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“The Unhappy Class of Females”:
An Examination of Non-Elite White Women in the Civil War-Era South

By
Reagan Elizabeth Whittington

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS
May 2021

Approved By

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DEDICATION

I spent my whole life in Mississippi never knowing about the women who came before me: the common women, the lower-class mothers, the farmer's wives, the criminals, the factory workers, and the domestic laborers. These women were left behind by the fantasy of the "Old South" and in a way, this thesis is dedicated to them. They are my sisters and we are connected by place and separated by time; this thesis is my love letter to them, the unloved by history and unobserved by national myth. I also want to dedicate this thesis to my mother, my grandmothers, and my sisters, who were my inspiration. To me, they represent the strength and spirit of the *real* southern woman that endures today. This thesis is also dedicated to my father, who has always challenged me to be my very best, and my brother, who I love dearly. This labor of love is for all of you.

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Dr. April Holm has been the most wonderful advisor and she is the reason this thesis was ever completed. Without her, my ideas would have been just disembodied thoughts floating in my head forever. She has both directed me and supported me in immeasurable ways over the past year and I owe this work to her. I also want to thank Dr. Anne Twitty, whose knowledge, advice, and access to Newspapers.com has been utterly vital for my research. Dr. Noell Wilson has also been extremely helpful by advising me academically this year and helping me get all of the course hours for my thesis. I should also acknowledge every professor or academic dean I've had the pleasure of working with this year. You all have had incredible patience with me and I am so very grateful for you!

ABSTRACT

“The Unhappy Class of Females”: An Examination of Non-Elite White Women in the Civil War-Era South (Under the direction of April Holm)

This thesis focuses on the perceptions and realities of non-elite white women in the South and how their lives and expectations changed from the antebellum years to the end of Reconstruction. There were many secondary sources consulted both before and during the research process for this thesis, and these sources are listed, alongside their significance, in the introduction. Most of the primary sources referenced for this thesis were newspapers printed in the South between 1850 and 1877, but United States census data and public records were also consulted. This thesis investigates how non-elite white women were expected to behave by white planter-class elite and why the high standards for white women in the Civil War-era South were so important to upholding the southern social hierarchy. The real-life experiences of these women, which we can see reported in newspapers, are also examined in order to analyze the relationship between perception and reality that existed for non-elite white women. The depictions of white women and more specifically non-elite white women that can be observed in these newspapers are also important to understanding the dichotomy in which they operated. By analyzing these women in the years before, during, and after the Civil War, we can gain a new lens through which to understand how southern womanhood changed over the course of one of America’s most important domestic conflicts. The loss of slavery created a new social system in the South based on racial terrorism and white supremacy, which changed the way white women were perceived as a group, including non-elite women. These women lived under a class of elite white men who wished to control them, but they subverted their expectations at every turn in a multitude of ways. These women did not change over the course of the Civil War-era, but the perceptions of and expectations for them did shift in accordance to the desires of the white aristocracy.

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Introduction

An endless subject of criticism, observation, fascination, fetishization, and even wonderment, the southern woman has persisted as an ideal in the United States since the antebellum period. The character of Scarlett O'Hara, with her absurdly high-strung disposition and famous tenacity, has solidified her position as the most well-known "Southern Belle" in the world and acts as the embodiment of the world's ideas and expectations of southern women. What Miss Scarlett does not represent, however, is any semblance of the reality of life for the majority of women in the South during the nineteenth century. She is more of a fantastical parody than an homage. While elite women, such as Margaret Mitchell's classic heroines, had an undeniably important role in the mythology of the South and in shaping the narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction, they represent a very small portion of the female population in the southern states.

Non-elite white women in the Civil War-era South were a mostly understudied yet very large group of people who existed on a broad spectrum of experience. These women were caught in a precarious position between the expectations for them, which were set and exemplified by planter-class elites, and their realities of being poor, single, working, or even criminal women. Before the Civil War, non-elite white women who broke or defied these rules and expectations, were liable to face jail time, workhouse sentences, social exclusion, or embarrassment. In newspaper articles, these women were condemned or ridiculed, but their behavior was depicted as an individual failing. During the war, the lives of non-elite white women did not change

drastically, but their surroundings did. The war took a huge toll on the economy and infrastructure of the southern states, which was felt most by non-elite white women who made up the majority of those left behind after their husbands, fathers, and sons were conscripted. After the Civil War, newspaper depictions and discussion of non-elite white women scrutinized their behavior and took it more seriously as an idealistic issue that reflected on the moral status of white women as a whole. The difference between how non-elite white women's conduct was depicted before and after the war had nothing to do with the actual actions of these women and everything to do with how the destruction of slavery changed the southern class system. In the antebellum years, non-elite white women's disobedience reflected poorly on themselves; after emancipation, their bad behavior was threatening a new racial hierarchy that was based on white morality.

The ideal of the southern woman has been a pillar of southern society "since the South began to think of itself as a region," according to Anne Goodwyn Jones' *Tomorrow Is Another Day*. Jones argues that this fantasy of southern womanhood was used by southern white planter-class men to control their women with complex and sometimes contradictory sets of arbitrary rules and structures and make them into soundless, mindless symbols for the moral and racial superiority of the South.¹ Expectations of sexual purity, religious piety, motherhood, and subservience to men were placed upon these women at point-blank range since they were meant to be the perfect representation of what a woman's role was the patriarchal plantocracy. Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress* also addresses the expectations of elite white women while giving first-person narratives from within the plantation. She explains the

¹ Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 3-4.

complicated life and status of the elite ‘Southern Belle.’ She enforces the idea that the southern social hierarchy reached beyond the need for white people to be in control of black people, and also required men to be in control of their wives, rich people to be in control of poor people, and fathers to be in control over their children.²

Similarly, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese discusses the idea that every southern woman operated within and was directly affected by the plantation household and that the planter class created a whole new type of women’s world utterly separated from that of any other region. In *Within the Plantation Household*, she argues that the heavily paternalistic view of the plantation household as a “family, black and white” was simultaneously appealing to the free and enslaved women of the house and demeaning and restrictive to both.³ Thaviola Glymph also tackles the relationship between white mistresses and the enslaved women within their households in *Out of the House of Bondage*. Glymph’s main project in this book is breaking down the myth of the “kind mistress,” that still prevails in the memory of the South. She deconstructs the idea that white women were unwilling participants in the system in order to reinforce the truth of plantation mistresses’ willing and sometimes vicious participation in slavery.⁴ The position of elite white women in the slave-economy South was somewhat complicated, since they were stuck in between the power that came with owning other human beings and the helplessness of having little to no agency and control over their own property.

² Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

⁴ Thaviola Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The scholarship on elite planter-class white women in the Civil War South is extensive and impressive, but these ladies were by no means the majority of women in the South and the importance of non-elite white women in the story of the South should not be discounted simply because they are less visible than their wealthy counterparts. The expectations of elite white women influenced the expectations that *every* white woman in the South was supposed to live by since they were the tangible models for these standards. These rules were created by and for the benefit of elite white men, and elite white women were arguably the only women in the antebellum South who could live up to them. Aside from having wealth and comfort, elite white women also had a perceived ‘honor’ that had to be protected by white men. Non-elite white women in the antebellum South were expected to live up to the standards upheld by elite white women but did not, due to their class status, have the advantage of wealth or the protection of white men at large.

The majority of white women living in the South between 1851 and 1879 were non-elite and lived below the planter class. In 1860, around 84% of the enslaved population nation-wide was owned by roughly 10% of the white population; less than 1% of this population made up the highest class of planter elites who owned more than 100 enslaved people.⁵ Making up a large percentage of the female population, these women’s influence on the Southern states during the Civil War cannot be understated; however, their importance to Southern society in the years preceding secession and during Reconstruction is often overlooked. Because these women were almost always illiterate, they rarely left behind the kind of documents that have helped us understand elite women, such as letters and journals of their making. Literacy among all non-

⁵ “Statistics: Slaves and Slaveholdings,” *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, Accessed March 21, 2021.

elite whites was low and stagnant in the South during the years leading up to the Civil War. The state of Georgia reported over 40,000 illiterate white citizens in the year 1850 and, in the region that would become the Confederacy, only 35% of the population were receiving any form of education in 1860.⁶ Historians have never been at a complete loss for sources pertaining to these women, though. Stories of non-elite women can be found in public records as well as periodicals but, because these records were written *about* these women and not *by* them, we miss an essential first-hand point of view when it comes to understanding their experiences.

The fact that these women were not highly literary or well-known in our national narrative does not mean they have not occupied the minds and curiosities of modern scholars. Many historians and writers over the past fifty years or so have tried to do justice by this particular demographic and many of them have done a fantastic job of bringing poor white women into conversations about the Civil War in the South. One issue with many of these accounts, however, is that the non-elite women take a background position to either their higher-class counterparts or the men that surround them. In many cases non-elite women are referred to as a homogenous group, but these women were anything but singular in nature. The collective way in which poor white women are often described is nothing out of the ordinary and mirrors perfectly the way in which they were perceived by southern newspapers in the mid to late nineteenth century. This thesis will rely heavily on this relationship between the newspapers in the South and non-elite white women and how this dynamic changed from the antebellum years to the end of Reconstruction, but many of the arguments find inspiration and evidence from a very solid base of existing scholarship on non-elite southern white women.

⁶ Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 154-155.

Susan Jean Tracy argues in *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature* that this myth of antebellum "sisterhood" was never realized in truth due to the many separations women experienced both within and across status, class, and race. She believes that, though popular representations paint a portrait of a refined gentlewoman whose purity set them apart, white southern women were deeply complex and grappled with many different limitations, both physical and emotional, of their sex. There is no way, Tracy asserts, for southern women to be definitively united under one idea of "Southern Womanhood," contrary to popular belief. The thing that all southern women shared, however, was the total lack of civil and political rights and a status of second-class citizenship under the control of white men. In real life, she acknowledges, southern women were complex creatures facing a myriad of obstacles and responsibilities that men did not have to face. In another vein, she discusses the spread of paternalism outside of the plantation household and into the lives and occupation of yeoman farmers and laborers. These women, however, were of little consequence to writers and journalists of the nineteenth century South.⁷

The divergent and sometimes criminal behavior of these lower-class white women caused them to stand out in antebellum Southern society and kept them from fitting into social norms. Victoria Bynum observes these women and their defiance in *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*. By examining the 'unruly women' of different races and classes in three North Carolina counties, Bynum paints a portrait of the ways in which the idea of womanhood was presented, warped, and outright defied by Southern women in the years before the Civil War. She argues that the newspapers in the nineteenth-century South were

⁷ Susan Jean Tracy, *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

mainly concerned with using stories and condemnation of these women in order to uphold paternalism and the ideals of the “cult of true womanhood,” which did not include poor white women. The ideals of piety, morality, and racial purity were so important in Southern society and white women who were poor, working class, or single could not achieve any of these and would therefore never fit into this “cult of true womanhood.” Because of this inherent exclusion, many white women were not accepted by Southern society for just being born poor; however, Bynum asserts that this did not keep these women from making their mark.⁸

Non-elite women in the nineteenth century South fell into many sub-categories: they were farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, factory workers, craftswomen, sex workers, businesswomen, mothers, and just about any other occupation one could imagine. The thing they all shared was work. As the market revolution spread to urban areas in the South, poor women found themselves with new opportunities to work and provide for themselves or their families. Some of these women went into sex work—either out of necessity or because the trade was highly lucrative—and others crafted and sold their own wares. In the country, yeoman farmers worked their own land and enjoyed relative autonomy. Meanwhile, tenant farmers worked alongside enslaved people on plantations in order to keep their heads above water. In all of these arenas women played different and important roles, often while acting as the backbone of a family.

Single and working women in the South represented a class of citizen that was economically freer than their married counterparts but preyed on by the legal system and Southern society. Due to the law of coverture that existed at the time, women who were married were forced to surrender all assets to their spouses, including their children, and divorce laws

⁸ Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

made it nearly impossible for a woman to initiate a divorce in order to get out of a marriage. In *Stepping Lively in Place*, Joyce Linda Broussard tells the stories of the unmarried women of antebellum Natchez, Mississippi. She utilizes examples from every imaginable class of woman in Natchez in the nineteenth century: wives, prostitutes, boarding-house owners, single mothers, enslaved and free black women, spinsters, divorcées, widows, and female entrepreneurs. These women, she argues, fought an uphill battle against the law, their neighbors, and their expectations in order to maintain their freedom and social liberation; even so they managed to thrive, running businesses and working in pre-war Natchez.⁹ In a similar vein, Keri Leigh Merritt outlines the common roles of ‘respectable poor women’ in her book *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*. In urban areas, these women could sometimes find jobs in factories, for themselves or for their children. She argues that sexual violence ruled the South and made it extremely dangerous for women to be poor and discusses the risky but lucrative nature of prostitution as an occupation in the region.¹⁰

Another group of women that had slightly more autonomy than their extremely poor or extremely rich neighbors were women in yeoman farm families. This class of non-elite white people owned their own land which they farmed themselves or with the assistance of a small number of enslaved people, if more than one, and the women living within these households operated in a unique role. Stephanie McCurry’s *Masters of Small Worlds* details the ways in which yeomen women were useful, through labor and child-bearing, and complicated, due to their ‘special isolation’ and mixed status in society. In the title of this book, the “Masters” are the

⁹ Joyce Linda Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place: The Not-Married, Free Women of Civil-War-Era Natchez, Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

yeoman fathers and husbands and they commanded only their “small world[s] within the fence,” or their families and wives.¹¹ She argues that the disparity between planter class men and yeoman men was so wide that control over their own households was all that these men had. McCurry shines a light on the very specific issues facing their wives and daughters. She acknowledges that the comparison between wife and slave is sometimes a hard one to justify, but one inarguable point is that yeomen women were kept as “perpetual children” their whole lives.¹² These women, though not regulated by the strictures of high Southern society, lived under a separate but just as rigid set of expectations.

Poor white laborers were known to move around frequently which allowed them unique opportunities to have interactions with enslaved people. According to Charles C. Bolton, it was not uncommon for poor white women working on plantations to engage in romantic relationships with enslaved black men. Because it was deemed less shameful for a woman to be raped than it was for her to have consensual extramarital sexual encounters, these relationships were often skewed by rape and assault allegations made by these women to maintain their reputations.¹³ Martha Hodes also addresses these illicit relationships in *White Women, Black Men*, but she takes a more focused approach and addresses how the dynamic surrounding these unions changed in the nineteenth century. Noting that legal interracial marriages took place in the Chesapeake Bay in the seventeenth century, Hodes argues that the dramatic shift in attitudes around white and black relationships occurred due the obsession with white supremacy and power held by white

¹¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹² McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.

¹³ Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

men that shaped and was shaped by the institution of slavery. These liaisons were dangerous before the Emancipation Proclamation, but almost never resulted in the death of a Black man; however, the lynching and murdering of Black men for the same kind of affairs became one of the most infamous features of Southern history from Reconstruction to the present. Hodes asserts that this was due to white men trying desperately to cling to the kind of power they wielded over Black men before slavery was abolished by taking advantage of non-elite white women's sexuality, something that they had never cared about before Emancipation.¹⁴

Southern society in the era of the Civil War was less than homogenous and varied from region to region. While regional lines were not always exact, the three basic areas this thesis will focus on are the deep South, made up of states on the very southernmost part of the country such as Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, the eastern South, which is comprised of the states along the eastern seaboard including Virginia, North and South Carolina, and the "border" states, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky. This regional framework won't be focused on until the third chapter, which discusses non-elite women in the Civil War. The Civil War and the political setup of the Confederacy really characterized these three regions: the border states found themselves on the frontline of the fighting and were split between Union and Confederate sympathies, the deep south contained a few very important Union-occupied port cities such as New Orleans and Mobile, and the eastern seaboard included Virginia, home of the Confederate capital of Richmond. The experiences of women in these three regions did not really differentiate in any drastic way until the Civil War, so the regional framework will only be used for that particular discussion.

¹⁴ Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

In *Slavery's Borderland*, Matthew Salafia discusses and unpacks the unique nature of slavery in the lower Ohio River Valley, mostly in the state of Kentucky, as it changed from the mid-eighteenth century up until the Civil War. He argues that, because the nature of slavery there was different from the slavery of the deep South, the nature of society itself was fundamentally unique from the surrounding area. For some living in Kentucky at the height of slavery, owning slaves was a way to become more financially independent and exercise a sort of power over the household, but for others, slavery represented the worst evils done by Americans.¹⁵ In *On Slavery's Border*, Dianne Mutti Burke, studies southern slave owners who lived and operated in the border state of Missouri. She makes a striking comparison between the gender ideals of the South and those of the North and the way in which they collided and confronted one another in the border states. The northern influence introduced the idea of 'separate circles' for husband and wife, which forms a base for a marriage based on companionship and helpfulness. This idea, Burke argues, was meant to further enforce women's subservience and the societal separation of the genders.¹⁶

Rebels on the Border by Aaron Aster more specifically discusses the ways in which women on the frontlines of the fighting found themselves embroiled in conflict, converting their homes into makeshift hospitals as they became the nurses for the wounded. Aster also talks about how, due to the close proximity of Confederate and Union women in the border states, many of them began to find lines being blurred and they found themselves harboring, aiding, and protecting soldiers from enemy armies. Women in these areas were now being called to serve the

¹⁵Matthew Salafia, *Slavery's Borderland: Freedom and Bondage Along the Ohio River* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹⁶Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border : Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

war effort on both sides in a very important way and found themselves in very complex situations. Aster points out how Union women perceived the Confederate cause to lack a moral backbone and how Confederate women, in many cases, continued to defy any sort of encroachment on their land or their lifestyle even after emancipation. He discusses the ways in which white southern women often acted as belligerents in the war instead of innocent lambs, as convention would have them portrayed, which shattered partially the gender expectations of the South. Conventional gender roles for women had little place in the war effort.¹⁷

Southern women have a somewhat famous history as participants in the Civil War. McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning* is one particularly detailed book that addresses several aspects of the Civil War in the Confederacy to provide a look into the lives and political ideas of those who lived it but poses a question: what did it take and what did it mean for secession to happen and then fail? One of the main issues she confronts is the ideals and illusions that white Southerners were armed with when they entered the Civil War, such as the "Antigone" ideal of women being kept outside of war and the assumption that Confederate people would continually support the state. She also focuses on the impact the war had on the daily lives of those left behind: women. After the Confederate states painted their new portrait of Southern Womanhood, which focused on the responsibility and appointment of 'soldiers' wives,' southern women embraced the new ideal. McCurry asserts that they learned to utilize these new roles to make themselves known through political, corporate, and violent participation.¹⁸ In *Women's War*, McCurry takes an extremely careful and intricate dive into the lives of women in the South

¹⁷ Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

during the Civil War. In a similar vein to *Confederate Reckoning*, McCurry again emphasizes the ‘Antigone ideal’ and how the recording of history overlooks the participation of women. She argues that the coverture, new Confederate policies, and Lieber’s Code worked hand in hand to greatly shape women’s experience of the Civil War, regardless race or class divisions. The Confederate States also offered women a special kind citizenship, characterized by their new status as soldiers’ wives, and this emboldened women to participate in politics. McCurry uses all these ideas and policies to argue that the Civil War not only changed the way southern women lived, but also changed the ideal of southern womanhood forever.¹⁹

These are the arguments and observations that have inspired and influenced this thesis and each of these works has informed a different chapter. In this thesis, I explore non-elite white women as a group as well as the ideals and expectations that are observed in the aforementioned works in order to paint a more complete portrait of the non-elite southern white woman in the Civil War-era South. It is vital to marry real stories—the closest we can get are accounts from newspapers—with the expectations of these women in order to see them clearly since the “Old South” was so heavily influenced by their own myth. While it cannot reasonably be argued that southern life in the nineteenth century is accurately depicted in national myth, it would be wrong to believe the realities of this time and place were completely removed from the fantasy. This is true especially for non-elite white women since there are virtually no self-written memoirs or first-person accounts to corroborate the things written about them in newspapers, and therefore we have *no choice* but to take the realities with the perceptions. In this thesis, I explore the relationship between expectation and real life for non-elite white women, not because they were

¹⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019).

necessarily ruled entirely by their expectations, but because without them, our image of these women is utterly incomplete.

Chapters one and two of this thesis focus on the antebellum period. Chapter one outlines the societal rules and standards non-elite white women were living under and how expectations of white women were important to the southern plantocracy while chapter two reveals what non-elite white women were really doing and what their lives were actually like. Chapter three discusses the relationship between expectations and realities for non-elite white women during the Civil War. This chapter will also analyze how and why expectations for white women changed and how non-elite white women took on different roles and engaged in the political sphere in a new way. Chapter four focuses on the Reconstruction period in the South and examines how expectations for non-elite white women shifted with the destruction of the institution of slavery after the war. This chapter also discusses how white women reacted to this shift and how their lives actually changed—or did not change—in these years. By analyzing newspapers as primary sources, we are able to view examples of what southern elites wanted and expected from these women as well as accounts of the ways in which non-elite white women subverted or outright defied these expectations. Southern newspapers offer us a unique point of view through which to view these women, the expectations surrounding them, and the opinions white elites had of them. This thesis addresses the question of how public expectations of non-elite white women's behavior changed from the antebellum years to Reconstruction and how this change affected these women and their real-life experiences.

Non-elite white women were breaking rules and shattering expectations left and right from the very beginning of southern history and still are today, but by examining their lives during the years preceding, during, and directly following the Civil War, we can see how they

changed and were changed by the biggest domestic conflict in United States history. By discussing the antebellum years as seen through the lens of the non-elite white woman, we can understand how class stratifications muddled the myth of the antebellum south and southern womanhood. We can observe how the pressure and tumult of the Civil War pushed some of these women to action, such as the assistants of guerillas in the border states or the bread rioters in Virginia, and exacerbated poor conditions that already existed for the poor women in New Orleans. Then, by analyzing the effect that the loss of the institution of slavery had on non-elite white women in the Reconstruction years, we can better understand the narrative of southern womanhood after the Civil War and how it told a story that was not true in order to maintain the order of the "Old South." These women can be an alternative point of view by which to analyze the myth of southern womanhood and how it tried and failed to control the entire population of white women in the South. Through non-elite white women, we can patch together the missing pieces of the South's Civil War-era story in order to really understand what being a white woman in that time meant.

“Womanhood in its Wretchedness”:

Expectations for White Women in the Antebellum South

The antebellum South, just like the Southern Belle that defined the era, has long been romanticized past the point of recognition. The spirit of change was moving relentlessly through the southern states during this time, but alongside it was the spirit of tradition, arguably one of the strongest forces at work in the South even today. Perfect conditions for a storm were brewing. Regardless, the deeply established and ever-growing plantation economy still ruled over the lives of everyone in the South in one way or another, directly and indirectly defining social norms, family dynamics, and even the idea of femininity. Dominion over women in particular was paramount to patriarchal control over the antebellum South and was achieved by implementing and enforcing rigorous standards and carefully crafted rules set by the slaveholding elites and perpetuated by newspapers and other popular print media. White women in the antebellum South needed to be sexually pure, religiously pious, good morally strong mothers, and submissive and obedient in order to uphold white planter-class men's hold on southern society.

The plantation household was an institution that reached outside of the realm of the plantation itself and worked to control the lives of all living within its sphere of influence, namely the southern states. Everyone, rich and poor, was to operate within the plantation system.

This system was dominated by patriarchal, biblical, and paternalistic ideals meant to uphold a white male-dominated culture; a set of strict standards were made and enforced by these ideals. In the same way a father was the head of a family, the planter was the master over his society. Even the very lowest class, those living without homes and struggling to survive, found themselves surrounded by the influence of the plantation. Despite the fact that elite Southerners who held large numbers of slaves only made up a microscopic percentage of the population, their role in setting rules and codes for the rest of society was obvious. Slavery as both an economic and social structure shaped what southern culture was, especially as it became threatened in the years directly leading up to the Civil War.¹ While the antebellum period can be broadly defined as the years following the War of 1812 and preceding the American Civil War, this chapter will specifically study the years between the Compromise of 1850 and the secession of the state of South Carolina in December, 1860.

Women in the antebellum South were special cases due to their greatly contrasting and sometimes unattainable expectations, which were leveled upon them by a patriarchal society. Held up in the plantocracy as symbols of purity, piety, and maternal strength, white women served as beacons of hope for the future as well as pillars of Southern tradition. For elite women, these expectations served to create a world in which they had their lives set out before them by the standards of southern society as long as they could adhere to the strict set of rules set by elite white men.² Middle class or yeoman women who worked a familial property were held to different standards that nonetheless branched from the same ideals aforementioned and still

¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

² Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

risked disgrace and social ostracization by breaching the status quo.³ Lower class and poor women found themselves simultaneously struggling to survive while also trying to conduct themselves in accordance with the classic southern expectations for femininity and faced a very different set of consequences than women in higher classes. These women, if they found themselves breaking sometimes seemingly arbitrary rules, could find themselves quickly jailed or thrown in a workhouse.⁴ In any case, elite women in the South spent their lives desperately trying to attain high ideals while lower class white women struggled beneath a system forged against them, laboring within a set of codes created by the plantocracy and enforced by newspapers, literature, and other print media.

The antebellum South was grounded in a certain set of moral codes and values based in the Christian religion, paternalism, and tradition. In the nineteenth century, especially nearing the Civil War, Baptist and Methodist denominations were taking over southern society and becoming increasingly popular among “plain folk” and enslaved people. Accessible in both practice and ideals, these evangelical sects of the Christian faith appealed to the vast numbers of people who lived without the privileges allowed to aristocrats.⁵ This sort of grass-roots lower class religiosity also helped to bring high-class moral ideals and expectations to lower-class men and women, in addition to the overarching grasp of the plantation household and the patriarchy’s reach. Within these denominations, non-elite white women found both the resources to be the religious centers of their families as well as a community of like-minded women to support them. The biblical themes of purity, chastity, and obedience had always ruled the lives of elite white

³ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.

⁴ Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁵ Dickson D. Bruce, "Religion, Society and Culture in the Old South: A Comparative View," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1974): 399-416, doi:10.2307/2711655.

Southern women, but poor women who lived beneath the radar of high society rarely had to fret over reputation or appearances before the rise of these close-knit church communities, at least in the way that daughters of wealthy planters did.⁶ After these communities formed and spread across the rural South, non-elite white women in these areas found themselves with a special kind of visibility.

This is not to say that poor or non-elite women could live how they wanted without fear of societal repercussions. Reputation in the antebellum South was something that could make or break a person's standing, career, and livelihood. There was indeed a set of moral rules that applied to *all* white southern women, regardless of status or class, and defined the ideal of southern womanhood. These values were embedded in the idea of paternalism, which ruled the South in the nineteenth century. Under these rules, women were considered more as commodities than individuals; women of all classes had little to no legal rights or opportunities to provide and live for themselves. Paternalism determined that a woman's role was directly beneath that of the man or men in her life, whether that be her father, brothers, husband, uncles, or any other male protectorate. The central unit of the family, the farm, the plantation, and the government was the 'man of the house,' surrounded by the women who served in him in various capacities.⁷ This dynamic is very clear, even overt, when observing the plantation household, but presented itself in more subtle ways in the lower classes.

One of the most important elements of southern womanhood in the antebellum period was purity, most often applied in the realm of sexuality. A woman, regardless of her class or status, was expected to remain sexually pure and untouched until marriage, and once married a

⁶ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 87-88.

⁷ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.

woman should produce children for her husband as soon as possible. Women who did not adhere to this rule were often outcast completely from southern society and even jailed for the crime of fornication or prostitution.⁸ In 1821, a middle-class Natchez, Mississippi woman by the name of Elizabeth Claravagal was accused by a neighbor of living in fornication with a man to whom she was not married. The man brought forth his own testimony of their crimes as proof of Claravagal's wrongdoing. The crime of fornication was considered a misdemeanor by the law of antebellum Mississippi, punishable by up to six months in jail, but a relatively short imprisonment was accompanied by a life sentence of shame.⁹ The accusation and conviction of a woman for sexual crimes was rare, because that business was not thought to have any place in the public sphere, where it could destroy the reputations and consequently the lives of citizens with otherwise good standing in society. When women were accused and convicted of such crimes, however, they were most often associated with houses of ill repute or disguised under the classification of "vagrancy."¹⁰ This kind of activity and behavior was believed to be evil and defeminized white women in southern society; social evils plagued the women of the antebellum South and represented another thing that they needed protection from.

A white woman's purity in the antebellum South was viewed as something sacred that was meant to be protected by the men of society. More than that, the purity of women was a subject of great interest for men, from the husbands of these women to the lawmakers that decided their rights in society. Catherine Clinton says in *The Plantation Mistress*, "men were virtually obsessed with female innocence," and that, "...men could dedicate themselves to the

⁸ Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

⁹ Broussard, *Stepping Lively In Place*, 137.

¹⁰ Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place*, 138.

maintenance of high standards—for women. Female purity became a practical crusade for a society in which the wives and mothers of the ruling class had to be above suspicion.”¹¹

Essentially, because white women were considered to be the safeguards of southern society’s morality, they had to meet much higher standards, which were set by men but did not apply to men. In the years leading up to the Civil War especially, women became the subjects of great scrutiny due to their intrinsic importance in upholding the ideal of southern piety and morality of the South. Clinton sums up this relationship between responsibility and suffocation when she says, “The nature of southern morality forced women into rigid and exacting roles. They were protected, yet at the same time confined by interlocking systems of patriarchal authority.”¹² antebellum southern white women and their purity were enshrined and imprisoned in a gilded cage.

There were many women in the antebellum South who by choice or by necessity found themselves in complete defiance to the strict expectations of female purity. A number of non-elite southern white women turned to prostitution. Some of these women had no choice—this was the prevailing narrative perpetuated by newspapers in the antebellum South—but others engaged in prostitution because it offered them a level of financial independence and a somewhat generous living. Prostitution was not seen as a legitimate form of employment in the 1850s; in fact, it was illegal to engage in the practice. Often referred to as ‘fallen women,’ ‘women of easy virtue,’ and ‘harlots,’ sex workers in the southern states found themselves demonized in newspapers and in the eyes of society as a whole. Jeffrey Adler argues that these women, known as “streetwalkers,” were seen by southern high society as “Immoral or disruptive women [who]

¹¹ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 87-88.

¹² Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 109.

posed special problems for nineteenth century policemen and policy makers” and that, “Their behavior contaminated innocent young men.”¹³

This idea that women without virtue only existed as stumbling blocks for men ties back into the idea that women in general were only meant to serve the men in their lives and spend their days as dependents. Newspaper articles detailing the work and imprisonment of these ‘women of the night’ were sensational and often tried to teach a sort of lesson about female vice. An article published in the *Charleston Courier* in July of 1857, described a report from New York city of a crowded tenement in which “debased” and “abandoned white women” lived alongside other similarly un-virtuous inhabitants. The editor then adds “Here is a fine illustration of one of the inevitable consequences of free society.”¹⁴ The sad description of the overcrowded, alcohol-soaked, unhygienic environment was meant to serve as a terrifying warning of what would come to those southern women who might surrender their virtue.

Piety was another one of the pillars of Southern womanhood and served as a guideline for the rest of a woman’s expectations, securing her purity and her charity. The church served as a gateway for non-elite women to engage in society, perform acts of goodwill, and earn an education. For example, an article published in July of 1860 in *The Staunton Vindicator* describes a fair being hosted by the “women of the M.E. church” and an 1858 article from *The Staunton Spectator* notes what is called “another fair” put on by the women of the Presbyterian church.¹⁵ It is no coincidence that many of the secondary schooling institutions for women in the antebellum South were tied in one way or another to a religious organization. Religious literature

¹³ Jeffrey S. Adler, “Streetwalkers, Degraded Outcasts, and Good-for-Nothing Huzzies: Women and the Dangerous Class in antebellum St. Louis,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer, 1992), pp. 737-755.

¹⁴ “Fire Points,” *Charleston Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, July 25, 1857.

¹⁵ *Staunton Vindicator*, July 13, 1860; *Staunton Spectator*, May 19, 1858.

was traditionally the standard curriculum for women's colleges in antebellum America, while secular readings increased in their acceptance and popularity for educated women in the years leading up to the Civil War.¹⁶ The Baptist and Methodist denominations were becoming increasingly widespread among the middle class in the South, as aforementioned, and were creating new opportunities for women. These churches, though led by men in the major leadership positions, were often hosts for women-led organizations to conduct charitable events and coordinate the moral direction of their communities.¹⁷ Religion not only acted as the source of a woman's moral virtue and piety, but also a gateway into society which middle-class women would otherwise not have access to.

The importance of Christian ideals and virtues in antebellum southern society cannot be overstated. Religiosity seeped into and molded the operations in several different sections of southern society but especially in the lives of women. Since women were regarded as the virtuous guides of future generations through their roles as mothers, special attention needed to be paid to Christian ideals of womanhood and motherhood. Modesty was one of the pillars of Christian womanhood in the antebellum South and emphasized the importance of selflessness in a southern woman. *The Biblical Recorder* from Raleigh, North Carolina published an article in 1858 about how the Bible tells women to dress; the writer of the article also took the opportunity to admonish women for wearing "useless ornaments." The piece states, "it is the will of God for women to dress in modest apparel and 'not' 'with gold, pearls, or costly array,'" and encouraged

¹⁶ Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in antebellum America," *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 401-24, doi:10.2307/2944941, 404.

¹⁷ Dickson D. Bruce, "Religion, Society and Culture in the Old South: A Comparative View," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1974): 399-416, doi:10.2307/2711655.

women to heed this biblical instruction for their souls and the souls of those around them.¹⁸

Another issue of this Raleigh-based newspaper included an editorial entitled “Work for the Women of the Church,” which emphasized the importance of a Christian woman’s selflessness and piety in the antebellum household as well as the church and society as a whole.

Women, Christian women, in the sacred sphere of home, exert an influence which is of inestimable benefit to the religious and social interests of all Protestant countries. Without that influence society would relapse into infidelity and barbarism. And what would the churches be, if deprived of the piety and activity of a woman? In the Sunday school, in the classroom, in the public worship of the sanctuary, her influence is given freely to the cause of Christ.¹⁹

Religion, like many of the other institutions that ruled over the lives of women, was a sort of double-edged sword. While it offered opportunities for community as well as comfort and guidance, it also worked to further a women’s second-class status beneath and dependence on the men in their lives. The Christian God acted both as a source of salvation for *everyone* as well as a representation of how the male father was meant to stand at the center of the family and at the head of society. The Christian religion as interpreted in the nineteenth-century South, especially in the forms of Baptism and Methodism, simultaneously empowered women to take up an evangelical mission and ordered them to be submissive to any and all male figures in their lives in the same way in which they acted in obedience to the Lord.²⁰ Nonetheless, a woman’s piety was one of her greatest virtues and qualities in the eyes of the antebellum South.

A woman in the antebellum South was not only expected to be pure and pious, she was also expected to be maternal. From the highest class to the lowest, a woman’s life essentially revolved around achieving and succeeding in the task of motherhood. Of elite women’s role as

¹⁸ “Dress of Christian Women,” *Biblical Recorder*, February 11, 1858.

¹⁹ “Work for Women of the Church,” *Biblical Recorder*, March 8, 1860.

²⁰ Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 19.

mothers, Catherine Clinton says, “Sexual reproduction has always been a woman’s religious and cultural duty, but maternity became a patriotic obligation in the new republic,” and that it became a sort of “biological destiny.”²¹ While Clinton’s *The Plantation Mistress* focuses on the wives and daughters of wealthy planters, this particular sentiment applies to every class in southern society. Motherhood was something that united women across status and the role of maternity was considered sacred and of utmost importance in antebellum society. Republican motherhood was more than an expectation, it was a calling. Women in the nineteenth century acted as vehicles for the production, purification, and patriotism of the upcoming generations, the safekeepers of the South.

Maternity in the antebellum South was both incredibly complicated and utterly essential. Fertility rates among women at the turn of the nineteenth century in the United States were extremely high and the average number of children born to a woman in her fertile years was seven. This number, however, does not denote the number of pregnancies, many of which would be lost or unsuccessful, but does define the maternal expectations for a woman.²² Bearing as many children as possible in a woman’s limited window of fertility was of the utmost importance for almost every family. In the Southern aristocracy, more successful pregnancies meant a higher chance for an heir to the family fortune and plantation to be born. In the yeoman class, more children born to a household meant more farmhands to work the land. In the lower class, children were a more complicated matter. On one hand, more children meant more possible incomes once they were grown, but it would take at least ten years for a child to grow before they could work

²¹ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 8.

²² Judith Walzer Leavitt, "Under the Shadow of Maternity: American Women's Responses to Death and Debility Fears in Nineteenth-Century Childbirth," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 129-54, 131.

for a wage. In those young years, children presented a financial problem for their parents; they were another mouth to feed and another little body to clothe and keep warm.²³

Regardless of the high child and mother mortality rates in the antebellum period, women at every class were still expected to become mothers at one point or another. This expectation came with another set of rules. Because of the importance of republican motherhood in the nineteenth century, women were also supposed to be *good* mothers in a very specific way: they were the spiritual way makers and guides for their households as well as the keepers of their family's morality. Linda Kerber defines a "Republican Mother" as one "dedicated to the service of civic virtue; she educated her sons for it; she condemned and corrected her husbands' lapses from it."²⁴ Mothers in the nineteenth century South had a moral responsibility to their families and their communities and were seen as the keepers of virtue. Fathers, in contrast, were the rulers of their homes and every order from the father was to be obeyed like a royal edict. The mother was often considered to be playing an even more important role, however, despite not having any real power in her house. The father of a home controlled his wife's and his children's lives and roles, but the mother was responsible for her husband's and children's immortal souls.²⁵ This was an extremely high expectation and an incredibly important responsibility to lay on women who were often quite young. It also extended beyond upper-class mothers, who had the advantage of a wide web of support and the financial freedom to guide their children in education and marriage. Maternity was one of the pillars of antebellum southern society.

²³ Richard H. Steckel, "The Health and Mortality of Women and Children, 1850-1860," *The Journal of Economic History* 48, no. 2 (1988): 333-45, 341.

²⁴ Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Special Issue: An American Enlightenment (Summer, 1976): 187-205, 202.

²⁵ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 50.

Aside from becoming good, pure, and pious mothers, women in the antebellum South were expected to become dutiful wives. Obedience to a father figure shifted to obedience to a husband once a woman came of age, but the nature of this relationship stayed relatively unchanged, especially for aristocratic women. Paternalism's rule dictated that women were to be under the protection and power of the man or men in her life; therefore, as one male figure drifted out of a girl's life, another one must take his place.²⁶ This was also a biblical ideal: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing."²⁷ The heart of southern marital relationships was an almost child-like sense of duty and compliance; a wife was meant to be the servant of her spouse in every way. She was supposed to bear children for the glory of her husband—and the Lord—as well as perform her domestic tasks about the household, no small undertaking regardless of class or size of estate. These duties were undertaken at the pleasure of a woman's husband.²⁸

In yeoman families, wives and mothers were often expected to take up certain tasks in the field as well as in the home, unless actively nursing children. Even in working-class families, a woman's reproductive labor was the most valuable kind of work she would undertake. Families that owned farms and a small number of enslaved people, most often one female, were able to allow more opportunities for leisure and a focus on domestic tasks for their mothers. On the other hand, families that relied on their mothers to perform physical labor for the survival of the

²⁶ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 3.

²⁷ Ephesians 5:22-24, (KJV).

²⁸ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 74-75.

farm could only spare them a little time to rest during pregnancy, birth, and nursing.²⁹ Women in these situations were expected to simultaneously undertake the role of laborer and domestic caregiver while also upholding the standard and ideals of republican motherhood. Juggling all of these responsibilities could put psychological as well as physical stress on these women and acting in obedience to their husbands was still paramount. Their dependence intermixed with their great duty. These women carried the burden of balancing industry with family on their shoulders and defined the kind of work ethic that ruled the sort of middle class of the antebellum South.

Despite their necessity on the farm, yeoman women were still considered complete dependents and had the same rights as children. In fact, women in this class were often referred to as or compared to children. In an advertisement for “J. A. Sherman’s Patent Anatomical Truss,” a piece of machinery is recommended for “children of six years of age or above and women unfit for plowing.”³⁰ This advertisement is just one clear comparison among many. While women in the lower classes were not only expected to work but found it a necessity, they were still relegated to certain kinds of work, as to protect their femininity. Perceptions of women as needing a form of childlike protection from men had a great influence on the kind of standing women held in the legal system. The second-class status of women in the nineteenth century South cannot be overstated; from their child-like classification to their minimal rights before the law, women at every level of society were at the mercy of the patriarchy.

At an ideological and political level, women also appeared as dependents in need of a sort of safekeeping provided by men. In his famous “The Crime Against Kansas” speech to Congress

²⁹ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 59.

³⁰ "Advertisement," *Mobile Register*, July 30, 1858.

on May 19, 1856, Charles Sumner used many overt metaphors and comparisons about women and femininity to make his point. These metaphors were so powerful because they implied that the worst thing that could happen to Kansas was akin to a sexual assault on a woman. Near the beginning of the tirade, Sumner said of the expansion of slavery into Kansas, “It is the rape of a virgin Territory.” By comparing the encroachment of slavery into a “virgin territory” as a “rape,” Sumner used evocative language to elicit emotional response. He called it the “rape of a virgin Territory” because it was the worst crime he could think of, the impurification of a previously pure entity. As a metaphor for the state of Kansas, women were clearly viewed by Sumner and other white male elites as innocents who needed to be protected since they had little to no control over their own lives or bodies.

Later, he described women suffering from what he calls, “womanhood in its wretchedness,” from which they are saved by men, along with infants and the elderly. At one point, Sumner compares the women who defended the anti-slavery settlement of Lawrence, Missouri against pro-slavery attackers to great historical women: “The matrons of Rome, who poured their jewels into the treasury for the public defence ; the wives of Prussia, who, with delicate fingers, clothed their defenders against French invasion ; the mothers of our own Revolution, who sent forth their sons, covered over with prayers and blessings, to combat for human rights, did nothing of self-sacrifice truer than did these women on this occasion.”³¹ In this quote, it can be clearly ascertained that women were to stand as examples of republican protectors as well as the aforementioned ‘wretched’ children of society, two complicated but important expectations. “The Crime Against Kansas” is fraught with troublesome rhetoric and

³¹ Charles Sumner, “The Crime Against Kansas,” (Speech given to the United States Senate, Washington D.C., 1856).

language meant to scare his audience into agreement; Sumner made a conscious choice to graphically compare the ‘crimes’ being committed against Kansans to the rape of a woman. Sumner's use of women and femininity to make his arguments more inflammatory presents a plain portrait of what women meant to the United States in the antebellum years: simultaneously extremely fragile and yet expected to bear the moral weight of the generations on their shoulders.

The dual expectation to be both delicately feminine and strongly enduring created a disparity between the ways in which newspapers and society in the antebellum South regarded women and their actions. One way in which southern publications sought to control women's behavior was by praising women who complied with the patriarchal ideal of womanhood. In newspapers, articles praising women for being industrious or outstanding in society were printed to encourage a certain standard and often utilized an almost uniform kind of language. An article from *The Staunton Vindicator* in 1859 acclaimed a group of women from the Methodist church for working to further female education: “[we applaud those] who have contributed to rescue their sex from the degrading charge of inferiority, under which they had so long and so unjustly suffered.” The article does lay out some reservations, stating that, “We do not expect or desire that our women should become statesmen or jurists, but we do wish to see them prepared to take the position, that so well becomes them, of guides and teachers to future Senators.”³² It was important to encourage women to be responsible and ambitious—but not too ambitious, lest they break from their rank below men—in order to preserve the patriarchy by giving women reasonable goals and jobs that would keep them in the “right” sphere. The backhanded nature of these compliments shows the bias that defined the newspapers' view of women in the antebellum South and the expectations laid upon them.

³² *Staunton Vindicator*, June 16, 1859.

In a more straightforward manner, antebellum newspapers in the South published many advice columns aimed at women in an attempt to control, prompt, or damn certain behaviors. This kind of newspaper coverage was more direct and was often addressed to “women” or “ladies” in general, attempting to lump all southern women into one singular identity. Regardless of class or social standing, newspapers felt women needed to know the latest rules or social practices. *The Knoxville Register* published an issue in February of 1857 that included a section of advice entitled, “To Unmarried Women.” Opening with the line, “The following items of advice to ladies remaining in a state of single blessedness, are extracted from the manuscript of an old dowager,” the article lists several practices or virtues that unmarried ladies should consider absolutely vital to their success in departing their singleness. The list includes, “When you have an opportunity to praise, do it with all your heart,” and ends by saying, “If you would live happy, endeavor to promote the happiness of others.”³³ This little entry is a perfect example of the kind of self-sacrificial attitude that southern society instilled in their women, both poor and great, in the antebellum years.

Another article appeared on the same page of that issue of “The Knoxville Register” and described two gentlemen discussing societal morality at the expense of women. The column, entitled simply “Women’s Rights,” described a conversation between two men when the issue of a bill in Kentucky that would institute a penalty for women caught wearing “low-necked dresses.” One man lamented that the bill should even be introduced and shouted about how women should be afforded rights; the other calmly rebuked this man and expressed his hopes that this bill, and many others like it, should be passed. According to this man, a women’s ability to seduce made her dangerous and evil and such women should be punished. He concluded his

³³ *Knoxville Register*, February 12, 1857.

argument by saying, “A low-necked dress is the devil in his most seductive guise,” and it is clear he was the level-headed hero of this particular story, leaving his opponent utterly speechless.³⁴ While this particular article was not directly addressed *to* women, it does give a very clear idea of what antebellum southern society thought of women and their need to be ruled over and governed by good Christian southern men and good biblically moral laws.

Another type of newspaper coverage that dealt with women were aphorisms meant to poke fun at femininity and the condition of southern women, usually in relation to their husbands. An example of this can be found in an edition of the *Staunton Spectator* published in September of 1860, which included a section with many little digs at women. One of the jokes read, “women are a great deal like French watches--very pretty to look at, but very difficult to regulate when they once take to going wrong,” and another joked, “Woman has many advantages over man; one of them is, that his will has no operation till he is dead, whereas hers generally takes effect in her lifetime.”³⁵ These jokes were poking fun at the fact that women were seen as too headstrong or hard to handle, but by doing so they insinuated that women were more like objects to be maintained or nuisances when they acted independently.

Another such article appears in an 1858 edition of *The Mobile Register* out of Mobile, Alabama that discussed in jest the reasons why young women were such enthusiastic churchgoers. It read, “Young women are the best feeders of a congregation, and their enthusiasm cools down like oatmeal porridge in a keen-cutting March northerly wind when the minister they run after gets a wife,” arguing that girls were so caught up in their desire for a husband that it became the only reason they attended church.³⁶ The derogatory nature of these little quips that

³⁴ *Knoxville Register*, February 12, 1857.

³⁵ *Staunton Spectator*, September 18, 1860.

³⁶ *The Mobile Register*, July 25, 1858.

can be found in just about any southern antebellum newspaper was meant to be comedic, but often comes off as a form of bullying women into accepting the belief that they are inferior and that men should regulate their behavior around them. Of course, these timeless quips that peppered newspapers were disguised as harmless jokes, but they pointed to a subversive kind of control exercised over women and the idea of what femininity meant.

In the antebellum South, poor women were the subjects of sensationalist articles wherein they played victims or receivers of charity from some benevolent citizenship and otherwise received no attention from the newspapers whatsoever. This kind of representation in antebellum newspapers exemplified the low, piteous, and infantilizing opinion that upper-class white southerners held of lower-class white women. These women occupied no independent space, but instead were used as props to boost the egos of and comfort planter-class elites. A September, 1859 issue of the *Republican Banner*, for example, addressed a story about a “poor woman” from San Francisco who found herself dangerously outside of her domestic sphere. The *Republican Banner’s* subsequent editorial note read as follows:

The young woman alluded to in the above report was poor Mary Holt, whose name has been so frequently mentioned in the Police Reports. Mary says that she is determined to reform, if God will give her strength to do; that the first kind words of Christian sympathy and encouragement which she has heard for years were spoken to her by the matron and managers of the Home for Inebriates. The poor creature seems really to understand the depth of degradation to which she has fallen and is resolved to amend her course of life.³⁷

It is important to note the sentimental language that this article utilized and how it framed Mary Holt not as someone who was struggling to overcome her addiction, but as a woman who spoiled her life with drunkenness and only had the faculty to redeem herself by the generosity of the “Dashaways,” a group of people who tried to battle alcoholism with religion in California.

³⁷ *Republican Banner*, September, 2 1859.

The editor of the *Republican Banner* was clearly trying to emphasize Mary's repentance and her turn from "degradation" but readers of the paper had no idea what drove this woman to such lows or whether or not she was married or had children; all the readers knew was that drunkenness destroyed her life and only temperance and Christian values could save her.³⁸ This extremely one-sided narrative, which was used to caution women more than anything else, was a popular way of depicting poor women in antebellum newspapers.

The rigid expectations and unwritten rules for women combined with strict laws and misogynistic legal policies ruled over women in the antebellum South, defining exactly how they were allowed to move about within society and how they could consider themselves in conjunction with the world around them. Their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers came before any chance that a woman could have to be an individual; duty stood above all else in a woman's life in the years preceding the Civil War. Why were these high ideals for women so important in antebellum southern culture? Understanding these expectations and what they meant to the survival of plantation society is vital to understanding what it meant to be a white woman in the pre-war South. In this time, womanhood was made up half by the reality of women's lives and half by the fantasy that the paternalist plantocracy created for women to dwell in and submit themselves to.

The reason that the virtues of purity, piety, and motherhood were so vital to this society was because they were all mechanisms by which white southern men could maintain control over an increasingly fragile and volatile system: the slave economy. These standards kept women in their place under the control of white men and society would continue to run in the South as it had since its inception. Locking women into marriages, restricting their power of choice and

³⁸ *Republican Banner*, September 2, 1859.

bodily autonomy, encouraging them to fit into clear-cut biblical molds, stripping away any semblance of rights before the law, and controlling them within the practice of coverture like children were the most effective ways to enforce paternalistic control over all of southern society and solidify the rule of the patriarchy. Expectations for women in this time period were weapons.

“An Unpleasant Subject”:

Non-Elite White Women’s Realities in the Antebellum South

While all women in the antebellum South were ruled over by the patriarchal society in one way or another, their experiences were extremely varied across lines of class, race, and place. Non-elite women especially found themselves breaking the mold of the traditional southern woman in a great multitude of ways which set them apart from their planter class counterparts. Poor, working, and single women often deviated greatly from their expectations just by existing, since a woman without the means to be a pure, pious, or obedient wife and mother could never fit within the parameters of the ‘Cult of True Womanhood,’ which defined southern ideals for women at the time. Those ideals and expectations of purity, piety, obedience, and motherhood did more than put pressure on women, they also had a great influence on law and policies in the antebellum South. Laws were more based on moral codes and biblical ideals than on reason or reality.¹ Because perception was an extremely powerful tool in the hands of the antebellum southern patriarchy and lower-class women had essentially no voice of their own, non-elite white women’s realities were wholly intertwined with the expectations and perceptions

¹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74, doi:10.2307/2711179, 152.

of the plantocracy. The importance of examining newspapers in order to understand what life was really like for non-elite southern white women is based on this close relationship between reality and perception. This chapter digs into and discusses what these realities looked like and how they were shaped by the ideals of southern society.

Non-elite southern white women in the antebellum South faced an unbelievably complex set of rules and expectations. They were white women who frankly did not have the resources to live like the treasured planter-class white women—these women had to try very hard in order to maintain the high standards of southern womanhood and still almost always failed. Non-elite white women needed to stay within a certain domestic circle and yet most of them were either forced by circumstance or simply chose to seek employment in the public sphere, where they really were not supposed to be. They also needed to maintain a certain level of purity but did not receive the same kind of protection or respect that elite women did, so they were infinitely more at risk to be attacked, raped, or taken advantage of. These women were judged by the ideals of a system—the Cult of True Womanhood—from which they were fundamentally excluded due to the disadvantages of their class. Women, even elite planter-class white women, were afforded very few rights, but non-elite white women suffered an even lower class of citizenship and were made to struggle to operate within a system that was essentially rigged against them.

The struggles of non-elite white women and the suffering of Black women in the antebellum South, whether free or enslaved, cannot be compared and the similarities of their plights do not go much further than their shared status of dependency at the mercy of white men.¹ Black women were victimized and brutalized in a way that non-elite white women were

¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 17.

not; they were arguably the most mistreated group of people in the antebellum South and suffered more intensely than anyone else. The importance of Black women in the narrative of the South cannot be understated. Their realities intertwined with those of non-elite white women, but their expectations were worlds apart. There were white field hands who worked alongside enslaved laborers, white yeoman households who had enough money to buy enslaved people for household or farm work, and white women who worked alongside free Black women in urban areas. Despite their sometimes close physical connections, Black women were utterly victimized by the southern patriarchy and were seen and used as property while non-elite white women were still allowed a certain—though undeniably low—level of freedom and autonomy. Non-elite white women were somehow expected to uphold the vital ideals of white womanhood as exemplified by planter-class women while Black women did not labor within these expectations. Non-elite southern white women, while they did not have the most difficult path to navigate, did have a very unique and complex one, specific not only to their gender and race, but to their class as well.

Antebellum southern white women labored within certain parameters laid by planter-class white men; white women's examples were set by the image of the elite white woman, who created an impossible standard for non-elite white women to live up to. Even the pastoral yeoman farmer's wife could find herself falling short of this feminine ideal by working in the fields and failing to be delicate or falling somewhat short in her motherly duties. Poor and single women often broke the rules of true womanhood by simply existing and the former could even be punished by law for their offense. Using the terms "vagrancy" or "disorderliness," police officers could arrest lower class women, who would wind up in jail or a workhouse for the crime of being poor, homeless, or destitute. Women who dared act out in illegal or just taboo behavior

found themselves crushed beneath the swift hand of the law. Laws were set by elite white men in positions of power, so fair treatment under the law simply was not in the question for non-elite women.² These women were followed ceaselessly by their expectations and the ideals that they were meant to live up to but were constantly breaking and falling short of. It is important to keep those expectations, which were discussed and analyzed in the previous chapter, in mind while observing how non-elite white women either fell short of or outright defied them in the antebellum South.

Poor women in the antebellum South found that they had very little hope of conforming to the rigid standards of womanhood set by the planter-class elites due to the necessity of work, much of which took place in the public sphere, that weighed on them. They therefore were not included in the planter-class narrative of “Southern Womanhood” in the antebellum years. These women, sometimes struggling to survive and support families, would often work as hired laborers in rural areas, moving around from season to season as work became available. Labor in itself could be categorized as completely un-feminine, especially in the antebellum South. Agricultural labor required women to do undignified or intensive outdoor work, which was traditionally seen as masculine and completely defeminized them. Yeomen women, who labored on *their own* property and even had slaves to assist in the labor, could also be viewed as completely unsexed by society due to the nature of their work or the “crudeness” of their living situations.³ In addition to the crude nature of agricultural labor, the element of inferiority that came with working alongside slaves was enough to make a poor white woman seem vastly less

² Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 188.

³ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 72-73.

dignified than her status already allowed.⁴ Of course self-awareness of a social hierarchy did not mean much to poor women, especially when compared to potential starvation. These poor white laborers did indeed work often alongside enslaved people but according to a former slave named Elias Thomas, “We all worked together. We had a good time. We worked and sang together and everybody seemed happy.”⁵

These women, who labored in fields doing back-breaking work for an absurdly small amount of money, had to juggle their responsibilities very carefully. When children were born into these very poor families, they had to undergo a few years of being an incredible burden, both financially and emotionally, before they could contribute to the survival of their household. A child as old as eight or nine would be expected to leave the house to perform paid jobs in order to help keep the family afloat.⁶ This reliance on child labor directly put women in violation of their sacred duty as good Christian mothers. The mother could only care for the child so long before both she and the child needed to go to work in order to stay alive. Some poor women were able to live off the wages of their working husbands and can afford to stay at home with their children, but as soon as a woman became widowed, she had to begin laboring to earn the only income her household would receive. In addition to agricultural labor, poor women could earn money by taking boarders in any extra room they had, working as domestic servants in the homes of elite or yeoman households, or as washerwoman, a very common job for women of this class.⁷ Even if poor women were able to labor solely as wives and mothers or secure appropriately domestic work that could be considered ‘noble,’ a very difficult task to accomplish

⁴ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 79.

⁵ Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 15.

⁶ Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 39.

⁷ Bolton, *Poor Whites*, 39, 100.

in the antebellum South, their status and often crude standard of living kept most of them from meeting the expectations of purity, piety, obedience, and motherhood that antebellum southern society held for white women.⁸

Women in higher classes had to try just a bit harder to break the molds set for them by the elites of the antebellum South. Despite the firm grasp that the patriarchal society of the antebellum south exerted on non-elite women in law and in practice, some women managed to achieve a certain level of autonomy within the system. In antebellum Natchez, Mississippi, there were a number of independently wealthy single women who sometimes ran successful businesses or simply lived alone and unmarried. These women, often closer to the planter class than the middle class in origin, presented a fundamental problem for a patriarchal society and found themselves plagued with lawsuits, some of them arbitrary or trumped up, for defying a system based on the dependence of women on husbands and fathers.⁹ These kinds of women were often punished to the furthest extent of which their society could achieve, whether it was imprisonment or public shaming. In the case of lower-class women, especially those who worked as prostitutes, punishment by law was applied most often and most vigorously. Natchez is an excellent subject for studying the lives of non-elite women in the antebellum period and the ways in which they either subtly or defiantly strayed from their expectations.

The law of coverture worked to confine women in obedience to the household of their husband by forcing them to surrender every asset in their possession upon marriage, including rights to children. This made it extremely difficult not only for a woman of any status to pursue and win a divorce, but for her to survive the divorce financially as well. Until 1850, extreme

⁸ Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 77-78.

⁹ Joyce Linda Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place: The Not-Married, Free Women of Civil-War-Era Natchez, Mississippi*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).

violence was not grounds for a real divorce in the state of Mississippi as physical domination could have been considered a lawful and reasonable way in which a husband exerted dominion over his wife.¹⁰ It was considered a man's right in the antebellum South to dominate his wife and set a path before her; it was her responsibility to be obedient to his will and execute the plans that he set for their children. He was the head and she was the heart. This very specific and unequal relationship dynamic made divorce in the South incredibly tricky, especially for non-elite women, whose word held little weight.

Divorces among non-elite couples were usually filed on the grounds of abandonment or adultery since no money or assets, which made divorces among wealthy couples so messy, were at stake. One such woman seeking a divorce from her husband was Lydia Flynn of Natchez, Mississippi, who filed for divorce in 1850 and claimed her husband Alexander had both cheated on and abandoned her. After having been married for about twenty years, Alexander Flynn disappeared, leaving Lydia alone to raise their six children with little to no resources. According to Mrs. Flynn, Alexander had engaged in extramarital affairs before running off to sell steamboats in Louisiana and she had been left to "pay her rent and to labor industriously" on her own. Although Lydia and both of her character witnesses were poor women and thus illiterate, the case progressed and Mr. Flynn admitted in a deposition in Louisiana that he had done everything his wife accused him of. It was only by his admission that Lydia was granted her permanent divorce, since her status allotted her very little standing before the law.¹¹

Mary Wattles, a woman who married into property then inherited those assets when her first husband died, made quite a name for herself in antebellum Natchez. She managed to use the

¹⁰ "An Act Amendatory of the Laws Relative to Divorce," *Laws of the State of Mississippi*, 1850, 118-119.

¹¹ Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place*, 69

dowry she received from her deceased husband to sustain herself, her children, and several free Black individuals in a time where women were not meant to be independent and white people were not meant to cohabit with non-white people. Wattle was by no means an abolitionist or a women's rights activist; in fact, it seemed as though the institutions of slavery and the patriarchy were utterly immaterial to her. She did not come from a massively wealthy elite family and in fact did not marry into riches entirely impressive among Natchez residents, but her craftiness and perhaps sheer luck of circumstance cannot be overstated. The status of *femme sole*, or single woman, was not necessarily a coveted one at the time since women found it nearly impossible to amass any independent wealth. Mary made money by leasing and renting the properties she inherited from her first husband but found herself in immense debt at the death of her second; however, by maintaining her hold on the most lucrative of her dower assets, Mary managed to pay debts, legal fees, and rent for a house in which she lived with free Black woman Eliza Smith, her children, and her children's families. While Mary could be classified as perhaps a nuisance or obnoxious presence in the community of Natchez, her ability to maintain a relatively low profile in society worked in her favor and she experienced little to no resistance from antebellum society during her later years in the 1850s.¹²

Due to the close relationship and perhaps direct influence between law and morality in the antebellum South, crimes that women could be punished for were greatly varied and often extremely subtle. Stepping beyond the boundaries of traditional femininity or gender roles could land a white woman of a lower class in prison or a workhouse; being a "public woman" or being seen enjoying oneself outside of any domestic capacity could be a serious offense in some cases. Drinking in taverns, being loud, having sexual relationships outside of wedlock, having children

¹² Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place*, 99-103.

outside of wedlock, and being disrespectful to a man or someone of a higher status were all charges that could be brought against and eventually condemn a non-elite woman. Despite the dangers of breaching the carefully laid fences that imprisoned antebellum women in the South, many of these women did just that. And because so many things constituted an act of criminality in women, there was such a wide variety of ways in which women were able to defy their roles and perhaps even receive jail time for it.

As far as criminality goes, non-elite white women had their fair share of offenses against the laws of the day, some of them violent and even shocking. For example, one “Rose Ranney” was noted to have participated in the abuse and murder of a man in New Orleans. In an edition of *The Daily Picayune* published in February of 1851, Rose is listed alongside four other men who beat and killed a man on Christmas Day, 1850. Witnesses testified that they had seen Miss Ranney beat the deceased with two bottles before he was stabbed to death with a knife and sword. The sabre used to finish the deceased man off was broken and it, “looked as if it had performed a great service.”¹³ Later, the witness statement was cleared up and the final official account of the events that occurred on Christmas Day, 1850 showed Mrs. Ranney in an entirely different light. It is clarified that the chaos was caused by the deceased Thomas Ryan’s attempt to murder Mr. O’Neill, a man he had accused of being from Connaught, Ireland. According to the description given by *The Daily Picayune* in February of the following year, Ryan had aroused the spirits of the tavern and led a mob out to the O’Neill residence on Girod Street. After being rejected from the house by Mrs. O’Neill, they ventured down to the Ranney residence and began to harass Rose about the whereabouts of a “Connaught son of a bitch.”¹⁴ When she

¹³ *Daily Picayune*, February, 1851.

¹⁴ *Daily Picayune*, February, 1851.

returned their abuse in her own spirited fashion, the rabble surrounding her house became increasingly irritated. She retaliated by launching a bottle into the crowd. After this display of Rose's indignation, Ryan stoked the crowd and they all began assaulting her house, breaking the windowpanes and pushing past her into the home. Here, the scuffle reached such volume that O'Neil was persuaded to reveal himself and thus the fight ensued that would kill Mr. Ryan.

The excessively violent nature of this particular murder, the fact that most of the witnesses produced were women, and Rose Ranney's involvement can help us understand what crime meant to antebellum southern women. Clearly, non-elite southern white women, especially immigrant women, were leading much more public lives than they were expected to at this time. Though Ranney and her "accomplices" received a verdict of "not guilty," the fact that this woman—who was defending her home and had no part in the murder whatsoever—was tried as an accessory alongside the men who quite literally stabbed and beat the deceased is intriguing. Despite Mrs. Ranney's status as a seemingly dutiful mother and wife, she was still arrested based off of little more than her proximity to the uproar. In another report from *The Times Picayune* just days after the murder occurred, it is noted that, "Mrs. Ranney, one of the accused in the above case, having a husband lying on the point of death, was allowed by the recorder to visit her husband, in company with an officer."¹⁵ Rose Ranney also appears in an article published in *The Times Picayune* in 1853 wherein it is reported that she had survived an assault. The man, listed as Thomas Johnson, attacked her in a home on Broome Street, but Mrs. Ranney successfully fought the man off and escaped with only a gash on her hand.¹⁶ Evidently, Rose moved past the

¹⁵ *Daily Picayune*, December 28, 1850.

¹⁶ *Daily Picayune*, May 12, 1853.

media circus surrounding the murder she had been tried for and lived freely, most likely as a widow, by the time of her attack in 1853.

She is also listed in the 1870 census under the name “Rose Rinney,” but there is enough evidence that we can safely assume she is one and the same with Mrs. Ranney. In the census, she is reported to have worked as a washerwoman and had an adult son who was born about one year before her husband most likely died; she lived with a family named the Flinns in Ward 1 of New Orleans.¹⁷ This information adds a layer to Rose’s story: on Christmas day, 1850, when Thomas Ryan led his rowdy party to the Ranneys’ home on Girod Street, Rose found herself not only protecting her own person, but protecting a dying husband and an infant son. We can assume she took all that she was defending into consideration as she volleyed harsh words and hurled a bottle at the crowd that night, and again when she fought tooth and nail against her male attacker in 1853. A strong fighter and dedicated wife and mother who also lived without the protection of a man, Rose Ranney is a perfect example of the duality that non-elite women often exhibited in the antebellum South.

Another New Orleans woman who took a less subtle approach to violence in the 1850s was Delia Swift, who went by the alias Bridget Fury. A prostitute, violent criminal, and well-known “public woman,” Delia, aka “Bridget,” was infamous for her proclivity for stabbing men as well as the mysterious disappearance of nearly every man to ever bring a charge against her. After being jailed for prostitution and pickpocketing in Cincinnati, Ohio—where she had been reportedly working as a prostitute since age 12—Delia escaped to New Orleans in 1856 where her career as a criminal flourished. She met and fell in with a group of famously violent prostitutes

¹⁷ U.S. Federal Census Bureau, *1870 United States Federal Census, New Orleans Ward 1, Orleans, Louisiana*, 1870.

headed by Mary “Bricktop” Jackson, nicknamed so for her bright red hair. Alongside her troublesome new friends and aided by her new moniker, Delia committed a slew of stabbing-based offenses but managed to avoid any jail time since her accusers, by some happenstance or perhaps sinister coercion, never seemed to show up to court. She and her compatriots moved about from one house to another, hounded by police and having to pay fines for running “bawdy houses,” or brothels until she was accused of murder in 1858.¹⁸ Due to the number of witnesses to the crime and the exasperation which the New Orleans legal system had suffered at her hands, this offense and the trial that followed could have been the nail in Miss Fury’s coffin.

The murdered man, a Mr. Croan of Ireland, was said to have insulted and harassed Miss Fury and her friends in Poydras market before he was stabbed to death. John Burns, who claimed to know everyone involved, gave his account in court and his story was corroborated by his companion on that day, Emma, in a statement which was recorded in an October, 1858 edition of *The Daily Picayune*. As the four of them—Burns, Emma, Delia, and her friend “Boston Kate”—were drinking coffee, Croan approached and, “slapped accused [Delia] on the shoulder and said ‘You are my prisoner—I want you.’” Apparently assuming she was a prostitute, Croan thought he could strong-arm his way into Swift’s bedchambers and force himself on her, or perhaps even kidnap her. This was the wrong move. Fury drew her dagger and warned the man, “that he had better go away, as she wanted no difficulty with him.”¹⁹ According to Burns, the women went to leave walked towards home but Croan pursued them, “calling them d— b— [damned bitches] and rats and saying he would burst the d— [damned] head of the accused, at the same time holding a loaded cane...” and calling Delia in particular a “slut” and a “whore.” A ‘loaded cane’

¹⁸ Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ *Daily Picayune*, October 1, 1858.

was a weapon that rose to popularity in the Victorian era as carrying a sword casually fell out of fashion and was essentially a sword blade disguised as a walking stick.²⁰ It was clear this man intended on attacking Swift and perhaps assaulting or even killing her, so it was not entirely surprising to witnesses when Delia turned on him and lunged, stabbing him in the abdomen with her concealed dagger, which she then deposited down a gutter.²¹

There was no doubt among witnesses that Fury was the murderer, but those who witnessed the whole ordeal most likely did not blame her; a witness on the street where the murder occurred admitted to tearing at Croan's outer garments as retaliation for his insults against the women.²² In 1859, Delia was sentenced to life in prison for this crime, but was released in 1862 for reasons which are commonly disputed. Despite her attorney's arguments that she had acted in self-defense against what could be defined as an actionable threat, the Louisiana Supreme Court did not consider Croan's aggressive behavior and insults to be tangible threats to Delia Swift's safety.²³ It was clear that Delia's status as both a violent criminal and a 'public' woman had an impact on her trial, as she had been brought before the court countless times on the word of men who had no evidence or witnesses to corroborate their statements and would have been put in prison long before the murder trial, had any of these previous accusers actually shown up to testify against her. Her reputation for "sexual immorality" also worked against her, as it would seem she was a deviant who could not be a victim of sexual violence since she previously 'sought' sexual encounters out. Delia was by no means an innocent,

²⁰ Phil Youngberg, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Weapon Canes," *M.S. Rau Antiques*, January 21, 2020.

²¹ Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*.

²² "Police Matters," *Daily Picayune*, October 1, 1858.

²³ Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*.

sexually pure, pious, maternal, or subservient southern woman; therefore, the law felt no need to protect or believe her.

Non-elite women made up a surprisingly sizable portion of criminals in the antebellum South, despite their expectation to be domestic and stay out of the public sphere, and they broke the law in diverse ways. In 1858, *The Staunton Spectator*, a newspaper printed in Virginia, told the story of two women who were arrested after falling into a brawl in an area of the town of Staunton called “Buzzard Roost.” Both of the women were heavily intoxicated and the article is entitled, “A Disgraceful Row.”²⁴ A story submitted to *The Vicksburg Daily Whig* from Fulton, Mississippi regretted to inform readers that “another woman is in our jail for killing a man with a spade,” and then joked that theirs might be the only jail in the country who could boast that they had *two* women who have killed men with spades.²⁵ In an 1856 edition of *The Daily Picayune*, a woman by the name of “Madam Ladoux” appeared before a judge on the charges of, “having on various occasions grossly and wantonly disturbed the peace and deranged the prospects of a butcher in Poydras Market.”²⁶ These charges of “disturbing the peace” often accompanied any offense through which a woman left her own domestic sphere, which could range from fighting, prostitution, residing with a man to whom she was not married, public drunkenness, swearing, or simply being too loud. All of these ‘crimes’ publicly violated the norms of proper womanly behavior.

Some poorer women in the antebellum South were simply low-stakes thieves, most likely stealing items and money to pay rent or buy food. Many of these women stole things like cash or jewelry from houses while others worked as pickpockets. Like other criminal activity, the

²⁴ *Staunton Spectator*, April 21, 1858.

²⁵ *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, May 2, 1860.

²⁶ *Daily Picayune*, December 27, 1856.

reporting of theft among women was concentrated in urban areas. One such thief was Mary Ann Kearns of New Orleans, who was accused of and tried for stealing \$17.50 from a Mr. John Toole. Neither her motives nor her connection with Toole are elaborated on, but *The Daily Picayune* let its readers know that Mary was released since Toole never showed up for the prosecution.²⁷ We could assume that perhaps this was a random crime and Mr. Toole might have felt too embarrassed at the idea of being hoodwinked out of nearly \$20.00 by a woman.

Other women stole significant amounts of money or expensive objects, often from their employers. Mary Mack was one of these women; she worked for and committed theft against her employers, a family in Louisville, Kentucky. Mary had been hired as a house servant in the home of the Dietz' and had cleaned the family out of around \$80.00 after being sent upstairs to clean the bedrooms alone. When the theft was discovered, Mary was nowhere to be found until a watchman caught her with all of the freshly stolen money on her person. When she was apprehended, it was discovered that she had in her possession countless other trinkets, all presumed to have been stolen.²⁸ Since Mary seemed to have reasonably good employment, desperation can be ruled out as the reason for her crimes. At the time, it was assumed that desperation was the cause of any white woman's crimes; newspapers always described prostitutes, thieves, drunkards, or vagrants as "poor women" who had "fallen" or were "abandoned" to become victims of sin and vice, which was true some of the time, but not always. This assumption was most likely made in an attempt to preserve the ideal of southern womanhood, not to excuse the criminals themselves. It is also true, however, that some of these

²⁷ *Daily Picayune*, December 2, 1857.

²⁸ *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 11, 1856.

women simply wanted to commit their special crimes, make a bit of extra money, or perhaps feel some satisfaction in defying their rigid standards and expectations.

One form of crime that was dominated by non-elite white women was infanticide. The disposing or killing of babies by mothers was a practice most commonly observed in urban environments. In cities, single women worked and lived in extremely close proximity with others and consequently found themselves in kinds of trouble less prominent in more rural settings. In New Orleans, for instance, there might be a reported case of infanticide in the papers on any given day. Many reports simply described the bodies of infants found in streets or gutters with no known culprit and lamented about the unfortunate circumstances that must have led to such an offense. A small segment in a January, 1857 issue of “The Times Picayune” was entitled “Infanticide” and stated, “Of late infanticide cases have become unusually frequent, as one turns up about every two to three days,” and then described the body of a baby boy found on a busy street. It was proved that the child had been alive at the time of birth; therefore, a charge of infanticide was being brought upon “persons unknown.”²⁹

In some cases, a woman was brought before a court for the crime of infanticide. Many of these cases present evidence of the assumed culprit becoming ‘ill’ or acting ‘suspicious.’ “The Times Picayune” details the case of a woman suspected of infanticide on March 29, 1856. The article reported that a woman named Mina Ailers was arrested for the crime of infanticide after an infant presumed to be hers was found in a “privy” next to the house in which she resided. Describing the circumstances of the case, the article said, “Mina Ailers, who had been employed as a servant in the house of Mrs. Kolb, a milliner, was observed to be in the advanced state of pregnancy...about three weeks ago she became so unwell as to be confined to her bed for three

²⁹ *Daily Picayune*, January 28, 1857.

days, after which she arose and went about her work as usual. All symptoms of pregnancy had however disappeared...” It later noted that five other women who lived in the same neighborhood were arrested as accessories after the child was found and determined to be Ailers’.³⁰ Infanticide was considered an especially heinous crime since it represented the most extreme way a woman could deny her sacred duty of motherhood, but some young mothers felt they had no choice but to give up a child who either did not have a father or was parented by an interracial relationship between a white woman and a Black man. Infanticide was another situation in which non-elite southern white women were trapped between punishment for one kind of defiance and ridicule for another, trying to live up to impossible antebellum standards.

The crime of infanticide was not limited to urban environments; in fact, it might have occurred at an even higher frequency in rural areas but was just less of a public affair and harder to detect. Infanticide that occurred in agricultural areas was most often perpetrated by white women who had been impregnated by a Black man. Mixed-race children born to white women were extremely dangerous since the rule of *partus sequitur ventrem* gave babies born from interracial sex the status of their mothers, no matter who their father was. This policy protected slave-owning white men who then could rape the enslaved women on their estates with virtually no consequences, but it endangered white women who had sexual relationships with enslaved men, a fairly common occurrence in the rural South, who would have to take on the ‘burden’ of having Black children, a crime that would leave them utterly ostracized or worse.³¹

Since an obviously mixed-race child could ruin the life of a white woman in southern society, the most convenient solution to the problem was usually to get rid of the child altogether

³⁰ *Daily Picayune*, March 29, 1856.

³¹ Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 131.

and at the earliest possible moment. Infant mortality rates in the antebellum South were extremely high and the chances of babies surviving infancy or birth itself were already quite low, so the death of an infant would not raise too many eyebrows by itself.³² If the child had been seen and determined by witness to be “darker” or “of mixed blood” before its death, however, suspicions of infanticide were almost always expressed and the mother would be investigated. In a few cases in antebellum South Carolina discussed by Keri-Leigh Merritt in *Masterless Men*, young women were either tried or accused of infanticide after their very clearly ‘mixed’ infants had been born healthy and subsequently killed. Merritt expresses that, while legal action was not always brought against these women who committed infanticide in rural communities, their lives were no doubt completely ruined once those in their circles understood what they had done. Although she also argues that perhaps the lack of legal consequences in these situations denotes that the community was somewhat thankful these mothers rid their society of the burden of free Black children.³³

Another form of vice in which women ruled as the main malefactors in the antebellum South was prostitution. Keeping a brothel, otherwise known as a “bawdy house,” a “house of ill-repute,” “ill-standing,” or “ill fame,” would not often land a proprietress in prison, but did demand a hefty fine. In the years leading up to the Civil War, sex work seemed to be booming across southern urban areas. Delia Swift, who was discussed just a few pages earlier, was only fined once for keeping a house of ill fame in New Orleans despite the fact that she worked as a prostitute for her entire stay in the city.³⁴ The subject of prostitution in discussion was taboo and

³² Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1974), 497.

³³ Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 128-130.

³⁴ Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*.

therefore little discussed, but the practice was impossible to ignore. In an 1858 article published in the *Memphis Daily Appeal* out of Memphis, Tennessee, the topic of prostitution is addressed and yet the word itself is completely avoided. Entitled “An Unpleasant Subject,” the article lamented the fact that decent women in Memphis could not go outside at night to enjoy the cool temperatures due to the effect that prostitutes had on men. It says, “...the unhappy class of females who, having lost virtue themselves, subsist by winning others to vice. The behavior connected with this class of persons make it almost impossible for ladies to pass through our streets at night,” and goes on to argue that there should be stricter laws and practices against this “evil” phenomenon.³⁵ The writer of this article was very clearly articulating that the issue, which was that the men of Memphis were apparently going about at night assuming every woman on the streets is a prostitute and therefore either propositioning or just plain forcing themselves upon them and therefore endangering the women of the city, was being blamed on the very existence of prostitutes. This is a very clear example of the demonization of these “public women” that was used to justify the bad behavior of southern white men.

In Mobile, Alabama, the 1850s were a decade of incredible population growth and the explosion of the brothel district. According to census records, the mistresses of many of these houses were women who had a fair amount of wealth at their disposal, but their boarders were less than lucky financially. Records also show that most of the sex workers in antebellum Mobile were women from out of state, probably coming in through the bustling port in the city. While many women working in antebellum brothels were women of color, all the women living in the bawdy houses that would eventually make up the “restricted district” of Mobile, Alabama were non-elite white women. Despite the fact that these houses were officially “boarding houses”

³⁵ *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 1, 1858.

where single women could stay, it was understood that prostitution was being practiced in the houses. Of the issue of vagueness, Christopher Raven says in his 2017 dissertation, “The two most common charges against women during the antebellum period were ‘keeping a disorderly house,’ and ‘riotous and disorderly conduct.’ These charges are ambiguous and it is impossible to determine if they are related to prostitution.”³⁶ The fact of the matter is that it did not truly matter whether or not these ‘disorderly’ women were engaging in prostitution since the fact that they were living their lives publicly and acting outside of their own domestic circles was enough to draw the negative attention of the press and the law.

Apart from prostitution, violent crime, and larceny, non-elite white women in the antebellum South could break the laws of the time in a myriad of little ways; they could be arrested for anything from public drunkenness to speaking with “an unruly tongue.” Two women who committed the latter offense were described in an article from a January, 1857 edition of New Orleans newspaper *The Sunday Delta*. The fourth paragraph under the “The Recorder’s Courts” section of the paper stated, “Kate Winters, who has the most unruly tongue and vagabond reputation of any female in the city, was sentenced to six months of hard labor in the workhouse,” and continued, adding that, “Caroline Clinton, who is about half as bad as Kate, was sent to the same institution for sixty days.”³⁷ Due to the fact that the women were described as having a “vagabond reputation,” we can assume that both of them were either homeless or near homeless; certainly both women somehow made a living in the public sphere and offended the good decent people of New Orleans with their rowdy presence. It seems these women

³⁶ Raven Christopher, “Negotiated Affections: Prostitution in Mobile from 1702-1920,” University of South Alabama, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017. 10267027.

³⁷ *Sunday Delta*, January 11, 1857.

committed the crime of simply being single women who were loud or operated outside of their designated spheres, which warranted hefty workhouse sentences.

Workhouse and prison sentences as well as fines could be given to women for improper language as well as general unruliness. The “Police Matters” section of *The Times Picayune* described the crimes of two women who had been arrested the week of December 2, 1857. Mary Spencer was accused of calling another woman “the worst names in the vocabulary of Billingsgate” and was told to either pay a fine of \$15 or go to jail for twenty days, which was quite a punishment for simply speaking out of turn in public. Another woman named Sarah Cooke was caught “uttering words unfit for ears polite” and was “politely requested to pay a fine of \$20.” Cooke paid this fine as quickly as she could, probably to avoid the threat of jail time. One more woman in this report is said to have been charged with the crime of “vagrancy” and required to pay a fine or risk being thrown in a workhouse for a month.³⁸ A woman in Nashville named “Mrs. Thom” was arrested in 1857 for “going outside of her domestic circle and correcting other people’s children.” The woman, who was a German immigrant and often spoke German in court, was only released by the judge after materializing a witness who defended her, saying the young boy she had scolded was being belligerent and unruly.³⁹ These women committed the offenses of speaking rudely, speaking wrongly, and wandering about, proving that doing little more than existing could land a non-elite or poor white woman in front of a judge in the antebellum South.

Public drunkenness was an offense that was common among both men and women in the antebellum South, but it was considered especially shameful for a woman, who really should not

³⁸ *Daily Picayune*, December 2, 1857.

³⁹ *Republican Banner*, April 30, 1857.

have been visiting public houses at all. This was one area of crime where, despite the fact that both men and women tended to commit the offense fairly often, there was a disparity between how the two sexes were punished. In Richmond, Virginia for example, two cases of public drunkenness are described one after the other in *The Richmond Dispatch*. The woman who had been arrested for being drunk in public was “sent to prison by order of the Mayor, in default of bail for her good behavior,” while the man “caged up” for the same offense was “reprimanded by the Mayor, and discharged.”⁴⁰ The crime that the two committed was described in identical terms, except that the man was said to have been drunk “in the streets” specifically, yet the woman was shipped off to a prison while the man received a slap on the wrist before going free.

Three women appeared in the *Louisville Daily Courier* in 1859 for being both illegally drunk and wicked with their words. The first section said that the two women were “quarrelling and used the vilest language imaginable. They shock even the modesty of the most hardened sinners.” These two received six months in a workhouse for their shameful offenses. The next reads, “Ann Donnelly was found on the street last Saturday night so drunk that she had to be carried to jail. She used vulgar words also, neither of which are excusable. Workhouse two months.”⁴¹ The impassioned and frankly disgusted way in which women’s public drunkenness was described in antebellum newspapers is almost comedic when compared to the very straightforward matter-of-fact way in which the same crime was reported when committed by a man. This is most likely because a woman in the antebellum South held a moral responsibility to herself and her family and drinking alcohol simply did not have a place in a woman’s role as a spiritual guide for her husband and children.

⁴⁰ *Daily Dispatch*, June 16, 1858.

⁴¹ *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 19, 1859.

This moral responsibility explains why it was so obscene and so upsetting to white southern men when women committed crimes in the antebellum South, especially when these crimes had a direct effect on the woman's sexual purity or motherhood. Even when her offenses did not have to do with these two most important of feminine pillars, a woman committing a crime was a woman openly defying a patriarchal society in which women were expected and sometimes forced to be obedient. Even when non-elite southern women were not committing crimes or acting out directly, they were still finding ways to break the mold set for them by planter-class elites. Regardless of laws, rules, social mores, or even newspapers' intervention that were designed and executed to keep women in designated places or "spheres," many non-elite women in the antebellum South were going to do what they wanted and what they needed to do to survive. For the most part, they did not pose any huge threat to the establishments that ruled the South in the years preceding the Civil War, but they were certainly not silent or invisible.

“Pray, How Do You Treat a Common Woman?”:

Non-Elite Southern White Women in the Civil War

During the Civil War, the delicate state of southern society was violently disrupted and began to crumble, toppling the pillars of southern womanhood that had stood for so long. With tens of thousands of men leaving homes and plantations to fight, white women found themselves in entirely new positions of responsibility, power, and independence. Non-elite white women felt this power shift in a hard way, since their husbands were the ones who were drafted while wealthy planters could use their money to avoid military service. Poor white women saw a different atmosphere in urban areas, as more and more southern cities came under Union occupation. Women on the border were extremely close to the combat and became the most important supporters and suppliers of Confederate guerilla groups. While the reality was changing for these women, so were their expectations. The standards were usually set by elite white men and exemplified by elite white women, but in the absence of a fair number of leading members of the patriarchy, the women who stood beside them took up their roles. In the antebellum South, the role of a woman was mainly that of mother, wife, and dependent but now many women were heading households singularly, regardless of class boundaries. Many non-elite and poor women had long been making their own living as single women and mothers and did not feel the absence of men quite as heavily as yeoman farmers' wives with children or

workers' wives living in single-income households. Unlike elite women, many of whom could rely on family money, these particular non-elite southern white women were left without a steady income.

Since their sphere was meant to be heavily domestic and within their own households, a strong community or infrastructure for non-elite women was rare in the antebellum South. The war and the new necessities it brought with it changed this. In some ways, a woman's role as a mother was further emphasized and intensified by this shift. Suddenly she was both caretaker and breadwinner, who entered the public sphere along with hundreds of other women trying to make ends meet. As the political and socioeconomic status of the Confederacy changed, so did the responsibilities and attitudes of the non-elite white women in these states. Many lower-class women had to leave their homes to find jobs or try to make money from domestic labor. At the same time the mishandling of the Confederate government, the escape and migration of a great deal of enslaved laborers, and worse-than-usual weather patterns caused massive food shortages across the South that directly impacted non-elite women and their families.¹ Widespread discontent among this demographic turned into public agitation and even insurrection. Changes in social structures due to the general atmosphere of war and the absence of men caused a reorganization of expectations, specifically the ideals of southern womanhood. The shift in importance of the ideals of subservience and patriotism marked a significant change in the standard for southern womanhood; however, this change would not be observed or lauded had it been non-elite women becoming famous for this kind of political public disobedience.

¹ Mary Elizabeth Massey, "The Food and Drink Shortage on the Confederate Homefront," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 26, no. 3 (1949): 306-34.

To understand how the Civil War affected the roles and expectations of non-elite white women in the South, it is important to know a very basic timeline of the Civil War itself. On Christmas Eve, 1860 the state of South Carolina adopted the “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” which officially severed the state’s ties with the United States of America and set off a chain reaction of secessions that would eventually start the Civil War. By the summer of 1861, the states of Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas had all seceded and come together under a unified government as the Confederate States of America and, with the attack on Fort Sumter in April of that same year, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee joined the Confederacy as well. Missouri and Kentucky left the Union by November, 1861 and brought the Confederate states’ total number of members to thirteen. These thirteen states, united under the Confederacy, engaged in a war against the remaining United States of America and their territories in what would be known as the Civil War, which lasted from the skirmish at Fort Sumter in April of 1861 to General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in April of 1865.²

As the conflict between the Confederacy and the United States intensified into an all-out war, a new set of war-time rules and practices were being instituted. Lieber’s Code, which was written in 1863 by Francis Lieber for the Lincoln administration, was the updated code of conduct for the United States military and set forth a new precedent of soldier-to-civilian interactions. The code made sure to differentiate between combatant and non-combatant in a way that did not exclude women. Section 155 of the Lieber Code reads, “All enemies in regular war are divided into two general classes - that is to say, into combatants and noncombatants, or

² Timeline, “The Civil War in America” Exhibition, *The Library of Congress*.

unarmed citizens of the hostile government,” which very clearly classified all *armed* citizens of the hostile government as combatants, which included armed women. This section and section 156 were both added to the code at the request of general-in-chief Henry Halleck, who had recently instituted harsh punishments for violent female combatants in Tennessee.³ The Union army was having a surprising amount of difficulty with Confederate citizens, especially the women, as they moved deeper into southern territory. Women were starting insurrections and causing problems throughout the Confederacy, in rebellion against both the Union soldiers and the Confederate government. Lieber’s Code was instituted to answer this unruly behavior on behalf of southern women.

Prior to this code, women were considered exclusively as non-combatants during military conflicts in accordance with the Antigone ideal, but now they were being seen as active antagonists. Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles' play by the same name, represented how a woman has not only a duty but a natural predisposition to stay within her domestic sphere and completely outside of war or politics. This expectation, which stemmed all the way back to ancient Greece and lasted essentially until the nineteenth century, counted women as enemies but not as threats, leaving plenty room for them to subvert these expectations in a myriad of ways during the Civil War, which they did.⁴ Lieber’s Code was both a response to the behavior of non-elite southern white women and a wakeup call for modern western society. The rules of engagement had fundamentally changed and the perceptions of those previously believed to be “innocents” were shifting quickly. Especially as the conflict changed to a war of attrition and leaders like General William T. Sherman resorted to causing absolute destruction of cities

³ Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 18.

⁴ McCurry, *Women's War*, 19-21.

throughout the South, white women presented a very agitated obstacle and sometimes fought back in very violent ways. In New Orleans, for example, the occupying Union forces had to institute Order 28, known as the “Woman Order,” in direct retaliation to the inhospitable behavior exhibited by the women of the crescent city.

When Union forces captured New Orleans in late April, 1862, General Benjamin Butler became military governor of the occupied city. A few weeks into the occupation, however, Butler realized that the city was going to be extremely hard to govern. The women, though they did not cause the only problems, posed a very unique challenge for Butler and his soldiers. It was overwhelmingly the elite ladies of the city that publicly and overtly mistreated and disrespected the troops, committing offenses as harmless as dramatically exiting streetcars when federal soldiers entered and as egregious as emptying chamber pots upon the heads of passing Union men.⁵ These women recognized that their status saved them from jailing, violence, or any other kind of public punishment and they utilized this sort of immunity to the fullest of their advantage to make absolutely sure the occupying Union army never got too comfortable in New Orleans. The extreme secessionist political identity held by these upper-class women caused them to act outside of their expectations in ways that made them seem brutish to Union forces but honorable and patriotic to Confederates. Further emboldened by the support of secessionist newspapers, who portrayed their misbehavior as acts of patriotism and proof that Confederate women were strong and loyal, elite white women in New Orleans took to the habit of spitting in the faces of passing officers, an offense that proved too much for General Butler to excuse.⁶

⁵ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 107.

⁶ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 108.

After less than a month of occupation, the women of New Orleans had pushed Butler past his breaking point; in a letter to a friend about the offenses he had suffered, he wrote, “How long do you suppose our flesh and blood could have stood this?”⁷ The military governor passed General Order 28, or as it is more infamously known, the “Woman Order.” This act was in direct retaliation to the wild and outrageous behavior of the well-to-do ladies of the crescent city and it used language that was meant to embarrass them:

As officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insults from women, calling themselves ladies, of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous non-interference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered hereafter, when any female shall by mere gesture or movement insult, or show contempt for any officers or soldiers of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman about town plying her avocation.⁸

This of course caused outrage among New Orleanians, but it also spread across the nation and overseas to strike up a heated debate about the woman’s place in politics. Confederate men used the “Woman Order” like some kind of banner under which to advocate for the protection of southern women’s honor while the Prime Minister of England noted that the order was the first of its kind to be so blatantly disrespectful to upper class women.⁹ The fallout from General Order 28 was swift and aggressive, but to Butler it was the only way to avoid mob violence and bloodshed. General Butler believed that these gestures of hatred exhibited by the ladies of New Orleans were not *only* gestures; beneath the spitting and the name-calling was a desire to aggravate and inflame the Union soldiers, to push them over the edge. If he had not passed such an order or taken such action, Butler was sure there would no doubt have been incidents in the

⁷ Jacqueline G. Campbell, “The Unmeaning Twaddle about Order 28”: Benjamin F. Butler and Confederate Women in Occupied New Orleans, 1862,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 1 (2012): 11-30, 11.

⁸ General Benjamin F. Butler, “General Order No. 28,” 1862.

⁹ Campbell, “The Unmeaning Twaddle about Order 28,” 11.

streets perhaps labeled ‘slaughters’ or ‘massacres’ on the fine and innocent women of New Orleans, which was the last thing the occupying Union forces needed.¹⁰

By comparing elite white southern women to “women about town,” or prostitutes, Butler took the least volatile path through embarrassment to soften the ladies without having to go through all the trouble of jailing and transporting them en masse. This comparison, however, sparked conflict from those who believed that he was insinuating that these disobedient women should be raped by Union soldiers. When asked if he was trying to imply that these women should be approached or assaulted like prostitutes, he asked them, “Pray, how do you treat a common woman? You pass her by unheeded. She cannot insult you. As a gentleman you can, and will, take no notice of her.”¹¹ Regardless of what Butler’s true intentions were, the mortification that resulted from General Order 28 seemed to work and the disrespectful acts somewhat lessened in frequency.¹²

When the women this order addressed spoke about it, they did not bring up the issue of sexual blackmail or fear, but instead criticized the order for arguing that they be treated like “harlots.”¹³ The mere suggestion that an elite woman should be subject to the same attitudes or opinions that accompanied the treatment of a lower-class woman was the greatest insult Butler could have employed against them. Most of the criticism came not from New Orleanians, but from strong secessionist publications trying to vilify “Brute Butler” and his “infamous order.”¹⁴ Even women who had not supported the mistreatment of the Union soldiers abhorred Butler’s choice of words. Some elite white women in New Orleans actually condemned the impolite

¹⁰ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 109.

¹¹ Campbell, “The Unmeaning Twaddle about Order 28,” 15.

¹² McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 110-111.

¹³ Campbell, “The Unmeaning Twaddle about Order 28,” 12.

¹⁴ *Daily Rebel Banner*, November 11, 1862.

behavior of their more shameless sisters, calling them, “long-tongued slandering women,” who embarrassed their entire class with their actions.¹⁵ The order and its scandalous implications was, however, weaponized by the Confederate government and remained a part of southern rhetoric regarding the honor of upper-class white women for the next century.

While the elite white women of New Orleans occupied themselves by spitting upon and humiliating Union soldiers, the non-elite white women of the city were busy going about their usual lives trying to make livings or support their families, only now with the ever-watchful eyes of an occupying military upon them. These women, for the most part, were not known to have participated in any great way in the disrespectful displays against the occupying forces. Some of them were, however, continuing to commit crimes and create general disruption as they always had. For example, on June 3, 1862 an issue of *The Daily Delta* announced that two women, Mary Hughes and Christina Hout, had been charged and brought before a judge for keeping respective “disorderly houses,” and serving liquor without a license.¹⁶ In a subsequent issue of *The Daily Delta* from August 22, 1862, many different women seem to be acting out against their fellow New Orleanians. A Mrs. Gleason, for example, was arrested for spitting on and yelling insults at another woman by the name of Kate Emerson, who brought the charges against her.¹⁷ In similar fashion, Ellen Mahoney was sent to a workhouse for a month after beating another woman in the streets. Ann Carroll was also sent to the workhouse for a month after being so drunk and causing such a commotion that it took four police officers to carry her to lock-up.¹⁸ An issue of that same paper the following week reported three female criminals in succession. One, a Mrs. Garrety,

¹⁵ Campbell, “The Unmeaning Twaddle about Order 28,” 20.

¹⁶ “Disorderly Houses,” *Daily Delta*, June 3, 1862.

¹⁷ “A Nasty Trick,” *Daily Delta*, August 22, 1862.

¹⁸ “Provost Court,” *Daily Delta*, August 22, 1862.

was charged with “retaining the trunks of a lady, contrary to all known laws or statutes.”¹⁹ The next, a Madame Celeste, was taken into custody on the charge of concealing arms in her home.²⁰ Finally, a woman named Emma Rodgers was arrested after a man brought charges of larceny against her.²¹ As can be observed from taking a look at the criminal sections of local newspapers in 1862, non-elite white women were being just as disruptive and divergent as they had been before the war.

The occupation of the city did have an impact on non-elite white women, but in a very different way than it affected elite white women. Women who already spent most of their time outside of their domestic sphere either being disorderly or industrious found themselves easy targets for the unwanted attention of Union soldiers. One such woman was Susan Parker, who was described in an issue of the *Daily Picayune* as being “a young yet well known woman of the town.” Parker had been shot twice by a Union officer after he claimed she “was making use of seditious language,” but at the hospital, the young woman alleged that she did not know the man and was shot instead because “she refused to speak to him.” There were other witnesses who supported her claim that the same man who had shot her had also shot a “negro man” on Canal street but the paper notes that Susan’s story was a bit foggy on account of her alleged inebriation.²²

While it seems as though Parker recovered from her injuries, she could easily have died. To make matters worse, she was shot on faulty grounds with absolutely no evidence against her aside from the word of the soldier who shot her. The *Daily Picayune* did not long lament poor

¹⁹ “Retaining Trunks,” *Daily Delta*, August 30, 1862.

²⁰ “Concealed Arms,” *Daily Delta*, August 30, 1862.

²¹ “Larceny,” *Daily Delta*, August 30, 1862.

²² “A Woman Shot By A Zouave,” *Daily Picayune*, December 12, 1862.

Susan Parker's injury or the injustice done against her, but instead noted that she had a terrible reputation and had been arrested several times before for public drunkenness.²³ It is likely that the officer saw Susan and, noting her dress or her drunken behavior, assumed she was a prostitute and attempted to force himself on her either physically or with verbal advances. This kind of rhetoric would be known today as "victim-blaming," but in the nineteenth century South, it counted as justification for violence against lower-class women.

Regardless what her reasons were, Susan rejected this soldier in one way or another and he proceeded to shoot her in a rage. Despite the fact that this poor woman was quite literally gunned down in the street for an offense that could have been barely considered crime, the same indignation that was shown at the insult of elite white women was not shown for her, an actual victim of a Union soldier's violence. One soldier's response when asked why he did not retaliate against two upper-class women who had spit on him was, "What could I do, to two ladies?"²⁴ These "ladies," were not being shot or attacked in the streets by these soldiers for their provocations, but non-elite women were, proving that it was not their sex or behavior that protected elite white women from the violence of the occupying Union soldiers, but their class status.

Susan Parker was not the only non-elite white woman to have an unlucky brush with the occupying army in New Orleans. A woman named Maria Summers stole \$30.00 in cash from a Union soldier, according to a November issue of the *Daily Picayune*. Summers had taken the money from the soldier but was apprehended and the bills were found rolled up and concealed in her hair. Maria Summers was sent to prison for six months for her offense.²⁵ Similarly, a woman

²³ "A Woman Shot By A Zouave," *Daily Picayune*, December 12, 1862.

²⁴ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 108, "Letters of General Thomas Williams," 320-322.

²⁵ *Daily Picayune*, November 8, 1862.

by the name of Bridget Whitehead was sent to the workhouse with her three young children for “stealing from a soldier.” Whitehead claimed that her daughter found the money on the ground and turned it into her mother who then refused to return the bills. When she was found out, she and her children were swiftly and mercilessly sentenced to four months at the workhouse.²⁶

According to an edition of the *Daily Picayune* published on August 31, 1862 a woman, who was left unnamed in the paper, was wounded by a knife thrown by a Union soldier “in a mad fit.”²⁷

Non-elite women seemed to be having the majority of unpleasant reactions with the occupying army; they were certainly the ones receiving any and all abuse at the hands of these soldiers. This can probably be chalked up to the fact that non-elite white women were vulnerable and present in the public sphere, especially if they were single or worked in a risky profession, such as prostitution. While these women were the ones being mistreated, they were not the ones the public cared to defend. None of the articles that detailed attacks of soldiers on women described the victims with any special sympathy and in the reports of women stealing from or tricking soldiers, the women again were given harsh sentences and publicly denounced, not lauded for their patriotism in the way in which elite women were when they assaulted soldiers.

Non-elite white women in the South were not only occupying themselves with crime like in urban areas such as New Orleans, but they were trying desperately to survive in a crumbling economy. Some of these women found themselves pushed too far and turned to public demonstration and disorderly conduct to get the attention of the Confederate government. In Richmond, Virginia, one such conflict was stirring among non-elite white women. Frustrated by the loss of their husbands, sons, and fathers, the disorganization of the Confederacy, and the

²⁶ *Daily Picayune*, October 25, 1862.

²⁷ *Daily Picayune*, August 31, 1862.

refusal of the government to respond to their pleas, the poor and working-class white women of Virginia had begun to raise small insurrections that culminated in the infamous Richmond “Bread Riot” of 1863. This riot was in response to more than just government shortcomings, though; many events, attitudes, and even astonishing weather conditions came together to brew this perfect storm.

When Richmond women, and some men, stormed Capitol Square on the morning of April 2, 1863, the Confederate government could no longer ignore “the breakdown of social stability, restraints, and law enforcement,” as Michael Chesson put it, that was occurring within their states.²⁸ These women were feeling the brunt of the failures of the Confederacy and yet little to no attention was being paid to them. Families, now without the aid of their primary source of income, found themselves on the brink of starvation. This widespread suffering was being felt by non-elite women throughout the Confederate states, but in Richmond the tragedies seemed to align just perfectly to cause this kind of public and political turmoil to be expressed through demonstration and violence. One such tragedy was the explosion of the Confederate ordnance laboratory on Brown’s Island, Virginia in March of 1863. The lab, which employed a large number of lower-class women and children, was one of the only places where poor women could earn wages to support their families. The wages for industrial workers in the Confederate States were criminally low and would not grow with the rate of inflation, so the more members of a household who held a paying job, the better. When the laboratory exploded, it killed nearly sixty women by some counts and injured around thirty others, including children and a small number of men.²⁹ An issue of the *Richmond Enquirer* published after the explosion reported that

²⁸ Michael B. Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines? A New Look at the Richmond Bread Riot," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 92, no. 2 (1984): 135.

²⁹ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?" 134.

the factory was run mainly by “females of different ages, from twelve to sixty years.”³⁰ The wages paid at this factory were also barely enough for one individual to feed themselves, let alone for a mother to feed her family, and the inflation of Confederate currency was only making matters worse.³¹ The fallout from this tragedy, which affected exclusively working class women and their families, put even more pressure on the already faltering state of morale in the Confederacy and inflamed the discontent felt by non-elite white women. The women and children who died in the explosion were buried in unmarked graves, a somewhat fitting parting gift from the Confederacy to the lower-class women they had disregarded time and time again.³²

In the early months of 1863, Virginia would face a myriad of unavoidable problems on top of the Confederate government’s seeming inability to provide any sort of infrastructure for its citizens. In March of 1863, Richmond would receive roughly a foot of snow, out of the ordinary for that time of year, which would almost immediately melt into a thick sludge that utterly destroyed already damaged roads. From there on, it was nearly impossible for farmers to transport their harvests to any markets and a shortage of food that was already weakening the population of Richmond became even worse.³³ Because of these colder-than-average temperatures and the shortage of food rations throughout the area, diseases such as scurvy, scarlet fever, and smallpox were running rampant through the lower-class population at unusually high rates.³⁴ Disease, starvation, harsh weather patterns, inflation, competition with soldiers for resources, military conflict, tragedy, and poverty all combined together and settled

³⁰ *Richmond Enquirer*, March 17, 1863.

³¹ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?” 134.

³² James P. Whittenburg, “Teaching Civil War Mobilization with Historic Sites,” *OAH Magazine of History* 26, no. 2 (2012): 43-47.

³³ Chesson, “Harlots or Heroines?” 134.

³⁴ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), 222.

on the shoulders of non-elite white women to create the incredible desperation required for the large-scale insurrection seen at the Richmond bread riot.

The riot technically began on the evening of April 1, 1863 at a protest meeting that was held at a church on Oregon Hill, but the actual rioting did not occur until the next day when a massive crowd of women, followed by men, made their way through the city streets of the capital. Mary Jackson and Martha Fergusson, two middle-aged working-class white women, were considered the ring leaders because they had been the two most notable speakers urging the crowd to act at the secret meeting on the night of April 1. The crowd descended upon Richmond armed with clubs, sticks, and even guns by some accounts.³⁵ The initial intention of the riot was not just to make a ruckus or loot shops, but to find the food they believed was being hoarded in stores for those who could afford it. These women were also hoping to terrorize President Jefferson Davis into making reforms to aid in the economic devastation being suffered by these women, but the situation quickly got out of hand. At some point the male hangers on, who were described by some as “spectators,” took advantage of the situation and destroyed storefronts left and right with little to no regard to their owners.³⁶

While they besieged the city armed with clubs, rocks, sticks, knives, and even guns, the mob plundered and pilfered foodstuffs and clothing wherever they could. At some point, the accompanying men broke off from the main group and caused pointless damage to the stores in downtown Richmond. A great deal of commercial goods was taken by the members of this assembly, adding up to thousands of dollars in damages.³⁷ As they moved determined through

³⁵ Andrew F. Smith, *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War*, (United States: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2011), 49.

³⁶ Chesson, *Harlots or Heroines?* 138-139.

³⁷ Chesson, *Harlots or Heroines?* 145.

the streets of Richmond, the crowd could be heard screaming the rallying cry, “Bread or blood!” These words did not just make a demand, they made a vow. The rioting and looting lasted for about two hours and ended when Jefferson Davis exited the capitol building and urged everyone to go home, pacifying them with empty promises.³⁸ In other accounts, Jefferson told the crowd that, if they did not vacate the premises, they would be fired upon by the accompanying Confederate forces that flanked him.³⁹ The actions taken during Richmond Bread Riot and the attitudes of the women who led the crowd were extremely serious and should never have been underestimated by the government these women were protesting.⁴⁰ Though the momentum of the mob was great and their conviction was strong, a canon placed strategically on the streets of downtown Richmond the next day was enough to send the mob back to their starving and impoverished households.⁴¹

The riot itself was not entirely unique in nature; several other food riots had occurred throughout the Confederate States of America, so what happened in Richmond was nothing inherently special. The discontent among non-elite white women was widespread in the South and before the Richmond riot came a food riot in Atlanta, Georgia, then Salisbury, North Carolina followed by Mobile, Alabama and Petersburg, Virginia. The Richmond bread riot was, however, the only food riot of its scale to occur in the South during the Civil War.⁴² The reports of just how many people participated in the bread riot are skewed. In some accounts, it was thousands and thousands of women that descended upon the capitol and wreaked utter havoc on

³⁸ Peter Bridges and John M. Daniel, *Pen of Fire: John Moncure Daniel*, (Kent State University Press, 2002), 201.

³⁹ Varon, *Armies of Deliverance*, 223.

⁴⁰ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 180.

⁴¹ Bridges and Daniel, *Pen of Fire*, 201.

⁴² McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 180.

good honest businesspeople. In others, it was probably a few hundred who wanted to voice their grievances and, upon being refused, did what they had to in order to survive. The riot did not exactly fit either of the aforementioned descriptions, though public opinion of these women was just as extreme and polarized as these depictions. Most publications took a very negative view of the rioters, calling them every wicked name or slur a newspaper would be allowed to print.⁴³

These women were not defying the rule of some occupying army, they were disobeying the order of the Confederacy itself. They could have been viewed as traitors and many of them were arrested and imprisoned for their crimes. In bread riots, non-elite white women became political players and engaged with the public in a way they were unable to in the antebellum years. They had been grossly mistreated by their government and finally took matters into their own hands.

After the spring of 1863, food riots did not reappear in the same intense and large-scale manner in which they had manifested among the non-elite white women of the South in that season. That does not mean the dissatisfaction that spurred such events dissipated; in fact, the discontent lingered like a thick fog among the lower-class southern women who were left with the short end of the stick in almost every regard during the Civil War. The newspaper reactions to the riots painted the perpetrators in an extremely negative light, which was highly strategic on Jefferson Davis' part. President Davis had instructed publications not to address the Richmond riot directly or indirectly, but that did not stop John Moncure Daniel's *Richmond Examiner* from speaking on the subject.⁴⁴ The *Examiner* published Daniel's opinion that the whole ordeal had been a scheme planned and executed by Union agitators and that these women were Yankee

⁴³ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?" 137-138.

⁴⁴ "Richmond Bread Riot," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, Accessed March 20, 2021.

criminals and harlots from anywhere but the South.⁴⁵ Daniel's outrageous account caused historians a great deal of grief and confusion when trying to understand the reality of the Richmond Bread Riot. It does, however, give us a fairly good picture of how the public viewed these disobedient insurrectionist women; they were nothing but the lowest of the low and after falling into poverty, turned against the South itself.

A group of non-elite southern white women who received a very different reaction from the public were those who aided Confederate guerrillas in Missouri. Since it was a border state, Confederate fighters and sympathizers in Missouri came up against a unique set of obstacles and dangers. The interactions between unionists and secessionists here were so incredibly close and so very violent that bloodshed and guerilla warfare ruled the state during the Civil War. Civilians, including women, were militarized on a large scale as guerilla tactics became more prevalent in the conflict with Union soldiers. Non-elite white women became a very important force aiding the border states' guerillas. "Bushwackers" from Missouri made a hefty amount of trouble for Union forces and, as they moved throughout the border states, the carnage left behind from their skirmishes increased exponentially. By the end of 1863, the entire borderland was inflamed with guerrilla warfare and its damages.⁴⁶ Non-elite white women, since they were included in the fighting and the conflict, were also included in the bloodshed. These women, in contrast to the rioters in Richmond or victims in New Orleans, became martyrs for the Confederate cause.

In July of 1863, a large group of women who had been charged with aiding and abetting guerilla forces in Missouri were arrested by Union soldiers and transported to a hotel in Kansas

⁴⁵ Bridges and Daniel, *Pen of Fire*, 202.

⁴⁶ Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 116-117.

City due to a lack of any women's prison in the area. After a prison facility had been put together in an old building just outside the city, the captive women were moved there to spend their sentences. Soon after the women were transported to this haphazardly constructed facility, the building collapsed and was destroyed entirely. Four women died in the collapse and many others were seriously or permanently wounded.⁴⁷ The women killed in this collapse became symbols of the victimized southern woman, senselessly killed by the mistreatment of Union soldiers. Their tragedy became the perfect banner under which to inflame southern hatred toward Union forces. This devastating loss did more than just strengthen the rhetoric of the secessionists; it caused one of the bloodiest attacks conducted by guerilla forces in the course of the Civil War. In direct retaliation for the mistreatment of their female relatives and compatriots, a force of guerillas rode into Lawrence, Kansas and essentially burned the city to the ground and murdered nearly 180 civilians. The sack of Lawrence was directly influenced by the injuries to these daughters, wives, and sisters and the loss of four of them at the hands of Union soldiers in that Kansas City prison and if it had not occurred, the infamous "Bloody Bill" Anderson would have remained plain old Bill.⁴⁸

Throughout the South, non-elite white women were breaking their gender norms and expectations even as the Civil War raged on around them, leaving many of them as single mothers trying to fend for themselves in a crumbling economy and broken social structure. These women were forced to break into new roles and find their own places in a sphere that had been previously policed by men. In New Orleans, non-elite white women ran up against Union troops

⁴⁷ Leeann Whites, "Forty Shirts and a Wagonload of Wheat: Women, the Domestic Supply Line, and the Civil War on the Western Border," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 1 (2011): 56-78, 56.

⁴⁸ Whites, "Forty Shirts and a Wagonload of Wheat," 59.

in the streets and often gave them a run for their money, literally. Despite the newspapers' fascination with the rude behavior of elite white ladies toward the occupying army, the historical actors who were causing actual trouble for and having a tangible impact on the Union forces were the feisty lower-class women who lived and worked among them. While upper class white women were outraged at the mere thought of being compared to "women of the town," real New Orleans prostitutes were pleased to have increased business. The disparity between the concerns of elite white women, which was most often embarrassment, and non-elite white women, which was usually death, violence, or imprisonment, is very telling of the kind of social structure that prevailed even as the Confederate States were falling apart from the inside out. The care with which the newspapers regarded the higher-class women and the disdain which they expressed for lower class women is also quite indicative of the environment in which these women lived and the double standards within which they operated.

The non-elite white women of Richmond, Virginia had a separate struggle, but one which nonetheless was exacerbated by the newspaper coverage they received. Despite the fact that these women and their families had lost husbands and fathers to a war that many of them did not believe in, were on the brink of starvation, could not find ways to make enough money to catch up to the rapid inflation, and were constantly passed over by a government that many of them did not support, they became the ones who were vilified for being "harlots." The women who rioted in Richmond for bread were some of the most desperate figures in the South during the Civil War. They were at the end of their rope and found that political action in the public sphere was the only way they could catch the attention of the powers that ruled over them. These women could not vote and most of them could not read or write, so this was a group of people who had almost no voice at all until they were quite literally screaming. This cause was of course not

singular to the non-elite white women of Richmond, Virginia, but was shared by low- and working-class women across the Confederate States who could not show fervent support for the Confederacy while they watched their children die of malnutrition.

Non-elite white women of the border states were extremely close to the conflict and made it their business to aid their husbands, fathers, brothers, and friends in combat. Through smuggling and subversion, these women hid arms, supplies, and even guerillas themselves from Union forces set out to take their rebellion down. Even after the tragedy that occurred with the collapse of that makeshift women's prison in Kansas City, the guerillas' resolve only became stronger and women still acted as a crucial part of the resistance until the close of the Civil War. What was meant to be a deterrent for militant women became a rallying cry for combatants and gave secessionists a group of martyrs to stand behind and brandish like badges of honor. While women were indeed being utilized as symbols or weapons and still found themselves dependent on their male protectors, they were also carving out a place for themselves in the conflict and acted in an extremely defiant way. Especially when considering gender norms at the time, non-elite white women on the border were defying expectations left and right while still maintaining a laudable loyalty to the South and the Confederacy.

The difference between these three groups of non-elite white women lies in both their levels of fervor for and loyalty to the Confederacy as well as the Confederacy's opinions and perceptions of the women themselves. As war ravaged the South and the mettle of southerners was tested, women's expectations shifted. A strong sense of loyalty to the Confederacy replaced a certain meekness that would have been valued above many other virtues in the antebellum years. This was a necessity, for when a large number of the men that made up the southern population went off to fight the 'Yankees,' the majority of the free people left in the South were

white women. In order for the Confederacy to stay afloat, it had to rely on the loyalty, allegiance, and resilience of its women. As we can observe, this was not always an easy thing to accomplish, as the majority of the women in the South were not elite planter class ladies, but working, middle-, and lower-class women. These women were extremely mistreated by the Confederate government, a very large misstep on their account, and could hardly be expected to be full of patriotic fervor under such regrettable conditions. Due to this complicated relationship between expectation and reality, the non-elite white women of the Confederacy found themselves in a precarious position between who they were and who the southern elites needed them to be.

“White Women and Children Must and Shall Be Protected”:

Non-Elite Southern White Women During Reconstruction

Non-elite white women gained a new kind of moral value in the eyes of white men in the postbellum South, but only insofar as they could be used to vilify Black men and uphold white supremacy. Their morality and assumed sexual purity were supposed to be protected by southern white men and they were suddenly included in the narrative of southern white womanhood, but only in theory. In reality, poor white women were regularly targeted by white male brutality and “women of low character” experienced violence and social exclusion at much higher rates than before the war.¹ This rhetorical, theoretical value was not very useful to non-elite white women, who continued to be punished harshly when they stepped out of societal lines, especially if they were committing any kind of “sexual deviancy” by engaging in relationships with Black men. This change did not have a positive impact on their lives, but it did include them in a broader historical narrative that they had formerly been excluded from. Suddenly the idea of “southern ladies” included nearly all white women, regardless of class stratifications; however, this inclusion would in turn subject non-elite white women to closer scrutiny and more restrictive control at the hands of the southern patriarchy.

Non-elite southern white women were also given a new identity in southern newspapers in the years following the Civil War, since they were part of the white patriarchy’s attempt to maintain control over free Black men without the institution of slavery. There was more forgiving rhetoric surrounding poor women, including prostitutes, in newspapers. This language,

¹ Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993): 402-17, 410.

which will be discussed more specifically later in this chapter, relied heavily on the assumption that white women had a certain inherent innocence that could be corrupted by Black men, suffragist ideas, or the ills of society. Due to this new role, all a woman had to do in order to incriminate a Black man was simply say he did something and she would be believed. In the antebellum South, a poor woman's testimony against an enslaved man would probably have been believed, but it would not have warranted any righteous retribution in the form of murder and lynching. Elite whites were not actually worried about the safety or sexual purity of non-elite white women; they were worried about how these white women's behavior blurred the "rigid color line" that was needed to uphold white supremacy.² This was just another way in which southern society put white women, even non-elite white women, on a pedestal so they could be used like martyrs for the cause of white supremacy in the Reconstruction-era South.

The lives and general goings-on of non-elite southern white women during Reconstruction was not entirely changed by these new expectations and perceptions; although, it could be argued that their lives became harder as their morality was more closely policed. Suddenly, the stakes for elite white men were higher than ever when it came to the behavior and reputation of white women. Prostitution in urban areas like Mobile and St. Louis was being regulated in new and experimental ways in order to "mitigate the evils of prostitution, to prevent the increase of disease, and to provide proper medical attendance for such women," but these attempts did not actually improve the lives, safety, or incomes of southern prostitutes.³ Non-elite white women who had long been involved in sexual and even romantic relationships with Black men while slavery still ran the South were suddenly victimized by groups such as the Ku Klux

² Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics," 415.

³ "Special Orders No. 19," *Advertiser and Register*, September 19, 1865.

Klan for choosing Black men as partners. After emancipation, it was less scandalous for a non-elite white woman to be raped by a Black man than it was for her to be in a consensual relationship with one.⁴ The Ku Klux Klan's targeting of white women who were living with and engaging in relationships with Black men further proves that white men in the postbellum South did not care about non-elite white women, they only cared about using them as weapons against Black men.

After General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House officially ended the Civil War, southern society was in the process of recovering from an era defining shift, in the form of nation-wide emancipation of the enslaved population. The loss of the institution of slavery did more than just disrupt the economy of the South, it uprooted an entire societal order. There was no longer a system recognized by the government that put the lives and rights of all white Americans, regardless of class or social standing, above those of Black Americans. This change affected the lives and expectations of non-elite white women in a few very large ways. Suddenly non-elite white women found themselves associated with a new ideal of southern womanhood, which was created by white men who had lost their "master" status after emancipation and were trying to rebuild the social structure of the "Old South," and were desperate to maintain their own masculinity through their "exclusive control over white women."⁵ This new ideal was founded on the notion that the virtue *all* white women needed to be protected. This, again, was only true in theory and rhetoric, not in practice. The perceived "threats" to white women were not necessarily threats to women themselves, but instead threats

⁴ Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics," 410.

⁵ Karin L. Zipf, "'The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die': Gender, Race, and Class in North Carolina Reconstruction Politics," *The Journal of Southern History* 65, no. 3 (1999): 499-534. doi:10.2307/2588132, 515.

to the social and racial superiority of white men as seen through their dominion over white women.

The first and most important threat that southern white men saw was Black men and their “sexual transgressions,” which they argued put the purity and safety of all white women at risk.⁶ Since being free no longer differentiated poor white women from Black people, their relationships and interactions could not, in the eyes of the southern patriarchy, continue to be as lax as they had been before the Civil War. During Reconstruction, all southern white women also needed to be protected from the slander of northerners. The rude behavior that elite white women showed toward Union soldiers during the Civil War gained national attention and some northern journalists wrote pieces criticizing the virtue of these women. The attitude towards non-elite women in southern newspapers softened somewhat after the war ended, since they were now members of a new white womanhood that was to represent the very best and most virtuous aspects of southern society. Southern women, including non-elite women, needed to be protected from Suffragist ideas and liberation as well. Paternalism was supposedly the only thing keeping the South as virtuous and pure as it was said to be, so for a woman to be “liberated” under Suffragist ideals was to sentence southern society to damnation.

Poor white women were enjoying a slightly higher status in the class system after the Civil War, but only in regard to free Black people; otherwise, these women were still considered “the lowest of the low.”⁷ In order to keep Black citizens in a position similar to slavery without slavery, southern elites raised non-elite white women to a slightly higher place in public opinion. Suddenly, people cared about whether or not working women were getting paid enough and

⁶ Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics," 404.

⁷ Jamie Winders, “White in All the Wrong Places: White Rural Poverty in the Postbellum US South,” *Cultural Geographies*, 2003, 10: 45–63, 56.

newspapers encouraged women not to look down on one another in the way that had become popular. One newspaper out of Kansas City, Missouri tells women, “do not scorn the unfortunate of your sex,” since circumstance often dooms women to “tarnish” the “crowns of womanhood” bestowed upon them by god.⁸ Where a disdain for women who were single, poor, or working once stood in between elite and non-elite women, a sort of common sisterhood of southern womanhood was being imagined by southern publications. This perceived connection did not actually allow non-elite women many real-life advantages and certainly did not rid poor women of their accursed poverty or degraded position in society, but it did allow them more forgiveness in public opinion. Women still could not vote and the laws in the South were still rigged against them, but they did have a more public voice, accompanied of course by a stricter set of rules and expectations.

This ‘new’ place in society was not given to non-elite white women en masse, since women who did not conform to white men’s expectations or standards were still excluded. The class shift was merely a way to weaponize the lives, sexualities, and choices of non-elite white women in order for white southern men to enforce a slavery-like power over Black men. Before the Civil War, if a white woman who was non-elite was to assert that an enslaved man had raped her, there might be a bit of a conflict and a punishment might be dealt to the accused, but lynching and murder were two very uncommon outcomes to this crime.⁹ One reason lynching was not as common before the war as it was after was that enslaved people were property, and very expensive property at that, so to kill a slave over the virtue of some poor white woman would be like throwing out an extremely expensive piece of machinery simply because it cut the

⁸ *Kansas City Times*, October 3, 1872.

⁹ Martha Elizabeth Hodes, *White Women Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

hand of some random factory worker in the eyes of the Plantation owner.¹⁰ In addition to the high monetary value of slaves, a non-elite white woman was worth little to absolutely nothing to the planter class elite of the antebellum South. Even after the war ended, “sexually deviant” poor white women, prostitutes, or “fallen” women were hated by white men and elite white women alike.

Once slavery was abolished and the Civil War was over, a new battle was being waged in the eyes of southern white men. The “war” on traditional southern values, which entailed a white-supremacy-fueled race separation, was a great concern for white southerners during Reconstruction. In no more obvious or dangerous way did this “war” appear than in its attacks on white women. An article from *The Metropolitan Record* was published in a September, 1868 issue of *The Moulton Advertiser*, a paper printed in Moulton, Alabama, is an incredible example of how the South viewed Reconstruction’s effects on white women. Entitled “A War Upon White Women and Children -- Democrats to the Rescue,” the article described the risks of allowing Union-centric ideals to permeate the thick fortress of tradition that was the Old South. In an extremely dramatic fashion, the article began:

We defy any Radical to prove that the war now waged against the South by his party is not *a war on white women and children*. They cannot shirk the issue. Every enactment for the punishment of so-called rebels, every step in the hellish programme of reconstruction, every scheme for the Africanization of the South includes within the scope of its punishments, pains and penalties, the young & helpless-aye women as well as men. We repeat that it is against women—all white women of the South—that the Radicals are now waging relentless, inhuman, brutal war.

The author described the Union’s people being focused too hard on vengeance and therefore mistreating those who could be classified as innocents in the conflict. Women and

¹⁰ Michael J. Pfeifer, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching: Collective Violence in Reconstruction Louisiana," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 50, no. 2 (2009): 189-201, 195.

children, therefore, were being punished for crimes they did not commit and by punishing a husband or father, one was also damning the man's wife and children. Destroying family units like this, the writer argued, threatened the destruction of the South itself. He also lamented over the fact that Black children in Louisiana *must* be admitted into public schools and he argued that it was positively deplorable that white citizens had to pay taxes to support an education system that "forced" their white children to be schooled alongside Black children. In closing, the author reminded "fellow-democrats" that the battle they fought was not a selfish one, but one to protect the "helpless and the weak" from "beastly mongrelism." The last lines read, in all caps, "WHITE WOMEN AND CHILDREN MUST AND SHALL BE PROTECTED, and let your battle cry be: 'THE CONSTITUTION AND SUPREMACY OF THE WHITE RACE.'"¹¹

This article is a very strong example of the kind of rhetoric being used in the years after the war to "warn" other southerners of the dangers of Reconstruction. The language used was extremely passionate and emotional, very similar to the rhetoric used in Charles Sumner's "The Crime Against Kansas Speech," discussed in the first chapter, and used subjects such as white women and children to arouse sympathy as well as outrage. This kind of language also politicized imagery of sexual violence and violation to place democrats on a moral high ground while demonizing republicans. While some of it might be thinly veiled, these sentiments were fairly clear in their white supremacist roots and used new tactics to demonize Black people. Most important of these new tools, though, were white women and their purity. As Reconstruction proceeded to shift the very soil on which southern society stood, white southerners became more and more dissatisfied with the U.S. government and the hoops through which they were being

¹¹ "A War Upon White Women and Children -- Democrats to the Rescue." *Moulton Advertiser*, September 11, 1868.

made to jump in order to rejoin the Union. This frustration on top of an already deeply rooted hatred for free Black people made the postbellum South an extremely dangerous place for African Americans. Black people were often targeted by extreme violence at this time, but “radical” republicans or Unionists in the South, whether white or black, also received punishments from white southerners who lashed out. According to historian Gilles Vandal, one hundred and twenty-four Black people and forty-six white people were murdered by lynch mobs between 1866 and 1876 in Louisiana alone.¹²

The Reconstruction years saw the outbreak of a pandemic of mob violence in the South which spurred the creation of groups like the Ku Klux Klan, who attempted to use terrorism and violence to maintain control over Black people. The Ku Klux Klan was an extremist group by definition and did not intend to protect “all white women” like the article from *The Moulton Advertiser* ordered. The Klan was known to have used violence against poor white women, prostitutes, or any white woman found to have been cohabitating or engaging in consensual sexual relations with a Black man. In some of the worst incidents, the Klan would mutilate the genitals of, rape, hang, and even burn alive women found to either have “bad reputations” or known to have cohabitated with Black men.¹³ In these incidences, white women were seen as merely an obstacle between the South and the rule of white supremacy instead of the weapon that they were supposed to be. If a woman of low status were to accuse a Black man of rape, however, she would not receive the punishment that she would have if she admitted to engaging in consensual sexual acts with the same man. It was when these women were not useful or did

¹² Pfeifer, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching," 191.

¹³ Hodes, *White Women Black Men*, 410.

not fit into the very specific role that they had been given by the southern patriarchy that they found themselves victimized by the same men who had vowed to protect “all white women.”

While a woman’s role as a tool for white men to wield against Black men was extremely important in the postbellum South, the overall discussion of white womanhood in this time was a bit complicated. Newspapers in urban centers of the South engaged in the discussion of subjects like sexual politics, women’s spheres, equal pay for working women, and sex work during Reconstruction in a way they had not before the Civil War. These papers addressed things and used language that would have been embarrassing if not scandalous before the Civil War. For instance, the word “prostitute” used as a noun could scarcely be found in an antebellum southern newspaper, since the editor would rather use roundabout language and euphemisms like “debased” or “fallen” women or “women of low reputation” to cater to the sensibilities of the antebellum reader. By the 1870s, however, the word “prostitute” was published in southern newspapers much more frequently and the general language used by editors was more liberal. Especially when it came to addressing women, opinions voiced in newspapers were more direct in the years following the Civil War. Most of this change can probably be attributed to the common shifts that take place from one generation to the next, but the growing rate of women in journalism in the late nineteenth century may have had some influence on this change in language, though women in this field were still relatively rare.¹⁴

The “woman question” caused a bit of controversy in the postbellum south and opinions were both wildly contrasting and closely related. An 1872 edition of the *The Clarion Ledger* from Jackson, Mississippi, for example, includes both an article entitled “Hymen and Hygiene,”

¹⁴ Lamar W. Bridges, "Eliza Jane Nicholson and the Daily Picayune, 1876-1896," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 30, no. 3 (1989): 263-78, 263.

which argued that men and women who enjoyed marital sex lived longer and healthier lives than their celibate counterparts, as well as an article called “Ownership in Women” that argued that women were partly owned by the men they had sexual relations with. While the opinions expressed in these two editorials weren’t necessarily opposing, the general spirit of them was. “Hymen and Hygiene” addressed both sexes as beneficiaries of marital sex and encourages, in very lighthearted terms, that couples should take advantage of that and find joy in it. “Ownership in Women,” however, was very critical of women who had sex out of wedlock, accusing one woman of being at fault for a murder in which one of her ex-lovers sought revenge on another of her carnal acquaintances. The piece argues that once a woman had sex with a man, “she is his, in a sense his, in a sense in which she cannot be another man’s without dishonor on him and damnation for herself.” This article also asserted that the ownership man was allowed to hold over women, especially in the way of sexual relationships, was the only thing standing between virtuous society and the “free-lovers.”¹⁵ According to this writer, a woman could only express her own sexuality while she was locked into marriage with the one man who “owned” her, but men had no such responsibilities, since they retained ownership of both themselves and every woman they engaged in sexual activity with. This further emphasized the idea that white women had none of the sexual independence enjoyed by white men.

In newspapers, prostitutes were seen as the ultimate moral stumbling blocks for men, who could also be criticized or even arrested for consorting with these women. In an edition of the *Nashville Union and American* published August 28, 1866, a man named Samuel Norman was fined for “walking the streets with a prostitute,” and James Norman was arrested for “talking

¹⁵ *Clarion-Ledger*, October 9, 1873.

to two prostitutes.”¹⁶ In an 1872 issue of the *Daily Picayune* from New Orleans, Louisiana, eight “prostitutes” were arrested for being “disorderly” and using “profane language.” The report ended by lamenting that, “Occurrences of this nature are frequent these days.”¹⁷ An 1875 issue of *The Charlotte Democrat* relayed the news of General Sheridan’s wedding with an addendum that tells the story of how he and a woman, to which they refer as “his prostitute” three times, traveled the South during the Civil War, following Sherman’s forces.¹⁸ Later in the same issue of that paper, an article read, “The day is not far distant that the Democratic party will control the National Government, and the people expect that the Washington city [Washington D.C.] Sodom will be *wiped out* and the whore-mongers and prostitutes will be driven from the government departments and official stations.”¹⁹ Clearly the language of southern newspapers became more explicit during Reconstruction, though not in a way that benefitted the women in question.

Prostitutes, though, did see some new developments in policy in the postbellum South. Mobile, Alabama had a long-established community of prostitutes who saw brisk business, since Mobile was a bustling port in the nineteenth century. The Civil War brought even more business to prostitutes in the city and soon enough business was booming, so to speak. As the war raged on, more and more troops were sent to Mobile due to its strategic position as a port city, so there were thousands more men in the area than ever before, which meant more business for “houses of ill repute.” Because prostitution was so popular in Mobile and had seen so much growth during the war, venereal diseases were running rampant among the city’s population. In response to the growing rate of these diseases and in an attempt to make a lasting improvement to the city,

¹⁶ *Nashville Union and American*, August 28, 1866.

¹⁷ *Daily Picayune*, August 7, 1872.

¹⁸ *Charlotte Democrat*, June 7, 1875.

¹⁹ *Charlotte Democrat*, June 7, 1875.

Brevet Major General McGarrack passed Special Order No. 19 in 1865. This Special Order commanded that all prostitutes be registered with the city and had to undergo weekly medical inspections, for which they had to pay a fine in order to continue to work. The order also brought about a hospital specifically for these women where they could be ‘inspected’ away from the general public. These inspections were quite invasive and did not do much to actually help these women, since the men who patronized them had to undergo no such inspections. This order, though it seemed clever to upper class elites and government officials at the time, did not work and barely did anything to reduce the amount of venereal diseases being spread among patrons of prostitutes in Mobile. It was really just a way to placate those who had been complaining about the heavy presence of prostitutes in the city. Because it was ineffectual and there was really no way to fully execute the practice, since these women could easily avoid detection and work illegally, the Order did not last long. Despite its short life, Special Order 19 in Mobile, Alabama spurred similar actions from cities like Nashville, Montgomery, and Memphis.²⁰

Similarly, prostitution was running rampant in St. Louis after the Civil War and the rate of venereal disease transmission was at an all-time high, so the city turned to drastic measures. In 1870, the city of St. Louis, Missouri legalized prostitution with the “Social Evil Ordinance.” This new law did not come without certain stipulations, however, and actually caused much strife for sex workers trying to make a living. In accordance with the ordinance, just like the one in Mobile, St. Louis built a new hospital in order to carry out medical examinations on prostitutes which was nicknamed “The Social Evil Hospital.” The St. Louis Social Evil Ordinance was fairly clearly inspired by the work of Dr. William Sanger, who urged urban cities like New York City to adopt a “Parisian” method of dealing with public women wherein they would receive

²⁰ Raven Christopher, “Negotiated Affections.”

inspections which would help wipe out the spread of venereal diseases. The Ordinance was not well-followed, as women realized they could actually make more money by circumventing the inspections and they would simply go about their business as they pleased, so in 1874 it was dissolved and the Social Evil Ordinance was no more.²¹ The Social Evil Hospital, on the other hand, merely fell under new management, received the new name “The Female Hospital,” and committed itself to caring for the poor, destitute, and unlucky women and children of St. Louis. The people of St. Louis found themselves grateful for the Ordinance in the long run, seeing the “great good” that was being done for those who had been previously uncared for or even considered: poor women.²²

Even though these ordinances did not effectively change the course of prostitution in the South nor did they really do much to protect prostitutes, they did open up new avenues in the field of medical care for women. By instituting female hospitals, despite the fact that they were originally meant to be hospitals wherein prostitutes would be poked, prodded, and humiliated through invasive inspections, the governments of these urban southern areas were setting a precedent of caring for non-elite women, at least in a purely medical sense. No one could reasonably argue that cities like Mobile or St. Louis were instituting these reforms out of concern for women—the language used in the orders refers to the “evils of prostitution”—but they did open the door to a different line of thought surrounding prostitution, or the management of the practice. For a few years, sex workers and female vagrants in these cities were referred to hospitals and care facilities instead of prisons or fines. This experiment was practically doomed

²¹ John C. Burnham, "Medical Inspection of Prostitutes in America in the Nineteenth Century: The St. Louis Experiment and its Sequel," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 45, no. 3 (1971): 203-18, 206.

²² *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 23, 1874.

from the beginning since, as John C. Burnham put it, “Regulation, one might perhaps conclude, did not thrive where liberal traditions against controls over personal life prevailed.”²³

Non-elite white women were mostly going about business as usual in the South after the Civil War and very little changed about their actual lives. Female criminals caught a fair amount of newspaper attention in places like New Orleans, where a large portion of the population was made up of Irish and German immigrants.²⁴ One such postbellum felon was Ada Thompson Wright, who was arrested because she had been drunk, disorderly, and had “swallowed poison,” according to an article in the *New Orleans Republican*.²⁵ In the same article, there was a story in which a woman who had been acting strangely was found to have given birth to, murdered, and subsequently buried her own infant. The body was found beneath the henhouse outside the house this woman shared. The culprit, listed as “Minnie,” was arrested alongside the couple who shared her home for the crime of infanticide.²⁶ The typical crimes committed by women in the South—crimes like disorderliness, drunkenness, petty theft, infanticide, and assault—did not change much in the years following the Civil War, but the coverage of them did.

Attitudes towards vagrants, poor women, female felons, and prostitutes expressed by newspapers in the postbellum years were noticeably different. Since non-elite white women needed to somehow fit into the white southern patriarchy’s ideal of southern white women, there was more room for forgiveness for these figures in the newspapers of the time. White women in the Reconstruction-era South held the keys to both white supremacy and southern morality and therefore needed to be given a less demonized face in the newspapers. They were innocent

²³ Burnham, “Medical Inspection of Prostitutes in America in the Nineteenth Century,” 204.

²⁴ Elizabeth Fussell, “Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans,” *Journal of American History*, 94 (Dec. 2007), 846–55.

²⁵ “Brief Mention,” *New Orleans Republican*, September 14, 1870.

²⁶ “Infanticide in Gretna,” *New Orleans Republican*, September 14, 1870.

figures who were victims of some outside corruption. Even cases of infanticide were more often accompanied by long stories about the women who committed the crime and their less-than-favorable conditions. Maggie Purcell, for instance, gave birth to and subsequently buried her infant in a privy in 1872; the *Daily Picayune* covered the story and published the witness statement of Maggie's roommate.²⁷ The article makes no moral stance on the crime and does not condemn Maggie. The paper does not provide any commentary at all and the witness statement itself conveys no strong feelings.

White women in the postbellum South were seen as victims who needed to be protected by southern men. Black men were just one 'evil' that white men 'saved' white women from during Reconstruction; another threat was northern voices. In a very emotional, exhaustive, and popular article from *The Mobile Daily Times* published in October of 1865, just months after the war's official end, southern women found themselves the subject of much controversy. Technically, the editorial published in *The Mobile Daily Times* was written in support of an editorial from the *Courrier des Etats-Unis* which was addressing Horace Greeley's opinions published in the *Tribune* in New York City. Apparently, Mr. Greeley had written an editorial in which he attacked southern women's virtues and intelligence, comparing them unfavorably to the very learned and civil women of the North. The *Courrier* did not take kindly to this and published their response, in which they reminded Mr. Greeley about the "heroism displayed by Confederate women" during the Civil War and argued that southern women were very highly regarded in Europe. The *Courrier* also responds to the assertion that southern women were less literate than northern women by saying, "If the women of the South are more illiterate than their husbands, it is not, in our eyes, a disparagement to their intellect. We, for one, have no love for

²⁷ "Infanticide Case," *Daily Picayune*, July 29, 1872.

literary women. We hate women versed in Latin and philosophy.” All of these assertions are emphasized in the *Mobile Daily Times* addition to the article:

There are times in a woman’s life when she must be only a tender spouse or loving mother, and there are other times when her duty is to rise above these social charms and set the first examples of the highest virtues...These higher virtues have been practiced by the women of the South without the display of vain ostentation...Is it from ignorant and base-minded women that such noble traits can be expected?

This small but powerful editorial is a perfect example of the way southern womanhood shifted due to the Civil War so that a sense of duty to the state was preferred over a certain tender meekness that was required in the antebellum years.²⁸ Women were excused during Reconstruction for behaviors they exhibited in the Civil War that would have been completely unacceptable under any other circumstances and the southern newspapers defended them. These “higher virtues” of duty and strength were shown by elite southern women in the form of spitting, name-calling, and all forms of assault during Union occupation of the South. Southern white women’s vulgar treatment of Union soldiers during the war was defended by papers across the world after they were punished with the infamous “Woman Order.”²⁹ At the same time, non-elite white women had been afforded the same harsh treatment they always had; they were jailed, discarded, and even brutalized by occupying soldiers. As asserted in the previous chapter, elite white women were applauded while non-elite white women were abandoned.

Another group of women that was not deemed worthy of southern protection was the suffragists, or the “Women’s Rights” ladies. These women and their ideals were seen not only as deplorable by southern white men, but also as a threat to their women. In the editorial I cited above, the writer also condemned those northern women who campaigned for the “Rights of

²⁸ *The Mobile Daily Times*, October 19, 1865.

²⁹ Campbell, “The Unmeaning Twaddle about Order 28,” 11.

Women” and noted that they were delivering “bothersome lectures” and “raising the disgusting banner of miscegenation.”³⁰ By using such strong language, the writer was essentially damning the idea that this outspoken group of women should have any influence on good southern ladies. Another article from a newspaper in Livingston, Alabama addressed female suffragists and joked that they were not known to be mothers. The editorial said, “God save the Anglo-Saxon race, if such women should become the mothers of the next generation,” but advised readers not to worry since the writer believed that God himself made it so that suffragists never became mothers for this express reason. Whether their inability to have children rested on “a physical as well as a mental malformation,” the author did not know, but it was implied that both afflicted the suffragist women.³¹

Since, according to the principles of southern womanhood in the nineteenth century, a woman’s most treasured role was as a mother, arguing that suffragist women were kept by a Christian god from having children was quite a damnation, which made them not entirely women. These women were considered the worst of the worst by southern men and newspapers, even lower than southern prostitutes it seemed, and their ideas were mocked and regarded with disgust throughout the southern states. The reason for this is most likely because they were fighting for a woman’s right to, essentially, defy the total rule of man and act with her own agency. Nothing could be more frightening to the southern patriarchy than the downfall of paternalism, so these women were vilified to the fullest extent to keep their ideals from entreating the hearts of southern ladies.

³⁰ *The Mobile Daily Times*, October 19, 1865.

³¹ *Livingston Journal*, December 8, 1866.

The use of the miscegenation rhetoric is also very telling of how these women were perceived by southern newspapers. Since at the time the biggest threat posed to southern white women, in the eyes of southern white men, was Black men, asserting that suffragists were also trying to create a world where Black men could freely have sexual relationships with white women was a very high accusation. The fear for southerners was that “intermarrying” would bring forth a “mixed generation” wherein white girls would be forced to attend school with Black boys, who would “make love to” them, which was the worst thing white southerners could imagine.³² This vision prophesied the loss of southern white men’s control over “their” white women to Black men, which was the largest threat to the order of the South and encompassed all others. These women, in the eyes of the patriarchy of the South, were tools used by Satan to corrupt good southern society and drag southern white women into the pits of Hell, tearing them from the protection of white men and damning them to destitution or vice.

Even once they were included rhetorically in southern womanhood, non-elite white women held many of the same places they had held before the war and continued to carry on with their lives as they had in the past. Non-elite white women heavily populated the South now more than ever, since colossal numbers of men had been killed in the Civil War, but they were not represented as the majority that they were. Despite being new members of a protected group, non-elite white women felt the pressures of southern patriarchy just as much as ever, if not more in the form of violence from groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Southern prostitutes too did not truly benefit from the reforms that were put in place to regulate the safety of the practice of prostitution. These policy reforms were really just instruments to appease the city elites and

³² *Wilmington Daily Journal*, March 28, 1868, In "The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die." by Karen L. Zipf. 499.

make the government seem more proactive, not genuine attempts to improve the lives of prostitutes. These women, too, were just tools by which to aid the white southern patriarchy. In the postbellum South, white women—meaning all white women, from the richest to the most destitute—held the key to enforcing white supremacy without the aid of slavery. In this era, non-elite southern white women were simply weapons to be wielded by white men and if they proved themselves useless or disobedient, then they were cast aside, or worse—destroyed.

Conclusion

Non-elite white women in the Civil War-era South were many things: farmers, laborers, sex workers, mothers, sisters, wives, criminals, immigrants, fighters, factory workers, domestic servants, drunkards, thieves, and murderers. One thing that this demographic of women was not was homogenous. They represented the majority of women in the South in the nineteenth century and the wide spectrum of experience in which they existed proves that the reality of white southern womanhood was not a one-sided story, but a quilt made of different threads, all interwoven yet completely individual. Despite the undeniable reach of the plantation household and elite influence on white women's expectations, lower-class white women broke the mold of womanhood and were not totally controlled by any patriarchal institution in the Civil War-era South. They operated within a system of ideals and rules made by white planter-class men and exemplified by white planter-class ladies, but they exercised their own free will within this system and sometimes managed to shock the gentle sensibilities of the 'Old South' with their 'un-feminine' behavior.

When observing these women and trying to understand their lives, we cannot lose sight of the system that tried to oppress and rule over them. The plantocracy was a strong system based on racial, masculine, and class superiority and saying that it made life difficult for anyone who was not a middle- or upper-class white man would be an understatement. While this system did not entirely dominate non-elite white women, who had a certain level of independence not

enjoyed by elite white women, it was still a very large, ever-looming presence in the lives of these women. Marriage, which would provide a woman some protection within a legal bond wherein she could benefit from the privileges afforded to even lower-class men, also worked against her by stripping some of her personal freedom. A woman who was under the legal supervision of a man, whether that was her father, husband, or legal guardian, was expected to embody the southern feminine ideal of subservience and restrict her operations to a domestic sphere. Motherhood, as the most sacred function of womanhood in the eyes of the antebellum plantocracy, was meant to occur within a marital relationship; therefore, pregnancy outside of marriage was seen as something borderline evil, especially if it was the result of a relationship between a Black man and a white woman. A direct result from this prevailing attitude about what motherhood was supposed to be and what it was not supposed to be led to the high rate of infanticides among non-elite white women in the Civil War-era South. These ideals about motherhood also made being a mother an essential part of being a wife, which would further tie a woman to the domestic sphere.

But single non-elite southern white women lived in an entirely different situation. These women were their own sole source of income. Even though many married women had jobs or worked as laborers, single women were more likely to enter the workforce than their married counterparts since they were the only ones responsible for providing for themselves and their families. Single non-elite white women could find work in factories, especially as the Civil War furnished more necessity for manufactured goods, like the women who worked in the Confederate ordnance laboratory on Brown's Island, Virginia. The factory was run by a huge majority of women and some children who made the heavy steel ordinances used by the Confederate Army; after this factory exploded and killed somewhere between sixty and ninety

workers in 1863, the pressure on the Confederate government to pay better wages to factory laborers grew.¹ The women who had worked and died in this factory had not been paid enough to support themselves, let alone the families that many of them were left behind to provide for single handedly when their husbands joined the war effort. This demographic of white women was routinely dismissed and mistreated by the white southern male-led government in the Civil War South.

From women like Delia Swift, who became a prostitute at the tender age of twelve and was later known as one of the first female gangsters in New Orleans, to Mary Wattles, the woman who owned and shared a house with Black families in Natchez, Mississippi, many non-elite white women were pushing the limits of their agency in the antebellum South.² During the Civil War, non-elite white women made up a significant portion of the remaining population in the South and some of them embraced increased political and public lives. The bread riots in southern cities, most notably Richmond, Virginia, were one way that non-elite white women made their mark on the Civil War South and the women who aided guerillas in the border states left a lasting effect on the way women could be viewed as combatants during wartime. Some of them, however, simply went about their lives as they always had in a different environment like the criminal women of New Orleans. Reconstruction brought about a tangible change in the way in which white women were regarded as victims to Black manhood, but the real day-to-day lives of non-elite white women did not change in a drastic way. While some women had to navigate the difficulties of heavier scrutiny from elite white men, others simply carried on with their lives as usual.

¹ Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines?" 134.

² Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*; Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place*.

After the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished, white non-elite women in the South were faced with a paradigm shift that put them in a new class in order for the former plantocracy to maintain a white supremacist racial hierarchy. These women's lives did not necessarily change, but the treatment of them at the hands of white men and southern newspapers did. Perceptions of white womanhood became more specific: a white woman's purity was not just important, it also had to be protected specifically from Black men in order to save the soul of the "Old South." The goal of this distinction was to ensure that white men's masculinity stayed at the very top of the southern hierarchy and that "race mixing" would never occur and therefore muddle the distinct racial lines that kept elite white men in power.³ Non-elite white women, however, continued to be thieves and laborers and single mothers and continued to have consensual and romantic relationships with Black men despite the dangers they faced from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, who were known to brutalize and even kill the white women they deemed guilty of the crime of "sexual immorality."⁴ These relationships and the immorality exhibited by non-elite southern white women was considered before the war as a nuisance or inconvenience by the planter-class, but became crimes against the South itself during Reconstruction. Non-elite white women's unconventional behavior was dangerous after the demise of slavery because it threatened the race-based class system.

By reading and analyzing newspaper articles about these women, we can get a sense of what these women were getting up to and going through while also gaining some insight into what southern newspapers thought of them and what they were expected to do. Sections dedicated to recording the proceedings of the courtroom divulge details of criminal women and

³ Zipf, "The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die."

⁴ Hodes, *White Women Black Men*, 410.

the punishments they faced. Little snippets that relayed the arrest records for a city also give us insight to what non-elite white women were arrested for and what could count as a crime when committed by these women. Offenses ranged from murder to scolding another woman's child in public. Advice-based editorials let us know better what the white men who wrote these columns thought women *ought* to do while "Recorder's Court" sections allow us to know what they were *actually* doing. This sometimes-humorous juxtaposition between attitudes about non-elite white women and realities of these women's lives illustrates perfectly the kind of world these women lived in and the kind of parameters they were meant to live by, but often didn't. Therein lies the importance of newspapers in this thesis: they not only provide a great deal of information, but they also act as examples of this dichotomy between perception and reality. Newspapers also provide us with an avenue to observe a group of historical actors who did not leave much behind to tell historians about their lives from their own point of view. Since most non-elite white women were illiterate, we do not have journals or records made of their own hands to study today. By searching through newspapers and analyzing all the different ways they discuss and refer to non-elite white women, we can better understand both the atmosphere surrounding them as well as the truths that they were living.

While conducting this research, it has become abundantly clear to me that non-elite white women of the Civil War-era South were some of the most influential and simultaneously glossed over forces of their time. These women worked in, provided for, stole from, rioted against, nurtured, fought for, and defied the South and southern society. They made up the majority of the actual population of white women and yet are left out of the narrative. There was no Scarlett O'Hara, but there were Delia Swifts, Rose Ranneys, Mary Macks, Susan Parkers, and Ada Thompson Wrights whose threads filled the patchwork quilt of southern womanhood. They were

the women who utilized a sometimes-shocking amount of independence within a system that sought to rule over them. What makes these women fascinating and important is not just that they were often unruly or disorderly or that they were oppressed by a societal class structure that was rigged against them, but that these two facts coexisted in a complex harmony. Non-elite white women in the Civil War-era South were an “unhappy class of females,” but they were also exceptional and diverse within and despite this class.

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