

**War, Loss, and What They Wore: Gender, Class, and Clothing in the Civil**

**War South**

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter One: The War.....	11
A. “They may control our actions, but looks they never can:” Political Symbols in Confederate Fashion.....	11
B. What Southern Girls for Southern Rights Will Do:” The Home Front’s Campaign for Homespun .....	17
C. “The Old Story of Rich and Poor:” Class and Clothing During the War.....	24
Chapter Two: Emancipation and the Post-War Years.....	37
A. “Infinitely Worse Than Sherman:” Lost Wealth and Sartorial Renegotiation.....	37
B. “The Writing on the Wall:” Reinforcing Racial Hierarchy Through Clothing.....	46
Conclusion.....	54
Bibliography.....	57

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### **Abstract**

During the Antebellum Period, white, elite, Southern women participated in a robust fashion culture, wherein they devoted considerable time and resources to procure elaborate wardrobes for the sake of class distinction. With the onset of the Civil War, though, these women were suddenly confronted with shortages, pecuniary trouble, and, following emancipation, the upheaval of their racial dominance. Using a methodological framework that treats clothing as a visual text, this thesis examines women's diaries, Confederate newspapers, and, at times, descriptions of their outfits and accessories, in order to trace the evolution of planter class women through the war, and the years that immediately followed. This investigation reveals that in the face of instability, planter class women used clothing to resist the erosion of their caste and to reinforce the racial hierarchy, particularly in their interactions with freedwomen, who, in contrast, relied on dress to assert their autonomy.

## Introduction

Mary Chestnut was all alone in Kingsville.<sup>1</sup> The strangeness of being without her husband or an attending servant was, to her, an oddity only these circumstances could have produced. It was May of 1864: the bloodiest month of the American Civil War. By the month's end, nearly 100,000 men would be dead in battle. Chestnut, though, was far from the fighting, feeling only the vicarious pangs of war wrought by the northern blockade that for four years now had choked all imports to the South: an economy accustomed to producing little besides cotton.

That is what landed Chestnut, the wife of a former U.S. Senator, in her old dress that day, as she searched for a hotel room near the train station – the old dress that was making finding a room so hard. Chestnut went about her business as she normally would. Lost, she approached a gentleman on the street and asked for directions. He curtly refused.

She reached the hotel counter. “One room for Mary Chestnut.” The hotel matron stared. “No room, try a different name. Mrs. Chestnut does not come here dressed like that.” Chestnut looked down. Her black silk dress was practically shredded. She had worn it into oblivion. “I was indeed a not so respectable looking woman,” Chestnut observed. “It was my first time in the character.”<sup>2</sup>

At least, this is how Chestnut tells it.

Amidst her misadventure tales of torn dresses and tattered veils, Chestnut continued to catalog her more winning ensembles: silks, pearls, shawls worn well into the war's darkest days. Whatever fine clothing was sold-off, or torn and worn, Chestnut seems to have owned enough to

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, ed. Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockhart (New York: Myrta D. Lockhart and Company, 1906), 307, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t86h4dt08>.

<sup>2</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 309.

replace it. Nevertheless, she harped on her soiled garb anyway. It was her fancy clothing that made her a Southern lady, but its destruction made her a Confederate one.

Indeed, the fixation on clothing in Chestnut's famed Civil War diary is characteristic of elite white Southern women's writing during the Civil War, and in its wake. Union troops were closing in on Kate Carney, but in her account a progress report on her sewing project proves more pressing.<sup>3</sup> Fighting had begun across the South, but Gertrude Thomas was mostly worried that she would not procure the proper sized-hat for her young son in time for church camp the next week.<sup>4</sup> At the war's end, Emma LeConte's primary concern is not the Confederate States of America's (CSA) loss, but whether she and her mother will be able to recover the silk dresses Union troops stole from them.<sup>5</sup> The trope exists even in fiction, where William Faulkner's Rosa Codfield grieves the collapsed South by wearing only black for forty-three years.<sup>6</sup>

Though unique (men's writings do not show nearly the same degree of interest in clothing), wartime fixation on finery among Southern aristocratic women was nothing new. During the Antebellum years, the attention they paid to these matters bordered at times on obsession. Gertrude Thomas, the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner outside of Augusta, Georgia, zealously reported on the fashions she both wore and witnessed. In this thesis, I seek to

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Carney, *Kate Carney Diary April 15, 1861- July 31, 1862*, transcribed by Kristofer Ray (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South Digitization Project 1999), entry dated July 21, 1862, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/carney/carney.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Burr, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1990), 191.

<sup>5</sup> Emma LeConte, *Diary, 1864-1865*, transcribed by Jordan Davis, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Documenting the American South Digitization Project 1998), 55, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/leconteemma/leconte.html>.

<sup>6</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International Edition, 1990), 3.

explore how the war and emancipation changed this fashion culture. For an effective discussion, though, more foregrounding is necessary.

The significance of women's fashion extended far beyond mere hobby or fancy, which was immediately clear to James Stirling, a British man visiting and observing America (de Tocqueville style) in the 1850s. While in New Orleans, he was shocked by the elaborateness of ladies' dress. Their clothing, he observed, "often equal in richness and expense those of our crowned heads of Europe."<sup>7</sup> At their high expense, the fashions were not only a feminine interest. Instead, the women's husbands, who were often keen to show off their wealth, aided and abetted their over-the-top ensembles. Stirling theorized that this was due to the low-cost of land in the United States. A wife's diamond necklace was the surest status symbol, unlike in Europe, where sweeping landed estates were counted on to get the message across.<sup>8</sup>

Stirling may well have been onto something. Later, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* argued that clothing was a favorite marker of class distinction for leisure classes writ large. Surely, this was the case in the antebellum South, where plantation mistresses favored tight corsets, cartoonish bustles, and fragile fabrics, such as silk, satin, and muslin. All of these made engaging in labor impossible for their wearer, thus identifying her as one who need not work (unsurprisingly, ladies of the South typically took their cues from the European styles).<sup>9</sup> In the South, where the fashion culture relied upon the slave system, its elaborateness went still further. Beyond demarcating the leisurely plantation mistresses from their working white counterparts and enslaved persons, dress took on a competitive element wherein each lady would

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<sup>7</sup> James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States*, (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), 158.

<sup>8</sup> Stirling, *Letters*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, n.d., 169, <http://moglen.law.columbia.edu/LCS/theoryleisureclass.pdf>.

attempt to outdo the rest with their party ensemble, often with the assistance of enslaved persons who would tailor, dress, and make-up their mistresses.<sup>10</sup> Clara Solomon, for one, admitted feeling “totally dependent” on a former slave to look nice and was incapable of completing a particular hairstyle on her own.<sup>11</sup> Such rituals seem to have distinguished the more wealthy mistresses from the less wealthy.

The women for their part paid close attention to what others were wearing, sometimes listing each component of others’ outfits in their diaries and, in the case of Eliza Francis Andrews, even ranking how attractive they each looked.<sup>12</sup> And yet there was such a thing as too much. As Elizabeth Fox Genovese writes, ladies had to know not to overdo it for fear of being judged as improper. Their language amounted to a “stratified ritual of knowing and not knowing” that quickly identified each woman as an insider or an outsider.<sup>13</sup>

When it came to dress, the “knowing” began early. Genovese writes that girls were taught at a young age about the meaning of various fabrics and the differences between cheap calicoes and expensive silks. Moreover, they learned to adhere to pedantic notions of “taste,” such as the proper colors to wear to church and the colors to avoid. Transgressions were clocked by one’s peers and duly noted.<sup>14</sup>

Many were taught to sew, but just as many, like Gertrude Thomas, counted on the enslaved to do their tailoring. In Thomas’s case, the need for a talented seamstress ranked so

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fox Genovese makes a similar argument in *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 163.

<sup>11</sup> Clara Solomon quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Eliza Francis Andrews, *Wartime Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864 -1865*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 95-96.

<sup>13</sup> Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 220.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 303.



highly among her priorities that, despite Thomas's concerns about one enslaved woman's reliability, she concluded, "her use of the needle... would almost counterbalance her faults."<sup>15</sup>

That the South's fashion culture was performative almost goes without saying. The most elaborate looks were reserved for social gatherings, trips into town, or receiving and completing visits to the home. While homebound, around only one's family (and those enslaved at the residence), simpler, more comfortable garments were donned.<sup>16</sup> Clothing was a means of articulation and, in analysis and historiography, is useful when treated as such. Yet despite the complexity and richness of the women's fashion culture in the South, few have stopped to ask what becomes of it in the face of the war, its shortages, and emancipation. Drew Faust offered a useful, but brief, discussion of Southern women's efforts to remake and replace their clothing in *Mothers of Invention*, and Thavolia Glymph explored the policing of freedwomen's clothes in *Out of the House of Bondage*, but both addressed clothing only secondarily and did not do so within the broader context of its transformation during the war.

The stakes of exploring this question are made clear by the lost cause ideology that developed in the decades after the war. As, Rollins Osterweiss wrote, "The legend of the lost cause... was a landscape dotted with figures drawn mostly out of the past"; among these figures, Osterweiss noted the "magnolia-scented Southern belle,"<sup>17</sup> who lived a charmed, stylish life on the plantation. The most contemporarily relevant artistic work of lost-cause lore, *Gone With the*

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Clara Solomon, *The Civil War Diary of Clara Solomon*, ed. Elliot Ashkenazi, (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 227.

<sup>17</sup> Rollin G. Osterweiss, *Myth of the Lost Cause 1865-1900*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1973), ix.

*Wind*, sees the reduction of Scarlet O'Hara's glamorous condition to one where she is pulling a dress together from old drapery.<sup>18</sup>

But to what extent did the material culture and conditions of elite white women actually change? This is what I seek to explore in this thesis through the investigation of the question: Did the meaning of Southern women's fashion objects transform during the Civil War and with emancipation? In this discussion, fashion objects will refer to both articles of dress and, tangentially, their production. I will limit my discussion to elite white women and, in my final section, freedwomen and their interactions with former mistresses. Information on other demographics, like yeoman women, is too scant to warrant their discussion.

Fashion culture, in this thesis, refers to the eco-system in which women (and men, though, again, not to the same extent) took great pains to dress in accordance with the latest fads, expended oftentimes enormous quantities of money or effort on ensembles, and exerted much focus on their own clothing and that of others. Enslaved and, later, freedwomen, are included in this discussion because they were frequently exposed to this culture given their proximity to the planter class.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the interactions and negotiations between enslaved or freedwomen and wealthy white women that frequently unfold via clothing prove revealing with regard to class reconfiguration in the South and are worthy of discussion.<sup>20</sup> As a point of clarification, throughout this thesis I use different phrases: planter class, slaveholders, aristocratic, elite, and wealthy, and occasionally, when referring to a young single woman or lost cause ideology, Southern belle. These phrases are used interchangeably to connote a group of well-to-do women,

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<sup>18</sup> *Gone With the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming, (1939, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), HBO Max.

<sup>19</sup> Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 163.

<sup>20</sup> Thavolia Glymph made a similar argument which greatly informed my discussion in *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 204-226.

who, for the most part, were situated in the same social strata and abided by similar expectations, especially as it pertained to clothing. Strictly speaking, not everyone was a member of the “planter class;” Clara Solomon's father, for instance, was a merchant.<sup>21</sup> All, though, belonged to families that owned slaves, or participated in the South's fashion culture.

In my investigation, I have employed a methodological framework in which I treat clothing as an object of material culture. This is to say, to use the words of sociologist Diane Crane, I use it as “a type of visual text” to understand whether “the identities,” in this case of planter class women, “change overtime.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, this thesis owes credit to the ideas of Roland Barthes, who wrote extensively about the semiotics and language of clothing.<sup>23</sup> With that said, this work does not adhere strictly to his vocabulary. I will use the words signify, symbol, and representation often interchangeably, to convey what was indicated by particular articles of fashion. This is not a project that examines fashion history or the popularity of particular styles; instead, I use clothing to examine whether modes of class and racial distinction changed as the planter class's wealth and racial dominance became more precarious.

I've structured this thesis into two chapters. Chapter One chronicles how the meaning of fashion objects changed during the war itself: many accessories, for instance, became politicized, but overall, this development represented a continuation of antebellum culture in which women used clothing as means of articulation and expression. That this continued to be the case indicates the reinforcement of gendered and aristocratic expectations of women's behavior.

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<sup>21</sup> Clara Solomon, *Civil War Diary*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Diana Crane, Laura Bovone, “Approaches to Material Culture: The Sociology of Fashion and Clothing,” *Poetics*, Volume 34, Issue 6 (December 2006): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.10.002>.

<sup>23</sup> See Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, Trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, (University of California Press: 1990).

Chapter Two focuses on the post-emancipation era in which some planter class women grappled with losing the wealth that once bankrolled their shopping habits and also relied on clothing to reinforce their social dominance, as freedwomen used clothes to lay claim to their independence. This section reveals that despite reduced extravagance, many sartorial expectations from the antebellum era persisted, and, in their freedom, freedwomen participated, to the dismay of their former mistresses. These developments indicate the falsity of historical revisionism that imagines the disappearance of the Southern belle and her luxuries. The real change, it seems, is that she no longer had exclusive claim to the fashions that before had distinguished her.

### **Chapter One: The War**

#### **A. “They may control our actions, but looks they never can:” Political Symbols in Confederate Fashion**

Walking through New Orleans towards Canal Street in May 1862, teenaged Clara Solomon observed how different the town had been the last time she had made the same walk only weeks earlier. “Then I breathed the air of a free city, now I breathed the air tainted by the breath of 3,000 Federals & a trod a soil polluted by their touch,” she wrote.<sup>24</sup> The Union Army had taken the city.

Solomon was not the only young lady incensed by what she perceived as the injustice of the army’s mere presence (“they should have never been allowed to enter”).<sup>25</sup> When she entered school a few weeks later, her classmates were rapturous with debate. In the face of federal

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<sup>24</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Diary*, 354.

<sup>25</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Diary*, 354.

troops, how could the school girls best display their patriotism to the Confederate cause? In a different context, such questions from the mouths of Southern girls would have been innocuous. As Stephanie McCurry notes, though, by the time Union forces had descended on New Orleans in 1862, women of the South had begun couching politics in the more ladylike rhetoric of patriotism, perhaps without full awareness of the difference.<sup>26</sup> In New Orleans, at least, the meaning was open defiance of the Union.

There, the Yankees were met with rowdy provocation from Southern ladies. At its most extreme, the women's' goading included violent threats, swearing, and spitting at officers. These instances alone were enough to threaten morale and to demand intervention from General Benjamin Butler, who, to the ladies' surprise, put down their defiance. On the part of Butler, much creativity was required to reach those ladies with his powers of war. Until now, they were not considered subjects of the state but of their husbands. This meant that soldiers were hardly permitted to respond to or punish ladies who drew their ire. To elite Southern women, who valued their privileged status as "ladies," Butler's solution was the ultimate insult. Any woman who behaved badly would be classified as a prostitute. This way, Union men could punish them without violating the rules of war.<sup>27</sup>

For Clara Solomon, who herself insulted Union officers by vacating her church pew upon their arrival,<sup>28</sup> Butler's order only fanned the flames of her political anger. "I cannot express to you the indignation this thing awakened," she confided to her diary.<sup>29</sup> She, and others like her,

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<sup>26</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 92.

<sup>27</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 110.

<sup>28</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 106.

<sup>29</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Diary*, 370.

resolved to make their dissatisfaction clear through subtler displays of insolence.<sup>30</sup> “They may control our actions, but looks they never can,” she concluded.

Many of Solomon’s classmates, had preferred the subtler route all along, choosing to wear their defiance rather than act it out. Not only in New Orleans but throughout the Confederacy, black bows were a popular choice, the color of mourning representing the grief the women said they felt at occupation. The other favorite symbol was, predictably, the Confederate flag, whether it was sewn onto one’s dress or merely the inspiration for its color scheme.

For ladies who were well-versed in the grammar of clothing and had developed a robust understanding of the meaning of particular colors, dress types, accessory combinations, and what each particular setting demanded, articulating one’s support through what one wore seemed perfectly natural. Better yet, it allowed them to couch their unbecoming political indignation in a wholly feminine language—dress.

As much thought went into the nature of their sartorial political interventions as it had into their complex, ritualistic antebellum outfits; a lengthy discussion between Solomon and her classmates in her New Orleans school shows as much. Solomon, for her part, did not agree with the aforementioned accessories preferred by her peers, arguing that both the black bow and the wearing of the Confederate flag articulated the wrong message to Union Officers. Black, she pointed out, was what one wore in mourning. In this context, it fatalistically suggested the Confederate cause was already dead. “Do we go in black for a very sick person?” she asked. “Our cause is not *dead*, it is only *sick*.” Wearing the flag, too, missed the point, “for they are all

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<sup>30</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 106.

well aware of the feelings & sentiments of Confederate women.” There was no need for redundancy or to imply the cause lacked unanimous support.<sup>31</sup>

Outside New Orleans, shows of sartorial support for the Confederacy achieved even greater levels of complexity and elaborateness. In South Carolina, as the blockades impeded the availability of affordable bonnets for most women, many ladies adopted the symbolic palmetto hat, a woven straw-like cap made from the bark of the palmetto tree, as an alternative. In addition to resolving the dilemma of what to wear on one’s head besides a bonnet—appearing without one was out of the question—the palmetto represented Confederate military strength. Referencing a revolutionary war era battle on South Carolina’s Sullivan’s Island, legend held that barricades made from downed palmetto trunks saved the patriots from British attack. Regarding themselves as the heirs to the American Revolution, South Carolina’s new flag featured the palmetto front and center at the dawn of the Civil War.<sup>32</sup>

That the Confederate ladies began sporting hats made from the tree is a testament to its popularity as a symbol. Prior to the war, these straw hats were worn typically by young boys, and during work on the plantation.<sup>33</sup> They were mentioned, too, in fugitive slave advertisements, when slave-owners provided clothing descriptions.<sup>34</sup> During the Antebellum, a Southern belle clad in such a cap would have been an unusual sight. Even outside the South, the straw hat had

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<sup>31</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Diary*, 354.

<sup>32</sup> “Seals, Flags, House & Senate Emblems,” South Carolina Legislature Online, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/studentpage/coolstuff/seal.shtml#:~:text=THE%20STATE%20FLAG&text=The%20palmetto%20tree%20symbolized%20Colonel,fleet%20on%20June%2028%2C%201776>.

<sup>33</sup> John H. Brent, “New Goods,” advertisement, *The Alexandria Gazette*, (Alexandria, Virginia), May 21, 1838. [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi\\_aquasox\\_ver01/data/sn85025007/00414215610/1838052101/0751.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi_aquasox_ver01/data/sn85025007/00414215610/1838052101/0751.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> W.M.E Collier, “Ranaway (*sic*),” advertisement, *Cheraw Gazette*, (Cheraw, South Carolina), October 11, 1836, 191, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/msar\\_kingsombra\\_ver01/data/sn83016863/00415662051/1844081401/0322.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/msar_kingsombra_ver01/data/sn83016863/00415662051/1844081401/0322.pdf).

been characterized as lowly, invoked in caricatures of the slave-owning, unsophisticated Southerner.<sup>35</sup>

Though the war prompted many ladies to embrace the hat, it was hard to forget that it once smacked of labor, slavery, and masculinity. One Southern woman, Judith McGuire, lamented that though the plaited caps she had seen were beautiful, she could not help but feel that milliners in Paris would regard them as antiquated and out-of-style. Despite her concerns, McGuire also felt that the fashions had been spoiled by their association with the North. “What do we care for Parisian style, particularly as it would have to come to us through Yankeeland?” she wondered. To her, more desirable were those styles that signified Southern self-sufficiency and independence from Northern industry rather than personal wealth.<sup>36</sup>

Emma LeConte reached the same conclusion as McGuire. “We’d rather wear sack cloths, and ashes if necessary than give up to the Yankees,” she wrote of herself and her aunt. Sack cloth may have been an exaggeration. Even palmetto hats, LeConte imagined, would require some transformation in order to be made wearable, even though she imagined they could be “plaited beautifully.” LeConte imagined they could be made sufficient if she were to trim them with flowers in the summer and holly berries and ivy in the winter.<sup>37</sup>

Many other women, too, soon figured that they could weave hats themselves, and weaving them became a favorite pastime. When shortages wrought by the blockades reached a fever pitch in the spring of 1863, newspapers clung to the production of woven hats, noting that

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<sup>35</sup> *Weekly Trinity Journal*, (Weaverville, California) July 16, 1864, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/curiv\\_knotgrass\\_ver01/data/sn85025202/00279557396/1864071601/0116.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/curiv_knotgrass_ver01/data/sn85025202/00279557396/1864071601/0116.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Judith White Brockenbrough McGuire, “Diary of Judith White Brockenbrough McGuire,” in *Women of the South in Wartimes*, ed. Matthew Page Andrews, (Baltimore, MD: Norman, Remington: 1920), 47.

<sup>37</sup> LeConte, *Diary*, 58.



they signified the viability of domestic industry in the Confederacy. “A young lady can learn to braid in a few hours and each one can teach fifty or one hundred others,” the Edgefield Advertiser breathlessly observed, even publishing instructions on the cultivation of rye for farmers so that the ladies would have enough straw for weaving. “Let us have straw, and we will not want for hats and bonnets!” the paper proclaimed, as though the scale and viability of bonnet manufacture could itself determine the outcome of the war.<sup>38</sup>

Even before wartime shortage forced substitutions, homemade hats were a much-talked about way for women to indicate their support for secession. The elements of one bonnet in particular received relentless coverage both in and outside the South, and were taken by many as evidence of the growing sympathy among ladies for the fire-eating Southern cause. The bonnet’s intricate ornamentation even articulated the values at the center of growing secessionist sentiment and Southern nationalism, and, at times, newspapers behaved as an interpreter, outlining for readers the meaning behind these various symbols. The bonnet itself was made from homegrown domestic cotton, which one letter to the editor took as “convincing proof of how independent [the South] can be of our northern aggressors.”<sup>39</sup> This was then adorned with an embroidered gold image of the palmetto trees, perhaps a nod to Southern military might, and the lone star, a reference to Texas’ former status as an independent republic, which the South now aspired toward. It left little need for women to attend secessionist meetings or pen op—eds like their Confederate brothers. The cause could be elucidated by a bonnet.

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<sup>38</sup> “Straw Hats and Bonnets,” *The Edgefield Advertiser*, (Edgefield, South Carolina), April 15, 1863, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/scu\\_jinx\\_ver01/data/sn84026897/00211101209/1863041501/0042.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/scu_jinx_ver01/data/sn84026897/00211101209/1863041501/0042.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Daily Chronicle & Sentinel (Augusta, Georgia), October 28, 1860, p. 3, c. 3 as quoted by Vicki Betts in “Homespun,” *Special Topics*, Paper 12, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/10950/796>.

Still, the clearest and most widespread example of Southern women signifying their politics through dress was neither the palmetto hat nor bonnet. Instead, it was the wearing of coarse, homespun fabrics, a development that in most historiography has been understood as largely being a product of wartime shortage. The reality appears to have been more complicated than that. This, though, demands its own section.

**B. “What Southern Girls for Southern Rights Will Do:” The Home Front’s Campaign for Homespun**

In one of the most enduring jingles from the Civil War, the Confederate woman is remembered by her dress:

*Oh yes I am a Southern Girl and Glory in Its Name,  
My homespun dress is plain, I know, my hat’s Palmetto too,  
But boast it with far greater pride, than glittering wealth and fame,  
Then it shows what Southern girls for Southern rights will do  
We envy not the northern girl, Her robes of beauty rare<sup>40</sup>*

That the Southern girl, with her dress akin to the “crowned heads of Europe,”<sup>41</sup> suddenly regarded herself as plain compared to her Northern counterpart, was no doubt an abrupt about-face. Perhaps, though, what was even more shocking about this jingle was its explicit veneration for homespun fabric that, years earlier, few planter class women would have dared wear.

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<sup>40</sup> “The Homespun Dress,” (New Orleans: A.E. Blackmar, 1865)  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/ihas.200002584.0/?sp=3>.

<sup>41</sup> Stirling, *Letters Slave States*, 158.

Homespun fabric, known simply “homespun,” had been a Southern novelty and a staple on many plantations during the early part of the 19th century and was particularly common among white, yeoman farmers and their families. The fabric was so discernible that it was picked out as strange by one Northerner during his visit to rural Mississippi in 1850. “In Ohio the spinning wheel and hand-loom are curiosities, and homespun would be a conspicuous and noticeable material of clothing,” wrote Frederick Olmstead, “[but] half the white population of Mississippi still dress in homespun, and at every second house the wheel and the loom are found in operation.”<sup>42</sup>

Even by the 1800s, though, its use among white people had declined significantly, and its use and production varied drastically by region and plantation. The one consistency, at least on plantations, was that it had become practically synonymous with enslavement. Colloquially known by many Southern white people as “negro cloth,” the production of the fabric seems to have firmly become the duty of the enslaved, and mentions of it seem to have turned up frequently in planters’ descriptions of runaway slaves.

At the outset of the Civil War, though, Confederate newspapers and jingles seem to have turned these meanings on their heads, and the admiration for the fabric as an article of fashion for well-to-do white women, bordered, it seems, on obsession. Editors seemingly sought to make heroines out of those women who wore homespun and those who wove it. In November 1863, one lady of Rockingham, North Carolina was married in an ensemble she made wholly from scratch, or so the Rockingham Register reported. Her “delicate hands spun and wove” the fabric that composed her dress. Her fingers braided the “beautiful and elegant straw hat.” The do-it-

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<sup>42</sup> Frederick Olmstead as cited by Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 121.

yourself project was completed, the Register wrote, all “for the purpose of showing the world how independent Southern girls are.” The newspaper made it clear how admirable—and attractive—her efforts were. “If this noble girl were not wedded,” they wrote, “and we were to publish her Pa’s name” then “her Pa’s house would be at once thronged with gallant gentleman seeking the hand of a woman at such a priceless value.”<sup>43</sup>

Even better were those women weaving homespun not merely for themselves but in bulk in an effort to sustain the South writ large. Editorials waxed poetic about their herculean displays of self-sufficiency, which at times veered so far to the extreme that they almost became comical. Take the woman from the Ozarks, who, “with an axe, a saw, a chisel and an auger, made herself a loom out of oak rails, upon which she now weaves eight yards of coarse cotton cloth a day,”<sup>44</sup> or a woman from Texas, who by 1864 claimed to have made a grand total of 3,000 yards of homespun fabric.<sup>45</sup>

Confederate newspapers no doubt had a vested interest in the acceptance and production of homespun. The success of the Confederate States, they appear to have recognized, would depend in part on their ability to overcome prior dependencies on the North. One of the most glaring was their reliance on the Northern garment industry.<sup>46</sup> But despite the obvious political stakes newspapers held in the production and use of homespun fabrics, historians have mostly accepted their accounts, or, paid only limited attention to who was wearing it and why.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Savannah Republican*, (December 4, 1862): 1, c. as quoted by Betts.

<sup>44</sup> *Memphis Daily Appeal*, (Granada, MS), November 13, 1862, p. 1, c. 6, as quoted by Betts *Special Topic*, paper 12.

<sup>45</sup> *Memphis Daily Appeal*, (Atlanta, Ga.), June 19, 1864, p. 1, c. 2, as quoted by Betts, *Special Topics*, paper 12.

<sup>46</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Joan Cashin, “Torn Bonnets and Stolen Silks: Fashion, Gender, Race, and Danger in the Wartime South,” *Civil War History*, Volume 61, Number 4, (December 2015): 350.

Historians, like Drew Gilpin Faust, who have challenged the homespun myth have focused mostly on its manufacture, putting to rest the notion that mistresses were suddenly doing the weaving themselves.<sup>48</sup> Almost no one, though, seems to have investigated whether anyone was wearing it to the extent the papers purported, or with any enthusiasm. Answering this question demands a look beyond the newspapers, and into the women's own writing, which reveals that a handful of women, do seem to have worn homespun for the first time, but they prove rare.

Lena Ledbetter was among these rare homespun converts, making a dress entirely from scratch for the first time.<sup>49</sup> To her, and other women, homespun like sewing and other sartorial symbols, was evidence of their participation in the war. Eliza Frances Andrews echoed this sentiment. When "worn aboveboard," she wrote, homespun represented her "confederate pride." But even despite the fabric's patriotic connotations, Andrews could not seem to unlearn its previous meanings. She hated wearing homespun undergarments, and while gazing at herself in the mirror, lamented how they made her appear "common and vulgar."<sup>50</sup>

Andrews was far from the only woman, even among slaveholders, who was left with little alternative to homespun. Emma Leconte, too, was forced to wear it, though it seems with less angst than Andrews. Still, enough women got away with never slipping into homespun (particularly it seems, those women who lived in cities) to make those who did wear it feel deeply self-conscious. Eliza Frances Andrews, for instance, dreaded appearing next to her well-dressed cousin, whose privileged trips to Memphis kept her beautifully dressed into the worst

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<sup>48</sup> Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Laurie E. Jasinki, "Lena Dancy Ledbetter," Texas State Historical Society, accessed January 5th, 2022, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/ledbetter-lena-dancy>.

<sup>50</sup> Andrews, *Wartime Journal*, 112.

days of the war. Andrews's embarrassment proved so pointed that at times she second-guessed even wanting to see her cousin. Next to her, Andrews wrote, "us rebs look like ragamuffins."<sup>51</sup>

Andrews was far from the exception. In one instance, "country" ladies sought the advice of a local newspaper, asking if a column on clothes could be presented alongside news of the war. We wear homespun, they wrote, "but don't like to be entirely out of the fashion." Their self-consciousness on account of their textiles had all but kept them out of the town, where they feared they would be unrecognizable to their still stylish city friends.

It seems, too, that women's embarrassment was not unfounded. Women who were not wearing homespun were far from congenial. According to Mary Chestnut, guests were not as impressed with one bride's homespun dress as writers of letters-to-the-editors seem to have been with other self-sufficient brides. The gray homespun wedding dress was apparently one the bride had on all winter and simply washed and turned inside out for her wedding day. The "female critics pronounced it 'flabby-dabby,'" Chestnut reported.<sup>52</sup>

The unlucky bride in Chestnut's story was not the only woman to attract sneers from fashionable ladies. Other women wrote in to newspapers, seeking editors' advice on how to deal with mocking belles whom economic necessity had not yet forced into a coarse dress. In one such account from the war's latter days, one woman attested that her "patriotic homespun" had "several times been laughed at" by ladies known to smuggle their finery in from Memphis. To her, the choice to indulge in the latest fashions was an affront to the Southern cause and a clear indication that one cares more for status than the Confederacy. These ladies "can't for their life

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<sup>51</sup> Andrews, *Wartime Journal*, 111.

<sup>52</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 300.

resist the temptation” to wear the “Garibaldi dresses” and “McClellan hats and McClellan sleeves,”<sup>53</sup> the woman wrote, invoking the names of an Italian military figure admired by Lincoln and a Union Army General.<sup>54</sup>

When it came to the production of homespun, it appears to have been much the same story. Though newspapers again offered a portrait of women coming together under a common cause and shirking notions of propriety, that rarely seems to have been the case. Most mistresses were not willing to take a seat at the loom. Instead, perhaps unsurprisingly, some instead opted to employ those they had enslaved in the now charitable production of homespun. As Celia Lawton recounted, her mother designated one room of the big house as the site of constant spinning and weaving by “six or eight” enslaved women, overseen by Marah, whom Lawton refers to as “mammy.” To Lawton, whose mother had commissioned a yeoman woman to teach them how to weave, this was no small deed. Her mother, she wrote, had “made a great sacrifice” by giving up Marah’s assistance.<sup>55</sup> Some newspapers even acknowledge that, for the most part, this is how the production of homespun took place. “The rich,” one writer declared triumphantly, “are looking after their servants and directing their work--the making of cotton and woolen cloth.”<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, homespun seems only to have been desirable so far as it was patriotic; when it was worn—or made—out of necessity, it still connoted vulgarity. When examined closely, even the newspaper reports bear this out. Homespun, it seems, was most popular before secession,

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<sup>53</sup> *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, July 16, 1864, p. 1, c. 8, as quoted by Betts, *Special Topics*, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Lincoln may have even asked Garibaldi to lead the Union Army, as some historians have long argued, see Howard Marraro, “Lincoln’s Offer of a Command to Garibaldi: Further Light on a Disputed Point of History.” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 36, no. 3 (1943): 237–70.

<sup>55</sup> Celia Lawton, *Incidents in the Life of Celia Lawton: A Memoir of Life, War, and Reconstruction in Georgia and South Carolina*, ed. Karen Stokes, (Macon, Mercer University Press, 2021), 34.

<sup>56</sup> *Southern Confederacy*, (Atlanta, Georgia), March 21, 1863, p. 3, c. 2, as quoted by Betts, *Special Topics*, paper 12.

when need had not yet compelled its use. In newspaper accounts published in 1861, ladies zealously organized homespun-themed social parties, balls, and picnics where guests were obliged to attend in their home state-made attire or cheaper fabrics such as calico, which typically would have been considered too base for an upscale party. Some even joined homespun societies, resolving to never wear anything but the textile.<sup>57</sup>

This was not the first time the South had shown such enthusiasm for the homemade fabric. By the eve of Secession, homespun had acquired a rich association with independence movements, both in the South, and nationally. Following the Panic of 1819, when reduced foreign demand disrupted American manufacturing, many touted homespun cloth as the solution to both economic challenge, and a sign of patriotism. One farmer wrote in an Illinois newspaper in 1821 that he and his countrymen should “wear clothes of our own fabrication,” calling it the only way “to secure happiness and independence.”<sup>58</sup> Then, in South Carolina, during the nullification crisis of the 1830s, men touted the same show of nationalism. Senator Robert Y. Hayne even donned a homespun suit on the Senate floor while debating nullification and Southern manufacturing with lauded Northern Senator Daniel Webster.<sup>59</sup>

For many Southern women (and men) wearing homespun signaled that were the inheritors of the American Revolution, and that they were drawing inspiration from their revolutionary mothers, like Martha Washington. One letter to the editor encouraged Southern

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<sup>57</sup> *Dallas Herald*, (Dallas, Texas), February 8, 1860, p. 1, c. 6, as quoted by Betts, paper 12.

<sup>58</sup> Frederick Rapp, “Extract of a letter from Mr. Frederick Rapp to a gentleman in this place,” *Edwardsville Spectator*, (Edwardsville, Illinois)

[https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/iune\\_bismuth\\_ver01/data/sn82015374/00332898012/1821081401/0118.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/iune_bismuth_ver01/data/sn82015374/00332898012/1821081401/0118.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Robert C. Byrd, *The Senate 1789-1989, V3: Addresses on the History of the United States Senate*, (U.S Government Printing Office, 1989), 4.



ladies to heed the example of these patriotic women, who once held Fourth of July Celebrations in which “both the ladies and gentlemen” were “all dressed in homespun.” All women would do well, it continued, “to imitate [their] customs.”<sup>60</sup>

But these events wholly preceded the economic ruin which would have made them necessary. By 1863, when the pangs of wartime shortages set in, homespun had fallen out of popularity. “Where are all the women who at the beginning of the war promised to wear homespun?” one newspaper asked.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, it seems, the wearing of homespun was not the remarkable rupture that it has been taken for. More than a remaking of aristocratic notions of propriety, it speaks to Confederate women’s desire to articulate their politics via dress.

### C. “The Old Story of Rich and Poor:” Class and Clothing During the War

When Eliza Francis Andrews, the homespun-clad belle who drooled after the finery her cousin Bessie smuggled in through the blockade, finally came into possession of her own lace contraband, she was beside herself with excitement. With Bessie’s guidance, Andrews whipped it into a stylish new kind of headdress, and wore it out to a party. That fine fabrics had suddenly become scarce only made showing off her hat all the more satisfying. “Nobody else has anything like it,” she proudly proclaimed in her diary.<sup>62</sup>

Andrews showed no signs of shame one might expect from a contraband-wearing Confederate lady had they read a Confederate newspaper, which regularly featured strongly-worded pleas to abandon all luxuries smuggled through the blockade. In one scathing reproach, a letter-to-the-editor declared that any lady sneaking fine fabrics into the Confederacy must not

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<sup>60</sup> *Austin State Gazette*, (Austin, Texas), December 21, 1861, p. 3, c. 2, as quoted by Betts, paper, 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Savannah Republican*, (Savannah, Georgia), August 19, 1863, p. 2, c, as quoted by Betts, *Special Topics*, paper 12.

<sup>62</sup> Andrews, *Wartime Journal*, 123.

care “one iota for herself or her country, or last of all... our brave gallant soldiers.” Lest it were not clear, the author emphasized that their condemnation applied, too, to any widowed soldier’s wife who went north in search of a new mourning dress. “Which is blackest,” the author asked of these women, “their mourning without or their hearts within?”<sup>63</sup>

In her recollections, Mary Chestnut recognized the gulf between what newspapers were wanted from Southern women and how the women themselves were actually behaving. In one 1862 incident, Chestnut claimed that ladies were “bitterly attacked” by the morning papers for continuing to wear their “silks and satins,” all while the poor soldiers’ wives toiled. The whole episode, Chestnut concluded, was the “old story of rich and poor.”<sup>64</sup>

Far from the only time these women faced the wrath of the Confederate newspapers, their antics became a frequent target and scapegoat. When severe food shortages shook the foundations of the Confederate cause during the spring of 1863, a rash of bread riots erupted among poor, starving women. The largest and most famous of these broke out in Richmond, Virginia, where thousands of hungry women raided local stores, with cries of “bread or blood!”<sup>65</sup>

In the South, news of the riot was initially suppressed until a northern prisoner of war, who had witnessed the incident from the window of his cell, leaked the story to the *New York Times*. There, it was taken as a sign that Lincoln’s war of attrition was working, and the will of the Southern people was weakening.<sup>66</sup> But when Southern newspapers were forced to report on

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<sup>63</sup> *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, (Mobile, Alabama), July 16, 1864, p. 1, c. 8, as quoted by Betts, paper, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 155.

<sup>65</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 180.

<sup>66</sup> “Bread Riot in Richmond: 3,000 Hungry Women Raging in the Streets. Government and Private Stores Broken Open,” *The New York Times*, (New York, New York), April 15, 1863, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1863/04/08/archives/bread-riot-in-richmond-three-thousand-hungry-women-raging-in-the.html>.

the incident in subsequent weeks, the story became something else entirely. The “three thousand hungry women raging in the streets” in search of bread and other items described by Northern newspapers became “fifty well-dressed, plump-cheeked” ladies in search not of food but of “boots, shoes, silks, tobacco, and jewelry.”<sup>67</sup> The crisis was not one of subsistence, but of the mistress’ insatiable appetite for finery and luxury goods, the papers meant to say. This was the grave threat to Confederate morale.

Eliza Francis Andrews, though, was far from the only woman who was unmoved, or simply oblivious to, pleas to forgo any and all finery. For others with greater resources, and who had perhaps accumulated a formidable collection of luxury articles before the war even began, it felt natural to continue indulging. Gertrude Thomas, for instance, was often willing to pay the skyrocketing prices demanded by the circumstances, despite suffering the financial strain of tumbling cotton prices.<sup>68</sup> For her and so many others, the habits were too hard to break. By 1862, Thomas still headed to town to purchase silk threads and accessories for her children, and in 1864 paid an “extravagant” \$100 for her children’s simple Christmas gifts.<sup>69</sup> Her own mother extended the same courtesy to her, gifting Thomas an expensive valenciennes lace collar, presumably from beyond the blockade, for Christmas in 1861.<sup>70</sup>

Despite her wartime extravagance, Thomas, who would eventually suffer serious pecuniary damage in the years following the war, was not wholly untouched by shortages and

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<sup>67</sup> “The Late Riot in Richmond Virginia,” *The North Carolina Standard*, (Raleigh, North Carolina), Wednesday, April 15, 1863, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/ncu\\_broad\\_ver01/data/sn83045706/00296022664/1863041501/0278.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/ncu_broad_ver01/data/sn83045706/00296022664/1863041501/0278.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 256.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 276.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 214.

blockades. At times, she feared openly that the luxury she was accustomed to would be gone by the time she became a grandmother, and by 1864, sensing what was increasingly inevitable, she observed nervously that “poverty offers no charms to her nature.”<sup>71</sup> But these fears and Thomas’s economic reality did little to disrupt her self-regard or her habits. While she esteemed herself as a lady of a particular class, this identity was largely independent of her financial reality and entitled her to particular luxuries. Even as her situation worsened post-war, it hardly became more obvious to her that she should forgo her lavish lifestyle, even as her world came down around her.<sup>72</sup>

Unlike Gertrude Thomas, who long sought to deny her worsening condition, Chestnut’s retelling of the war revealed in and perhaps even exaggerated the financial toll the war took on her. Chestnut extensively detailed the bloated cost of new finery and the degradation of her nicest clothing, like her favorite green dress, which by 1864 was “tattered, torn...worst worn” and “wadded.”<sup>73</sup> Her telling of being denied that hotel room in Kingsville, it turns out, was only the tip of the iceberg. Soiled and forfeited clothes were a badge of pride, evidence that one was part of the action, at least to Mary Chestnut, to whom “the action” was perhaps desirable as she had otherwise continued to live quite cozily.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, Chestnut’s frustration with wartime inflation did not stop her from paying astronomical prices, even if she was not always pleased with her purchases. “I gave \$375 for my mourning... with bonnet and gloves it came to \$500...Before the war, such things as I have

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 343.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 510.

<sup>73</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 278.

<sup>74</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 299.

would not have been thought fit for a chambermaid.”<sup>75</sup> Though in some moments she felt less becoming, overall, the war did not fundamentally remake her notions of sartorial propriety. In one instance, surprised by the imminent arrival of an esteemed Confederate, and embarrassed by her too casual dress, Chestnut “rushed off to put on [her] bonnet and furs.”<sup>76</sup>

Her elaborate social life, the staging ground for all her ensembles, too, went mostly uninterrupted. Chestnut chronicled her experience at fancy parties and gatherings. At one 1864 “Luncheon to the Ladies” given by Mrs. Jefferson Davis, Mary Chestnut reported wearing her “black velvet, diamonds, and pointed lace” to dine on a decadent lunch of “gumbo, ducks and olives, chickens in jelly, oysters, lettuce salad, chocolate cream, jelly cake, claret, champagne.”<sup>77</sup>

Like Chestnut, other woman adopted signifiers that previously indicated working class status for the sake of contributing to the war effort (even in spite of her special lifestyle), or at least feeling as though one had. Other ladies, who were previously under no economic obligation to produce their own garments, took up sewing as a way to show support for their men. “Defend us with your bayonets, and we will sustain you with our needles!” they declared in the newspapers.<sup>78</sup> Their needles, though, however wifely and feminine, proved less effective than this slogan would suggest. As Stephanie McCurry notes, some women who enthusiastically joined relief societies at the war’s outset quickly realized they did not actually know how to sew.<sup>79</sup> Gertrude Thomas can perhaps be counted among these as, in spite of all her lamenting of her poor sewing abilities and noted distaste for the activity, she was quick to begin sewing on a

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<sup>75</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 300.

<sup>76</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 267.

<sup>77</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 284.

<sup>78</sup> *Charleston Mercury*, (Charleston, South Carolina) April 29, 1862, p. 4, c. 1, as cited by Betts, paper 12.

<sup>79</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 93.

soldier's jacket. It was not long, though, until she turned to other forms of charity, usually donation.<sup>80</sup>

Not all women, even those in slave owning families, were in a position to adopt these activities so superficially. Clara Solomon and her mother began making extra money by sewing soldiers' drawers as part of a family friend's business. The extra money helped the family, who owned one domestic slave and kept hired Irish help, chip away at debts that had begun accumulating before secession. But because the war had spawned expansive networks of women sewing soldiers' clothes for charity, it was easy for Solomon to regard her and her mother's new business as something that was still proper according to their class. Perhaps because they did both charitable and profitable projects, Solomon regarded herself as distinct from other women who worked to live, even though, for her, it had become something of an economic necessity. Despite this doublethink, Solomon was remarkably lucid in her analysis of the wartime economy, observing that war had "bettered the condition of many" as it had created employment for many "indigent women." She simply was not among them, though her hired help, Mrs. Deegan, who had also begun sewing drawers for extra money, was.<sup>81</sup>

The Confederacy responded to food shortages and hardship with charity measures, such as the New Orleans' "free market," where struggling soldier's wives could get free and low-cost food. Solomon's mother would obtain the necessary ticket on behalf of her hired help, but the Solomon family themselves would not go. The market, Solomon noted, would be a "Godsend for a needy woman!"<sup>82</sup> Accepting charity was the uncrossable boundary, even as notions of

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 350.

<sup>81</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Journal*, 206.

<sup>82</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Journal*, 121, 221.

propriety governing the productive manufacture of clothing became blurred. Solomon was not the only well-to-do woman for whom the war and charity obscured the propriety of sewing as labor. Following the war, the same was true of the Palmer family of South Santee, South Carolina, whom I will discuss more in Chapter Two.

#### **D. “The Dress She Wears:” The Women and their Objects of Sacrifice**

In the Spring of 1861, war crept closer, and Judith McGuire was dread stricken. “I am trying to employ the passing hour,” she wrote, but “a cloud hangs over us and all that surrounds us.”<sup>83</sup> In spite of her fear, McGuire was clear-headed about what war would mean for her and other women of the South. In her mind, they were not to be spectators and would shoulder as much obligation as their men. “All ages, all conditions, must meet now on one common platform,” she declared in her diary. “There is much for us to do, and we must do it... we will be dependent on our exertions, and great must those exertions be.”<sup>84</sup> Gertrude Thomas felt much the same, and was impressed by how her fellow Georgia women had risen to the occasion. “Georgia had nobly done her duty,” she observed in July 1861.

The potent responsibility that many Southern women seemed to have felt at the war’s arrival was not unlike the attitudes of those men who felt it was their duty to fight and die for the Confederacy in battle. Indeed, as Drew Gilpin Faust argues, in the Civil War South these impulses had been similarly informed. The women, Faust points out, had been “no less influenced by a genre of ‘war stories’” that left them with visions of their silently self-sacrificing “foremothers,” whom many remembered having contributed admirably during the Revolution.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> McGuire, *Diary*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> McGuire, *Diary*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” *The Journal of American History*, Volume 6, Number 4, (Oxford University Press, 1990), 1202.

Indeed, this mythos was obvious enough in Confederate propaganda, where, in newspapers, Southern women were described at their charity events as having “worked cheerfully and made sacrifices uncomplainingly.”<sup>86</sup> Another editorial promised that the “martyrdom” of Southern women would cement their place in the arc of history. Their “heroism” would become part of the legend itself, remembered by “daughters of future centuries,” outlasting even the memory of “Rome and Greece.”<sup>87</sup>

Of the sacrifices that were to make them into legends, the most significant was, no doubt, the offering up of their husbands and sons. Many who left for battle would never return. The ideal of the martyred Southern belle, though, demanded more, emphasizing that while on the home front, Confederate women were to avoid idleness.<sup>88</sup> Their proactive support of the war often took the form of only sometimes effective ladies’ aid associations, where wives went to sew military uniforms and to provide charity to poor soldiers’ wives.<sup>89</sup> But as often, it seems, wealthy women supported the war differently: by sacrificing their clothing.

“Most men like to deny that wives (*sic*) own anything” began Gertrude Thomas after the war, even though many things, like plantations, horses, and cows, “are really as much her own as the dress she wears.”<sup>90</sup> Though that may be, when the war broke out in the spring of 1861, it seems that the only property planter class women felt was properly their own *was* the “dress she wears,” as well as her jewelry, bonnet, cloaks, and other finery. The feminine halo that surrounded the realm of fashion made a woman’s clothes her property, whether or not she had

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<sup>86</sup> *Weekly Columbus Enquirer* (Columbus, Georgia), May 26, 1863, p. 3, c. 6, quoted by Betts, paper 12.

<sup>87</sup> *Washington Telegraph*, (Washington, Arkansas), January 20, 1864, quoted by Betts, paper 12.

<sup>88</sup> *Washington Telegraph*, (Washington, Arkansas), January 20, 1864, quoted by Betts, paper 12.

<sup>89</sup> McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 93.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 318.



earned the money for their purchase. Perhaps this sense of ownership is what made it so impressive to Gertrude Thomas that some women, in the conflict's earliest days, sold their jewelry and other finery, donating the proceeds to the war effort.<sup>91</sup> Neither Thomas's family, nor she herself, were strangers to charity. Over the course of the war, her father donated substantially to the cause, and Thomas sometimes offered contributions to indigent soldiers' wives, including money, food, and once even a stove.<sup>92</sup> It was the donations of one's finery that seems to have struck Thomas as the most meaningful. These women, it seemed to Thomas, had answered the call of duty by "emulating the example of our revolutionary mother's" with their self-sacrifice.<sup>93</sup>

These ladies in Augusta were far from the only ones to contribute to the cause in this manner. Mary Chestnut, too, reported giving up a string of pearls to be raffled in support of a ladies' aid association. Her friends, as well, she testified, were parting with their valuables in support of the war. But to Chestnut, such donations had become trivialized by the sacrifice of their loved ones. "Our silver and gold, what are they? when we give up to the war our beloved?"<sup>94</sup>

The sacrifice of the clothing, though, was not always done for the sake of financially contributing to the war. Even those women who perhaps did not own clothes that would garner a substantial profit or who were not excited to part with what they did have were forced to make some sartorial compromises. The competition that pervaded ladies' fashions before the war took on new color as, to some, wartime sacrifice became a test of one's ingenuity. Clara Solomon was thrilled at her own creativity after she clipped a flounce off of an old dress and halved it, making

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 185.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 350.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 185.

<sup>94</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 155.

two flounces from one. “Necessity and *war* were the mothers of invention,” she noted.<sup>95</sup> To Solomon, at least at first, fashion was made more satisfying by one’s own efforts. “Its charms were heightened by the thought of what it *was*,” she remarked upon seeing her friend’s rejuvenated dress. Solomon was not alone in her initial enjoyment of do-it-yourself fashions. Eliza Frances Andrews, too, impressed herself with her own ability to patch together old dresses, turning them into something that felt wholly new. “My dress was a masterpiece,” she remarked, “though patched up, like everyone else’s, out of finery.”<sup>96</sup>

Even more than the test of the ladies’ creativity, efforts by women to replace luxury clothing with its Southern reconstructions seemed to be a test of Southern self-sufficiency and viability as a nation independent of the northern economy. Many women understood their duty in this context. By the last months of the war in 1865, Emma LeConte reasoned she was nearly capable of making every item of clothing she needed by herself.<sup>97</sup>

The women’s sartorial sacrifices did not go unnoticed by their male counterparts. In a retrospective 1867 address, Jefferson Davis offered an over-the-top commendation of women’s wartime compromises. “The exquisite frivolities so dear to the sex were cast aside... their trinkets were flung into the public crucible... Women bred to every refinement of luxury wore homespun.” Still, he continued, they accepted “every sacrifice with unconcern and lightening the burden of war...[with] labor proper to their sphere.”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, at the war’s outset, one letter to the editor in Georgia praised some women’s newfound austerity, a necessary correction to

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<sup>95</sup> Solomon, *Civil War Diary*, 311.

<sup>96</sup> Andrews, *Wartime Journal*, 106.

<sup>97</sup> LeConte, *Diary*, 58.

<sup>98</sup> Jefferson Davis, as printed in *The Memphis Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), October 31, 1867, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/tu\\_bonnielou\\_ver01/data/sn83045160/00200292960/1867103101/0379.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/tu_bonnielou_ver01/data/sn83045160/00200292960/1867103101/0379.pdf).

their previous excess, which he claims had “risen to the degree that ordinary good men could not marry, for they had not the means to support the wife’s extravagance.” He hoped the change would be permanent.<sup>99</sup>

But despite their early patriotic zeal, women were not as eager to prolong their martyrdom as this Georgia man and Jefferson Davis seem to have hoped. Mary Chestnut, in particular, was disturbed by the implications of what she saw after she sold her dress for extra money. “What a scene it was— such piles of rubbish, and mixed up with it, such splendid Parisian silks and satins,” Chestnut recalled of the shop run by “a mulatto woman under a roof in an out-of-the-way old home.” Here, Chestnut claimed, the “*ci-devant* rich white women sell to, and the negroes buy of, this woman.”<sup>100</sup> Of course, Chestnut’s suggestion that black women during the darkest days of the Civil War would be in any more of a position to purchase finery than their white counterparts is ludicrous, but her disdain at forfeiting some of her finest clothes at such a shop nonetheless suggests that the whole incident had been interpreted symbolically by Chestnut. To her, it seems, it represented the turning of the wheel. The grip on her status and wealth appeared to be loosening, if only slightly.

Other women, perhaps due to the same sense of precarity felt by Chestnut, were steadfast in their efforts to preserve what clothing they had left and to come by more, however they could. As Drew Gilpin Faust notes, one Confederate newspaper reported in the final years of the war that the South had seen an “epidemick (*sic*)” of well-to-do ladies shoplifting,<sup>101</sup> which could explain the attempt by Confederate newspapers to pin the Richmond bread riots on fashion-

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<sup>99</sup> *Albany Patriot*, (Albany, Georgia), March 21, 1861, as quoted by Betts, paper 12.

<sup>100</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 300.

<sup>101</sup> Faust, *Altars of Sacrifice*, 1227.

starved mistresses. Though in that case the suggestion that the bread riot was really a fashion riot is far-fetched, some incidents of shoplifting seem very much real. In some of these, it is not the women themselves who are the shoplifters but enslaved people who were apprehended after, perhaps stealing clothes on their behalf. In one instance, two enslaved black men were charged with lifting shoes from a local store after they allegedly attempted to sell them to a white woman who turned them in, but only after taking the shoes.<sup>102</sup> In another, an enslaved woman was charged with burglarizing a home and leaving the stolen goods, a “basket of clothes,” with her mistress, who went uncharged after claiming to have not touched or examined the goods herself.<sup>103</sup>

Plantation mistresses and their apparent accomplices were not the only ones caught up in thievery. Union soldiers, as they barreled through the South on Sherman’s well-known March to the Sea and comparable operations, developed a reputation for pillaging women’s clothing and other valuables, oftentimes with the intention of bringing the spoils home to their own wives. To Southerners, this was such an outrage that one Confederate newspaper decried it as a violation of the laws of war.<sup>104</sup> But, perhaps in a testament to their unrelenting attachment to their clothes, many women took great pains, even as their cities were coming down around them, to keep their best pieces out of Yankee hands.

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<sup>102</sup> *Richmond Whig*, (Richmond, Virginia), March 23, 1864, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi\\_hanoverian\\_ver01/data/sn84024669/00414184753/1864051001/0227.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi_hanoverian_ver01/data/sn84024669/00414184753/1864051001/0227.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> *Richmond Whig*, (Richmond, Virginia), May 10, 1864, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi\\_hanoverian\\_ver01/data/sn84024669/00414184753/1864032801/0155.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi_hanoverian_ver01/data/sn84024669/00414184753/1864032801/0155.pdf).

<sup>104</sup> *The Richmond Enquirer*, (Richmond, Virginia), May 1, 1863, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi\\_chanel\\_ver01/data/sn84024735/00415664400/1863050101/0075.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/vi_chanel_ver01/data/sn84024735/00415664400/1863050101/0075.pdf).

As the Union Army approached, Dolly Lunt Burge, who had depleted her wartime food stores almost entirely, buried what little flour she had left in the backyard. Just as important as her last bits of food were the dresses that belonged to her and her daughter, which she took care to hide under the bed in a slave cabin. The Union found them anyway, stuffing her silks under their saddles before riding away. She was furious.<sup>105</sup>

Back in Columbia, South Carolina, Emma Leconte had heard that Sherman's Army could burn down the whole town. As her family gathered their valuables—clothing, jewelry, silver, and wine—Leconte fastened crude pockets onto the inside of her hoop skirt, hoping to smuggle out what she could. The family's very best items, she wrote, would be sent ahead out of the city with her father. Though her family fared slightly better than her less prepared aunts, the Yankees, as they tore through town, bested the Lecontes, as they had Dolly Lunt Burge. “We lost heavily,” she noted, after her attempt to recover her stolen dresses failed. “How are we to get clothes? When even calico is from \$25 to \$30 a yard?” LeConte's 1864 diary declaration that she would *gladly* “wear sackcloth and even ashes” to withstand the Union had proved more a prophecy than a promise.<sup>106</sup>

LeConte's overstated capacity for sacrifice, though, seems to be characteristic of most Southern women in her position. Despite their early eagerness to support the war, be it through martyrdom or the wearing of homespun fabric, as the fighting dragged on, its consequences became unsavory. The old ways proved resilient, especially since the fashion culture spawned during the Antebellum Period informed how women articulated their support for the war. The

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<sup>105</sup> Dolly Lunt Burge, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge 1848-1879*, ed. Christine Carter, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>106</sup> Leconte, *Diary*, 58.

post-war years, though, promised fresh disruption to habits forged in the Old South and growing desperation on the part of many women to keep things the same.

## **Chapter Two: Emancipation and the Post-War Years**

### **C. “Infinitely Worse Than Sherman:” Lost Wealth and Sartorial Renegotiation**

As blockades were lifted, women who felt they had been deprived of the fashions for five long years were eager to return to antebellum extravagance. Emma LeConte was beside herself with excitement to see her aunt’s new dresses from the North, even as she remained unable to come by a new frock. “Just to touch an organdie, and silks!” she exclaimed. “How many years it seemed since we dreamed of a new frock finer than homespun or at most calico!”<sup>107</sup> When clothing prices dropped, ladies, it seems, descended in droves. With calico once again priced at 25 cents, Sallie Palmer went to the shops to buy dresses for her nieces but was too late—the inventory had already been picked over, perhaps by women as excited as Emma LeConte.<sup>108</sup> Many, though, quickly discovered that they could no longer afford expensive clothes and found themselves renegotiating notions of sartorial propriety in light of their new position.

The amount of wealth that had vanished by the end of the war and with emancipation was stunning. Take South Carolina, for example. Following the 1860 census, the State estimated its cumulative wealth at 400 million dollars. By 1866, damages to banks, railroads, and cities totaled 100 million dollars. With emancipation, another 200 million dollars evaporated. The remaining

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<sup>107</sup> LeConte, *Diary*, 84.

<sup>108</sup> Sarah Palmer to Harriet R. Palmer, December 8, 1865, in *A World Turned Upside Down: The Palmers of South Santee 1818-1881*, ed. Louis P. Towels, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 493.

100 million dollars was mostly in landholdings, the value of which had plummeted. In short, less than 25% of the State's 1860 wealth remained.<sup>109</sup>

One comparison of the 1860s and 1870s census data suggests the downfall of the planter class may have been even starker. By the end of the 1860s, the wealthiest 10% of Southerners saw a 90% decrease in the value of their personal property.<sup>110</sup> Whether or not these figures offer the full picture, they certainly give a sense of the scale of the fall. For Gertrude Thomas, though, the reckoning was even more dramatic.

As Thomas described it, emancipation reduced her family to “utter beggary... for, the thirty thousand dollars Pa gave me when I was married was invested in Negroes alone.”<sup>111</sup> Though the full extent of the Thomas family's loss is unclear, a comparison of their 1860 and 1870 census forms reveals that the value of their personal property declined by at least 75%,<sup>112</sup> but their actual circumstances appear to have been much worse. When all was said and done, by 1897, Thomas had only \$70.62 to leave each of her children—that is, after they sued her and Mr. Thomas for squandering their inheritance.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Edward Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2005), 743, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/ADH2296.0001.001?view=toc>.

<sup>110</sup> Brandon Dupont and Joshua Rosenbloom, “Impact of the US Civil War on southern wealth holders,” *VoxEU & CEPR*, June 19, 2016, <https://voxeu.org/article/impact-us-civil-war-southern-wealth-holders>.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 276.

<sup>112</sup> U.S Census Bureau, *1860 United States Census Record for Ella G. Thomas*, Ancestry.com, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/11635396:7667?tid=&pid=&queryId=5ba3570ad28aca2b8d7d492c4f14e815&\\_phsrc=MKJ99&\\_phstarrt=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/11635396:7667?tid=&pid=&queryId=5ba3570ad28aca2b8d7d492c4f14e815&_phsrc=MKJ99&_phstarrt=successSource); and U.S Census Bureau, *1870 United States Federal Census for Ella G Thomas*, Ancestry.com, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/6438438:7163?tid=&pid=&queryId=5278123a21adc1232d502e6a7b892286&\\_phsrc=MKJ113&\\_phstarrt=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/6438438:7163?tid=&pid=&queryId=5278123a21adc1232d502e6a7b892286&_phsrc=MKJ113&_phstarrt=successSource).

<sup>113</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 2019), 183.

At the outset of the post-war era, Thomas would have liked to blame her family's pecuniary nosedive on the war, but their circumstances had been exacerbated by her husband's disastrous business dealings. Her extreme circumstances, though, are what make her an excellent case study of her class. Few others capture the drama of the planter class' downfall.

For a class of women accustomed to wearing their husbands' money quite literally upon their sleeves, this sudden loss of wealth meant a renegotiation of proper notions of dress. These renegotiations differed from those prompted by the blockade during the war precisely because the pecuniary losses were not uniform and the expectations far from universal. Many, like Mary Chestnut, for example, seemed to emerge from emancipation relatively unscathed, even in the face of some financial loss. Moreover, the failure of the Southern cause and the end of battle more or less removed the confounding variable in notions of proper clothing: patriotism. No longer did silk and satin represent blockade running or the betrayal of the Southern cause. The old rules and meanings, writ large, had been reinstated. At least, for those who could afford to follow them.

Thus, the issue of how to dress in the face of increasingly precarious class position occurred on a more individual basis. Gertrude Thomas, for example, suddenly found herself second-guessing whether it was appropriate for her and her children to appear in public decked out in their luxury garb, particularly as the daily paper advertised the foreclosure of their property.

At once, Thomas and her family members feared both being perceived as impoverished and as overly extravagant. In one instance, when Thomas offered her son a diamond pin to wear upon his suit, "he objected because 'sister had worn it.'" Thomas, upon second thought, accepted



his refusal, fearing that ““people will notice it”” and think that she should have already sold her diamonds to use to pay her publicly ballooning debts.<sup>114</sup> Even as her embarrassment mounted so severely that she hesitated to appear in public, Thomas struggled to break her shopping habit. “I bought me ‘a love of a bonnet’” and a “coloured barege for which I gave 35 cts pr yd.” she recounted.<sup>115</sup> “I was ashamed to buy them” despite their being purchased with money “saved by selling some of my last summer dresses.”<sup>116</sup>

Thomas’ fears that others would find her lifestyle irresponsible in the face of economic trouble were not imagined. Both her mother and sister, who suffered far less financially following emancipation, reminded her frequently that her new position meant her old style of dress, as well as other extravagances, had become inappropriate, even as Thomas, according to her own description, felt she had severely reduced her sartorial expenditures. “For three years I have been wearing sack cloth and ashes,” she reported by 1870, “the little baby... I have scarcely provided clothing enough for a change.”<sup>117</sup> Still, her account suggests incongruity between her own perspective on her sacrifices and that of outsiders who kept a keen eye on what she was wearing. In one instance, Thomas raised eyebrows when her sister saw her repairing a section of costly valenciennes lace. ““Where did you get so much of [it] from?”” she demanded of Thomas. ““I haven’t been poor always,”” Thomas retorted. In another incident, Thomas’s mother admonished her for outsourcing her sewing rather than completing it herself. ““What do you do

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 312.

<sup>115</sup> See Stephanie McCurry *Women’s War*, 183, for additional discussion of this passage.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 311.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 341–343.

at home every day? I should think... you would have a great deal of time to sew.’” To Thomas, this was a rightful “conviction.”<sup>118</sup>

At times, this teasing prompted Thomas to briefly reconsider whether her new lifestyle was as austere as she believed. “Am I extravagant?” she wondered in 1871. “I have bought one pair kid gloves and one pair of gaiters for myself since Christmas and paid 1.30 for sewing for the children.” For Thomas, her planter class background was too tough to shake. What others perceived as extravagances, she had habituated as necessities and unlearning proved a challenge. Even as her circumstances worsened, for example, Thomas kept a washerwoman and continued to outsource her sewing. Managing her clothing herself remained unimaginable. Her family, for all their criticisms, did not regard these sartorial symbols as entirely dispensable for a woman of Thomas’s position, and when Thomas herself was unable to provide, her mother and sister were willing to bridge the gap. This generosity was particularly relevant when it came to Thomas’s children. Even these gifts, though, Thomas worried, could be misinterpreted. When her mother returned home from a trip to the North, Thomas was delighted when she discovered she had brought with her “some very nice articles of dress”; her thrill was dampened, though, when she imagined how they could be perceived. “I would often like to explain,” she wrote, “‘Good people, Ma gave me this’... I have a great dislike to be thought extravagant.”<sup>119</sup>

Though the meanings of fine gifts from her family were fraught, they nonetheless aided her and her children in their efforts to maintain their social position in spite of financial humiliation. Even by 1869, Thomas reported that, of her daughter’s “crimson dress, white

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 360.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 328.

hat...white plush sacque, and coloured kid gaiters,” every item, save the dress, had been a gift from her mother. The generosity displayed by Thomas’s mother only increased as her daughters aged into their courting periods, attending endless gatherings in hopes of attracting a well-to-do suitor. The process, no doubt costly, was bankrolled by “Ma,” who ordered young Mary Belle special dresses from the North and supplemented these material gifts with etiquette and dancing classes.<sup>120</sup> Ma, though, was not the only family member willing to help Thomas afford her family’s wardrobe. Even Thomas’s aunt, she reported, chipped in, loaning Thomas \$20 that she used to purchase her husband a new suit.<sup>121</sup>

Still, Thomas’s efforts at playing the wealthy aristocrat through borrowed finery were not entirely effective at preserving her own or her children's status. On New Year's Day of 1880, for instance, Thomas was devastated to discover that a well-to-do acquaintance of her daughter’s had excluded her from plans to receive visitors in her home, as was custom in the South on New Year's Day. To Thomas, this snub was the consequence of their diminished wealth and the public knowledge of their debts. Thomas was so disturbed by the incident that she was kept up at night. “I cried because I could not give to my children the advantages of society and comforts which money alone could procure for them.”<sup>122</sup>

To Thomas, it seems that these luxuries were about more than just status. Luxury clothing was, to her, a mother’s duty to provide, at least in the early years that followed emancipation. When Thomas was eventually obligated to take a position as a teacher to supplement her husband’s earning, her primary joy seemed to be her new capacity to buy her children clothing

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<sup>120</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 328, 379.

<sup>121</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 465.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 392.

on her own accord. “It is so pleasant,” she observes, “to work for my children and thus procure them the clothing they require.” Cora, one of the youngest children, in particular had “had very few luxuries lavished upon her during her brief young existence.”<sup>123</sup> But by the 1880s, this reality seems to have become a bit easier to accept. Thomas observed, perhaps pleased with her own growth on the matter, that were she to be a “rich woman” again, the cascade of luxury articles would make her no happier than pinching and stretching her teaching paycheck now did.<sup>124</sup>

Thomas, and women more broadly, also unsurprisingly seem to have considered their husband’s gazes in assembling an outfit. Amidst the efforts of her mother and sister to nudge her towards austerity, Thomas wondered whether her husband would still find her attractive in plain clothing, even as his frivolity and failed business judgments were largely to blame for their pecuniary downfall. “Mr. Thomas never praises” Mrs. Thomas’s sartorial economy, she wrote in 1869. “He is not the man,” Gertrude concluded, “to appreciate a wearied woman wearing faded calico till she can afford a better one, so much as a gay woman, fashionably dressed in clothing for which she is owing money for the cost.” Whether or not Thomas’ assessment of her husband’s sentiment was correct, it nonetheless suggests that men, particularly as husbands, were not completely alienated from the realm of women’s fashion and instead may have been active participants in the spectacle, encouraging their ladies’ extravagance perhaps even for their own enjoyment.<sup>125</sup> The possibility that men themselves had a stake in the matter may partially explain

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<sup>123</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 382.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 404.

<sup>125</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 323.

why this luxury culture was hard to shake in light of the South's changed economic landscape post-emancipation.<sup>126</sup>

After all, Gertrude Thomas was not the only woman who had a hard time parting with her fancy clothing. The Palmer women, who were the daughters and daughters-in-law of a pair of successful planters with massive landholdings in South Carolina, also struggled to adjust to their reduced circumstances. Like Thomas, a comparison of their 1860 and 1870 census gives some idea of the damage. In ten years, one brother, John S. Palmer's holdings in "personal property," presumably invested mostly in enslaved persons, fell from 116,000 to only 2,000 dollars.<sup>127</sup> The full scope of the damage sustained by he, and the rest of the extended family, is unclear. Amidst this financial strife, though, letters between the sisters still abounded with mentions of their new muslin dresses, veils, and hats. Still, their ladies' correspondence seemed to indicate that the women nonetheless felt deprived.<sup>128</sup> As Henrietta wrote to Harriet in the spring of 1872, she would have to "content [herself] with calico" despite how desperately she wanted a "Spring Street dress."<sup>129</sup>

The common sentiment among those women failing to live within their means after their means had been dramatically reduced, seems to have been that their loss of wealth was somehow a temporary aberration, a period of "hard times." To the Palmers, their financial strife was a

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<sup>126</sup> Towles, *World Turned*, 6.

<sup>127</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1860 *Federal Census Records for John S. Palmer*, Ancestry.com, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/18658957:7667?tid=&pid=&queryId=5b111307111a060222f5b85289086e80&\\_phsrc=MKJ115&\\_phst=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/18658957:7667?tid=&pid=&queryId=5b111307111a060222f5b85289086e80&_phsrc=MKJ115&_phst=successSource); and U.S. Census Bureau, 1870 *United States Federal Census Records for John S. Palmer*, Ancestry.com, [https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/9927359:7163?tid=&pid=&queryId=6ecb1ff5c20732d7d3b6708d0bc1693d&\\_phsrc=MKJ109&\\_phst=successSource](https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/9927359:7163?tid=&pid=&queryId=6ecb1ff5c20732d7d3b6708d0bc1693d&_phsrc=MKJ109&_phst=successSource).

<sup>128</sup> Sarah Palmer Williams to Harriet R Palmer, May 18, 1871, *World Turned*, 691.

<sup>129</sup> Henrietta Palmer Smith to Harriet R. Palmer, April 11, 1872, *World Turned*, 718.

simply a rut; as Peter Gaillard imagined in 1871: ““a change would do us all good, if only if it was only from our part of town to another.””<sup>130</sup> To Thomas, the decrease in wealth at first seemed to be a run of bad luck. She wondered how long it could all continue, appearing to reject the possibility that the consequences of her financial loss would be lasting or even permanent.<sup>131</sup>

Unlike Gertrude Thomas, who was perhaps too inept with the needle, the Palmer sisters, particularly Alice, were well-served by their expansive knowledge of sewing and crafts. As John Palmer, the patriarch, declared in an 1870 letter, the family was “worse off now” financially “than any year ‘since the Union came in’”; the ladies worked to monetize their sewing to supplement the family’s other dwindling sources of income.<sup>132</sup> Even less adept seamstresses, like Henrietta Smith, found there was money to be made from her clothing, selling off what was no longer in common use in order to purchase new articles, just as Thomas had.<sup>133</sup> Much like Clara Solomon, who mixed the production of clothing for charity and for profit during the war, for the Palmer sisters it proved a small jump from making and selling clothes for the benefit of charity, in their case the church’s ladies’ society, to doing the same for their own supplementary income. Small-time clothing sales seem to have proved to be an attractive means of garnering extra money while maintaining an air of feminine propriety.

Maintaining appearances following the war, it seemed, was more important than ever. Whatever sartorial leeway patriotism had provided to palmetto-cap wearing women during the fighting had been revoked. Many women felt as though they were enduring their sudden and senseless poverty alone, apparently oblivious to their abundant company. “This is infinitely

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<sup>130</sup> Alice Palmer to Harriet Palmer, May 21, 1871, *World Turned*, 693.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 420.

<sup>132</sup> John S. Palmer to Harriet Palmer, November 29, 1870, *World Turned*, 678.

<sup>133</sup> Henrietta Smith to Harriet Palmer, August 11, 1871, *World Turned*, 699.

worse than Sherman,” Thomas wrote as her world came down around her. Back then, “it was so general a loss that we could sympathize with each other, but this trial I am now undergoing is lonely,” she said, unaware of how many others were learning to repair their valenciennes lace.

#### D. “The Writing on the Wall:” Reinforcing Racial Hierarchy Through Clothing

When Union soldiers raided Southern plantations in the final days of the Civil War, ladies were horrified by the confiscation of their finest clothing. More baffling, though, were those instances when, instead of stealing their luxury articles, Union soldiers instead chose to destroy them, oftentimes as the astonished plantation mistress looked on. As Joan Cashin notes, encounters of this kind were not uncommon. One woman saw her silk dress “torn to flinders” in the hands of a Union soldier, believing his motivation to be nothing but cruelty.<sup>134</sup> As Cashin argues, that their “garments symbolized the plantation elite’s power,” something some Union soldiers felt compelled to destroy, was a possibility lost on many women.<sup>135</sup>

Though the symbolic value of their clothing may have escaped some women in the moment, as the war came to a close, they understood it more than ever. As their class and racial dominance became, at least in their eyes, increasingly precarious, many tried to reinforce it through dress.

Perhaps that is why Thomas, it appears, was particularly intent on maintaining old master-slave dynamics while managing her home’s now hired help, particularly with regard to their clothing. As Cashin argues, mistresses often used the bestowal of finery as a show of domination toward the enslaved, a reminder that they were the paternalistic gatekeepers of such

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<sup>134</sup> Cashin, *Stolen Silks*, 356.

<sup>135</sup> Cashin, *Stolen Silks*, 356.

luxuries.<sup>136</sup> Following emancipation, as many black women were able to obtain fashionable clothing for themselves, Thomas attempted to reproduce the customs of slavery by gifting clothing accessories, even as she herself was plummeting into poverty. “I gave [Charlotte] a white dress to wear and a ribbon for her sash,” Thomas recorded.<sup>137</sup> The effort to maintain these hierarchies, too, extended beyond clothing. Thomas also recalls during the same period furnishing a hired servant, Martha, with proper stationary, vases, flowers, and kitchenware for her wedding, as a mistress would have done for an enslaved person.<sup>138</sup> Martha, though, had never been enslaved on Thomas’s plantation.

Maintaining her position of superiority was an important precondition for Gertrude Thomas to lend, or give, any clothing or material goods to her hired help. Though some other women were willing to sell clothing and sewing to freedwomen for the extra income many now needed, this remained unthinkable to Thomas, despite her growing financial strain.<sup>139</sup> In one instance, Cornelia Shelman, former slave and now hired servant, approached Thomas, presumably aware of her well-publicized economic hardship, and offered to pay Thomas to cut out a dress for Shelman to sew. During the Antebellum Period, mistresses were often tasked with cutting cloth for the production of enslaved persons’ clothing, but the offer of payment, and perhaps the fact that Shelman wanted a fashionable dress not unlike something Thomas herself would wear, prompted Thomas to refuse her offer.<sup>140</sup> In recounting the incident, Thomas recalled having lent Shelman “a second day dress” for her wedding the summer before, but that

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<sup>136</sup> Cashin, *Stolen Silks*, 339.

<sup>137</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 331.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 281.

<sup>139</sup> Thavolia Glymph discusses many former mistresses who regularly sold to their now hired help in *House of Bondage*, 209.

<sup>140</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 351.



she “did not cut it out or make it for her,” Thomas noted, clarifying the difference. For her, being commissioned by one’s servant represented the ultimate humiliation.<sup>141</sup>

As Gertrude Thomas and her husband’s dire financial straits worsened, her finery became an increasingly important source of capital for the former mistress. Her clothing and the money she could earn from selling it became a tool to keep enslaved persons turned servants in place in the most literal sense. “Last summer’s dresses,” Thomas notes in 1869, furnished “part payment of the servants’ wages.”<sup>142</sup> Her customers, though, were never freedwomen themselves, as she made clear to one former slave: “I cannot sell a dress to you, Aunt Lily.”<sup>143</sup>

But try as Thomas might to salvage what was left of slavery, freedwomen themselves had other ideas. Many, as Thavolia Glymph notes, began to enjoy the “small rights,” as she calls them, of freedom, which entailed “self-definition and determination,” oftentimes through the new and exciting ability to purchase clothing and other small luxuries.<sup>144</sup> Glymph notes that a wide body of historiography has framed the interest that freedwomen took in clothing following emancipation as “imitative” of their former mistresses, an interpretation that Glymph notes fails to account for the “scanty” conditions enslaved persons had been accustomed to in contrast to the comfort they saw their mistresses enjoy. More than a desire to be like their mistresses, Glymph contends, enslaved persons may have wanted to enjoy the same material conditions that their mistresses enjoyed.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Gertrude Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 351. See Glymph’s discussion of Thomas’s willingness to give, but not sell, her clothes, *House of Bondage*, 221.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 311.

<sup>143</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 351.

<sup>144</sup> Glymph, *House of Bondage*, 209, 207.

<sup>145</sup> Glymph, *House of Bondage*, 206.

Even this interpretation, though, underplays the complexity with which enslaved persons, much like their mistresses, understood clothing and its meanings and ignores how it was used in their subjugation. During the Antebellum Period in Charleston, South Carolina, for example, Barbara Fields notes that legislators attempted to ban slaves from wearing luxury clothes so that there could be no ambiguity with regard to their inferior status. As Fields puts it, if “phenotypic difference” in complexion did not already make the status of enslaved persons clear enough, “sumptuary rules” were used “to do what nature leaves undone.”<sup>146</sup> Other enforced norms, like the demand by some masters that enslaved persons remove their hats and bonnets before entering the big house, were intended to indicate the enslaved persons’ submission.<sup>147</sup>

Prior to emancipation, too, enslaved persons had turned to clothing as means of asserting their dignity and, much like their free white counterparts, followed their set of tacit sumptuary rules governing propriety and beauty. Church, weddings, and funerals, for instance, all demanded one’s best clothing. Some would even set-aside their nicest outfit, saving it for their eventual burial.<sup>148</sup> On plantations where cloth was woven and produced by enslaved women themselves, the production took on even greater cultural significance, offering a space for community and creativity as women sat at the looms together.<sup>149</sup>

It’s no wonder, then, that in freedom clothing would come to be a means of asserting one’s independence and take on great personal significance. Years later, Virginia Newman, a

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<sup>146</sup> Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 33.

<sup>147</sup> Mary Anderson, “Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States,” ed. G.L. Andrews, *The Federal Writers Project*, August 23, 1937, <https://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/111/111.pdf>.

<sup>148</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 298.

<sup>149</sup> Temple Herdon Durham, “Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States,” *Federal Writers Project*, August 23, 1937. Elizabeth Fox Genovese makes a similar argument, *Plantation Household*, 183.

freedwoman, could still recall the first dress she ever bought, a “blue guinea with yellow spots.”<sup>150</sup> Their interest in clothing did not escape their former mistresses, who were at times dismayed by freedwomen’s interest in clothes and finery. Some of their contempt was probably due to what they perceived to be the “gaucheness” of freedwomen’s dress. Many black women had taken to dressing their families in red on Sundays as a show of piety, but to white women like Gertrude Thomas, who once in her diary mocked a friend for wearing “conspicuous colors” to church, the custom would have been taken as gaudy.<sup>151</sup> In her diary, Thomas would even ridicule her own hired help when their dress failed to live up to her standards. “My cook Cornelia Shelman... I wish you could see her. A stout black woman... without a perfectly whole garment — a waist of kind, skirt of another... ‘body and soul coming apart.’”<sup>152</sup>

Freedwomen’s clothing, though, provoked more than just disapproval. It also provoked anxiety. This was especially true when their outfits came closer to living up to aristocratic norms of propriety than white Southern women were comfortable with. Mary Chestnut, for one, was rattled by stories she heard of “ladies’ maids” who “dressed themselves in their mistress’s gowns and walked off.”<sup>153</sup> Chestnut, it seems, would likely be disturbed by the sight of any newly freed people in finery—that it was the property of their mistresses only added insult to injury, a too literal embodiment of the fears of many planter class women.

Gertrude Thomas, too, dreaded the implication of these class transgressions but, unlike Chestnut, was often reluctant to recognize what was likely deliberateness on the part of the

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<sup>150</sup> Glymph, *House of Bondage*, 204.

<sup>151</sup> Lydia Jean Wares, “Dress of the African American Woman in Slavery and Freedom: 1500 - 1935” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1981), 151. Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 303.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 315.

<sup>153</sup> Chestnut, *Diary*, 403.

freedwomen. In one incident, for example, Thomas is aghast by the sight of freedwomen parading down the street in finery. As Thavolia Glymph writes, such parades of freedmen and women predate the war but earned new attention following emancipation as the lively events that “struck a deliberate targeted blow at racism” became increasingly menacing to nervous and often humiliated white Southerners.<sup>154</sup> When Gertrude Thomas encountered one of these parades, she refused to understand the display as anything more than absurd, though it unnerved her enough to inspire a biting diary entry. The women, she wrote “[promenaded]” down the street, a “black lace veil shading them from the embrowning rays of a sun under whose influence they had worked their all their life.”<sup>155</sup>

Even following emancipation, Thomas did not want to see black women’s desire for nice clothing as resembling her own; instead, when black women felt the impulse to buy and wear nice, fashionable clothing, it was transformed into vice. “The servants are such improvident creatures,” Thomas wrote. “They well often spend a large amount... most of their monthly wages in buying articles of dress.”<sup>156</sup> That she too spent disproportionately on her clothing, even as her wealth dwindled, was an irony utterly lost on her.<sup>157</sup>

It would be easy to write off the derision displayed by dethroned mistresses vis-à-vis freedwomen's clothing as a sort of petty woman-on-woman social crime, but to do so would ignore the broader fixation that white women had on black women’s appearance, body, and sexuality, which for many had its roots in the Antebellum Period. As Stephanie McCurry notes in *Women’s War*, Gertrude Thomas seems to have known that her father—and at least suspected

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<sup>154</sup> Glymph, *House of Bondage*, 214.

<sup>155</sup> Glymph, *House of Bondage*, 379.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 351.

<sup>157</sup> Stephanie McCurry noted this irony in *Women’s War*, 183.

that her husband—maintained sexual relationships with women enslaved on the plantation.

Thomas was far from the only one in her position. “Every lady,” claimed Mary Chestnut, “tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own.” To Chestnut, this sexual corruption was the result of what she termed the “monstrous system.”<sup>158</sup>

Thomas was as appalled by interracial sexual relationships as Chestnut, but she did not anticipate they would end with slavery. Instead, according to Thomas, emancipation promised more social equality and intermingling. The threat that black and mixed-race women posed, in her eyes, had only become more menacing, though not all white women, she insisted, were aware. “White women and mulattoes prove rivals,” she wrote, “unconscious though the former may be.”<sup>159</sup> More was at stake, though, than the Southern belle’s ego.

She put it in astonishingly plain terms. Within a generation, the children of freed people “having never known the weight of bondage” will be “received socially into some families” through marriage. Other white Southerners, she said, “did not see the writing on the wall” and did not understand that white supremacy must not be “imaginary,” but instead a “real, substantial fact.” The sophistication of black and mixed-race women represented the ultimate threat to Thomas’s racist ideal, and she knew it. “I see the contrast,” Thomas wrote in 1869, “between black as well as mulatto women who have... been trained under the most refined associations.”<sup>160</sup> It seems probable that this “contrast” included their dress.

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<sup>158</sup> Mary Chestnut, *Mary Chestnut’s Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward, (New York: Yale University Press 1981), 29.

<sup>159</sup> Gertrude Thomas as cited in McCurry, *Women’s War*, 195.

<sup>160</sup> Thomas, *Secret Eye*, 321.

Though others were perhaps less willing, or less able, to articulate it, the contempt white women seem to have felt both for black women and their clothing, as well as their fears of interracial sexual relationships, suggest Thomas was not alone. This was not just about fashion. It was about the persistence of white supremacy.

### Conclusion

Throughout the Civil War, articles of women's fashion were imbued with new meaning, at least in the public sphere, as clothing became a language through which women articulated both their support for the Confederate cause and their eventual exhaustion. The impulse of these women to wear their support, so to speak, seems to be a continuation of antebellum fashion culture, in which women paid much attention to the details of their outfits, as well as those of other women. Moreover, the desire of many women to contribute to the cause via clothing production, too, extended from antebellum norms, in which it was a woman's duty to clothe her family properly. Even for women that were poor sewers, charitable clothing production proved initially attractive because of its domestic connotations. The realm of fashion offered ladies means of participating in the cause while remaining ladies.

In this sense, the popularity of patriotic dress, as well as outfits chock-full of signs and symbols of a strong, self-sufficient Confederacy, represented the reinforcement of normative notions of aristocratic Southern femininity. By couching one's politics in the language of patriotism and articulating it via one's dress, Southern women intervened in the political sphere without transgressing the boundaries of acceptable female behavior.

These new meanings, though, did little to permanently deconstruct conceptions of propriety. Despite the apparent early enthusiasm for homespun claimed by the newspapers, it seems that homespun was acceptable only symbolically, hence its popularity ahead of secession and the angst that later surrounded it when the blockades wrought shortages. When worn out of necessity, many women dreaded its appearance and could not look past its "vulgar" connotations. In the cities, where fashion culture was the strongest, wartime propaganda was

insufficient in convincing women to adopt the fabric, so long as they could avoid it. The wealthiest women, it seems, never donned homespun.

The same proved true in other areas of the war. So far as clothing went, the war did much to distinguish the very wealthy plantation owners from the moderately wealthy. Though all women, it seems, saw their lifestyles reduced, those who had ostensible stockpiles of finery in the form of their expansive wardrobes prior to the war or could afford to pay the high prices demanded by speculators and those who had run the blockade continued to wear the finery they had. Among them, there was little difference in their behavior, even as many women, like Mary Chestnut, noted all the pressure to give into austerity around her.

Even greater reluctance to part with one's clothing was evident following emancipation, as many aristocratic women grappled with the synonymy of their clothing and status. As the planter class saw their wealth decimated, habits were hard to break. Even those facing extreme financial ruin did what they could to conceal their circumstances via their dress, a project that often proved so pressing that other family members stepped into help. This, importantly, indicates that despite the overall loss of wealth seen by the former slave-owning class, those struggling to maintain their previous standard of living still proved the exception. Sartorial propriety had remained largely the same.

In many ways, it had become even more consequential. As many women felt their social dominance dwindle, they turned to clothing to reinforce the disintegrating hierarchy and grasp at what was left of their old power. For many, this meant the replication of old master-slave rituals via the gifting of clothing, as well as an unwillingness to sell to freedwomen even as other former mistresses, perhaps more compelled by necessity, did. This dynamic was not merely one-



sided. Freedwomen often articulated their autonomy via their dress and their participation in the fashion culture which, while in bondage, they had watched their mistresses act out. Though not mere emulation, clothing for free black women functioned similarly, facilitating the expression of their elevated status.

All of this complicates lost cause nostalgia for the well-coiffed Southern lady. Though no doubt the planter class exited the 1860s in humbler conditions than they entered the decade, the luxury fashion culture forged during the Antebellum Period and its elucidations of status emerged mostly unscathed, the desire for finery having returned before the end of the war. What had changed, though, was elite Southern women's monopoly on fashion. Though during the Antebellum Period well-to-do white women were ostensibly the primary, if not only, participants in this fashion culture, emancipation introduced a new contingency. Black women, who, as slaves, were steeped in the language of dress as observers and, when possible, participants. With emancipation, they became full-fledged consumers. To the Southern belle, this threatened her social and racial dominance. She no longer laid exclusive claim to the fashion objects that had distinguished her. They no longer indicated her power alone. This is what ideology of the lost cause yearned for, not the planter class's "magnolia-scented belle," but for her undisputed dominance.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Osterweiss, *Lost Cause*, ix.

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