century form as the Helen Hokinson club woman. Nevertheless, women's benevolent organizations have had a significant impact on American society. In the antebellum period numerous active women's organizations played a major philanthropic role. The accumulated proceeds of each sewing circle or charity bazaar were prodigious. These ladies' organizations also paved the way for the great women reformers of later generations and were the predecessors of many modern organizations such as those supporting working women and female suffrage.<sup>1</sup>

Charitable activities, according to antebellum thinking, were a natural extension of women's moral superiority and religious sensibility. Women's organizations were encouraged by the clergy, who assured the timid that benevolent activities were entirely proper and divinely approved. Still, "benevolence necessarily became a semi-public activity," and one that widened women's scope of experience. Women learned to form organizations, run meetings, collect and disburse funds, and publicize

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<sup>1</sup>Keith Melder, "Ladies Bountiful: Organized Women's Benevolence in Early 19th-Century America," New York History 48 (July 1967): 249.

their activities. Women's charitable activities "served as building blocks and mortar for women's moral pedestal."<sup>2</sup> Yet it was that pedestal existence that left women isolated and frustrated, and caused them to channel "frustration, anger, and a compensatory sense of superior righteousness into the reform movements."<sup>3</sup> In either case, women's charitable activities added immensely to their social stature.

Studies of female reformers and organizations have drawn almost exclusively on northern sources. Southern women, motivated by reasons similar to those of northern women, also formed benevolent organizations. In the South, moreover, the tradition of noblesse oblige was a further impulse to benevolent activities. The sense of noblesse oblige "permeated the upper class of Southern society in the antebellum period of history," and gave rise to a strong sense of personal honor and of obligation for public service.<sup>4</sup> Not only men, but women too were "leaders in their community from whom all sorts of public service was expected."<sup>5</sup> It was with that sense of duty that Richmond women organized to provide homes for Norfolk children orphaned by the yellow fever epidemic in that city in 1855:

The ladies--God bless them!--put their hands at once to work, to aid the committee in preparing for the little guests. Conspicuous among them was that venerable lady, Mrs. BARNES, who, octogenarian as she is, seems to be rejuvenized by

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 240-43.

<sup>3</sup>Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," American Quarterly 23 (October 1971): 564.

<sup>4</sup>Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Ernest R. Groves, The American Woman: the Feminine Side of a Masculine Civilization, rev. ed. (New York: Emerson Books, 1944), p. 155.

thinking of the bereaved little creatures . . . and with the energy and ardor of youth, she has gone to work for them.<sup>6</sup>

The most common benevolent organization among Richmond women was the church sewing circle. The women of the First Baptist Church organized a Sewing Society in November 1855 to raise funds for a city missionary. In this pre-war period the church paid a city missionary an annual salary of six to seven hundred dollars.<sup>7</sup> The Sewing Circle of St. Paul's Church was able in 1859 to raise five hundred dollars.<sup>8</sup> The Richmond press ran frequent notices of Ladies' Fairs such as the week-long Sale and Supper for the "purpose of supporting a missionary at Rocketts [a poor section of the city]," the Methodist ladies' "Mission Chapel Fair," and the fair to aid St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum.<sup>9</sup> A history of the Monumental Church states that in 1857 its ladies' fair raised \$725.<sup>10</sup>

Training in benevolent activity started at an early age; schools often had their own sewing circles and sponsored charitable fairs. In 1860 the Sewing Circle at Miss M. A. Allen's School held a fair to raise funds for a new Episcopal church. Showing good promotional sense, the girls sent the Enquirer staff a sample of the "flowers, fruits and other

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<sup>6</sup>Richmond Daily Dispatch, 13 September 1855.

<sup>7</sup>Henry Allen Tupper, ed., The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), p. 224.

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Wright Weddell, St. Paul's Church, Richmond, Virginia, Its Historic Years and Memorials (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1931), pp. 119-20.

<sup>9</sup>Richmond Semi-Weekly Enquirer, 21 February 1860; Daily Whig, 21 March, 4 December 1860; Daily Dispatch, 13 January 1858.

<sup>10</sup>George D. Fisher, History and Reminiscences of the Monumental Church, Richmond, Va., from 1814 to 1878 (Richmond: Whittet & Shepper-son, 1880), p. 255.

delicacies" to be sold at the fair.<sup>11</sup> The Richmond Female Institute had a Foreign Missionary Society founded in December 1855 and endowed with a thousand dollar gift from Dr. W. H. Gwathney, a deacon of First Baptist Church, and his sister. The 1856 catalogue of the Institute noted that Dr. Manly was president of the Society and Miss Louise S. Loftin was secretary. A donation of "a number of valuable books, consisting of Biographies, Missionary Travels, &c." had been made to the library with the hope that "a greatly increased interest in the cause of missions may spring up among the young ladies."<sup>12</sup>

Many antebellum women were notable for their church-related work. Mrs. Catherine Bethel, "a woman of means and remarkable business ability," owned that part of Richmond now called Monroe Park and was a "leading spirit" in the Methodist church.<sup>13</sup> Other women were known more for their deeds than for their liberal gifts. When Miss Jane Gray, "an accomplished young lady," died, her funeral procession included four hundred children from the Second Baptist Church's Sabbath School where she was "a favorite teacher."<sup>14</sup> Margaret Robinson was well known for her missionary works:

After her return from school, she devoted herself in an unusual and remarkable degree to the relief, comfort, and

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<sup>11</sup>Richmond Semi-Weekly Enquirer, 25 May, 29 May 1860.

<sup>12</sup>Circular and Catalogue of the Richmond Female Institute for 1856 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1856), p. 40; Tupper, p. 237; Emma Morehead Whitfield, comp., "A collection of original letters and papers relative to the founding of the Richmond Female Institute . . ." (Typewritten, title taken from introduction), pp. 170-71.

<sup>13</sup>Edith Denny White, The Elect Ladies of Centenary: the Story of the Organization and Development of the Women's Work in Centenary Methodist Church, Richmond, Virginia, Through One Hundred and Fifty Years (Richmond: Centenary Methodist Church, 1964), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Richmond Daily Whig, 8 May 1860.

instruction of the poor; waiting upon the afflicted; strengthening the weak; succoring the tempted; guiding the ignorant into the way of knowledge, and daily endeavoring, according to her health and opportunities, to advance the interests of Christ's church on earth. . . . she was a zealous co-laborer in behalf of the armory mission; the Tredegar Free School; the distribution of Bibles and tracts; the temperance society; the Union Benevolent Society, and the Male Orphan Asylum.

Miss Robinson's death in 1857 inspired tributes from admiring friends and those "who had reason to be personally grateful for her liberal charities."<sup>15</sup>

In this period Richmonders also founded organizations for mutual assistance. Black women participated in societies that aided sick members and provided burial for the dead. One such organization was the Daughters of Zion, organized at the African Church.<sup>16</sup> Jewish women organized in 1849 the Ladies' Hebrew Association or Ladies' Chebrah "for the purpose of drawing into closer relationship the Jewish women of our community." It provided sick benefits and care to ailing members. During the war it shifted its operations to care for wounded soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

Richmond women were involved in temperance societies, though in general men led in this work. The Richmond Society for the Promotion of Temperance reported in 1830 that its constitution had been altered to admit women to membership. Twenty women had joined, and the society expected many more would "lend the aid of their spotless example, in the

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<sup>15</sup>Fisher, p. 223.

<sup>16</sup>Ira Berlin, Slaves Without Masters: the Free Negro in the Antebellum South (New York: Pantheon, 1974), pp. 308-9; Richard C. Wade, Slavery in the Cities: the South 1820-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 171; Mary Virginia Terhune, Marion Harland's Autobiography (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), p. 228.

<sup>17</sup>Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917 (Richmond: Herbert T. Ezekiel, 1917), p. 231.



promotion of a design, the success or failure of which must cause the heart of many a female to beat with rapture, or to writhe in anguish."<sup>18</sup>

In the 1840s the Sons of Temperance was organized in Virginia, in many cases replacing older temperance organizations. The Sons did not admit women, so Richmond women founded the Sisters of Temperance, apparently the only such section in the state.<sup>19</sup>

Richmond women in their missionary work among the city's poor had ample opportunity to observe the destructive effects of liquor. The Union Benevolent Society made it a practice actually to visit among the poor, an early form of social work. In 1860 the Daily Whig reported that the women visitors

while administering to the temporal wants of the poor, endeavor to minister to their spiritual necessities: also they distribute tracts and gather children into the Sabbath School. They report many cases of sickness and death--also a few conversions.

Five years earlier the members of the Union Benevolent Society discovered that some women who had been receiving food at their Relief Houses were actually "keepers of low boarding houses" who turned a profit by selling the food to their tenants."<sup>20</sup>

The Union Benevolent Society was founded in the early 1830s and was apparently connected with a Gentlemen's Society.<sup>21</sup> Its name suggests that it was founded to centralize the work of several charitable

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<sup>18</sup>The First Annual Report of the Richmond Society for the Promotion of Temperance (Richmond: T. W. White, 1830), p. 10.

<sup>19</sup>"The Temperance Reform," Virginia Historical Register 3 (July 1850): 156-57.

<sup>20</sup>Richmond Daily Whig, 15 November 1860; Richmond Daily Dispatch, 5 January 1855.

<sup>21</sup>W. Asbury Christian, Richmond: Her Past and Present (Richmond: L. H. Jenkins, 1912), p. 153.

organizations. The Society's officers were listed in the 1860 city directory; among them was Julia Mayo Cabell, who was connected with many benevolent causes and was a frequent contributor to the Southern Literary Messenger.<sup>22</sup>

The most venerable of Richmond's charitable organizations was the Female Humane Association, incorporated by the legislature in 1811. The moving spirit behind the organization was Mrs. Jean Wood.<sup>23</sup> Touched by the plight of a little girl left on her doorstep, Mrs. Wood and several neighbors formed a group to aid children and destitute widows. In 1817 the ladies supported secular Sunday schools, hoping to "reach the poor children and youths working in the factories and mills."<sup>24</sup> In the ensuing decades the Association chose to focus its efforts solely on orphaned girls. Its early efforts, according to an 1843 history, were "feeble," and the Association aided no more than thirteen children at a time. Interest fluctuated, the membership dropped to six or seven women, and the "meetings were uninteresting, nay even painful, and of course badly attended."<sup>25</sup>

Interest in the organization revived several years later. In 1828 the Humane Association held Richmond's first fair for charity. The proceeds of the annual fair and community support enabled the Association

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<sup>22</sup>W. Eugene Ferslew, Second Annual Directory for the City of Richmond, to Which is added a Business Directory for 1860 (Richmond: By the author, 1860), p. 47.

<sup>23</sup>"Mrs. Jean Wood, of Chelsea," Southern Literary Messenger 16 (September 1850): 551-52.

<sup>24</sup>Margaret Meagher, History of Education in Richmond (Richmond: City School Board, 1939), p. 106.

<sup>25</sup>Female Humane Association, Constitution and By-Laws of the Female Humane Association of the City of Richmond (Richmond: Shepherd & Colin, 1843), p. 3.

to support thirty-five girls by 1843.<sup>26</sup> In that year the Association moved to a large new building, built with funds left by Edmund Walls. The Association found itself in the embarrassing position of having "room to accommodate many more than their means will enable them to support." The thirty-six members resolved to add to their number and were especially anxious to replace some of the earliest members who had died in recent years.<sup>27</sup>

The member women published their constitution as a demonstration of "the earnest desire of the Association that all their proceedings should be conducted with such regularity and precision, that the confidence of that community by whom they are supported may never be diminished." According to its constitution the Association's Directors were in charge of the operation of the asylum. They selected the children to fill any vacancies and arranged for the girls to be "bound out" when they reached the age of twelve or thirteen.<sup>28</sup> A matron, a "prudent, discreet and capable woman," was hired to run the asylum, to feed and instruct the children. The constitution further specified that:

The children shall be neatly and comfortably clothed and lodged; have a plain wholesome diet; be taught reading, writing, arithmetic, needle work, knitting, spinning, and every kind of domestic business; they shall be taught the fundamental principles of the Christian Religion, and have their health and morals diligently attended to.<sup>29</sup>

The largest number of children under the care of the Association

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<sup>26</sup>[Kate Cabell Cox], Historical Sketch of Richmond's Oldest Chartered Charity, Memorial Home for Girls, Formerly Female Humane Association [Richmond: Memorial Home for Girls, 1923], p. 8.

<sup>27</sup>Constitution of the Female Humane Association, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 5, 7-8; [Cox], p. 11.

<sup>29</sup>Constitution of the Female Humane Association, p. 11.

at one time in the antebellum period was seventy-five. As with most other Richmond institutions, the Female Humane Association suffered during the war, but it revived and continued into the twentieth century as the Memorial Home for Girls.<sup>30</sup>

Organizing charity fairs, running an orphan asylum, and doing benevolent work among the city's poor all to some extent introduced Richmond women to the world outside their domestic sphere. Then, in 1854 Richmond women began a project that demanded a high degree of organizational skill and ultimately had an effect upon the types of activities considered proper for women. One July evening that year about thirty Richmond women met to form an organization to promote local support for the effort to save Mount Vernon.

The Mount Vernon cause was initiated by Ann Pamela Cunningham of South Carolina. Miss Cunningham, who initially called herself "A Southern Matron" to avoid using her name in public, was deeply disturbed by the sight of the deteriorating mansion and grave site of George Washington. She set about the task of raising the money to save Mount Vernon with little conception of the difficulties such a huge project would present. Fortunately, her determination and intelligence more than made up for her lack of organizational experience, though she was burdened by very poor health.

Both the federal government and the state of Virginia had rejected proposals to purchase Washington's home. The idea of preserving the homes of national heroes was unheard of, and popular opinion could see no sense in such government expenditure. Initially, Miss Cunningham's idea was to have southern women take up solely the task of raising the money to

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<sup>30</sup>[Cox], p. 11.

purchase Mount Vernon. Once that task was completed the estate would pass to the federal government or to the state of Virginia to be maintained as a public shrine. Only later, when both governments remained reluctant to take on the responsibility, did the idea evolve of a women's organization that would not only purchase Mount Vernon but own and manage it as well.<sup>31</sup>

Virginia women, especially the women of Richmond, responded enthusiastically to the plea of the "Southern Matron," and throughout the campaign played a key role because of their strategic location in Washington's home state. Perhaps even more important than the geographical element was the presence in Richmond of two talented women who played crucial roles not only on the local scene but also in the national effort to save Mount Vernon.

Anna Cora Ritchie, who would have been an outstanding woman in any age, had, as Anna Cora Mowatt, brought remarkable dignity and emotional power to a successful acting career in the United States and England. She was born into the large family of a wealthy New Yorker, Samuel Ogden and his wife, Eliza Lewis. At the age of fifteen she eloped with James Mowatt, a well-to-do attorney. After seven years of marriage Mowatt's health failed, and he lost his money in speculation. The burden of supporting her husband fell on the young Mrs. Mowatt. Her initial venture was a series of public poetry readings, and from that beginning she went on to an extremely successful stage career, defying the convention

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<sup>31</sup>The most complete history of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association is Elswyth Thane, Mount Vernon is Ours (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1966). See also "Ann Pamela Cunningham" in Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., Notable American Women 1607-1950 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971) 1: 416-17.

that the theater was no place for a lady. She also was a talented and popular writer best remembered for her play Fashion (1845), which satirized New York social life, and her Autobiography of an Actress (1854).

James Mowatt died in 1851 and shortly thereafter Mrs. Mowatt's London manager committed suicide. These events proved too much for Anna's always delicately health, but in spite of physical collapse she returned to the stage about a year later. In 1854 she finally consented to marry William Foushee Ritchie, who had for several years been smitten with her beauty and talent. Ritchie was the editor of the Richmond Enquirer, and Anna moved there to assume the life of a Richmond matron at the age of thirty-five. In the tight circle of Richmond society the new Mrs. Ritchie undoubtedly met with some suspicion. Not only was she an actress and author of international repute, but she was also known for her rather strange views, not the least of which was her adherence to the Swedenborgian religion.<sup>32</sup>

Inspired by Miss Cunningham and prompted by her own patriotism (and perhaps by a desire to find a place for herself in Richmond society), Mrs. Ritchie immediately plunged wholeheartedly into the Mount Vernon cause. At the founding meeting in Richmond of the Virginia Central Mount Vernon Association, Mrs. Ritchie accepted the office of Recording Secretary. Her husband, whose political connections proved very helpful, also took up the cause.

Mrs. Ritchie quickly developed an affectionate friendship with Miss Cunningham. Her letters to Miss Cunningham are not only instructive

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<sup>32</sup>See Eric Wollencott Barnes, The Lady of Fashion (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954) and "Anna Cora Ogden Mowatt" in James, et al., 2: 596-98.

in the history of the Mount Vernon Association but reveal the lively character of their author and her well-developed talent for organization. In one she confessed to an "almost absurd dislike of confusion in business matters--or even in trifles. It is positively a fact that some species of confusion give me a sense of being crazy!"<sup>33</sup> No doubt Mrs. Ritchie's own competence and passion for order led her to become impatient with the Richmond women who lacked her organizational experience and skill. Yet she seems to have acted fairly, never asking from others anything she was unprepared to do herself. She wrote Miss Cunningham:

You are quite right about the impropriety of my personally devoting valuable time to traversing the city and soliciting subscriptions--but--there was no alternative. It was absolutely necessary for me to start the ladies and I could not refuse to assist in the labor that I urged them to perform.<sup>34</sup>

Once set on a goal Mrs. Ritchie pursued it tenaciously: "Be sure I will follow the matter up--It must be pushed through at once, and I will not have it on my conscience hereafter that I left one stone unturned."<sup>35</sup> Her business-like nature was a good balance to Miss Cunningham's more idealistic frame of mind. She did not stop to quibble about the motives of her coworkers, and reproached Miss Cunningham for being excessively delicate in this matter:

Dear Friend, you speak of mere Vanity actuating certain parties--vanity not patriotism. So long as they work well, we have no right to enquire into their secret motives--no right to judge. Vanity may be the only feeling they are capable of--then let us turn their vanity in a good and useful current; not quarrel with it because we looked for patriotism and found vanity.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Anna Cora Ritchie to Ann Pamela Cunningham, 10 January 1859. This and all further letters relative to Mount Vernon are in the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Library, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

<sup>34</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 18 June 1855.

<sup>35</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 25 August 1855.

<sup>36</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 28 June 1855.

Miss Cunningham chose Anna Cora Ritchie to be the Vice Regent for Virginia in the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, a position she held until 1865. Then, living in Europe and suffering from ill health, she regretfully submitted her resignation, expressing her continued interest in and willingness to serve the Association.<sup>37</sup> Her remarkably full life ended five years later in London.

Less is known of Susan Pellet, the other pillar of the Mount Vernon cause in Richmond. She was born in Massachusetts in 1808 and was married to a doctor. When he died in 1838, she moved to Richmond and for many years ran a large school for girls.<sup>38</sup>

Mrs. Pellet was apparently as skilled an organizer as Mrs. Ritchie. Her letters show her to have been a hard-working, energetic, no-nonsense person, yet possessed of a sense of humor (and blessedly legible handwriting). She approached her work for Mount Vernon with an almost religious fervor, signing letters "yours in the bonds of Mt. Vernon faith." When Miss Cunningham asked her to serve as Corresponding Secretary of the Mount Vernon Central Committee, she eagerly accepted the job, but apologized for her lack of social stature. She wrote that she would take the position only on the condition that if "there should be any other Lady whose influence might give more weight to our cause, her name may be substituted in place of mine."<sup>39</sup>

In spite of her modest expression of hesitancy, Mrs. Pellet moved confidently to meet her new responsibilities. She was not afraid to

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<sup>37</sup>Ritchie to Sarah G. Tracy, 18 December 1865.

<sup>38</sup>Report of the Virginia Board of Visitors to Mount Vernon for the Year 1901 (Richmond: J. H. O'Bannon, Supt. of Public Printing, 1901), p. 42.

<sup>39</sup>Susan Pellet to Cunningham, 15 April 1857.



tackle the dignitaries at the Ritchies' political soirees. She sent packets of information on the Mount Vernon cause to all inquirers and made certain that progress reports appeared in leading publications, such as Godey's Lady's Book and the Southern Literary Messenger. Letters from her pen flew thick and fast in every direction, yet with all this activity she kept up her duties as a school teacher. "I seize a moment from school duties," she wrote Miss Cunningham, "to acknowledge the receipt of your two letters." Later in the same letter she revealed, "I wrote this by dictation! (My daughter as amanuensis) while hearing a class."<sup>40</sup>

Whereas Mrs. Ritchie acquired her organizational skills while making her way in the theatrical and literary worlds, Mrs. Pellet drew on her experience as a teacher. Commenting to Miss Cunningham on a rift in the Virginia Mount Vernon Association she remarked: "it is no more than I anticipated from my experience in the legislation of Ladies."<sup>41</sup> She exhorted the women of Richmond to do more for the cause and deplored their apathy as she might that of her students. She frequently wrote in this vein:

I have been trying to get Mrs. Cabell to do something for the 4th but she seems apathetic and rather declined making the effort. . . .<sup>42</sup>

I spent all day Saturday walking in the hot sun endeavouring to arouse the ladies to celebrate the 4th.<sup>43</sup>

Fortunately Mrs. Pellet, unlike Miss Cunningham and Mrs. Ritchie, seemed possessed of an iron constitution.

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<sup>40</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 15 June 1857.

<sup>41</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 7 September 1855.

<sup>42</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 11 June 1857.

<sup>43</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 15 June 1857.

The public meeting signalling the official beginning of the Mount Vernon Association in Richmond was held at Metropolitan Hall on July 12, 1854. A slate of officers was quickly elected, a constitution approved, and Mr. J. H. Gilmer appointed a committee of one to correspond with John A. Washington about the conditions for the sale of Mount Vernon. Gilmer was also elected Corresponding Secretary, and William H. Macfarland, a prominent banker, was elected Treasurer. Mr. Gilmer's relation to the cause is unclear. He served as Corresponding Secretary for a few years, then resigned. Mrs. Pellet suspected that he did not entirely support the ladies. She wrote to Miss Cunningham on one occasion:

I cannot tell you why, but I have got an idea in my head that John Harmer Gilmer is at the bottom of this Masonic move & that he would move heaven & Earth if he could to defeat us!!!<sup>44</sup>

While men handled the money and correspondence, women were elected to the remaining positions:

President: Mrs. Julia Cabell  
 Vice Presidents: Mrs. E. Sims, Mrs. Pellet, Mrs. Dunlop,  
 Mrs. Wirt Robinson, Mrs. Pegram  
 Recording Secretary: Mrs. William F. Ritchie

At that first meeting thirty women signed the constitution which named the new organization the Virginia Central Mount Vernon Association of Ladies. The name of the group and its constitution changed several times as Miss Cunningham consolidated the national organization, and Virginia became just one of many participating states in the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.

The Richmond newspapers took note of this first meeting. The Enquirer published a list of the officers, the constitution, and the text of Mr. Gilmer's "Address to the Ladies of Virginia." The Dispatch

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<sup>44</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 14 November 1857.

gallantly noted: "We have every hope of the success of this movement since the ladies have it in hand."<sup>45</sup> The Enquirer, however, confessed to mixed feelings about the ladies' efforts:

The facility and success with which they went through the routine of a public meeting, was admirable, and the order and decorum which characterised their deliberations, would have put the male members of Congress to the blush . . . . But, if it be not ungentle to suggest an objection to anything which woman sanctions, may we not intimate, with all possible deference and politeness, that there was something unusual and incongruous in the spectacle of a public meeting of Virginia ladies. The thing is very common at the North, where women of strong mind practice physic and preach the gospel; but heretofore we believe the ladies of the South have thrown around their benevolent societies the delicate charm of seclusion and privacy. To our ear there is something harsh and unpleasant in the sound of Mrs. President and Miss Secretary. But perhaps our prejudice is unreasonable, and the ladies may find an apology for the breach of an ancient usage, in their anxiety to promote a noble cause.<sup>46</sup>

Actually, the "spectacle" of women running a public meeting was not as "common at the North" as the Enquirer believed. And it may have been with some relief and sense of exhilaration that the Richmond ladies cast off the cloak of "seclusion and privacy" to hold their meetings in the public eye and gain public recognition for their achievements. Perhaps this is where some of the vanity which disturbed Miss Cunningham crept in. She was concerned also that southern women would hold back from the cause out of modesty. In "To the Ladies of the South" she tried to assure those women:

To the timid he [sic, we?] would remark there is nothing to deter associated action with us. None can shrink more than ourself from individual notoriety or newspaper publicity of names, which we do not think absolutely necessary to the transaction of such business with your own sex . . . . We

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<sup>45</sup>Newspaper clipping in scrapbook, p. 1, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Library, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

confess our preference for this mode, as more in consonance with southern feelings and manners . . . .<sup>47</sup>

The Richmond women proposed to raise money by selling subscriptions to membership for one dollar. While the intention originally was to raise money only among women, they did not hesitate to take money from men. A subscription book used by Mrs. Ritchie and Mrs. Pellet commenced with this printed statement:

To you we now extend the highest privilege ever granted to American women, one which should thrill every fibre of our hearts as the daughters of one common "Father" whose legacy of freedom and happiness lights up our homes . . . . Offers from gentlemen gratefully received and registered--but doubly welcome if done for an absent mother, sister or friend.<sup>48</sup>

One list of subscribers dated July 4, 1855, was gathered at the African Church. (One wonders how that congregation felt about the "legacy of freedom.") Later entries show subscribers from an Odd Fellows gathering in 1858 and from the Richmond Agricultural Fair of 1857.

The ladies of Richmond headed out across the city on foot and in carriages to raise the money. The number of women involved is not known, but that they at least on occasion worked very hard is clear:

Mrs Semmes and Mrs Caskie deserve the highest praise--they have been indefatigable--for five days they were out every day and all day. They collected \$500! Mrs Caskie is a lovely creature and perfectly irresistible.<sup>49</sup>

Understandably there were problems as a result of the ladies' lack of experience and the magnitude of the task. With some irritation Mrs. Pellet reported: "I expect we shall have some difficulty in collecting

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>48</sup>"Subscription Paper for Mount Vernon," glued into subscription book dated 1855, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Library, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

<sup>49</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 18 June 1855.

all that has been subscribed." Over a year later the problem persisted, and Mrs. Pellet admitted that "it is not a pleasant occupation to collect Mount Vernon funds in Richmond in parts of the city where these subscribers reside."<sup>50</sup>

The collection of donations was made even more difficult by John Washington's refusal to have anything to do with the ladies. In Richmond Mr. Washington's decision caused some confusion. Again Mrs. Pellet was annoyed by the lack of business sense exhibited by the ladies:

Mrs. M[illegible] informed me that money had been returned, and in one instance Mrs. Semmes had given back \$100 to a gentleman who had generously subscribed that sum. But she says it will be paid over, if required, if Mr. Washington consents to sell. It strikes me, that returning money when once in possession was a foolishness on the part of these ladies, for it may not be as easy to get it again.<sup>51</sup>

The first three or four years of the association in Virginia were marked not only by hard work but also ample measures of chaos and dissension. In August 1855 Mrs. Ritchie reported to Miss Cunningham that the Richmond workers were "languid, querrelous [sic], malcontents."<sup>52</sup> Apparently the Virginia women, led by the Richmond group, set up an organization that put itself at the head of the Mount Vernon movement. The motives for this are not clear. Perhaps there were elements of Virginia chauvinism and resentment of Miss Cunningham. Probably the biggest factors were the ladies' inexperience in constituting organizations and Miss Cunningham's own confusion over the exact form she wished the Mount Vernon Association to take.

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<sup>50</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 11 June 1857; Pellet to Christie Johnson, 14 December 1858.

<sup>51</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 2 January 1857.

<sup>52</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 25 August 1855.

Mrs. Pellet tried to heal this wound and clarify the situation. She wrote to Mrs. Cabell explaining that the organization which they helped found in July 1854 had "not connected into the Central Committee of the Union as Miss Cunningham intended it should be." Continuing, she laid down the law:

You will at once perceive, that the duties of the members of the State Committee are confined solely to action with the State of Va. while to Miss Cunningham and the Ladies forming the Central Committee belongs the right to correspond with Mr. Washington and the State Committees, throughout the Union &c &c.<sup>53</sup>

The problem was apparently solved by 1858 when the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union was set up with the structure that essentially continues today. At the end of 1858 Mrs. Ritchie reported with relief that in Virginia "the people are really showing unmistakable interest in the new organization;--Lady Managers accept graciously and contributions are coming in."<sup>54</sup>

That the confused organizational status of the Mount Vernon cause hindered its work in Richmond is reflected in Mrs. Pellet's frustration over the lack of events in support of the cause on the Fourth of July, 1857. Disgustedly, she wrote to Miss Cunningham:

and do you ask "what demonstration did the Capital of the Old Dominion make for the grave and homestead of her illegible Son?" None!! Mrs. Cabell and I did our best to get up an interest but without success. She went to see "Cousin Jim," who declined having anything to do with Mt. Vernon celebrations, & if I could have my way, he never would be at the head of municipal affairs in Richmond again. 1857 should be his last year of office as Mayor.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Pellet to Julia Mayo Cabell, 29 March 1856.

<sup>54</sup>Ritchie to Mary M. Hamilton, 20 December 1858.

<sup>55</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 10 July 1857.

In 1857 Mrs. Pellet was able to report that in Virginia the ladies had managed to collect \$2,324. That did not include one thousand dollars raised by an oration delivered in Richmond by Edward Everett, the well-known Massachusetts orator.<sup>56</sup> Moved by Miss Cunningham and her cause, Everett devoted ten years to aiding the Mount Vernon Association. He delivered his floridly patriotic lecture on George Washington throughout the states, North and South, eventually donating to the Mount Vernon Association more than fifty thousand dollars (one quarter of the purchase price of Mount Vernon). Everett admired the dedicated women of the Mount Vernon cause and reportedly felt that "if the President would appoint Ladies as Ambassadors, he would entrust the interests of the Country to you Miss Cunningham & Mrs. Ritchie in preference to any gentlemen in the Country!"<sup>57</sup>

Everett delivered his first benefit lecture in Richmond in March 1856, the day after the ladies' victorious campaign to be chartered by the Virginia legislature. In deference to custom, the details of Everett's visit were handled by men, and an all-male dinner party was held in his honor at the governor's home. Looking to repeat the success of his first visit, the Richmond women invited Everett again to deliver his lecture in 1857 during the fall Agricultural Fair. In glee-ful anticipation Mrs. Pellet wrote: "Wont we put our tickets at \$1 each and make the old farmers 'fork over.'" Thinking of Richmond's organizational troubles and poor performance on the Fourth of July, she added: "Richmond shall be redeemed in spite of the croaking of the incredulous."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Report of the Board of Visitors, p. 41.

<sup>57</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 20 April 1857.

<sup>58</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 10 July 1857.

The effort in 1856 to get a bill passed in the Virginia legislature chartering the Mount Vernon Association illustrates the extent to which the Richmond ladies' work for the Mount Vernon cause pushed them into activities that were unusual for women of that time. In order to negotiate the purchase of Mount Vernon, the Association had to obtain a legal charter in Virginia. For that task Miss Cunningham was fortunate to have two such loyal and dauntless campaigners as Mrs. Ritchie and Mrs. Pellet. The resourceful pair used Mrs. Ritchie's salon as their battleground. Anna Cora reported to Miss Cunningham the optimistic outcome of one skirmish with the politicians:

I have been electioneering and very successfully. Night before last I gave a musical soiree and desired my husband to invite as many Senators, and members of the Legislature as the house would hold. Our small but expansive rooms were well crowded--every one declared he had a delightful evening,--. . . . Then came the grand coup! As the ladies began to retire, Mrs. Pellet commenced the subject with Governor Floyd, and I soon managed to make it general. Governor Floyd pledged himself to use his best endeavors to pass our bill and at once-- so did the other members and senators present.<sup>59</sup>

Even more extreme measures were required of the ladies when the bill was finally passed on 17 March 1856. Mrs. Ritchie's euphoric letter to Miss Cunningham expresses vividly the excitement and satisfaction the ladies felt that day. In its entirety the letter reveals the political skills the women had learned and the extent to which they were willing to defy conventional standards of female behavior in pursuit of their goal:

Victory! Victory! Beloved friend and fellow worker! Heaven smiles upon our efforts. I have just returned from the capitol. Our bill has gloriously passed both houses! but after what troubles--what exertions!--It has passed! Let that good news sound in your ears, shouted from a host of tongues!--

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<sup>59</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 25 August 1855.



Lie down and rest, and then read in quiet all we have had to contend with. . . . I pass over the electioneering of the last few weeks. Gov. Floyd and Mr. Langfitt had both pledged themselves to pass our bill, while day after day slipped away and it did not pass. Saturday came, the Houses were to rise on Monday. I entreated my husband to see Mr. Langfitt again and to urge him to pass the bill that day. Mr. Ritchie saw Mr. Langfitt and heard from the latter that he had been opposed by Mr. Stanard when he (Mr. Langfitt) attempted to bring up the bill. Mr. Stanard informed him that he had received a protest from the ladies of the Association, against the bill, instructing him to oppose its passage. Mr. Langfitt was thunderstruck, and asked the names of those ladies. Mr. Stanard did not give them . . . . Mr. Langfitt naturally became indignant, and considered the matter at an end! My husband came home with this bad news, and he also thought our cause was lost. I would not listen to the idea, but asked him to take me at once to Mrs. Cabell that we might solve the enigma. She knew nothing of the matter and was very much excited at the opposition. She said she would go at once to Mr. Stanard and have an explanation. Mr. Ritchie told her she must also gain the signatures of all the ladies that would sign in favor of the bill. She is a most energetic person, and late as it was she started on her errand, illegible the ladies to meet at her house after church on Sunday, there was no time to lose. Mr. Stanard told her that he had been desired to act as he did, by one of the ladies whose name I think it best not to mention. She told him that all the ladies, with the exception of Mrs. Cabell, Mrs. Pellet, and Mrs. Ritchie, were opposed to the bill. Now let me pause to explain that several of the ladies were opposed. Mr. Gilmer had harangued them on the subject and entreated them to oppose the bill saying that they would injure the cause if they did not, that he would furnish a proper bill, etc. etc. I cannot pause to repeat all the misjudged and pernicious arguments of the unfortunate marplot. Mr. Stanard felt authorized in what he did. Mrs. Cabell next called upon the lady who had given Mr. S this information and had a long argument with her. After church on Sunday a number of ladies met at Mrs. Cabell's. Of course I attended. We had to argue with some of them but at last brought all over. Then what was to be done! To see Mr. Langfitt and Governor Floyd, of course. I proposed that we should go to the Exchange Hotel that instant. Mrs. Cabell, Mrs. Pellet, and Mrs. Robinson agreed to this, and we set out. We did see Mr. Langfitt and Gov. Floyd, and explained matters and entreated that the bill might be passed that day. Governor Floyd said that there was only one way, for us to see the Speaker of the House and ask him to give the floor to Mr. Langfitt at a certain hour for five minutes. Fortunately I knew the Speaker, Major Crutchfield and sent for him, introduced him to the ladies and then begged him to grant us a favor blindfolded. He promised, and I told him what it was and explained matters. He said Mr. Langfitt should have the floor at eleven o'clock today, and that he

requested the ladies of the Association would attend to assist their cause. We gladly consented, and at once rushed about to try to apprise the other ladies. My husband was quite alarmed at my long absence from home and sent a servant in search of me. But I could not be found. But he forgave me for keeping the Sunday dinner waiting hours, and then not appearing until its conclusion, when he heard all we had accomplished. We agreed to meet at Mrs. Pellet's at half-past ten this morning and go to the capitol in a body by eleven. The most enthusiastic of the ladies appeared at the appointed hour. We went to the House, Mr. Ritchie escorting us. You would have laughed to have seen the sensation created by our entrance. Mrs. Langfitt with her husband awaited us. Mr. Stanard was among the gentlemen who greeted us, and now all was right with him. Soon after our entrance Major Crutchfield addressed the House, and asked if the gentlemen would not set aside other business until our bill was attended to. Most of the gentlemen replied Certainly, certainly, but there were a few murmurs from others who whispered in our hearing, Outrageous, outrageous, ladies taking up time, etc. To shorten my account let me only say the bill was passed, Mr. Langfitt having the floor, with only two dissenting votes. . . . Governor Floyd then came to me and said we must go at once into the Senate, and have the bill passed there. Several of the members escorted us out. Mr. L taking the lead. We had not been in the Senate more than 5 minutes before the bill was brought up and certain which I do not understand gone through. One gentleman made a short speech which I could not hear, but I think it was against it. The Ayes and Nays were then taken, and we gained a unanimous vote. Think, think, imagine, if you can, how we felt. I was perfectly overpowered with joy. Many of the members and senators talked to us, and assured me again and again that the bill never would have passed but for the presence of the ladies.<sup>60</sup>

The scenes of the women cornering the governor at the Exchange Hotel, letting household routines go while they rallied for emergency meetings, and parading en masse into the capitol are staggering given the "southern feelings and manners" to which Miss Cunningham was so sensitive. These women seemed to be fulfilling the fears expressed by the Enquirer back in July 1854. Gone was "the delicate charm of seclusion and privacy." These Richmond women, motivated by the "Mt. Vernon faith," were behaving much the same as their strong-minded northern

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<sup>60</sup>Ritchie to Cunningham, 17 March 1856.

sisters involved in the abolition movement. No doubt this comparison would have horrified the Richmond ladies, but in the heat of the moment they did not pause to examine their actions. They did what was necessary, and experience had apparently taught them that what was necessary was bold action.

Later, John Washington's refusal to sell Mount Vernon to be managed by the Virginia government (He had altered his opinion, and now believed the estate should be out of the hands of politicians) necessitated the women getting another charter that would allow them to purchase and manage Mount Vernon. Again, the redoubtable team of Ritchie and Pellet went into action. In December 1857 Mrs. Pellet wrote Miss Cunningham:

On Saturday evening I met several of the members of the Legislature at Mrs. Ritchie's, and you may be sure I made a good use of this opportunity to advocate the Mt. Vernon Cause, and am satisfied that it is Safe! The Legislature will do all that you wish!<sup>61</sup>

The Virginia legislature granted the second charter for the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association in the early spring of 1858. The victory belonged to Miss Cunningham who went to Richmond because she had told Mr. Washington that she would personally see that his wishes were followed exactly. The effort had disastrous consequences for her health. When the papers were brought for her to sign, she could only manage to write two or three letters of her name at a time. A deposit of eighteen thousand dollars was paid to Mr. Washington, with the agreement that the remaining \$182,000 would be paid in yearly installments over the next four years.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Pellet to Cunningham, 14 December 1857.

<sup>62</sup>Thane, pp. 70-75.

In the vast effort that the rescue of Mount Vernon entailed even the least of the women involved took on considerable responsibility. Approaching the citizens of Richmond for contributions, attending the regular meetings, organizing benefit theatricals and tournaments, and in general aiding the cause undoubtedly were instructive experiences and for most a departure from the normal course of their lives. The organizational confusion both in Richmond and in the national effort was a symptom of the women's lack of experience. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that in their undertaking they had no example to guide them. Their fund raising and preservation project was something new under the sun. Also the poor communications available at the time contributed to confusion. Letters were a poor substitute for face-to-face meetings and slow, uncomfortable transportation made those difficult.

The ladies were also hindered by Mr. Washington's vacillation and generally negative, unhelpful attitude. He was miffed when people thought excessive the two hundred thousand dollars he asked for Mount Vernon. No doubt he was more than a little defensive about the fact that the Washington family could no longer afford to maintain its own home. Family and masculine pride appear to have been part of his objection to the movement begun by the ladies. He wrote to Gilmer in July, 1854: "For my own part, I had rather present it [Mount Vernon] a free gift to the State or nation, (little as either would deserve it) than be subject to the mortification of receiving these offerings of patriotism from the mothers, wives and daughters of Virginia." He felt that should the ladies succeed, their very success would "commemorate the degeneracy

of myself and the men of our land."<sup>63</sup>

While Mr. Washington appears to have been a highly sensitive individual, his objections to the ladies' efforts were probably shared by many others. Similarly, the suspicion expressed by the Enquirer that there was something not quite feminine about the public work of the Mount Vernon Association was widely shared. Some of the controversy may have stemmed from doubts about the legality of the undertaking. Perhaps because of the legal bars to women entering into contracts, there was speculation that should the women succeed in raising the money for Mount Vernon they could not legally own it.<sup>64</sup>

Further objections to the ladies' work were answered in An Oration on the Origin, Purposes and Claims of the Ladies' Mt. Vernon Association delivered by Andrew Dawson and printed in Savannah in 1858. While Mr. Dawson's speech has no direct connection to Richmond, it provides a clue to the attitudes that the women faced. Dawson's objective was to counter those who scoffed at the women's efforts. These people, he said:

are against it, because it will fail, and it will fail, they allege, because its origin is feminine, and it is under the direction and control of Ladies. They admit the move is eminently patriotic, but, they say, Woman's patriotism is evanescent. They style the undertaking herculean, and insist that woman is wanting in the decision, will, and mental power necessary to conduct it successfully.<sup>65</sup>

Dawson charged that these women-doubters ought to be proud "that our country has produced a woman capable of conceiving a thought of such

<sup>63</sup>John A. Washington to John H. Gilmer, 26 July 1854, newspaper clipping in scrapbook, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup>Report of the Board of Visitors, p. 28.

<sup>65</sup>Andrew H. H. Dawson, An Oration on the Origin, Purposes and Claims of the Ladies' Mt. Vernon Association (Savannah: E. J. Purse, 1858), p. 32.

infinite moral grandeur, and thousands of women equally capable of appreciating such a thought."<sup>66</sup>

Dawson believed that "man has spared no pains to make of woman a toy, and he has struggled resolutely to make the world believe he has succeeded." "Woman," he said, "is excluded from all the great arenas wherein mind is developed; the sacred desk, the senate, the bar, the hustings, and the army." Lest he be misunderstood, he hastened to add: "I would not have you understand me, from anything herein said, as wishing to unfeminise your sex. I am opposed to your appearance at the bar, sacred desk, hustings, or in the camp."<sup>67</sup> Here again, was the old bind. While nineteenth-century opinion was increasingly willing to admit, as Dawson put it, that "mind is sexless," the woman who developed her mental potential was thought to be unsexed; she lost her femininity.

In this climate hostile to their effort how did the Mount Vernon women manage to survive and attain their goal? Central to their success was their determination and an unswerving faith in the rightness of their undertaking. Also in their favor was the pervasive view of woman as the guardian of the soul of the nation and the conscience of man. The effort to save Mount Vernon was seen as a noble manifestation of woman's guardian angel role. This attitude silenced questions of the women's propriety and provided an apology for breaches of acceptable female behavior. Also advantageous to the cause was its national appeal at a time when the country was increasingly split by sectional feelings. To many the Mount Vernon effort was a welcome relief from controversy and a needed reaffirmation of the patriotic principles evoked by the

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., pp. 48, 56, 67.

memory of George Washington.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was the beginning of the historic preservation movement in the United States. More immediately, however, it may have been an inspiration for a group of Richmond women loyal to the Whig party. Led by Lucy Barbour (widow of Governor James Barbour), Julia Leigh, Sally Fry, and Louisa Carrington, they formed the Virginia Association of Ladies for Erecting a Statue of Henry Clay. Following the example of the Mount Vernon women they collected funds for a statue of their hero to be presented to the state.<sup>68</sup>

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was an unusual organization for its time. Still, its sentimental, patriotic goal was a natural extension of antebellum women's benevolent organizations. The Richmond women approached preserving a historical site and saving souls with the same sense of righteous mission. These women took seriously their role as moral leaders and established a tradition of women's volunteer and charitable work.

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<sup>68</sup> Richmond Daily Whig, 12 April 1860; Journal of the House of Delegates of the State of Virginia for the Session of 1859-60 (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, Public Printer, 1859), p. 279.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: "THE MARCH OF IMPROVEMENT"

Richmond on the eve of the Civil War was an intriguing blend of "rural provincialism and urban potential."<sup>1</sup> The social life of the city was still largely dominated by the plantation ideology. The Richmond elite was a closed circle in which everyone had known each other since childhood, and family connections were all-important. T. C. DeLeon observed that in Richmond "trade, progressive spirit and self-made personality were excluded from the plane of the elect, as though germiniferous. The 'sacred soil' and the sacred social circle were parallel in the minds of their possessors."<sup>2</sup>

Richmond was the home of the Southern Literary Messenger, one of the most influential purveyors of southern romanticism and sectional feeling. Planter dominance had a conservative effect on the city and accounted for the tenacity of the Southern Lady ideal among the upper class. Slave labor tended to discourage free labor, and the controversy over slavery that had divided the nation dampened progressive social and economic thinking in Richmond.

Nevertheless, there was much that was forward looking in Richmond. "Bankers, merchants, and industrialists . . . had begun to challenge the

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<sup>1</sup>Emory M. Thomas, The Confederate State of Richmond, a Biography of the Capital (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>T[homas] C[ooper] DeLeon, Belles, Beaux, and Brains of the 60's (New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., 1909), p. 59.



supremacy of the planter," and "the city's Whiggish policies, diverse economy, and heterogeneous population gave her a youthful, cosmopolitan air exceptional in the ante-bellum South."<sup>3</sup> The city had begun to develop a working class, including a significant number of skilled mechanics.<sup>4</sup> Richmond attracted merchants and industrialists from the North as well as the South, a large immigrant population, and, as we have seen, a growing number of women seeking employment.

While there is no denying the distinctively southern character of Richmond, there was much that made it similar to any northern city of comparable size. Certainly it was not free of urban problems of social disorder. On a tour of the South, Frederick Law Olmstead observed that "there was at least as much vice and of what we call rowdiness in Richmond as in any Northern town of its size."<sup>5</sup> Lines of class were more sharply drawn in Richmond than in the rural South. Certainly its population, a mix of traditional elite, newly successful merchants, immigrants, slaves, free blacks, and a growing white working class, had changed dramatically in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century. The plantation ideology, in spite of its preeminence, represented an experience alien to increasing numbers of Richmonders.

As a growing city Richmond created new roles and opportunities for women. The women who worked as washers, seamstresses, household and hotel servants, and even boarding house keepers performed functions

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>Kathleen Bruce, Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era (New York: Century, 1930; reprint ed., New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), p. 312.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick Law Olmstead, The Slave States, rev. ed., Harvey Wish, ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 46.

that in a rural setting were the province of individual households. The city also made it possible and profitable for women to go into business as shopkeepers, grocers, and milliners. The general success of Richmond merchants opened the way for women clerks and salespeople. Necessity, however, went hand in hand with opportunity. There is no doubt that the majority of working women in Richmond in this period worked because they had to. Many were supporting themselves; others were married women whose husband's salaries were not sufficient to support a family.

City conditions also altered attitudes toward working women. Some of the more progressive elements in Richmond felt that female employment should be more widespread. The Enquirer urged that women be allowed "no longer to lead a listless and inactive life." The editor of the Whig suggested that too often women had "been content to live in a state of dependence rather than break through the prejudices of society by a noble effort to maintain themselves."<sup>6</sup> Notions of what was proper employment for women began to change.<sup>7</sup> A. Judson Crane, a Richmond lawyer, discussed working women in a commencement address at the Mississippi Female College in 1854:

That the range of employment for females who are compelled to some sort of labor, might be enlarged, is highly probable, and that there are some employments followed by men which could, advantageously to both, be confided to women, there can be little doubt.<sup>7</sup>

Women's work in benevolent organizations illustrates in another

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<sup>6</sup>Richmond Enquirer, 4 September 1846 and Richmond Whig, 14 October 1845 in J. Stephen Knight, Jr., "Discontent, Disunity, and Dissent in the Antebellum South; Virginia as a Test Case, 1844-1846," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 81 (October 1973): 452.

<sup>7</sup>A. Judson Crane, Address Delivered at the Annual Commencement of the Mississippi Female College, at Hernando; DeSoto County, July 4th, 1854 (Memphis: Eagle & Enq. Steam Printing House, 1854), p. 18.

way the opportunities that Richmond presented. It is true that rural women regarded it their duty to aid the suffering and less fortunate, but the city provided the setting for women to perform their benevolent mission in an organized manner. Instead of acting individually, women joined together to organize charity fairs, secular Sunday schools, and missions, run an orphanage, and even establish a primitive welfare system. In benevolent organizations women learned how to work together to achieve a goal, how to organize themselves to be most effective. Of necessity, these organizations took women out of their domestic setting and into public view. As they fulfilled their charitable responsibilities, these Richmond women could not help but gain in self-confidence, and their accomplishments belied the skeptics who doubted women's intelligence, stamina, and determination.

Some of these changing attitudes were reflected in Richmond's schools for women. Although their educational programs never suggested any sweeping change in women's sphere, there was some recognition that young women ought to be allowed "the opportunities which were forced on every booby brother in her family."<sup>8</sup> Ideas of female mental inferiority were becoming decidedly old-fashioned. Perhaps the most significant change in women's education was the notion that they should be encouraged to think for themselves, to develop independent powers of reason and decision. An education that included a smattering of academic subjects and graceful accomplishments was no longer considered sufficient. The interest in teacher training also introduced a practical note into female education. Ultimately, these educational changes challenged the

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<sup>8</sup>"Condition of Woman in Ancient Greece," Southern Quarterly Review 16 (January 1850): 340.

restrictions of women's sphere:

There was a time when Nature drew the circle in which woman was to walk, and Education taught her how to keep within its bounds. But the march of improvement has trampled out the lines, and woman wanders where she will.<sup>9</sup>

In The Southern Lady, Anne Scott suggests that the Civil War was a transforming experience, a kind of furnace that forged a new breed of southern women. In general she echoes the commonly accepted sentiment that southern women responded to the demands of war with surprising and unprecedented competence. Without denying the tremendous impact of the war, it is possible to see in the antebellum period the beginning of changes that developed more fully during and after the war. Scott writes that "soldiers' aid societies sprang into being as if southern women had all their lives been used to community organization."<sup>10</sup> In Richmond, at least, the women had been used to community organization. As in the case of the Ladies' Hebrew Association, they were able to convert their organizations to serve the war effort.

The war and its aftermath broke down many barriers for women, but they were prepared to take advantage of these new opportunities in part because of changes which had begun before the war. Women too old to make drastic changes in their lives supported the efforts of younger women. A. D. Mayo, a minister and educator, wrote in 1892 that "the push to the front of the better sort of Southern young womanhood, [was] everywhere encouraged by the sympathy, support, toils, and prayers of

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<sup>9</sup>"Woman's True Mission," Southern Literary Messenger 19 (May 1853): 303.

<sup>10</sup>Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 81.

the superior women of the elder generation at home."<sup>11</sup> Much of the experience that these women had acquired in organizations such as the Female Humane Association and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was applied to the challenge of re-building the South. The post-war woman, like her antebellum counterpart, often used the protection of social position and a supportive network of family and friends to advance progressive or controversial causes.

Perhaps the greatest change wrought by the war was in the attitudes toward women. During the war women's work became entirely public. The war effort and plain financial need broke down many prejudices. Scott cites a case of a young woman who had wanted to teach, but was able to overcome her family's opposition only after the war.<sup>12</sup>

The war accelerated a process of development and change that had already begun in antebellum Richmond. Ernest R. Groves in The American Woman suggests that the plantation system hampered the southern woman's "orderly progress during the cultural changes of the nineteenth century."<sup>13</sup> In Richmond, however, urban conditions mitigated the effect of plantation ideology and slavery. The city offered to women opportunities similar to those available to all American women. Groves also warns against looking at women's life "in the antebellum South in the shadow of an approaching final collapse" of the patriarchal slavocracy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>A/mory/ D/wight/ Mayo, Southern Women in the Recent Educational Movement in the South, Bureau of Education Circular of Information, No. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), p. 55.

<sup>12</sup>Scott, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup>Ernest R. Groves, The American Woman: The Feminine Side of a Masculine Civilization, rev. ed. (New York: Emerson Books, 1944), p. 144.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

The antebellum South was, in a sense, a doomed society, but in Richmond the process of modernization and change had begun before the war. The progress of Richmond women at mid-century was part of the national developments in women's role and status.

APPENDIX

A. TOTAL FREE FEMALE POPULATION--RICHMOND 1860<sup>a</sup>

	WHITE	BLACK <sup>b</sup>
FIRST WARD	3,414	572
SECOND WARD	4,038	281
THIRD WARD	3,787	581
TOTAL	11,239	1,434

B. FREE FEMALE POPULATION AGE 18 AND OLDER AND WORKING MINORS<sup>c</sup>

	TOTAL	BLACK	WHITE	FOREIGN <sup>d</sup>
FIRST WARD	2,392	405	1,987	716
SECOND WARD	2,626	190	2,436	662
THIRD WARD	2,529	357	2,172	521
TOTAL	7,547	952	6,595	1,899

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<sup>a</sup>Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), p. 519.

<sup>b</sup>The census distinguishes between black and mulatto, but they are listed together in this study.

<sup>c</sup>Using the manuscript census returns all women eighteen and over and women under eighteen with occupations were counted. The latter represented 2 percent of the total. The total (7,547) was used as a working figure of total adult free female population.

<sup>d</sup>Foreign- and non-Virginia-born women are included in total of white females, but also listed separately for illustrative purposes.

## C. FREE FEMALES WITH OCCUPATIONS

	TOTAL	BLACK	WHITE	FOREIGN	NON-VA.
FIRST WARD	587	291	296	90	19
SECOND WARD	355	120	235	93	35
THIRD WARD	551	193	358	118	22
TOTAL	1,493	604	889	301	76

## D. FREE FEMALES UNDER 18 WITH OCCUPATIONS

	TOTAL	BLACK	WHITE	FOREIGN	NON-VA.
FIRST WARD	79	46	33	9	2
SECOND WARD	36	15	21	10	--
THIRD WARD	65	22	43	12	2
TOTAL	180	83	97	31	4

Total represents 2% of all working women.

## E. ILLITERATES

	TOTAL	BLACK	WHITE
FIRST WARD	258	173	85
SECOND WARD	310	105	205
THIRD WARD	370	267	103
TOTAL	938	545	393



## F. PROPERTY HOLDERS

	TOTAL	BLACK	WHITE
FIRST WARD	329	68	261
SECOND WARD	266	11	255
THIRD WARD	251	23	228
TOTAL	846	102	744

## G. PROPERTY HOLDERS WITH OCCUPATIONS

FIRST WARD	128
SECOND WARD	44
THIRD WARD	53
TOTAL	225

## H. AMOUNT OF PROPERTY

	TOTAL	REAL	PERSONAL
FIRST WARD	964,264	525,221	439,043
SECOND WARD	2,160,736	976,270	1,184,466
THIRD WARD	1,465,030	668,685	796,345
TOTAL	\$4,590,030	\$2,170,176	\$2,419,854

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