

# Southern Women in the Civil War

## Working Class White Women: Pressure

The Civil War posed greater challenges to Southern women than it did to women elsewhere in the United States. The situation started off badly, because the Confederacy had less of everything than did the Union: a smaller population, with a smaller labor force and smaller pool of men eligible for military service; fewer supplies, weapons, ammunition, and other war material on hand; an inadequate, poorly coordinated transportation network; a meager industrial base incapable of producing all the material to conduct a war. From the outset, conflict plagued Confederate governments on the national level, on the state level, between the national and state governments, and among the states themselves. It did not help that enslaved and free African Americans, a sizable portion of the population, were openly hostile to the Confederate cause.

The war intensified the Confederacy's weaknesses. Women found themselves in the eye of the storm, in a war fought on Southern soil. It was General William Tecumseh Sherman who became associated with what we now know as "total war" with his infamous march through Georgia and South Carolina in 1864. But the Union Army actually made the destruction and confiscation of property part of its strategy early on, so as to demolish the Confederate Army's transportation network and supply lines as well as to undermine morale. The presence of armies, be they Union or Confederate, strained local communities that were already stretched to the limit, because of the troops' voracious need for supplies. Kate Carney's descriptions of soldiers in Murfreesboro, who took everything from flowers to horses, suggest the difficulties for people who barely had enough for themselves. To maintain the war effort, the Confederate government confiscated horses, livestock, and food stuff, leaving some farm families without the means to make their next crop. With the region's manufacturing capacity occupied in the production of war material and trade virtually cut off by the Union blockade, it was nearly impossible to obtain basic goods, such as coffee, cloth, or even the items necessary to make cloth.

Endemic guerilla warfare within communities, such as the violence that marked Walker County, Alabama, took its toll, as did years of neglect that left houses and farms in ruins. To make matters worse, speculators bought up goods, hoping to sell them at a profit because of scarcities. Inflation—where the currency loses value—only heightened the problem. Faced with mounting expenses, the Confederate government did the only thing it could to sustain the war effort: it printed more Confederate money. The more Confederate notes the government printed, the more worthless they became. Women went to the store to find that their ten dollars of Confederate currency bought half as much as it had just months or even weeks ago.

Three letters to North Carolina's Governor Zebulon Vance illustrate how deprivation undermined working women's commitment to the Confederate war effort. Nancy Mangum not only asked for relief but pressured the governor for it by threatening to ask her soldier husband to abandon the battle and come home. This was not an idle threat, for, as the second letter illustrates, the men were all too ready to stop fighting and start farming. Eliza Evans also suggests that she will ask her husband to return, but in addition she hints at class differences that are eroding her support for the War.

## Discussion Questions for Readings on Working Class White Women and the War Effort

- What kinds of economic hardships did women face?
- How did they respond?
- Who did they blame?
- What kind of support did women expect?
- What do these documents tell us about the way that the Civil War affected lives on the homefront?
- How did the conditions the women describe affect the conduct and course of the Civil War?
- What do these documents reveal about the southern economy in 1863?

- What do they reveal about Confederate patriotism?
- What do they suggest about class differences and tensions in the Confederacy?
- What do they suggest about women's relationship to the Civil War?

## Letters to North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance

**Nancy Mangum to North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance, April 9, 1863**

McLeansville NC

Aprile 9th 1863

Gov Vance

I have threatend for some time to write you a letter-a crowd of we Poor wemen went to Greensborough yesterday for something to eat as we had not a mouthful meet nor bread in my house what did they do but put us in gail Jim Slone, Linsey Hilleshemer and several others I will not mention-thes are the ones that put us to gail in plase of giving us aney thing to eat and I had to com hom without aneything-I have 6 little children and my husband in the army and what am I to do. . . . if you dont take thes yankys a way from greensborough we wemen will write for our husbands to come . . . home and help us. . . .

Yours very

Respectfully

Nancy Mangum

**North Carolina Soldiers of Lee's Army to Governor Zebulon B. Vance, 24 January 1865**

We have been to the front endeavoring to keep the Enemy back for the past three or four years (against great odds too) and would still fight them to the last, hoping to conquer in time, but those at home must look tot he wants, and ameliorate the suffering of our wives and little ones there.

Very many of our wives were dependent on our labor for support before the war, and when articles of food and clothing could be obtained easier than now. At this time they are alone, without a protector, and cannot by hard and honest labor, obtain enough money to purchase the necessaries of life. We had hoped that something would be done to render the currency better, but it seems to get worse. Many of us have left our wives and chidlren at home in the country upon little tracts of land, and who are now suffering for want of help to raise bread and meat.

It is not in the power of Yankee armies to cause us to wish ourselves at home—we can face them, and can hear their shot and shell without being moved; but, Sir, we cannot hear the cries of our little ones, and stand. We must say something, must make an effort to relieve them, and would do it through you, believing it to be the best way. . . .

But it is not of ourselves that we would complain, it is of our wives and little ones at home, who are necessitous.

Do something for them and there will be less desertion, and men will go into battle with heartier good will. But it is impossible for us to bear up under our many troubles, the greatest of which is, the suffering of our wives and little ones at home.

We beg your pardon for bothering you with this, but something must be done, speedily.

**Eliza Evans to North Carolina Governor Zebulon.B. Vance, 18 October 1864**

"I wish to no of you whether Mr Moore can throw me out of dose or not i hav bin living on his land for the last six years and my husband has paid the rent u to the presant year and if he has the good luck not get killed he sill pay the rent as long as I stay governor I think it is a hard case that my husband is fiting for other folks property and my self and five little children is to be throwed out of dose Governor sir this man Silas Moore has a son just as able boded man as my husband he is left at home to work for his father because he is paralyzed and he has aplenty

to suptt on and because my pore husband had the misfortun not to have land in his absence I am to be thrown out of dose governor sir I hav tried every where in the neighborhood to get a house and there aint any one that I can get or here of and sir I dont no what to do if you sufer him to thow me out unless my husband can get to come home.”

### **Working Class White Women: Protest**

In addition to writing letters, working class white women mounted what today we would call protests or demonstrations to demand relief from their suffering. In 1862 and 1863, in cities from Mobile, Alabama, to Richmond, Virginia, these gatherings often erupted into riots in which crowds of working class Southerners, made up largely of women, broke into stores, depots, and warehouses and carried off supplies of food and other goods. Different local circumstances triggered each riot, but the underlying causes were the same in every case, severe inflation and deprivation. Working class families and those living on the meager wages of Confederate soldiers, who were paid in Confederate dollars of steadily decreasing value, simply could not afford to buy what little food was for sale. Historians have interpreted women's roles in the riots in different ways. Some have seen women's actions as an extension of their traditional roles, noting that women often participated in bread riots in the previous century. Such actions were part of an economy in which prices for basic commodities were supposed to be set at a level that was “just,” not what the market would bear. The customary way of drawing attention to exorbitant prices was to stage a riot—officials and merchants could hardly miss the point. Other historians see Civil War bread riots as a new form of self-assertion for women and their rejection of the culture of sacrifice encouraged by Confederate leaders.

The New York *Herald* article suggests that the Richmond bread riot resulted when Virginia Governor Letcher dismissed women who had organized a protest, launched, interestingly, from an “African church.” Reporting on a similar riot, the Salisbury (NC) *Daily Carolina Watchman* does not suggest that the upheaval resulted from organized effort but does display the dismissive attitude that probably provoked the women in Richmond.

News of the riot quickly spread north. There newspapers used the riots to shore up waning support for the Union war effort. The engraving from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* suggests that elite women and the rioters were one in the same: the same women who urged their menfolk to war were unwilling to endure the sacrifices necessary to sustain the war effort. One panel depicts Confederate women, in bonnets and hoop skirts, pressing their men to fight; in the other it shows them feeling the effects of their actions as, haggard and desperate, they storm a bakery. Even though Union newspapers had their own agenda, they underscored one of the central points about the riots: the war effort affected women directly and women's actions, in turn, also affected the Confederacy.

### **Discussion Questions for Readings on the Bread Riots**

- The letter written by North Carolina soldiers (See above.) emphasizes women's distress, but also their helplessness. How do you reconcile that characterization of women with the actions of women rioting?
- Compare these documents with Kate Carney's journal. What similarities and differences do you find in the actions of elite Southern women and the rioters?
- Compare the reporting of The New York *Herald* with that of the Salisbury newspaper. How do you account for the differences?
- What effect did such actions have on the Confederate war effort?

## “The Food Question,” *The New York Herald*, April 11, 1863

INTERESTING FROM THE SOUTH: “THE FOOD QUESTION.”

The Bread Riot in Richmond.

OUR HEADQUARTERS CORRESPONDENCE.

April 11, 1863.

A refugee from Richmond, who left that city on Tuesday, gives an interesting account of the riot of the 2d inst. (“instant,” meaning “of that month”)

Considerable excitement had prevailed for some time in consequence of the exorbitant prices, and rumors of a popular movement had been in circulation for several days. Females had begged in the streets and at the stores until begging did no good, and many had been driven to robbery to sustain life. On the morning of the 2d inst. a large meeting, composed principally of the wives and daughters of the working classes, was held in the African church, and a committee appointed to wait upon the Governor to request that articles of food should be sold at government rates. After the passage of sundry resolutions the meeting adjourned, and the committee proceeded to wait upon Governor Letcher. The functionary declined to take any steps in the matter, and upon urging the case the ladies were peremptorily ordered to withdraw. The result of the interview was soon made public, when a body of females, numbering about three hundred, collected together and commenced helping themselves to bread, flour, meat, articles of clothing, &c. The entire city was at once thrown into consternation. Stores were closed, the windows barred, doors bolted, and every precaution taken against forcible entries; but hatchets and axes in the hands of women rendered desperate by hunger made quick work, and building after building was rapidly broken open. The destruction commenced on Carey street, above Fifteenth street, and was becoming general in that section of the city, when the City Guard, with fixed bayonets, arrived at the scene of operations. A few individuals attempted to resist the women, but without success. One man who struck a female was wounded in the shoulder by a shot from a revolver, and the threatening attitude of those armed with hatchets, &c. intimidated others from attempting force. The Mayor soon appeared, and, mounting a stool on the sidewalk, proceeded to read the Riot Act. During the reading of that document a portion of the crowd suspended operations; but no soon had the Mayor concluded than the seizure of provisions commence again more vigorously than before. At this juncture an attempt was made to arrest the more violent; but the party immediately scattered, and, entering Main Street, resumed operations.

Gov. Letcher then appeared, and, mounting a vehicle in the centre of the street, addressed the throng, characterizing the demonstration as a disgrace and a stigma upon the city, and announcing that but five minutes would be given them in which to disperse. If in that time the order was not complied with, the troops would be called upon to act. Again the crowd broke up, and in a few moments burst into the stores of Franklin Street, but little damage was done here, however, and the riot finally subsided; but not until after the arrest of about forty of the women, and the promise of the Governor to relieve the wants of the destitute. A large amount of bread and bacon was carried off, and all engaged in the riot succeeded in getting a good supply of provisions. Steps have been taken to provide for the immediate wants of some of the families; but great suffering still prevails and is daily increasing. Another uprising is feared, and precautionary measures for its suppression have been instituted; but great uneasiness is felt throughout the city, and merchants are adding to the strength of doors and shutters in every possible manner. The effect of this riot upon the troops about Richmond was very demoralizing. The authorities are much exercised over it, and the greatest vigilance is enjoined upon the police force. The leading men of the city attempted to circulate the report that the women were “*Irish and Yankee hags*,” endeavoring to mislead the public concerning the amount of loyal sentiment in the city, miserably failed. The fact of their destitution and respectability was too palpable, and the authorities are forced to admit the conclusion that starvation alone incited the movement.

## Bread Riot in Salisbury, *Salisbury Daily Carolina Watchman*, March 23, 1863

. . . Salisbury has witnessed to-day one of the gayest and liveliest scenes of the age. About 12 o'clock, a rumor was afloat, that the wives of several soldiers now in the war, intended to make a dash on some flour and other necessities of life, belonging to certain gentlemen, who the ladies termed "speculators." They alleged that they were entirely out of provisions, and unable to give the enormous prices now asked, but were willing to give Government prices. Accordingly, about 2 O'clock they met, some 50 or 75 in number, with axes and hatchets, and proceeded to the depot of the North Carolina Central Road, to impress some there, but were very politely met by the agent, Mr. —: "What on earth is the matter?" The excited women said they were in search of "flour" which they had learned had been stored there by a certain speculator. . . .

Finally . . . they returned to the depot . . . and again demanded the agent that they be allowed to go in. He still refused, but finally agreed to let two go in and examine the flour, and see if his statement was not correct. A restlessness pervaded the whole body, and but a few moments elapsed before a female voice was heard saying: "Let's go in." The agent remarked: "Ladies . . . it is useless to attempt it, unless you go in over my dead body." A rush was made, and they went in, and the last I saw of the agent, he was sitting on a log blowing like a March wind. They took ten barrels, and rolled them out and were setting on them, when I left, waiting for a wagon to haul them away. . . .