

Southern Women in the Civil War

Part II: How did the Civil War affect Southern women?

Discussion Questions for Readings on Social Upheaval and New Possibilities

- 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?
- Do you think that the conditions the women described affected the conduct and course of the Civil War?
- How did the presence of the military change the lives of Gertrude Clanton Thomas, Edith Reddick, Hannah Guy, and Sarah Guttery?
- How did these women respond to the presence of the military?
- Why was family and marriage so important to African Americans?
- Why was family important to Sarah Guttery?
- Do you think Sarah Guttery meant the same thing when she claimed that her son supported her that Gertrude Clanton Thomas might have meant?
- How did all the women respond to the end of slavery? What do their responses reveal about the differences among southern women?
- These documents reveal the presence of conflicts among elite white women and African American women. What are the sources of those conflicts? What form do they take?

Social Upheaval and New Possibilities

We usually think of war as something distant from women's lives. That is a mistaken impression when it comes to the Civil War, which literally took place in southern women's backyards. Even those who escaped the military conflict could not avoid its social and economic fallout. Confederate leaders fought to preserve their social order, but the resulting upheaval undermined it and opened up an internal conflict over the structure of southern society. Households, fields, country lanes, and city streets became battlefields as southerners struggled to redefine the terms of their lives as slavery collapsed, the economy disintegrated, government authority disappeared, civil unrest destroyed local communities, and all the basic necessities of life disappeared. For some women, the war was purely destructive. For others, particularly those who had been enslaved, the collapse of the Confederacy opened up new possibilities. As varied and different as southern women's lives were, they all experienced the war directly and took active roles in it.

Southern women had few options during the War. In the nineteenth century, poor relief was the responsibility of churches and counties or private charities and concerned individuals. Church coffers, county funds, and private organizations and individuals were soon overwhelmed. State legislatures began making allotments for the poor, but their distributions did not begin to meet the need.

By 1864, the Union Army already occupied large sections of the Confederacy. The Union Army controlled the Mississippi River and key areas on the Atlantic coast in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. Arkansas and Tennessee (with the exception of the eastern part of the state) were under Union governments by 1864 as were large swathes of Virginia, Mississippi, Alabama, Virginia, and Georgia. Although General Robert E. Lee had not yet surrendered, the Confederate army's prospects were bleak.

The collapse of the Confederacy meant different for different southern women. For elite white women like Gertrude Clanton Thomas, it was a frightening event. In her diary, she tries to come to terms with what might come next in her life. With her family's fortune gone, she imagines that she will have work to help support herself

and her family. She imagines that she might teach but is apparently unaware that a teacher's salary will not begin to cover her family's basic expenses, let alone the style of life which she has come to expect as her due. She sounds almost resigned to the situation, but that may be because she is so distracted and depressed. She had good reason to be. Her family lost most of its property during the war, and her husband proved unable to recoup their losses. She and her family lived on the edge. Thomas's efforts to earn money did little to alleviate the situation, because women's economic options were so limited and their wages so low. Disillusioned with women's reliance on men, she ultimately became an advocate for women's rights.

The greatest loss for slaveholders was the destruction of slavery. It was an enormous loss in economic terms. It was also a loss in other, less tangible ways as well. Elite white women, like Gertrude Clanton Thomas, defined who they were in terms of slave ownership. They had overseen their households, but never done the domestic chores themselves, because they had slaves to do that work. More than that, their core identities were based around the fact that they were "ladies" who were different from poor white women and all African American women, whether free or enslaved. Both women and men responded with a range of emotions when their slaves set off of their own. The image of two women walking by ruins in Richmond, Virginia, suggests the material and emotional desolation that many elite white southern women faced with the end of the war and the collapse of slavery. Rage was also a common response, as suggested by the violent actions of the former owners of two African American women in North Carolina. Shock was another response.

Elite Slaveholding Women: Social Upheaval

The Diary of Gertrude Clanton Thomas

The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848–1889, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 1990), 236-237, 257-258, 272.

Thursday, September 22, 1864: ". . . Truly the skies are gloomy and the heavy storm appears ready to discharge its thunders in our very midst. Yet how calm, how indifferent we are—we laugh, we smile, we talk, we jest, just as tho no enemy were at our door. And yet the idea has several times suggested itself to me that someday I would have to aid in earning my own support. We have made no arrangement whatever for such a contingency. . . ."

Wednesday, March 29, 1865: ". . . I have seen poverty staring me in the face when I expected Sherman in Augusta and our planting interest was destroyed and god knows there was nothing attractive in the gaunt picture presented. But even then I nerved myself and was prepared to do something if I could—I believe it was the sitting still and doing nothing which unnerved me more than anything else. I looked forward and asked myself, what can I do? Nothing, except teach school and if I left Augusta nothing to support me with my little ones—If I remained, the doubt as to wether [sic] I could procure a school . . ."

Monday, May 29, 1865: "Out of all our old house servants not one remains except Patsy and a little boy Frank. We have one of our servants Uncle Jim to take Daniel's place as driver and butler and a much more efficient person he proves to be. Nancy has been cooking since Tamah left. On last Wednesday I hired a woman to do the washing. Thursday I expected Nancy to iron but she was sick. In the same way she was sick the week before when there was ironing to do. I said nothing but told Patsey to get breakfast. After it was over I assisted her in wiping the breakfast dishes, a thing I never remember to have done more than once or twice in my life. . . . Immediately after breakfast as I was writing by the window Turner [her son] directed my attention to Nancy with her two children, Hannah and Jessy, going out of the gate. I told him to enquire, 'where she was going.' She had expected to leave with flying colours but was compelled to tell a falsehood for she replied, 'I will be back directly.' I knew at once that she was taking 'french leave' [leaving without permission or without announcing one's departure] and was not surprised when I went into her room sometime afterwards to find that all her things had been removed. I was again engaged in housework most of the morning...."

Case of Mr. Wm Barnes of Wilson Co N.C. Charged with gross abuse to an aged woman of color.

[Goldsboro? N.C., August 1865?]

Chanie "the abused" states as follows—

I That Mrs. Sally Barnes "wife of the accused" beat her with her hand—

II That not satisfied with this the said Mrs. Barnes beat her with a shingle.— that she "Chanie" caught hold of the shingle. when Mr. Barnes appeared and said—"Turn that shingle loose. you g—d. d— old b—h. or I'll knock you in head with this walking stick— whereupon she "Chanie" let go of the shingle and suffered Mrs. Barnes to continue beating her.

III That while Mr. Barnes and family were at breakfast she started for the town of Wilson, Watson Co. to report the case to Capt. Bullock of the Local Police for said Co.

IV That she was turned back by some person unknown to her who claimed to be a Yankee

V That soon after return home Mr. Barnes appeared and said— Oh yes you have come back G—d A—y G—d d— old b—h You went off to report me G—d A—y d— you— I'll report you after I get my dinner G—d A—y d— you— I'll report your back

VI That after his dinner he appeared and said Now go out in the road G—d d— you and strip your coat and shirt right off— I'll give you h—ll before I have done with you

VII That he beat her terribly after which he told her to go on now and spin your task of cotton or I'll give you as much more in the morning

VIII That she worked around until sunday "This being upon Tuesday Aug 1" watching for an opportunity to escape, when she left for Goldsboro.

Mary Ann daughter of Chanie—states as follows

I That she "Mary Ann" told her mistress "Mrs. Wm Barnes that she would not stay there and work if she "Mrs. Barnes" kept her clothes locked up—whereupon Mrs. Barnes attempted to whip her. that she guarded her blows when Mrs Barnes called Mr— Barnes— who with his grown son James, came in and between the three gave her a hundred or more blows—

II That they tied her hands and told her to get down— That she resisted when Mr. Barnes says, that won't do. Bring her out doors Let's tie her between two trees

III That they tied her feet to one tree and her hands to another, then cut her hair off.

IV That they allowed the dogs "three in number" to tear her clothes off and bite her. that James took off such clothing as the dogs left

V That Mr Barnes gave her two hundred lashes with a Paddle "A strap made purposely for whipping negroes" And said no d—d nigger should be free under him &c. &c.

Testimony of Chanie and of Mary Ann in case of William Barnes, [Aug. 1865?], Miscellaneous Records, ser. 2637, Goldsboro NC Subassistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives.

Working Class Women: Social Upheaval

If the War made elite women poor, it made poor women even poorer. Not only did they have no livestock or supplies, but they no longer had male relatives whose labor was essential in maintaining a viable farm—one of the few economic options in a region centered on agricultural production. We can measure their desperation and determination in the testimony of Sarah Guttery, a Unionist in Walker, County Alabama. White women regularly did field work, such as cotton picking, during particularly busy seasons on their families' farms, but few hired themselves out to do such work because it was considered work that only African American women did. That Guttery worked for pay on the farms of neighbors testifies to the extremity of her plight. The pension examiner asked questions about Guttery's loyalty to the Union and her economic dependence on her son, because those were the criteria she had to meet to obtain a pension. The records indicate that she received her pension. Other women in similar circumstances were not so fortunate.

The case of Sarah Guttery, in the file of Henry Guttery, Regiment 1, Company L, First Alabama Cavalry, Records of the Pension Bureau, RG 15, National Archives.

Report:

"I have honor to return herewith the papers in the pension claim no. 245264 of Sarah Guttery of Holly Grove, Walker Co. Ala. mother of Henry Guttery late private of Co. L. 1 Regiment Alabama Cavalry who died while in the service and line of duty as is shown by the records of the War Dept.

"The case was referred for special examination January 20, 1883 to determine claimant's loyalty and dependence of the soldier for support. . . . The following is a summary of the evidence presented. . . .

"Her age is sixty years. Claims pension for loss of her only son Henry Guttery while he was serving in Co. L. Ala. Cav. Who supported her for four years before enlistment by his labor on her father's farm. He received no pay for his labor, only their support. Claimant's father was a poor man and let her son support her. Soldier was first forced in Confederate service but deserted at first opportunity and joined Northern Army. He sent claimant \$20 and she drew \$14 of his pay and some salt while he was in the Confederate service. Never sent her any money while he was in the Northern Army but was told that he rolled up \$100 to send her at one time by some Yankee soldiers but got afraid to send it as he was afraid they would get captured. Claimant had two children Henry and Nancy. Henry Caywood was Henry's father and George Dallyrimple was Nancy's father. Has not seen Henry's father since before Henry was born, he died a good many years ago in Miss. Has not seen Nancy's father for thirty seven years. She has never received a nickel [sic] in aid from them. The daughter has been poor and claimant has had to help her. Since her son died she has gained her own living by hard labor in the field and elsewhere. Her father was loyal, rebels came to hang him for loyalty during war, run him away and took off all his horses and meat so at close of war, only had one yoke of cattle and his land left. Yankee soldiers used to come to their house for food and claimant and her sister used to carry victuals to them in the woods. Henry never married nor left any children. All the property he left was seven hogs. Claimant owned no property before the war. After war her mother gave her a mule and in trying to make a crop the horse which she had traded the mule for was taken for rent of land. Then afterwards her mother gave her a cow which she sold. Owned no other property. Her parents gave her nothing else. Was never married or lived with anyone as wife since Henry was born. Claimant drew \$226.00 bounty on account of soldier but it did not last long as everything cost so high."

Sarah Guttery's testimony on how she supported herself:

Question: "Prior to his enlistment and at the time he entered the service how did you gain a living?"

Answer: "He supported me for four years before he entered the war by his labor. He worked on my father's farm and he received no pay for his labor only our support. My father was a poor man and was my son was able

to work for my living he had him do it. . . .”

Question: “How have you gained a living since Henry went away?”

Answer: “Just by hard labor. I have hired out a heap, hoeing, picking cotton, weaving and coloring blue [perhaps bleaching laundry] for people, nursing the sick and spinning.”

Enslaved Women: New Possibilities

For enslaved women, the Confederacy’s collapse and the end of slavery meant new opportunities and new dangers. What their owners lost, enslaved African Americans gained in the form of their freedom. The accounts of Hannah Guy and Edith Reddick, as told to officials from the Pension Bureau, give some idea of the new horizons that opened for enslaved African Americans. For both of these women, marriage was important, and not just because it established their ties to Union soldiers and entitled them to pensions. Slaves had been unable to marry legally and, by extension, to maintain the integrity of their own families. Slave owners could and did sell wives, husbands, and children at will. For many slaves, marriage symbolized a key element of freedom, namely the ability to have and maintain a family of one’s own, like the one pictured here. Marriage certificates were material evidence of this important element of freedom. Supporting those families would prove difficult, given the hostility of white southerners—and those conflicts would continue through Reconstruction and into the twentieth century.

For more on family and plantation life among the enslaved, visit *The Making of African American Identity: Vol. 1*, an anthology of primary teaching documents from the National Humanities Center, at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm>.

On family life: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text1/text1read.htm>

On plantation life: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text2/text2read.htm>

Henry Guy, 55th Reg., Co. A, United States Colored Troops, Records of the Pension Bureau, RG 15, National Archives.

Hannah Guy, statement, 9 December 1903, before H.J. Hinricks, special examiner:

She was born in North Carolina, was told that her father’s name was Rickson Harris, although she never saw him “from the time I was a little girl”; her maiden name was Ricks; “I lived with Henry as his wife while we both belonged to Lorenzo Bug. I don’t know whether you would say we were married. We were permitted by our master to live together. We had 2 or 3 children when we left Lorenzo Guy. No I had never lived with any man before I took up with Henry. Henry had had a slave wife before he had me. Her name was Nancy Pride. She was sold and went to Mississippi, some time before Henry and I commenced to live together. Henry never saw her after he and I commenced living together. When the U.S. Army came through Alabama Henry and I left Mr. Lorenzo Guy and went with the army to Corinth Miss. and Henry enlisted there. I lived in the contraband camp there with the regiment and worked and cooked for the soldiers.

“After we had been at Corinth 2 or 3 months orders came that everybody had to be married under the new laws, and a whole lot of us, including Henry and I were married by Mr. Peirson. I don’t know whether he was a preacher, but I suppose he was. He stood a whole lot of us up in line and married us. . . . he gave Henry and me a certificate that we were married, and Henry took it with him when he left Corinth with the regiment, and he told me that when he was captured by the rebels he tore it up, and we never got [an]other certificate. . . . [I] went with the regiment as far as Memphis, Tenn., and I think we staid [sic] there about 2 years. Then the regiment was sent down the river, and I went to Henry’s mother’s house (Elmira Guy) at Cairo, Ill., and staid [sic] there until

Henry was discharged and he came there right after he was discharged. We did not live at Cairo more than a year after Henry was discharged and then removed to Elkhville, Ill.”

Taylor Reddick, 33rd Reg., Co. D, United States Colored Troops, Records of the Pension Bureau, RG 15, National Archives.

Edith Matilda Reddick, statement, 13 March 1889, before a local official, Jacksonville, Florida:

. . . was born in Effingham County in the state of Georgia. I lived on a Plantation in said county and my owners received their mail from the post office at Springfield Georgia to the best of my recollection. I left the Plantation and followed the United States Army to Savannah Georgia where I remained three or four months, then went by a U.S. steamer to St. Simon's Island, Georgia to live with an aunt and there for the first time met Taylor Reddick who was then a soldier in Co. D 22 Regiment United States Troops and married him there. We were married by the Rev. Mr. Eaden who was also a Government official for the issuing of Rations to the People. The Regiment being under marching orders we were married on Sunday morning and left same day at 11 o'clock for Augusta, Georgia. My Husband going with his Regiment and I with him. . . . I moved with my Husband in the Army from August Georgia to Edgefield So. Carolina thence to Andersonville, thence to Walhalla and thence to Charleston S. Carolina where we remained until he was taken sick and where he died at the Governemnt Hospital. I remained with his Company at Charleston living with and assisting the Company's Cook Mrs. Doc Williams until the Company was mustered out of service on Morris Island. I then went to Savannah Georgia where I remained several years working as cook, house servant &c. I then came to Florida where I again married and am now living with my Husband Prince Perry. . . .