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*Women and Work in Early America
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All is Fair in Love and War

For the past century and a half, the Civil War has been the subject of much scholarly work. This has included, but not been limited to, an examination of the various aspects of American society, economics, and politics that underwent radical transformation during wartime. On an individual level subtle changes also occurred, creating a noticeable trend within the daily lives of those living in mid-nineteenth century, war-torn America. The lives of individuals, specifically their personal relationships, often suffered during this period of national duress. Relationships between family members, friends, and spouses were influenced in both positive and negative ways. But marriages were perhaps most affected because of the dramatic alteration of gender roles during the war years, which often caused strain. On a more intimate level, married couples during the Civil War, primarily those in the South, experienced fierce loyalty and love as well as power struggles, role reversals, heartbreak, and death.

One such marriage was between the famed General George Pickett and his third wife, Sally Corbell. While he had two earlier marriages, his third and final marriage no doubt affected him the most as it lasted through the Civil War and into the post-war years. His wife, Sally, played an imperative role in their marriage and in the creation of Pickett's legend. However, she was also his confidant as evidenced by Sally's extreme devotion to her husband. This is portrayed through her idyllic writings of their marriage, which neglected the sordid details of Pickett's post-war life. He returned from the war a bitter drunkard who was in poor health. Nevertheless, it is clear that Sally "became his comfort and support

when things went terribly wrong” (Bleser and Gordon 79). A series of correspondences written by Pickett to Sally during the Civil War perfectly illustrate the important role Sally played in Pickett’s life. These letters have received much attention from scholars, although the validity of the documents is uncertain since they may have been written as a result of Sally’s attempts to “[promote] her mythical husband and their mythical marriage” (Bleser and Gordon 85). The letters, though they may have instances of falsification, are still widely accepted and Pickett’s undisputed love for Sally is quite evident. But the letters also serve the purpose of telling a larger tale, one that focuses on the dynamics of marriages during the war. General Pickett’s letters provide a new perspective on women as supporters, confidants, and essential contributors to the preservation of marriages and families, during trying times.

Many of the women who experienced role reversals in their marriages were those married to men involved in important political or military positions and, therefore, had the opportunity to voice opinions or at least provide imperative support to their husbands. However, that is not to say that women of lower classes were excluded from this same type of experience. It appears that there was a fundamental shift in ideologies of “important” women’s roles because women, like Sally Corbell, perceived themselves as necessary to boosting morale for the South, particularly when the war had ended with the Confederacy’s bitter defeat. After having survived the war, a number of marriages were strengthened because the couples managed to support one another despite constant tensions and uncertainty during the war. Arguably, wives offered more support in their marriages as they went to great lengths to maintain their relationships with their husbands despite other responsibilities. While a majority of Southern women remained on their plantations or homesteads with the slaves, some wives felt their services were better used by accompanying their husbands and the soldiers near the front. Records even show a few women who left their children in the care of family or slaves to follow their husbands because they felt that their moral support, if nothing else, was essential to their husbands and the military effort (Faust 35). This is rather surprising considering

that common expectations for women of this time were grounded in their respective roles as wives and mothers. For a woman to abandon her motherly duties to accompany her husband during a time of war is a bold decision. This dramatic shift in the roles of women could easily be seen as a prelude to suffrage, as women expanded past their cultural bounds and exercised their rights as citizens. Although each woman encountered a different experience during the war years and after, they all discovered a way to offer support to their husbands, and thereby became partners in their marriages, which strengthened them as a whole. The correspondences between Sally Corbell, Virginia Tunstall Clay, and Varina Howell and their respective military husbands offer an effective microcosm into this fascinating dynamic.

When Pickett met Sally Corbell, though she was only eight years old, she left a lasting impression on the lonely, sorrowful soldier who had taken a furlough to grieve the death of his first wife and infant daughter, also both named Sally. The story of their fateful meeting is something of myth, and while Sally Corbell would later claim its truth, the validity has yet to be fully accepted. Sally claimed they met during Pickett's grieving period in 1852 at a seaside fort in Virginia. The story explains that Sally found George reading on the beach alone and assumed this was because he, like her, had the whooping cough, and had to avoid human company. He told her that instead what ailed him was "something worse, a broken heart, and he did not like to make others sad with his sorrow." Upon hearing the sad tale of his loss, it is reported that the young girl responded, "You can call me Sally, I'll be your wife and little girl," to which he countered, "That's a promise. You shall be named Sally and be my wife" (Gordon 36). After the encounter, Pickett was soon called away on military duty and was not reunited with Sally Corbell until approximately ten years later in 1861 when they began their romantic courtship and married the following year on September 22, 1863 (Gordon 123). It is the courtship and their engagement that started the series of correspondence in which General Pickett – at the time Captain Pickett – wrote to Sally while he was away in battle, all the while hoping desperately to return to his future bride. The letters began on September 17, 1861 and continued well into 1865,

providing glimpses of Pickett's evolving intimate feelings towards his fiancée and later wife, as he journeyed through the most painful and triumphant part of his military career.

A number of Pickett's letters tell the tale of a man who defended his military career and the choices he was forced to make, particularly that of siding with the Confederacy. A pattern begins to emerge in the closing sentences of his letters in which he addressed Sally on an intimate level, telling her in one of his first letters that it had been "two long weary weeks since [he] drank comfort from those bright eyes" (Pickett to Corbell 40). It is a simple sentence that Pickett wrote, but the word comfort in this context, appears to indicate more than comfort from the drudgery and horrors of his life in battle. Instead, the word shows the way in which he relied on Sally as a source of strength and hope. For Pickett and other soldiers in the war "the actual demands of fighting [...] made them increasingly conscious of their own dependence upon women's love and labor" (Clinton and Silber 16). This sentiment is continuously expressed in Pickett's letters to Sally. In one letter from September of 1862, just after he had returned to battle from a short leave, Pickett wrote:

Darling, my heart turns to you with a love so great that pain follows in its wake [...] Your face, is the sweetest face in all the world [...] and I must not cast a shadow over it by the fears that come to me [...] No, a soldier should not know fear of any kind. I must fight and plan and hope [to be with you], you my goddess of devotion, and I your devoted slave. (Pickett to Corbell 58)

In this letter, Pickett's most intimate feelings were revealed to Sally as he told her in exquisite detail how precious she was to him in his hour of need. More importantly, however, Pickett explained that her devotion to him was that of a "goddess" and his to her, that of a "slave." The description he used is particularly interesting because he asserted that Sally's dedication to him was a necessity to his happiness and success in battle. Sally Corbell was not just a fiancée, but a goddess, from whom he drew comfort, with whom he shared

his feelings towards the war and his more intimate feelings towards her, furthering the concept of Sally as a confidant with a crucial role in Pickett's life and their life together. Southern interpretations of women and femininity often depicted them as frail goddesses, which is why Pickett describes Sally as such and himself as her slave. While it may seem strange considering this description does not reflect the equality in marriages that the Civil War brought, this portrayal of women is historically accurate. Pickett's depiction of Sally in a position of higher power than himself again shows Sally's importance in their relationship and how he was well aware of her extreme devotion to him, a devotion that extended long after Pickett's death. Essentially, their devotion is evident of their equal partnership because they cared for one another and were committed despite constant tragedy and devastation. Even shorter sentences, such as "be brave and help me to be brave, my darling," serve to designate moments in which Pickett relied on Sally to provide him with inspiration and hope in times of great distress (Pickett to Corbell 71).

It is quite an obvious conclusion that "their story [...] was in some ways unique; yet it also had elements of timeless wartime romances where two lovers struggle to rise above the pain of war, defeat, exile, and death. Their devotion to one another is undeniable" (Bleser and Gordon 71). While there has been ongoing historical debate on whether or not the Picketts' marriage was in fact idealized by Sally in an effort to portray not only her husband as a military hero, but herself as "the innocent 'Child-bride'" and he, as "the brave but doting Soldier-husband," (Bleser and Gordon 85) their love and devotion to each other, as the previous quote stated, was "undeniable." Historians have concluded that Sally's reason for creating a romanticized version of their life was most likely to support herself and young son because Pickett died in 1875 leaving no financial support, which forced Sally to be entirely self-sufficient (Bleser and Gordon 83). While she presumably idealized parts of their marriage, evidence clearly portrayed that Pickett, even at the age of 36, often acted like a reckless boy in love. He neglected his military duties as "his growing passion for Sally Corbell became an obsession; he increasingly defied danger, censure, and acceptable military protocol

to see his sweetheart whenever possible” (Bleser and Gordon 72). That Pickett was willing to risk his position in the army by sneaking off on horseback at night to spend time with Sally attests to his love and devotion. She was Pickett’s true confidant and source of strength throughout the war. That being said, Sally’s idyllic writings of her marriage with Pickett indeed possessed instances of exaggeration and fantasy, owing in part to the post-war reconstruction, which advocated a rehabilitation of the South’s reputation and the soldiers in the Confederate army. Sally herself spent much of her widowed life writing of the military successes of Pickett and participating in conferences between the North and the South, one that even proposed that Pickett, along with other Confederate Generals, should be added “to the state’s [Virginia] roll of illustrious citizens” (Reardon 98). At these conferences Sally’s presence was often viewed as a sign of true peace amongst a formerly divided nation; some Northerners even thought of her as having been the “first woman who welded the Blue and Gray together” (Reardon 98). While Sally was viewed as a heroine in her own right and her writings are often considered idyllic, to condemn the description of their entire relationship as fantasy is unfair in that Pickett’s love and devotion to Sally, her as the “goddess” and him as the “slave,” was no doubt a true sentiment.

In his letters to Sally, Pickett repeatedly assured her of his deep devotion to her, but he also recounted the details of the battles and skirmishes that he and his men had engaged in recently. Often the retelling of these occurrences rendered an image of Pickett as a deeply troubled man who suffered from both the cruelty of war, in which he witnessed the loss of many of his dear friends. It also shows how, by sharing these details with Sally, he was able to better reconcile his position in the war. Still, he appeared to struggle with the “rightness” of battle at times. In one letter he told her, “May our Heavenly Father bless us with an early and a victorious return. But even then, the price of it – the price of it, my little one – the blood of our countrymen! God in his mercy temper the wind to us” (Pickett to Corbell 79). Here, Pickett told Sally, that while he longed for victory, the blood to be shed, and the price to be paid for said victory is necessary, but possibly not worth the consequences. His statement provides a strong

indication that Pickett indeed was hesitant when it came to battle, and it seems that sharing these doubts with Sally provided him comfort. Perhaps one of his most personal admissions to Sally came in a letter written June 24, 1863, when he told her of his deep regret at having engaged in a bloody skirmish with Union troops. He stated:

I never could quite enjoy being a “Conquering Hero.” No, my dear, there is something radically wrong about my Hurrahism [sic]. I can fight for a cause I know to be just, can risk my own life and the lives of those in my keeping without a thought of the consequences; but when we’ve conquered, when we’ve downed the enemy and won the victory, I don’t want to hurrah. I want to go off all by myself and be sorry for them [I want to] rest my soul and put my heart to sleep and get back something – I don’t know what – but something I had that is gone from me – something subtle and unexplainable – something I never knew I had lost it – till it was gone – gone – gone. (Pickett to Corbell 81)

The beauty and power of this passage written to Sally is quite explicit; it reveals Pickett’s regret and sorrow at having won a battle but lost a moral victory. Even more important is the fact that he made such an admission to Sally which, if read by his fellow soldiers and commanders, could have indicated that his heart was not devoted to battle and could have jeopardized his already precarious position in the Confederacy. Pickett’s deepest fears and doubts are reflected in his letters to her in which he exposed himself to her, relied on her, and by doing so, elevated her position in their marriage to that of a true confidant.

Similar to Sally’s experience in her relationship with General Pickett, the marriage of Virginia Tunstall Clay to Clement Claiborne Clay also revealed a marriage in which the wife’s position was elevated because she was her husband’s confidant. Husbands and wives in the Civil War often experienced semi-role reversals both on a personal and public level; such was the case in the Clay marriage in which the husband was involved in politics and sometimes relied on his wife for support, courage, and even advice. The relationship

between the Clays was filled with romance, but was also etched with pain and struggle from the years of the war. Like many marriages of the time, Clement was separated from Virginia in the beginning of their relationship so he “filled his letters to Virginia with lengthy declarations of what she and their relationship had done for him,” admitting once that she “[had] almost supreme power over [him]” (Bleser 139). No doubt, the early years of their marriage were likened to any “Southern Belle’s” fantasy, but the cruel reality of war changed their marriage in many ways. Because of the war, Clay suffered poor health and a shattered political career among other things, which only strengthened his relationship with Virginia as his dependence on her increased over time (Bleser 150). It is evident that by the end of the war, “Virginia, who had seemingly been destined to be a Southern Belle, [...] stepped forward after the war to become the stronger spouse” (Bleser 152). This is not unlike Sally Corbell, who, after the war, “became her family’s main provider to her husband and young son” because Pickett was bedridden, “weak and depressed” (Bleser and Gordon 81). Still, both Sally and Virginia’s love and admiration did not falter due to the problems that the war caused in their marriages. This is proven in the many publications in which Sally idealized her husband as a wonderful partner and soldier. The Clays also had a “romantic love for one another, which was a constant force in their relationship [...] and made it possible for their affection to survive in the midst of vast historical change” (Bleser and Gordon 153). Though it may appear rather cliché, the love between the Clays was strengthened greatly because of the war. Despite Clement’s suffering political career and health, their marriage remained strong because of Virginia’s dedication and support of her husband and while their marriage experienced a number of trials, the constant threat of a Confederate loss united them even more. The Clays underwent a somewhat of a role reversal in their marriage. Though the husband was still in charge, his wife gained an elevated position in their relationship.

The second chapter of Pickett’s life with Sally begins when he urged her to come and meet him in Petersburg, Virginia so they could finally be married. Upon the crushing defeat at the Battle of

Gettysburg in which the Confederate armies were massacred, and about which Pickett stated, “it was too late to retreat, and to go on was death or capture.” He felt it even more imperative to hurry and unite his life with Sally’s as the fate of their love was under constant threat from new military orders which would take Pickett further from Sally or worse, place him in fatal combat (Pickett to Corbell 107). After marrying, Pickett was again sent out on a mission and was separated from Sally for weeks at a time. He continued to write to her stories of the war, in which he admitted his insurmountable guilt but accepted it as a necessity to his position as General. In 1864, as the war was coming to an end, the need for hope was crucial; the men fighting in the Confederate army were but shells of their former selves. As Pickett described in a letter to Sally, “You would hardly recognize these ragged, barefoot soldiers as the trim, tidy boys of two years ago in their handsome gray uniforms, with shining equipment” (Pickett to Corbell 71). This statement exposed an important aspect of the war, because it indicated an instance of doubt in the troops; the war effort was exhausting the soldiers, for they were two years in and the promise of victory seemed a habit of wishful thinking, the defeat at Gettysburg only furthering this notion. Perhaps this admission was the culmination of Pickett’s and all the soldiers’ fear that an ultimate loss of the war was imminent. With all of the tragedies surrounding the soldiers, support from their loved ones was essential; Pickett was no exception. In the letters to Sally, written just after they were married and again separated by battle, Pickett urged Sally to not lose hope and by doing so, encouraged himself. One letter, written in June, 1864, told of an attack on their camp in which “a boy with golden brown curls – somebody’s darling” was “seriously wounded,” and Pickett proceeded to tell Sally, that “if only this wicked war were over so that we could in peace and tranquility finish the book of Love which we have just begun” (Pickett to Corbell 129). Pickett not only told Sally of another horror he had witnessed, but also admitted that he was ready for the war to end, not only because of the atrocities that had occurred but because he was longing, just as his wife, to be in the future where the war was no more.

Not all marriages were so heavily idealized. In contrast to the marriages of Sally and Virginia, the marriage of Varina Howell to Jefferson Davis emphasized the power struggles that some couples endured during this period. As creatures influenced by the social constructs of a patriarchal society, many husbands demanded control of their wives' behavior and attempted to change them, much like Jefferson, who "loved his wife, but he meant to mold her to his preferred image – by instruction or punishment" (Berkin 134). Here, the love that Jefferson had for his wife extended beyond her supposed flaws, but nevertheless he continuously attempted to change her. This is in part because Jefferson, like most men of the time, was expected to control his wife's behavior owing to social constructs, but also to his position as President and the further expectation of decorum it imposed. Because of the war and Varina's status as first lady, she had the opportunity to voice her opinions on various issues, the most prominent being slavery. Although the Davises were not sympathetic to the abolitionist movement, Varina did in fact accuse her husband of giving too "forcible" a speech in response to a speech proposed by New Hampshire's senator John Hale, who saw justice in the abolitionist movement (Berkin 134). Her assertion of independence on this matter, and moreover, the small accusation against her husband indicated Varina's struggle in her marriage, playing both the role of loving wife and political advisor to her husband. Later in their marriage, however, and in the middle of the war, "the precarious condition of the nation [...] brought Varina and Jefferson closer emotionally than they had ever been," as seen in correspondence between the two (Berkin 166). The relationship of Jefferson Davis and Varina Howell Davis underwent drastic changes as they experienced heightened tensions in their marriage brought on by the war and general domestic disputes. Their marriage was nonetheless strengthened by the constant threat of violence and danger, not unlike that of the Pickett or Clay marriages.

For five years, the Civil War raged throughout the nation, threatening borders, lives, and love. With its recession came a period of economic, political, and societal change, most noticeably in the South. The people affected by the war knew no bounds

to its atrocities, yet it appears to have strengthened a number of relationships — marriages in particular — because of the tensions created during war time. Wives of the more prominent figures in the war, whether through politics or the army itself, often experienced role reversals in their marriages. Sally Corbell, for example, became the significant source of comfort for her husband. She was his utmost confidant to whom he revealed his secrets, particularly those regarding the war. Others, like Virginia and Varina, maintained strong roles in their marriages from the beginning, desiring a foothold in politics and in their husbands' political affairs. For these women, the war, while treacherous and awful, provided them the means to gain power in their relationships and the importance of this cannot be understated. Essentially, the Civil War allowed women the opportunity to support their husbands in a new manner, become sources of strength, and even participate in the politics of ante and postbellum America.

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