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FROM PLOW TO PODIUM: POLITICAL ACTIVITY OF POOR AND YEOMAN WOMEN
IN CIVIL WAR GEORGIA

by

DAWN S. WILEY

Under the Direction of Glenn T. Eskew, PhD

ABSTRACT

Women in the Civil War era engendered new identities that directly opposed traditional female roles set forth by Southern society. Women belonging to the non-elite classes emerged out of the domestic sphere and became enmeshed in political life. This analysis evaluates the political life of white Georgia women of the poor and yeoman class during the Civil War in comparison to the conclusions set forth by Stephanie McCurry in *Confederate Reckoning*. An introduction of terms and class structures is followed by a discussion on how women impacted public policy in Georgia through writing government officials, petitioning, and rioting. A study of how women affected the rate of their husbands' desertions provides additional evidence that enriches the existing scholarship on women's involvement in Civil War politics. The conclusion offers a brief insight into the lives of women after the Civil War and their conscious involvement in post-war public policy.

INDEX WORDS: Civil War, Women, Gender, Yeoman, Politics, Class.

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DAWN S. WILEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

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IN CIVIL WAR GEORGIA

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May 2016

DEDICATION

I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my Mother and Father, Jacqueline B. Wiley and Thomas J. Wiley. You both taught me to never forsake my dreams. Without your unwavering encouragement and support, this project would not have been possible. This thesis is also dedicated to the long forgotten memory of the poor and yeoman women of the state of Georgia, who proved to be all steel and no magnolia. May your voices continue to rise out of the abyss.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSA

Confederate States of America

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the Civil War era, white women across the Southern United States engendered new identities that directly opposed the traditional female roles prescribed by Southern society. Women belonging to the non-elite classes emerged out of the domestic sphere and became involved in the political arena like never before. Though these women were not found to advocate a feminist agenda of women's' rights that historians would classify as "political" activity by modern standards, they nonetheless engaged in a form of political activity according to their class status and, due to war deprivation, they were unaware that they acted in a political fashion.

Much scholarship has been produced to portray white elite women's and even slave women's lives at the height of the Civil War conflict, but the history of common women's involvement in politics has not been fully developed. Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* is one of the first books to address lower class women's political activity during the Civil War. McCurry posits that women of the non-elite class possessed strong political agency by forging a constituency under the identity of "soldiers' wives." However, many criticisms can be raised in the existing narrative regarding the validity of the sources and loosely defined definitions of class and political activity. The issue to consider now is not whether women took such political actions, as they most certainly did, but to what extent did they believe in their own political agency and were their actions significant. Additionally, did their political activity during the Civil War have any further implications for them when the conflict ended?

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Utilizing Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* as a focal point, the purpose of this study is to re-examine the existing scholarly work, present new sources to offer a fresh perspective, and point out several discrepancies between how white Georgia women of the poor and yeoman class acted politically in comparison to white women across the entire Confederate South that McCurry used as the basis of her own work. Georgia women engaged in different forms of political activity during the Civil War as a direct result of their economic standing and war hardships; not to gain political recognition. In short, their activity was conditional. Women's persistence in writing government officials, petitioning, and rioting affected public policy in the State of Georgia to a certain degree but perhaps was not done intentionally and certainly not as strongly as women in other Confederate states. A study of how women affected the rate of their husbands' desertion forms an additional avenue through which existing scholarship on women's political involvement in Civil War politics can be enriched. This thesis concludes with a brief insight into these women's lives after the Civil War and their further implication in post-war public policy.

1.1.1 HISTORIOGRAPHY

A male perspective is often assumed when history is being studied in academia. History traditionally reflects the involvement of men and their accomplishments and has failed to acknowledge women and their roles. Women's roles and their contributions have conventionally been regarded as less important and have not garnered much merit or examination. This perspective is evident in several areas of history, but is especially true with respect to the Antebellum and Civil War eras. Although the field has seen a significant shift with the assistance of gender historians and their ultimate quest to balance the form of history being told to ensure

that a male objective does not dominate the literature, significant progress remains. In a historiographical sense, what has been published about the American South, the institution of slavery, and the plantation system, mostly derives from the male perspective. This work will, therefore, attempt to advance and deliver new perspectives to the existing field of women's studies and will chart how historiographic gender research in the South has evolved over time.

The popularity of gender history came to fruition in the 1960s due to dissatisfaction among academics who recognized that the perspectives of women were invisible in historical analysis. While much knowledge has been gained and resulted in a production of excellent research to enrich our knowledge of the Civil War, leading books on the subject such as Betty Wood's *The Origins of American Slavery*, John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* and Robert Fogel's *Time on the Cross* are all devoid of women's voices and female agency. Scholarship of the American South during the Antebellum and Civil War continued to go through dramatic changes in the mid-1970s. Bell Irvin Wiley, an expert historian on the South and perhaps one of the earliest advocates for women's perspectives in history, came to the forefront of Southern literature and research with his publication of *Confederate Women*. Catherine Clinton followed Wiley's lead with her own book entitled *The Plantation Mistress*. However, both of these works were one-sided and focused entirely on elite white women of the affluent planter class. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese went against the traditional grain of most of her contemporaries in *Within the Plantation Household*. In this lengthy study, Fox-Genovese used journals, diaries, correspondence, and memoirs to incorporate the lives of not only white, slave-owning women, but of African slave women, into the existing male-dominated narrative. Publications such as David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine's *More than Chattel* and Deborah Gray White's *Ar'nt I a Woman* expound on the topic of gender

and slavery that Wiley, Clinton, and Fox-Genovese failed to consider by focusing specifically on the lives, situations, and experiences of slave women.

As such, existing scholarship examining the role of women in the American South during the Antebellum and Civil War eras are discussed in two realms. The first portrays events through a largely male-dominant voice. Second, the few instances when female agencies are examined, they are primarily focused on either white elite women or slave women. What is less emphasized, if at all, are the views of those women who fall in the middle to lower end of the economic spectrum.

Accordingly, historiography devoted to the subject of white women's roles in the Civil War period tends to follow one of two well-established approaches. The first follows along the footsteps of Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, in which she tells the tale of the American Civil War through the eyes of elite Confederate women. Since women of the slave-owning class had leisure time for reflection and education that afforded them the opportunity to write, they left behind a rich literature in the form of diaries.¹ *Mothers of Invention* turned existing Civil War history on its head by providing one of the first female perspectives of public life in the South. Faust argues that the Civil War was a time of personal transformation for elite white women. The war not only ushered in the abolishment of slavery and the dethroning of the master class, it also forced women to alter their identities. Once considered a dependent and fragile group to be protected by male authority, women found their roles reversed as a result of the war. In order to survive, they became responsible for new tasks that were previously undertaken by men. These included assuming roles of nursing, teaching, and

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xii.

overseeing plantation operations. The Civil War pushed wealthy women to reinvent themselves against the accepted domestic roles that southern society afforded them. “Necessity,” Confederate women repeated, “is the mother of invention.”²

Despite her success in providing excellent evidence to support her claims of women’s transformed roles, Faust’s narrative lacks a discussion of women’s active engagement in politics. Only a few pages are dedicated to a discussion of politics and Faust attributes the political activism of white slave-owning women to their Confederate patriotism. *Mothers of Invention* also makes few references to the women of the poor and yeoman class. She fails to give voice to white women of a lower social rank but who were nonetheless crucial to an understanding of changing gender roles in the American South.

The second approach is found in Stephanie McCurry’s book *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*. This book is successful in providing agency to those considered to be peripheral to the upper class women in *Mothers of Invention*. McCurry offers a perspective on power and politics in the Civil War by focusing on common white women as vital political actors. She argues that although poorer women were a disenfranchised group, they were able to exert political force that ultimately affected issues of statehood, slavery, and democracy in the Confederate States of America.³ Women of the non-elite class emerged as a new collective identity under which they referred to themselves as “soldiers’ wives.” This group of poor rural white women, who had no previous history of political participation, forged politics of subsistence and demanded justice from the Confederacy.⁴ A majority of the history of white women in the

² Ibid., 7.

³ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2-3.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

Civil War South is covered when these groundbreaking books are read in tandem. However, both books lack an investigation into how class distinctions may have influenced the ways southern females acted politically, and specifically, how Georgia women of the poor and yeoman class contributed to politics during and after the Civil War.

There remains an obligation in the field of history to seek truth in the past. Often times the history produced is skewed due to several biases. One of those inconsistencies is that an overwhelming amount of literature is produced through a male perspective and gives meager credit to women and their viewpoint. Furthermore, when women's voices do shine through, only a few groups are represented. The scholarship involving southern gender studies during the Antebellum and Civil War eras is on the rise. Advancements in the field have been made by the discovery and compilation of new data, new techniques of analysis and the formulation of new questions to explore southern women's lives during this cataclysmic event in the nation's history. When analyzed through the female panorama, it is evident that poor women and even yeoman women were integral and essential actors, fully deserving of a place in southern scholarship. Perhaps future scholars and historians will find alternate avenues to analyze southern women from all classes and ethnicities and will discover groundbreaking voices that have yet to be heard. This study makes such a contribution.

1.2 EXPECTED RESULTS

While preceding scholarship set forth in Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning* is used as an important starting point, this analysis contributes to it in four distinct ways. First, it calls into question assumptions of class structures in the Antebellum South and seeks to define women's political activity in the State of Georgia prior to the war to accurately show how those activities shifted during the conflict according to class. Second, it adds to the ongoing argument that women

of the yeoman class, in addition to the poor class in the Confederate South, engaged in a form of political life. Especially in Georgia, women participated in a loosely defined definition of “politics of subsistence and survival” by writing to government officials, petitioning, and rioting. They were found to engage in this form of political activity due to their economic circumstances brought about by war but were not necessarily driven by political ideology. Wives and female relatives of Georgia soldiers were able to exert some influence on public policy though they possessed no notions of political power or group recognition. Third, this thesis will set out to examine Georgia soldiers’ wives influence on their husbands’ rates of desertion from the Confederate Army. Correspondence between soldiers’ wives on the home front to their husbands away at war may indicate that women strongly urged their husbands to seek furloughs from active duty or desert the Confederate ranks altogether. Though an abundance of these sources are difficult to find, evidence does exist in the form of women’s letters to their husbands, muster rolls, and Confederate deserter lists. This evidence may provide enough backing to argue that the loss of manpower, at least from the state of Georgia, was directly correlated to the wishes of soldiers’ wives and thus one of the contributing factors to the downfall of the Confederacy. A distinct spin on the traditional narrative of why the South lost the war is given by the implication that southern women had a stake in its outcome. Lastly, existing scholarship could be further advanced by researching evidence as to what happened to these women after the Civil War. This study finds that poor and yeoman women did not continue to act politically and their political endeavors subsided with the end of the conflict. Little evidence exists in public policy documents showing southern women’s involvement in relief societies, organizations formed benefiting widows of Confederate soldiers, orphanages, and education that could argue for an increase or continuation of women’s political activity in the Reconstruction era.

2 CHAPTER ONE: CLASS DISTINCTIONS AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY

*“They thought of themselves as plain folk, except they would
have said, ‘plain folks.’”*

~Frank L. Owsley

The history of the South has largely been written based on several archaic assumptions which have never been thoroughly tested until a recent push by contemporary academics. The writings reflect a simplified view of class stratification made up of only the rich and the poor. The assumption of the nonexistence of a large rural yeoman class in the Old South is perhaps one of the greatest injustices to the understanding of the nation’s history.⁵ The issue of politics in the Antebellum and Civil War era are also muddled, and often; devoid of important considerations of gender, they are deserving of re-examination. As such, this project looks closely at class structures while examining political activity of poor and yeoman women in the State of Georgia during the Civil War era, and challenges old theories and assumptions about their role in political life. In order for an analysis on women’s involvement in politics to take place, a discussion of class stratification in the South prior to the Civil War is necessary. The key to understanding the following chapters rests on clearly developed definitions since existing historiography is somewhat underdeveloped. The topics presented in this chapter will first discuss class structure and economics of the Antebellum South and will define the groups of women being sampled in this study. Second, this chapter examines politics during the Antebellum era to show how women’s involvement in the political sphere drastically changed with the onset of war.

⁵ Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), vii-xi.

2.1 CLASS DISTINCTIONS

While it is enticing to believe that the American South in the mid to late nineteenth century was stratified into a simple upper and lower class, a closer look into the economic and social structure proves that it was not that simple. The Industrial Revolution in the United States is widely known to have brought about a middle class in the Northern states, but what of those states south of the Mason-Dixon Line? Was the concept of a middle class feasible in an agrarian society? The literature of influential writers, such as Frederick Law Olmstead, a Northerner who toured the Southern states, weighed heavily on early views of the Old South. A popular vision was born out of his premature observations that slaveholders in the south were “great monopolists, who dominated politics, religion, and all phases of public life and crowded everyone else off the good lands.”⁶ The six or seven million non-slaveholders who comprised the remainder of the white Southern population, were considered “poor white trash.”⁷ This Northern view and generalization was perpetuated and further solidified with the publication of J.E. Cairnes’ *The Slave Power*, in which he presented the stereotype of Southern society as being one that resolves itself into three classes: “the slaves on whom devolves all the regular industry, the slaveholders who reap all its fruits, and an idle and lawless rabble who live dispersed over vast plains in a condition little removed from absolute barbarism.”⁸ George M. Weston, in *Poor Whites of the South and Progress of Slavery in the United States*, commented in the same fashion-- he, too, offered an oversimplified observation of Southern class structures that was commonly accepted in the North:

“The whites of the South not connected with the ownership or management of slaves, constitute not far from three fourths of the whole number of whites, confined at

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁸ Ibid., 4. See also J.E. Cairnes, *The Slave Power*, (New York: Carleton, Publisher), 1862.

least to the low wages of agricultural labor and partly cut off even from this by the degradation of a companionship with the black slaves, retire to the outskirts of civilization, where they lead a semisavage life, sinking deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with each succeeding generation. The slave owner takes at first all the best lands, and finally all the lands susceptible of regular cultivation; and the poor whites, thrown back upon the hills and upon the sterile soils are mere squatters without energy enough to acquire the title even to the cheap lands they occupy, without roads, and at length without even a desire for education.”⁹

With these interpretations, it is easy to make the mistake of believing that the equivalent of a middle class did not exist in rural southern areas since the South primarily relied on agriculture. This stereotype unfortunately dominated Northern views and academic thinking for years. Simply stated, it was assumed that the South’s white inhabitants normally fell into two categories: the slave holders and the barbaric “poor whites.”¹⁰

That leaves the unanswered question: What of the common people, the “plain folk” who held just as much pride in their “self-description, who possessed the same amount of integrity, independence, courage, love of freedom and fellow man and love of God as the next well-to-do planter”?¹¹ Shall they be written out of history and into obscurity? With incomplete Northern observations controlling the view of Southern class structures, several authors emerged to alter that vision. Perhaps the earliest writer that attempted to tackle this skewed Northern perception of southern class structures was Hinton Rowan Helper. A proud southerner from North Carolina, Helper published his view of the political and social economy of the United States South in 1857 in a book entitled *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*.¹² Helper saw the great difficulty in defining the non-slave owning group in southern society. This faction was made up of farmers, tenants, laborer, herders, and artisans were described and categorized incorrectly as

⁹ Ibid., 3-4. See also George M. Weston, *Poor Whites of the South*, (Washington, 1856), 5. *His Progress of Slavery in the United States* was published in 1857.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹ Ibid., vii.

¹² Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*, (New York, Burdick Brothers, 1857).

crackers and poor whites by Northerners.¹³ Thus, Helper radically re-assessed the South's class structure through the eyes of a white non-slaveholding male in *The Impending Crisis of the South*. The publication was a devastating and deliberate attack upon the slave society. Helper described himself to be "the voice of the non-slaveholding whites of the South" in his literature outlining the interests of common non-slave holding white men with respect to their slave-owning brethren. This circulation of literature impacted the national stage and played a contributory role to the start of the Civil War. Helper became "the only southern intellectual to theorize non-slaveholders as their own distinct class." He argued that class divisions were widening and worked to raise class consciousness amongst the non-slaveholders, who he believed, were being dominated and exploited by the wealthy planter elite.¹⁴

Following in Helper's path, W.J. Cash's publication of the *Mind of the South* became the more contemporary and accepted publication that worked in tremendous ways to change the accepted vision of the South by focusing on the middle man. Cash, also a southerner and journalist himself, proclaimed, "everybody in the South was aware of, and habitually thought and spoke in terms of, a division of society into Big Men and Little Men, with strict reference to property, power, and the claim to gentility."¹⁵ Cash produces a specific rhetoric that sheds light on a culture that is often misunderstood by outsiders and brings out unspoken nuances to convey a better understanding of the real culture and heritage of the South by focusing on common white men. The "Man at the Center," in which Cash refers to over and over again, describes ordinary Southern white men, full of their own individualism when compared to the ruling cavalier elite in a frontier

¹³ David Brown. "Hinton Rowan Helper: The Logical Outcome of the Non-Slaveholders' Philosophy?" *The Historical Journal*, Vol 46, No. 1 (Mar., 2003), pp. 39-58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; 39-42.

¹⁵ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, (New York: Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, 1941), 34-35.

atmosphere.¹⁶ The idea of the “Man at the Center” would be echoed by several historians to follow Cash’s lead.

Frank Owsley’s painstaking volume on the forgotten man of the Old South, also resurrects Cash’s idea of the “Man at the Center” by suggesting that the common man should not be written out of history. Owsley perpetuates the importance of ordinary men in *Plain Folk of the Old South* and maintains that the divisions of class were inherently complicated in the Old South. It was the plain folk, or inhabitants belonging to the yeoman class, which comprised the bulk of the southern population from the Revolution to the Civil War; not the wealthy plantation owner or the poor white class.¹⁷ The key to comprehending politics in the Civil War era lies first in a clear understanding of class structures that were set in place long before the battle cry for secession had been sung. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that it was this middle or “yeoman” class, and often times the lowly poor; -- not the well to do planter elite;-- who exerted a heavy influence in Confederate economic, political, and social life.

To claim that Southern society in the nineteenth century was simply divided into rich and poor is a grave error. Owsley suggests that these stereotypes were a product of untrained historians who simply believed that unlike large plantation owners, farmers and small planters were inadequate in preserving their private papers, business accounts, or records of their life. However, the true miscue lies in the lack of scholarly effort made to uncover and analyze church records, wills, administration of estates, county-court minutes, marriage licenses, trial records, mortgage and deed books, tax books and Federal census manuscripts. Along with these records, autobiographies, biographies, and the recollections of men and women such as preachers, lawyers, doctors, and newspaper editors, who knew every family in the county, a rich story is unearthed,

¹⁶ Ibid., 29-58.

¹⁷ Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, viii.

and the lives of the “plain folk” who comprised the bulk of Southern society and economy can be recreated.¹⁸ Instead of the elementary, two-fold division of an agricultural population into slaveholders and non-slaveholding poor whites, other economic groups appear.¹⁹

In a detailed study of these sources, Owsley concludes that there were several classes of planters from his sample. Some classes owned thousands of acres of land and hundreds of slaves, others owned a thousand or fewer acres and two score slaves, others were small planters with five hundred acres and ten or fifteen slaves, and still others were large farmers with three or four hundred acres and five to ten slaves. Finally, there were even smaller farmers with two hundred or fewer acres and one or two slaves.²⁰ The story is further complicated when he asserts that his sample shows there were non-slaveholders who were also large farmers who employed hired labor to maintain two hundred to a thousand acres; a middle group which owned from one hundred to two hundred acres and “one horse farmers” with less than one hundred acres. At the bottom rung were landless renters, squatters, and laborers known as the “leisure” class whose means of support was not on record.²¹ Daniel R. Hundley’s *Social Relations in Our Southern States* argue in tandem with Owsley that “as in all other civilized communities, the middle classes of the South constitute the greater proportion of her citizens, and are likewise the most useful members of her society.” A man belonging to this group was usually a slaveholder, owning from five to fifty negroes, and generally looked after their management himself.²²

Since the focus of this project lies primarily on Georgia residents, presented below are just a few samples of Owsley’s charts that analyze the size of holdings of both slaveholding and non-

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

²¹ Ibid., 7.

²² Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 76-87.

slaveholding farmers for 1850 and 1860 in seven black-belt counties together, and Houston County, Georgia as a sample county. Two things can be concluded from these tables. The first is that the black belt region of Georgia was comprised of landowners engaged in agriculture who were both slaveholders and non-slaveholders. The second conclusion is that the numbers indicate that the bulk of slaveholders in the Georgia black-belt were farmers rather than wealthy planters who owned rich estates.²³

Table 2.1 Sizes of Holdings 1850²⁴

	Georgia Black Belt as a whole 1850		Houston County 1850	
	Slave-holding landowners	Nonslave-holding landowners	Slave-holding landowners	Nonslave-holding landowners
	2,939	1,412	539	185
Acres owned	Percentage of owners	Percentage of owners	Percentage of owners	Percentage of owners
1-50	2.55	14.16	2.04	17.29
51-100	8.61	28.97	6.30	25.94
101-200	19.73	31.16	15.95	35.67
201-300	17.90	14.87	16.32	11.35
301-400	12.62	4.82	17.25	7.02
401-500	9.32	2.48	8.90	1.08
501-1,000	19.72	2.62	20.96	1.62
1,001-5,000	9.12	.21	11.69	---
Above 5,000	.24	---	.56	---

²³ Ibid., 174-175.

²⁴ Ibid., 174.

Table 2.2 Sizes of Holdings 1860²⁵

	Georgia Black Belt as a whole 1860		Houston County 1860	
	Slave-holding landowners	Nonslave-holding landowners	Slave-holding landowners	Nonslave-holding landowners
	1,534	692	424	145
Acres owned	Percentage of owners	Percentage of owners	Percentage of owners	Percentage of owners
1-50	2.15	12.57	.47	11.71
51-100	5.22	29.20	5.43	26.21
101-200	14.60	35.12	8.02	27.50
201-300	15.52	11.13	16.51	17.24
301-400	11.73	5.92	12.50	9.66
401-500	7.11	2.31	5.19	2.07
501-1,000	24.64	2.46	24.06	2.76
1,001-5,000	18.25	1.29	27.59	2.76
Above 5,000	.78	---	.24	---

It is evident from this data that the plain country folk made up several millions of the free white population in the South. Thus, debunking the Northern myth of simple class stratifications into wealthy and poor perpetuated by early historians and scholars. The fact that slaveholding families comprised nearly one third of the white population of the South, and most of them being small slave-owners and small landowners themselves, suggests that class divisions were more complicated. Owsley estimates that 60 percent of landowners in the entire southern region owned from one to five slaves and another large group held from five to ten.²⁶ Additionally, most slaveholders were also small landowners who owned farms ranging from fifty to three hundred acres.²⁷ The data presented from tax lists, census reports and other documentation from Owsley's research allows for the determination with some accuracy of the social and economic structure of the rural Antebellum South. The most remarkable fact that can be taken away from his findings is

²⁵ Ibid., 175.

²⁶ Ibid., 7-10.

²⁷ Ibid., 8.

that a large yeoman class was actually present in the pre-Civil War era. Owsley firmly placed the yeomanry at the center of scholarship and other historians followed to add to their significance.

Owsley's push for revisionist thinking regarding class formation in southern literature enticed several later authors to take this information into account and explore it further. Lee Kennett's *Marching Through Georgia* included an excellent piece of evidence that supports the claim that Southern society was never one that was broken into a wealthy and poor white class. The official records and letters of General William T. Sherman shed light on southerners as well as northerners during the Civil War who acknowledged that class structures were not rigid. These official records contained a letter from Sherman corresponding with General Henry W. Halleck. The letter discloses Sherman's innermost thoughts on the people that he was trying to conquer during his famous march to the sea.

Sherman instructed Halleck that in order for one to prescribe a government for the people of the Confederacy once the nation foundered, one had to understand the four classes "into which they naturally divided themselves." Sherman went on to first describe the large planters, who held a monopoly over power, and who could possibly retain their power once defeat was brought to them. There was a pro-Union segment that would not cause any trouble. Then there were the "smaller farmers, mechanics, merchants and laborers," who made up about three fourths of the white population. Lastly there was a fourth class that Sherman labeled the "young bloods" otherwise known as the flaming youth of the Confederacy.²⁸ Sherman proved to be quite progressive in his views for the time because he included the great mass of the yeomanry and plain folk as the center of his understanding of Southern society. This directly contrasts the views of most of his contemporaries who believed that white Southerners divided themselves as either

²⁸ Lee Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers and Civilians During Sherman's Campaign*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 1995), 15.

planters or “poor white trash.” Sherman also claimed that those belonging to the common yeomanry did not blindly follow the leadership of the planters in political matters but formed leaders amongst themselves.²⁹ Despite his forward thinking, Sherman did not address the issue of gender among the yeomanry. Women belonging to this group played an active role in forging new identities and taking power into their own hands, as will be further developed in this study.

The subject of the yeomanry was brought into question in Stephanie McCurry’s earlier work, *Masters of Small Worlds*. Though she focuses mainly on class divisions in the South Carolina Low Country, her evidence can be applied to yeoman groups in Georgia and throughout the American South. McCurry argues that though the presence of the yeomanry was evident in manuscripts and census records, its importance has been overlooked and even denied in comparison to the large black majority and the wealthy and powerful planter class.³⁰ Though varying definitions of yeoman have been offered over the years, she classifies the low country yeoman as they would have described themselves. Federal officials traveled throughout the South after the Civil War conducting surveys. What the officials found to distinguish the yeoman from the higher planter class was that they proclaimed themselves to be “self-working farmers.” They differentiated themselves by the character of their labor and by the fact that they “worked the land with their own hands.” The yeoman were different from their affluent planter neighbors whose slaves were sufficient and great in number to provide the labor for themselves and that of their families, while plain folk farmers and their families composed most, if not all, of the labor supply of their households.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 16.

³⁰ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii.

³¹ Ibid., 48.

The ownership of slaves did not divide the line between yeoman and planter. An example can be made of Ezekiel Stokes, a slaveholder himself but still one of the self-proclaimed “working farmers” that census officials described. The slaves he had purchased numbered about three or four and he and his family worked alongside his slaves in the field. As such, it took more than the ownership of slaves to transform a farmer into an elite planter or to relieve his wife and children from the back-breaking day-to-day life on the farm.³² McCurry maintains that farmers in the low country of South Carolina could have owned as many as nine slaves and were still dependent on themselves and other family members for field labor.³³ In sum and in quantitative terms, the definition of a yeoman or “self-working farmer” were those heads of households who owned fewer than 150 acres of improved land and fewer than ten slaves according to McCurry.³⁴

Shifting from the South Carolina low country, Stephan Hahn turns the focus of the Yeomanry to the Georgia Upcountry in his acclaimed *Roots of Southern Populism*. The Georgia Upcountry was a major staple-producing area and had an entire social structure all its own. Hahn believes that to describe the non-plantation districts of the Upcountry as a homogenous zone of smallholding cultivators would be far too simple and static.³⁵ Instead, the Upcountry, like the Plantation Belt, had its rich and poor, its landowners and its landless, its slaveholders and non-slaveholders. A numerically preponderant yeoman faction existed in the socioeconomic formation. While Hahn shows that most of Georgia’s Upcountry citizens were farmers, he includes evidence from two counties that reveal that roughly one-quarter had different occupations. Included in Hahn’s definition of yeomanry were a small number of merchants, lawyers, physicians, miners,

³² Claim of Ezekiel Stokes, Beaufort, Southern Claims Commission Records, RG 217, File #6662, NA.

³³ McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

³⁵ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20-21.

artisans and laborers. Hahn presents evidence from Carroll and Jackson counties to show that more than three-quarters of the group were either craftsmen or laborers but were also tied to the agricultural economy. Many of these people combined farming with their trade.³⁶ The table below portrays the diverse society and occupations of the inhabitants of the Georgia Upcountry.

Table 2.3 Occupations of White Household Heads, Jackson and Carroll Counties, 1850-1860³⁷

Occupation	Percentage of Household Heads			
	Jackson County		Carroll County	
	1850	1860	1850	1860
Farmer	75.4%	69.2%	74.7%	78.3%
Trade	1.5	0.7	2.4	2.1
Professional	2.4	3.7	2.6	3.0
Service	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.2
Artisan	8.1	11.0	12.6	11.5
Laborer	11.7	15.4	7.5	5.0
Other	0.6	0.0	0.2	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	332	428	454	430

A closer look at the table provided by Hahn shows that laborers and artisans formed a large part of a non-landowning segment among the yeoman farming population in Georgia's Upcountry. The evidence presented for Jackson and Carroll Counties shows that half of the group were craftsmen and more than three-quarters were either craftsmen or laborers or artisans during the 1850s. The households were nonetheless tied to the agricultural sector and combined farming with a certain skill set. For example, John Park, a Jackson County blacksmith, owned 100 acres in 1850 and Baxter McPherson, a Carroll County sawyer who owned 200 acres, exemplifies the quintessential yeoman experience of craftsmen owning land.³⁸ It is also estimated that three of ten

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

³⁸ Ibid., 21-22.

heads of households who classified themselves as farmers owned no real estate in 1850. Some may have been farm laborers, who resided in dwellings on plantations or farms they worked. Men like Baron Maynard, a carpenter in Carroll County, who rented small parcels on which he set up his shop to supplement his earnings, were by no means among the “floating body of the dispossessed” or poor white trash. Tenancy accounted for at least 15 percent of those claiming agricultural occupations.³⁹

The evidence presented by Hahn complicates the theory of the Yeoman farmer provided by Owsley and McCurry by including a merchant and labor class in the data pool. Yeoman farmers were not simply landowners who owned less land and possessed a small number of slaves compared to their planter elite neighbors. They were also more than “self-working” men who had to work the soil with his own two hands alongside his family members and slaves. However, they were also heads of households who may not have even purchased land but whose trade was linked to the agricultural community that fueled the Southern economy. Lastly, some were mere tenants who lacked the resources necessary to purchase land and utilized the renting process as an avenue to gain wealth and independence later on.

One cannot read documents such as these without concluding that class divisions in the Old South were complex. The conventional division of the South into three classes-- planters, poor white, and slaves-- is a simplistic misrepresentation that historians will continue to grapple with in future studies. This thesis borrows liberally from works of prominent historians to provide a distinct definition of class structures in the state of Georgia in the Antebellum South. For all intents and purposes of this analysis, the yeoman class will be considered farmers or heads of households who owned up to several hundred acres of land and a few slaves, but who were not solely in

³⁹ Ibid., 22.

managerial positions over their labor force. Instead they relied on their own labor and the labor of their family members to supplement the work of slaves on their smaller farms. The yeoman population also includes those middle class lawyers, doctors, artisans and laborers, who had agricultural ties to the Southern economy. The women referred to in this sample are not numerically women of the poor class but “plain folk” females belonging to the yeoman household as either wives, daughters, or relatives of yeoman male kin. Though not considered to be very rich nor very poor, it is subsequently argued that women of this social and economic class were an important group who exercised political and social control in different ways than their upper-class female counterparts. The story of the yeoman woman is just as important as the story of that of her husband or father; she is deserving of recognition and not shackled by the confines of traditional historiography that excludes women from the population of the Confederacy and political history.

2.2 POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Following the conversation on class structures in the State of Georgia and the agrarian South, the second component of this chapter discusses yeoman women’s political involvement preceding the Civil War. Prior to secession, women, regardless of their social or economic standing, operated under principles of male protection and paternalism.⁴⁰ They possessed few rights or identities separate from their husbands and homes and were subject to the domination of men. Most southern women knew that they had no political freedoms and that such activities were a privilege and responsibility of men. Yet the secession crisis and war hardships brought about a moment of national upheaval and the lure of politics became irresistible and unavoidable for women, especially those belonging to the middle and lower classes. This fascinating phenomenon is important to highlight because women began to step out of traditional roles that society placed

⁴⁰ Edward J. Cashin and Glenn T. Eskew, *Paternalism in a Southern City: Race, Religion, and Gender in Augusta, Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), xi.

upon females and began to act politically in the public sphere as soon as the Confederacy waged war. Yeoman women's wartime political activity is juxtaposed against their low advocacy in public affairs before the Civil War to show the significant changes in their behavior once the war began.

As is true of all antebellum women, literature concerning Confederate politics and public life are almost completely bereft of women's voices, regardless of their economic standing. All women were effectively disregarded and were not even considered targets of policies; they most certainly were not thought to be influenced by Confederate protocols. However, Drew Faust was one of the first historians to argue that not only did Confederate opinions and government policies directly affect women's lives, but women of the South became enthralled and vocally responded to the southern government's policies on conscription, relief, home defense, economic production, and slavery. As a direct result of these war born policies, women were able to reinvent themselves amidst a social and political metamorphosis, otherwise known as the American Civil War.⁴¹

The farm or plantation was the central economic and social institution of the Old South, as well as the primary site for political organization. The plantation upheld the quintessential model of southern paternalism. By definition, the concept of paternalism describes a "personal association between individuals whereby an authority figure relates to someone under his influence as a parent treats a child; the person in power regulates the other's conduct and provides for the other's needs. In return, the other performs some service on behalf of or remains committed to the person in power." It is a system based on deference and not equality, as it reflects the reciprocal

⁴¹ Drew Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xiii.

duties and mutual obligations of those individuals who participate in it.⁴² Paternalism functioned as the driving force behind racial control and the subordination of white women.

The form of paternalism presented here is one in which the master or yeoman farmer designated himself as the head of his “family white and black.” All males assumed the responsibility over southern households and stood at the pinnacle of the “domestic pyramid of power and obligation of the Old Southern order.”⁴³ Like most women of the affluent class, Lucy Wood acknowledged that she had “no political opinion and had a peculiar dislike of all those females who discussed such matters.”⁴⁴ Well to do ladies living in the nineteenth century south regarded politics as being entirely the privilege and obligation of men. Men casted their votes and spoke in public, while women remained within the sphere of the home and family. As one South Carolinian plantation mistress remarked, “woman has not business with such matters.”⁴⁵

Instead, a woman’s place was at home. Gender roles and women’s work in the household reinforced their inferior status and place within the social hierarchy of the Old South. Women belonging to the upper class had specific duties. Besides being educated, the epitome of a Southern woman and wife would be one that could maintain order and cleanliness of the household, she would be able to distinguish the amount of provisions needed for the family and when to replenish foodstuffs, as well as being extremely thrifty and economical. Elite white women were considered “second class citizens,” a label that would limit their actions and expectations to the sphere of the household. Thus, the ideology of paternalism in which the male held rights and authority over the

⁴² Cashin and Eskew, *Paternalism in a Southern City*, ix.

⁴³ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 31-32.

⁴⁴ Lucy Wood to Waddy Butler, January 21, 1861, Butler Papers, Manuscripts Department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

⁴⁵ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 10.

dependents of his estate was born in the Old South. In a sense, women's household work, was an important symbol and extension of men's power.⁴⁶

The world of the yeoman class in the Antebellum South was similar to the planter class in that it also rested upon production and consumption in the household. It conjointly upheld strong notions of paternalism. Men identifying with this class placed little emphasis on public or political life compared to those men belonging to the wealthy and powerful planter elite who exercised power over government and economic matters from the confines of their large estates. Rather, families belonging to yeoman group exercised their long and short term independence not in the political realm but by securing most of life's necessities through their own agricultural efforts. Power rested upon the control over their own small households. As Stephanie McCurry posits, male heads of households were masters of their own world, acting as the nucleus of their family. A form of paternalism existed in the yeoman household in that farmers controlled the labor of their wives, children, and slaves. While the wives and daughters of yeoman farmers were legally free, their husbands and fathers viewed them as dependents, and therefore, as a kind of property akin to slaveholding.⁴⁷ The yeoman household was much that of a strict patriarchy, fueled by legal and customary dependence, not equality as males assumed the head of the family. Women of the yeomanry in the Antebellum South could not "vote and surrendered rights of property to their husbands upon marriage."⁴⁸

The division of labor among the yeoman class was based on sex and age in Antebellum Georgia. Males took charge of the production by working in the fields where they cleared, plowed, and planted most of their families' foodstuffs such as corn, wheat, oats, sweet potatoes and some

⁴⁶ Cashin and Eskew, *Paternalism in a Southern City*, 43-44.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43. See also, Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴⁸ Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 31

cotton.⁴⁹ Women's domiciliary roles were just as important to their families' survival as the men's. Wives and daughters were also brought into the fields at harvest time where they tended to small gardens and livestock. However, the yeoman female's primary role was consumed with domestic chores that included child rearing, cooking, sewing, spinning thread, and producing clothing. Census and estate records show that many yeoman families owned spinning wheels and looms and many raised sheep for wool and a cotton crop that clothed families with the fruits of their own female labor.⁵⁰ This structure of typical female behavior and responsibilities would be shaken by the onset of war. Yeoman women would soon be laying claim to their own autonomy and obtaining a specific kind of independence in a way they had never fathomed in the antebellum era.

As previously stated, white women of all classes were politically disenfranchised and remained in their own private sphere of domesticity in the antebellum era. The American South's twelve million people consisted of four million free white women, who were considered citizens but possessed none of the political rights or privileges afforded to their male compatriots at the dawn of the Civil War.⁵¹ As events unfolded, men of the Confederacy worked tirelessly to build a proslavery and anti-democratic state that was dedicated to the proposition that all men were not created equal and who also nullified the individual and collective agency of women.⁵² As Stephanie McCurry so brilliantly stated, "there would be far more of the people to contend with in the making of the history of the Civil War than the founders ever bargained for because no one expected to contend with women."⁵³ This Confederate project would be tested at every point, not just by the bayonets and muskets of Yankees but by the very people that the founders of the nation

⁴⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁵¹ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 2.

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ Ibid., 3.

excluded from the political process. Common women of the yeomanry who were never much of any interest to state officials, were regarded like Antigone in Greek mythology--to be “outside politics and war.” They were parties to be protected “under the governance of husbands and fathers” at the war’s inception. But by its conclusion women were savage political actors who forced Confederate officials to reevaluate their political clout.⁵⁴

It must be noted that women’s politics during the Civil War was not an activity in support of women’s rights or immediate suffrage. Lobbying for women’s suffrage would come about in the South later on in the 1880s. Yeoman women in Georgia did not speak a language of “rights” at all. Rather their political significance was evident from their changing roles in their communities and family units.⁵⁵ Thus, writing to government officials, signing petitions, and rioting will all be considered as political actions in this analysis. These activities by Georgia women of the Yeoman class were done deliberately outside of the domestic sphere as notions of paternalism and coverture ceased to drive society with the outbreak of the Civil War. The promise of protection due to women under the old paternalistic order would morph into a cutting-edge rallying cry for Georgia females as they seized and adopted with grand fervor political standing in the newly formed republic.

3 CHAPTER TWO: POLITICAL ACTIVITY OF GEORGIA WOMEN

*“I write with tears in my eyes to think my all is gone and
if there is not some amendment made, me and my children
will suffer, and many others.”*

~Elizabeth Fields

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2-3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 136.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

“Politics engrosses my every thought.”⁵⁶ This short, yet powerful, statement written in 1861 by an elite Confederate sympathizer Amanda Sims to her confidant, Harriet Palmer, merely scratched the surface of the complex world of female politics in the Civil War South. Women’s political activism at this stage in history proves far different from what academics consider “politics” in the modern day. Women in the early 19th century South did not fight to obtain civil rights in the name of feminism until the suffrage movement of the 1880s.⁵⁷ Instead, they laid claim to an alluring era in which women engaged in a unique form of politics that served as a precursor to the modern day women’s rights campaign. The Civil War South witnessed a surge of yeoman and poor women writing to government officials, petitioning, rioting and even participating in incriminating behavior punishable by law. It is unfortunate that their voices remain largely silent in historic memory despite the intriguing story they tell. This chapter seeks to answer questions that remain unanswered in academia regarding women of the non-elite class and their political implications in the making of public policy in the State of Georgia. This study discovers that Georgia women of the poor and yeoman class engaged in forms of politics to a certain degree and their acts were statistically significant because they ushered in some change in Confederate policy. However, this study also explains that these women did not intend to be political actors and Georgia women differed from the sample of women used in Stephanie McCurry’s avant-garde book *Confederate Reckoning*.

A large amount of literature pertaining to the changing roles of upper-class white women in the State of Georgia are at the disposal of today’s leading historians, but they were by no means

⁵⁶ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 11.

⁵⁷ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 137.

the only economic group to undergo a transformation and achieve political standing during the Civil War. White women of the non-planter class, who were either dirt poor or kin to the yeoman class, tenant farmers, overseers, and the merchant class, also engaged in the political sphere in distinct ways. Though the backgrounds of these women are not documented as extensively as elite women, they remain an influential group deserving of recognition. It is apparent from the introductory chapter that there is a serious need for critical re-evaluation of women's issues in the existing narrative when attempting to answer questions that have yet to be interpreted.

Though scholars have taken great efforts to analyze the roles of upper class women and slave women during the Civil War, little effort has been made to examine lower and middle class women's political involvement until Stephanie McCurry's publication of *Confederate Reckoning*, which attempted to address the issues belonging to the lower class unfranchised female population. Viewed as a valiant effort and landmark publication, some in the field still consider the book long on argument and short on evidence. The evidence that McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning* incorporates is somewhat selective and does not include many sources from Georgia. It leaves several ideas and arguments underdeveloped and faulty. This project attempts to fill in that gap by bringing the voices of poor and yeoman Georgia women into the prevailing discussion. It challenges assumptions and offers a fresh perspective on female political activism in Georgia in comparison to their sisters throughout the Confederate South. Primary source documents, including letters, petitions, newspaper articles, and diary entries from the state of Georgia are used to shed light on the politicization of Georgia women who belonged to the poor and yeoman classes. By examining primary source documents only from this state, a model is created through which to evaluate the role of white women. The evidence provided here is juxtaposed with the data from

other Confederate states to mark similarities or ambiguities otherwise proposed in *Confederate Reckoning*.

In *Mothers of Invention*, Drew Faust was correct to argue that the Civil War acted as a catalyst to entice wealthy white women of the planter class to think more openly about politics than ever before. However, the war had a more profound effect on the political considerations of non-elite white women. It is a story that few have chosen to develop. Common women and families left on the home front were plagued with dire and economic consequences of a savage war that ripped through the Confederate South with tremendous force, thus compelling the poor and yeoman female class to engage in what Stephanie McCurry calls “politics of subsistence and survival.”⁵⁸ According to McCurry, letter writing, petitioning, and rioting became new means of political expression to help women address their hardships. The numbers of non-affluent females participating in these forms of expression skyrocketed throughout Georgia and are verifiable with concrete evidence. However, Georgia evidence contains several variables that give cause to re-evaluate how the non-elite women of the entire Civil War South expressed themselves politically. It is arguable that poor and yeoman women participated more fervently and actively out of necessity than elite women, whose articulation of political opinions were less invested because of their economic standing. Affluent women were endowed with financial resources, region-wide networks of family and kin, and access to information and transportation that were denied to their poorer sisters. This resulted in exponentially dissimilar war experiences according to class.⁵⁹ Yet, this is not a tale of the women belonging to the planter class. It was the yeoman and poor females

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 33.

who would move into the political sphere in Civil War Georgia due to their destitution, simultaneously reshaping welfare policy with their own hands.

The famine and poverty that swept over Georgia and its female population like a tyrannical cumulonimbus cloud was a direct result of the market economy. In the years leading up to the war, planters focused on cultivating more and more cotton, which in turn left inadequate amounts of land to produce food that the South desperately needed. Georgia's livestock population was also in decline.⁶⁰ Corn production was stagnant from the early days of the secession crisis and oat cultivation had also declined over the previous decade.⁶¹ Some areas in Georgia even supplemented their supplies with meat and grain from the Midwest.⁶² Georgia and the rest of the South were engaging in a very dangerous game of roulette. It was only a matter of time before the bullet would enter the chamber.

The *Macon Telegraph* ran an ad in early January 1861 urging planters to "Plant corn! Plant corn! We must have large supplies, or poverty and suffering will come upon us like a strong man armed."⁶³ Its editor was prescient when he predicted that if war eventually followed the secession crisis, double the supplies of corn would be needed for soldiers on the battlefield and for the families they left behind. Merchants kept a tight grip on food resources and only sold to those who could offer top dollar. These capitalistic principles severely affected the interests of the plain folk. Inflated food prices had a profound effect throughout the Georgia economy, which in turn made home front suffering unbearable for the common population.⁶⁴ Once the Civil War officially began, inflation began its relentless march on the home front as prices for meat, salt, flour, coffee,

⁶⁰ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, "The Women Rising: Cotton, Class, and Confederate Georgia's Rioting Women," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (Spring 2002), 53.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

cotton, yarn, leather and firewood skyrocketed. Both rich and poor were affected by the economy but none so much as the non-planter classes.⁶⁵

Georgia politicians consideration for the welfare and the condition of women and families were little to nonexistent before the onset of war. Lawmakers agreed that assistance would be given in rare cases so as not to increase dependence on government once war did begin. Lower class women and yeoman families on the home front were afflicted with insurmountable shortages of food, salt, cloth, and money as the war progressed. It became increasingly apparent to the Georgia legislature that its citizens were in a state of deprivation as the war dragged on. Welfare measures needed to be enacted to prevent starvation and suffering.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the Confederate government did not hold up its end of the bargain. This resulted in a specific phenomenon in which women began to address their problems throughout the Confederate states. Southern women emerged as a collective and formidable adversary of the policies of the Confederate States of America by embracing a new identity outside their traditional gender roles and demanded that justice and protection promised to them be upheld.⁶⁷ The meek and delicate belles gracing the southland became mythical creatures of days long past.

White Southern women's allegiance came to matter as never before in the American Civil War and the notion that women were parties outside of war became a fable. Women intentionally pushed themselves to be recognized as a force in Confederate political life. They forged individual and collective identities to advance their interests when war policies disadvantaged them. Out of the conventional ideology of male paternalism and the promise of protection that Southern politicians made in the secession crisis, female citizens moved to hold the state accountable to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁶ Wright, Denise. "Welfare and Poverty during the Civil War." New Georgia Encyclopedia. 05 June 2014. Web. 25 March 2015. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/welfare-and-poverty-during-civil-war>

⁶⁷ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 4.

them as the war continued.⁶⁸ Out of the massive public records generated by wartime governments, Stephanie McCurry unearths the untold story of the process by which ordinary white women assumed these political roles by pressing Confederate officials for “means of protection, survival, redress and justice.”⁶⁹ It became a new chapter in Southern political history when women contrived themselves into a new political constituency of “soldier’s wives”-- a sinew to be reckoned with at the Confederacy’s own peril.⁷⁰ The following discussion demonstrates the manner in which yeoman and poor women in Georgia contributed to changing political life and female roles in the Civil War. Also incorporated throughout the subsections are examinations showing how evidence from Georgia compares to the postulations set forth by McCurry regarding white non-elite rural females in the entire Civil War South.

3.2 LETTER WRITING

A social contract between the Confederate government and soldiers was created at the outset of the Civil War. The citizen soldiers placed all their faith in local and state governments for the support and protection of their families in their absence.⁷¹ Many servicemen viewed the obligation as the *Confederate Baptist* and the Charleston Board for the Relief of Families of Soldiers saw it; “Our soldiers’ families are entitled to our protection and care for those soldiers are our defenders...the soldier in this terrible war is rightly entitled to know and feel that his loved ones at home are under the kind protection of his State Government and in the care and protection of those who regard them as part of their household.”⁷² The letters flooding into government offices during the apex of the Civil War were certainly indicative of the constant reminder to Confederate

⁶⁸ Ibid., 88-89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁷¹ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 134.

⁷² *Confederate Baptist*, Mar. 11, 1863; *Report of the Board for the Relief of Families of Soldiers in the Parishes of St. Philip and St. Michael* (Charleston, 1863), 9.

officials to uphold their duty under that contract when soldiers' families were in severe deprivation and on the brink of starvation.⁷³ What is even more fascinating is the phenomena in which the foundations of Southern life were forever altered. The vision of "the people" that governments recognized forever shifted with the emergence of soldiers' wives.⁷⁴

The first avenue through which Georgia yeoman and poor females acted politically to address their state of destitution was through writing government officials for assistance. Corresponding with government was previously considered a privilege reserved only for males throughout the entire Southern region. Women's correspondence to state legislatures and men of political power were an uncommon occurrence prior to the Civil War. White yeoman and poor women became vocal when it became clear that the war would not be of short duration and that the absence of their men was proving to be devastating to the welfare of their families.⁷⁵ Stephanie McCurry was one of the first historians to recognize the phenomenon in which women of the non-planter class in the Civil War South collectively identified themselves as soldiers' wives in their correspondence to government officials pleading that their basic needs be met.⁷⁶ Women in the state of Georgia proved no exception, but were, to a certain degree, slightly abnormal from the results documented in *Confederate Reckoning*. McCurry's arguments were based on limited sources from only a few states in the entire Confederacy, despite the abundance of available archival resources from Georgia women. This exclusion proves significant when analyzing the available data and making sound conclusions about the political agency of Confederate women. Though the following letters may or may not have been slightly exaggerated for effect, there can

⁷³ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 133-134.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁵ Robert Kenzer, Review of *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30350>

⁷⁶ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 135, 145.

be no true way to identify their accuracy. It is certain that women were desperate enough to go through great lengths to write government officials and the phenomena is important to examine, nonetheless.

Perhaps the most widely cited letter found not just in McCurry's work but in numerous publications involving the Civil War South is Elizabeth Fields' November 10, 1864 letter to Governor Joseph E. Brown from Colquitt County, Georgia. It is an excellent source to begin the discussion portraying the mass human suffering at the grassroots level and shows how Georgia females assumed political roles in which they had never before. Mrs. Fields writes:

"Dear sir I now take the liberty of dropping you a few lines to let you know how we are getting along the soldiers wives of Colquitt County we that have nobody to work is faring bad - I have 5 in family my children are two small to work. and I am here without corn and cannot buy a bushel without paying from 5 to 10 dols for it the rich men that is sworn to sell soldiers familys corn at government price will not sell them a bushel at any price whatever I have called on several of them for corn and they say they have the corn but will not take government price for it and are sworn not to take anymore and they will not sell all xx I cannot work for money enough to keep my children from suffereing I have hogs, enough to make my meat if I could get corn to feed them my husband has been in the service nearly 3 years though I heard last week that he is dead and if he is he died a faithful soldier and when he was here I did not lack for anything that was I write with tears in my eyes for my heart is full of greif to think my all is gone I dont draw anything of importance our court was a great deal of xx them they want to have if it gets it and every day is the of it and if there is not some amendment made me and my children must suffer and many others I dont know who else to apply to only you for assistance."

yours with respect

Elizabeth A. Fields⁷⁷

Similarly, Tho I. Smith took a pen to paper on October 8, 1963, "Sir, permit to write you a few lines to inform you somewhat the condition of our section or immediate settlement here are soldiers wives who have been in the service for 2 ½ years who have worked hard taken hold of the plow and through their exertion made corn enough to have done them that has not to day has not a nubbin left. We cannot make one up this crop. We will be compelled to abandon our homes. We

⁷⁷ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-011>

cannot support our families. I mention those circumstances so that you may be posted as to our condition.”⁷⁸ Smith does not mention exactly what city or town in Georgia she is writing from but she does end the letter with the conviction that the Governor has an obligation to help the soldiers’ wives in this area since he received every vote in their precinct except 6 of 57.⁷⁹

Soldiers’ wives and women were not the only people in Georgia affected by the lack of resources as a result of increased demand for goods to support the Confederate army. Children of soldiers who were left on the home front with no one to provide for them but their mothers and matriarchs of their households often spent many nights falling asleep with empty stomachs. Isabella Herondior [sic] and Jemima Clements of Whitfield County, Georgia jointly appealed to Governor Brown on October 8, 1863 to inform him of the condition of the families in the county. Both of their husbands were fighting for Confederate independence under General Bragg in Chattanooga. They state that they were entirely destitute of any provisions to support themselves and their families and pleaded with him to provide relief for the “crys of the orphans and the distressed soldier’s wives,” as they could always count on him for sympathy. Ms. Clements and Ms. Herondior [sic] knew no other friend disposed to assist them and trusted that Governor Brown would not leave the poor families to perish. Their words speak through the ink on the paper that they most likely undertook great pains to procure. One can almost hear and feel the anguish in their voices when they write: “We are willing to bear all that is possible but when our poor children call to us for bread and we have none to give them, the case is harrowing beyond description.” As

⁷⁸ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-058-014>

⁷⁹ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-058-014>

winter approached, these women looked to his excellency Brown as a guardian and remained his humble servants to the bitter end.⁸⁰

A Miss I.P. Hadden also wrote Governor Brown on May 21, 1864 from Jefferson County and mentioned the children her husband left behind for her to look after. Unfortunately for Miss Hadden, her husband would never return from the battlefields to see the faces of his beloved wife and children. The only support that she could now turn to for protection was Governor Brown and the Confederate legislature:

“I take the pleser to rite you a few lines to inform the harshality that is case in this county among us wimen. I am a widder with too little children. My husban has bin kill in the war. My name has bin taken of the list an is not aloud to draw enny money which others draw is more aloud to then I am to live and they say I’ll be alone to sequester for a day. If this is the case me and too children will perish. I reply to you as you are for helps friends con the best gov that ever Georgia.”⁸¹

The most heartbreaking correspondence comes from a seventy three year old widow in Dawson County, Georgia who was too old to work the plough for any of her own subsistence. On May 22, 1864, Sarah Hudlow identified herself as a “poor widow” who had twenty odd children and grandchildren in the war and was suffering for want of a little help from Governor Brown since some of her children came home wounded and unable to work. Below is an excerpt of a gut wrenching account of her wartime experience. Ms. Hudlow also gives a good indication of the situation of many other poor widows and families in the surrounding area:

“I am not able to do hardly anything and I hadn’t got one peck of corn to make me bread and I have not received one single farthering from the government yet. I am living with my youngest daughter for I

⁸⁰ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-058-014>

⁸¹ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-005>

can't wait on myself. I can't walk one mile but what it lays me up for one or two days and I have made application to the court but I can't get no help and I want you the governor to write this court for they are not doing right. They are ruled by the clerk of the Superior Court so I am told and I want you to inquire into this business for it is not managed right for some draws corn that ought not or the meanest corrector and don't he try to make anything. I do all that I can to try to get something to live on and I can't get none if I don't get help from the government. I shall have to suffer if not parish and I write to you so that you may know how these smart rascals is doing for it is not me alone that is complaining but a great many more as well. I write to you believing that you are our friend and don't know how we are treated and I thought I would give you a few lines to let you know some things about the way things is a going on. I know you are a man of sense for you have acted like a friend and I think you are our friend and I hope will remain our friend. We will look up to you to befriend and soon as you can give the inferior court word how for them to do and for them not to make fish of one and fleck of another. I don't want you to think hard of me for writing to you for I wrote to you as a friend for I am your friend and expect to remain your friend. I hope you won't forsake us for we are a poor needy set of people. This neighborhood is a poor neighborhood of folks and I think they are friendly people towards one another or I find them the most of them so to me. These lines comes from a poor old sister in the church and if I had not of been slighted as I thought I was I would not of pestered you with these lines and do if you please attend to my case. I could write more but Brother J. E. Brown I don't want to pester you too much. So I must come to a close by subscribing myself your affectionate friend and sister in the Baptist church until death.

Sarah Hudlow

To. J. E. Brown Governor of Georgia"⁸²

Though a great number of letters exist in which women of the poor and yeoman class in Georgia wrote to Governor Brown for monetary assistance and rations, women also wrote to Brown to have their wishes granted in other ways. Mary Cordle of Macon, Georgia penned a letter to the Governor on April 5, 1864 requesting that her poor and ill child, drafted before the age of 18, be sent home from the Confederate Army. This ailing woman was blind and would surely perish as her son was her only source of relief and assistance. She wrote that her neighbors and own daughter were unable to give her assistance. Not only was Ms. Cordle blind but she also lost the use of her "rite arm" and begged Brown to have pity on a "poor old blind helpless woman" by sending his officers to release her son from active duty. She ended her agonizing letter by stating that his troubles would be rewarded in the coming day.⁸³

⁸² Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-005>

⁸³ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-004>

As Mary Cordle managed to write a few lines to Governor Brown urging him to use his political prowess to grant leave for her son, Mary Flemmons of Taliaferro County, Georgia was perhaps the angriest of the women used in this sample. Her displeasure is unmistakable when she wrote to the Governor not of issues pertaining to monetary assistance or furlough requests but an appointment of an agent to ensure that rations be distributed equally in the county in which she resided.

“Last year I got 50 dollars for the year. I lived harder last year than I ever did in my life. We are not commanded to live by bread alone. We want bacon to go with the bread. Would you not think it very hard to set down to a meal of dried bread 3 times a day for three months at a time. I want to know what is the reason we soldiers families are not provided for like those soldiers families in Columbia County. The soldiers families in that County is fed from the Commissary stores. They draw for one a bushel of corn meal for a child one-half bushel and one draws 12 pounds of bacon and a child draws 6 pounds a month. Can’t you fix it so hear that we can draw from those stores. We don’t want no money, we want provisions and you are the man that ought to appoint an agent in this district to attend to this business. I want you to do your duty and appoint one here. Do you expect we poor and weakly women to our children and help meet in the battle field fighting for your freedom as well. William Woodruffe is a very honest fellow. I think you ought to appoint him agent. I believe he will attend to this. He has been in the Army and got wounded in the leg. He is of no service to the Army now and I think it will suit him very well if you will please to do so. I have not a pound of bacon nor has not had any in three weeks. What do you think of that. Don’t you think Christianity is done a wary will. Mr. Brown, I hope you fear God more than that and will help the District. Will you not do so, Mr. Brown. By so doing you will oblige a great many that cannot that cannot help themselves, me for one.”⁸⁴

Ms. Flemmons in her distress describes herself as a wife with three small children, whose husband was fighting in the Confederate Army. Possessing the education of only two months, she had no other way of making a living and would not be asking the Governor for assistance if she could have helped herself. Ms. Flemmons openly apologizes for her poor grammar and bad spelling and though she does not refer to herself as a poor woman, her economic stature is clearly that of a common yeoman woman.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-004>

⁸⁵ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-004>

Though it was commonplace for women in Georgia to draft letters to their governor making note of their status as a soldier's wife, there were many who made no identification with that title at all. As was the case of Milton County woman, Francis A. Darris, she spoke of her husband being away on active duty but never clearly used the title "soldier's wife." Ms. Darris pleaded:

"Sir, I seat myself this morning for the purpose of explaining to you my foremost condition. I would like to ask of you whether I am allowed to draw rations from the government or not. My husband is in the service and there is no one to assist me in making a support. The court of Milton Co is to women a drawing their rations which is entitled to them if they have anything at all. I once had something but they have pressed what little I did have and under the present circumstances I am left without something to support me and my little children and I don't think that the court is doing justice to a portion of the women. I remain as ever a friend."⁸⁶

The body of evidence presented in the letters to Governor Brown from women belonging not to the poor and yeoman class who were tied by marriage or familial bonds to Confederate soldiers, portrays a transforming relationship in Confederate politics. The assumed contract that soldiers formed with their state governments was not upheld. Georgia women and families were not only abandoned by their husbands' duties as warriors of the Confederate army but from the protection and coverture under the ideology of paternalism that was due to them. The result proved crippling and devastating. The events led to women utilizing the identity of soldiers' wives when demanding justice from their governments. This act also challenged the long held notion that women were dependents of men in the Old South. Using the term "soldiers' wives" as their calling card, white rural women living in Georgia moved individually and as a "boddy" to define the terms of protection for themselves and to hold state governments accountable for their promises. Though unknown to them at the time, women found a means of self-representation in the political sphere

⁸⁶ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-004>

and made unpredictable claims on the State. In the process of doing so, less affluent Georgia women turned themselves into a “powerful voice for social justice in the C.S.A.”⁸⁷

Though the story of emerging soldiers’ wives in the Civil War South is certainly evident in the numbers of documented correspondence, the letters from Georgia vary to a certain degree when compared with the letters produced in *Confederate Reckoning*. The wide range of sources used in McCurry’s book comes from women residing in several other states in the Confederacy. A pattern emerges when suffering women throughout the South signed their names on letters and petitions and then wrote next to their names identifying themselves as “wife of a deceased soldier,” or “soldier’s wife.” An example can be made of a handful of Tippah County, Mississippi women who signed letters to the secretary of war as “Soldier’s Wife,” “Husband in the Army,” “Husband in Service,” and “2 sons in the army.”⁸⁸ These women undoubtedly used a political identity that was tied with marriage and the practices of coverture throughout the South. However, the pattern is somewhat dissimilar among Georgia females. Francis A. Darris and Mary Cordle made no reference to the term “soldier’s wife” or “soldier’s families” at all. When they did write claiming to be soldiers’ wives, Georgia females were found more to use the identity when expressing their destitution in the body of the text of their letters as opposed to using the signature block to show their political agency. Despite this small variation, the new evidence from the State of Georgia provided here does correlate with the trend that McCurry was able to identify in *Confederate Reckoning*: that Southern women of the non-planter class spoke for themselves in the public arena during the Confederate war and thus obtained a new found voice that no one of their sex had ever expressed before. It is important to note that the original letters provided in this work contain

⁸⁷ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 134-135.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 142-143.

handwriting from either Governor Brown himself or an assistant from his office as to what date they were responded to. Though outgoing correspondence from Brown to these women were either destroyed or have not been found, the fact that women's letters contain a date when the Governor responded to their requests show that they were recognized by a political official, at least in the state of Georgia.

Class distinctions are also important to highlight when discussing letters from soldiers' wives in a political sense. Not all women who had a husband in the Confederate army identified themselves with this name. White elite women of the planter class rarely, if ever, used this term. The numbers of elite women writing to government was not nearly as high as women from the poor and yeoman class. This was plainly due to economics. As was previously noted, planter women fared better monetarily and had multiple resources for survival that were not afforded to women of lower social ranking. Elite women never saw a use in embracing the term soldiers' wife in correspondence.⁸⁹ When they did manage to write to state officials, the requests were mostly for the deployments of military units or to particular men to "manage and assist the control of slaves."⁹⁰ Affluent women who needed assistance from the government often went through channels of patronage and working through family connections.⁹¹ Even at that, these women referred to themselves as "ladies," not "soldiers' wives," and interpreted protection to mean a paternalistic guidance over their sex as affluent ladies of the leisure class. Their needs were those for immediate survival and their requests proved trivial in comparison to those of the common folk women who had no political patronage to offer other than acknowledging their dependence on government in exchange for their husbands' military service.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁹¹ Ibid, 157.

That leaves the question, were all of the women used in the sample of *Confederate Reckoning* really “poor white” rural women? What did Southern women mean when signing and referring to themselves in their correspondence as “poor women?” The word “poor” can assume two very different connotations. To be a poor person in economic terms is defined as being one who is “meagerly supplied or endowed with resources or funds and dependent on charity or public support.”⁹² To describe oneself as “poor” could also be unrelated to economic stature, but rather an adjective to describe an individual as being “humble, meek, pitiable or eliciting or deserving of pity.”⁹³ The women were in a poor state based on the condition of the state of Georgia being involved in a savage war, not so much as being economically poor. Taking, for example, Frances Brightwell’s letter to President Davis, she demanded the discharge of her husband while identifying herself as “a tinder female with a poor orfint child [with] no one to take care of me.”⁹⁴ In Mrs. Brightwell’s case, her letter is indicative of the latter meaning of poor and gives no indication to her economic well status.

As was discussed in detail in the introductory chapter regarding class structures in the United States South, it is problematic to group society into two simple economic classes of rich and poor. Class divisions in the South were highly complex and were by no means conventionally divided into planter, poor white, and slave. It is important to keep in mind that planters were defined by their ownership of large estates and twenty or more slaves and the term yeoman refers mainly to small landholding farmers who owned a few or no slaves or those merchants who

⁹² American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. Copyright © 2011 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

⁹³ American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. Copyright © 2011 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

⁹⁴ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 145.

possessed a specific skill or trade. Unskilled urban workers or the “poor whites” worked land owned by someone else and were usually tenants, sharecroppers or farm laborers.⁹⁵

Throughout most of McCurry’s argument, she uses economic class structures to describe her sample of soldiers’ wives to be “Southern white women, most of them poor” because they referred to themselves as such in their letters.⁹⁶ However, a closer look into the Georgia sources reveals that perhaps not all of these women belonged strictly to the poor class but many of them may have identified economically with the yeoman or middle class. The women surveyed certainly were not women of the planter elite, but in fact many were women who were neither very rich nor very poor. Perhaps they used the word to describe the state of destitution they were in due to the circumstances of war and not one to describe their prior economic standing in society. Simply speaking, it is conceivable that a yeoman female could write her state governor that she and her children were in a “poor” condition as a result of floundering Confederate policies but at the same time, were not women married to or had familial ties to what society would have classified a “poor white” farmer.

Taking Elizabeth Fields’ letter as the first example, she writes to Governor Brown of the scant resources available to soldiers wives in Colquitt County. She specifically states that she owns hogs and would be able to make meat for her suffering children had she enough corn to feed them.⁹⁷ The ownership of livestock indicates that Mrs. Fields may have previously belonged to the middle yeoman class and was not the wife of a poor white worker, who would have owned no livestock at all. Similarly Tho I. Smith wrote of the pitiful condition of the soldiers’ wives who could not

⁹⁵ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising: Cotton, Class, and Confederate Georgia’s Rioting Women,” 52.

⁹⁶ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 135.

⁹⁷ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-011>

make “one up this crop” and would be “compelled to abandon our homes.”⁹⁸ Keeping in mind that smaller farmers belonging to the yeoman group still depended on work provided by other family members, such as their wives and children, the letter from Smith indicates that women in her area were reliant on producing crops on the homesteads that they would be forced to abandon if the assistance they were due as a result of their husbands’ service to the Confederacy did not reach them. Subtle clues in the text provides insight into these women's lives. They indicate that many were working the plows and laid claim to homes which indicates that they were not entirely “poor white” women but simply women of an agrarian middle class who were in a “poor” condition as a direct result of the travesty of war. Describing themselves as “poor” women certainly helped to elicit sympathy from the politicians who had taken their husbands away in service of the Confederacy. It is a reminder to once again to think carefully when analyzing sources according to preconceived class distinctions. When discussing plain folk or the common class, it may fare better to include the yeoman class in conjunction with poor Southern women, while not forgetting the characteristics that define both; the yeoman and poor classes behaved similarly as a result of their circumstances and markedly unlike members of the elite class. In conclusion, when deciphering to which economic class the authors of these letters belonged, their use of the word “poor” should be taken with a grain of salt.

3.3 PETITIONS

Letter writing was not the only avenue through which poor and yeoman Georgia women have been found to forge new identities and engage in forms of politics. When the secession crisis turned into a four-year long war with grave consequences, not only on the battlefield but also on the home front, non-elite women took matters into their own hands by banding together and signing

⁹⁸ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-058-014>

petitions under the collective identity of “soldiers’ wives.” As was seen in the case of letter writing, scores of indigent, wives, mothers, and daughters wrote to Governor Brown begging for assistance. All the women wanted was simply enough provisions to keep themselves and their dependent children alive. It is unfortunate that their cries often fell upon deaf ears. The conditions in the South deteriorated to such a degree that women were forced to speak out publically as a means of protection for themselves and members of their household. The delicate southern female role that many had assumed in the antebellum era receded when the benefits of Southern paternalism were spoiled by war. When it looked as if individual efforts to express their want for flour, corn, bacon, and other precious staples needed for subsistence were being ignored by those in office, the non-elite women took the initiative to band together in hopes that collective action would gather the attention of those who held political power. Perhaps yeoman women believed that if these officials could visualize the exact number of suffering individuals on one sheet of paper, it would influence Confederate policies to increase rations for starving families of the soldiers who were fighting bravely on battlefronts for their country's freedom. The available sources hidden away in the Georgia archives prove that petitioning was yet another avenue in which rural females acted on the political stage. An example can be made of the following petition to Governor Brown from Heard County, Georgia in May 1864:

“To His Excellency Gov Brown

I do here by certify that the women of Heard Co. are in a pitiful condition. The men are all gone in service and are very patriotic. Their wives are on starvation. They can’t get or draw any thread, corn cards, meat, or anything of the like. I or we therefore appeal to you for assistance.”

Yours very respectfully

Dollie Heftinstall	Susan Dyer
Mary Bruffy	Mary A. Dyer
Martha Gray	Jane Dyer
Elizabeth Beck	Margaret Langley
Permelia Dukes	

Yours Very Respectfully

Mary Bryant	Bo Adrefs and Dollie Heftinstall
M Callee	A Bushy
Jane Parker	M. A. Cruis
M. Wagman	M. Rate
Rebeckah Langley	
	-Franklin, GA ⁹⁹

As war heightened in the autumn of 1864, local and state governments failed to ease the burden on common folk. The conditions of poor Georgia women and soldiers' families grew far worse. The plight of the war ravaged state further induced even more lower class and yeoman women to sign mass petitions to Governor Brown for relief. The trend of increased political activity by Georgia women is certainly indicative in the following petition where dozens of "soldiers' wives" of Baker County, Georgia wrote in October, 1864:

⁹⁹ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/harg/turningpoint/id:harg1170-059-005>

and also to build coffins as it is impossible to get these done if he leaves our neighborhood and county. He has a wife and eight children who depend on him for support. He has responded to your call and is now at camps but we wish him sent back for the benefit of us.”¹⁰¹

Mrs. S. A. Hudspeth	Mrs. Elizabeth Sutton
Jno Duise	Mrs. E. J. Glover
Mrs. S. A. McNully	Mrs. S. E. Johnson
Mrs Nancy Stanelle	Mrs. Jos. Senllay
Miss Virginia Doan	Mrs. T. Allen
Mrs. Jane Magapuh	Mrs. A. Odum
Miss M. Mckey	Mrs. Willis James
Miss Julia Bentley	Mrs. Amanda Sapp
Mrs Susan Barlow	Mrs. Dot Offin
Mrs. A. E. Norris	Mrs. Jane Bryant
Mrs. Susan Burnett	Mrs. M. W. Faulk
Mrs. S. A. Jones	Mrs. Surilda Sorrels
Mrs. Sarah Butter	Mrs. Hilda Oritez
Mrs. A. Clark	Mrs. E. Gosh
Mrs. July Rhodes	Mrs. Rebeca Walden
Mrs. Ann Kirks	Mrs. Mary T. Sutton
Mrs. Evrett	Mrs. Nancy S. Davis
Miss Eliza Evrett	Mrs. Sarah E. Davis
Mrs. E. Burk	Mrs. Sallie E. Borland
Mrs. M. Crouch	Mrs. E. T. Mathis
Mrs. C. Hughes	Mrs. M. I. Dunlap
Miss M. Hughes	Mrs. Alif Collins
Miss S. Hughes	Mrs. Elizabeth Collins
Miss T. Williams	Mrs. Gracie Williams
Miss Nancy Bentley	Mrs. Mary Richardson
Amanda E. Bell	Mrs. Mary A. Huett
Mrs. Ema Gray	Mrs. C. M. Bell
Mrs. Martha Odum	Mrs. Chapman
Miss Malinda Butler	Mrs. Susana Milyan
Miss Mary A. Milian	Miss Nancy Coker
Mrs. Charlotte Fist	Mrs. Sarah Hair
Mrs. Mary Odum	Mrs. July Odum

¹⁰¹ Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/cgi/turningpoint?repo=harg;item=harg1170-059-010>

Mrs. Mat Cooper
 Mrs. Charlet Odum
 Mrs. Mary Wyna

Mrs. Mary J. Odum
 Mrs. Julie Cooper
 Mrs. Rebecca Kirks¹⁰²

Though not always the case, men often enlisted in a company recruited in the counties where they resided. Companies also combined men from other counties or units after several casualties had occurred. Judging from the date of the Petition and the women's claim, the man they were petitioning Governor Brown to return had already left the county to join the Confederate fight prior to October 1864. Several regiments were formed during the Civil War that included men from Baker County, Georgia but several conclusions can be drawn when corresponding dates of Confederate Military Records are matched with the dates of Petitions. According to the muster roll of Company B, 62nd Regiment Georgia Infantry, men from Spalding and Baker Counties were recruited into this group on or around July 11, 1864. It is probable that Adam Semise [sic] more than likely would have reported to Company B, 62nd Regiment Georgia Infantry, since the other companies that were comprised of Baker County men, such as the 6th Regiment Company H, 7th Georgia Cavalry and the 51st Regiment Company D and E, were all created in years prior to 1864.¹⁰³ Additionally, though the precise spelling of the last name of the individual is unclear, the muster rolls for each of these military groups from Baker County, Georgia made no reference to a soldier with the first name of Adam or a last name with a close spelling to "Semise."

Plain folk women in Baker County in this instance were not necessarily driven by hunger to draft and submit a mass petition to their governor but had a specific need for a male to remain

¹⁰² Telamon Cuyler collection, MS 1170: Series 1. Historical Manuscripts, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/cgi/turningpoint?repo=harg;item=harg1170-059-010>

¹⁰³ Muster Roll of *COMPANY B, 62nd REGIMENT GEORGIA VOLUNTEER INFANTRY.

<http://files.usgwarchives.net/ga/baker/military/civilwar/rosters/cob62reg.txt>

in their area because not only did his own family depend on him for support but other families expressed their dependence on his special skill set to provide them with spinning reels to produce clothing and coffins to bury the dead, whose numbers were increasing due to the war. Though the women do not indicate how they organized the petition or how they gathered the high signature count, it may be surmised that the plain folk women of Baker County, Georgia exercised their female agency and were successful in swaying the state government to allow Adam to return home, since his name made no appearance on the Confederate muster rolls belonging to the regiments to which he would have reported.

Governor Brown's collection of letters produces concrete evidence which confirms that not only did common white women in Georgia experience extreme economic hardships during the Civil War, but as a result of the conflict, it appears that yeoman and poor women also united under a collective identity of "soldiers' wives" due to their state of depression. Out of necessity, and necessity only, these women found a means of self-representation they had never possessed in the antebellum era. They demanded that the state be held accountable for their protection and wellbeing. By drafting and signing petitions to government officials for assistance, it is evident that lower class and yeoman white women in the State of Georgia stepped out of the domestic sphere under a newly found female political voice. Just as Stephanie McCurry posited of all Southern women in *Confederate Reckoning*, the evidence shows that women of the poor and yeoman class in Georgia also organized under this status as a political tactic to persuade government officials to act on their behalf in obtaining food necessary for survival or military leave for their men. The archival material provided above would have further strengthened McCurry's argument to some extent had she incorporated the large Baker County, Georgia petition. Unfortunately, the source was overlooked or omitted.

Though the door was sprung wide open to unleash the important discussion regarding female political activism during the Civil War, *Confederate Reckoning* fails to develop and explain the process that supports its key arguments. McCurry herself is one to focus more on processes rather than the outcomes as a historian. She states in her introduction that emphasis is not placed on why the South lost the war, as is the usual approach, but on the “profound and unpredictable transformation into which the Confederacy was propelled by war and the new cast of characters that were brought into the making of history that included the disenfranchised common and poor white rural women.”¹⁰⁴ For a historian to make assertions without considering the mechanics behind the formation of this group and labeling women as a true political constituency is debatable. The underlying questions remains: where did the use of “soldiers’ wives” originate from? Did Southern women of the non-affluent class really view themselves as political agents under the assumed role of the “soldier’s wife”? Did plain folk women intentionally use that title in their petitions to exert dominance over those in power or was it simply a tactic to tug at the heartstrings of the right politician in hopes that pity would be paid upon a group of suffering soldiers’ wives? This then begs the most vital question: did yeoman and poor women intentionally and knowingly assume this role at the time it was being enacted in the midst of their struggle or is it simply a trend that modern historians have identified and labeled in the present? McCurry essentially falls short in explaining how these women organized. It is only assumed that they organized collectively and were later classified as a true political constituency after some observation.

Additionally, no evidence is provided showing how yeoman and poor women, who were wives of Confederate soldiers, orchestrated group meetings, organized local meeting points, distributed information, and whether or not a specific woman or women were appointed to draft

¹⁰⁴ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 6.

these petitions. The best source brought forth currently is a threatening letter from two North Carolinian women writing in November 1862 to Governor Vance of how “women cant make support for ther familys” and sent a warning that “the women talk of Makin up Companys going to try to make peace for it is more than human hearts can bear.”¹⁰⁵ By speaking of “companys” it may be their own way of expressing that they are banding and organizing together ideas on how to bring about imperative relief of their miserable condition.

The capacity for organization and potential for mobilization of rural soldier’s wives was embodied by a mass petition by the Women of North Carolina. Based on a total of 522 female signatures from the Rockingham area protesting against the “exploitation of the poor by planter speculators” and asking for “relief and protection,” McCurry was able to make an argument that women were highly coordinated to produce such a document.¹⁰⁶ However, she herself had some lingering questions. “How did women achieve such numbers, did someone carry the petitions around the neighborhood, and did they write them up at local meetings or hire an agent to collect signatures?”¹⁰⁷ McCurry does state that there was “no national organization of soldiers’ wives with state or local branches organizing a petition campaign in the Confederate South.” The best conclusion that can be made is that for the coordination required to produce those huge petition clearly shows an ad hoc local mobilization effort on the part of soldiers’ wives in the South.¹⁰⁸ At the present, research on the subject clearly lacks supporting records that give clues as to how and if women in fact met in groups. No evidence such as minute books or agenda catalogues have been

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 171.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 169-170.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 169-170.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 171.

brought forth that clearly shows intentional female collective political action in the State of Georgia or throughout the Confederate South.

Thus, it is difficult to prove that women intentionally acted politically without hard evidence of their intentional planned organization. What can be concluded is that it is highly unlikely that women of the yeoman and lower class would have behaved in the same ways that affluent ladies who ran their relief societies, many of whom kept extensive records of their meetings in the form of minute books. Perhaps it was due to their lack of higher education and even more so the fact that they were primarily focused on obtaining food, goods, and other precious staples necessary for their families' survival. The thought of keeping such records would have paled in comparison to the grim possibility of death by starvation and exposure. Although those inclinations are based on postulation, it may be too premature on the part of a historian to argue that the phenomenon of "soldiers' wives" was an intentional and active political force in the minds of the women involved during the height of the conflict. Though it is clear that plain folk white women in Georgia faced tremendous hardships, which forced them to sign petitions to the politicians responsible for their situation, it is the process through which they did so that deserves further investigation. It is conceivable that evidence of soldiers' wives organizations exists and are waiting to be uncovered or perhaps this information remains only in the hearts and minds of those women who bore the burden of the struggle. Had this information been found, it would bolster support for the argument that women viewed themselves as such and were in fact true intentional political actors in the height of the Civil War, capable of intricate organization and would enrich the existing arguments in literature. One fact is certain, primary source documents cataloging the logistics of the organization of the "soldiers' wives" in Georgia and throughout the Southern

Confederate States are insufficient. Without them, this may be another aspect of the Civil War to sojourn as an unsolved mystery.

3.4 GIVE US BREAD: RIOTS THROUGHOUT GEORGIA

As the war progressed and more able bodied men were needed to wear the color gray and join the ranks, Confederate Congress passed the first draft in American history. The Enrollment Act of March 1862 summoned all white males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five subject to voluntary duty. Class divisions were once again strained as the wealthy were able to buy exemptions and substitutes or used the twenty-slave law to remain at home. Plain folk had little to no choice but to comply. Women of the yeoman and poor class lost their husbands, male kin, and farm support as military duty forced them to the battlefronts. Surviving became a daily struggle.¹⁰⁹ As if the draft wasn't a severe enough blow to the female population, matters worsened with increased speculation, impressment, and hoarding of precious commodities throughout the southern economy. It quickly led many stomachs to feel the sting of hunger. Though both rich and poor were affected, degrees of suffering varied based on class. Non-elite white women left behind to keep the home fires burning were severely affected by the lack of provisions to sustain their families. That very need drove Southern women to lash out in ways they had never been documented to act in history. This could not have been more true than in the State of Georgia.

Thus far, several avenues have been discussed that provide insight into the ways indigent Georgia females rallied against their government for assistance when the secession crisis turned into a long and ruinous war. However, none of the ways were as collective and notorious as the act of rioting. When it seemed as if those in power would never yield to the women's letters and petitions and no reprieve was given by the planters who vowed to keep soldiers' families fed and

¹⁰⁹ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, "The Women Rising," 57.

protected during the war, women of the poor and yeoman class took up arms and raided stores, warehouses, and depots across Georgia for the elusive goods needed for their sustenance.¹¹⁰ To the Confederacy's own peril, the ignorance of the struggle on the home front and the increased focus on battlefield strategies would have severe consequences for the survival of a young republic on the brink of its inception. The notion of a protected Southern woman would make a complete turn once more. Desperate Georgia women vowed to commit any act or assume any role necessary to protect their families and would rather resort to violent and un-lady like behavior placed on them by society than see their children starve. No longer would they remain puppets on a string at the mercy of the Confederate government.

One of the earliest documented riots in the state of Georgia was recounted by the *Atlanta Southern Confederacy* newspaper. On June 17, 1862, an angry group of soldiers' wives demanded cotton be disbursed to them at the Cass Depot in Bartow County when a government agent refused to bend to their wishes. The group of women did not retreat obediently when asked to leave. Instead they returned later that day and "called for the Agent as a witness of their doings, cut the rope from one bale, took what they needed, and marched very quietly home with it."¹¹¹ A few months later, the same newspaper reported in November, a "party of Ladies driven by necessity" raided a store in nearby Cartersville, Georgia.¹¹²

Class conflict and speculation continued to drive hunger and destitution for plain folk women in Georgia. The year 1863 saw an increase in the number of poverty stricken females who would wreak havoc by any means necessary in numerous cities all over the state. A dozen women raided a store on Whitehall Street in Atlanta on March 16 when they learned the price of bacon

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹¹ *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, June 17, 1862.

¹¹² Ibid., November 7, 1862.

had soared to an all-time high of over a dollar per pound. The angry group of wives and daughters of Confederate soldiers were led by a “tall lady” who “drew a long navy repeater from her bosom” and ordered the rest of the women in the crowd to “help themselves to what they liked.” When the dust settled, the *Americus Sumter Republican* reported that this group made off with nearly two hundred dollars’ worth of bacon.¹¹³

But what was the significance of this incident and others like it and furthermore, did female riots have any influence on county or state politics? Though not much is known about the Atlanta uprising, it is confirmed from newspaper reporters, mayors, local elites, politicians and the general public that the rioters were, in fact, wives and daughters of soldier’s families. A few gentlemen who questioned the female participants outside the Whitehall Street store felt immediate sympathy for the ladies and immediately raised a fund for their relief. The mayor of the city and his counsel, moved to provide additional aid for the relief of these soldier’s families, even though they denounced the armed action they committed. One editor admitted that the fund was “the result of the recent women’s raid in this city.” The Atlanta citizens and the political officials most certainly acquired enough empathy for these soldiers’ wives to acknowledge the debt owed to them and as a result, were able to raise funds to assuage their suffering.¹¹⁴ Atlanta women were clearly practicing the new politics of subsistence and survival and became masters at their craft. But was it even known to them that their behavior was political?

A similar incident occurred in Columbus, Georgia on April 11, 1863 when a group of about sixty-five females rallied between Broad and Franklin Streets to raid the stores of speculators, all the while armed with knives and pistols.¹¹⁵ The angry mob seized George A. Norris’s dry goods

¹¹³ *Americus Sumter Republican*, March 27, 1863. See also, Wendy Hamand Venet, *A Changing Wind: Commerce & Conflict in Civil War Atlanta*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 102-103.

¹¹⁴ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 181-182.

¹¹⁵ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising,” 70.

store and “commenced to helping themselves to whatever they wanted,” but were stopped by police before they had time to reach other stores.¹¹⁶ Seven months later, these same Columbus women penned an open letter to Governor Brown stating that they would again organize a mob to procure provisions if they received no relief.¹¹⁷ The Governor then forwarded the letter to the County’s court justices and instructed them to “take such action in the premises as the court might think proper.”¹¹⁸ If Georgia women possessed any agency in their sex, the letter to Governor Brown and his further action to address the situation of the Columbus riot shows that common women were an influential group, fully capable of using their sex to leverage Confederate policy to their benefit.

A group of women in Milledgeville, Georgia were just as successful as the Columbus and Atlanta women in taking matters into their own hands to sway government to meet their demands. On April 14, 1863, a group of women of an undisclosed number seized items from a dry goods store.¹¹⁹ The women’s riot only dispersed when Judge L. Harris promised them that they would receive immediate relief if they would end their crusade and return home. The women did as was instructed and received funds from the city treasury.¹²⁰ This operation undertaken by Georgia females, which appears to have been organized and collective, confirmed that they did possess and exercise some political power and resulted in the successful disbursement of city funds to women suffering from war shortages. The below illustration portrays just how widespread riots by women were across the state.

¹¹⁶ *Columbus Sun*, April 11, 1863.

¹¹⁷ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising,” 70-72.

¹¹⁸ *Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel*, November 23, 1863.

¹¹⁹ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising,” 72.

¹²⁰ *Columbus Sun*, April 14, 1863.

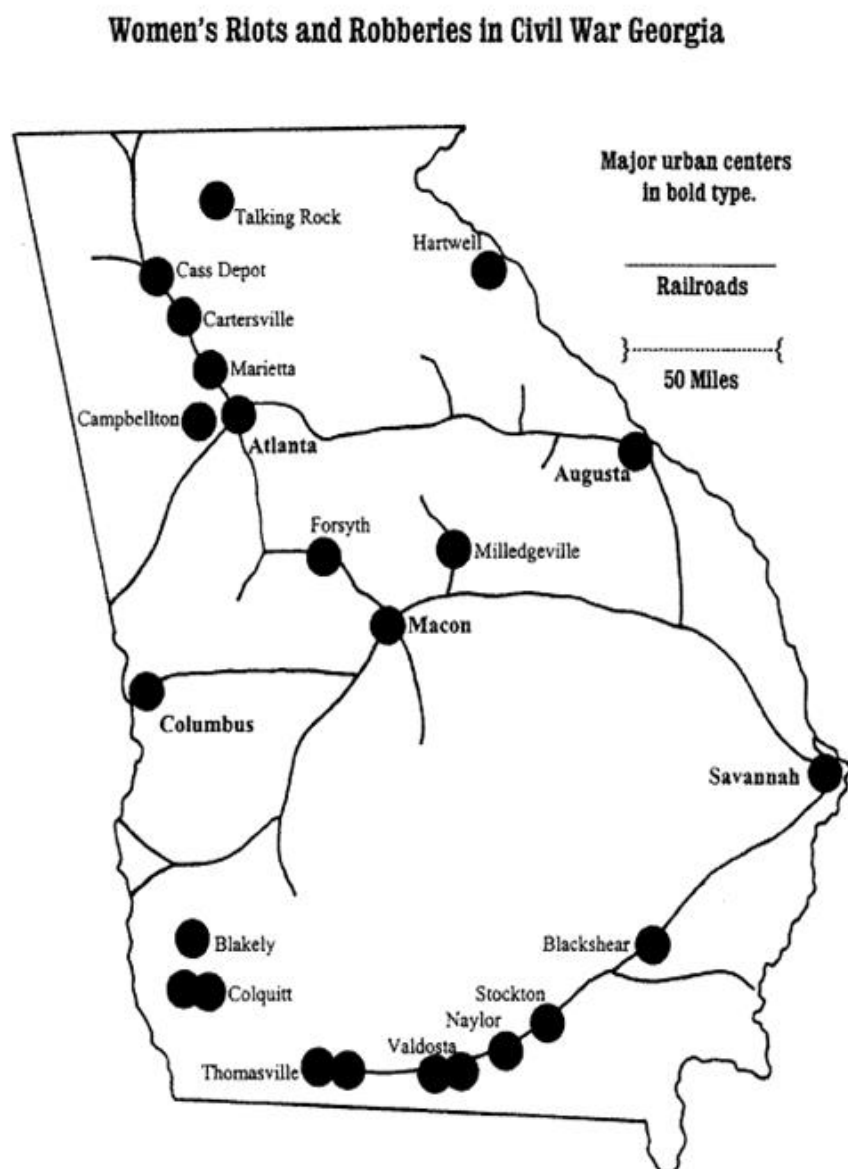


Figure 3.2 Women's Riots and Robberies in Civil War Georgia¹²¹

However, three questions remain when analyzing the accounts of rioting by Georgia women in comparison with the sources used and the arguments made in McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning*. The first is that the primary source material that is available on the riots that occurred

¹²¹ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, "The Women Rising," 71.

in the areas of Bartow County, Cartersville, Milledgeville, Columbus, and Atlanta do not give any information on the economic or social status of the women involved. The issue of class is once again revisited. Though they are identified in newspaper accounts as being daughters, wives and mothers of Confederate soldiers, their economic status could have very well ranged from poor white, yeoman, or even well-to-do females. Whether the rioter be a wealthy lady, graced with an education and life's fineries or an ordinary woman, whose only possession was the house her husband rented and the meager homespun dress that clothed her back, any female could be married to or affiliated by familial ties to a soldier regardless of class. Thus, to make the claim that only poor women rioted for want of provisions would be foolhardy as the Civil War affected women of a wide range of social and economic status with varying degrees of intensity. While evidence exists that supports the phenomena in which women of limited means were found to have a higher propensity to lash out and seize goods they desperately needed as a result of war, until further evidence is uncovered as to exactly where the soldiers' wives participants lie on the economic spectrum, it cannot be assumed that the only class to participate in these riots were dirt poor females in the state of Georgia.

More often than not, the word "poor" is thrown about too lightly by McCurry when identifying the status of women used in her sample and is done so on several occasions throughout her book. McCurry uses her sources to make the claim that the steady influx of letters, petitions, and riots provide an index into a new politics: "the archival record of the emergence of a collective public voice of poor white Southern women in the Civil War." Though she does make reference to the women from yeoman households, rural landless or urban working men's households a handful of times, the designation of the word "poor" when describing the majority of her sample blurs several lines and proves problematic when forming sound conclusions. If all classes were

affected by the Civil War, women who would have belonged to the yeoman class before the war brought on their economic ruin and hardship, could have very well engaged in these riots as well thus, weakening the idea that only “poor” women were active rioters. The argument could have benefited from a clear definition of class divisions and specified exactly which class of women she intended to study and incorporate into her sample.

Georgia women were not the only women in the Southern states to express their grievances through armed insurrection. Similar trends have been documented in other states but include variations. These variables lead to the second unanswered question: what was the true motive of their rioting? Related outbreaks were documented in Salisbury, North Carolina, on March 18; Mobile, Alabama, on March 25; and Richmond, Virginia on April 2.¹²² With respect to the Salisbury raid, a group of forty to fifty soldiers’ wives marched from store to store demanding that prices for flour be lowered or would take the much needed flour from store rooms by force. At the end of this riot, the women collected “twenty-three barrels of flour, a barrel of molasses, two sacks of salt, and twenty dollars.” They divided the goods amongst themselves and none of the women were prosecuted.¹²³ It is assumed thus far by the items they raided that women throughout the Confederacy were driven to riot for sheer want of provisions but evidence exists that would cast serious doubt on some of their intentions. Were these women only influenced by the cries of their hungry children and their own empty stomachs or did they possess ulterior passions?

Though most Southern newspaper editors viewed needy women as victims of a cold-hearted government and helpless individuals taking back only what was theirs by right because the rich had robbed them through speculation, hoarding, and impressment, not all took pity on them.

¹²² Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising,” 68.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

Newspapers published articles dismissing hunger and destitution as motives for female lawlessness.¹²⁴ Respectable women would never participate in such absurdity and one editor stated that “the class composing the mobs are of the lowest-- prostitutes, plug uglies...and those who have always been a nuisance to the community, and who are not in a perishing, or even suffering condition, for want of food.”¹²⁵

The *Troy Southern Advertiser* newspaper may have been justified in their claims that the women participating in the rampages were not women in need, soldiers’ wives or even kin to Confederate men in the service, since they were not the only newspaper to address this issue. The *Southern Confederacy* ran a similar article a few days prior acknowledging the riots in Columbus and Augusta:

“These riots appear to have been simultaneous at this place, Columbus and Augusta, It is a pro concentrated movement among very wicked and ignorant women, generally instigated thereto and led on by some rascally individual who aims at plunder and robbery. These bad men and women received their first lessons from those high officials who set the example of lawlessness by appropriating what did not belong to them without any necessity for it. this is the prime instigation of these riots. these officials have sown to the wind and are now reaping the whirlwind. let all unlawful seizures and robberies hereafter, whether perpetrated by officials or by their imitators in crinoline, be summarily and severely punished.

The riot here had women engaged in it collected from four counties- only three of who were residents of this city, as i am informed- the women seizures at Columbus and Augusta were like those here. they aimed at finery and not at something to eat. the man who planned instigated and perfected and led on the villainy in this place is in jail for ineiting [sic] a riot. let him suffer. in all the crowd, I learned there was but one soldier’s wife. Good women are never caught in such disgraceful and dishonest scrapes.”¹²⁶

It is evident from this report that Georgia women participating in riots were not all driven by hunger and necessity and most certainly were not compelled by political notions of justice at all. There must be some truth in this report because while most women rioted for goods necessary for survival, there were also a handful that seized “fineries.” Clearly a select few were driven to rob for other reasons. The account also acknowledges that only one soldier’s wife was present in

¹²⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹²⁵ *Troy Southern Advertiser*, April 22, 1863.

¹²⁶ *The Southern Confederacy*, April 16, 1863, Page 2. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/atln newspapers/id:asc1863-0262>

the crowd and dismisses the accusation that it was a furor enticed by destitute wives, mothers, and daughters of Confederate soldiers. Perhaps a select few “poor white trash” women took advantage of the “political” actions of soldiers’ wives and used their actions of desperation as cover for their own usual criminal behavior.

Uproars in other cities throughout the Confederacy also had an impact on those riots occurring in the State of Georgia. The *Southern Confederacy* published an article on April 16, 1863 calling the Richmond, Virginia riot a lesson to all cities on the measures that should be taken for preventing the dangerous classes that have marred the quiet of cities. A correspondent, who was also a spectator of the disturbance in Richmond writes:

“I think it is all important to call attention to one or two points connected with this outbreak. the mob, which was not up under the name of a woman’s bread riot, was in reality, a man’s plundering riot. The females, a fraction of whom were respectable, were all comfortably clad, and many of them were bedizened out in finery, which was not wanted to show their trade. These “ladies” as worthy Mayor addressed them, were of home production and well as of foreign growth. The indications were that they had stimulated to the part they were acting, not by want, but by the thousands of ruffians who stood around them, and who hoped to secure, by means of them, both safety and plunder. who can describe a mob gathered in Richmond, and the vilest of the vile dregs which the war has been causing to flow into this city for many months.

Hunger was the ostensible cause of the riot. But neither butcher nor the baker suffered. Stores containing provisions escaped, while those containing dry goods, boots and shoes, and above all, fancy articles were sacked. No. 117 Main Street, kept by Mr. Rouss, was the cheapest store in the city, was attached because it was known there was fine goods within. It was not a rising against extortion, but for plunder and open robbery.”¹²⁷

It must be considered on the issue of motive that while most women were driven to riot out of necessity, students of history must look carefully at the sources because it is vital to acknowledged that not all the uprisings could be labeled as a “bread riot” or even a women’s riot for food orchestrated by a group of “poor” women. While the majority of women who rioted in Georgia did express female agency, it is important to acknowledge that perhaps not all of them participated in politics of subsistence due to their destitution as a result of war.

¹²⁷ *The Southern Confederacy*, April 12, 1863, Page 1. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/atlnbspapers/id:asc1863-0257>

Desperate times called for desperate measures when poverty struck many females left on the Georgia home front. War hardship became a grave reality as women were reduced to any means necessary and even engaged in violent and armed riots to procure the goods required for survival when there was simply no other alternative but to steal and loot. Many of them believed the sacrifice of their menfolk to what they saw a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” entitled them to do so.¹²⁸ For the first time, women had physically risen out of the domestic sphere and could be seen assuming their political stages, otherwise known as the streets, depots, and stores of towns throughout the South. Their platform? “Bread or Blood.”¹²⁹ Southern soldiers’ wives in Georgia relied on word of mouth just like everyone else did in the Confederate States of America and lived through information they received through proclamations, newspapers, military orders and broadsides.¹³⁰ This alludes to the final unanswered question: exactly how did women organize the riots?

Stephanie McCurry asserts that women's riots in the Confederate South during the Civil War had “deep context” which involved “savvy politicking, strategic thinking, collective organization, political leadership and mass participation of women. They were manifestly political events and an expression of soldiers’ wives politics of subsistence.”¹³¹ While she investigated several riots throughout the Civil War South, she only used the trial evidence from the riot in Richmond, Virginia to argue that all women possessed a high level of organization when planning these riots and as a result, women achieved and displayed their political agency.

¹²⁸ Teresa Crisp Williams and David Williams, “The Women Rising,” 53.

¹²⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 180.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

As the Richmond newspapers reported, the morning of April 2, 1863 saw a mob of a few hundred women surging the western gates of Capitol Square. The impoverished women proceeded down Ninth Street and crossing onto Main Street. They appeared “as by concert” and were reported to have said they were “hungry and must have food.” An eyewitness account confirmed that the women remarked that they were going “right in the direction to find plenty in the hands of the extortioners.” The witness also learned that several women were armed with “pistols, bowie knives, and hatchets, as they forced their way into numerous stores, emptied them of their contents, and hauled off their loot, all while holding off police at gunpoint.”¹³² The numbers, the timing, the routes taken, and the discipline of the women involved clearly indicated organization but the witness had not seen the choreographed beginning of the event.¹³³

An investigation and court testimony of the women arrested that day revealed what had remained unknown. The riot on April 2 had been in planning for at least ten days, and was orchestrated by one feisty ringleader, Mary Jackson, mother to a Confederate soldier, and farm wife. Jackson and three hundred women had “planned and pulled off what many consider to be the biggest riot in Confederate history.” Recruiting began around March 22 when Jackson began telling other women in the marketplace that she was planning on hosting “a meeting of the women with respect to the ever increasing prices of goods.” Several women in the court testified that Jackson sent word to women in surrounding counties that they must come to town to participate in the proceedings. The meeting came to a head on April 1, 1863 at Belvidere Baptist Church on Oregon Hill. The object of the meeting was to organize a plan “to demand goods of the merchants at government prices, and if they were not given, the stores were to be broken open and goods

¹³² Ibid., 185.

¹³³ Ibid., 186.

taken by force.” By the accounts given, Jackson even “went up into the pulpit” to instruct the crowd to leave their children at home, to come armed and how to quietly seize the goods once they started marching.¹³⁴ There could be no doubt from the court proceedings that the women of Richmond premeditated this organization and precisely executed their agenda; thereby, engaging in a true form of politics as a mass of Confederate soldiers’ wives. Exemplary evidence exists with respect to the Richmond uprising but similar evidence is unavailable to make the same argument of the riots in other Confederate states and especially in the State of Georgia.

McCurry makes an over-assumption when making the claim that women rioters played their part in forcing the redirection of federal and state power and resources to bend to their wishes. It is without question that these women influenced public and welfare policies throughout the Confederate states but what she fails to prove thoroughly and effectively is that women in all of the riots in each state organized in the same fashion as the Richmond riot. In this case, there is only enough evidence to support the organization, mobilization, and modus operandi of the females involved in the disturbance in Richmond, Virginia because of the sworn court testimony given from the mouths of the women involved. There is little to no account of how Georgia women orchestrated their lootings or the premeditated actions they took to plan collectively in areas such as Atlanta, Mobile, Salisbury and other cities where uprisings occurred. Simply applying the mechanics and process of how a riot was organized in Richmond to riots enacted by women of similar class and shared economic distresses in other cities throughout the South without hard evidence proves extremely faulty. It cannot be assumed that women in Atlanta, for instance, conducted themselves in the same organized fashion as Mary Jackson did when she called up three hundred women to a church and set out their plan with a vengeance. Furthermore, since evidence

¹³⁴ Ibid., 187- 188.

has yet to be produced as to how Georgia yeoman and poor women organized these raids within their own state, can they really be considered a true political constituency? Until documentation arises that shows “savvy politicking, strategic thinking, and collective organization,”¹³⁵ it may be best to simply acknowledge that poor and yeoman Georgia females were successful in expressing themselves under the collectively identity of soldiers’ wives and indirectly influenced state policies to suit their needs due to their class and hardships brought on by a war economy.

3.5 SWAYING POLICY: THE REAL INFLUENCE OF GEORGIA WOMEN

This chapter has brought to light several avenues through which Georgia women of the poor and yeoman class manifested political actions during the Civil War. It has also introduced new sources that have rarely made an appearance in existing Southern literature regarding the politicization of women to show the differences between women’s political activity in the State of Georgia in comparison to the women throughout the remaining Confederate states. The additional data provided allows for the re-examination of the existing narrative and calls for a reinterpretation of the question: “Just how much influence did poor and yeoman women actually have on Georgia policies?” While this thesis acknowledges that documentation exists to show that non-affluent Georgia women, like other women throughout the CSA, engaged in political behavior during the Civil War as a result of their economic standing and war hardships, and did possess some agency in swaying government officials to circumvent welfare policy, it debunks the assertion that it was only after the year 1863 and only after enough riots and collective action had been committed by white lower class Southern women that government and state officials across the CSA began to address the starving poor. The case for Georgia proved remarkably different when compared to the remaining states in the CSA. A closer look at government documents shows that Georgia

¹³⁵ Ibid., 191.

women, in particular, may have had less of an effect on public policy than in other states because government action to aid the poor was already precedent.

Stephanie McCurry brings an important discussion to the table on how historians still grapple with the phenomenon of women's political action throughout the Confederate South in 1863. There can be no mistake that competition for resources was so fierce that women on the streets were essentially driving policy by inciting riots. The coincidence between the question of bread and available material in the revolution, increasing accounts of female uproar, and the reform programs government officials made to welfare policy in the spring and summer of 1863 is also undeniable. One thing is certain: the South was starving from the inside out mid-way through the war; and middle and lower class women on the home front felt the heaviest burden and took action. But just how effective were these women engaging in what has been labeled a form of politics under subsistence and survival?

McCurry posits that forms of female political activity such as writing letters, signing mass petitions and, even more so, armed insurrection throughout the Southern states are what finally forced the government to alter its ways in 1863, which in turn made them successful political agents. McCurry distinctly argues that the year 1863 was a crucial one. "It was then and only then did Confederate state governors and federal officials issued a series of public resolutions about the food crisis, and moved, finally, to revise and reconsider a variety of social and military manpower policies bearing on the food crisis faced by the nation's now legion crew of indigent and mobilized soldiers' wives."¹³⁶ McCurry reiterates that the actions of soldiers' wives severely affected the Confederate body politic and nowhere with more urgency than in Georgia. Nine days after the Atlanta riot, Governor Brown called the legislature back into session early to deliver a message

¹³⁶ Ibid., 197.

that was reprinted all over the state. He recommended the passage of an Act which restricted the cultivation of cotton and required planters to supply provisions to soldier's wives because "the women and children are destitute of bread."¹³⁷ Specific state budgets and policies were developed securing subsistence for soldiers' wives and those remained Governor Brown's priority for the remainder of the war. McCurry expresses that no other state would do or spend more than Governor Brown who "delivered property tax exemptions, free salt, free corn, and so much aid in money to counties that it almost equaled that expended on wartime military costs."¹³⁸

While those actions by Brown are true and despite the obvious political agency that soldiers' wives possessed in 1863, what McCurry fails to take into consideration are the proactive measures adopted in early years of the war and Governor Brown's own background as a yeoman. Governor Brown was born in 1821 in upland South Carolina to a yeoman family of limited means and moved to Cherokee County, Georgia later in life. Brown joined his father in farm work at the age of eight, on a few acres that were described as "a scrap of hillside." It was even claimed that the elder Brown had to plow his field with a bull when he was in want of oxen.¹³⁹ Brown later attended a small South Carolina academy and earned a law degree at Yale. Despite his higher education, Brown remained unsophisticated in manner and retained a southern drawl. Georgians of the most modest station saw Brown as a regular barebones man and put their complete faith in him when electing him to office. Power never corrupted Brown and his upbringing strongly affected the way he ran his office.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid., 198.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 198.

¹³⁹ Kennett, *Marching Through Georgia*, 16.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

Brown took a special interest in the common folk's welfare long before 1863. All other governors and officials in corresponding states in the CSA took a less zealous approach and acted in retrospect to lower class women's growing dissatisfaction. The governing bodies in other states only addressed women's issues when their presence could no longer be ignored and became a paramount force to be reckoned with. With respect to Georgia, specifically, the "political will to deliver aid and the embrace of poor white women as part of the governor's core constituency" was not a revolutionary idea that came solely as a "political response to the mobilization of poor and yeoman white women."¹⁴¹ In fact, that charity had been there all along.

Evidence of this claim lies in Governor Brown's message from Milledgeville, Georgia on November 6, 1861. This proclamation contains a special section entitled "Relief to the People" where he addresses unfair burdens of speculation which affect poor families. The best mode of relief that occurred to the governor would be appointing an officer to devote their time to ensure that planters properly deposit cotton in warehouses, meet their current expenses, and pay all taxes required of them for the necessary expense of the war, thus decreasing unnecessary speculation.¹⁴² Governor Brown also extended Stay Laws between debtors and creditors because if creditors were able to bring the property of debtors to sale by the Sheriff, it would entice speculators who had funds to buy up the property of poor debtors. This would surely increase the "amount of suffering among helpless women and children, whose husbands and fathers, contracted debts when money was plentiful and the country was prosperous, and would now be insufficient to satisfy." Brown continues to say that many of these debtors are now in "military service of the country, risking themselves and sacrificing all the pleasures of home, in defence of our lives, liberties and families.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴² Governor's Message, Executive Department, Milledgeville, GA., Nov. 6, 1861, Duke University Libraries, 16.

I can imagine no greater cruelty, than to permit the creditor in absence of the soldier, to take from his family, the small pittance left for their support.” It is evident that not only was Governor Brown heartfelt on the subject of the poor, one of his main agendas early on in the conflict was to recommend to enact legislation to provide ample protection for the weak and helpless from the “grasp of the avaricious and the powerful.”¹⁴³

The following year, Governor Brown issued another Annual Message to the Georgia Legislature which was assembled on November 6, 1862. In this address Governor Brown discusses that the state had been cut off by Union troops and would no longer receive supplies of provisions from Tennessee and Kentucky. He soon discovered the state had no grain to spare and demanded that distillation cease. The increased price in the available grain put an undue hardship on the poorer classes and especially the families of the poor men who were in the army. Brown used his constitutional power to issue a proclamation “ordering militia officers of the State to seize the Still of any person in the State who should continue distilling after March 15, 1862.”¹⁴⁴ This was certainly indicative of a proactive effort to prevent suffering and secure a supply of food for the people.

Also contained in this address was a special section for the “Families of Our Soldiers in Service.” In that passage he states:

“The families of our noble troops, who, by their gallant deeds, have illustrated the character of our State on the battlefield. These heroic citizen soldiers have till recently received but \$11 per month from the Government. The act of Congress, passed at last session, raises the wages of private and non-commissioned officer four dollars per month. Many of these privates are poor men, who have left behind large families dependent on their own exertions for a livelihood. They send back their wages to afford their loved ones at home a meagre subsistence at the present prices of provisions and clothing. In this state of things, I think it proper that the wealth of whole State, when necessary be compelled to contribute to the wants of soldiers’ families in all parts of the State, who need assistance. I

¹⁴³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴⁴ Annual Message of Governor Joseph E. Brown to the Georgia Legislature, Assembled November 6th, 1862. Boughton, Nisbet & Barnes, State Printers, Milledgeville, GA 1862, 14-16.

therefore recommend that the State provide, a bounty of one hundred dollars for the family of each soldier in service of the war, or who may hereafter enter service, whose property when last given in by him on the tax book, was worth less than one thousand dollars, and the like sum for each widow of a deceased soldier and for each widow who has a son or sons in service or has lost a son in service. I further recommend that the whole net proceeds of the Western & Atlantic Railroad for the ensuring year be appropriated to pay the bounty. I also recommend, that the Governor of the State be authorized to raise the money to meet payment of this bounty by negotiating a temporary loan at five percent to be paid to the creditors, so soon as the money is paid into the Treasury by the state Road and Tax Collectors... the success of our cause depends on the gallantry and endurance of our troops. They cannot fight unless they and their families can be supplied with at least the necessities of life. The wealth of the country must come to the relief and contribute whatever exigencies may require.”¹⁴⁵

First, it must be noted that Governor Brown was not only addressing the poor class but was also taking the yeoman class underneath his wing since he refers to “those soldiers’ families who owned less than one thousand dollars in property” according to the tax books. Dirt poor farmers would not have appeared as land owners in corresponding tax books according to the county, so it is evident that Brown meaningfully included the yeomanry in Georgia public policy. This economic group may have owned farms ranging from a few acres up to several hundred acres but equaled less than one thousand dollars. This detail adds to the debate that primary sources should be examined more carefully to include issues of class. A closer look reveals that not only were the rural poor affected but women of the middle or yeoman class were also in need of aid once war began.

Secondly, though the official term “soldiers wives” would make a distinct appearance all on its own in Georgia public policy documents later on in the war, soldiers wives were undoubtedly included in Governor Brown’s documents when he addressed the “Families of Soldiers in Service” and “Relief to the People” in the years 1861 and 1862. Brown’s proactive measures to aid the poor and struggling people of Georgia may have significantly altered the numbers of women writing,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 16-18.

petitioning, and rioting in the state of Georgia to be lower in comparison to the high numbers of women engaging in these sorts political activity in South Carolina and other states across the Confederacy. Had Brown's watchful eye and charity been lacking in the beginning of the war, it is highly probable that more primary sources documenting the politicization of yeoman and poor women would exist today. Furthermore, it can be argued that Brown's efforts to aid the poor families of Confederate soldiers may have significantly reduced the numbers of women addressing their destitution politically in the state of Georgia as compared to the women that McCurry used in her sample, whose governors and state officials did less to help them. Perhaps the reason why little evidence from Georgia makes an appearance in *Confederate Reckoning* is because the political phenomena of females in this particular state did not reflect the same patterns in the rest of the Confederacy, thus weakening her argument that rural white women in the Confederate South were valiant political actors, who directly affected public policy in the Civil War.

3.6 COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS

An innovative spin on who actually held power in the Civil War South was provided by Stephanie McCurry in *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*. Specific emphasis is placed on common white women as vital political actors. McCurry posits that rural white women were able to exert a strong force through keen politicking and organization that ultimately affected issues of statehood, slavery, and democracy in the Confederate States of America, even though they were considered to be peripheral to politics.¹⁴⁶ Confederate women of the non-elite class emerged as a new collective identity under which they referred to themselves as "soldiers' wives." This group of poor white women, who had no previous history of political

¹⁴⁶ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 2-3.

participation, forged politics of subsistence and demanded justice from the Confederacy.¹⁴⁷ While some of those assertions hold water, a closer look into women specifically residing in the State of Georgia slightly challenges the existing narrative.

This chapter makes several conclusions when comparing how white women acted politically in Georgia and how McCurry portrays women as political actors in the entire Confederate States. First, the evidence provided herein indicates that women of the poor and yeoman class in the State of Georgia were forced to tread out of their customary gender roles primarily due to their economic circumstances and war hardships. As a result, they were able to exercise their female agency and influence on Georgia welfare and public policies to a certain extent. While Georgia women were found to act in the same political ways in which McCurry describes, the real differences emerge when the primary sources are re-examined and additional sources that were not used in *Confederate Reckoning* are added to the ongoing debate. The new evidence indicates that not only did poor women engage in what McCurry calls “politics of subsistence and survival” but women of the “yeoman” or middle class, who were not very rich, nor very poor, also behaved in a similar fashion and should be included in the sample of women who were affected the most when war hit. Essentially, poor and yeoman women both behaved in politics in the same way as dirt poor women and in a strikingly different manner than their elite sisters. Thus, it is in the very idea of class status where the true variations rest. The issue of class must be paid closer attention to include yeoman women in the sample, as their actions, in addition to the poor, were significant in ushering some change in Confederate policy.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

The sources also indicate that Georgia women's actions were not deliberately manifested in the name of politics, through political ideology, nor did they consider themselves as true political actors during the Civil War years. The unfranchised poor and yeoman women of Georgia simply wrote letters, signed petitions, and rioted individually and collectively as a means of survival to assuage their suffering in the midst of a savage civil war due to their economic standing. This behavior was only indicative of the poor and yeoman class and not that of the wealthy females in the Confederate South. Furthermore, it is only in the present that scholars can search historical remnants and piece together certain patterns to show the political culture of non-elite females in the Civil War South. The effect that women had on the political arena and public policy in Georgia is a phenomenon that is easily recognized today, but was not as such in the minds of those women who actually lived it.

Adding to the idea of non-conscious political activity by Southern women, while it is evident that soldiers' wives had enough prowess to sway public welfare policy in their favor to some extent, there exists little evidence to show the mechanism behind their group organization. On that ground it can be further concluded that Georgia women and soldiers' wives did not consider themselves as true political constituents in the height of the conflict because they did not leave behind any indication as to how they organized the riots and petitions. In addition to not writing of any political notions or ideologies, true political groups looking to exert dominance in government have strong premeditated agendas, a key factor that is certainly lacking in this sample of women. Though modern historians may have some validity in classifying women's war-time activity under "politics of subsistence" in the present, simple survival, not obtaining political power or group recognition in the political arena, was Georgia women's top priority during the Civil War years.

This study also postulates that rural poor and yeoman soldiers' wives residing in Georgia were less active in altering public and welfare policy than their counterparts in other parts of the CSA because the governing bodies in Georgia took a more proactive approach to aid the poor and needy families in the early years of the Civil War. Governor Brown's legislative measures and addresses to the common folk in the years 1861 and 1862 do not support the idea that it was only in 1863 and after enough political action assumed by angry soldiers' wives that Confederate state governors and federal officials began to address the food crisis on the home front. While riots did occur in Georgia in the year 1863 that pushed Governor Brown to increase aid to the needy, specific policies and provisions were already in place well before 1863, thus, not only lowering the number of documented poor rural women clamoring to the government for sustenance but also lessening their involvement in the form of politics described by Stephanie McCurry in *Confederate Reckoning*.

There is an obligation placed upon writers of history to seek truth in the past. Often times the literature produced is skewed due to biases, inconsistencies, or lack of inclusion of available resources. Detailed and rich material such as letters, petitions, and riot accounts provided in this analysis can be found in Georgia that enrich the growing interest in the field of gender and politics in the Southern United States. Poor and yeoman women's untold stories comprise an essential component to the rich part of the fabric woven into the making of Civil War history and must not be neglected. It should be a continued effort by historians to uncover additional sources like these to either enhance or challenge existing scholarship regarding female political trends in the Civil War South.

4 CHAPTER THREE: DESERTION IN GEORGIA

"I don't want mother to suffer for anything as long as I live.

When I hear she is in want of provisions and can't get them,

I am going home.'"

~Louise Calhoun Barfield¹⁴⁸

The Civil War desertion crisis proved to be a fascinating event in Georgia that historians still contend with as women's inadvertent effect on desertion circumvented power in their favor and rerouted focus back to the home front. To understand desertion, one must begin by understanding the seeds of dissent sown in the beginning of the Civil War. It is well documented that Georgians were by no means united on the issue of secession. The issue of unity, or lack thereof, would eventually resurface, rearing its ugly head at the end of the Civil War, manifested in acts of desertion. During the Georgia Secession Convention of 1861, more than half of the popular vote was in favor of staying in the union; however, enough votes were changed to give the secessionists a 166 to 130 majority at the Convention.¹⁴⁹ As the story goes, Georgia left the Union before allowing the issue to be directed by popular vote with enough push from its pro-secession delegates. The first shots fired in the war occurred in Charleston harbor in April 1861 and exacerbated war support. By the following month, 18,000 Georgians joined the Confederate army.¹⁵⁰ This heightened event bolstered support for the war. The valor that men assumed as they climbed over each other to put quill to ink and then ink to paper to ensure their names secured a highly coveted grey uniform is an intriguing story all on its own. That enthusiasm would quickly fade as the new born republic would experience the ravages of a gruesome war.

¹⁴⁸ Louise Calhoun Barfield, *History of Harris County Georgia, 1827-1961* (Columbus, GA., 1961), 758.

¹⁴⁹ David Williams, "Civil War Dissent." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 12 October 2015. Web. 17 February 2016.

¹⁵⁰ David Williams, "Civil War Dissent." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 12 October 2015. Web. 17 February 2016.

One of those men to quickly enlist was Charles Colcock Jones, Jr., the son of a wealthy Liberty County, Georgia planter and minister. When Jones, Jr. wrote to his father in 1862, he spoke of growing unity amongst recruited Georgians and from others who finally joined the Confederacy from the reluctant states of Kentucky and Tennessee. He spoke of the impact of their ambivalence. “The mask has been torn from their faces, and the cloud lifted from their eyes. They now see clearly the unhappy results of their own indecision, and the almost fatal consequences of their self-deception, and are prepared with united effort to throw off the galling yoke of the oppressor.”¹⁵¹ Jones, coming from a life of opulence, did not echo the same sentiments as other Georgia men of the lower and yeoman class and may have projected Georgia’s unity under his own loyalties developed as a privileged child growing up in coastal Georgia who believed that slavery benefited all white people, whether they owned slaves or not. Therefore, it seemed logical to the planter class that all white Southerners would fight those who worked to end their institution and way of life. However, as the war grew more turbulent, that naive thinking was put to test by plain folk who refused to blindly follow in their path.¹⁵²

Many of those men, including Jones, signed their life away to the Confederate Cause for several reasons. One of those motivating factors was the influence of women in their lives. Men of the upper elite class were undoubtedly urged by their wives, daughters, fiancés, and sweethearts to defend their womanhood and honor, and men of the lower classes had monetary motives of supporting their wives and children. As the war progressed, food and supply shortages swept through the entire South and lead to starvation, poverty, class tensions, and war disenchantment. Women of the common class left on the home fronts began rioting and petitioning local and state

¹⁵¹ Robert Mason Myers, *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 938.

¹⁵² Mark A. Weitz, *A Higher Duty: Desertion among Georgia Troops during the Civil War*, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 9-10.

governments for food and supplies. Some of the same soldiers' wives who supported their men's decision to fight, began to write of their distress to their husbands on the battlefields when their cries for help to government officials fell on ineffective and deaf ears. The home fronts of Civil War Georgia were so rife with such suffering that it caused disunity among the soldiers in battle and left men little to no choice but to abandon their ranks, permanently or temporarily, to answer their families' pleas. The narrative of the interplay and relationship between husband and wife, father and family in the Civil War South is a great one; perhaps even more fascinating than that of Confederate motivation for enlistment but is a story that has been underdeveloped until recently.

This chapter begins by examining the reasons why men from Georgia enlisted in the Confederate Army and then dissects the motives behind their desertion. A common factor in both decisions to enter and flee the ranks was the influence of women. The central argument of this study is that women not only motivated their sweethearts, husbands, and male kin to enlist but women also influenced their men to retreat from their duties and return home when the hardships of war hardened and disadvantaged them. It is mostly gives agency to those husbands and wives belonging to the poor and yeoman class, since they were the most affected by war. The desperate cries for help from a soldier's loved ones left on the home front influenced desertion among Georgia troops the most.

The arguments previously set forth by military and social historians that poor and yeoman women on the Georgia home front encouraged desertion among their men are also taken into consideration and this chapter propels that assertion further by suggesting that these acts committed by white plain folk women had political ramifications which ultimately affected the outcome of the Civil War. Although their influence may not have been recognized in the women's own consciousness as having political implications at the time, the effect of women's actions

during the war are certainly clear when examining primary sources on desertion. Essentially, these political tendencies are observed and identified in the present, rather than acknowledged as political activity in the minds of those plain folk women involved in the Civil War. It is evident that the collective actions of soldiers' wives and female relatives of soldiers inadvertently and unknowingly influenced wartime policy by encouraging desertion in the State of Georgia. Desertion became an issue so highly contended in war policy that it would be one of the major downfalls of the Confederacy.

4.1 MOTIVES FOR ENLISTMENT

The moment of national upheaval, otherwise known as the secession crisis in the early days of the Civil War, threw women into public affairs unlike before. While showing strong support of the new Confederate Nation, women had conflicting perceptions between their duty as Southerners and the painful distress and anxiety that separation from their men brought them. Even though women acknowledged that they were afforded no place in the public arena, they nonetheless were able to assert their claims within it.¹⁵³ Women not only expressed the tension between loyalty to their family and obligation to the state but proved to have a stake in motives for enlistment. When a South Carolinian woman's husband joined the army she stated, "I do not approve of this thing. What do I care for patriotism? My husband is my country. What is country to me if he be killed."¹⁵⁴ Kate Rowland of Georgia admitted that her husband Charlie "is dearer to me than my country and I cannot willingly give him up."¹⁵⁵ However, the thrill and obsession of the military, coupled with notions of manhood, honor, courage and glory outweighed the reluctance of most elite women to give up their loved ones. A "man did not deserve the name of a man if he did not fight for his

¹⁵³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 12

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

country,” was the sentiment that numerous upper class women echoed. Sarah Lawton of Georgia expected men to fulfill her expectations of them as she viewed the crisis as “something [that] was needed to wake them from their effeminate habits and [I] welcome war for that.”¹⁵⁶

Males felt the adoration from females in ritualized dramatic troop departures. Towns and communities would gather in large masses to bid soldiers farewell. Newly enlisted soldiers were presented with uniforms or flags sewn by local ladies. Brave soldiers were “pelted with fruit, flowers, cards, and notes” by throngs of lovely ladies as they marched on. Banners were waved, patriotic speeches were given, and marching bands played cheerful music as the romance of war and glorious victory were proudly on display.¹⁵⁷ “Go for us, we’ll pray for you,” was the emotion women would pour over their men as stirring marches commemorated the ceremony of parting. Men certainly felt an obligation to uphold the duty and honor of their women as they strode off nobly into the horizon, while their women waved handkerchiefs and cheered their departure in unwavering adoration and support.¹⁵⁸

The claim that Confederate men’s war efforts rested on their passion, love and admiration for women is argued by Stephen W. Berry in *All that Makes a Man*. The mere figure of women placed on pedestals is crucial to the understanding of the male psyche in the Civil War. Men marched off to battle undertaking a woman’s name. This sentiment grew out of the image of the Confederacy and newly formed republic being female in origin; an image that grew from deep rooted antebellum culture that inextricably linked male self-esteem to the expectation of feminine approval. Berry maintains that “women were witness to male becoming” and acted as a gauge for

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 18.

male self-esteem and ambition.¹⁵⁹ The letters examined in this book come from upper class soldiers to give insight into the understanding of why young men were willing to risk their lives on the battlefronts. The correspondence reveals a fascinating tale about the relationship between men and women. A man's ambition was worthless unless females noticed their bravery, and in the same vein, a man without ambition was unworthy of a woman's love. Ultimately, the love of a woman was a justifiable motive for enlistment in the Confederate Army.¹⁶⁰ "Each man had planted his patriotism in the sturdier soil of his love of woman...Their woman was their country and their cause, the reason they fought and killed." Their sweethearts and wives thus provided a "reason to die."¹⁶¹

Upper class women certainly played an integral part in influencing male support for the war and ultimately their enlistment, but what were the motivations for common folk men to support secession and enlistment? The answer also lies in the female presence. With regard to secession, yeoman and planters were brought together as freemen and citizen soldiers united under one common cause: to preserve the institution that sustained the Southern economy and way of life. The yeomanry had a particular place in Confederate politics as masters of their own small worlds in a region of a great planter elite.¹⁶² Classical republican virtues brought men of all classes together by a common impulse of "manly resistance" which came in reference to the vulnerable state of white womanhood. Yeoman and poor men were brought together by their status as free white males to "meet, parade, deliberate, break bread and vote, usually in the presence of a female

¹⁵⁹ Steven M. Stowe, "Review of All that Makes a Man," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring, 2004), pp. 796-797. See also, Stephen W. Berry, II, *All that Makes a Man*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 796-798.

¹⁶¹ Kenneth W. Noe, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 67.

¹⁶² Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 268.

audience.” Without women, there was no one to “witness, authorize, and validate manhood that was a signature of all freemen.”¹⁶³

Though yeoman and poor white men were by no means equal in wealth and status to the elite planters, they also became united on the issue of secession and the common struggle for political independence. As freemen in a world of dependent wives, children, and in some cases, a small number of slave property, as was indicative of some yeoman farmers, their manhood and households were at stake. Lower to middling class males had an obligation to protect the virtue of their women and wanted to secure a chance of success and upward mobility in a slave driven economy. When the secession crisis hit in 1860, yeoman and poor farmers supported the cause for independence and came to the defense of the Confederacy in their own identity as “masters of their own small worlds.”¹⁶⁴

Kenneth Noe examines the symbolic role that women and families played in motivating men who rallied to the Bonnie Blue Flag after 1861 in the landmark publication of *Reluctant Rebels*. He contends that for youthful enlistees, romance and the ideals of Southern womanhood provided a different kind of ideology and reason to fight. Older and married men fought because they were determined to protect their loved ones and hard-won property. Bounties also played a subtle role in enlistment because it gave men an economic means of supporting their home and hearth and the women and children within that sphere.¹⁶⁵ Soldiers often accepted money out of desperation rather than greed, as it secured an income for men to provide for and defend their families. Since the role of a male was the head of the household, they enrolled in the army, sometimes unwillingly, because the monetary needs of their wives and children proved so great

¹⁶³ Ibid., 269.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 304.

¹⁶⁵ Noe, *Reluctant Rebels*, 10-11.

that they would knowingly risk their lives in battle for their benefit.¹⁶⁶ If men, regardless of social and economic status, were willing to enter the war seeking the admiration from the women they loved or simply out of love and moral obligation to the families they created with their spouses, women certainly must have held the same power over their men when it came to their decisions to desert.

4.2 CRIES FROM THE HOME FRONT

Primary source material such as personal memoirs and letters portraying the way men regarded women as symbols of their crusade certainly supports the claim that women were motives for soldier enrollment in the Confederate army during the Civil War. Conversely, white Southern women were also just as successful in lowering the moral and spirits of their men and directly influenced desertion. A truer statement could not have been more indicative of a group of people than the poor and yeoman women in the State of Georgia.

Studies on Confederate desertion show that soldiers who abandoned their posts were not always cowards and shirkers but were some of the most seasoned and well-respected veterans from prestigious regiments.¹⁶⁷ Hence, what exactly spurred some of the most honorable and patriotic southerners fighting for a cause in which they believed to desert their units is an ever-evolving question faced by Southern historians. The common variable amongst Georgia troops is that their duty as men to provide and assuage the social and economic sufferings endured by their family members at home trumped their duty as a soldier. Female calls from the home front are an aspect of desertion that has received little scholarly attention, but nonetheless is significant, not only concerning Georgia, but the rest of the Confederacy as well. Retreat did not always indicate

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 121.

¹⁶⁷ Samuel B. McGuire, "Desertion during the Civil War." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 24 December 2014. Web. 18 February 2016.

cowardice, but actually was an assumption of agency in a hopeless situation. That same agency is also present in women's tearstained letters to their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.

The quill that produced words on meager sheets of paper would prove to be a powerful tool for Georgia women as they wrote to their husbands and their government about the fears and suffering brought on them by war. The differences in the concerns expressed by Georgia women is linked to their economic standing. Planter women went through channels of patronage and asked for furloughs for their men to protect their property from gangs and slave insurrection, while poorer women begged government officials for mercy in asking for relief of a husband or son to help out on their dwindling farms.¹⁶⁸ Accordingly, this section will focus primarily on the poor and yeoman women on Georgia home fronts, whose letters would increase and become more despairing as the war waged on.

When Georgia soldiers of the common class marched off to defend their families, property, and virtues, they found often themselves homesick for their loved ones. They also faced difficulties leaving farms and household duties usually reserved for their oversight to their wives. The duty to perform on the battlefields left many yeoman and poor male heads of households little choice but to place farm management in their wives hands. It was a compromising situation that left men uncomfortable with the new dependence they placed on females. Georgia recruits routinely sent information and detailed instructions to their wives and others who were left to manage their affairs. They regularly inquired about the status of gardens, the condition of crops, livestock, and whether or not their families had enough to eat. Men told wives when to sow and reap the harvest, and when to buy salt to preserve meat stocks.¹⁶⁹ John S. Battle of the 11th Georgia Artillery

¹⁶⁸ David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 71.

¹⁶⁹ Noe, *Reluctant Rebels*, 82.

instructed his wife regarding the family's sow to "nurse her close, probably you had better stop reading this and feed her."¹⁷⁰

Farming and governing their households by proxy proved difficult for men when inflation, impressment and speculation increased and local and state governments proved inferior at protecting soldiers' families. Women acted with urgency to obtain immediate relief. Women began to lose respect for the Confederacy's ability to provide for the common folk and wanted nothing more than for their men to come home. While it was not uncommon for them to write letters and petitions to the government, as a group or individually, and even participate in riots because their families were left "without a morsel of bread," they also exercised their agency by requesting furloughs for their men from government and military officials. When that strategy did not produce the results they sought, Georgia women wrote directly to their husbands on the front lines and begged for their return.¹⁷¹ The effects of female action would prove devastating to the Confederacy's capacity to sustain a viable military corps.

Several letters from poor and yeoman women flooded Governor Brown's office as the conditions on the home front deteriorated to such an extent that they were unable to draw any thread to make clothing, corn and meat. Since Governor Brown came from a yeoman background, common folk women regarded him "a friend of the poor" and requested leaves for their menfolk. Pauline Wheeler of Columbia County had already lost her husband and two sons in the war. She summoned Brown to release her only remaining son to help out with her small farm since she had no help of slaves. She described the work of a typical yeoman woman that hauled corn and wood,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷¹ John Bachlott to Joseph E. Brown, February 12, 1864, Governor's Incoming Correspondence, 1861-1865, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

cutting crops and tending stock. “Not having my son with me to do these things, I live in a state of perplexity and vexation which is enough to drive me insane.”¹⁷²

Martha Tyler of Lowndes County, Georgia wrote Brown that she and her children were “destitute of food and clothing and without help we will suffer.” Tyler’s husband had been in the Confederate Army but remained unpaid. Without her husband’s presence at home or a steady income, Tyler demanded that her husband be discharged.¹⁷³ On the other hand, Martha Lane from Greenville did not want her husband to know of her complaints and instead wrote to Governor Brown in secrecy, directly asking for immediate relief because it would have been too troubling for her husband to know she had been in desperate want of something to eat. Instead she wrote “I want him to do all for his country he can.”¹⁷⁴ It is probable that Martha Lane knew her husband’s character well enough to know that if she wrote of her state of affairs to him that his duty as a husband and father would trump his call to the Confederacy and would inevitably cause him to be absent without leave.

Martha Tyler and Martha Lane were not the only women to be affected by the war. Soldier’s wives of the yeoman and poor classes throughout Georgia began asking for the release of their husbands from military service, some permanently, but mostly, for furloughs long enough to assist with the planting and harvesting. Their children were either too small to help in the fields or recruited and taken away from home at young ages. Able bodied men were essential for their survival. Elkanah Johnson, a Captain in the Confederate Army wrote to Governor Brown of the conditions of soldier’s wives after visiting Colquitt County, Georgia, “I am sorry to say that nearly

¹⁷² Pauline Wheeler to Joseph E Brown, October 31, 1864, Governor’s Incoming Correspondence, 1861-1865, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹⁷³ Martha Tyler to Joseph E. Brown, October 11, 1864, Governor’s Incoming Correspondence, 1861-1865, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹⁷⁴ David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War*, 67.

all of the families in that County are almost wholly [sic] destitute of any and all the articles of subsistence.” Johnson suggested to Brown that the soldier’s be sent home to help plant crops or else “famine will be the inevitable result.”¹⁷⁵ Brown was not the only governing body to receive such pleas. Mildred Bone of Boggs Chapel sent ten sons into the Confederate Army and superseded Brown’s authority by writing directly to General Robert E. Lee himself on April 7, 1863 and requested that one of her ten sons be sent home to help with planting crops. Bone’s request was unfortunately denied by Lee. Despite his admiration of her son’s noble dedication, “If we allowed all to return who are needed at home we should soon have no country and no home.”¹⁷⁶

As the war dragged on, worsening conditions faced by soldiers’ wives and children on the home front tested men’s Confederate patriotism and loyalty. From the war’s early months, soldiers belonging to the middling and poor class had concerns for their families and became disgusted when ineffective and cold hearted planters and local governments failed to address the growing destitution in Georgia towns. Men became torn between the nation’s demands placed on them and their traditional male duties as the protectors of their domestic spheres when they received word from home.¹⁷⁷ Gloomy letters from wives, mothers and sweethearts filled with grief and despair reached the frontlines when they were unable to get the assistance they desperately needed from the government. Thousands of soldiers began to consider desertion.

Sergeant William Andrews of the Fifty-First Georgia Regiment stated that it was a frequent occurrence for men to receive letters from home stating that their families were on the brink of starvation. “Many a poor soldier has deserted and gone home in answer to that appeal, to be back and shot for desertion.” Although he was a bachelor himself, Andrews would have done the same

¹⁷⁵ David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams, “The Women Rising,” 67-68.

¹⁷⁶ David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War*, 76-77.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

if called upon, “Thank God I have no wife and children to suffer on account of an ungrateful government.”¹⁷⁸ The problem of desertion became so rampant that it not only plagued regiments in Georgia but also undermined the entire war effort across the Confederacy.

Letters from home tugged at the heartstrings of Georgia soldiers as women told their husbands, brothers and fathers of their destitution and desperately pleaded for their return. Yeoman and poor women were left with small children and farms to run without any assistance. For example, Mary Brooks from Greenville wrote to her husband, “I never get any rest night or day and I dont think I will last much longer.” Brooks was running low on bacon, salt and money. She was not shy in expressing her need for him to obtain a furlough that was often very difficult to obtain.

Mark A. Weitz argues that poor rations, loss of camaraderie, and even Sherman’s destructive march through Georgia, were not adequate enough reasons why men from Georgia deserted.¹⁷⁹ He maintains that husbands owed their wives back at home a higher duty than they owed the Confederacy and any soldier’s failure to understand and respond to their calls would severely undermine their marriages.¹⁸⁰ One case of desertion most highly cited by Civil War historians is by Mrs. Edward Cooper. After repeated attempts to gain a furlough, Mr. Cooper left without permission and upon his return facing a court-martial, he gave no defense except the letter from his wife. Though her letter began by telling her husband how proud she was of him, she wrote that the situation at home had reached such unbearable proportions that her youngest son would wake up in the middle of night screaming “o mamma I am so hungary” and that “Before God, Edward unless you come home, we must die!” Mrs. Cooper repeated, “your darling Lucy, she

¹⁷⁸ David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams, “The Women Rising,” 80-82.

¹⁷⁹ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 90.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

never complains but she is growing thinner everyday, and I repeat, unless you come home, we must all die.” The panel at the court martial was undoubtedly moved by the letter but still sentenced her husband to death. Fortunately for Mr. Cooper, Robert E. Lee lessened the sentence and he returned to his unit.¹⁸¹

The *Atlanta Southern Confederacy* newspaper wrote of many soldiers leaving the ranks due to horrible conditions faced by their women at home. In early 1863, one soldier received a letter from his wife begging him to come home. He abandoned his post after several agonizing days of reading and re-reading the letter. The soldier was captured, tried, convicted of desertion and executed by firing squad. A commentator wrote of the wife, “She inconsiderately brought her husband to a dishonorable death.” The commentator ended his rant “Wives! mothers! beware what you write to your sons and husbands in the army. A thoughtless and imprudent letter may lead to discontent, desertion and death.”¹⁸² These sentiments were echoed by other newspapers across the state. In Augusta, an editor wrote in the *Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel* on August 8, 1861, “If you feel sad, don’t write at all, rather than write in a sad strain.”¹⁸³

Cries from home not only included worries of farm life and sustenance but familial affairs as well. Issues of parenthood affected rates of desertion amongst Georgia troops. When enlisted men had difficulty obtaining furloughs to answer to family crises, it left them pitted against their loyalty to their country or their family. G.W. Huguley asked for leave after receiving word that his child was ill and possibly dying in 1862. He described his wife to be in a “wreched and desolate

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸² David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War*, 78.

¹⁸³ *Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel*, August 8, 1861.

condition” Huguley wrote to the commander of the Third Brigade, “I must see my Bebe. I must go to my wife.”¹⁸⁴

A collection of letters between Private William Ross Stillwell of the 53rd Georgia and his wife Molly also reveal the extent of suffering absence from their families had on men. In 1862 when he learned that his wife was pregnant with their second child, he expressed grief rather than elation at the blessed event. Childbirth was a dangerous obstacle for both mother and child in the mid nineteenth century. Separation from their wives increased the dread of pregnancy among males. Stillwell became increasingly worried at the precarious arrival of the babe and he wrote to her from Fredericksburg: “If I lose my Molly I lose my all. If I was to lose you I would not want to fight anymore for what is life or liberty to me without my Molly.” He would roam the forest late at night waiting on word of the circumstance, “Deliver me from having the pain of mourning for the one that I love with love stronger than death...Molly, I thought I had a heart like a man but confess that I am nearly ready to give up.” Thankfully, Molly gave birth to a baby girl and Stillwell later asked his wife to “kiss the children for me...I am your devoted loving husband taken from your bosom without my consent, left here against my will.”¹⁸⁵

Historians have posited that the reason behind the few number of letters from Georgia women to their husbands, fathers, brothers and male kin on the battlefields requesting they come home was due to fear of discovery would lead to their capture and execution.¹⁸⁶ The majority of these letters were most likely destroyed upon receipt. One can only imagine that if the letters of soldiers’ wives and mothers to their husbands and sons matched those scores that Governor Brown received in office, it is understandable how easy it would have been for soldiers to desert and

¹⁸⁴ G.W. Huguley to commander of the Third Brigade, April 9, 1862, Telamon Culyer collection, Historical Manuscripts. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

¹⁸⁵ Noe, *Reluctant Rebels*, 77-78.

¹⁸⁶ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 103.

answer the calls from home, thus making the claim that women influenced desertion all the more solid.¹⁸⁷ However, sufficient evidence exists to suggest strong female agency affected rates of desertion.

Like clock-work, and as steady as the sun, Georgia women's despairing letters reached the Governor's desk and the battlefields on which their loved ones fought, but what is the significance of this behavior? Perhaps the most telling indicator of poor and yeoman female's newly found power in influencing soldiers' retreat lies in Governor Brown's November 1863 inaugural address. Brown specifically called upon Georgia's women to support the war and reminded them that America would never have won the first revolution and secured its independence from Britain without the "contribution of the nation's women." He insisted that "without their energetic efforts and moral support of the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the Confederate States, our liberties would before this time have been lost." Brown also included, "With their continued effort and God's blessing upon it, women will avenge the blood of their slain relatives."¹⁸⁸ For a group of unfranchised people, who were considered to be parties to be protected and far removed from politics before the war, women certainly exercised some agency with their newly adopted roles in the Confederate project because Governor Brown consciously directed part of his address to women's concerns. Clearly their support was vital to the success of the Confederacy's ability to wage war. The leaders of the Confederate government clearly understood the value in women's opinions by making this statement and knew the dangers if loss of man-power by desertion continued. Keeping women happy and content would mean keeping their husband's equally satisfied with the affairs of their families left at home. Ultimately, this peace of mind knowing that

¹⁸⁷ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 103.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

their womenfolk were not suffering would give Georgia soldiers a motive to continue the fight, instead of retreating to answer their beck and call.

Only one study has been conducted tracing the patterns of desertion in Georgia. Mark Weitz painstakingly produces valuable information on the number of soldiers reported either absent without leave or true desertion, or reasons behind their desertion in the Civil War. Interestingly, the letters to Governor Brown and to those husband's and men on the fronts were received between 1863 and 1864 and coincide with escalated desertion among Georgia soldiers in the upper piedmont area. It also correlates with the severe deprivations on the home front and acute distress experienced by yeoman and poor females. Additionally, though Georgians continued to desert, it is interesting that desertion actually declined after September 1864.¹⁸⁹ This deals an immense blow to modern theorist who argue that Southern defeat was primarily due to "Union naval and military victories, which lead to the dissolution of Confederate will, and created war weariness and destroyed morale." These theorists point specifically to the fall of Atlanta and Sherman's March to the Sea as being crucial military events that doomed the Confederacy.¹⁹⁰ Quite tempting as it may be to accept those postulations, the evidence provided specifically from the State of Georgia seem to challenge those accepted theories. The loss of will as a result of Georgia women's influence and the cries from home brought defeat; it was not defeat that brought the loss of will. Internal forces doomed the Confederacy rather than Northern victories. Sherman's march did not drive Georgian's to desert and return out of fear that their family members left on his path to Savannah would meet his burning torch. Instead Georgia deserters came before the Atlanta campaign and many left before the fall of Atlanta.¹⁹¹ Motives behind desertion within the state of

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 106.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 118.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 118.

Georgia can be surmised by quoting J.F. Walker in 1861, “As long as I no my wife and children are cared for and doing well I am willing to stay here and fite in defense of our beloved country.”

If a Georgia soldier’s wife and children lacked the sustenance to remain protected, clothed and fed, his obligation to serve the Confederacy surrendered to a higher power: home.

4.3 CONCLUSION

The problem of desertion plagued units from Georgia and influenced and had serious repercussions on the Confederate war effort. Numerous works have been published regarding this issue and many authors have linked desertion rates to the loss of the Southern cause. They have also listed several motivations for Confederate soldiers’ retreat from the war front, but very few have linked the agency of women to desertion rates. In this chapter, it has been proposed that the greatest effect on desertion rates was soldiers’ attempts to alleviate the hardships of their women, families, and communities. Enlistment in the army kept many heads of households away from their homes for extended periods of time. Crop failures, raids, salt and food shortages, and speculation ravaged Georgia communities. Despite Governor Brown’s attempts to maintain order and relieve shortages, many soldiers began to lose faith in the State’s ability to help their families while they were away serving the Confederacy. Faced with harrowing cries from home, many Georgia soldiers chose to uphold loyalties to their family above their country.¹⁹²

Southern women regarded themselves as dependents within a social order of male paternalism and female subordination in the Old South. Women received protection and support in return. After the first shots of the Civil War were fired, wartime policies and procedures failed to provide basic subsistence for the families left behind by soldiers called away, and ushered in starvation and poverty among the middling and lower classes. The “notions of “virtual” political

¹⁹² McGuire, Samuel B. "Desertion during the Civil War." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 24 December 2014. Web. 17 April 2015.

representation --which argued that women's interests would be protected by their men-- had proven hollow."¹⁹³ Women began to defend themselves and their families and acted in ways that showed they possessed agency in their sex and not just in the assumed duties and obligations ordered by men.¹⁹⁴ One of those avenues through which women exercised their feminine power was in encouraging desertion. Patterns of desertion ran in family lines, and women were key parties to their operations.¹⁹⁵

Throughout the Civil War, and especially by the last months of the war, women were actively encouraging their husbands, brothers and male family members to retreat from the battlefields. The risk of execution and public shame in the communities to which they belonged were just as high as the almost certainty of injury and death on the frontlines. Confederate leaders and government officials began to acknowledge that women had some leverage over soldiers in encouraging their desertion.¹⁹⁶ "The source of all of the present evils of Toryism and desertion in our country is letter writing to the army" as one military officer wrote to the secretary of war, in his desperate attempt to try and persuade him to censor incoming correspondence before delivery. A North Carolinian Confederate official also proclaimed, "Desertion takes place because desertion is encouraged... and though ladies may not be willing to concede the fact, they are nevertheless responsible...for the desertion in the army and the dissipation in the country." It is clear that women interfered with military recruitment and retention and contributed to Confederate military failure and defeat.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 242.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 242.

¹⁹⁵ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 125.

¹⁹⁶ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 242-243.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 123-244.

As Mark Weitz so keenly delivered, “desertion measures morale like a barometer gauges weather patterns.”¹⁹⁸ This study shows that Civil War desertion in Georgia was rather complex. To argue that desertion patterns were mostly the result of conditions on the battlefield is highly flawed. To discount the importance and influence of women left on the home fronts produces skewed results; familial obligations also prove central to understanding motivations for desertion. The will of Georgia’s soldiers to fight was certainly put to the test and they eventually gave way to the higher call of home.¹⁹⁹ Women’s attitudes regarding the progress of war and their influence over their husbands can be irrefutably linked to disunity, lack of morale and, eventually, retreat.

The equation of dissent equals desertion equals military defeat may not be supported by exact quantifiable evidence.²⁰⁰ However, enough primary source documents are available to suggest that the desperate letters of soldiers’ wives to their husbands were enough of a significant phenomenon to instill fear in the minds of Confederate officials. That same fear is evident in wartime policy and media coverage. The letters and diaries between Georgia soldiers and their families provide insight into the complex relationships and hardships experienced on the home fronts which led so many soldiers to abandon the Confederate cause and return home.²⁰¹ The massive number of accounts of Georgia women requesting furloughs for their men and going so far as to convince their husband’s that an even more important battle was waiting for them back at home, cannot be denied or brushed aside any longer. Women indirectly undermined support of the Confederacy’s ability to wage war by influencing desertion through their persistent letter writing. With that, it can be concluded that the internal dissent among poor and yeoman women on the

¹⁹⁸ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰⁰ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 192.

²⁰¹ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 8.

Georgia home fronts caused by ill operating governments and poverty forced them to call their husband's home for assistance. This action by women had severe political consequences. As much as other factors such as invading Yankee armies, lack of supplies for troops, and internal economic failure, women calling for desertion was also a meaningful and decisive component in the outcome of the Civil War. Recognizing the importance of gender and women's agency on the subject of military desertion should be a continued for exploration by future students of Southern history.

5 AFTER THE WAR AND CONCLUSION

Wars are often a catalyst for transforming the status quo in society. Whether the change occurs socially, economically, politically, or in a combination, the standing of nations are always drastically altered from the inception of a conflict to when the battle dust settles. The Civil War produced several transformations. Some of these changes have been studied in depth by historians, while others remain at large. Women began to disrupt the traditional expectations of the female place in the Old South in this pivotal era. A reexamination of the well-established conclusions regarding Civil War power and politics and the accepted gender theories is consequently long overdue.

This thesis has sought to make a lasting contribution to the history of Southern women redressing gender imbalances and exploring the ways that the Civil War affected a particular group in the nineteenth century: those plain folk women of the poor and yeoman class--a group that left clues into their experiences and consciousness that have been overlooked. Women have left posterity with an everlasting mark through their correspondence with loved ones and government officials and their appearance in public policy documents and newspaper accounts. The Civil War experience hit directly to the heart of lower and middle class Confederate women as they suffered

great material deprivation that was imposed on them by the elite class and by the weakness of the Confederate government.²⁰² Very little attention has been paid, until recent years, to this individual and collective transformation, and the ways that national upheaval affected women's behavior and allowed them to produce their own legacies.

By taking Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* as an inspiration to begin a study on Georgia women of the poor and yeoman class, several conclusions have been drawn regarding women's implications in Civil War politics. First, it is problematic and simplistic to classify people in the Old South as either poor or wealthy, when there was actually a viable middle class or "yeomanry." Women belonging to this yeoman class acted in staunchly similar ways to the dirt poor faction and also deserve to be recognized among those who stepped out of their traditional gender roles that Southern society required of them. Secondly, this study takes McCurry's argument that poor women in the Confederacy were political actors and argues that even though Georgia women engaged in the same forms of politics described in *Confederate Reckoning*, such as writing to government officials, petitioning and rioting, they did not actually view themselves as a political constituency. Georgia women behaved in this manner because of class differences and out of necessity and survival, not because they were driven by political ideologies. Though their behavior yielded political consequences in public and war policy, survival was their first priority, not achieving political standing or recognition or advancing a political cause. The issue of women and desertion patterns in Civil War Georgia offers the final contribution. Primary source material documenting soldiers' wives and mothers correspondence to government officials and their husbands and sons on the warfront suggest that women played a vital role in influencing desertion among Georgia troops. Though Georgia is only one state that

²⁰² Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 5.

made up the Confederacy, the loss of manpower in that state due to men retreating battle to answer the calls of their wives and families on the home front is an interesting and significant event that could be considered as the final straw, amongst many, that finally broke the Confederacy's back. Surprisingly, the act of women encouraging desertion was not considered to have political meaning according to McCurry.

Though the majority of this work focuses on how the Civil War pushed poor and yeoman women of Georgia to act out of necessity and how they affected the politics, it is even harder to find their agency after the war ended. Several questions remain unanswered but they all center on what happened to these women after the Confederacy's defeat? Did women continue to behave in this manner after the hardships of war subsided? Was there still a large presence of non-elite women in Georgia who continued to write to government officials, petition, and riot? Were the issues of famine, starvation, and survival still women's rallying cry or was their attention turned to other issues? Were the podiums women graced, be they real or symbolic, still present in the post-bellum era or did they simply recede back into domestic life and re-assume their plows?

Other avenues that deserve further exploration that could answer these lingering questions may be found in public policy initiatives. Were there any relief societies created to aid or provide funding for soldier's wives who have been widowed, orphaned children and destitute families? When the Civil War ended in May 1865, Governor Brown had left behind a war ravaged Georgia that was completely devoid of order. The state would take part in its own Reconstruction efforts, which included women. Georgia framed a new state constitution that fulfilled the demands of the First Reconstruction Act. The new constitution also called for the establishment of a free public school system, provided debt relief and gave wives control of their property.²⁰³ Georgia continued

²⁰³ Bragg, William H. "Reconstruction in Georgia." New Georgia Encyclopedia. 16 September 2014. Web. 16 April 2015.

to supply soldiers; families and other destitute Georgians who were “unable by their own labor to obtain bread” during the Presidential Restoration. Additionally, the legislature appropriated \$200,000 in early 1866 to purchase corn for deceased soldier’s children and widows, disabled veterans, and other “aged or infirm white persons.”²⁰⁴ These welfare and public policies to help the once destitute and poverty stricken poor and yeoman women, soldiers’ wives and families that were set in place during Reconstruction provide a good indicator as to why the desperate letters and petitions to government officials and rioting among women steadily declined and eventually ceased. However, there are still a handful of requests such as the letter from Mrs. E.A. Christian who organized a school for freedmen in Americus in July 1865. As many as sixty-five students attended her school but fewer than half the students were able to pay her. Christian wrote to the Freedman’s Bureau describing herself as very poor widow who had two daughters to support. She wrote to the bureau stating that she was forced to find work and “although my school has not supported me I am in hopes, that with your assistance, I may be able to render it useful, as well as profitable.”²⁰⁵

Though it may be difficult to find additional primary sources such as this one as to how women continued to matter in political life, these are mere suggestions for further studies on women’s role in politics after the war’s conclusion. Is it possible that these learned behaviors are linked to the formal Women’s Suffrage movement at a later stage in Southern History? The innate courage and strength learned by these women was instilled in them as a result of war and economic upheaval. The repercussions enticed by war may have enabled white non-elite women in Georgia

²⁰⁴ Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth Century Georgia*, (Chapel Hill: *The University of North Carolina Press*, 1987), 138.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

to keep pushing boundaries of Southern society well into fighting the crusade for rights of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Only time and further research will tell.

The study of Southern women in the course of the Civil War is ever evolving. This thesis urges future scholars to look more closely at differences in women's behavior throughout the Confederate states and within the different economic classes, in addition to the shifts in the foundations of the South. It is only then that one can get a true sense of what lead to the transcendental movement of women into larger roles in the social and political arena. Georgia women did not only put their shoulders to the plough in the absence of male relatives, but also possessed innate ability to prove that their significance was more than just the female counterpart to the superior paternalistic figurehead. Though yeoman and poor women may not have recognized themselves as such, or claimed themselves to be social and political actors, their actions had political ramifications all on their own.

Due to their destitution and deprivation, not because of the need to acquire political prowess and recognition-- the desires and needs of Georgia women in a war borne state enhanced their ability to achieve a kind of agency that they would not have assumed otherwise. Women acted in ways that had political effects not based in seeking political successes, but as a result of desperation and the fundamental need to survive. For a brief moment common women throughout Georgia dropped their ploughs and assumed figurative podiums where they commanded a formidable voice. The ever powerful pen and ink and open streets became the platforms upon which they proudly stood. Though female voices became silent after the Confederacy's demise and would not be awakened again until the Suffrage Movement at the end of the century, their stories are paramount. Often regarded as "plainfolk," Georgia women were far from ordinary.

Women of this class and era are revenants, whose spirits come back to life with each letter read; they remain integral pieces to the enigma known as the Civil War.

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