

**The Other Beecher: Laura Beecher Comer,
Plantation Mistress and Daughter of the Confederacy, 1846 - 1900**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the life of Laura Beecher Comer (1817-1900), which spanned the tumultuous nineteenth century in America. For most of her adult life, Laura resided in what would be the heart of the Confederacy during the Civil War. She was a member of the prominent Beecher family of New England, yet she was a plantation mistress, a strong supporter of the Confederacy during the Civil War, and an ardent defender of the Lost Cause. There was no extant work about the life of Laura Beecher Comer except for a section of a 1947 book on the Comer family and some minor works done during the 1970s as part of a women's history project in Columbus, Georgia. As revealed in Laura's diaries and ancillary primary source materials, her life brings to light themes that were crucial to the period and provides the setting for an epic history: union and Southern independence, slavery and emancipation, war and peace, and reconstruction and race relations. It is a tale of the rich and famous of the Old South and the Confederacy. It is also an exploration of the lives of the African Americans who inhabit the shadow world of Laura's diaries, yet provide a nuanced understanding of the contours of Southern society and the people, black and white, who were its actors.

Laura Beecher Hayes arrived in rural Russell County, Alabama, in 1846, a twenty-nine year old, eloquent, well-educated, petite widow with lustrous dark hair and calm dark eyes, who was engaged by the planter community to establish an academy for

young women. By 1848, this young, Connecticut-born woman, who was a member of a branch of the famous, influential, but often controversial Beecher clan, was the wife of prosperous Alabama plantation owner and slave master James Comer. At first glance, Laura's life, viewed through the prism of her diary, merely offers a picture of the day-to-day concerns of a Northern woman who married well in the planter aristocracy of the Old South. The odyssey of research and investigation integral to rendering a thoughtful account of her life reveals a life that was a great deal more than that of a wealthy Southern plantation mistress. Her diary, at times, becomes a page-turner couched in the inner circles and back stories of the Confederacy that compels the reader to return to discover what happens next. Understanding the chronicle of Laura's life demands intellectual engagement, because, her saga is the story of the men and women who facilitated the Confederacy through their wealth and influence. Laura's subtle diary entries challenge the researcher to explore the innermost reaches of elite white society in order to analyze and understand the record of those Southerners and ardent Confederates who worked behind the scenes during the antebellum and Civil War eras.

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This dissertation was written in honor of
my beloved father and mother,
Maximillian Ludwig Bächl and Ann Rose Bressi Bächl.

It is dedicated to the love of my life,
Donald Wayne Dennis.
You are my inspiration.

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Introduction

This dissertation explores the life of Laura Beecher Comer, which spanned the tumultuous nineteenth century in America. For most of her adult life, Laura resided in what would be the heart of the Confederacy during the Civil War. She was a member of the prominent Beecher family of New England, yet she was a plantation mistress, a strong supporter of the Confederacy during the Civil War, and an ardent defender of the Lost Cause. There was no extant work about the life of Laura Beecher Comer except for a section of a 1947 book on the Comer family and some minor works done during the 1970s as part of a women's history project in Columbus, Georgia. Based on Laura's diaries and ancillary primary source materials, her life brings to light themes that were crucial to the period and provides the setting for an epic history: union and Southern independence, slavery and emancipation, war and peace, and reconstruction and race relations. It is a tale of the rich and famous of the Old South and the Confederacy. It is also an exploration of the lives of the African Americans who inhabit the shadow world of Laura's diaries, yet provide a nuanced understanding of the contours of Southern society and the people, black and white, who were its actors.

Laura L. Beecher (b. March 6, 1817- d. January 3, 1900) was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, where she received a strong religious education. She was a member of the Trinity Episcopal Church of New Haven. New Haven had struggled

mightily with racial tensions during the years when Laura was growing up. Nascent abolitionism and the question of the position of African Americans in New Haven society were hotly contested from the 1830s through the 1840s with many social reactions and attending controversies that included discussions of the colonization of free people of color and the subject of the inclusion of African Americans in churches and schools. New Haven's Trinity Episcopal Church had a prominent place in this history. Trinity's rector during this period, the Reverend Harry Croswell, played a significant role in unobtrusively supporting his black parishioners in the formation of a separate, independent black Episcopal Church amidst racial tensions in the urban environment of nineteenth-century New Haven where blacks were considered "a vile ignorant race of beings."¹ Croswell quietly ministered to the African Americans in his congregation and apparently faced disapproval among white church members for doing so. Trinity's vestry members voted to limit the presence of "colored people" in their church to four segregated pews in the back of the gallery in 1842 when Laura was 25 years old. This event demonstrated to black parishioners that they were unwelcome at Trinity. It also inspired Alexander DuBois, great-grandfather of W.E.B. DuBois, and other black members to lead Trinity's African American Episcopalian congregation in the movement to start an independent black Episcopal church. This effort culminated in the

¹ Randall K. Burkett, "The Reverend Harry Croswell and Black Episcopalians in New Haven 1820-1860," *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History*, 7, 1, (Fall 2003), 1-20, hereafter Burkett, "Croswell"; and William E.B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 8, hereafter DuBois, *Darkwater*; and Edward J. Getlein, *A History of Trinity Church On-The-Green, New Haven, Connecticut, 1752-1976* (New Haven: Trinity Church on the Green, 1976), 96, hereafter Getlein, *History*. Crosswell papers at Yale University Archives <http://drs.library.yale.edu:8083/HLTransformer/HLTransServlet?style=yul.ead2002.xhtml.xsl&pid=msa.ms.0781&clear-stylesheet-cache=yes>

establishment of St. Luke's Parish in 1842-4 in New Haven.² It was the Reverend Harry Croswell who presided at the marriage of Laura Beecher and her first husband, Samuel Hayes, in September of 1841 at Trinity Church on the Green in New Haven. Laura's constant pronouncements throughout her diary that her servants were dark minded and ignorant are reflective of the opinions of a significant portion of the white population in the racially charged environment of New Haven and in particular, Trinity Episcopal Church, in which she came to womanhood. Above all, Laura's observations in her diary, before, during, and after the Civil War, lead to the conclusion that Laura found living with blacks insufferable, and she believed that they were inferior, incorrigible, and untrustworthy.

Laura Beecher Hayes arrived in rural Russell County, Alabama, in 1846, a twenty- nine-year-old, eloquent, well-educated, petite widow with lustrous dark hair and calm brown eyes, who was engaged by the planter community to establish an academy for young women.³ Regrettably, Laura's diary does not reveal how Samuel Hayes died. We also have no record of why she chose to teach in Alabama rather than teach in New Haven or another Northern location closer to home and family; thus, her move to Alabama warrants contemplation. Connecticut experienced significant demographic changes during the early years of the nineteenth century. Westward migrations siphoned off large numbers of young immigrants. Farmers with large families were often unable to offer land to their younger sons; consequently, young men seeking opportunity and independence found it advantageous to migrate to the Northwest Territory. There they

² Burkett, "Croswell," 1-20; DuBois, *Darkwater*, 8; Getlein, *History*, 96.

³ Anne Kendrick Walker, *Braxton Bragg Comer, His Family Tree from Virginia's Colonial Days* (Dietz Press, First Edition, 1947), 92, hereafter Walker, *Comer*.

sought to acquire newly available lands to start new towns and family farms. Changes in demographics serve to illustrate the impact of these early migrations. The population of Ohio, which became a state in 1803, had been about a quarter of a million in 1810. By 1820, Ohio's population numbered approximately a half million. The advent of the Erie Canal, in 1825, provided the convenience of a water route that facilitated migration to the Great Lakes region where large numbers of Connecticut immigrants settled.⁴

The end of the War of 1812 also advanced migration when Andrew Jackson appropriated 14 million acres of land from the Creek Indians. Additional opportunities opened after Jackson's victories in New Orleans and Florida and the cessions of land from the Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes through the treaties in 1816. Thousands of white Americans hurried to secure land in the Old Southwest. By 1820, settlers from Georgia, Tennessee and the Carolinas increased the population of Alabama to 128,000. Above all, the Creek cession of east-central Alabama, the very fertile region known as the "Black Belt," so called for its rich, dark soil, led to migration in record numbers. The Creek Indian Removal of the early 1830s spurred additional migration.⁵ By the 1820s, the ratio of free white women to men in Connecticut was 1.04, which meant that fewer young men were available as suitable candidates for marriage for young widows like Laura Beecher Hayes. This situation continued to be exacerbated until the 1840s, and left young women searching for alternatives. Among the acceptable options for gainful employment for an educated young woman was teaching. Whether Laura answered an advertisement for a

⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 136-7, hereafter Howe, *Transformation*.

⁵ Howe, *Transformation*, 125-7. For additional reading on the removal of the Creek Indians from the Black Belt see: 416-17.

teacher or chose Alabama through networks of friends and associates is unknown.⁶ What is known is that this young, Connecticut-born woman, who was a member of a branch of the famous, influential, but often controversial Beecher clan, arrived in Alabama to establish an academy for young women, and within two years, became the wife of an eminently eligible and wealthy Alabama bachelor plantation owner and slave master, James Comer.

At first glance, Laura's life, viewed through the prism of her diary, merely offers a picture of the day-to-day concerns of a Northern woman who married well in the white planter aristocracy of the Old South. The research and investigation integral to rendering a thoughtful account of her life reveals a reality that was a great deal more than the life of a wealthy white Southern plantation mistress. Her diary, at times, becomes a page-turner couched in the inner circles and back stories of the Confederacy that keeps the reader eager to discover what happens next. Understanding the tale that Laura tells demands intellectual engagement, because, her story is not told in a straightforward manner in the diary. Her subtle entries are clues to the daily events that occurred in the inner most reaches of one of the bastions of white Southern society, as well as the private lives of the privileged white men and women who facilitated the Confederacy from behind the scenes

⁶ Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Introduction especially 3-6; Kelley's earlier work remains pertinent on the subject of women's education and their purpose especially for antebellum Southern women: "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *The Journal of American History*, 83, 2 (Sep. 1996), 401-424. Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1740-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 4, 16-32; on the demographic changes of the period see Marcia Guttentag and Paul Secord, *Too Many Women?* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc., 1983); See also Patricia A. Palmieri, "This Single Life: Respectable Spinsterhood, 1780-1840," *American Quarterly*, 37, 4 (Autumn, 1985), 588-606. For additional reading on the subject of teaching as an alternative for women see Nancy Hoffman, *Woman's True Profession* (New York: Feminist Press, 1981); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973).

through their wealth and influence. Her diary entries challenge the researcher to explore the archives, published sources, and scholarly literature to supply the details that enable the historical analysis required to understand the record that Laura provided as a faithful diarist.

Laura Beecher Comer's diary has been quoted for her observations on the Comer slaves, but no one has ever taken a closer look at the woman and her life in Columbus, Georgia, and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley. Doing so reveals a highly literate and well-spoken woman who proudly delineated her husband's Revolutionary heritage. Laura tells the story of how James built his plantation empire on the old frontier in the wake of the Cherokee removal. She happily recounted the pleasures that she and James experienced as newlyweds while traveling to the North on tours and on visits with her family in New England. Later on, she complained of her husband's gruff behavior toward her and his relationship "at bed and board" with his slaves; nevertheless, she worked side by side with him in the highly lucrative business of cotton farming prior to the war. When the "War for Southern Independence" came, she joined him, and together, they worked as a team to support the South's fight for its way of life and the "property" that they had earned through hard work. In the early stages of the war, they joined forces with notables like Mrs. Robert Toombs to provide a hospital for Georgia's soldiers in Richmond. They donated the land for the Columbus Guard Armory, clothed and outfitted several companies of Georgia's soldiers, and provided cash and furnishings for Columbus's first hospital – the Soldier's Wayside Home – as well as shelter and countless meals for the overflow of the wounded during the Battle of Atlanta. The members of Laura and James Comer's social circle ranged from President Jefferson

Davis and Vice-President Alexander Stephens to Generals Henry Benning and Robert Toombs and their wives, Admiral Franklin Buchanan of the Confederate Navy, and the future governor of “Redemption” Georgia, Colonel James M. Smith.

Extended family members of the Comer clan offer some intriguing insights for the historian as well. Among her closest friends Laura counted Catherine Drewery Comer, the mother of future Alabama governor Braxton Bragg Comer. Catherine Comer’s two eldest sons, Hugh and John Wallace, played a major role in Laura’s life during the war and after James Comer’s death in 1864. They, together with their mother, provided crucial moral support for Laura who experienced widowhood at the climax of the Civil War and was faced with running her husband’s plantation empire by herself.

Laura recounted the upheaval and chaos experienced in Georgia during the Battle of Atlanta and in her firsthand account of the devastation of the battle of Columbus. She provided a vivid picture of events when Yankee soldiers surrounded her plantation in Alabama and proceeded to carry off her terrified black male slaves. Her heart-rending descriptions of loneliness and longing for a soulmate during the period following James’ death breathes life into timeworn tintypes of Civil War era Southern white widows. Laura’s steadfast loyalty to the South and the Lost Cause in the later years of her life demonstrate the level of commitment with which she chose her place in society and became a devoted daughter of her adopted homeland. A study of her life adds a new anti-abolitionist facet to the historiography of the Beecher family and provides a pathway to understanding the crucial role played by elite white Southerners as they worked to protect the Southern way of life and the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the antebellum and Civil War years, and to perpetuate white hegemony in post-war Southern society.

Chapter One

Memorial Days and Wedding Days, 1846 to 1862

In 1898, the people of Columbus, Georgia, celebrated Memorial Day, the “Sabbath of the South,” with great fanfare.⁷ The theme of the celebration centered on the historical origins of Memorial Day. The founders of the Lizzie B. Rutherford Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy played a prominent part in the festivities. It was a highly respected member of their group, Elizabeth “Lizzie” B. Rutherford, who was reputed to be the person who first conceived the idea of an annual day of commemoration to honor Confederate soldiers by placing floral decorations on their graves. Laura Beecher Comer, widow of James Comer, Jr., took her place among the distinguished guests on the dais that day.

Laura Beecher was born in 1817 to Lysias Beecher and his wife, Lucy Tolles, in Bethany, New Haven County, Connecticut.⁸ Lysias Beecher was the youngest son of

⁷ *History of the Origin of Memorial Day, 1898*, Lizzie Rutherford Chapter UDC Collection, MC006 Genealogy & Local History, Columbus Public Library, Folder 7. Laura Beecher Comer was among the founding members on the stage in Columbus in 1898. As a member of the Soldier’s Friend Society during the war and Ladies Memorial Association (LMA) afterward, she became a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy automatically and received praise for her avid support of the South and the Lost Cause in her obituary in the *Atlanta Constitution*. See *Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, April 27, 1898, on the Memorial Day celebration held in Columbus on April 26, 1898. See also obituary of Laura Beecher Comer of Columbus, Georgia in the *Atlanta Constitution* of January 6, 1900 available from <http://search.ancestry.com/browse/view.aspx?dbid=50000&iid=548455772&pid=1442330&ssrc=&fn=ames&ln=comer&st=g> accessed August 7, 2011. See also Gary W. Gallagher, *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 201.

⁸ For children of Lysias Beecher and Lucy Tolles see <http://www.oxfordpast.net/Web/28mar11/aqwg331.htm>, and Donald Lines Jacobus, *Families of Ancient New Haven* ([CD]Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1981[originally]Rome, N.Y. and New

David Beecher and his second wife, Hannah Perkins. Lysias was also the younger half-brother of Lyman Beecher, who was born to David Beecher and his first wife, Esther, who died two days after Lyman was born. Thus, Laura Beecher was first cousin to Lyman Beecher's daughter, Harriett Beecher Stowe.⁹

Bethany, a farming community located ten miles from the port city of New Haven, Connecticut, began as an ecclesiastical community of the Congregational Church in 1762, and was incorporated as a parish that year. The first school in Bethany was established within five years. Laura was well educated and very religious.¹⁰ Laura L. Beecher married Samuel Hayes, also of New Haven County, at Trinity Episcopal Church. The wedding ceremony was conducted by Rector Harry Crosswell on September 13, 1841. By 1846, Laura was a young, twenty-nine year-old widow on her way to the South to teach school.¹¹

Haven, Conn., 1922-1932), vol 1, p 179, accessed January 11, 2011. For birth data for Lysias Beecher see <http://www.archive.org/details/bethanysketchesr00shar>; a pdf. of the text is in possession of the author. Lysias Beecher was the son of David Beecher, who commanded a company of militia in the New Haven, Alarm 1799 available at http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=angs-g&gsfn=laura+beecher&gsln=Comer&uidh=3g5&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=21997&recoff=3+4+5&db=drev accessed February 13, 2012.

⁹ Lineage Books, *The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution Volume 29, p 141*. "Mrs. Laura Beecher Comer. Born in Bethany, Connecticut. Widow of James Comer. Descendant of Capt. David Beecher, of Connecticut. Daughter of Lysias Beecher and Lucy Tolles, his wife. Granddaughter of David Beecher and Hannah Perkins, his wife. David Beecher, (1746-83), commanded a company of militia at the New Haven Alarm, 1779, Hezekiah Sabin's regiment, which turned out to repel Tryon's invasion. He was born in Bethany, Conn., where he died."

See also "U.S., Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970, as found at Ancestry.com and available online at <http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/view.aspx?dbid=2204&path=370.560&sid=&gskw=David+Beecher> Accessed November 9, 2012.

¹⁰ Alice Bice Bunton, "Bethany in 1982," in *Bethany's Old Houses and Community Buildings* (Bethany Library Association: Bethany Connecticut, 1972), unpaginated available at <http://www.bethany-ct.com/historicalsociety/bhs-facts.htm> accessed August 12, 2011.

¹¹ Laura L. Beecher of New Haven, Connecticut, was married to Samuel Hayes of Bethlehem, Connecticut, on September 13, 1841 at Trinity Episcopal Church by the rector, Harry Crosswell. New England Historic Genealogy Society available at <http://www.americanancestors.org/PageDetail.aspx?recordId=6848491> accessed February 7, 2011.

Now known as Laura Beecher Hayes, she arrived in the old frontier farming community of Russell County, Alabama, to take up her life as a school mistress in November of 1846, only ten years after the end of major hostilities with the Creek Indians and the removal of the Creeks to Oklahoma and a few years prior to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.¹² She was given room and board at Colonel Smith's plantation, which she characterized in her diary as "patrician in the Domestic arrangements."¹³ She traveled from Connecticut to Virginia in the company of her brother and continued on to Charleston alone and arrived on November 14, 1846. From there she went to Savannah, Georgia, and then proceeded from Savannah to Macon. She arrived in Macon at 9 o'clock in the evening and journeyed on to the Smiths' home in Russell County, Alabama, in the latter half of November, 1846. In December and January she prepared to open an academy for the young women of the planter community.

Academies of the nineteenth century served students of fourteen or fifteen years of age. They offered a curriculum that consisted of various subjects including music,

¹² Lucy Tolles (b. c. 1783 – d. August 26, 1854) m. Lysias Beecher (children: Laura L. Beecher, Chauncey Tolles Beecher, Eliza Beecher, Harriett Beecher). See Families of Ancient New Haven Vol III at Ancestry.com; available from <http://search.ancestry.com/browse/bookview.aspx?dbid=48029&iid=FamNewHavenVIII-004554-1847&rc=265,772,359,791;796,746,884,771&pid=168157&ssrc=&fn=lysias&ln=Beecher&st=g> and http://search.ancestry.com/browse/bookview.aspx?dbid=15163&iid=dvm_GenMono000595-00208-0&rc=498,1100,653,1128;674,1390,821,1413;478,1579,599,1613;597,1579,745,1608;339,1796,473,1829&pid=399&ssrc=&fn=lysias&ln=beecher&st=g. accessed June 17, 2011. Donald Lines Jacobus, *Families of Ancient New Haven*, vol 1, p 179. Laura L. Beecher of New Haven, Connecticut married Samuel Hayes of Bethlehem, Connecticut on September 13, 1841 at Trinity Church by the rector, Harry Croswell. New England Historic Genealogy Society available from <http://www.americanancestors.org/PageDetail.aspx?recordId=6848491>. accessed February 7, 2011. See also Walker, *Comer*, 92-4. See also Ann Williams Boucher, "Wealthy Planter Families in Nineteenth-Century Alabama" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1978), 68-9.

¹³ Walker, *Comer*, 92. H. C. A. Smith or Hopson C. Smith showed at least thirty-eight slaves, four of whom were female, living in six sets of quarters at his Russell County plantation in the 1850 census. There is also a John C. Smith living in Russell County, Alabama in 1850 and again in 1860 with his wife and eight children. It remains to be determined with which Smith family Laura Beecher Hayes lived per the census data.

French and Latin, science, mathematics, history, geography, natural philosophy and botany. In the case of academies for young women, dance, deportment and manners might also be included. Academies were well suited to rural settings like Russell County, Alabama, and were normally privately controlled day and boarding schools.¹⁴ Most often, the purpose of the curriculum of the academies was to render young women the informed helpmates of future husbands.¹⁵ Assessment of students' accomplishments in the academy was achieved through oral examinations that were held in a public setting. Oral exams demonstrated the enduring understanding of "eternal truths."¹⁶

On February 8, 1847, in Alabama, Laura noted that she "commenced school with 20 pupils."¹⁷ She was impressed with the "young Ladies" in her "Academy" and was convinced that they would soon be "everything that is lovely, intelligent, and agreeable."¹⁸ In July, she joined a Sabbath School at the Methodist Church, and by August 4, 1847, the public examination of her school was scheduled. Upon completion of the school examination, Laura began a vacation period during which she visited in nearby Columbus, Georgia. Evidently her academy was well received and she resumed classes on August 30, 1847. It was in September of 1847 that Laura noted in her diary that she lacked only one "blessing," and that was "an *intimate – confidential friend.*" Perhaps in

¹⁴ Clarence J. Karier, *The Individual, Society, and Education: A History of American Educational Ideas* (Champlain: Illini Books, University of Illinois, 1986), 69-71.

¹⁵ Kim Tolley, "Science for Ladies, Classics for Gentlemen: A Comparative Analysis of Scientific Subjects in the Curricula of Boys' and Girls' Secondary Schools in the United States, 1794-1850," *History of Education Quarterly*, 36, 2 (Summer, 1996), 129-53.

¹⁶ On the nineteenth century academy, education and assessment see Martin Daunton, Editor, *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5-6.

¹⁷ Walker, *Comer*, 93.

¹⁸ Walker, *Comer*, 93.

regrettable and enigmatic, but the local tradition is that Laura's academy was located across the road from one of James Comer's plantations.²³ Though the couple's early encounters remain a mystery, it is fortunate and remarkable that Laura's diary during this period records a lively, albeit brief, outline of her new husband's past life in which she details the means by which he built his plantations and fortune.

The Comer family history dates to colonial Virginia in St. Peter's Parish, New Kent County, where Martha Washington worshipped when young and where she married George Washington. Here, Elizabeth Moss, daughter of James Moss, married James Samuel Comer, establishing a new Comer family branch. Elizabeth Moss Comer's brother, Hugh, served as Lieutenant of Militia, Captain and Major of Militia in 1758, 1760, and 1770, respectively, and was wounded at the Battle of Brandywine, all recorded in the files of the Goochland County Court in Virginia.²⁴ The Moss family had settled in Lunenburg County, Virginia, appearing in the local records as early as 1741. Lunenburg County is situated in southwest Virginia, and its settlers differed greatly from the eastern Tidewater gentry. They were a part of the great Virginia frontier that experienced rapid

²³ Louise Jones DuBose Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, Georgia here after referred to as LJDB.

²⁴ Walker, *Comer*, 3-6. See *New Kent County, St. Peter's Paris Vestry Book and Register, 1684-1786*, Index 14, available at <http://search.ancestry.com/browse/view.aspx?dbid=7469&iid=StPeters-VA-0782&rc=212,2168,291,2202;346,2170,440,2203;817,510,896,543;926,509,1027,546;816,556,895,589;931,555,1025,588;1069,553,1207,587;815,646,894,679;929,646,1024,679;813,1395,892,1427;813,1440,892,1472;935,1439,1029,1474;813,1487,891,1520;932,1487,1026,1519;813,1534,891,1566;813,1579,891,1612;812,1671,890,1704;932,1671,1025,1703;812,1718,890,1750;939,1717,1031,1749;812,1806,890,1840;813,1852,891,1885;932,1852,1025,1884;812,1941,890,1975;813,1988,891,2020;940,1987,1032,2019;212,1821,292,1855;346,1822,444,1857;212,1908,292,1942;357,1909,453,1943;812,2212,890,2245;935,2212,1026,2243&pid=1621&ssrc=&fn=Elizabeth&ln=Moss&st=g> accessed Aug 25, 2012.

On the Battle of Brandywine Creek see Nancy V. Webster, "A Commonwealth Treasure: Brandywine Battlefield Park," *Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine*, XXIII, 4 (Fall 1997), available from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Trails of History at [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/trails_of_history/4287/brandywine_battlefield_park_\(ph\)/472297](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/trails_of_history/4287/brandywine_battlefield_park_(ph)/472297) accessed Aug 25, 2012.

migrations of rugged and exceedingly mobile pioneers who moved in and out of the county in the eighteenth century.²⁵

In the years following the War of Independence, the descendants of Samuel and Elizabeth Moss Comer continued this pattern and migrated south and west seeking the opportunities offered by newly available lands in Georgia. James Thomas Comer and Hugh Moss Comer, the eldest sons of Samuel and Elizabeth, drew land in Cherokee County, Georgia, in the Cherokee Lottery in return for their military service during the American Revolution.²⁶ They joined the great stream of Revolutionary veterans in southern migrations out of Virginia into Georgia.²⁷ James Comer had served as a Captain in the Revolutionary War and died in 1837 in Clinton, Georgia. His first wife (he married three times) bore him one child, James Comer, Jr.²⁸

Laura recorded that James began to build his plantation fortunes in 1822 in Monroe County, Georgia, with the purchase of 202 ½ acres for which he paid \$600.00 to James Echols. In 1825, he went to Maryland to purchase five slaves one of whom ran away. When he moved to Monroe, Georgia, in December of 1825, he owned “two Negro women with infants and two Negro boys not old enough to plow.” He started this

²⁵ Richard R. Beeman, *Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County Virginia, 1746-1832* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), Prologue, 11-13.

²⁶ James Comer, Senior, 7th district, 1st section, Cherokee, number 276; available from: <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=4242>, accessed June 17, 2011. Original data: Smith, James F., *The Cherokee Land Lottery, Containing a Numerical List of the Names of the Fortunate Drawers in Said Lottery*. New York, USA: 1838.

²⁷ David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 143.

²⁸ Walker, *Comer*, 3-6.

operation with eight slaves some of whom his father gave him, including two girls about fourteen years of age. With slaves in tow he moved to Alabama.²⁹

James sold his land in Georgia in 1832 and moved to Alabama in 1833. An early speculator, he bought land from the Creek Indians in Alabama but could not get good titles, and lost most of those investments. Beginning in 1834, however, James' land speculation began to produce a profit and in that year he turned a profit of \$9,000. In 1836, he bought his Uchee Plantation for \$3,406.25 and his Cowikee Plantation for \$2,648.00. He was also able to purchase an additional 640 acres for \$3,200.00. In 1837 his father, James Comer, Sr., died and James, Jr. was named executor of his father's estate. James assisted his stepmother with settling the estate and received very little from it. When in July of 1839 James joined the Baptist Church at Uchee, Alabama, he had arrived as a very successful eligible bachelor member of the landed gentry of the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Georgia and Alabama.³⁰

²⁹ Walker, *Comer*, Laura Beecher Comer diary excerpt 1848, undated entry, 95. See 1830 U.S. Corroborating evidence supporting this assertion is available on the 1830 Census for James Comer in Monroe County Georgia at Ancestry.com <http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/view.aspx?dbid=8058&path=Georgia.Monroe.Not+Stated.33> and <http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/view.aspx?dbid=8058&path=Georgia.Monroe.Not+Stated.33> accessed August 7, 2011. See also U.S. Census Record available from http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=angs-g&gsfn=james+&gsln=comer&msbdy=1797&msbpn ftp=Georgia%2c+USA&msbpn=13&msbpn_PInfo=5-%7c0%7c1652393%7c0%7c2%7c3245%7c13%7c0%7c0%7c0%7c0%7c0%7cuidh=3g5&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=1853134&recoff=6+7&db=1830usfedcenancestry&indiv=1 accessed August 7, 2011.

³⁰ United States General Land Office Records, Montgomery, Certificate # 574 transferring three hundred and twenty two and one half acres from Wade Allen who had originally purchased this land as part of the "Public Land" available by Act of Congress as of April 24, 1820. The location is given as the south half of section twelve in Township sixteen. Document available from http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=1246&iid=RHUSA2007B_AL1330-00481&fn=James&ln=Comer&st=r&ssrc=&pid=2112686 accessed August 7, 2011. See also Certificate # 763, transferring 161.28 acres in District Lands, Section twelve, Township sixteen to James Comer, Jr. of Russell County on April 1, 1837 available at http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=1246&iid=RHUSA2007B_AL1340-00173&fn=James&ln=Comer&st=r&ssrc=&pid=2112886 accessed August 7, 2011. See also Alabama Land Records certifying transfer of title to James Comer, Jr. for land registered in the Tallapoosa Land

James Comer, Jr. purchased his first slaves through the American internal slave trade in Maryland.³¹ The scholarly literature on the interior slave trade is extensive. Notable is Walter Johnson's compelling study of the New Orleans slave markets. Johnson illuminated the concept of the "chattel principle" defined as the final means of control owners had over intractable slaves. When James bought two women with infants in Maryland and two young boys, it was no doubt with an eye to the future expansion of his slave holdings. James began building his slave empire in the mid-1820s. Edward Baptist explores the seamy and sordid aspects of internal slave trading and the objectification and commodification of female slaves as a significant part of the history of the expansion and development of the Deep South's slave plantation empires. Baptist starkly illuminates the sexual connotations of slave ownership.³² James, a bachelor from the mid-1820s until he married Laura in 1848, was accustomed to living and working on his plantations with his slaves and he may have found sexual gratification among the slave women of his plantations perhaps alleviating the need to marry until his empire was built and secure. He would not have been alone. Mary Chesnut gave striking testimony on the subject of a master's sexual relations with slave women:

office recording over 1200 additional acres of land in Alabama in 1839 available from http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=angs-c&gsfn=james&gsln=comer&msbdy=1797&msbpn__ftp=Georgia%2c+USA&msbpn=13&msbpn_PInfo=5-%7c0%7c1652393%7c0%7c2%7c3245%7c13%7c0%7c0%7c0%7c0%7cuidh=3g5&pcat=36&h=247174&recoff=8+9&db=al&indiv=1 accessed August 7, 2011. Russell County, Alabama maps available from University of Alabama Maps <http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/counties/russell/Landowners%20Map.htm> accessed August 30, 2011.

³¹ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8, 11, 17, 30, 34.

³² Edward Baptist, "Cuffy, Fancy Maids and One Eyed Men: Rape, Commodification and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review*, 106, no 5 (Dec 2001), 1619-1650.

You say that there are no more fallen women on a plantation than in London, in proportion to numbers; but what do you say to this? A magnate who runs a hideous black harem with its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife, and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head as high and poses as the model of all human virtues to these poor women whom God and laws have given him. From the height of his awful majesty, he scolds and thunders at them, as if he never did wrong in his life. . . .³³

Edward Baptist observes that there was little difference between slave traders who often became planters and planters who often became slave traders – all bought and sold slaves along the way.³⁴ James was involved deeply in this bonanza period of slave empire building.

The Creek Indian removal in the late 1820s and early 1830s meant that prime farm land was readily available. Ambitious young men like James Comer participated in a frenzied race to buy as much land as they could to build their cotton empires and profit through land speculation. The *Columbus Enquirer*, a weekly newspaper established in 1828, serves as an excellent record of the land passion of these early days. James had two plantations, other land investments and 134 slaves in both Georgia and Alabama by 1861, property that rendered him very wealthy. The dollar value of 134 slaves at modern dollar

³³ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie*, ed. Ben Ames Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 122.

³⁴ Baptist, “Cuffy.” See also Anthony Gene Carey, *Sold Down the River: Slavery in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Alabama and Georgia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 51.

values would equal over two million dollars.³⁵ In the Old South a planter owned twenty or more slaves in contrast to a small slaveholder who owned fewer than twenty slaves. There were far more small slaveholders and yeoman farmers who owned no slaves in the Old South, but it was the wealthy white planter aristocracy that controlled the political and social arenas.³⁶

Even though Laura never noted how she and James met or courted, we know that she was twenty years his junior and that after they were married in 1848. James purchased the land for “our home place” in Columbus, Georgia, from “L.T. Downing, Esqr” for \$3,500.00 in 1853. He built the house and outbuildings that same year. Laura and he moved to Columbus on January 1, 1854.³⁷ At this time Columbus utilities began offering gas lighting and city water service supported by a reservoir. In addition, a rail connection with the port of Savannah through the Butler Line was established in 1853, bringing possibilities for cotton transport, manufacturing and travel for denizens of the

³⁵ The average price of a slave in 1861 was \$800.00. Data available from <http://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php>, accessed February 7, 2011. James owned approximately one hundred and thirty four slaves located on two plantations in Alabama and in the household in Columbus, Georgia. Their value is the equivalent of two million dollars in 2011 dollars. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1861 Slave Schedules; available from http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=1860slaveschedules&so=2&pcat=CEN_1860&rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=angs-c&gsln=Comer&uidh=3g5, accessed February 7, 2011. For cost comparisons one may also refer to http://people.hofstra.edu/alan_j_singer/Gateway%20Slavery%20Guide%20PDF%20Files/1.%20Introduction/6.%20Activity%20Sheets/2.%20Cost%20in%20the%20Past.pdf.

³⁶ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, Chapter One.

³⁷ Laura can be found at this residence on Talbotton Road in the Columbus, Georgia, City Directory of 1898-99 listed as the widow of James Comer, Jr. available from Ancestry .com at http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&dbid=1540&iid=31089_142650-00571&sid=82004042=Georgia%26_82004044=Georgia%26_81004041=1886-1900&rc=530,611,664,645,955,610,1086,650;529,656,662,689;529,700,658,734;849,1820,1042,1860;632,2314,753,2349;631,2359,754,2394;632,2404,754,2438;2897,453,3034,483;2386,2600,2519,2640&pid=153792&ssrc=&fn=james&ln=comer&st=g accessed August 7, 2011 and for 1886 available from http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&dbid=1540&iid=31089_142650-00346&sid=82004042=Georgia%26_82004044=Columbus%26_81004041=1886-1900&rc=2041,651,2180,687;2510,652,2657,688;2156,2263,2219,2296&pid=153567&ssrc=&fn=james&ln=comer&st=g accessed August 7, 2011.

Lower Chattahoochee Valley and residents of Columbus.³⁸ The rear property line of the Comer estate in Columbus was bounded by the railroad.³⁹ The Comers were now positioned as one of the more prominent and influential couples in the Valley. They possessed extensive land, many slaves and a very fashionable residence in Columbus.

Laura's marriage to James meant that she entered planter society with substantial social status.⁴⁰ James fulfilled his role as a Southern patriarch/plantation master through his marriage to Laura. James was a member of the first generation of American sons in the early national era after the Revolutionary War. This generation of young men was raised with patriotic ideals and charged with a mission of civic responsibility and patriarchy as the first duty of the Southern gentleman. They were reared with an eye to the parameters of Southern regional identity in addition to a mandate to protect the "Southern way of life" and its patriarchal institutions. Unlike their Northern counterparts in the early nineteenth century who came to manhood in an era of increasing industrialization and urbanization characterized by the rise of the ideal of fatherhood and

³⁸ David Williams, *Richman's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 9-17, hereafter Williams, *Richman's War*.

³⁹ Columbus, Georgia, Land Plat 1900 Sanborn Insurance Maps, no. 513 sheet 34, 2234 Talbotton Road, Columbus, Georgia. Columbus State University Archives and also available from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/sanborn/Year/Columbus1900/> accessed September 16, 2011.

⁴⁰ See Loula Kendall Rogers Journal, March n.d., September 10, 1860; December 27, 1862; January 14, 1863, Rogers Collection, Emory. See also entries for June 29, 1855; May 25, 1857; October 23, 1858; March 1, 7, December 18, 1859; December 25, 1860; November 12, 1861, as quoted in Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 181-184. For discussions of the status of unmarried and widowed women in the Old South see also Joyce Linda Broussard, "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, Mississippi, 1850-1888" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1998), 1-10. See also Gloria Bynum, *Unruly Women, the Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Michael O'Brien, ed, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-1867* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994); Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 193-242; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1983), 38-9, 56, 59, 85-6; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 226-53.

middle-class domesticity, the sons of Southern white elites were raised to continue to uphold the of personal qualities the Revolutionary generation. The virtues of Southern planter gentlemen like George Washington, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and first President of the United States, were held to be the standard for young men of this cohort. The importance of proving themselves worthy of distinguished family bloodlines was emphasized in education and in the home;⁴¹ men were cautioned against marriage based on sentiment rather than with duty and family in mind. Laura shared this proud Revolutionary War era heritage. Her grandfather, David Beecher (1746-1783), commanded a company of militia at the New Haven Alarm in 1779, when the British attacked that city.⁴²

Heritage and family bloodlines were not the only issue considered by men of the Old South when they married. “A good marriage is the result of *success* in one’s career – very rarely the beginning of it,” wrote Henry Hammond.⁴³ For some men, choosing a wife of wealthy means was a necessity to secure their financial future, but to men like James, whose success was secure already, social standing was of greater importance.

⁴¹ Lori Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 11-12. On Northern men see: Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), Introduction.

⁴² Chauncey Goodrich, “Invasions of New Haven by the British Troops, July 5, 1779.” *Papers of the New Haven Colonial History Society*, 2 (1877), 29-92. See also Thomas Farnham, “‘The Enemy was in Town’: The British Raids on Connecticut, July 1779,” *Journal of the New Haven Colonial Historical Society*, 24 Summer 1976, 2, 3-63. See New Haven Colonial Historical Society at <http://www.ctheritage.org/biography/colonytostate/militaryhist.htm> accessed February 12, 2012.

See also Lineage Books, *The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution Volume 29, p 141*. “Mrs. Laura Beecher Comer. Born in Bethany, Connecticut. Widow of James Comer. Descendant of Capt. David Beecher, of Connecticut. Daughter of Lysias Beecher and Lucy Tolles, his wife. Granddaughter of David Beecher and Hannah Perkins, his wife. David Beecher, (1746-83), commanded a company of militia at the New Haven Alarm, 1779, Hezekiah Sabin’s regiment, which turned out to repel Tryon’s invasion. He was born in Bethany, Conn., where he died.”

⁴³ James Henry Hammond to Dr. John Hammond, November 17, 1844, Hammond-Bryan-Cumming MSS, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina as quoted in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 199.

Laura was the granddaughter of a Revolutionary War soldier and a member of the nationally prominent Beecher family; she brought the caché of the Beecher family name and prestige to the marriage.⁴⁴ In addition, since she was not yet thirty, there was ample opportunity for her to bear children, thereby providing heirs to James Comer's empire.⁴⁵ Marriage was a serious business in the Old South for the successful planter, and to remain a bachelor for life was akin to failure. Marriage demonstrated civic worthiness and protected the Southern patriarchal order.⁴⁶ No doubt all of these issues were of great consideration to James and Laura at the time of their marriage.

The Comers move to Columbus exhibited their wealth and confirmed their status in antebellum plantation society. Columbus was established as a city which became a trade and manufacturing center in 1827 by the Georgia state legislature, and by the late 1850s this Deep South center of the cotton trade had become a local cotton manufacturing power second only to Richmond, Virginia. There were factories producing textiles in sufficient quantities that by 1861, Columbus's population had burgeoned to the level of more than 20,000. The city was becoming a cosmopolitan manufacturing and trading center, and, as a port attracted successful planters and their families to establish their residences in town rather than on the plantations.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Lori Glover, *Southern Sons*, 132-4. On the importance of courtship, marriage, and the age of brides see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 199-207. See also Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); and on Alabama bride ages see Ann Boucher, "Wealthy Planters," 41-5; on the ages of brides in Boston see Peter Hall, "Family Structure and Class Consolidation among Boston Brahmins," Ph.D. diss. State University of New York at Buffalo, 1973, table 6, p. 170, as quoted in Boucher, "Wealthy Planters," 41-2.

⁴⁵ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 199.

⁴⁶ Lori Glover, *Southern Sons*, 132-4.

⁴⁷ On displays of wealth and opulence in antebellum Columbus see Lynn Willoughby's *Fair to Middlin: The Antebellum Cotton Trade of the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 13-5, 19; and Williams, *Rich Man's War*, 12-5.

Maintaining in-town residences was an expensive venture but served to accommodate the lifestyles of the more affluent planters of the region. Other locations that attracted the wealthy to their amenities and accommodations in Alabama were Eufaula, Tuskegee, and Montgomery. Columbus, however, was the most heavily populated by wealthy couples, such as the Comers, who built admirable homes and decorated the interiors with fine imported *accoutrements* including furniture, china, silver and draperies, things often purchased during Grand Tours to the North and financed with the profits from cotton and the toil of slaves.⁴⁸

In keeping with the traditions of wealthy Southerners, the James Comers took an American Grand Tour to the North on several occasions Laura recorded that they traveled in 1849 (probably their wedding tour), 1852, and 1859.⁴⁹ Laura wrote that they traveled to Washington, D.C., New York, Boston, Saratoga Springs, Niagara Falls, and Canada.⁵⁰ The honeymoon of the nineteenth century was a peculiarly American tradition that appeared, to one observer, to publicize the honeymooners' pleasure in their marriage. These trips could involve simply the groom's taking the new bride on a journey to her new home like that experienced by Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox when she and her new

⁴⁸Walker, *Comer*, 92-6. On Southerners shopping while travelling in the North see Franklin, *Southern Odyssey*, 88-99. On the growing demand for luxury attire and household furnishings in Savannah and other locations in throughout antebellum Georgia see Michele Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), Chapter One, 90-9.

⁴⁹ See "American Tourists: the Grand Tour Comes Home" available from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/tourist/main.html> accessed August 10, 2011. See also "The Grand Tour" available from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/tourist/gtour.html> accessed August 20, 2011. Grand Tour literature of the period included works such as James Kirke Paulding, *New Mirror for Travellers & Guide to the Springs by an Amateur* (New York: G&C Carvill, 1828).

⁵⁰ The Comer tour described by Laura follows, with minor variations for family visiting in New Haven, the suggested tour outlined in Paulding's travel guide. See Walker, *Comer*, 92-6, and Paulding, *New Mirror for Travellers*.

husband traveled to his Louisiana abode. On the other hand, Grand Tours, like that taken by newlyweds James and Laura Beecher Comer, demanded occasional leisure time and financial resources.⁵¹

Laura and James traveled in luxury, enjoyed sight seeing in fine carriages, and stayed in the most sumptuous hotels, the details of which she wrote in 1852. Notable among the hotels that provided them lodging was the Pavilion in Charleston, South Carolina, currently a registered historical landmark located at East Bay and Market Streets in the Historic District of Old Charleston. Here, they “rang for the maid and ordered soda in their room to refresh” after they spent an hour and a half strolling about the city’s market district sightseeing and shopping. They also visited various churches including the Episcopal Church of St. Grace and the French Catholic Church.⁵²

In Washington, D.C. they visited the National Hotel, built in 1826 and located six blocks from the Capitol on the northeast corner of Sixth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Here they witnessed the funeral procession for Henry Clay, former Secretary of State under President John Quincy Adams and three times Speaker of the House of Representatives representing the state of Kentucky. Laura indicated surprise that she found Washington, D.C., to be a “pleasant, lovely city” when she and James visited the

⁵¹ Barbara Penner, *Newlyweds on Tour in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009), 3. See also Tryphena Blanch Holder Fox, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 1856-1876*, Wilma King, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1.

James first cousin, John “Fletcher” and his wife “Katy” Drewry Comer’s plantation was located in Old Spring Hill near Eufaula. The two couples were close. Katy Comer noted that “Cousin Jimmy Comer” rode over her plantations checking on work to be done after Fletcher died; how grateful she was, and how good he was to her and her family. She also wrote of a debt of \$15,000 that she owed him and wanted to pay off. It is possible to speculate that in Fletcher’s lifetime, there was a reciprocal relationship and that Fletcher would keep watch on James’ interests when he and Laura traveled. Catherine Drewry Comer to My Beloved Son, letter dated March 21, 1860, folder 1, papers, scan 5, in the Comer Family Papers #167-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill available online at: <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?ead.13703> accessed March 15, 2012.

⁵² Walker, *Comer*, 92-6

Rotunda of the United States Capitol. Yet, she declared the Exchange Hotel of Richmond, Virginia, located at Fourteenth and Franklin Streets as the “finest hotel” they stayed at in the South. Among famous individuals who made their home-away-from-home at the Exchange were English author Charles Dickens, Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, and American author Edgar Allan Poe.⁵³

During their journey, Laura was fitted for dresses at a Boston dressmaker.⁵⁴ Among elites it was customary for new brides to have their trousseau created at a chic couture house. In addition, affluent Southern couples anticipated shopping in major cities as part of the pleasures of touring.⁵⁵ They looked forward to luxurious displays of furniture, draperies and crystal chandeliers that were regarded as the foremost in opulence and splendor available in contemporary home décor, and to the latest in ladies’ and gentlemen’s attire.

If couples could not go to one of the great French fashion houses in Paris, then New York and Boston remained worthy fashionable destinations.⁵⁶ Great fashion houses

⁵³ Walker, *Comer*, LBCD excerpt 1848, 92-6. See *Old and Sold* available from <http://www.oldandsold.com/articles25/hotels-14.shtml> accessed August 3, 2011.

⁵⁴ Walker, *Comer*, LBCD excerpt 1848, 92-6. On brides and clothing see “The Etiquette of Trousseau,” *Godey’s Ladies Book* (hereafter *GLB*) 38, (June 1849): 440, also available from http://books.google.com/books?id=BYIMAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA228&lpg=PA228&dq=the+etiquette+of+trousseau+godey's+lady's+book&source=bl&ots=8C-RnQsJ2e&sig=xiWT2b1DmdpsLKMYmr92nY16Fp0&hl=en&ei=Lss5Tu_wIeft0gGnzcDnAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9&sqi=2&ved=0CEgQ6AEwCA#v=onepage&q&f=false accessed August 3, 2011. See also Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860 to 1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 2. See also Maurie D. McInnes, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), Introduction.

⁵⁵ John Hope Franklin *A Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Antebellum North* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 88-99.

⁵⁶ On Charles Frederick Worth see Jessa Krick, “Charles Frederick Worth (1826–1895) and The House of Worth”. Jessica Krick, “Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History,” New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Costume Institute, 2000 (October 2004) available at http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wrth/hd_wrth.htm accessed January 9, 2012. See also, Elizabeth Ann Coleman, *The Opulent Era: Fashions of Worth, Doucet, and Pingat*. Exhibition catalogue. Brooklyn:

were among the most popular destinations for newlyweds and others on the European grand tour. In America, leading hotels located in elegant shopping districts in New York City and Boston featured fine boutiques as an added attraction specifically intended to accommodate the desires of their wealthy female clientele. At “palace hotels” such as New York’s St. Nicholas travelers could enjoy elegant displays especially designed “for the convenience of the ladies.” They could buy the latest fashions for both gentlemen and ladies and have them custom made during their visit. Home furnishings such as drapery, furniture and silver services were also displayed in shops within the hotel to entice and delight the discerning guest. Guests dined in luxurious restaurants on china services burnished in gold and discussed their purchases and travel plans.⁵⁷ Along with shopping, affluent Southern travelers also included church visits and leisurely reading opportunities.

Laura and James attended church services in New England and other venues along the way. During the trip of 1852, Laura records that she and James read the books that were popular at the time including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* written by her first cousin, Harriett Beecher Stowe. She observed that Mrs. Stowe’s characters were “true to life” and that “We seem to see and hear them in every scene she so graphically portrays.” She also noted in her diary “I wish no one would speak to Mr. Comer on the subject of slavery,” a telling indication that the Comers’ relationship with the Beecher clan was, at

Brooklyn Museum, 1989; and Diana De Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture*. 2d ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990). See also Karl Aspelund, *Fashioning Society: a Hundred Years of Haute Couture by Six Designers* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 2009), Chapter One: the Age of Worth.

⁵⁷ Franklin, 88-99. Barbara Penner, “‘Colleges for the Teaching of Extravagance’ New York Palace Hotels” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 44, 2/3 (Summer/Autumn, 2010) 159-192. See also St. Nicholas Hotel, Henry B. Voigt, “the American Menu: Potatoes a la Santa Claus” available at <http://www.theamericanmenu.com/2010/12/potatoes-la-santa-claus.html> .

times, strained.⁵⁸ Laura's first cousin, Harriet, was not the only Beecher who sought to influence American society.

Harriet's elder sister, Catharine Beecher, championed the cause of education for women, which led her to establish the Hartford Female Seminary in 1823, of which her sister, Harriet, was an alumna. Catharine created a correspondence network in support of women's education that reached from Maine to Georgia and from Massachusetts to Iowa. She lectured, taught, and wrote extensively on the subjects of women's education, women's domestic economy, and women's health.⁵⁹

Harriet and Catharine were the daughters of Lyman Beecher, a leading New England evangelical preacher and his wife Roxana. The Beechers had eleven children. Lyman had three wives by the end of his life. Four of the Lyman Beecher clan achieved national recognition. Their brother and Laura's first cousin, Henry Ward Beecher, was a reform preacher who advocated, most notably, the abolition of slavery and education reform. He published a number of pamphlets and sermons and was highly popular on the lyceum circuit. Another brother, Edward Beecher, wrote the new "American Anti-Slavery Society's Declaration of Principles" and was a noted and controversial preacher

⁵⁸ LBCD diary 1852 quoted in Walker, *Comer*, 97. For insight on the importance of reading to women in antebellum America see Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *The Journal of American History*, 83, no 2 (Sep, 1996), 401-424.

⁵⁹ Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976), Chapter 5. Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley and Anne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: the Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Women's Sphere* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 345.

of reform. Their sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was a militant campaigner for women's rights.⁶⁰

Noteworthy in Beecher family scholarship is Milton Rugoff's *The Beechers: An American Family in the Nineteenth Century* (1981), which focuses on Lyman Beecher and his eleven children. The story of the family encompasses a century that witnessed the evolution from a primarily rural and agrarian society into a heavily industrialized one. The men and women of the Lyman Beecher family were passionately engaged, active and influential actors in their social and cultural environment seeking significant change in their society. The causes they championed on a national level included evangelical religion, temperance, antislavery, and women's rights, putting them at the forefront of social and political controversies of the century.⁶¹

Three of the Beecher sisters are the focus of *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* by Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis. *Limits of Sisterhood* introduces Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Isabella Beecher Hooker, three remarkable women whose lives spanned the nineteenth century. Each sister pressed social reform: Catharine in the area of domesticity and education for women, Harriet as a successful author championing the abolition of slavery, and Isabella as a leader in the fight for women's rights. The authors portray a close family relationship, illuminating the vibrant and lively communications of family members who maintained close ties through ingenious methods like family serial

⁶⁰ Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), xiii; Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood* and Sklar, *Catharine Beecher*.

⁶¹ Rugoff, *The Beechers*.

letters and shared diaries. Included are the difficulties Catharine suffered as she endeavored to meet the demands of her father in the Calvinist faith, and how she subsequently developed her own expertise in the areas of domesticity and women's education. It includes Harriet's literary evolution within her domestic environment, exploring the tensions of a literary career confronted with constant family responsibilities while all the while feelings of remaining unfulfilled and doing nothing haunted her. Isabella's search for fulfillment in the cause of women's rights led to uncomfortable results as her family members struggled with conflicting convictions about women's place and sphere.⁶²

In her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: a Life* (1996), Joan D. Hedrick engages the reader in an analytical narrative that explores Stowe's life in the domestic sphere, her successful writing career, and her close relationship with the Beecher clan. Hedrick examines women's culture and Stowe's importance to women's and social history. She wrote in order to supplement the family income, and at the same time, contributed influential social commentary on issues of the day by locating those issues in the domestic sphere. Stowe used the emotions and sentiments of women's culture to frame moral, religious, and political issues in the popular nineteenth-century style of parlor literature. Hedrick also emphasizes the limitations that domesticity placed on Stowe's literary achievements. By supporting the patriarchy and never venturing outside the domestic sphere, Stowe witnessed the demise of her own career when writing became more professionalized. During this American literary period, women who wrote novels couched in women's culture were marginalized as less serious literary contributors. Even internationally acclaimed authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe suffered from this

⁶² Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood*; Sklar, *Catharine Beecher*.

movement as men pursued the financial advantages of careers in the lucrative world of literary fiction.⁶³

Recent research suggests that this generation of Beecher's family, that of Harriett and Laura, influenced significantly the entire nation on the subject of human rights by spearheading the nation's abolitionist crusade in reaction to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. In particular, Harriet's translation of the human tragedy of slavery into fictional form clarified, for Northerners who supported the law, the ultimate agony and injustice of slavery. She also hoped to "awaken a conscience" among Southern slaveholders that would inspire them to emancipate their slaves.⁶⁴ David S. Reynolds' *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* challenges the accepted wisdom that Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had little impact on American society in the nineteenth century. He highlighted Abraham Lincoln's emphasis on the value of public opinion and its influence on public policy. Reynolds argues that no literary work influenced American public sentiment more than did *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He asserts that Stowe's book "helped redefine American democracy on a more egalitarian basis . . . and rectify social injustice." He observed that Stowe had written a work that employed a "realistic human narrative" to clearly make the point that slavery was an evil as "were the political and economic institutions that supported it."⁶⁵ When juxtaposed with the

⁶³ Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Preface, 126, 403.

⁶⁴ Wilson, *Crusader in Crinoline*, 252. Harriet Beecher Stowe to the Earl of Shaftsbury quoted in Barrie Hayne, "Yankee in the Patriarchy: T. B. Thorpe's Reply to Uncle Tom's Cabin," Part I, *American Quarterly* 20 (Summer 1968): 180-81 as found in Aydelotte, "One Family, One Faith, One Purpose," 136-7. Charles Edward Stowe, *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Compiled from Her Letters and Journals* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1889), 172.

⁶⁵ David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: Norton & Co., 2011), Introduction, x-xii.

avowals of John C. Calhoun's argument that the institution of slavery was a common good for society, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as viewed through the lens of *Mightier than the Sword*, becomes tantamount to a declaration of war on the South. Beside this Northern abolitionist background, Laura Beecher Comer's life in the plantation South as a plantation/slave mistress who eventually devoted every effort to the success of the Southern "Cause" and its memorialization adds a decidedly new and unexplored anti-abolitionist facet to the extant Beecher family scholarly literature.

By the standards of the day, Laura Beecher married well, espousing a wealthy and successful bachelor member of the landed gentry in the plantation South. She was now a very wealthy plantation mistress whose main residence was in the urban environment of Columbus, Georgia.⁶⁶ The Comer family was close-knit and maintained strong relationships with the recently married couple.⁶⁷ Laura's diary entries reflect that among their closest friends were James' first cousin, John "Fletcher" Comer (b. 1794 – d. 1858) and his wife Catherine "Katy" Lucinda Drewery Comer. Like James, Cousin Fletcher was among the first pioneers who entered Alabama when Creek Indian lands became available. Cousin Fletcher and Catherine, or "Cousin Katy" as Laura often referred to her in her diary, settled at Old Spring Hill in Barbour County. Barbour County bordered on Russell County where James, Jr. bought his plantations. Old Spring Hill Plantation, located twenty-two miles north of Eufaula over rough and rocky roads, was much more

⁶⁶ Walker, *Comer*, 92-6.

⁶⁷ On the importance of extended family and kinship relations in Southern elite culture in Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina between 1810 and 1860 see Joan Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: 'The Ties that Bound us was Strong,'" *The Journal of Southern History*, 56, 1(Feb, 1990), 55-70. See also Lorri Glover, *All Our Relations: Blood Ties and Emotional Bonds among the Early South Carolina Gentry* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Glover regards understanding horizontal ties between siblings and kin as the key to understanding elite culture in South Carolina.

slaves over the years. He shipped his cotton from Irwinton, Alabama, on the Chattahoochee River to Apalachicola, Florida and then on to Liverpool.⁷¹

During the 1850s, Fletcher was elected to the Alabama legislature and served two terms. Alabama legislation of 1850 concerning free persons of color stipulated that free people of color must have guardians. If a person of color did not have a guardian of record, then county probate judges were required to appoint one for him. The laws forbade free people of color from buying or selling slaves or running businesses without the signature of their guardians. These restrictive laws tightened legal controls on free people of color to the point where many in both Alabama and Florida, fearing the loss of their freedom, fled for more friendly shores migrating to Haiti or Tampico.⁷²

Fletcher and Catherine had eight children, two daughters who died in infancy and six sons who lived to adulthood. When Fletcher died in 1858, his sons were minors, and Catherine continued to run the plantation; his entire estate passed to Catherine since all the children were underage. The eldest son, Hugh Moss Comer, assisted his mother in running the plantation from the time that he was fourteen until he was of age.⁷³ In the late 1860s, Hugh Moss Comer married the daughter of Wilson Bates, a neighboring planter. He eventually moved to Savannah as a cotton commissioner in partnership with his

⁷¹ Walker, *Comer*, 72-6. See also Ann Kendrick Walker, *Backtracking in Barbour County: A Narrative of the Last Frontier* (Dietz Press, 1941), Chapter XII. Lynn Willoughby's *Fair to Middlin'* offers comprehensive coverage of the relationships and business processes followed by antebellum Georgia and Alabama cotton planters and Apalachicola history as a major player in the cotton export business. On the importance of Apalachicola as a seaport; see also Williams, *Richman's War*, 9-17.

⁷² *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 45-7, John H. Dorman, ed.

⁷³ Walker, *Comer*, 72-6.

father-in-law, Wilson Bates. Laura enjoyed a lasting and close relationship with both Katy and Hugh Comer, who often visited her in Columbus.⁷⁴

The port of Columbus, the busiest cotton market on the Chattahoochee River and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley, developed into a cotton shipping and manufacturing center and a thriving cotton growing region in the antebellum period.⁷⁵ James Comer was one of only a small number of men of a population of 200,000 in the Valley who were major slaveholders who owned one hundred or more slaves. This small group of planters formed the elite class and styled themselves the aristocracy of the community. They traveled extensively and lived in luxurious homes either on the plantation or in town. They drove fancy “cotton carriages,” they set their tables with fine imported china, porcelain, crystal and silver, and they entertained lavishly.⁷⁶ Upon her marriage, Laura Beecher Comer immediately assumed the posture of a lady of the plantation aristocracy. She dressed in fine clothing of velvets, silks and laces and expensive furs.⁷⁷ Conspicuous consumption of luxury goods demonstrated affluence and high rank in society and served to establish hegemony over less fortunate working people and the enslaved. Overt displays of lavish and costly clothing, furs and jewelry reinforced the ascendancy of the master class,⁷⁸ and Laura joined the company of the other wives of the wealthiest and

⁷⁴ LBCD, January 9, 1862.

⁷⁵ Williams, *Rich Man's War*, Prologue.

⁷⁶ Willoughby, *Fair to Middlin'*, 19-25, 13-5; and Williams, *Rich Man's War*, 14-6.

⁷⁷ LJDB.

⁷⁸ Ulrich B. Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier Documents 1649-1963* (New York: Burt Franklin Publishers, 1969), 2:113, reprint, orig. 1910, 2 vol. Herein citing “Memorial of the Citizens of Charleston to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina [Charleston, 1822].” See also Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 22-3. Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoise: a History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) Richard

most politically influential men in Columbus and spoke of them throughout her diary.⁷⁹

But all was about to change.

Biennu, trans. English ed, orig. published in French in 1981. Perrot remarks that, in France, “as signs of wealth and ornamental objects, women replaced the lace and jewels banished from men’s clothing by the Revolution.” He notes that in Nineteenth-Century France “clothing was a science that mirrored one’s social and economic status.”

⁷⁹ LJDB. LBCD, throughout the diary Laura discusses daily social rounds and visits for tea with the ladies of the planter class and other elites in Columbus.

Chapter Two

Secession: “May we, as a nation, be taught by the Holy Spirit. . .”⁸⁰

Laura began a new volume of her diary for 1862, “Evening before New Years! Forty-four years, the 6th of last March, of my life have passed away . . .”⁸¹ She prayed for God’s guidance in the future. Laura began this volume almost one year after the Secession Crisis. Very regrettably, the volume for the year 1861 is not available; therefore, I rely for this period upon the diaries and letters of elite, white, Southern mistresses and masters as well as those of others of the white community to serve as proxy for Laura’s voice. I also rely on newspapers and other primary sources to recreate the panorama of the momentous year of 1861 in Georgia and Alabama. The events accompanying secession from the Union and the ensuing war changed daily life for planter society. Elites no longer discussed tours to the North and shopping sprees for fine clothing in Boston. Kate Stone remarked, in “Retrospect,” that she and her mother planned a Northern tour in 1861, and a European sight-seeing excursion in 1862 to follow. She declared that “life seemed so easy and bright before us when in the winter of 1861 commenced the great events that swept away this joyous future and set our feet on new and rugged paths.”⁸²

⁸⁰ LBCD, Jan 3-5, 1862.

⁸¹ LBCD, Dec 31, 1861.

⁸² Kate Stone, *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), “Retrospect,” 11, John Q. Anderson, ed., introduction to 1995 edition by Drew Gilpin Faust, hereafter, Stone, *Brokenburn*.

Secession and war were at the forefront of public discussion after Lincoln's election in November of 1860. Antebellum ladies remained circumspect on the subject of politics in public since Southern society traditionally regarded public discussion of politics among ladies as unbecoming and coarse. One does find, however, ample discussion of political events in the private discourse of their diaries and letters as far back as the Revolution. A fine example is found in the papers of Maria Campbell of Virginia who wrote to her cousin, Jefferson [Campbell?], in 1815 regarding the war with England, "You know we ladies are forbidden by the polite world to say much on this subject." Yet events taking place around her compelled her to continue, "I cannot avoid looking around me, and viewing from my inaccessible mountains, the important struggle in which my native and beloved Country is engaged – Her destiny is connected with the lifeblood of my heart."⁸³ The secession of the South from the Union likewise presented such gripping motivation for private discussions among Southern women.

The Secession Crisis, a continuously debated historical event, found its origin in the Missouri Compromise and culminated in Abraham Lincoln's election.⁸⁴ Milestones

⁸³ Maria Campbell to Jefferson, January 20, 1815, Campbell Collection, Duke University, as found in Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress, Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, Div of Random House, 1982), 182-3.

⁸⁴ For historical discussions of the events that led to war see William Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969); Anthony Gene Carey, *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1960* (New York: Oxford University

along the way included the Nullification Crisis, the Mexican-American War, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the breakdown of the Whig Party, the rise of the Republican Party in John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and the election of "the Black Republican," Lincoln.⁸⁵ Racial fears galvanized the South, and John Brown's raid brought talk of secession in the Deep South to a fevered pitch. In October 1859, John Brown led an armed attempt to take control of the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Brown acted in the hope that the local slave population would rise up in insurrection. When the effort failed, a state court condemned Brown and his co-conspirators to death by hanging for the crime of treason.

Press, 1988); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: the Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); James L. Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Michael Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: the Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalist and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860* (New York: Norton, 1979); Stephen B Oats, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 41-43; Mark J. Stegmaier, *Texas, New Mexico, and the Compromise of 1850: Boundary Dispute and Sectional Crisis* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996); J. Mills Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Margaret M. Storey, "Civil War Unionists and the Political Culture of Loyalty in Alabama, 1860-1861", *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), pp. 71-106.; Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Williams, *Rich Man's War*.

⁸⁵ Barry L. Brown and Gordon R. Elwell, *Crossroads of Conflict: A Guide to Civil War Sites in Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Anthony Gene Carey, *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); Albert Berry Saye, *A Constitutional History of Georgia, 1732-1968*, rev. ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, [1970]); David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* (New York: New Press, 2008).

Accounts of Brown's raid and subsequent execution in December headlined Lower Chattahoochee Valley newspapers, and white Southerners reacted with fear and hostility. "A great excitement prevails in some of the Southern states in consequence," declared Sarah Espy, a native Georgian living in Dublin, Cherokee County, Alabama. "May the Northern assassins be put down with their free Negroes allies," she continued. She prayed that the "women and children of the South would be saved from their Northern murderers." "Five men have paid for their fanaticism with their lives," she warned in January, 1860, "May others take heed."⁸⁶ The *Eufaula Express*, with the banner watchword "A Southern Confederacy – The Sooner the Better," declared, "Since blood has commenced to flow, we say let it flow on until the question is settled once and for all," and called upon the slave states to form an independent confederacy.⁸⁷

In the aftermath of John Brown's raid, waves of fear swept the Lower Chattahoochee Valley. In the South, fear of slave insurrections had existed since the American Revolution. Incidents like the events of the bloody revolution in Saint Domingue kept white Southerners ever vigilant. Southerners feared that the slaves of white Saint Domingue refugees who sought asylum in Louisiana and South Carolina would spread the contagion of revolt and lead to a repetition of the gruesome events experienced in Saint Domingue.⁸⁸ One of the most disturbing events of the revolution occurred after declaration of the Republic of Haiti, when the rebel leader, now emperor

⁸⁶ Sarah Rodgers Rousseau Espy Diary, 26 Nov 1859, 2 Dec 1859, 10 Jan 1860, SPR2 ADAH hereafter referred to as Espy Diary, available online at: <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/u/?voices,3587> and <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/u/?voices,3584> accessed 29 Apr 2012.

⁸⁷ *Eufaula Express*, 29 Nov 1859.

⁸⁸ Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128-34. See also John Edward Baur, "International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution." *Americas* 26, no. 4 (1970): 394-418.

Dessalines, ordered the annihilation of the whites who remained on the island. The deadly spirit of revenge displayed by Saint Domingue rebels terrified Southerners and left them on their guard with regard to slaves exposed to details of the Saint Domingue experience.⁸⁹

Winthrop Jordan's *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek* demonstrated that these fears were not unfounded. Jordan unearthed long overlooked evidence and convincingly argued that slave insurrection plots did exist in the South. In the case of Second Creek, Jordan pointed to the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, and the advent of war in 1861 as inspiration for the plot. Groups of slaves at Second Creek, located outside of Natchez, Mississippi, planned an uprising that included the massacre of whites and the rape of white women. The plot was discovered and the conspirators were "examined" for evidence at a local racetrack by a vigilante committee and afterwards executed. The entire incident was kept quiet as possible in order to prevent additional slave conspiracies.⁹⁰

Racial fears and the perceived threat of bloody slave insurrections combined with Lincoln's election in 1860 to inspire political debates centered on white men's honor and freedom, and white women's safety and security. For more than thirty years increasing

⁸⁹ David Brion Davis, "The Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions," in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), Chapter 1, 8; David P. Geggus, ed.

⁹⁰ Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993) hereafter referred to as Jordan, *Tumult*. Jordan cautioned that older parts of the South like Virginia viewed insurrection threats differently from the way that recently settled sections like the states of Alabama and Mississippi. In those sections recently carved out of the old frontier like Mississippi and for our purposes here, the Lower Chattahoochee Valley, planters and other whites dealt with the possibility of uprisings immediately and used brutal force often without consideration of the law, see 77-8. Examinations were a deadly process during which a doctor checked the person being examined to determine whether it was safe to continue the process. The accused slave was whipped by two individuals simultaneously until he fainted. The doctor would check the slave's pulse and indicate when it was safe to proceed; see slave testimony on 256.

tensions between slave and free states had been ongoing on the issue of slavery, and its expansion or abolition. The existence of differing ideologies exacerbated by the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 led less temperate residents of the Valley to discussions of secession and war. Many Southerners feared that Lincoln and his party intended to abolish slavery immediately regardless of their promises to the contrary. They believed that Lincoln and his Republican cohorts spoke publicly of accepting the containment and maintenance of slavery where it already existed, allowing the institution to die a future natural death, when their true intention was to extinguish slavery immediately. From the South's perspective this amounted to a course that was disastrous for Southern white society.

In Georgia, for example, slaves comprised approximately 44 percent of the population between 1861-5. They were the workforce of cotton plantation society, and also produced a majority of the staple food supply. Slaves represented 95 percent of the personal wealth in the region. More slaves resided in Georgia than any Lower South state (only Virginia had more slaves), with the majority located in the Black Belt, so named for its prized dark rich soil. In the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Alabama and Georgia, the most heavily slave populated counties were Russell, Barbour and Chambers Counties in Alabama. In Georgia, Muscogee and Troup Counties boasted a slave population that ranged from 44 to 66 percent, the City of Columbus not included.⁹¹

In addition to economic fears such as the loss of productivity, wealth and property, the abolition of slavery gave rise for Southern whites of ominous implications of stark

⁹¹ Anthony Gene Carey, *Sold Down the River: Slavery in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Alabama and Georgia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 43; and *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

racial issues. Southern white trepidation included fears of bloody insurrections like those discussed previously and apprehensions of race mixing and racial equality. Alabama Secession Commissioner to Maryland, Congressman Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry, wrote that “An infidel theory corrupted the Northern heart.” Lincoln’s presidency and Republican rule meant “peril and dishonor.” “Instead of the culture and development of the boundless capacities and productive resources of their [our] social system,” he elaborated, “it is to be assaulted, humbled, dwarfed, degraded and finally crushed out.” The prospect of Republican rule meant “a saturnalia of blood.” The result of emancipation, which was surely the ultimate goal of the Republicans including Lincoln, would mean “the abhorrent degradation of social and political equality,” and “the probability of a war of extermination between the races or the necessity of flying the country to avoid the association.”⁹²

On Election Day, November 6, 1860, Sarah Espy wrote in somber tones, “Today the fate of this nation is to be decided by the election of a President.”⁹³ On November 14, Espy declared, “Lincoln the black republican candidate is elected.” She feared that the Southern states would withdraw from the Union and presciently observed, “If so, it is the beginning of woe.” She “greatly” feared that “war will be the final result of such withdrawal.”⁹⁴ Lincoln was elected without the support of any Southern states. The

⁹² Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 56-7. See Congressman Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry’s letter to Governor Thomas Hicks, December 28, 1861, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1902) ser. 4, I:38-42, hereafter referred to as *Official Records*.

⁹³ Espy Diary, Nov. 6, 1860, available online at <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/u/?voices,3586> accessed May 1, 2012.

⁹⁴ Espy Diary, 14 Nov 1860, available online at <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/u/?voices,3587> accessed 1 May 2012.

Republican Party called itself the free soil, free labor party; Southerners called it the Black Republican Party. Parthenia Antoinette Hague of Barbour County, Alabama, believed that the Republican Party regarded the “people of the South” as “fit only for the pikes hidden at Harper’s Ferry.” She saw no other choice than secession and war: “to your tents, O Israel,” she cried and evoked biblical images of a new Israel.⁹⁵

In 1860, as before, Americans, both North and South, had a common culture, and religious beliefs, and lived and worked in common political and economic systems, but the institution of slavery divided them. As secession from the Union and war loomed on the horizon, Southerners sought and received the blessings of the clergy. In both Georgia and Alabama, clerics openly supported the move to secede. The Alabama Baptist Convention resolved that dissolution of the Union and Alabama’s secession were necessary steps taken “in defense of the sovereignty and independence of Alabama and her sacred right as a sovereignty to withdraw from this Union.”⁹⁶ Historian Mitchell Snay observes that Lincoln’s election and the triumph of the Republican Party in 1860 illustrated the South’s untenable position and compelled it to a transition from Southern sectionalism to Southern nationalism. The belief that the “Black Republican Party” threatened to “envelop the slave South with a cordon of free states” fueled enthusiastic secessionists with a sense of urgency that required immediate action.⁹⁷ “It is absolute submission to Black Republican Rule,” wrote young attorney Hubert Dent of Eufaula to

⁹⁵ Hague, *Blockade*, 3-6.

⁹⁶ T. C. Bryan, “The Churches in Georgia during the Civil War,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 33, (1949): 283-302, 284; Walter L. Flemming, *The Churches of Alabama during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Montgomery: Wm. A. Rogers Co., 1902), 4-5.

⁹⁷ Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 151-2.

his wife, “Dear Nan” (Anna Beal Dent), on November 8, 1860, “or absolute resistance. I feel like the South now expects every man to do his duty,” mused Dent as he declared his intentions to rejoin the Eufaula Rifles.⁹⁸

News of South Carolina’s secession on December 20, 1860, reached Columbus at the Christmas holidays. Columbus secessionists rejoiced in the fact. A torchlight parade, bonfires, and fireworks lit up the city.⁹⁹ Henry Lewis Benning, Columbus attorney, passionate secessionist, and close friend to James and Laura Comer, argued that “Mr. Lincoln has declared eternal hostility to slavery. That is the sum of his creed.” Benning asserted that once Lincoln took office the Republican Party would waste no time in abolishing the institution of slavery, thereby destroying the South and endangering the welfare and safety of Southern women, forcing them to “call upon the mountains to fall upon them.” Only immediate secession could preclude the “horrors of abolition.” The choice for Benning was “between life and death.”¹⁰⁰ Calls for war permeated the atmosphere of disunion and conjured biblical images: “We of the South will Samson-like

⁹⁸ Stauton Hubert Dent to “Dear Nan,” November 8, 1860, Dent Confederate Collection, Auburn University Special Collections and Archives. Dent was a former member of the Eufaula Rifles and rejoined them at the outset of the war.

⁹⁹ John M. Martin, ed., *Columbus, Georgia, from its Selection as a Trading Town in 1827 to its Partial Destruction by Wilson’s Raid in 1865* (Columbus: Thomas Gilbert, Book Printer & Publisher, 1874), 2:120, original available at <http://djuved.libs.uga.edu/F294xC7xM3/iF294xC7xM3.html> accessed May 2, 2012. Diffie William Standard, *Columbus Georgia, in the Confederacy: the Social and Industrial Life of the Chattahoochee River Port* (New York: William-Frederick Press, 1954), 2, hereafter referred to as Standard, *Columbus*.

¹⁰⁰ William W. Freehling, Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia’s Showdown in 1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115-44, hereafter referred to as Freehling, Simpson, *Debate*. See also Henry L. Benning biography available at <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-3813&sug=y> accessed May 3, 2012.

Henry L. Benning, accepted the assignment to the Georgia secession convention in Milledgeville to stand in for Howell Cobb, his archrival for pre-eminence in Georgia politics, who remained in Washington, D.C. An extreme states’ rights advocate, Henry Benning led the Georgia delegation that walked out of the Democratic National Convention in 1860. Benning was known as “the Old Rock” for his firm stand on states’ rights.

From 1837 to 1839 he served as solicitor-general in Columbus, and in 1839 he married Mary Howard Jones (a first cousin to the Georgia writer, Augusta Jane Evans), with whom he had ten children.

lay hold upon its pillars, and if need be, perish in its ruins,” declaimed Augusta Jane Evans.¹⁰¹

Opposing voices registered dissent, and declared the haste to secede from the Union precipitous at best. Anti-secessionists rallied across the Valley and a committee of one hundred organized for “redressing the South’s grievances within the Union.”¹⁰² At the secession convention at the state capitol of Milledgeville, Georgia, on the evening of November 15, 1860, the voice of Troup County planter Benjamin Henry Hill rang out proclaiming “no people have ever assembled to deliberate a graver issue.” He passionately argued for Union, “For nearly a century we have been accustomed to boast and speak of it as the best on Earth.” He called for “wisdom,” “moderation,” and “prudence” in the deliberations considering secession. He recognized that there were those who would agree to “nothing but disunion.” Nevertheless, Hill believed that “common ground of agreement” could be found. He contended that “even the history of slavery agitation in this country does not justify the very conclusion that Abolitionism has been always progressive.” He maintained that “popular sentiment in politics” prevailed in Abolitionism’s decline. Hill made an impassioned plea to the Convention to consider constitutional means to seek redress for Southern grievances. He reasoned, “Mr. Lincoln cannot do us damage,” and he elaborated that “he cannot even form his cabinet unless he make it acceptable to a Democratic Senate!” Hill stated that “the wisest policy,”

¹⁰¹ Augusta Jane Evans to Mrs. L. Virginia French, from Mobile, Alabama, January 13, 1861, Louise Jones Dubose Papers, Columbus State University Archives Columbus, Georgia, see “Dear Madam,” from “Augusta J. Evans,” available at digital archives <http://archives.columbusstate.edu/LGunbyJonesDubose/frenchletter.php> accessed October 14, 2012, and Henry L. Benning, January 13, 1861, Louise Jones Dubose Papers, Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, Georgia, to “My dear Cousin,” from “Your Affectionate Cousin” available at digital archives, <http://archives.columbusstate.edu/LGunbyJonesDubose/benningletter.php> accessed October 14, 2012.

¹⁰² Standard, *Columbus*, 21-2.

and “the surest way to vindicate our honor and self-respect, is to demand the unconditional observance of the Constitution by every state.” The South must demand that the Constitution be enforced. If a state allowed a fugitive slave to be rescued in its jurisdiction, then the government should require that the owner be paid for his loss and the state compelled to enforce the law. States that did not abide by the Constitution and the law were the true rebels in this instance. Hill advocated forcing a constitutional showdown with states, like Massachusetts, that did not enforce the Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress in 1850. Furthermore, cautioned Hill, the South was inadequately prepared for secession. “We have no treaties, commercial or otherwise, with any other power” required to conduct the commerce required for survival. “We have no postal system,” he enumerated. If war should occur, we have “no navy, no forts, no arsenals, no arms,” he warned. Nothing divided the South “from our enemy but an imaginary line,” Hill declared, and the South had “a sea and gulf coast extending from the Potomac to Galveston Bay” to defend. He argued that working within the Union and the Constitution would offer the added advantage of allowing the South time to address these shortcomings.¹⁰³

Meanwhile, as the talk of secession and war continued, and women expressed their fears, the men of the Valley reassured their wives and sweethearts, as Hubert Dent did: “Dear Nan,” wrote Dent, “Don’t be uneasy, Darling.” He continued, “Recollect that there is someone willing and able to take care of you.” In January of 1861, talk of secession and war gave way to reality.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Freehling, Simpson, *Debate*. 80-104.

¹⁰⁴ Stauton Hubert Dent to “Dear Nan,” November 8, 1860, Dent Confederate Collection, Auburn University Special Collections and Archives.

Alabama's secession convention met on January 7, 1861, and the delegates voted, 61 to 39, to secede on January 11, 1861. Georgians followed, on January 18, 1861 with a vote of 166 to 130. On Feb. 4, 1861, Montgomery, Alabama, became the provisional capital of the Confederate States of America (CSA), and the Provisional Constitution of the Confederate States of America was adopted shortly thereafter. On February 9, 1861, Jefferson Davis, former United States Secretary of War under President Franklin Pierce, United States Senator from Mississippi, and an 1828 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, became president of the Confederate States of America.

Parthenia Hague remembered "the day when word came with lightning speed over the wires. The State of Georgia, my native State, one of the original thirteen of revolutionary fame, is out of the Union." Hague experienced sadness, but she declared, "Come weal or woe, success or adversity, we will willingly go down or rise with the cause we have embraced." The Valley, with Alabama and Georgia, was out of the Union, and a new chapter began.¹⁰⁵

On February 11, Elizabeth Rhodes of Eufaula observed, "War is impending. Our people have made a formal demand for Forts Sumter and Pickens." "If not granted," she continued, "they will be taken, if possible, by force."¹⁰⁶ On April 12, 1861, the Confederates fired on the federal garrison at Ft. Sumter. When Sumter surrendered, John Horry Dent noted that the people of the North volunteered "by the thousands" and "a

¹⁰⁵ Hague, *Blockade*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Rhodes Diary, January 6, 1861 to February 13, 1861, Auburn University Special Collections and Archives.

bloody war” loomed.¹⁰⁷ Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia seceded shortly thereafter, and the South was at war.

The call to arms went out across the Valley as it did the entire South. Some like Hubert Dent immediately rejoined existing militia units. Both “Cousin Wallace Comer,” with whom Laura would correspond throughout the War, and who would visit in Laura and James Comer’s home in Columbus often during the War, and “Cousin Legare Comer,” wrote their brother Hugh that “Uncle James Comer” visited his young cousins who called him uncle at their home at Spring Hill, Alabama. They wrote that “Uncle James,” now 62 years old, declared his intentions to “go to the War,” and was leaving for Richmond the next week. The brothers reported enthusiastically that there would be a gunpowder mill not too far from Eufaula. They also notified “Brother” (Hugh Comer) that Spring Hill boasted a seventy-five man Militia Company that sported “drums and fife” acquired at the cost of “\$32.00 in Columbus.” Indeed, they added excitedly, “the Barbour Grays of Claton will leaf [sic] day after tomorrow for Richmond, Va.!”¹⁰⁸

Although James was too old to serve in the army, he was not deterred from serving the Confederacy. In reminiscences written in 1898 Laura declared that James, “a liberal supporter of the Confederacy,” whose “age only kept him from active service in

¹⁰⁷ Ray Mathis, *John Horry Dent: South Carolina Aristocrat on the Alabama Frontier* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 195.

¹⁰⁸ J. W. Comer and G. L. Comer to “Dear Brother,” in the Comer Family Papers #167-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; available at <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?ead,13697> accessed March 15, 2012. Hugh, Wallace and Legare were the sons of John “Fletcher” Comer, James Comer’s first cousin, and his wife, Catherine “Katy” Drewery Comer of Spring Hill, and Cowikee, Alabama, near Eufaula and Barbour County. “Brother” Hugh Comer was away at school engaged in a classical education and also studying to be a surveyor at Warrior Stand, Alabama, see letter from Catherine Drewery Comer to “My Beloved Son,” January 22, 1860 in the Comer Family Papers #167-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill available at <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/u/?ead,13688> accessed March 15, 2012.

the Army,” combined with her and together they “worked continuously to aid in the terrible struggle of battling for a principle of right.” They set up spinning and weaving operations at the plantations. They immediately purchased two bales, “one blue and one gray flannel and gave enough to make shirts [to outfit] Ivey’s Company” She elaborated that they also gave “whole bolts of the same Cadet flannel to other companies and individuals,” and recounted that they “furnished thread for one thousand pairs of socks,” which Laura contracted to be knitted by the girls at the Columbus Orphanage. In addition, they contributed “the material for twenty-five hospital mattresses and \$200.00” to the Soldier’s Wayside Home. On August 10, 1861, Laura and James boarded the train and journeyed to Richmond, Virginia. The following day they “called upon the President [Jefferson Davis] and other officers,” and visited the various camps in Richmond. They “hired a carriage” and then “drove around picking up home-sick boys and men, those sick with Measles and getting them into private houses where we could as all the public buildings in the city were filled.” She stated that “Georgia then had no Hospital ready to receive the men, and many were dying with Measles.” They established a hospital and hired the doctors and nurses on behalf of the Soldier’s Aid Society, the Georgia Hospital at Twenty-First Street. Also involved in the establishment of the Georgia Hospital were Mrs. G. W. Randolph of Richmond, Virginia; Mrs. W. A. Henningson of Richmond, Virginia; and Mrs. Robert Toombs, from Georgia.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Reminiscences of Mrs. Laura B. Comer, United Daughters of the Confederacy Collection, MC28, Columbus State University Archives. These memoires were written by Laura in 1898. Laura possibly refers to Mrs. G. W. Randolph, whose husband was Secretary of War under Jefferson Davis; Mrs. Henningson was perhaps Mrs. C.F. Henningsen, wife of Colonel Charles F. Henningsen, CSA, who ran Henningsen Hospital in Richmond during the war; Laura refers to Mrs. Robert M. Toombs whose husband was the first Secretary of State under Jefferson Davis.

Women's wartime reactions were mixed. Kate Cumming declared that a "man did not deserve the name of man if he did not fight for his country."¹¹⁰ Sarah Espy, on the other hand, dreaded her son's departure "I do not like it much," she noted, "but will have to submit."¹¹¹ When the time came for "Cousin Wallace" to go, Laura remarked that he was a handsome young man, and she hoped that the war would not affect him adversely.¹¹² As the men donned military garb and took rifles in hand, women throughout the South rallied to the cause in other ways. The household was the engine of production in the South and the transition to wartime production occurred immediately.

At the close of 1861 in Alabama, the Governor's Office compiled a list of 91 ladies' aid societies tasked with manufacture of tents and uniforms to outfit military units,¹¹³ and the Governor's Office distributed fabric for that purpose. When a shortage of socks became a concern, women of the Valley, like women throughout the Confederacy, heard and answered the call. In 1861, an appeal went out from the Georgia Quartermaster General that "every one of the women of the State of Georgia knit a pair of socks for the soldiers." The members of the Soldier's Aid Society of Columbus responded that they would "pack and forward all socks sent in response to this appeal." For Laura, volunteer work with the Columbus Soldier's Aid Society, which was instituted in May 21, 1861, in response to a call in the *Columbus Daily Sun*, offered the opportunity to participate in the war effort. In addition to knitting socks for soldiers at the front and

¹¹⁰ Kate Cumming, *The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*, ed. Richard Barksdale Harwell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1959), 49.

¹¹¹ Espy Diary, April 19, 1861.

¹¹² LBCD, February 22, 1863.

¹¹³ Governor's Files, John Gill Shorter Papers, January 1, 1862, List of Ladies' Aid Societies, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

making trips to Richmond, she remained committed to social calls, weddings and funerals, shopping, managing the household and servants at the Talbutton Road residence in Columbus, and she, of course, maintained an active correspondence with friends and family in her busy wartime days.¹¹⁴

Mary Chesnut referred to the “everlasting sock” as the women of the South knitted stockings for the soldiers. “I do not know when I have seen a woman without knitting in her hand. Socks for the soldiers is the cry.” Like other women of the Valley, Laura knitted day and night. One of the most common ways that women in the South contributed to the war effort, knitting socks became the activity that replaced fancy sewing and embroidery at ladies’ social gatherings. As they sat by firelight and candlelight, senior women took the opportunity to teach juniors the arts of knitting and sewing. “Mother has begun her second pair, but I have not finished my first one yet,” wrote Sarah Lois Wadley of the Monroe, Louisiana, Soldier’s Aid Society. “Mother is a famous knitter of socks,” commented native Alabamian Kate Stone from her home at Brokenburn Plantation in Louisiana. “I am only capable of knitting comforters of crewel,” she declared. Kate continued to practice her art with determination and recorded finally the pleasure she took in her endeavors, “I am knitting gloves as I can do well and rapidly, now.” Sarah Lois Wadley observed that “Everybody seems desirous to do their part of the soldiers’ work.” Women gained a sense of achievement in the satisfaction of working

¹¹⁴ Confederate Memorial Association, *History of the Confederate Memorial Associations of the South* (New Orleans: Graham Press, 1904) 116. Officers at the founding of the Columbus Soldier’s Aid Society originally called the Columbus Soldier’s Friend Society: Mrs. Absalom H. Chappell, President; Mrs. Robert Carter, Vice-President; Mrs. John A. Urquhart, Secretary; and Mrs. Richard Patten, Secretary. The society was formed at a meeting at Temperance Hall in Columbus on May 21, 1861. Regular meetings convened at the Perry House.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=TBFCAAAIAAJ&pg=PA114&dq=columbus,+georgia+soldier%27s+aid+society&hl=en&sa=X&ei=pMmmT96UFJcm8QSjntCYAw&sqi=2&ved=0CDkQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=columbus%2C%20georgia%20soldier%27s%20aid%20society&f=false>

to support “their” soldiers. Laura expressed her delight in “the daily exercise of active benevolence” that knitting socks for the men in the Columbus Guard yielded. Although childless, she associated with junior women among her social acquaintances and participated in home-front activities in support of the soldiers. Senior women expressed great pride in the achievements of junior women’s efforts and called their knitting and sewing “patriotic assertions” and “honorable contributions” in service to “their soldiers.”¹¹⁵ The contributions of warm clothing and bedding offered Southern women the opportunity to share in the Confederate Cause. Laura’s activities related to the war effort occurred in addition, however, to the daily routine that continued in Columbus.

On January 2, 1862, Laura wrote of the joy she experienced because “Mr. Comer’s servant,” Lithe, baked a cake for the first time. She noted all the “labor” she had invested in Lithe against “mountains of opposition” and expressed hope for the future, “Can the events of this day presage the ensuing year?”¹¹⁶ She spent the day visiting the Rutherfords, Susan Thweatt and Adolphus and their daughter, Elizabeth. Susan and Elizabeth were also members of the Columbus Soldier’s Aid Society.¹¹⁷ Elizabeth “Lizzie” Rutherford had the honor of serving as the Secretary in 1862.¹¹⁸ Laura then spent the

¹¹⁵ LBCD Jan 2, 1862. Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, (New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 113, hereafter referred to as Chesnut, *Diary*.

Giselle Roberts, *The Confederate Belle* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) “The Trumpet of War,” 47-55.

Sarah Lois Wadley, *Diary of Sarah Lois Wadley, August 8, 1859 to May 15, 1865*, PDF transcript in possession of the Author, also available in electronic form online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/ims/wadley/wadley.html> accessed 24 Apr 2012.

Stone, *Brokenburn*, 47, 144.

¹¹⁶ LBCD, Jan 2, 1862.

¹¹⁷ The 1850 Federal Census lists Adolphus (41) and Susan (39) Rutherford (\$4000 Real Estate)and their children: Elizabeth P. 17, Robert 15, Augustus 12, Mary 10, A.S. 7, Sarah 5. Occupation for Adolphus Rutherford U.S. Marshall’s Office.

¹¹⁸ Jacqueline Cook, “Elegy in Flowers,” *Georgia Journal*, April/May, 1983, 3.

evening at home. She wrote letters that evening which included “one letter to Mr. Comer who is at his Plantations in Ala.” She commented that it had been a pleasant day with one exception. She “had to perform. . .a terrible duty” in the morning. She punished a “servant” and asked, “How can they be so perverse?”¹¹⁹

Privileged white mistresses across the South, like Laura, lived within a social system grounded upon the institution of slavery. Whether in an urban environment such as Columbus or on the plantation, daily life consisted of managing the various activities of the Southern household. From the requirements of planning and providing all the meals for household members, which in Laura’s case included eight slaves plus any from the plantations that might be there on assignment, herself and James, also provision must be made for whatever visiting family, and their guests and “servants” who might be with them. Tasks like preserving meats, laundry, mending, and ironing, even grading roads at the Alabama plantations and roofing the house in Columbus all meant supervision of work performed by slaves. This constant contact between mistress and slave led to a situation laden with opportunity for slave resistance.

Mistresses complained of the ungovernability of unruly slaves, especially in the absence of masters. Slave women assigned to work in the Big House found endless ways to wage what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese terms “an unending war of nerves,” knowingly taking actions that they knew would anger and exasperate mistresses to distraction. “In the field, where a man is with them whom they fear all the time they will get along,” Laura opined as she supervised the work of slaves at the house in Columbus. Slave women regarded whippings and punishments as worth tolerating for the satisfaction of resistance, and they were also aware that whippings from the mistress did not necessarily

¹¹⁹ LBCD, Jan 2, 1862

indicate the master's judgment on the subject. A mistress's power and authority was an extension of that of the master, and slaves were well aware of it.¹²⁰

The elite, plantation society of Georgia and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley consisted of white men who wielded enormous social and political power and guarded it jealously. White men were free to control their own labor, to own land, to vote, and to rule. Wives, children, and slaves, on the other hand, were dependent on the family patriarch and subject to his rule and control of their lives and labor. The majority of the population was black and enslaved. For the most part, these Southern-born, ruling, elite white men were Protestants, engaged in farming, and resided on farms and plantations scattered throughout the Valley.¹²¹

Although not all farmers possessed James Comer's wealth and status, white men who owned even small amounts of land and one or two slaves were accorded respect by virtue of their efforts and position. Esteemed above all was a white man's honor. Here on the edge of the old frontier, careless remarks unrepented could and did result in formal duels or vicious fights that cost the offender, at the most, his life, or perhaps, an eye or an ear. Fine carriages and cotton money did not change this violent aspect of Southern white men's society. But honor was between men and not necessarily interpreted the same in each household throughout the Old South.¹²² Laura believed that the many who envied her for her advantageous marriage to a successful and wealthy member of the Southern elite might think otherwise if they knew the intimate details of her life.

¹²⁰ LBCD January 7-10, 1862. Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 309-13.

¹²¹ Anthony Gene Carey, *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 7-13, hereafter referred to as Carey, *Parties*. See also Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 103-5, hereafter referred to as Cashin, *Venture*.

¹²² Carey, *Parties*, 7-13. Cashin, *Venture*, 103-5.

“Who can appreciate or understand anything about such a life,” she lamented “but a woman who marries a bachelor who has lived with his Negroes at bed and board.” She continued “What a life many poor wives have to live in uncomplaining silence.” These statements give the reader pause. In this instance, Laura not only objected to the slaves’ uncontrollable behavior and poor performance as servants; she also alluded to the question of intimate relations between white masters and black slave women, specifically her husband and his relations with the Comer female slaves. Mary Chesnut described the intimate associations of the Southern patriarchy with slave women by referring to the Bible, “So it is – flocks, herds and slaves – and wife Leah does not suffice. Rachel must be *added*, if not *married*. . .”¹²³ But by social conventions in the Old South, the sexual accomplishments of Southern men were held in high esteem.

Within the Southern patriarchal society, a man was expected to come to the marriage bed fully initiated; to be otherwise led to distrust and derision among his contemporaries. Bertram Wyatt-Brown observed that Southern men, like their French and English counterparts, regarded “sleeping with a woman as rite of virilization,” a ritual of passage to manhood. The availability of experienced young enslaved women, whom Alexander Wilson of Philadelphia, a visitor to Charleston, South Carolina, characterized as “all sprightliness and gayety,” made them the obvious choice for this all-important aspect of entry into manhood. Chancellor Harper of South Carolina attributed the sexual relations of young men of the plantation South with slave women to the “warm passions of youth” and categorized them as “less depraving.” Harper stated confidently that

¹²³ LBCD January 7-10, 1862. Mary Boykin Chesnut, *The Private Mary Chesnut: the Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 42, eds. C. Vann Woodward, Elizabeth Muhlenfield hereafter referred to as Chesnut, *Private Diary*. Chesnut refers to Genesis 29-30. Woodward noted that Jacob was not satisfied with his wife, Leah, but also married her sister Rachel. Jacob had children with both of them and with their handmaidens.

privileged young white men naturally gravitated to the “greater allurements” of white women of planter society for the purposes of courtship and marriage. To illustrate, W. W. Harrison of Alabama wrote to Benjamin Yancey that he had discontinued his “love visits” to the “quarter” since he began a courtship with a white woman. Thus, the coerced services of sexually experienced slave women in the Old South served the purposes of plantation society by aiding in the preparation for manhood of Southern gentlemen and also served to maintain the moral order much as prostitutes did in the Old World. Gentlemanly discretion was expected, but men discussed among themselves their sexual prowess with black slave “wenches” or “ladies of colour”, thereby enhancing their images while gaining the respect of their contemporaries. “I have just returned from unchaste enjoyment of pleasant sensations in associating with my dear Jane,” John Guion wrote to his brother George in 1827. Robert Taylor Scott, when visiting White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, bragged that he “resisted the charms of all the young ladies at the Springs, the ladies of colour excepted, of course.”¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 296-8.

On the French see Jacques Rossiaud, “Prostitution, Youth, and Society in the towns of Southeastern France in the Fifteenth Century,” in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, eds., *Deviants and the Abandoned in French Society*, Elborg Forster and Patricia Ranum, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978,) 1-46.

On the women of Charleston see Alexander Wilson, *The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson, the American Ornithologist* (Paisley, Scotland, 1876), I, 167-8, Alexander B. Grosart, ed.

On the positive good of the services of slave women to planter society see *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on this Important Subject* (Augusta: Pritchard, Abbott, & Loomis, 1860) Harper, ed. E. N. Elliott.

On visits to the quarter and courting white women see W. W. Harrison to Benjamin Yancey, 3 December 1837, Benjamin Cudworth Yancey Papers, UNC. On pleasant experiences with “Jane” see John G. Guion to George S. Guion, 31 December 1837 as found in Cashin, *Venture*, 105.

For a comprehensive discussion of sexual/sensual encounters of young men of the Old South at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, see Robert Taylor Scott quote as found in Charlene M. Boyer Lewis, *Ladies and Gentleman on Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790 – 1860* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 146.

There is no evidence of mulatto children in the schedules for James Comer's slaves during this period that might support conjectures of his possible liaisons with slave women. It is imaginable, however, that James may have been sterile since he and Laura remained childless. Nevertheless, Laura's statement about James's relations with his slaves necessarily leads to speculation. James may have prevailed upon the census taker to prevent written evidence of children on his plantations being listed as mulatto in the interest of gentlemanly discretion. It is also plausible that errors were made. After all, census takers listed James's cousin, John Fletcher Comer, and his family as black in the 1850 census contrary to all evidence.¹²⁵ Therefore it is not outside the realm of possibility that a careless census taker neglected to note the mixed race of slave offspring on James Comer's plantations. Then again, James may have sold off the evidence of his sexual liaisons with slave women. Sarah Gayle wrote of men whose "bestly passions" led them "to the bed of a slave" and then demonstrated no remorse "when they see their blood sold" and "bartered like their horses."¹²⁶

The behavior of the Comer slaves at the house in Columbus may be considered as part of the equation. Intimate relations may have led James to accord special considerations for work assignments at the Big House for trusted or favored slaves. Assignment here offered exposure to the city and whatever freedom and social interactions that might be available there. "My mother in law told me when I was first married not to send female servants in the streets on errands" commented Mary Chesnut

¹²⁵ See discussion of Braxton Bragg Comer, note 21 in, Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum "Anglo" Alabama: A Reexamination of Southern Race Relations," *The Journal of American History*, 68, 1 (June, 1981), 16-34.

¹²⁶ Sarah Haynesworth Gayle Diary, 7 Feb 1828, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama hereafter referred to as HSC.

in 1861; “they were there tempted,” she stated. The senior Mrs. Chesnut added that she had been very “particular, but *you see with what result* [emphasis in the original].” Chesnut’s sardonic tone illustrates the social and moral dilemma mistresses faced within the patriarchal society of the Old South. C. Vann Woodward observed that Mary Chesnut believed that the senior “Mr. Chesnut had children by the slave woman whom she called Rachel.”¹²⁷

To elucidate, consider the arrangements made by Henry Hammond for his two slave mistresses, Sally Johnson and her daughter, Louisa, who were assigned to serve in his family’s main residence where his wife, Catherine Fitzsimmons Hammond, and their children lived. Catherine took umbrage with the arrangements and demanded that the two slave women and their children, some of them fathered by Hammond and his son, Henderson, be sold.¹²⁸

Laura stated that mistresses faced condemnation and contempt if they objected to master-slave relationships or masters’ behavior at any level: “If they say one word, censure, without measure is heaped upon them.”¹²⁹ Slavery in the Old South was a paternalistic institution. It consisted of a complex set of intensely personal human relationships. Slaves had an obligation to give faithful and obedient service to their masters. The masters reciprocally had an obligation to treat their slaves well and provide for them (or chastise disobedient slaves) and to take an interest in the lives of their slaves. Genovese argues that this system allowed slaves considerable space in which to live their

¹²⁷ Chesnut, *Private Diary*, 42.

¹²⁸ See an extensive discussion on master and female slave relationships in Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 86-8.

¹²⁹ LBCD, Jan 5, 1862.

own lives and develop their own culture. They were frequently able to establish their own rhythm of work, which included regular periods of light work and days off in between cycles of hard work. They developed their own version of Christianity, and enjoyed themselves during corn-shuckings, hog-killings and other activities that combined work, food and fun.¹³⁰

An example of such an occasion at the Comers' home in Columbus occurred on January 7, 1862 when a wagon arrived from the plantations with provisions and meat. Laura directed the house slaves and those from the plantations who brought the wagon in the cutting and storage of meat. Pork and corn, along with other garden produce, represented the staples of the Southern diet.¹³¹ An example of a similar occasion was described by Kate Stone on her plantation, Brokenburn: "Today they are killing the last of the hogs," Kate declared "All of the house servants with a contingent from the quarters are making lard, sausage, souse, etc., etc.," she continued.¹³² The events of hog-killing time, a time of plenty, caused great excitement for one and all. On a cold day in early winter, all other activities ceased. All hands, men and women, joined in the tremendous undertaking that was butchering and preserving meats in the Old South.

The operations began before daylight when servants lit great fires and set huge pots to boil. "Mammy was the commanding genius when it came to saving the lard," remarked Sam Williams, with "whole troops of women to do the work." At general hog-killings on large plantations, it was not unusual to butcher 150 hogs. Beginning just after

¹³⁰ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 316, hereafter referred to as Genovese, *Roll Jordan*.

¹³¹ LBCD, Jan 7, 1862.

¹³² Kate Stone, *Brokenburn*, 81.

midnight, the men went to the pens and one by one delivered a disabling blow to the hogs' heads. The hogs' throats were slit, for "He of the knife never failed," noted Williams. The hogs were then plunged into "scalding vats," where "Uncle Mike was supreme..." As soon as Uncle Mike "pronounced it 'good'" each hog was hauled out of the water and placed on "a long platform of rails, and then a dozen black hands snatched the loosened hair." Processing "runs" were organized so that when the hog reached the end of the run the carcass was completely cleaned and ready to be suspended, head down, on a "gambrel stick" to facilitate cleaning and drainage of blood. "For days I sniffed the odor of cooking lard and fresh meat, until for once I had enough of the kitchen," Williams concluded. Slaves enjoyed hog-killing time. They ate their fill and sang as they worked. Cleaned and drained hogs were cut up in sections, rubbed with salt and hung in the smokehouse to cure. Slave women prepared elaborate meals as the work came to completion. Everyone including the white folks enjoyed the results of the work involved presented in a great harvest-style feast.¹³³

According to Genovese, then, slaves in the paternalistic society of the Old South were not regarded solely as chattel to be exploited, but were real people who entered into communal relationships with their masters. This reciprocal relationship with the Comer slaves may have been carefully developed by James over the years. Laura may not have comprehended or agreed with this organization, as James and the Comer slaves understood it, since it existed long before she married James. Mary Chesnut wrote that

¹³³ LBCD, Jan 7, 1862. Stone, *Brokenburn*, 81. W.S. Harrison, *Sam Williams: A Tale of the Old South* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1892), 9-12. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974) 320. See also John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770 to 1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988); Sam Brewer Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

Northerners' expectations of slave behavior were different from those of Southerners. "The Northern men and women who came here were the hardest, because they expected an African to work and behave as a white man. We do not." It is possible that James's treatment and expectations of his servants were not the same as Laura's, which resulted in slaves' difficult behavior with her and her irritation and distress when dealing with them. The Comer slaves' attitude toward Laura may have arisen from other circumstances, however.¹³⁴

Laura registered long-standing grievances with her marital circumstances. She wrote that in twelve years of marriage there were times when she was kept alone in the house by James for three weeks at a time. She added that he would "not even" allow her the company of "a child." She feared "that at the last great day" there would be many who were judged "saints in the church and devils at home."¹³⁵ More than likely, Laura did not count the presence of black domestic bondsmen and women and longed for the company of other white women during the period when she and James lived exclusively on the plantation in Alabama in the 1850s.

Isolation ranked highly among the complaints of mistresses. "For about three weeks I did not have the pleasure of seeing one white female face," wrote Mary Lovelace Kendall to her sister Lydia in 1853. The plantation household presented special challenges to mistresses in the Old South. As Fox-Genovese argues, antebellum Southern society was composed of networks of master-dominated patriarchal households, both farm and plantation, that formed the central focus for production and reproduction.

¹³⁴ Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 5; Chesnut, *Private Diary*, 42.

¹³⁵ LBCD, Jan 5, 1862.

As mistress of James' household, Laura, like the household slaves, was subject to the master's, James' rule.¹³⁶

Among the many trials described by Laura was the “insulting, insolent and disobedient” behavior of James' slaves, and his behavior offended also. He was gruff and he showed “all his fight out at home against a defenseless woman – his wife!” She concluded, “True manliness exists in a different course in contending with the strong and in great gentleman protecting the weak!”¹³⁷ In this observation on “true manliness,” Laura raised questions regarding the definitions of manliness and honor in the patriarchy of the Old South.

During the colonial era and in the years immediately following the Revolution, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown points out, the culture of honor was prominent in the North as well as in the South. During the nineteenth century a culture of guilt and respectability, “domestic and civic virtue” as Wyatt-Brown characterized it, developed in the North that was concerned with an individual morality that differed from concepts of honor and reputation as they were understood in the Antebellum South. Mary Chesnut expanded on the subject of the immorality embodied in masters' harsh behavior in the home. Chesnut referred to Laura's cousin Harriet Beecher Stowe's villainous character Simon Legree as similar to a man she knew; “I know half a Legree,” declared Chesnut. She remarked that he is cruel, yet “has polished manners” and is the “best member of the Church in the world.”¹³⁸ On this subject both Laura and Mary Chesnut demonstrated the conflicting

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, Chapter One. See Mary Lovelace Kendall to “Sister Lydia,” June 20, 1853, Hamilton-Kendall Family Papers, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Georgia (C61818) as found in Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 39.

¹³⁷ LBCD, January 5-6, 1862.

¹³⁸ Chesnut, *Diary*, 114, 142.

cultures of honor versus guilt at odds in the antebellum United States. They employed the Northern morality standards as found in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to indict Southern men's behavior within the Southern honor society.¹³⁹

In the society in which Laura lived, men like James ruled their households – their wives, their children, and their slaves – as small kingdoms. Southern masters were free and equal with each other as independent farmers and heads of households, but white women, children, and slaves were emphatically not free and equal. In the reciprocal relationship in which they were dependent on the patriarch for provision and protection, all members of the Southern household owed their labor, and above all, their loyalty and obedience to the family patriarch. James Comer expected his family, both black and white, to follow these tenets honorably. In Laura's position, this meant hard work managing his household, properly managing the slaves as defined by James, acting as a moral exemplar on his behalf, and performing as a gracious hostess for his guests. For the slaves, it meant the completion of work and tasks to standards established by James and, for the female slaves, possible sexual servitude. In this separate and subordinate role, privileged Southern mistresses were not, in any sense, rulers of the home, in the way they might be in the Victorian North. In the home or workplace (farm, plantation, law office, etc.), or the household as Southerners defined it, women, children, and slaves, all were under the patriarchal rule of the master.¹⁴⁰ When defied, disappointed or disobeyed, masters could deal roughly with the offending slave, child or spouse. James's bullying

¹³⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *Honor*, 16-22.

¹⁴⁰ Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 6-7; on "family black and white," 73. On the Southern household see Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, Chapter One.

and gruff behavior perhaps indicated his dissatisfaction with Laura's performance of her duties as mistress. An unhappy and disgruntled slave population with perceived grievances precipitated by their mistress's mismanagement, unreasonable work expectations, inappropriate or excessive punishment and abusive language, could more than likely displease and anger any master. Dissension spread rapidly in the slave population threatening the reciprocal relationship and endangering the peace that made the plantation work.¹⁴¹

Slaves confided their problems and objections to masters and were expected to do so. "My Negroes are permitted to come to me with their complaints and grievances and in no instance shall they be punished for so doing," wrote J. W. Fowler of Mississippi.¹⁴² Masters asked slaves their opinions about managers' performances and respected their evaluations. As patriarch, James may have disapproved of Laura's treatment of his slaves and her criticism of his mastery of them. Laura's complaints, therefore, might indicate possible domestic disagreements between Laura and James instigated by slaves' complaints of perceived grievances due to their dissatisfaction with Laura's slave management skills and her treatment of them. And it is possible that James' gruff behavior resulted from disagreements due to the differences in James's and Laura's expectations of slaves' services.¹⁴³ Then again, news of Lincoln's election, secession and the war may have contributed to the unruly behavior of the Comer slave population.

¹⁴¹ Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 5, 15-7, 91, 122.

¹⁴² Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., *Plantation and Frontier Documents: 1649-1863: Illustrative of Industrial History in the Colonial and Ante-bellum South* (Cleveland: Arthur. H. Clark Company, 1909) I, 113.

¹⁴³ Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 72-3.

Not surprisingly, slaves were Lincoln's most enthusiastic audience in the South. They were well aware of the possibilities a Lincoln presidency might hold. "Mrs. James had a sister that came from the North" and she would talk to the slaves on her sister's plantation, one slave noted. This Northern woman explained to the slaves that "Lincoln was going to free all the slaves," and that they "would be as free as she was."¹⁴⁴ Slaves eagerly attended campaign rallies in Columbus and demonstrated an "unusual interest" in the 1860 election. As a result, the city barred slave attendance.¹⁴⁵ With all that the election of Lincoln portended, slaves in the Valley demonstrated their objection to these limitations by setting fires in Fort Gaines that destroyed businesses, banks and stores, amounting to over \$50,000 in damages and loss.¹⁴⁶ These actions emulated one of the preferred tactical maneuvers of slave insurrections in the British Sugar Islands.¹⁴⁷

Slaves heard the discussions going on around them about the threat of abolition posed by Republicans and Lincoln, and after his election and the onset of war, there can be little doubt that they anticipated freedom. In the words of Charlotte B. Griffith's carriage driver, "Freedom was at our door."¹⁴⁸ They listened closely to their owners' conversations for news of the war and the advance of the Union Army. Mary Chesnut and others guarded their conversations in the presence of servants to the extent of speaking

¹⁴⁴ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood Publishers, 1972), 131.

¹⁴⁵ *Columbus Daily Sun*, September 26, 1860.

¹⁴⁶ *Columbus Enquirer*, November 13, 1860.

¹⁴⁷ Jordan, *Tumult*, 220. See also Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 112-4.

¹⁴⁸ Jordan, *Tumult*, 204.

only French in slaves' presence.¹⁴⁹ House servants occupied an integral position within the slave news and information network; carriage drivers, in particular, with their propinquity to the mistresses of the planter community were important sources of data. Planters generally rode their horses on outings while the womenfolk rode in chauffeured carriages. The Rockaway carriage mentioned in Laura's diary represented elite status and wealth in Southern plantation communities, and the position of driver was the preserve of trusted male servants who often doubled as manservants for masters.¹⁵⁰ Carriage drivers ran errands, collected visitors and returned them to their homes or the depot, in addition to their regular driving duties for the mistress. They often required no travelling passes when on assignment, and they enjoyed opportunities to visit with other servants while waiting for mistresses to do their shopping and visiting. Thus, carriage drivers provided to others some of the most important news and information regarding the events of the war. In the events that transpired in Louisiana at Second Creek, this privileged position had larger implications, and offers an opportunity for further analysis of the Comer slaves' behavior and attitudes.

For an extended period, Willis, Laura's driver, transported his mistress on calls and errands. On January 2, 1862, Laura met a member of the Columbus Guard on her trip into Columbus and spent a few minutes discussing the Columbus Guard's role at Manassas. The Battle of First Manassas (called Bull Run in the North), fought six months before on July 21, 1861, near the city of Manassas, Virginia, had clearly demonstrated the

¹⁴⁹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 67.

¹⁵⁰ Maurie Dee McInnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 169-71. On social rank and seating in carriages see Robert L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 36-7.

bloody and violent nature that would characterize the war by the high number of casualties inflicted there and the level of ferocity shown on both sides. Later that day, Laura gave a dollar to a lame man in “soldier’s clothes and crippled with rheumatism” before posting a packet of woolen socks to the Army (the Columbus Guard) at the front. She returned home and was surprised to find “cousin Anderson Comer here from Macon,” but was “very glad to see him.” Anderson dined with Laura and spent the night and travelled with her in her Rockaway to Columbus the following day.¹⁵¹

Interspersed in her diary entries of routine daily activities Laura noted that she visited a friend and spent the evening knitting socks to send to the members of the Columbus Guard at Manassas. The morning paper “brought encouraging news from England and France” on the surrender to the British of Confederate “Ministers Mason and Slidell” who, “it is supposed sailed for Europe on the Niagara on the 1st.”¹⁵² She

¹⁵¹ LBCD, January 2, 1862. Anderson Comer is listed on Bibb County, Georgia slave schedule 2 of 1860 as owning twenty slaves several of them described as mulatto. Data found at Ancestry.com in association with the National Archives available at <http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/view.aspx?dbid=7668&path=Georgia.Bibb.Warrior.4&sid=&gskw=Anderson+Comer> accessed April 1, 2012. On the 1865 U.S. I.R.S. Tax Assessments List Anderson Cooper is listed as owning a gold watch, \$70.00 worth of silver plate, and a carriage 1865 Assessments List found at Ancestry.com available at http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=1264&iid=RHUSA1862_101687-00300&fn=Anderson&ln=Comer&st=r&ssrc=&pid=4473031 accessed April 1, 2012. Anderson Comer applied for and was granted a Presidential Pardon at Milledgeville, Georgia on September 25, 1865. At the time the pardon was granted it was noted that his worth was \$32,000. Data found at Ancestry.com available at http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=1187&iid=MIUSA1865_113132-00715&fn=Anderson&ln=Comer&st=r&ssrc=&pid=2826 accessed April 1, 2012.

¹⁵² Laura refers to a diplomatic incident, commonly called “The Trent Affair.” In November of 1861, Union Captain Charles Wilkes, in command of the USS San Jacinto, intercepted the British ship RMS Trent and removed Confederate Ministers Plenipotentiary James Mason (Virginia) bound to London, and John Slidell (Louisiana), bound to Paris, declaring them to be the ‘embodiment of despatches.’ The capture and arrest of Mason and Slidell nearly brought Britain into the war against the United States. See James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 388-91.

implored, “May we, as a nation, be taught by the Holy Spirit and have true wisdom from above to direct our councils.”¹⁵³

In the course of this entry, Laura mentioned meeting with veterans of First Manassas and discussing the ferocity of the battle and the outcome for the Confederate Army. She also addressed the Trent Affair in which the British threatened war against the United States. These were major topics of interest that centered on the success or failure of the South in its war for independence. During this period of time, Willis was positioned to hear the conversations Laura held with friends and acquaintances, and to converse independently with other servants or Freedmen in Columbus. This fact-finding opportunity would have provided him with a wealth of information and a solid understanding of the current situation. He then, in all likelihood, shared this information with other members of the Comer slave community.¹⁵⁴

The events of the war signified possibilities of liberation to the enslaved in the South. Historian Winthrop Jordan reveals that news of approaching freedom inspired resistance. In the words of one of the many chauffeurs involved in the insurrection plot at Second Creek, Mississippi, “The carriage drivers thought the Negroes would be free.”¹⁵⁵ It is reasonable to ponder the possibility that explanations for the Comer slaves’ disrespectful and unruly behavior might originate in the slaves’ anticipation of pending freedom.

¹⁵³ LBCD, January 3-5, 1862. James cousin, John Wallace Comer, son of John Fletcher and Catherine Drewery Comer of Barbour County, Alabama, served with the 57th Alabama. See Kenneth W. Noe, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 42, hereafter Noe, *Rebels*.

¹⁵⁴ On slaves’ means of gathering and disseminating information see: Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 563, 624.

¹⁵⁵ Jordan, *Tumult*, 204.

On January 10, 1862, James arrived in Columbus from the plantations and was picked up at the depot by Willis. James presence relieved Laura of the onerous task of dealing with their servants alone, and freed her to enjoy the visit of their cousin, Victoria, and her family.¹⁵⁶ On January 19, 1862, Laura recorded, “Georgia seceded from the Union one year ago this day!” She prayed, “May the struggle for Southern Independence soon be over.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ LCBD, January 7-11, 1862.

¹⁵⁷ LBCD, January 19, 1862.

Chapter Three

War: “May God avenge the wrong and support the right!”¹⁵⁸

On the cool, rainy morning of Saturday, April 12, 1862, Laura wrote, “Stirring news expected from the war! Ft Pulaski is attacked. I am anxious to hear from the East and the West.” She believed, “A few weeks must reveal great things. The immediate future is full of important events!” The next day she disappointedly observed, “Ft. Pulaski surrendered yesterday at 2’clock after a fight in which only four were wounded. What a terrible war this is.” On April 11, 1862, after a siege that began in January, the Fort Pulaski garrison commander, twenty-five year old Confederate Colonel Charles Olmstead, fearing that the fort’s powder magazine might be struck by a mortar shell endangering the lives of all 383 men within, surrendered the fort. The loss of Fort Pulaski left the port of Savannah vulnerable to Union attack, but Savannah was not taken.¹⁵⁹ The blockade of Confederate ports tightened; consequently, the process of securing supplies of military munitions and *accoutrements* as well as necessities required by the general population became more difficult.

¹⁵⁸ LBCD, June 1, 1862.

¹⁵⁹ LBCD, April 13, 1862. See also “By Telegraph: Fort Pulaski Surrenders,” *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, 3. The report in the *Atlanta Southern Confederacy* claimed that the Union barrage breached the walls of the fort seven times and that a shell hit the powder magazine. Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, div. of Random House, 2008), 152-4. See also David H. McGee, “Fort Pulaski,” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia* available at <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-610> accessed May 28, 2012.

Lincoln's controversial decision to blockade the South occurred on April 19, 1861, shortly after the Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter. The problem with the blockade, in terms of international law, concerned the acknowledgment of a sovereign Confederacy, since legal blockade meant *de facto* recognition of the Confederate States of America. Lincoln maintained throughout the war that the seceded states did not represent a sovereign entity but merely states in rebellion. This presented a problem for European states since formal recognition of the Confederacy represented an unfriendly act toward the Lincoln administration. Yet respect for the Union blockade required that foreign powers recognize the independence of the entity under blockade; therefore, the Lincoln administration, in a thinly veiled ruse, characterized the blockade as an attempt to collect fees and import duties from Southern shipping. In the end, Lincoln had to accept the term "blockade" with all its legal inconvenience.¹⁶⁰

The Union blockade never totally closed the South Atlantic coast to trade. Union blockade operations netted about \$30 million in Confederate shipping.¹⁶¹ To offset the obvious risks, blockade runners operated at a huge profit margin, which meant that cargos consisted of high priced goods such as medicines and expensive fabrics. The ships engaged in running the blockade required speed and agility and carried reduced cargo loads as a result.¹⁶² The loss of Fort Pulaski and tightening of the blockade had additional consequences.

¹⁶⁰ Craig L. Symonds, *The Civil War at Sea* (Oxford: Praeger, ABC-CLIO, 2009), 33-4, hereafter referred to as Symonds, *Civil War*.

¹⁶¹ Symonds, *Civil War* 32-3.

¹⁶² Symonds, *Civil War*, 32.

The capture of Fort Pulaski meant that two hundred miles of the Southern coast were under Union control since Fernandina and St. Augustine, Florida, had fallen previously. It also rendered the Port of Savannah incapable of further participation in the Confederate war effort as an international shipping center. The significance of Columbus as a port and a center for wartime production and shipping activity increased as Savannah's usefulness to Lower Chattahoochee cotton planters for shipping their cotton came to an end. Savannah had ranked third among the nation's cotton shippers in 1861, and the loss of this commercial port for cotton producers of the Valley resulted in not simply a tightening of the blockade on necessities of life such as medicines and imported items like shoes and fabrics for clothing. Goods available through blockade runners were priced fifteen hundred to two thousand percent of their original cost. It also threatened the financial stability of the cotton-based economy in the Valley. Cotton and other produce from the Valley normally reached the port of Savannah via the Central Georgia Railroad to be shipped from there to buyers primarily in the pre-war North or Europe. Over time the blockade had serious implications for the Valley and the entire Confederacy.¹⁶³

Georgia was the most industrialized state in the Confederacy and the city of Columbus ranked highly in this respect.¹⁶⁴ Columbus did not experience the adverse effects of the blockade in the early years of the war; in 1862, Columbus merchants' shelves brimmed with luxury items. The supply of foodstuffs reflected the success of farmers who had ready access to the Columbus market for their produce. Fabric and yarn

¹⁶³ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Ersatz in the Confederacy: Shortages and Substitutes on the Southern Homefront* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 13-4, hereafter referred to as Massey, *Ersatz*.

¹⁶⁴ Massey, *Ersatz*, 161-2.

continued to be offered at relatively reasonable prices, and Laura marveled at the discovery of “beautiful calicos” available in Columbus at “\$1.00 per yard.” The many goods available on the shelves surprised her.¹⁶⁵ Cotton was in high demand at Valley textile mills,¹⁶⁶ and the Comers sold their cotton just before Laura embarked on her annual effort to provide clothing for the slaves in August of 1862. Prices began to rise during that summer, and Laura observed that since the cost of staples was increasing, the Comers must increase prices on their own produce, or they would not be able to survive.¹⁶⁷ Confederate morale also fluctuated.

In April 1862, news of the Battle of Shiloh had sent tremors reverberating throughout the South. Grant’s victory at Shiloh sent Confederate spirits plummeting. The casualties numbered about 20,000: 10,000 killed or wounded on each side. No battle to date compared with Shiloh, and the devastating numbers of casualties and the level of brutality set a new tone to the war. Any remaining visions of gallant cavaliers engaged in a short, heroic struggle for right and liberty evaporated as news of Shiloh spread across the South.¹⁶⁸

On April 24, Laura began to experience a deep depression that continued for several days. New Orleans fell on April 27, and Laura selflessly spearheaded the effort to organize nurses to assist with the wounded in expectation of a great battle. “The political horizon is dark and forebodes evil. The horrors of Civil War are hanging over us,” she declared. Like Laura, the Confederacy was depressed and experienced a feeling

¹⁶⁵ LBCD, June 20, 1862.

¹⁶⁶ David Williams, *Rich Man’s War*, 79-80.

¹⁶⁷ LBCD, Aug 1862.

¹⁶⁸ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 405-13.

of imminent disaster. The crisis intensified when Major General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac advanced to six miles outside of Richmond, and it appeared that the Confederate capital might fall.¹⁶⁹

Laura wrote, "A terrible battle is now raging near Richmond." She continued, "May God avenge the wrong and support the right!" Urged into action by President Jefferson Davis, Confederate commander General Joseph Johnston initiated an early-morning attack, which became a tragedy of errors. To complete the disaster, Johnston suffered wounds inflicted by shell fragments and a bullet to the shoulder. Few, if any, realized at the time the importance his replacement would have on the course of the war. President Davis appointed General Robert E. Lee to command the newly organized Army of Northern Virginia. Davis respected Lee, a fellow West Point graduate. Lee, the brilliant strategist with whom Davis served during the war with Mexico, practiced an offensive/defensive strategy and skillfully utilized his cavalry in reconnaissance and diversionary tactics. Lee broke off the engagement outside Richmond and prepared a plan to draw the Federals away from the capital.¹⁷⁰

On June 10, 1862 Laura was able to cheer, "The Guerilla Warfare in our Army is most effectual. Stone-wall Jackson has had another victory!" She observed, "I am deeply interested in the result of this war but am more calm and complacent than last year." She had previously foolishly felt as though the "weight of the Confederacy" was on her shoulders. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley thrilled the people of the Lower Chattahoochee Valley and the Confederacy and buoyed

¹⁶⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 427. LBCD, May 16, 1862.

¹⁷⁰ LBCD, June 1, 1862. McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 464-71.

morale as Lee campaigned to draw the Federals away from Richmond. It was in the Shenandoah Valley campaign that General Jackson, former Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy and Instructor of Artillery at Virginia Military Institute, a West Point graduate, and also a veteran of the War with Mexico, demonstrated his astonishing talent as a tactician and became an indispensable part of Lee's command. Devoutly religious and, often, quirky, he gained the enduring respect of his soldiers who nicknamed him Uncle Jack and considered him "crazy like a fox."¹⁷¹ Confederate Army successes, however, yielded casualties that meant suffering for family and friends on the homefront.

Casualty lists brought sad news from Virginia. Laura lamented the death of her dear friend, Sergeant James More, CSA, son of Dr. and Mrs. More of Columbus. Laura wrote "I am anxious to hear further news of the recent battle." She continued, "Upon hearing the news, I immediately called for the carriage; rode down to Dr. More's; found the family greatly distressed...a gem has fallen." Sergeant More's body arrived in Columbus; it was accompanied by his servant, Phil, who, during the funeral services at the Columbus Presbyterian Church, received heartfelt praise for his devotion to his master. On June 30, 1862, Laura observed, "great anxiety prevails here, no dispatches have been received all day." Then the news arrived that Henry Lockhart of Columbus, son of another friend, had suffered possibly mortal wounds. The Lockhart family had already lost its husband and father, and now, possibly, its eldest son. Laura mourned, "How much can the heart bear" as she wrote "a notice for the paper."¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 464-71, Shenandoah Valley, 425, see also 429.

¹⁷² LBCD, June 29 - July 4, 1862.

From June 25 until July 1, 1862, the Army of Northern Virginia fought the series of battles known as the Seven Days. From the James River to Mechanicsville to the Pamunkey River, battles were fought in an effort to force the Federals out of Virginia. When it ended, twenty thousand Southerners lay wounded or dead, and McClellan had abandoned the Yorktown peninsula.¹⁷³

Lee, once considered overly cautious, now assumed the stature of hero. He “amazed and confounded his detractors by the brilliancy of his genius,” declared the *Richmond Whig*.¹⁷⁴ In the North, calls went out for additional troops. Radical abolitionists gained strength and forced a shift in the Republican mindset. The concept that the nation’s destiny intertwined with the abolition of slavery gained ground. The belief that slaves, the labor force supporting the traitorous rebels, as a free labor force dedicated in service to Union and liberty would greatly aid the Union cause began to gain momentum. But opinion was polarized on this major issue, and the fear of Democratic backlash signaled caution to many Republicans. On July 22, 1862, Lincoln announced to his cabinet his intention, under the Presidential War Powers, to emancipate the slaves in the rebel states. Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William H. Seward, approved of the measure but counseled patience; he advised Lincoln to wait for a Union victory on the battlefield.¹⁷⁵ On August 22, 1862, Abraham Lincoln declared, “My paramount object in the struggle is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or destroy slavery.” He

¹⁷³ LBCD, June 29, 1862. McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 470. See the article from the *Richmond Examiner*, “The Great Battle,” in *The Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, July 1, 1862, 2.

¹⁷⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 490. *Richmond Whig* quote as found in McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 490; see also Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1934-5) II, 244-45.

¹⁷⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 505.

elaborated that if he had to free all, half or none of the slaves to save the Union, he would do it.¹⁷⁶

Confederate hopes soared in the summer of 1862 due to General Robert E. Lee's successful campaigns in Northern Virginia. Confederate possibilities for alliances with France and England rose. The *London Times* stated, "The North and South must now choose between separation and ruin." In a strategic move designed to enhance the South's diplomatic efforts to enlist the support of England and France, Lee took his Army of Northern Virginia, 55,000 men, into Maryland. James McPherson observed that "The fate of diplomacy rode with Lee in this campaign"¹⁷⁷

In England and France, statesman sought to broker a diplomatic settlement. They received negative responses from Secretary of State Seward who replied, "There is no possible compromise." The British Foreign Minister, Lord John Russell, wrote, on September 17, as the battle at Sharpsburg unfolded, to advocate a plan for mediation. He declared that if the North would not cooperate, then Britain "ought ourselves to recognize the Southern States as an independent State." Confederate Minister Plenipotentiary John Slidell wrote from Paris to President Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia, "I am more hopeful than I have been at any moment since my arrival."¹⁷⁸

Although Lee's army fought the Union forces to a standstill and parried every move by the Union Army at the Battle of Antietam (called Sharpsburg in the South) Lee

¹⁷⁶Roy C. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 Vols., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), V, 388-89.

¹⁷⁷ Times quotation as found in Frank L. Owsley, Sr., *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 297, 353, hereafter referred to as Owsley, *King Cotton* ; see also James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 554-8, hereafter referred to as McPherson, *Battle Cry*.

¹⁷⁸ Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis: Confederate President* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 294.

was forced to retreat to Virginia for resupply. Traditional rules of battle held that the army that commanded the field at the end of battle was the victor, and after the stalemate at Antietam, the Confederate political and diplomatic prospects remained in limbo. Word of Lee's retreat into Virginia caused British Prime Minister, Viscount Palmerston, to hesitate, and in a letter to his foreign minister, who continued to advocate recognition of the South, Palmerston declared, "These last battles in Maryland have rather set the North up again." Lincoln's declaration of his intention to emancipate the slaves changed the game for England. The Federals now battled for Union, but they also carried the banner of freedom.¹⁷⁹

Lincoln regarded Lee's return to Virginia as a Union victory. On September 22, 1862, he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves in the Confederate states (i.e. the states in rebellion) that did not return to the Union by January 1863. In so doing, Lincoln resorted to presidential war powers to confiscate enemy war assets. Accordingly, the Border State slaves remained in slavery after January 1, 1863, leading to endless public debate and controversy. Upon the news of pending emancipation, some slaves made freedom a reality by simply walking off plantations, while others displayed resistance behavior. Such reaction hindered the Confederate war effort and threatened to undermine the households that were the very foundation of Southern society. Slaves provided vital services that allowed Confederate soldiers to leave farms and plantations to fight the war. Also, without slave cooperation, the

¹⁷⁹ Palmerston quoted in James V. Murfin, *The Gleam of Bayonets: The Battle of Antietam and Robert E. Lees Maryland Campaign, September 1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 394, 396-7, 399-400; Introduction by James I. Robertson; New Forward by Scott Harwig, reprint, original, 1965.

McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 555-6.

reciprocal relationship of the patriarchy and the household, the basic infrastructure of the Confederacy, was challenged. The patriarchy of the Old South, already frayed when Southern white men went to war, now faced an increased threat to its race and slave-based social system.¹⁸⁰

On October 1, 1862, Kate Stone mused, “The most important fact is Lincoln’s proclamation freeing all slaves held by rebel masters after January 1. I wonder what the result will be of this diabolical move.” She hopefully remarked, “Surely not as bad for us as they intend it to be.”¹⁸¹ Laura Beecher Comer’s increased complaints about slaves’ obstinacy and disobedience “from some cause unknown to” her were contemporaneous with Lincoln’s open letter of August 22, 1862. Lincoln clearly stated that if he had to free the slaves to preserve the Union, he would. Any reason for freedom was a good reason for the slaves; Lincoln’s motives, altruistic or otherwise, did not matter to those who could now feel their chains begin to loosen.

After August 22, 1862, Laura’s troubles with servants intensified. Surely slaves listened to whites talk and gathered intelligence on the progress of the war. “Last evening, after tea, we all became quite interested in conversing about the war,” wrote Laura on the warm, sultry evening of August 29. She observed also, “How terrible it is when servants have these fits of obstinacy and indolence. The Negro is certainly, not more than half civilized [Laura’s emphasis]?”¹⁸² The Comers and their guests often spent the evening after tea or dinner discussing the war in 1862. At this time, the Comers’ friend whom they regarded as a member of the family, Major W. G. Clemons, spent thirty days on

¹⁸⁰ Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 5, 7, 71-3, 134.

¹⁸¹ Stone, *Brokenburn*, 145-6.

¹⁸² LBCD, Aug 29, 1862.

furlough from the war at their Columbus residence. His visit was the occasion for a tea and social gathering of friends in the Comer home, and during dinner Major Clemons regaled the Comer guests with the details of the battles around Richmond.¹⁸³ House servants lingered within earshot of these conversations, and carriage drivers for the various Comer guests congregated nearby as well. On any given evening, Judge Henry L. Benning, a noted Georgia fire-eater and champion of Southern independence, and members of his family, numbered among the guests. These visitors were among the leading Confederates in Columbus and the Valley. For the slaves, listening to their regular conversations proved a vital source of data for slaves on the movement and location of troops, successes or failures of the army, and the general state of the Confederacy.¹⁸⁴

But eavesdropping constituted only one of the ways that servants gained intelligence.¹⁸⁵ Laura regularly received many newspapers and letters in the mail or delivered by friends. One day in August, 1862, she wrote that “Willis brought me three

¹⁸³ LBCD, Aug 7-10, 1862.

¹⁸⁴ Henry L. Benning led the Georgia delegation out of the 1860 Democratic National Convention, and presented a fiery argument for secession at the Georgia secession debate. During the war, he fought at the Battles of the Seven Days, Second Manassas, Antietam, and he led Georgia troops in the deadly fighting at Little Round Top at Gettysburg in 1863. At Chickamauga he had two horses shot out from under him as he led the successful charge that broke the Union lines. He was with Lee’s forces at the surrender at Appomattox. He ended his military career in the rank of Brigadier General, see Charles Pou, “Henry L. Benning, (1814-1875)” at The New Georgia Encyclopedia, available at <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-3813> accessed Aug 27, 2012.

See also James C. Cobb, "The Making of a Secessionist: Henry L. Benning and the Coming of the Civil War," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 60 (winter 1976): 313-23. William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁸⁵ LBCD, Sep 29, 1862. Laura noted that her cook, Olivia, had been off on a “frolic” but had returned. Lithe also visited her mother on the Comer plantations to no avail as far as altering her behavior. The only one of the slaves who behaved well was Manson the carpenter.

papers and two letters this morning.”¹⁸⁶ Some literate slaves could read newspapers, dispatches, and letters, and they would read aloud or share the information with others. The word spread rapidly, in whispered tones in the quarters, about “the possibility of freedom.”¹⁸⁷ To the slaves, the Union Army was now an army of liberation. Every Union victory and advance of Union forces translated to whispers of liberation and freedom. In the Lower Chattahoochee Valley and throughout the Confederacy, the slaves held clandestine meetings and prayed fervently for Union success. They gathered in their cabins at night to “sing, pray, and relate experiences all night long,” observed Mary Gladdy of Columbus. She declared that, “Their great soul-hungering desire was freedom.”¹⁸⁸ Slaves became convinced that the war was for them. “The war was for the freedom of the colored people,” declared former slave Riley Tirey.¹⁸⁹ The resistance behavior exhibited by the Comers’ and other slave-holders’ bondsmen and women, provides insight into Valley slaves’ reactions to pending freedom.

On the “delightfully cool & pleasant” evening of August 22, 1862, Laura recorded the events of that morning when “Willis, a careless rascal, allowed one of the horses to fall & break the Rockaway very badly; insomuch that I was compelled to leave it at a shop and send him home for a carriage.” This incident might just as easily indicate

¹⁸⁶ LBCD, Aug 7, 1862.

¹⁸⁷ Mary Gaddy, George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Supplemental Series I. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 11, 19 volumes, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972) 12 (b) hereafter referred to as Rawick, *American Slave*, as found in Anthony Gene Carey, *Sold Down the River: Slavery in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Alabama and Georgia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011) 208.

¹⁸⁸ Rawick, *American Slave*, ser. 2, vol. 12, pt. 1, 26-7.

¹⁸⁹ Riley Tirey, in the claim of Robert Guttery, #3128, Walker County, AL., Allowed Claims, Southern Claims Commission, National Archives as found in Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlet Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 100, here after referred to as Edwards, *Scarlett*.

sabotage as part of one slave's resistance game, rather than the carelessness to which Laura attributed it.¹⁹⁰

At the Cowikee Plantation, Laura recorded that a young slave boy, Edmund, disappointed her, for the first time, by "telling a story." Edmund was Laura's "model good little boy," who never before lied to her. She "punished" Edmund, and he displayed "shocking temper."¹⁹¹ Shortly thereafter, Laura complained that it "is terrible to be weighted down with a large family of these ignorant creatures." She continued, I "would gladly now be free of them forever."¹⁹² She did not advocate freeing the slaves. She merely wished for servants who did as they were told and behaved as she expected. Other white slaveholding women acted on the impulse to rid themselves of recalcitrant slaves. A woman in Savannah declared, "I am greatly relieved from having sent him away and have written to have him sold at any rate . . ." Another Savannah mistress explained to her husband, "We are doing the best we know, or as good as we can get the servants to do." She elaborated indignantly, "They learn to feel very independent . . ." Another noted, "Nancy has been very impertinent. She said she would not be hired out . . ."¹⁹³ Common tactics used by frustrated mistresses included the "hiring out," and sale of slaves who proved uncooperative. Laura Beecher Comer had Edmund, the boy who defied her when she punished him, sold on August 1, 1864.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ LBCD, Aug 22, 1862.

¹⁹¹ LBCD, Dec 5, 1862, Cowikee Plantation.

¹⁹² LBCD, Dec 11, 1862.

¹⁹³ Thomas Conn Bryan, *Confederate Georgia* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1953) 125-6, here after referred to as Bryan, *Confederate Georgia*.

¹⁹⁴ LBCD, Aug 1, 1864.

So difficult had slave management become in 1862, that the Georgia legislature enacted laws that removed exemptions from patrol duty for whites, and required travel passes for slaves to demonstrate owners' consent for their movements.¹⁹⁵ Absent owners due to military service greatly added to the difficulties of slave governance for those who remained on the home front. In the absence of owners, overseers more freely resorted to whippings and this increased slave resistance. In the extreme, slaves' lives were endangered. Such was the case at the Hines Holt plantation where a slave was shot for resisting punishment by whipping.¹⁹⁶

Laura had the luxury of having white men available for slave supervision in 1862. James, who was too old to serve in the army, remained at home to supervise plantation operations. He frequently returned from the plantations to the house in Columbus. In addition, he rode over the plantations of his deceased cousin, John Fletcher Comer (commonly known as Fletcher) to assure Fletcher's widow, Katy, that all there was in order. Fletcher died in 1858 and left his wife to manage their plantations with the help of their underage sons. Katy expressed how grateful she was that James assisted her in this way in a letter to her son Hugh, who was away at school.¹⁹⁷ Major Clemons, a family friend and Confederate army officer, of whom both Laura and James were very fond, maintained his residence at the Comer house in Columbus in 1862.¹⁹⁸ James Comer also

¹⁹⁵ Bryan, *Confederate Georgia*, 125-6.

¹⁹⁶ Rawick, *American Slave*, ser. 2, vol. 12, pt. 2, 17.

¹⁹⁷ Catherine Drewery Comer to "My Beloved Son," Mar 21, 1860, Comer Family Papers #167-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁹⁸ Clemons was a family friend. There is evidence of a Clemons family residing at a neighboring plantation in Russell County, Alabama near Uchee. Major Clemons is mentioned in passing by Wallace Comer in a letter from camp at Montgomery. See W. G. Clemons, Request for Confederate Commissions, as found at Ancestry.com. *Georgia, Civil War Correspondence, 1861-1865* [database on-line]. Provo, UT,

employed two overseers on his plantations. The presence of white men maintained the discipline of the servants in the household.

From August to December, 1862, Laura moved her base of operations from Columbus to James's Cowikee Plantation, located approximately thirty miles southwest of Columbus in Russell County, Alabama, returning to the house where she and James resided as newlyweds. "I will not keep house [in Columbus] again until nearly Christmas."¹⁹⁹ She would commute back and forth from the plantations in Alabama to Columbus as needed. "Seated by the bed at Cowikee Plantation," she wrote on November 19, 1862. "Yesterday evening, Miss Ella Boswell & myself came out here on the Cars [Laura's emphasis]," she continued. She would spend this time, as she did every August, at the plantations organizing the annual allotment of winter clothing and shoes for the Comer slaves. Prior to her departure to Cowikee, she had "engaged 800 yards of Osnaburg" and arranged for shoes to be made for the slaves in Columbus. She wrote, "preparing and arranging the winter clothing etc. etc. for the servants. I shall feel greatly relieved when clothing is prepared & shoes," and "shall feel I have done my duties let the servants do as they may." On December 3, she recorded, "The past month has been spent mostly in arranging for the winter. It is no small job," she observed, "now at exorbitant prices to provide for a family of servants." Traditionally, masters provided all spring and winter clothing articles, including coats, shoes and hats, and the Comers

USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Original data: Defense — Adjutant General — Letterbooks 1860–1909. 22/1/1. Georgia State Archives, Morrow, Georgia. Defense — Adjutant General — Incoming Correspondence, 1861–1914. 22/1/17. Georgia State Archives, Morrow, Georgia., available at http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=angs-c&gsln=Clemons&mswpn_ftp=Columbus%2c+Muscogee%2c+Georgia%2c+USA&mswpn=19231&mswpm_PInfo=8-%7c0%7c1652393%7c0%7c2%7c3245%7c13%7c0%7c2130%7c19231%7c0%7c&msbdy=1840&uidh=3g5&pcat=39&h=57737&recoff=8&db=GAcivilwarcorr&indiv=1 accessed May 18, 2012.

¹⁹⁹ LBCD, Aug 15, 1862.

had nearly 160 slaves to clothe. “Nevertheless, ours have their usual supply minus a portion of their shoes, which will soon be forthcoming,” she ended.²⁰⁰

Kate Stone wrote, “each plantation was a law unto itself;” therefore, household operations such as meal and clothing preparation differed slightly from one plantation to the next. She observed that she felt sorry for her widowed mother, Amanda Stone, during the “spring and fall” when her mother prepared clothing for the servants. For the cutting of fabric, “a large room would be cleared out and the great bolts of white woolen jeans, Osnabergs, and linseys” and “bolts of red flannel for the little ones,” brought in. Then “the women with great shears would commence their work.” Kate continued, “There were several sets of patterns with individual ones for the very tall and the very fat,” but she noted, “There was not much attention paid to the fit, I fancy.” Amanda Stone would “lay a pattern on several layers of the goods, chalk it around, and a woman would cut it out.” Kate remembered that the “Negroes often dyed the white suits tan or grey with willow bark or sweet gum.” Above all, Kate remembered the “ugly” shoes servants were given. She contended that they must have been “excessively uncomfortable,” and “after many . . . greasings, the poor darkies could at last bend their feet in them.”²⁰¹ Not all masters and mistresses displayed Amanda’s and Laura’s devotion to the Christian duty of properly providing for the slaves who served them.²⁰²

In South Carolina, a planter supplied pants, but did not give his male slaves coats. Women received no clothing allocation whatsoever. Supplying shoes became a major

²⁰⁰ LBCD, Sep 7, 1862, Nov 19 – Dec 3, 1862.

²⁰¹ Stone, *Brokenburn*, 6.

²⁰² LBCD, Nov 16 – Dec 3, 1862.

challenge and expense. On the other hand, some masters simply did not even try to clothe their slaves for winter. Half-clothed and shoeless slaves became a common sight in some parts of the Confederacy when supplies dwindled and money grew scarce.²⁰³ The Comer slaves benefitted, in 1862, from the remote location of the Lower Chattahoochee Valley, where factories and commerce remained unaffected by the battles occurring elsewhere, and still offered supplies of fabric and shoe leather. They also had the advantage of James and Laura Comer's apparent dedication to duty, relatively enlightened management approach, and financial ability to provide adequate food and clothing.

Clothing occupied a major topic area on the care of slaves in plantation management literature of the nineteenth-century as is illustrated in the following discussion. Mild southern winters led many planters to inadequately clothe slaves, and some stingy slaveholders held the dollar dearer than the welfare of the slaves in their care. In the mid-nineteenth century, Reverend C. F. Sturgis of South Carolina railed against the practice of sending inadequately clothed servants into the fields. He deplored "the miserable practice of allowing servants to go to their labor in rags, for want of clothing." He indicted masters for employing "the hours of Saturday night, almost to Sabbath morning, in washing those miserable garments." He condemned this practice and the fact that it left slaves naked until the clothing dried or required that they wear damp clothing, thereby threatening their health. This effort to encourage progressive practices yielded improvements to a certain extent.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Edwards, *Scarlett*, 101.

²⁰⁴ Reverend C. F. Sturgis, *Duties of Masters to Servants, Three Premium Essays* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851) Essay II, 71, PDF copy in possession of the author. *Planters*

Robert Collins of Macon, Georgia, brought thirty years of experience to bear on the subject of plantation management. He advised, “The proper and usual quantity of clothes for plantation hands is two suits of cotton for spring and summer, and two suits of woolen for winter.” Collins counseled the addition of “four pair of shoes and three hats, which with such articles of dress the negro merits and the owner chooses to give, make up the year’s allowance.” To this allotment planters often added socks and undergarments and blankets. Laundering of clothing was limited to once a week due to the meager allocation each slave received.²⁰⁵

Mistresses who were responsible for clothing large slave populations tasked slave seamstresses on the plantations with producing wearing apparel for the slaves. Throughout the antebellum period mistresses like Amanda Stone and Laura Beecher Comer struggled each August to accomplish this task. Mary Telfair of Savannah, Georgia, wrote of the endless hours consumed when engaged in this operation, “My mind dwells upon the one subject that I find it necessary to be actively engaged—I have been making up clothes for the Negroes.” Many mistresses insisted upon cutting the cloth for slave clothing themselves to minimize waste. They then tasked slave seamstresses with sewing the garments to completion. Still others did a good deal of the sewing themselves. One woman noted “I have had a quantity of sewing to do of late.” She continued, “I do not know how I would accomplish the work of the family if I did not have a Grover and Baker machine. Sewing machines are a great invention.” Grover & Baker (1850-1876,

Banner, XIV, August 2, 1849, np, as found in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) 550, hereafter referred to as Genovese, *Roll Jordan*.

²⁰⁵ Robert Collins, “Management of Slaves,” *Southern Cultivator*, XVII (Oct., 1854) 424. See also Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 550.

Boston, Massachusetts) sewing machines received the Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867. The average price for one of these fine sewing machines in the 1860s was \$70.00, the equivalent of \$1400.00 in modern dollar values. It was a true luxury machine.²⁰⁶

During the Civil War, woolen cloth became scarce due to the needs of the army. The cotton fabric of choice, osnaburg, generated sturdy but uncomfortable clothing. Laura purchased eight hundred yards of it in 1862 for slave clothing. A former slave from Virginia remembered, ‘Dat ole nigger-cloth was jus’ like needles when it was new.’²⁰⁷ Wartime slaves’ shoes proved equally uncomfortable. Masters grew disgusted with poor quality, mass-produced shoes from New England and arranged for the local production of shoes. Laura purchased leather and contracted to have shoes made for her slaves in Columbus. Brogans, heavy shoes, were worn by adults. Children received light-weight shoes called “Pekers” due to their shape. Kendricks remembered that on the Moore plantation in Georgia everyone had shoes for Sunday that were bought for special

²⁰⁶ Mary Telfair to Mary Few, Few Collection, Georgia State Archives, Atlanta. For discussions on the production of clothing etc. for slaves see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 27-30; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Plantation Household*, 184-5. James Colcock Jones’ married daughter quote on advantages of the Grover and Baker sewing machine from Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: The True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 604, as found in Marli Francis Weiner, *Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 43. See “Sewing Machines: Historical Trade Literature in Smithsonian Institution Collections” (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Publication, 2001), 28, forward by Mary Gwinn, PDF copy in possession of the author. See Smithsonian online digital offerings of trade literature for Grover & Baker machines as well as many others available at: <http://www.sil.si.edu/DigitalCollections/Trade-Literature/Sewing-Machines/CF/single-recordonpiece.cfm?CompanyName=Grover%20and%20Baker%20Sewing%20Machine%20Company> accessed June 7, 2012.

²⁰⁷ *The Negro in Virginia* (New York, 1940) 72, Works Project Administration, Workers of the Writers Program, State of Virginia, , as found in Genovese, *Roll Jordan*, 551.

occasions.²⁰⁸ Eliza White of Opelika, Alabama, who lived on the plantation of Billy Jones and his wife, Angeline, in Harris County, Georgia, near Columbus, remembered receiving her first pair of shoes, “I still ‘members de Christmas I got my fust shoes. I just hugged dem tight and went to sleep holdin’ ‘em. Dey was button shoes,” she remarked.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, when slaves prayed for freedom, they also prayed for shoes that “fit our feet.”²¹⁰

Many slaveholders who resided in cities returned to the plantations for the semiannual ritual of making and distributing clothing to the slaves. In this Laura was not alone. Eugene Genovese argues that “masters and especially mistresses distributed clothing in a manner designed to underscore their own benevolence.” Genovese notes that they desired to “evoke gratitude” for clothing allotments.²¹¹ Laura remarked that she would do her duty on the subject of slave clothing, but she held reservations about slaves doing theirs.

As a rule, slave women’s garments consisted of straight or slightly tapered long dresses of rough material designated for slave clothing. Slaves’ shoes possessed wooden soles and uppers of stiff leather. Their garments were tan or grey. Women working in the

²⁰⁸ Jennie Kendricks, Works Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Georgia Narratives, Part IV.

²⁰⁹ Eliza White, Works Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Alabama Narratives, Part I.

²¹⁰ B. A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (New York: Delta Publishing div. of Dell, 1973) 72, with forward by Jerold Hirsch, reprint, first printed by the University of Chicago Press, 1945.

²¹¹ Genovese, Roll Jordan, 553-5, see also Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 78-9, herein after referred to as Camp, *Freedom*.

fields became indistinguishable from the men and often performed the same work as men. Slaves' clothing and appearance was indicative of their position in the patriarchal society.

Laundering clothing amounted to challenging work. Ed McCree of Athens, Georgia, recollected, "Dey didn't wuk none Sadday atter dinner in de fields. Dat was wash day for slave 'omans." Slave women on plantations made lye soap by pouring hickory ashes and water over straw in a barrel. Later on they added old meat, fat and grease and stirred. After about ten days, they withdrew the lye from the barrel and boiled it with more grease. Gracie Gibson of Florida recalled, 'Dis was lye soap,' and 'good to wash wid.' "We all used battlin' blocks and battlin' sticks to help clean the clothes when we wuz washin,' remembered Sally Brown. After soaking in hot, sudsy water, clothing received a liberal application of lye soap. Slaves then placed the clothing on the 'block and beat em with a battlin' stick which was made like a paddle.' She elaborated, 'On wash days you could hear them battlin' sticks poundin' every which way.' After being rinsed, clothing dried on lines, or over fences, bushes and tree limbs.

Former slave Tom Singleton of Athens, Georgia, related that he hired out at night to earn extra money to buy special clothing. "I plowed durin' de day on old Marster's farm," he explained. On "bright moonshiny nights, I would cut wood, fix fences, and sich lak" for neighbors who had no slaves to help, he continued. He recalled, "Wid de money dey paid me I bought Sunday shoes and a Sunday coat." He remembered that he "always did lak to look good on Sunday."²¹²

²¹² Ed McCree, Works Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Georgia Narratives, Part IV. Gracie Gibson quoted in Genovese, Roll Jordan, 553; Sally Brown quoted in Fox-Genovese, Household, 168-9. Tom Singleton, Works Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Georgia Narratives, Part IV.

Sundays offered opportunities to enjoy new clothes and a few hours of relaxation and fun for slaves. Having bathed and donned clean clothes, slaves participated in social activities of their own making after attending religious services. Julia Larken, a former slave living in Athens, Georgia, remembered watching adult slaves go off to attend Sunday church services. “Dey was dressed in deir best Sunday go-to-meetin’ clothes,” she recalled. They would shine their shoes, tie them together and carry them over their shoulders “to keep ‘em from gittin’ dust on ‘em,” she explained. Men wore plain homespun shirts and pants. For the most part, women wore calico dresses they saved for special occasions such as Sunday church services. “The ‘omans wore two or three petticoats all ruffled and starched,” observed Julia, “’til one of dem underskirts would stand by itself.” The women would pin up all their petticoats except one to keep them clean. Julia remembered, “Dey went barfoots,” with their shoes hung over their shoulders just like the men did. Harriet Martineau, visiting friends near Montgomery, Alabama, observed that Negroes “never appear better than on such occasions.”²¹³ The money slaves earned in off hours provided for improved quality of life along with enhanced style and self-esteem.

Slaves conducted a lively internal economy in which they generated appreciable discretionary funds. Larry Hudson pointed out that “individuals or family groups” could earn a considerable amount of cash raising chickens, hogs, cotton, and garden produce. For example, one plantation account book reflected \$130.00, \$2600.00 today, paid to a

²¹³ Julia Larkin, Works Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Georgia Narratives, Part IV.

Harriet Martineau, *Society in America, Two Volumes* (New York: Unders and Otley Publishers, 1837) I, 296-7, available online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=VYpJAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> accessed May 15, 2012.

slave for cattle. Another slave received \$110.00, \$2200 today, in exchange for sugar molasses, flour, handkerchiefs, aprons, homespun, and calico. Others earned \$200.00 for their cotton crop for the year. With this discretionary money, slaves purchased luxuries like brightly colored calicos and ribbons, food and treats, or items for the home that were not supplied by masters and mistresses.²¹⁴

Even with the blockade, residents of the Valley enjoyed the advantages offered by the city and port of Columbus and its connections through inland rivers and streams with Apalachicola, Florida, and the Gulf of Mexico. In the sultry microcosm of the antebellum Deep South that developed on the old frontier, the waterway created by the confluence of the Chattahoochee River and the murky Flint River in Georgia, which becomes the Apalachicola River in Florida, and empties into the Gulf of Mexico at the port of Apalachicola, Florida, teemed with commercial and passenger traffic. Steamboat travel on the Chattahoochee-Apalachicola waterway began in 1828. By 1832, four steamboats plied the waters between Columbus and the Gulf of Mexico.²¹⁵ But the Chattahoochee required fortitude and timing, since hot, dry summers rendered the river a trickle in some places. During these periods, farmers raised their cotton and produce, and commerce waited. Fall harvest time brought the rains, and as farmers picked and ginned cotton into the white gold fiber so prized in textile production in the pre-war North and abroad, the Chattahoochee swelled to meet the rising needs of transporting produce and people to the markets in Columbus and Apalachicola.

²¹⁴ Larry E. Hudson, ed., *Working Toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the Old South* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1995), 82.

²¹⁵ Stewart C. Edwards, "River City at War: Columbus Georgia in the Confederacy" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1998), 13.

Passengers traveled for business or on pleasure excursions. Residents of the Valley could enjoy a stay in Columbus to shop or visit family and friends, or simply take a short respite from rural plantation life. By boarding one of the many steamboats that served the waterway community, one could take a leisurely trip to Columbus and make connections to Savannah and beyond “on the cars,” or from Columbus to destinations such as Eufaula, Alabama, and the various stops, large and small along the way. Also traveling along the waterway, commission merchants or cotton factors plied their trade as the foremost middlemen of the cotton business. Planters like James Comer employed cotton factors who arranged credit during the growing season and sold the cotton enabling planters to repay their loans. Factors often purchased on credit supplies as well as luxury articles for planters during their trips to the North and to Europe, allowing planters to pay their bills at the time of cotton sales and revel early in the profits of their success.²¹⁶

In the early years of the war, the Chattahoochee-Apalachicola waterway’s significance warranted its designation as a military district. Lynn Willoughby Ware observed that it was important to protect “both the breadbasket of the interior and the major manufacturing center of Columbus.”²¹⁷ Protecting imports of essential supplies and medicines and safeguarding the stored cotton vital in trade with Europe proved of paramount importance to the Confederacy. To this end the Confederate Navy endeavored to construct a fleet of seaworthy vessels designed to assist in efforts to

²¹⁶ Lynn Willoughby Ware, “Cotton Money: Antebellum Currency Conditions in the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol LXXIV, 2, Summer, 1990, 219-20, hereafter Willoughby Ware, “Cotton Money”. See also Lynn Willoughby, *Flowing Through Time: A History of the Lower Chattahoochee River* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999) Chapter “Land of Cotton.”

²¹⁷ Willoughby Ware, “Cotton Money,” 219-20.

challenge the Union blockade imposed by Union ships that lay in wait near “the passes of Apalachicola Bay.” The *C.S.S. Chattahoochee* was designed and built for that purpose in the Early County, Georgia, shipyard at Saffold outside Columbus. Delivery of the wooden gunboat, the “Chatt,” as it was affectionately known to its officers and crew, took place on December 8, 1862.²¹⁸

Apalachicola and the waterway to Columbus tantalized the ambitious young members of the United States Navy charged with blockade duty. In December of 1862, Lieutenant-Commander A. F. Crossman, in command of the *U.S.S. Somerset*, suggested a plan to take Apalachicola and Columbus. Crossman’s objective was to deprive the South of this great “source of strength.” A “grand depot” of the Confederacy, Columbus boasted 60-70,000 bales of cotton in storage, three cotton factories, a rolling mill, foundries, machine and gun shops, and railroad connections extending to Montgomery in Alabama, and Savannah, Augusta, and Milledgeville in Georgia. Its environs also served as home to the navy yard that produced “the rebel gunboat *Chattahoochee*, which gunboat is in the river and waits an opportunity to get out and prey upon our commerce, and where are three more gunboats building.” Crossman argued that a small force of light gunboats would take Apalachicola, proceed up the Chattahoochee River, successfully engage the *C.S.S. Chattahoochee* and then capture Columbus.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Lynn Willoughby Ware, “Enchantment and Ennui: The Experiences of the Crew of the CSS Chattahoochee,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 70, 3, (Fall, 1986) 409, hereafter referred to as Ware, “Enchantment.” See also Willoughby, *Flowing*, Chapter 5, “The Civil War Years” on the Union blockade of the Chattahoochee.

²¹⁹ Crossman to Welles, December 17, 1862, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies of the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols., (Washington, 1894-1927) Series I, Vol. 17, 347-48, hereinafter referred to as *ORN*, transcript of the letter is in possession of the author. See also Ware, “Enchantment,” 425.

While Crossman argued for his upriver assault on Columbus, members of the Confederate States Navy worked to prevent the advance of Union forces. The governors of Alabama, Georgia, and Florida all agreed on the serious nature of the situation for their states and the Confederacy. To protect this critical region it was determined that the “Chatt” must be cut off from the sea. A barrier was erected to prevent access to the inland waterway that led to Columbus by stretching a heavy chain across the Apalachicola, trapping debris and creating an impassable obstacle. The Chattahoochee was now the sentinel tasked with guarding that waterway. The duty bored most of the men and also presented hazards. Several crew members died of swamp fever; others deserted. A boiler explosion in May of 1863 killed eighteen and wounded many more. The injured were taken to the Soldier’s Wayside Home, the first hospital established in Columbus by the Soldier’s Aid Society. The members of the aid society, organized by Laura, performed the nursing duties and subsequently received outstanding recognition for their dedication to duty. Among them served Miss Lila Howard, one of the young women who frequented the Comer home and one of Laura’s young female acquaintances.²²⁰

Assisting men in the military assumed even greater significance in 1863 as the war continued. The state of Georgia responded by establishing the Georgia Relief and Hospital Association headquartered in Augusta, Georgia. In the freezing cold days of January 1863, Laura received special requests from the General Superintendent of the

²²⁰ See Columbus, Georgia *Enquirer Sun*, June 9, 1863, “Steamboat Chattahoochee Destroyed – Terrible Loss of Life,” regarding the boiler explosion 18 killed many injured, available at <http://enquirer.galileo.usg.edu/enquirer/view?docId=news/cwe1863/cwe1863-0045.xml> accessed March 17, 2012. See also Civil War Naval Museum at the Port of Columbus exhibit available at: <http://portcolumbus.org/exhibits/css-chattahoochee/> accessed June 5, 2012. See also the Historic Naval Ship Association available at: <http://www.hnsa.org/ships/chatta.htm> accessed June 5, 2012.

Hospital Association for supplying socks and blankets for needy soldiers. In response, she secured enough cotton and wool yarn for the production of one thousand pairs of socks for soldiers. She desired to complete the project by April 1863. The Hospital Association's formerly limited funds, meant to benefit needy soldiers and their families, multiplied with the additions of private charitable contributions from dedicated and conscientious Georgians, among them Laura and James Comer.²²¹

The state appropriated \$400,000 in 1863 for the relief of Georgia's soldiers at the front who remained short of clothing, shoes, and blankets, and were suffering great hardships. Some articles such as hospital supplies and blankets could not be had for any amount of money, and Laura and other women in Georgia furnished these hard-to-find articles from their own homes. The Soldier's Wayside Home established by Laura and the other women of the Columbus Soldier's Aid Society began with fifteen beds, and over time, expanded to care for hundreds of wounded and ailing soldiers. Funds from the Hospital Association assisted the effort but most supplies and food and clothing provided came from Georgians like Laura and her friends who combined this charitable assistance with volunteer labor. As the needs of the soldiers increased and more wounded soldiers came to Columbus, plans developed for the establishment of a General Hospital. Prior to the war, patients received medical care in their own homes. Now, the large numbers of soldiers in need of care led to the recognition that the city needed a plenary medical facility. Throughout the war, Laura and other women in Columbus nursed soldiers in their homes when the available facilities at the Wayside Home filled to capacity. Laura

²²¹ LBCD, Jan 21, 1863. Peter Wallenstein, *From Slave South to New South: Public Policy in Nineteenth Century Georgia* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 101-5, hereafter referred to as Wallenstein, *Public Policy*.

observed in late January 1863 “I understand a General Hospital is soon to be established here and I am glad of it.”²²²

Grain shortages also posed a problem in Georgia in 1863. Governor Brown declared that the “great question in this revolution is now a question of *bread*,” and agricultural producers in the Valley became the major suppliers of food for the entire section. In February of 1863, Laura paid the freight for corn shipped by Quartermaster Frank W. Dillard and the Columbus Quartermaster Depot.²²³ Georgia instituted regulations governing grain production and rationing in the state in response to the needs of its soldiers at the front and Confederate civilians on the homefront who suffered shortages or faced a total lack of bread in 1863. Corn meal substituted for wheat flour for the preparation of bread and muffins, and the occasional cake or pie crust.²²⁴ Public policy in Georgia provided corn for bread for needy or indigent soldiers and their families at no cost and for others in need for reduced rates. To this end Georgia allocated a total of \$1,890,000 in 1863.

Laura’s charitable work and efforts notwithstanding, her troubles at home continued. In the beginning of February, on a Sunday morning, Laura’s front door mysteriously caught fire. Willis the driver alerted her when he “knocked and called out” through her bedroom door, “Our front door is all on fire.” She “put on stockings and shoes and threw on my shawl” and rushed to the front of the house. Several of her neighbors “had collected” to come to her assistance, and she directed the servants to

²²² LBCD Jan 21, 1863.

²²³ LBCD Feb 8, 1863.

²²⁴ Hague, *Blockade*, 25. Massey, *Ersatz*, 67-8.

extinguish the flames. The fire occurred on a night when Mr. Clemons visited with “Mr. Woodruff” overnight, and Laura remained “home alone with the servants.” Later that week Laura contemplated the event, and she wondered who would wish to destroy the home “for which I have labored so hard.”²²⁵ On January 1, 1863, slaves in the Confederacy were freed by the terms of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. In Columbus, Georgia, and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley, however, they remained in bondage.

²²⁵ LBCD, Feb 8, 1863.

Chapter Four

“The very sky is o’er hung with gloom.”²²⁶

A sense of apprehension cast a pall over the Confederacy on February 24, 1863. Laura wrote, “Battles are daily expected at, either or both, Charleston and Savannah.” She continued, “I am informed many people are flocking here from Savannah!” Major Clemons departed for Mobile to see to the welfare of two of the Comers’ slaves who were hospitalized. Laura worried about “Mr. Comer,” whose leg caused him problems due to an unspecified affliction. The Comer slaves continued to “annoy” Laura, “almost to death” as the war came closer to Columbus, and Confederate fortunes weighed in the balance. She remarked that she had “never felt the uncertainty of earthly possessions as I now do,”²²⁷ She feared that she and James might lose everything. Since the incident of the fire Laura experienced an uncertainty that she never knew before.²²⁸

To add to her feelings of melancholy, Laura received a letter in which she learned that “Cousin Wallace while cleaning a pistol” had accidentally shot his seventeen-year-old brother, Edward, and she added, “it is feared that the wound will prove fatal!”²²⁹ “Oh,” she mourned, “now that whole family circle is plunged in deep distress!” To the relief of all, the shot did not prove fatal, and on March 22, 1863, J. Wallace Comer (called Cousin Wallace or simply Wallace by family) left from the James Comer house in Columbus to

²²⁶ LBCD, Feb 24, 1863.

²²⁷ LBCD, Feb 17-25, 1863.

²²⁸ LBCD, Feb 24, 1863.

²²⁹ Edward Trippe Comer – youngest of John Fletcher and Catherine Drewery Comer’s surviving offspring.

go to war. Laura commented, “Cousin Wallace left here yesterday. He is a very pleasant boy, and very fine looking withal [sic] I pray,” she continued, “he may resist the influence of the evil which will inevitably surround him in the Army.”²³⁰

Pictorial as well as written evidence informs us that Wallace Comer’s body slave, Burrell, accompanied him to war (See Appendix A). There is no mention at this point of Burrell’s existence in Laura’s diary entries. Wallace Comer, however, wrote letters to his family during the war including among them a discussion of Burrell’s value to him in the army. Burrell faithfully served his master and earned Wallace Comer’s praise, demonstrating bravery and loyalty that proved uncommon among other enslaved body servants. If “Burrell holds out fast to the end & stick to me as well as he has done here to fore & I come out safe a mint could not buy him,” declared Comer. “There are very few Negroes in the army that are not worth anything to their masters in times like this,” Comer asserted. He went on to elaborate, “Burrell is not afraid of anything.” Often boys of the planter elite were given a slave boy as a playmate who later became their body servant in adulthood. Burrell may have been Wallace Comer’s childhood friend with whom he grew up, and who then served as his companion and servant in the war. Kate Stone observed that her brothers each owned a slave boy who became their body servants in adulthood. In the above mentioned photo, Burrell appears attired in a Confederate Army private’s uniform with hat in hand, and stands next to Comer. The young black man levels a firm, straightforward gaze at the camera’s lens. He seems innocent, unaccustomed to and just a little apprehensive of the process of photography, yet displays

²³⁰ LBCD, Mar 22, 1863. Comer brothers’ birth and death years: Hugh Moss Comer (1842-1900); John Wallace Comer (1845-1919); St. George Legare Comer (b. 1847-?); U.S. senator and Alabama governor Braxton Bragg Comer (1848-1927); John Fletcher Comer, Jr. (1854-1927); and Edward Trippe Comer (1856-1927).

a pleasant charm, dignity, and physical power. In contrast, Lt. J. Wallace Comer lounges elegantly in a chair next to Burrell, legs crossed, hat cocked at a saucy angle with officer's saber in hand and resting at his side. His attitude bespeaks the nonchalance of the scion of a white Southern planter accustomed to wealth and privilege. On closer look, it can be discerned that Burrell's sleeve slightly touches Comer's shoulder, affecting an intimate and protective attitude. The two appear completely relaxed in each other's company, perhaps reflecting the confidence of a long-standing private relationship.²³¹

Burrell's presence with Comer must not be misconstrued as evidence of slaves' desire to participate in the Confederate war effort, although some young slaves must have anticipated the experience with pleasure. War offered a change of scene, danger and excitement. Wealthy Confederate soldiers often went to war accompanied by their bondsmen. Southerners regarded slavery as an accepted part of life, and the presence of enslaved servants in the army was the not uncommon especially among the prosperous planters from the Deep South. Southern soldiers routinely hired the slaves of others in the army to perform the services of batman/valet as customarily found in the British Army of the period. They acted as valet and runner, and performed menial tasks like cooking meals, laundering clothing, maintaining uniforms, and polishing brass buttons and boots on a routine basis. They also performed as grooms for their masters' horses. Before daybreak they cooked breakfasts, brushed uniforms, polished and buffed boots and saddles, and cleaned, polished and cared for sabers and pistols. After feeding,

²³¹LBCD, Mar 22, 1863. See letter, Lt. J. Wallace Comer, to Mother and family, June 14, 1864, Comer Family Papers, SHC-UNC. Stone, *Brokenburn*, 10-1. Picture of Burrell with J. Wallace Comer available at http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/photo&CISOPTR=5174 accessed June 17, 2012.

brushing and currying horses, they awakened masters, readied water for shaving and bathing, straightened up campsites and living quarters, laundered and pressed linen and acted as supply scroungers gathering what supplies and food they could find. Body servants nursed their masters when they suffered wounds in battle or fell ill from the many diseases that plagued the army in camp. They protectively escorted their masters on journeys home when wounded or dead (see discussion of “Phil” chapter three). In the event that Confederate officers required rented quarters, the Confederate government paid for the expenses for body servants’ lodgings and meals as well. Body slaves’ status relied upon the positions of their masters; a master’s personal or family status and their wealth and rank in the military contributed to the status of his servants within the slave community. Eighteen-year-old Wallace Comer entered the Confederate Army as first sergeant. By the time the depicted photo of Comer and Burrell appeared, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant, which more than likely provided a proud day for Burrell. Not only did he serve a wealthy young white Southerner, he now served an officer in the Confederate States Army. Comer’s success reflected his service accomplishments and was achieved in part by the excellence of Burrell’s efforts in his capacity as gentleman’s body slave. Not all masters demonstrated appreciation for their bondsmen’s performance. Some found that their slaves’ behavior warranted physical punishment, and unlike Burrell, many enslaved servants found opportunities to run away and did so.²³²

On Saturday, April 11, 1863, Wallace, undoubtedly with Burrell, returned to Columbus and remained for a visit. Laura remarked that she would have enjoyed this visit very much were it not for the fact that she could get nothing for him to eat. Her

²³² Ervin R. Jordan, *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 185-190. Noe, *Rebels*, 41-51.

houseslave Lithe would not work, and was condemned her for her “hard heart.” Laura offered her “every inducement,” including money, but to no avail. Major J. W. Clemons’ visit on April 25, brought pleasure to Laura’s heart. She and James were delighted to see him, and “he was the joy of their home.” Still when she received invitations to picnics and soirees given by the younger members of the Columbus Ladies Soldier’s Aid Society , Laura chose not to attend. She could not enjoy music and dancing when she thought of the many soldiers suffering in Columbus hospitals. She preferred the quiet of home at “this dark hour of the country’s fate.” At the same time that Laura worried about the “sanguinary events” that the Confederacy experienced, she feared for husband’s health. He had come down with a chill after which he took to his bed. Dr. Beach attended him and Laura spent her days nursing him in his room. By April 29, he appeared to be convalescing.²³³

On May 6, 1863, Wallace returned again to Columbus, and Laura recorded that a large contingent of soldiers passed through Columbus on its way to Mississippi. She noted that the Confederacy celebrated another victory on the Rappahannock in Virginia. But with that victory there came a sad loss. “Gen’l Jackson’s arm was shot and amputated near the shoulder.” She lamented “Sad; such a useful man should suffer & be compelled to leave the field in this trying hour of our nation’s history!” She prayed that he should “yet live and be a blessing to his country!”²³⁴ Lieut. General Thomas J. Jackson died of complications from pneumonia on May 10, 1863. The entire South mourned his passing, which brought an atmosphere of despair and sadness to the Confederacy. On May 11, at

²³³ LBCD, Apr 2-29, 1863.

²³⁴ LBCD, May 6, 1863.

the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) where Jackson taught before the war, the news came from the Adjutant General's Office, Virginia:

“By Command of the Governor I have this day to perform the most painful duty of my official life in announcing to you and through you to the Faculty & Cadets of the Virginia Mil. Institute the death of the great and good - the heroic and illustrious Lieut. General T.J. Jackson at 15 minutes past 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon. The Governor directs that the highest funeral honors be paid to his memory, that the customary outward badges of mourning be worn by all the officers and cadets of the Institution.”²³⁵

The *New York Times* reported on May 14, 1863, “In the death of Stonewall JACKSON [sic], the rebels have unquestionably lost by far their greatest military leader, in the peculiar style of strategy which has made his name famous.”²³⁶

The form and composition of notifications of death during the Civil War era put in motion preparations for an ensuing period of mourning. By mid-nineteenth century societal norms, the bereaved entered a formal period of mourning after the death of a

²³⁵ Archives of the Virginia Military Institute, “Death of Stonewall Jackson,” VMI General Orders May 11 - 14, 1863, available at <http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=5003> accessed June 21, 2012. For a discussion of the significance of the death of Stonewall Jackson to the Confederacy see Robert K. Krick, “The Smoothbore Volley that Doomed the Confederacy,” in *Chancellorsville: The Battle and its Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 107-142, ed. Gary W. Gallagher. For a taste of the enthusiasm and devotion invested in Jackson by his Confederate troops at Chancellorsville see the narrative beginning page 108 available at http://www.amazon.com/Chancellorsville-Battle-Aftermath-Military-Campaigns/dp/0807859702#reader_0807859702 and analysis of the impact of Jackson's death upon the Confederate Army and the “Cause,” beginning page 133, http://www.amazon.com/Chancellorsville-Battle-Aftermath-Military-Campaigns/dp/0807859702#reader_0807859702 courtesy Amazon preview of Krick's article accessed July 30, 2012.

²³⁶ *New York Times*, May 14, 1863, 1.

family or kin member; deep mourning by women consisted of wearing black dresses and veils and black jewelry. After a prescribed period, two and a half years upon the death of a spouse, women progressed to half mourning manifested in grays or lavenders. For men, the outward signs of mourning consisted of black crepe armbands or rosettes, and the time periods were shorter. At VMI, mourning lasted a full month after the death of Stonewall Jackson. As the death toll mounted during the war, women found themselves in mourning more often than not. Laura and the Comer family participated in the suffering and trepidations of friends and acquaintances while carrying the fears for their own loved ones in harm's way.²³⁷

On the heels of the news of Stonewall Jackson's death came a letter from James's brother, Major W. G. Comer, notifying them that "Gen'l Cummings & staff were ordered to Vicksburg, Mississippi." Major Comer announced that he would travel with the command to Mississippi via Columbus and spend a day or two. Laura believed that "no doubt terrible fighting will occur in Mississippi at an early day." As Laura recorded all these events in her diary, she noted that Wallace arrived the day before at noon and went into the city after dinner. "Cousin Wallace is sleeping sweetly but I must soon awake him; as the hour is now 10 ½ and he will leave soon after 11 o'clock for Montgomery." The events of the next two months confirmed the validity of Laura's fears of terrible fighting.²³⁸

The developments of the summer of 1863 proved dismal for the Confederacy. U. S. Grant's campaign for Vicksburg, Mississippi, began in May of 1863 and ended with

²³⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), Chapter 5, 145-8, hereafter Faust, *Republic*.

²³⁸ LBCD, May 5-31, 1863.

the surrender of that city on July 4, 1863, after a siege that left the defenders too weak from starvation to attempt a final assault. The loss of Vicksburg effectively eliminated the crucially important Mississippi River from the arsenal of the Confederacy. The Mississippi had provided a vital transportation link and supply lines from the Lower South to Upper South states. It also cut the Confederacy in half, dividing East from West.

Farther east, in May 1863, General Robert E. Lee convinced President Jefferson Davis that taking the fight to the enemy on its own territory might alleviate the predicament in Mississippi and relieve the situation in Vicksburg. He believed that by drawing Federal troops from the Western theater of the war to defend Northern states and the capital of Washington, D.C., the Confederates might weaken the Union assault on Vicksburg and other Confederate strongholds. The invasion of Pennsylvania ensued, and beginning on July 1, 1863 and culminating on July 4, 1863, Union and Confederate forces engaged in a series of battles at Gettysburg. The capitulation of Vicksburg, and Lee's ultimate defeat at Gettysburg cast a pall over the South and dampened morale in decisive ways.²³⁹

The Confederacy had experienced euphoria during the heady days of Lee's military successes in April of 1863. Beginning with the loss of Stonewall Jackson and followed by the defeat of Confederate forces at Gettysburg and the loss of Vicksburg, the South began to succumb to a growing sense of hopelessness. Rising inflation and shortages of commodities contributed immensely to these feelings of desolation. Prices

²³⁹ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 636.

on food and clothing rose seventy percent by November of 1863 and, although commitment to the cause remained firm, a sense of loss and futility prevailed.²⁴⁰

Diary evidence for Laura is absent from the spring of 1863 through June of 1864 (Extant volume ends June 1863). During this period, Southern sentiments changed. Most Southern whites supported the Davis administration's war aims but not its planned requirements to accomplish them. Especially problematic were total-war effort requirements of military conscription and governmental confiscations of goods and services. In response an anti-administration or anti-Davis faction arose, most vocal in Georgia and led by Vice-President Alexander Stephens, Ex-General Robert Toombs and Governor Joseph Brown. A controversy of crisis proportions erupted when the Confederate Congress authorized President Davis to suspend the writ of habeas corpus.²⁴¹

Vice-President Alexander Stephens declared suspension of the writ of habeas corpus unconstitutional,²⁴² and Governor Brown charged Davis and Congress with efforts to attain absolute power and the abrogation of the rights of liberty. "What will we have gained when we have achieved our independence of the Northern States if in our efforts to do so we have . . . lost our Constitutional Liberty at home," he decried. A move to seek peace negotiations to end the war followed. Brown's and Stephens's conduct met with indignation and reprimand from the general public and scorn from the troops in the field. The editor of the *Atlanta Intelligencer* did not regard the opposition to the Acts of Congress as counter to the Davis administration, but rather in the interest of the welfare

²⁴⁰ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 689-95.

²⁴¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 689-95

²⁴² *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, Mar 24, 1864, 2.

of the Confederate citizenry and support of state sovereignty. The *Intelligencer* asserted that to say anything else would be “calumnies.”²⁴³

Lincoln took advantage of Southern sentiments for peace by issuing a declaration that offered pardons and amnesty for those Confederates who acknowledged and agreed to abide by the laws of the Union, including its proclamations on slavery. Top Confederate leaders were excluded from this offer. Lincoln still held the belief that the seceded states in fact remained in the Union and that returning loyal governments to power accomplished their reconstruction. If ten percent of the number of voters in 1860 swore loyalty, that group could form a state government and be accepted back into the Union. The more extreme, radical Republican Reconstructionists desired to obliterate Southern society, strip owners of their land, and redistribute the land and wealth equally among whites and freedmen. These imposed new rules of law would yield a complete social revolution in the South. Most Republicans, like Lincoln, maintained more moderate opinions. Above all, most Republicans searched for a means to prevent the former Southern Democrat’s political power complex and the South’s white ruling elite from resuming that power after the war ended, the Constitution’s stipulation that each state should maintain a republican form of government notwithstanding. Lincoln’s primary objective, however, remained the integrity of the Union, and in pursuit of this goal, he focused on intensified military action. In Georgia, that meant crushing one of the bastions of Southern rebellion: Atlanta.

²⁴³ McPherson, *Battle Cry, 689-95* and *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, Mar 24, 1864, 2.

In May 1864, Sherman increased the Union's effort to conquer Confederate resistance in his campaign to take the city of Atlanta. On June 19, 1864, in Columbus, Laura recorded that "Mr. Comer and Maj. Clemons are conversing in the Drawingroom . . ." Southerners' conversations now focused on the hope that their armies could perform well enough to prolong the fight with such ferocity of purpose that the North would seek a peaceful end to hostilities that would guarantee Southern independence. Among their most fervent hopes was the election of a Peace Democrat over the bellicose Lincoln in the impending Northern presidential campaign. They counted upon the courage and tenacity displayed in battle by Southern armies to induce war weariness in the North that would yield such a political result in November 1864. Some factors did exist that offset the overwhelming advantage the North enjoyed in sheer numbers. Although the Northern armies appeared to be much larger in numbers, desertion of Northern troops increased to such a level that when combined with other factors nearly evened the odds. Conquest of vast Southern territories required occupation forces to be stationed along the way; therefore, Union forces dwindled with each victory, thereby reducing the numbers of Union forces in the field. Also, enlistments that ended in 1863 diminished Union numbers. Southerners, on the other hand, remained in place fighting for their comrades in arms, their homes, and their people. They grimly resisted Union advances fighting desperately to maintain their Southern way of life and for the property they believed had been earned through honest labor. This does not mean that the Confederacy did not suffer from desertion. Southern soldiers often left the ranks without leave to go home and tend to families and to help with harvests to stave off starvation. Often, they would return to the Army to join their comrades when they

completed their work at home.²⁴⁴ In this tense atmosphere of June 1864, Laura began a new volume of her diary.

“Now this book is just opened, but who can tell what events will occur before impressions are made upon the last page?” Laura registered a frustration she had not experienced before. “Never in my life of 47 years, have I felt so utterly incompetent of myself to do any good thing.” She prayed that “my will may be in all things, subject to & merged in God’s will.”²⁴⁵ Columbus, Georgia, is located a scant one hundred miles southwest of Atlanta, and news of Sherman’s bloody campaign to bring Atlanta to its knees reached Columbus regularly. Its hospitals overflowed with the wounded flooding in from the fighting to the north, and wounded and dying soldiers occupied every available space in the city. The war edged closer to Columbus and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley, inch by bloody inch, every day.

On June 26, while noting that the women of the Chancellor family, accompanied by Miss Appler and Miss Rutherford, paid social calls, she rented half of the Comer house to the “chief surgeon at Post,” Dr. Douglass, in an effort to aid in the housing shortage. Laura continued in devoted service to the hospitals and the efforts of the Columbus Soldier’s Aid Society. Surrounded by the ever-present evidence of the bloody conflict being waged around Atlanta, she suffered from “despondency and gloom” and stated she “never before so much felt the need of social friends daily around” her as an

²⁴⁴McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 689-95, and for a comprehensive discussion see the highly acclaimed James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For additional reading see, Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2007).

²⁴⁵ Walker, Comer, 99-100.

antidote to her depression.²⁴⁶ But the worst was yet to come for both the Comer family and the city of Columbus.

At summer's end in 1864, Laura declared "During the past year, our home has not been many days without either sick or wounded. Demands from the afflicted are constant." The seven wartime hospitals in Columbus overflowed with sick and wounded soldiers. An atmosphere of death and dying permeated the air, and when added to the uncertainties of the military situation in Atlanta, only deepened her depression. In 1864, the 57th Alabama Infantry Regiment joined the Confederate Army of Tennessee under Lt. Gen. John B. Hood and fought in the Atlanta Campaign, suffering heavy casualties in the Battle of Peachtree Creek, eight miles south of Atlanta, on July 20.²⁴⁷ J. Wallace Comer served with the 57th Alabama, and was wounded in the fighting at Peach Tree Creek. Burrell, his body-slave, placed him in a bateau, a small flat-bottomed sailing craft, and navigated the Chattahoochee River down to Columbus. On Wednesday evening, July 27, Laura recorded, "Last Saturday, Cousin Wallace Comer's servant came and informed me he was wounded & I went immediately for him, did not bring him home until evening." Upon receiving word that Wallace had been wounded in the Battle of Atlanta and now

²⁴⁶ Walker, Comer, 100.

²⁴⁷ Fifty-seventh Alabama Infantry Regiment, ADAH, available at <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/referenc/alamilor/57thinfn.html> accessed July 6, 2012. For those focused on military aspects see the following unit digest, posted at the ADAH above in this note:

This regiment was organized at Troy, in Pike, March 1863, as part of the brigade of Gen. Clanton of Montgomery. It was stationed at Mobile and Pollard till January 1864, when it moved to Demopolis. Brigaded there under Gen. Buford, (soon succeeded by Gen. Scott) with the Twelfth Louisiana, Twenty-seventh, Thirty-fifth, and Fifty-fifth Alabama and a Louisiana regiment, the Fifty-seventh joined the Army of the Tennessee in time to share fully the hardships of the Dalton-Atlanta campaign. The casualties of the regiment, however, were not severe till the battle of Peach-tree Creek, when it was cut to pieces. The Fifty-seventh participated in the movement into Tennessee, and at Franklin and Nashville its losses were again very large. Transferred to North Carolina, the regiment fought at Bentonville with severe loss. Its colors were there folded when the army was disbanded.

convalesced at Laura's home, members of his family from Spring Hill converged on Columbus. Katy Comer gathered her wounded son, and the family returned on July 27 to Spring Hill. Laura accompanied them to the depot in Columbus, and there she and the other Comers learned that Wallace's cousin on his mother's side, Sgt. James A. Drewry, had been killed on July 22 at the Battle of Atlanta.²⁴⁸ During the week that followed this devastating news, Laura wrote that "Last Monday Columbus was thrown into an intense excitement by an expected raid from the Enemy." The impending danger compelled her to remain "at home; did not go out at all." She continued, "Capt. W. A. James rode up in the morning & prepared for the fight," and at the same time "Maj. Clemons offered his services to the Commandant of the Post & rendered signal service, day and night." She added that James went to the plantations in Alabama and she remained in Columbus. She

²⁴⁸ Sgt. James A. Drewry, 45th Alabama Infantry Regiment, killed July 22, 1864, at the Battle of Atlanta, available at <http://www.45thAlabama.com/pages/companyc.html> accessed July 6, 2012. Forty-fifth Alabama Regiment, ADAH, available at <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/referenc/alamilor/45thin.html> See the following unit digest available at ADAH above:

This regiment was organized at Auburn, in May 1862 and preceded at once to Corinth. At Tupelo it lost many men by disease, but in the autumn moved into Kentucky in Patton Anderson's brigade. It charged a battery at Perryville, and suffered very severely in casualties. The regiment came out of Kentucky with the army, and was soon after engaged in the battle of Murfreesboro, where its casualties were numerous. Placed in the brigade of Gen. Wood of Lauderdale, Cleburne's division, (with the Sixteenth, Twenty-sixth-Fiftieth, and Thirty-third Alabama), the Forty-fifth remained on duty with the Army of Tennessee, passing the first half of the year 1863 at Tullahoma. It fought under the eye of Cleburne at Chicamauga, and its mutilated ranks told the eloquent story of its services. Gen. Mark Lowery of Mississippi succeeded to the command of the brigade, and the Forty-fifth was present at Mission Ridge and Ringgold Gap with slight loss. The winter was passed at Dalton, and the regiment took a full share in the Dalton-Atlanta Campaign, especially at Resaca, and at New Hope, where Cleburne's division grappled with Logan's corps. On the 22d of July, at Atlanta, Death revealed in its ranks, and half the regiment went down on the hard-fought field. Six weeks later it again fought "where Cleburne crossed the line" at Jonesboro, with considerable loss. Then followed the long and disastrous march into Tennessee. The Forty-fifth opened the battle at Franklin the evening before by a brilliant fight at Springhill, and the next day was in the bloody and desperate assault of Cleburne's division on the enemy's works, and was almost annihilated around the corpse of its heroic division commander. Its colors floated before Nashville, and a remnant of the Fort-fifth moved into North Carolina. It was there consolidated with other Alabama regiments, and surrendered with Gen Johnston's forces.

observed, "I am alone for the first time in a long while."²⁴⁹ Laura was not alone, however, in enduring the emotional effects inflicted by the war.

Like other planters throughout the South, James Comer faced the loss of everything he worked a lifetime to create. Regardless of brave talk and saber rattling over brandy and cigars in finely appointed drawing rooms the demise of the Old South loomed on the horizon as the fighting raged less than one hundred miles away. Laura remarked that "It distresses me to see him so sad and serious all the time," and attributed James's despondency to a "slow fever he has" that "very sensibly affects his spirits." As the war came closer to Columbus, the passing of the society so recently built upon the edge of the Old Frontier appeared imminent. Laura lamented, "Maj. C [Clemons] tries me exceedingly by his unsocial selfish ways and angry words and looks. I cannot account for them." She elaborated "since he went into the war he is no more the same man he was before. I always fear a sharp reply or a cross look," she complained of Major Clemons' behavior. Wartime experiences plus undoubted disappointment and apprehension at the current state of the war had apparently affected Major Clemons' emotions and behavior. More than likely, Major Clemons was preoccupied while he strapped on his sabre and sidearm and prepared for battle. Columbus faced invasion with few defenders, now including young boys and old men. As he and the men of the Lower Chattahoochee Valley braced themselves for ferocious war and destruction as practiced by U. S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, Laura observed of the Major, "The most of his time

²⁴⁹ Walker, *Comer*, 100-1. See Catherine Drewery Comer to "My Beloved Son," Mar 21, 1860, Comer Family Papers #167-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Catherine Comer refers to "Willie James," evidently a friend of the family, in her letter.

here now he renders himself exceedingly disagreeable.”²⁵⁰ The reader cannot help but find Laura’s a rather naïve observation on men’s lack of sociability during preparation for battle and the possibility of their own deaths. Clemons and the other men of Columbus were well aware of the total-war tactics being applied at this stage to defeat the Confederacy. They knew the possible fate of Columbus, the Lower Chattahoochee Valley and of their friends and loved ones who lived there.

The Union’s conduct of the war had assumed new, more gruesome proportions, and Grant waged war with unconditional surrender his stated objective. His most ruthless and determined general William Tecumseh Sherman now was in position for a campaign aimed at total destruction from Atlanta to Savannah. Sherman held all Southerners collectively, men, women, and children, responsible for the rebellion, regardless of evidence to the contrary. He employed tactics of retribution against the civilian populations in addition to the confiscation and destruction of food supplies and munitions. Sherman’s objective was to wreak havoc on the society and institutions that bolstered the Southern soldier’s morale and motivated the Southern army to fight on. He launched a total war of terror, death, and destruction on the civilian men, women and children of the Southern heartland.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Walker, *Comer*, 100-01. For discussions of the adverse social, emotional, and psychological effects of the Civil War on soldiers see Eric Dean, Jr., *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), Introduction; and Dennis Brandt, *Pathway to Hell: A Tragedy of the American Civil War* (Cranbury, N. J.: Rosemont Publishing, 1997), Preface. On the social effects of the war for women see Faust, *Republic*, Preface.

²⁵¹ John Bennett Walters, “General William T. Sherman and Total War,” *Journal of Southern History*, 14, 4 (Nov 1948) 447-80. See especially Walters’ discussion of Sherman’s theories of collective responsibility on page 462-5; on retributive operations see also 462-3. These tactics directly violated the accepted rules of war and of this Sherman was certainly aware, see Walters, 463, note 35.

Others like Michael Fellman in his highly respected *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 32-3, 43, contends that Sherman was dramatic, self-absorbed, repellant, charming, angry, subject to rage, and various other often contradictory things, but

As the war had progressed, Columbus, deep in the heartland of the Confederacy, grew more important as a manufacturing and supply center. During the summer of 1864, Columbus factories hummed day and night, and the population employed in these endeavors increased to between 15,000 and 17,000. The city produced everything from armaments and munitions to fabrics, uniforms and shoes unavailable elsewhere due to the blockade. The naval shipyard continued to produce ships for use by the Confederate Navy. At anchor in the Chattahoochee and awaiting its maiden voyage in 1864 was the *CSS Muscogee*, a new gunboat constructed at the Columbus yards. The *CSS Chattahoochee* was alongside her still being repaired. Inflation and high prices plagued the community but almost everything was available at a price. Flour cost \$300 a barrel and brandy could be enjoyed for \$100 a bottle. Seven hospitals now served Columbus, and the incessant slaughter around Atlanta ensured that they overflowed and that every available space including the Columbus Courthouse, accommodated the wounded.²⁵²

he was certainly not religious. See also John F. Marszelek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 49, 59, 408-412.

A more recent scholarly study, see Dr. Stephen E. Bower, "The Theology of the Battlefield: William Tecumseh Sherman and the U. S. Civil War," *Journal of Military History*, 64, 4, (Oct 2000), 1005-34, highlights the pervasiveness of religious imagery in Sherman's prose when discussing the nature of war. Bower contends that Sherman perceived the Civil War as a war of religion, waged by a religiously motivated people against the heretic forces of evil at work in the heartland of the Confederacy (see Bower page 1015). At stake were the souls of the people of the South and of the salvation of the nation in general. Bower finds in Sherman's writings a "visionary impulse." Sherman did not accept membership in any organized faith although his wife and children belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. Bower wrote that Sherman: "believed in God, the transcendence of the American nation, and the prophetic nature of the Civil War." His was a civil and prophetic religion. Hauntingly similar discussions of collective responsibility, deadly religious zeal, and collective salvation can be found on the subject of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacres in Paris see: Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) where Catholics rampaged through the streets of Paris massacring and mutilating the Huguenots. At stake for the Catholics in Paris was the collective salvation of the entire population of the city. Either way religiously inspired or not, Sherman's tactics for total war did not bode well for the people of the Chattahoochee Valley and Columbus, Georgia in 1864.

²⁵² John H. Martin, *Columbus, Geo., from Its Selection as a "Trading Town" in 1827, to Its Partial Destruction by Wilson's Raid, in 1865* (Columbus, Ga.: T. Gilbert, 1874-75), 166-7.

The excited Laura discussed the news that Union forces under General Lovell Harrison Rousseau advanced through Alabama, by way of Talladega to Montgomery toward Columbus. Rousseau's orders were to destroy the railroad at Opelika, Alabama, disrupting Confederate supply lines to Atlanta, and then move to threaten Columbus. With this mission accomplished, Rousseau would proceed to join Sherman at Atlanta where he would participate in Sherman's march of destruction to Savannah. Rumors of impending raids by upwards of 3,500 Yankees swept through Montgomery and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley and caused widespread panic. As the Union cavalry approached, every able-bodied man in Montgomery was enlisted in the city's defense. Rousseau chose to bypass the Alabama capital and spent the night at the McKinney Plantation in Socopato, about eighty miles northwest of Columbus. He then proceeded to the town of Loachapoka, tearing up and burning the rails there and accidentally setting fire to the depot and nearby houses. The Union troops saved the homes by placing their own wet blankets on the threatened roofs. The Yankees tore up rail lines from Loachapoka to Notasulga and continued on toward Opelika. Cadets from the University of Alabama engaged the Union troops at Beasley Station, Alabama, for an hour of heated battle before breaking under heavy fire. Rousseau's raiders continued on to Auburn, Alabama, thirty miles from Columbus where armed, wounded Texas soldiers fired one shotgun volley and immediately retired. Beforehand, Capt. Thomas H. Francis, the Confederate commander, telegraphed Columbus for reinforcements, a request that sent the population into the frenzied preparations mentioned by Laura. At Auburn, the clacking of carriage wheels on the town's rocky roads gave Union forces the impression that major preparations for pitched battle were underway. According to Isabelle Wood

Johnston Shacklette, a wartime resident, the noise stemmed from the townspeople ferrying wounded soldiers in their carriages from the local hospitals into safer locations. Rousseau's troops entered the town, cut telegraph wires, destroyed military stores and broke into warehouses. After helping themselves, they opened the stores to the townsfolk. Residents absconded with grain, flour and hams. In nearby Opelika, the Yankees took whatever they wanted and torched the remainder. The next day, they headed to Marietta, Georgia – toward Atlanta, not Columbus.²⁵³

During this excitement, the men of Columbus rallied to meet the impending threat. Their forces numbered a mere six to eight hundred and included old men and factory workers. They served under the command of Colonel De Lagnel²⁵⁴ in the field, Major Dawson supervising the post. They comprised an undisciplined, inexperienced and poorly armed lot, and took their stand the week of July 23, 1864, a mile and a half west of the city at the intersection of Crawford and Salem Roads. The defenders gained a reprieve when they learned that Rousseau's raiders had turned north to join Sherman, and relieved, returned to Columbus.²⁵⁵ Sherman's plan to vanquish the South from within

²⁵³ Dan Lee, *Kentuckian in Blue: A Biography of Major General Lovell Harrison Rousseau* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2010), Chapter 14, 144-68. See also Isabel Wood Johnston Shacklette, Narrative, 1864, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky. Finding aid at Kentuckiana Digital Library <http://kdl.kyvl.org/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=kyead;cc=kyead;q1=shacklette;rgn=main;view=text;didno=Knt001052> . See also, Williams, *Rich Man's War*, 170-4.

²⁵⁴ Julius A. De Lagnel, formerly served at the ordinance bureau at Richmond, Virginia and declined appointment as brigadier-general in the provisional Confederate States Army in 1862, as found in *The Photographic History of The Civil War: in ten volumes, Thousands of Scenes Photographed 1861-65, with Text by many Special Authorities, Volume 5: Forts and Artillery* , Francis Trevelyan Miller, Ed. Chapter 9, online at Tufts University Digital Online Library Project – Perseus Digital Library, Gregory R. Crane, Editor and Chief available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2001.05.0110%3Achapter%3D9> accessed July 18, 2012.

²⁵⁵ Martin, *Columbus*, 167-8.

proceeded apace. In this tense atmosphere, on August 1, 1864, Laura drove into Columbus to do some banking and to look for salt. She noted that Edmund, formerly her “model boy,” was sold, and declared “I am glad he is gone.” With the impending demise of the Confederacy, it appears that James Comer was selling off his slave property to hedge against his losses as well as dispose of slaves who proved ungovernable. Later that month, Laura observed, “A cloud of gloom seems resting over the entire community.” She added that “Almost every family is suffering from the terrible effects of this awful war!”, and implored, “I pray the Lord will soon, in his great mercy, stay the cruel tide [Laura’s emphasis] of war.”²⁵⁶

In the summer of 1864, the towns and villages of the Valley were faced with grim prospects. Supplies dwindled. Hamilton Weedon, a Confederate army surgeon stationed at Auburn, characterized the town as “a miserable little place almost in ruins.”²⁵⁷ A mantle of despair spread over the Valley. Columbus churchgoers became distracted, and many residents took flight or took to the bottle. To many, the war appeared lost. The Confederate Army began to suffer heavy losses from attrition and desertion, and evacuated Atlanta in early September. Sherman had broken Atlanta; his march to the sea now began. On Saturday morning, September 12, 1864, Laura, herself recovering from illness, received word that James Comer was very ill. He was at the Uchee plantation, and had “congestion of the Brain & was very low indeed; it was doubtful whether he” would live. She arrived on Tuesday evening in time to see him before he died. “I entered the room & viewed him there outstretched, ghastly & in the semblance of death. What a

²⁵⁶ Walker, *Comer*, 100-01.

²⁵⁷ Hamilton Weedon to Mary Young, March 26, 1865. Weedon, H. M. Papers, Auburn University Archives, Auburn University, Alabama.

host of recollections came rushing from the fountain of my heart and mind,” she declared. She remembered that she “bent over him and spoke to him; he knew me – how glad I was to hear him speak once more.” At 9:10 p. m. on September 14, 1864, at the age of sixty-seven, he died. In Laura’s words, her husband “fell quietly asleep I trust and hope in the arms of his Savior.” With the help of eight servants, Laura transported James’s remains to Columbus on the train. From the depot, they drove to the house on Talbutton Road and the coffin was placed in the parlor for visitation. Katy and Wallace Comer arrived and remained until Friday after the funeral and interment in City Cemetery.²⁵⁸ “How grateful I was to them for their kind attentions,” wrote Laura. She lamented that some of James’s other relatives were not so kind. In particular, his cousin, Mrs. Victoria Winter, disappointed her. “Many of his relatives acted strangely; proving that the love of money is the root of all evil,” she mused. Friends and relations assisted Laura in acquiring appropriate mourning attire, and she began “dyeing black.” Miss Lizzie Rutherford, one of her faithful friends, offered to help with this. “I suppose it will be very difficult to get a full suit of Mourning, but I shall try,” she observed, “My heart claims its right.” She received a bonnet and veil from another friend and a collar from Katy Comer. But Laura faced bigger challenges than acquiring mourning attire. James’s death meant that she would be responsible for running their plantations and managing their slaves, and she would assume sole control of his considerable financial estate. She needed help and guidance.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ James and Laura Comer’s cemetery plot is located between Cypress Street and Evergreen Avenue at historic Linwood Cemetery, Columbus, Georgia formerly known as City Cemetery.

²⁵⁹ Walker, *Comer*, 103-5. Alexander Ramsay, *Anatomy of the Heart, Cranium, and Brain: Adapted to the Purposes of the Medical and Surgical Practitioner* (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1813) 54-6, online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=Kk4sAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA54&lpg=PA54&dq=brain+congestion&so>

On Sunday morning, September 18, Laura recorded that on Friday, September 16, in desperation, she had “sent for Gen’l H. L. Benning & Mrs. Benning for counsel as I knew not what to do! They pointed out to me, the way.” Laura would now require strong management skills and the assistance of male friends and overseers to maintain the discipline required to operate successfully her dead husband’s empire and to protect her own financial security. Henry L. Benning provided the perfect option in whom Laura could place her trust. Benning served on boards as the male representative for many of the Columbus women’s activities such as the Ladies Educational and Benevolent Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Columbus, which sponsored the female orphanage in Columbus.²⁶⁰ His network of connections would prove invaluable in dealing with any issues that might arise, and since it appears from diary evidence that Henry L. Benning and James Comer enjoyed a close friendship, he was a man in whom her late husband placed his trust. Some of her most difficult duties required immediate attention, she had to write James’ obituary and execute his Last Will and Testament.²⁶¹

On Monday, September 19, 1864, Laura noted that she “arose early this morning to write Mr. Comer’s obituary. Who will write mine?” she poignantly wondered. On

[rce=bl&ots=Zc9YBCfb61&sig=QgluZqka60jQMn6Xf0jDSIOUivY&hl=en&sa=X&ei=G4n1T-WIEoX48gTXobDHBg&ved=0CFIQ6AEwBTge#v=onepage&q=brain%20congestion&f=false](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000017.htm) (accessed Oct 10, 2012). Brain Congestion – the result of any disease that prevents propulsion of blood through the vessels of the brain – induces sleep – in Edgar Allan Poe’s case it has been deemed by a team at University of Maryland Medical Center working in 1996, to be the result of rabies. University of Maryland Medical Center, “Edgar Allan Poe Mystery” online at <http://www.umm.edu/news/releases/news-releases-17.htm> (accessed Oct 10, 2012).

²⁶⁰ Anne Elizabeth Shepherd Home established by The Ladies Educational and Benevolent Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Columbus, originally known as the Asylum for Female Orphans and Destitute Children. Henry L. and Mrs. Benning (President-1869) appear from the 1840s on as board members. Among the members were many of Laura’s closest friends including Lizzie Rutherford, and Mrs. Woodruff and Mrs. Urquhart. Anne Elizabeth Shepherd Home Records (MC 22), Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, Georgia

²⁶¹ LBCD, Sep 19-25, 1864 .

September 20, Judge John Johnson (Court of Ordinary, Muscogee County, Georgia) came out to Laura's home to advise her on the terms of James's will and how she should proceed. An extract of the proceedings is available in the James Comer estate file. Laura immediately filed the will and codicil with the Court of Ordinary in Muscogee County, Georgia. The Court of Ordinary issued subpoenas to all persons interested in James's estate to appear at a date to be determined. The Court of Ordinary also placed notices about the upcoming proceedings in the *Columbus Enquirer* for two months since the names and locations of James's half siblings and their residences were not all known to Laura and other family members. Of the known family members, Marcus Comer and Isabella Bostwick were residents of Georgia. The interests of James's sister, Nancy Renfrou were represented by Nancy's husband, Nathaniel Renfrou, who resided in Alabama. A substantial portion of the estate, the plantations and slaves, were located in Russell County, Alabama, and the Muscogee County Court of Ordinary referred the matter to Judge Waddell, Magistrate of the Probate Court at Crawford, Alabama. James left everything to Laura except for bequests to the Baptist missions to the slaves and the Indian tribes, and a few small bequests to his brother, Marcus Comer and two of Laura's family members.²⁶² Within days, on September 25, she learned that James's cousin, Victoria Winter, and her family intended to contest the will. "Shocking!! How can any person have such a mean principle?" she exclaimed. On the first of October, Laura sat at

²⁶² James left \$1000 to each of the Baptist Christian mission mentioned above. He left \$3000 to his brother Marcus Comer, \$500 to Laura's brother, Chauncey Beecher, \$500 to Laura's niece, Elizabeth Smith, and all of his remaining estate real and personal to Laura. JCEF.

her desk at home in Columbus, and wrote, “Although bereaved I trust I feel the full measure of gratitude for all these rich blessings that have fallen to my lot in life.”²⁶³

James left Laura very wealthy. She now owned two plantations, numerous slaves, and the house in Columbus. Slave prices had fallen since 1860. It is possible that James, a savvy business man, had been selling off slaves as the fortunes of the Confederacy dimmed. A move to liquidate his assets in slaves by 1864 would have been a shrewd business maneuver. Whatever the case, Laura now faced management of the plantations and the slaves in addition to her other concerns.

Women throughout the South had confronted similar dilemmas from the beginning of the war. For most of them, the necessity of fulfilling men’s roles in the Southern economy began when the men left home to fight. Throughout the war, elite women like Laura, who previously lived within the confines of Southern society’s strictures, rules that restricted plantation and slave management primarily to the purview of men, were forced to face exigencies of crop production and slave management. They bore not only the responsibility of producing the socks and clothing previously discussed, but also production of the staple crops, livestock, and cotton that kept the Confederacy and Southern family life viable. The fact that James remained at home and managed the Comer plantations and slaves until his death sheltered Laura from the trials and struggles with which so many Southern women had contended since 1861. Now, in September of 1864, as Confederate fortunes waned, and Columbus and the Lower Chattahoochee Valley faced the full wrath of Union forces, the responsibility of the James Comers’

²⁶³ LBCD, Sep 25-Oct 1, 1864.

empire including plantations, slaves and related business concerns rested firmly upon Laura's shoulders. She did not, fortunately, face these weighty circumstances alone.

Male members of the Comer family offered immediate assistance to Laura upon James's death. Wallace Comer and the other Comer men present in Alabama and Georgia provided moral support and the crucial male authority necessary for maintaining order in the slave population. Hugh Comer assisted in the execution of James's will. Hugh's younger brother, Wallace, of whom Laura was so fond, stayed at the Comer house in Columbus for several periods during Laura's bereavement. Their mother, Katy, and Laura's numerous friends among the women in Columbus delivered emotional support. She continued to rely upon the counsel of General and Mrs. Henry L. Benning, and her finances appear to have been in good order. She seems to have had full knowledge of the financial circumstances of James's estate as the plantations in Alabama and the house in Columbus remained untouched by the devastation of war.

Laura went to the Cowikee plantation on Saturday, October 1, 1864 and the servants treated her kindly, but one of the slave children had died and several were ill. She returned to Columbus that evening, and the next morning four Confederate soldiers from Missouri joined her for breakfast, after which she went to church for the first time since James's death. On Monday she recorded that she and some of the servants had worked at James's grave planting flowers and adding topsoil to improve the cemetery plot.²⁶⁴

On Monday, October 9, 1864, Laura dined with Mrs. Tory and Miss Grant at the Cowikee plantation, and that evening in Columbus, St. George Legare Comer, younger

²⁶⁴ LBCD, Oct 1, 1864.

brother of Wallace and Hugh, and his friend, Mr. Hendrick, spent the evening at the Comer home. That same day, Laura resumed her complaints about her house servants. She prayed “for patience until such time as I can be delivered from my tormentors!” She observed that they were thieves and liars, noting that houseslaves Lithe and Rose had broken into her storeroom while she was at the plantation in Alabama.²⁶⁵

The following Tuesday, Legare and his friend left for Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to attend the University there, and by October 14, Laura was back at the Uchee plantation where James Comer had died. She found much that demanded her “presence and care.” Five male slaves were ill, among them Buck and Commodore. She sent for Dr. O’Neil, who treated them with pepper poultices and left calomel powders to be administered once every four hours. The Court of Ordinary in Muscogee County had ordered a complete inventory of the estate, and by October 16, Laura had taken an inventory of tools and livestock at the plantations. She lamented that this was the first Sunday she ever spent without a bible. She reached an agreement with the overseer, Mr. Lawrence, for his services for the ensuing year. He would receive \$1500.00 and food for himself and his horse along with use of the overseer’s house. Upon returning to the house in Columbus, Laura discovered that the servants, Lithe and Rosa, had again neglected their duties. Worst of all and to Laura’s horror, they tied her two guinea hens together by the feet and starved them to death. As punishment she determined to give the servants no meat for a period to teach them a lesson.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ LBCD, Oct 9, 1864

²⁶⁶ LBCD, Oct 1, 1864. The order for an inventory is recorded in the extract of the proceedings which is in evidence in the James Comer Estate Files. Receipts of payment to the overseer is in evidence in the James Comer Estate Files, 1864-1867, Court of Probate, Russell County, Alabama, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Microfilm Reel: S2004.540, copy in possession of author hereafter JCEF.

On a busy Thursday, November 3, Laura worked with the surveyor, Mr. Whitten, and Mr. Ford from the Railroad to determine her property lines in Columbus, as part of her efforts to comply with the court orders referenced above. She also paid taxes in Columbus and Alabama. Along with this, Mr. Lawrence required directions for the work she expected on the plantations, and she rode her pony out to discuss that with him. Life now consisted of riding out to plantations in Alabama to supervise the work of the overseer and the slaves and settling James' estate. Laura needed family and friends around her.²⁶⁷

Wallace Comer spent time with Laura in Columbus in November 1864, and during that visit "His bright face lighted up my home." She and Wallace attended church together on Sunday, November 13, and Lizzie Rutherford dined with them that afternoon. Wallace remained with Laura for a time and travelled back and forth to the plantations with her; they again attended services at the Episcopal Church on November 27. In December, Laura moved to the Cowikee plantation accompanied by Cousin Wallace, where she would spend all of December and half of January. She anxiously awaited the arrival of Wallace's brother, Hugh.²⁶⁸

On December 24, 1864, Laura distributed turkeys and pork to the slaves for their Christmas dinner and gave them the day to clean their houses and prepare for the holiday. She called them into the house at Cowikee for services on Christmas Day and reported that all sang and prayed together. Major Clemons came out from Columbus to join Wallace and Laura at Cowikee for Christmas. The holiday had its ominous side. Laura

²⁶⁷ LBCD, Nov 3, 1864, JCEF, documents in evidence for surveyor, etc.

²⁶⁸ LBCD, Nov 13-27, 1864.

found it very disturbing when “a very capable but exceedingly bad servant we had sold” appeared at the door. She sent him away immediately. To her great relief, Hugh arrived on the Thursday after Christmas. Together with Hugh and Major Clemons, four mules, three saddle horses and a wagon, Laura proceeded to the Uchee Plantation house, arriving after dark. The weary party found the old house at Uchee desolate and dreary since all the furnishings had been removed to the overseer’s house for safekeeping. She ordered them supper, which proved meager. The slaves brought in beds, set them up, and Laura and her two companions endured a less than comfortable night’s sleep. Before dawn, Willis, Laura’s driver, awoke them, set a fire in the fireplace and informed them it was raining. The party set out for the Russell County, Alabama, Courthouse in Crawford. After travelling “more than one mile of the worst road I have ever seen,” Laura, Hugh and Major Clemons arrived at eleven o’clock in the morning. They consulted with Judge of Probate Waddell, and were directed to Judge Hooper. That magistrate read the estate papers and approved their efforts to have Hugh Comer appointed as administrator for the Alabama portion of the estate. They left Crawford at two o’clock and arrived back at Uchee after dark. On a chilly Saturday morning after Christmas 1864, Laura, Hugh and Major Clemons breakfasted and then proceeded to the Comer plantation house at Cowikee. After dinner, his business with the estate of James Comer for the time being completed, Hugh Comer left for home.²⁶⁹

Over the next three years, at the request of the Estate and with Laura’s express approval, the Probate Court of Judge H. Waddell, Russell County, Alabama, would assign a full half of the assets of the James Comer Estate in Alabama to Hugh M. Comer in compensation for his services as administrator there. After a complete accounting, the

²⁶⁹ LBCD, Dec 24-31, 1864.

estate appeared to be valued at approximately \$200,000 or \$4,000,000 in current values. Of this total, approximately \$175,000, or \$3,500,000 in current values, represented the assets in personal property invested in slaves. The remainder represented assets such as mules, wagons, a cotton gin, tools, furnishings, etc., for the two plantations at Cowikee and Uchee, Alabama. After notices of the event were placed in the newspaper, the estate lands were sold at public auction on the premises at Uchee by a commission duly appointed by the Probate Court at 12:00 p.m. on December 8, 1864. They were purchased by Mrs. Laura B. Comer, the highest and best bidder, for the sum of \$13,500.00, paid in cash, which was then held by the commission to be paid to the interested parties according to the law. Laura did not attend the auction. She preferred to remain indoors and away from the sale. A formal division of personal property (slaves), to which Laura refers below, took place where all county appointed commissioners, after being duly sworn in by oath, supervised the division proceedings. Documents that enumerated the property in total and then enumerated the equal shares of property divided by Laura B. Comer and Hugh M. Comer were admitted to the court as official exhibits in the estate proceedings. Appropriate notices appeared in local newspapers (*Columbus Enquirer* – receipts on file) for the required amount of time before the sales took place. Hugh Comer placed his share of the Comer slaves for sale with Thomas Harris & Michael Cody Dry Goods. This amounted to eighty slaves listed at a resale value of \$126,000 in 1864 or \$2,520,000 in today's values. Cody & Harris bought half interest in the total value or \$63,000 (\$1,260,000 in current values) paid to Hugh Comer upon consignment prior to the final sale of the Comer slaves by Cody & Harris. Division of the estate assets at this point in the process shielded half of the estate against any legal

action taken on behalf of any other family members who might wish to contest the will. It also rescued a fortune from slave assets that might have been lost in the event of the South's losing the war. The appointment of Hugh Comer as administrator placed a male member of the Comer family in the equation, and helped protect Laura from the onslaught that she faced when other members of the family contested the will. In spring of 1865, James Comer's half-sisters and brother (Marcus Comer, Isabella Bostwick, and Nathaniel Renfrou husband of James deceased sister) contested the will to claim a portion of the assets as their rightful inheritance as heirs at law. All proceedings for accounting, division and sale took place in Russell County, Alabama, and final results and attenuating documents then were submitted to the Court of Ordinary at Muscogee County, Georgia. Laura recorded some of these events in her diary.²⁷⁰

In the first week of April 1865, on Monday, she observed that Maj. Clemons and Col. G. W. Hooper came in the evening before and took their oaths as commissioners for the sale. On Wednesday the "Division," as discussed above, began and was concluded by the following evening. Laura recorded that "the gentlemen appointed as commissioners, lawyers, Justice of Peace & all were so honorable! None could have been more so." Nevertheless, in the midst of Laura's personal trials with James' estate in April of 1865, ominous events of the war brewed in Columbus.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ JCEF, documents in evidence. See for example, *Columbus Enquirer*, July 30, 1867. For discussion of women's property rights in the nineteenth century see Susan D. Lebsack, "Radical Reconstruction and Southern Women's Property Rights" *Journal of Southern History*, 43, 2 (May 1977): 195-216.

²⁷¹ Walker, *Comer*, 110-4. JCEF, division documents in evidence.

On Thursday, April 12, Laura spent the evening with Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Benning.²⁷² Admiral Franklin Buchanan of the Confederate Navy and his aide joined them for tea. The Admiral, formerly of the United States Navy, had served as the first Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy, 1845-7, and Commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, from 1859-61. Buchanan now commanded the Confederate forces at Mobile Bay.²⁷³ On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee had surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House, and on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Events of the war were moving quickly now, and, although Columbus emerged unscathed previously, it did not appear that such good fortune would continue.²⁷⁴

Laura reported with excitement on April 16, 1865, "The Federalists were said to have captured Montgomery and were approaching Columbus via Tuskegee and Society Hill, about noon to-day, several scouts rode up to our gate and inquired the way to Hatchchubbie. One squad of the Enemy passed by Uchee today. I have not heard the extent of the injury. I shall go in the morning." On April 17, 1865, Laura wrote that "Columbus was taken last night. Great excitement prevails." She noted that the Federals were advancing toward Cowikee. "Information has reached me that 7 of our men servants & all of our mules were taken from Uchee," exclaimed Laura on April 18. "I am

²⁷² Walker, *Comer*, 110-4. Mrs. Seaborn Jones and her daughter, Mrs. Henry L. (Mary Howard Jones) Benning. Seaborn Jones and Henry L. Benning were partners in a prominent law firm in Columbus, Georgia.

²⁷³ Admiral Buchanan was on board the CSS Tennessee, and wounded in the leg at the Battle of Mobile Bay, Aug 5, 1864 and subsequently taken prisoner.

²⁷⁴ Walker, *Comer*, 113-4.

submissively & quietly waiting to see the results of this tremendous Revolution,” she declared. “Columbus is in ruins,” she noted sadly four days later.²⁷⁵

In what is known today as Wilson’s Raid, Columbus, the second most important military manufactory and supply depot of the Confederacy, was the primary objective. Detailed by Sherman to wreak havoc on Alabama and western Georgia, Union cavalry destroyed the city of Selma, Alabama, triumphantly marched through Montgomery, the first capital city of the Confederacy. They enjoyed a pleasant interlude in Tuskegee, where young ladies offered bouquets of flowers to Union soldiers, and the mayor came out to greet the Yankee invaders in order to prevent wanton destruction of that town. Subsequently, 13,480 Union cavalry under the command of General James Harrison Wilson struck out for Columbus in April of 1865. They had conducted a lightning-fast raid through Alabama that left death and destruction in its path, and along the way, liberated the slave population and accumulated over three thousand contrabands of war.²⁷⁶ Union forces armed and mounted over two thousand freed black men in separate cavalry units. On April 16, 1865, Wilson’s Raiders engaged the forces of Confederate Generals Howell Cobb and Abraham Buford and their six thousand men. The Battle of Columbus lasted for eight grisly hours and is arguably the last battle of the Civil War. When the action ended, the city of Columbus lay devastated. In the wake of the battle, the victorious Union soldiers under Wilson marched into Columbus, flags aflutter to the strains of *Hail Columbia*. The victors destroyed all stores of munitions and military

²⁷⁵Walker, *Comer*, 113-4.

²⁷⁶ Benjamin Butler declared runaway slaves that found their way to the Union Army in Virginia as Contraband of War when their slave owner came to the Army and attempted to claim them as his property. See McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 355.

supplies; factories and workers' homes were demolished and burned. The Union troops smashed merchants' store windows, took what they wanted, dumped merchandise in the streets, and mobs of looters, black and white, swarmed about. They carried off whatever they could. Although Wilson ordered that civilians not be harmed, drunken troops accosted women and threatened elderly men. Plumes of smoke rose above the city as warehouses filled with bales of cotton succumbed to the flames. The people of Columbus barricaded themselves in their houses and prayed that the horror of the conflagration would pass them by. Columbus did not suffer the worst that Sherman could inflict. Unlike the sack of Atlanta, where Sherman's tactics for total war included turning the civilian population out of their homes with nothing but what they could carry and burning the city to the ground, Columbus residents remained in their homes, most in comparative safety. Bands of soldiers roamed the countryside outside Columbus looking for food and forage in Alabama and Georgia.²⁷⁷

On Friday, May 5, 1865, Yankee troops completely surrounded the Comer plantation at Cowikee. They came with flags flying and demanded mules and provisions. Laura was in residence and treated them as soldiers and gentlemen. They rode up to the fence and did not enter the Comer home but went into the yard and "stepped into the servant's houses." They left the next morning with most of the "frightened servant men and all the mules."²⁷⁸ On the previous Monday and Tuesday, Laura had travelled into the

²⁷⁷ Charles A. Misulia, *Columbus, Georgia, 1865: The Last True Battle of the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010) 179-82, Chapter 16, "Laid in Ruins". For a complete listing of facilities and stores as well as four bridges destroyed or captured at Columbus by Wilson's Raiders refer to the after action report which lists property captured or destroyed in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* Vol XLIX, 485-7, Official Records: Series 1, vol 49, part 1, available online and searchable at <http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/sources/recordView.cfm?Content=103/0487> (accessed Aug 10, 2012).

²⁷⁸ Walker, *Comer*, 113-4.

desolate city, walked the city streets and viewed the devastation. Stores and factories were in ashes. Since the bridges that crossed the Chattahoochee River to Columbus from Alabama were destroyed, she had crossed over the river on a flat boat and returned in a little canoe to the Alabama side of the river to return to the plantation at Cowikee. In the countryside outside Columbus, Union soldiers lived off the land foraging for what they needed.²⁷⁹ By Saturday, July 1, 1865, Laura commented that “Freedom has fallen so suddenly upon the negroes as to completely upset his equilibrium & turn his head.” Like everyone else in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley, the Freedmen and women faced a new world.²⁸⁰

Although the war had ended, Laura remained busy. In July 1865, Laura supervised the preparation of bales of cotton for market. She had wheat ground in Columbus, and the first pies of summer appeared. A lonesome soldier came to the plantation and asked her to make pies with the blackberries he had with him. Maj. Clemons convalesced in her home, presumably injured in the fighting, and she wondered when her entire family would be well again. She again negotiated to rent out her house in Columbus to Dr. Minor “since so many were homeless.” August 4, 1865 found Laura on a shopping expedition via the cars to Montgomery where she stayed at the Exchange Hotel. After arriving at 11:00 p.m. at Montgomery, she dined at the hotel and went out to price goods in several stores. She returned to the plantation in Cowikee the next day. New laws now permitted the Freedmen and women to marry, and she noted that her servants attended weddings where all wore white muslin party dresses trimmed with

²⁷⁹ Walker, *Comer*, 113-4.

²⁸⁰ Walker, *Comer*, 114-5.

ribbons as the freed slaves rushed to solemnize long-standing relationships. In November, Laura inquired at the plantations, whom of the servants desired to stay or go at Christmas. After consideration, most of the servants opted to stay. Laura had misgivings about asking them to stay on and work on her plantations. She had found her first experience with the Freedmen's Bureau to be a terrible ordeal. She attempted to explain the situation to her servants. "They cannot comprehend," she declared. "How dark their minds must be," she observed. She continued, "Life is now an effort with these Freedmen . . . poor, ignorant things."²⁸¹

²⁸¹ Walker, *Comer*, 116-7. On Freedmen and women's marriages and information about access to the extensive Freedmen's Bureau record collections see: Reginald Washington, "Sealing the Sacred Bonds of Holy Matrimony: Freedmen's Bureau Marriage Records," *Prologue*, 37, 1, Spring 2005, available at the National Archives online <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/spring/freedman-marriage-recs.html> (Accessed Aug 8, 2012).

Chapter Five

The Undefeated: A True Daughter of the South

On a clear, delightful day in March of 1866, with the peach trees in full bloom, Laura sat at her desk at Cowikee to write in her diary. The previous Saturday she had sent her driver, Willis, to the courthouse at Crawford, Alabama, to deliver the inventory of James's estate. She observed it was "folly for people to be covetous!" The thought that her late husband wanted her to have all his property deeply touched her heart, and she declared that "meant more to me than the property itself." She vowed to "defend it from all his enemies with all the powers within me even to the last Dollar."²⁸² Since his death, Laura defended her status as heir against the claims of James's brother and half-sisters, and supervised the operations of the two plantations and the house in Columbus. This left her little time for much else. Yet life went on. In 1866, she and the elite white women of Columbus faced other concerns.

Laura went to City Cemetery to tend to James Comer's grave regularly. Like so many women dressed in black, she pulled weeds, planted flowers and grieved. Many local young men who had fought and died in service to the Confederacy were interred there along with their compatriots from other areas of the South who had fallen during the battles for Atlanta and Columbus. Among those who went to the cemetery often to

²⁸² LBCD, Mar 1-10, 1866.

tend the graves of fallen Confederate soldiers was Laura's dear friend Lizzie Rutherford. In the early part of 1866, Lizzie suggested to the women of the Columbus Soldier's Aid Society, soon to be called the Ladies Memorial Association, that there should be an annual day of commemoration each spring to honor Confederate soldiers similar to the one she had read about in Baroness Tautphoeus's novel *The Initials*.²⁸³ The women of the Columbus Ladies Memorial Association (LMA) worked together to tend and care for all the graves of Confederate soldiers at the cemetery each year, and shortly after they held the first commemoration day in Columbus, they published an appeal to LMAs in other areas that they also consider an annual day of commemoration. This led to the custom of Decoration Day that is celebrated in the South every spring.²⁸⁴

Ladies' memorial organizations developed across the former Confederacy, and though independent entities, they maintained informal lines of communication. The associations generally included honorary male members who were often prominent members of the elite white community; young Confederate veterans assisted in the cemetery projects providing labor as needed. Prominent men also contributed financially

²⁸³ Baroness Von Tautphoeus, *The Initials* (London: Richard Bentley, Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty, 1853) available at Google books online <http://books.google.com/books?id=yNMBAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> accessed Sep 17, 2012. See also obituary of Baroness Tautphoeus, *New York Times*, Dec 9, 1893, available online at <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=FA0B12FF3A5F1A738DDDA00894DA415B8385F0D3> accessed Sep 17, 2012. The New York Times obituary discusses the "Frenchification" of the continent of Europe by Napoleon who imposed the policies of the French Revolution on lands conquered by his armies. The end result of Napoleon's policies was to inspire national solidarity in the conquered lands. See George Duby and Robert Mandrou, *Histoire de la Civilization francaise* (Paris: A. Colin, Publisher, 1984) 216-9.

²⁸⁴ *A History of the Origin of Memorial Day as Adopted by the Ladies Memorial Association of Columbus, Georgia* (Columbus: Thos. Gilbert, Printer, 1898), Original of *History of the Origin of Memorial Day, 1898*, as found in Lizzie Rutherford Chapter UDC Collection, MC006 Genealogy & Local History, Columbus Public Library, Folder 7, copy in possession of the author.

See also obituary of Laura Beecher Comer of Columbus, Georgia in the Atlanta Constitution of January 6, 1900 available from <http://search.ancestry.com/browse/view.aspx?dbid=50000&iid=548455772&pid=1442330&ssrc=&fn=jam&ln=comer&st=g> accessed August 7, 2011.

and in other significant ways to the women's efforts. This unpretentious beginning represented a community healing process, and allowed the white citizenry public occasions to mourn for their fallen soldiers and defeated nation. Eventually benefits like teas, dances and bazaars were instituted to raise funds to pay for the permanent memorials to all the Confederate dead so commonly found in cemeteries and town squares throughout the South today. On the occasion of public ceremonies that commemorated the sacrifice of the "grand and glorious dead" who had fallen in the "Lost Cause" of Southern independence, mourners from across the spectrum of society, rich and poor alike, joined in. Southerners lamented the loss of their fallen soldiers as they grieved for the loss of a way of life. Their most disturbing thoughts reflected the sadness that, although loved ones died a valiant death in a cause perceived as just, their sacrifice ended in overwhelming defeat. In the aftermath of the war, families and kin suffered a kind of living death of the soul, and feelings of futility and despair led to an overall atmosphere of gloom. Mourning rituals conducted by LMAs facilitated the process of recovery and allowed communities to find a place within which to sort out the dilemma of the defeat not only of their army, but also their hopes and dreams, and ultimately, their identities as southerners.²⁸⁵

For devoted Confederates, the evidence of crushing defeat and death was everywhere embodied in the persons of former slaves and the Freedmen's Bureau.

²⁸⁵ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2000), 201, hereafter Gallagher, *Myth*. See also Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (Kindle Locations 4905-4906). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition, hereafter Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy* and "Ladies' Memorial Association, Montgomery," manuscript in box #6, Thomas M. Owen Papers, ADAH as found in Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 218.

On death and dying see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred K. Knoff Publishers Div. of Random House, 2008), Chapter 5, especially 142-6 on living death of the soul.

Freedmen and women now walked the streets in the Yankee-occupied cities of the South as free as their former masters and mistresses. Elite white women unaccustomed to carrying out the domestic tasks of cooking, cleaning and laundering found themselves faced with performing the work themselves or employing competent servants.

Employment of the former slaves presented difficulties since the Freedpeople refused to work as they had previously. They insisted that they alone determine the circumstances and terms under which they would work. This labor predicament caused no end of tribulation and concern for Freedmen's Bureau agents. Bureau agents' purpose was to begin the process of revolutionizing Southern society by developing a free labor economy, which in their view was the superior approach to seminal change.

Potential employers, faced with engaging their former slaves, confronted the formidable challenges of instituting working arrangements with the Freedmen who felt the empowerment of their new freedom and worked to define their own identities as freedpeople. Employers also found it necessary to contend with agents of the Freedmen's Bureau. For Republicans, the Bureau was the instrument by which the rights of the recently liberated people were protected and the way to a new life in freedom facilitated. For those who continued to maintain allegiance to the Old South's special way of life and its peculiar institutions, the Bureau represented the oppression of the occupational force of the conqueror intended to revolutionize the plantation South and turn it into a free labor society. For newly freed slaves, the Bureau was the agency designed by the government to advocate on behalf of their welfare. Thus, life was dramatically transformed for all Southerners, rich and poor, black and white, and change brings its own kind of grief during periods of adjustment to new circumstances. Columbus and the

Lower Chattahoochee Valley became an inverted world. For defeated planter elites, it became a world filled with mourning for the society and way of life they had known before the war.²⁸⁶

Laura observed that “the servants were all free on November 14, 1866.”²⁸⁷ She employed eighty workers at the three Comer establishments, which, in Alabama, consisted of approximately a thousand acres under cultivation. Laura did not suffer from the poverty and destitution experienced by most former slave owners. It appears from the available evidence that Laura and James had been very careful in the judicious stewardship of their wealth. It is also possible that they kept a portion of their funds in gold bullion on hand in the house in Columbus, and also with a factor in London rather than investing everything in the plantations and the war effort. Virginia Foster Durr observed that her grandfather had not purchased Confederate bonds but held his money in gold bullion on reserve with his factor in London during the war. The Comer family and circle of friends had the good fortune to have a cotton factor in their number. Hugh Comer became a factor sometime after his marriage to Mary Emma Bates, daughter of neighboring planter Wilson M. Bates. Wilson Bates was also a cotton factor whose main business concerns were located in Savannah. It is possible that during the war James had arranged to keep a portion of his funds in London through Hugh Comer and Wilson Bates

²⁸⁶ On Freedwomen’s demonstrations of agency and assertion of rights as well as the Bureau’s efforts to institute a free labor society see Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen’s Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) hereafter Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen*: on agency 3-4, 58-61, 67-68 and on assertion of rights 34, 103-4, 115-26, see especially withdrawal from workforce, ungovernability and efforts to institute a free labor society 64-7.

²⁸⁷ LBCD, Nov 14, 1866.

or another trusted factor as had Virginia Foster Durr's grandfather.²⁸⁸ Regardless of the means by which the Comers maintained their wealth during the war, Laura was well-off in comparison to others in the Valley when it was over. Rather than contending with poverty, she spent her time supervising these lucrative concerns, which left her "wearied out," and careworn.

Freedom for the slaves had come as a relief to Laura. She declared "I never liked forced labor. I have suffered more than tongue can tell from slaves. By their being freed, I am free also and relieved from them." Perhaps she was relieved that she no longer had to see to their food and shelter, or spend the endless hours devoted to seeing to their clothing and worrying about their shoes and healthcare. Prior to emancipation, in order to recoup the considerable financial investment made in enslaved servants who proved deficient or uncontrollable it was necessary for owners to sell slaves to a willing buyer or place them with a slave trader. While waiting for sales, masters continued to be responsible for slaves' bed and board. If Freed men or women's services were not satisfactory, or their attitudes unacceptable, Laura could simply dismiss them without further care for their welfare. Despite her feelings of relief from the responsibilities and inconveniences of managing the slaves, Laura registered equally as many objections about free servants. In March of 1867, when her driver, Alfred, arrived too late to take her to church, she complained "The Freedmen are intolerably lazy! I am worried out with them. I am worn out completely." Laura expected the freedpeople to simply go to work for wages or other compensation and accommodations without a thought for anything else, and was disappointed and disgusted when they did not. Those who were so recently

²⁸⁸ Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 3-6, Hollinger F. Barnard, ed., Forward by Studs Terkel.

freed from bondage faced greater challenges as they worked to define their new lives in freedom.²⁸⁹

The emancipation moment had arrived later for slaves in Georgia and Alabama than it had in other parts of the South, but was greeted jubilantly by them all the same. At the news that they were free, many simply dropped what they were doing and walked away. They left plantations and farms, flocked to towns and cities, and vowed never to return. Cities and towns offered greater safety, independence and excitement. In rural areas hostile whites found it easier to take the law into their own hands; conversely, cities provided the protection of Union troops and Bureau agents as well as opportunity and hope. Freedpeople regarded the fact of enslavement as the overall greatest evil to which they had been subjected, and they refused to go back. They sought out friends and family members with whom to celebrate their great happiness, plan for the future, and begin the process of transitioning to a new life in liberty. This new life, as yet undefined, meant a period of discovery and negotiation. Many of the freedpeople simply left. To those whose freedom of movement had been so strictly circumscribed during slavery, the ability to travel freely without a pass was liberating in and of itself. Many returned after a few years to the security of old home places, family and friends. Many remained with the white folks for whom they had toiled for so long because they had no other place to go and no way to earn a living, or felt needed where they were since quite often, their family and friends remained there. They insisted on self-determination and the ability to decide

²⁸⁹ LBCD, Mar 1867. See Anthony Gene Carey, *Sold Down the River: Slavery in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley of Alabama and Georgia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), on slave trading, 9, 18, 51-70; and slaves' transitions to freedom, 214-5. On freedom of movement see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863 - 1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 80-1, hereafter Foner, *Reconstruction*.

their own futures. This was a time of revolution for Southern society. New societal arrangements were evolving on a daily basis in what had been a highly stratified society ruled by the planter elite and supported by the enslaved. For the most part, emancipation decimated the wealth and power of plantation society, leaving chaos in the vacuum. Many among the former ruling elites swore to fight to preserve the traditional society of plantation days. Yeoman farmers and poor whites challenged the authority of the planter community and sought to renegotiate their position in society. Freedmen struggled to survive and adamantly demanded civil rights, better treatment and the freedom to make their own choices.²⁹⁰

State governments were in flux. In Alabama, President Andrew Johnson's provisional governor Lewis E. Parsons and white citizens convened a Constitutional Convention in 1865 and ratified the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution thereby affirming emancipation. They wrote a new state constitution, and held elections in December that produced an all-white government including Governor Robert M. Patton. Governor Patton successfully performed most but not all of his functions. The confusion continued as Union generals issued regulations that reversed state law. The United States congress refused to admit Alabama and passed the Reconstruction Acts of 1867. The Reconstruction Acts required black suffrage and were reflected in a new state constitution that resulted from Alabama's 1867 Constitutional

²⁹⁰ Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1972), Introduction, xvi-xvii, hereafter Kolchin, *First Freedom*.

Convention. In the elections of 1868, a new state government was elected; consequently, Alabama representatives were readmitted to the United States Congress.²⁹¹

Paramount to solving the problems of disorder during the first few years of the Reconstruction period, in the view of Union officials, was restoration of the economy and agricultural production. The means to accomplish this goal was to put freedpeople back to work, which would in turn provide workers with shares of crops, shelter, a modicum of subsistence, and would restore order. Union officials were also concerned with prevention of vagrancy, idleness, perceived impudence, and Freedmen's refusals to work. Outright rebellions occurred on some plantations because of freed people's dissatisfaction with contract terms and remuneration. In these instances Freedmen's Bureau agents found it necessary to negotiate with workers to establish an acceptable agreement.²⁹² Early employment contracts for freedpeople reflected the historical arrangements of the Old South. Union officials gave vague directions on the details such as wages and compensation. Employers promised to provide crop shares, a small wage if any and such necessities as might be needed like food, housing, tools, supplies, and medical care in exchange for faithful service and proper conduct. An early form of this contract labor system had been imposed on Union-occupied territories prior to the Emancipation Proclamation.²⁹³

The Freedmen's Bureau, officially known as the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, was the federal agency established by the War Department, in

²⁹¹ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, xvii-xix.

²⁹² Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 30-32.

²⁹³ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 30-32.

March 1865 to assist emancipated slaves and destitute white refugees in finding shelter, jobs, food, land and other accommodations. The agency was primarily responsible for monitoring and managing employment arrangements for former slaves; however, it was not merely a continuation of a military system that served to mediate the wartime contraband problem. Rather, it served the dual purpose of seeking justice for freedpeople and enabling them to adapt to the challenges posed by their newly acquired freedom. The Bureau resulted from the common belief held among Republicans that the Federal Government must provide for the vital needs and requirements of the emancipated slaves. In that capacity, it acted as a regulatory agency and a modern-day social services agency. Since the Bureau was charged with the oversight of all concerns that related to the former slaves, its representatives played a crucial role in implementing the Reconstruction policy that revolutionized Southern society. Within its purview lay the interpretation and implementation of directives and laws intended to assure the civil rights and liberties promised by emancipation, thereby challenging the status quo in the South. In Georgia and Alabama, hundreds of Bureau personnel worked as field agents, clerks, and medical staff managing the labor, education, and relief efforts that facilitated a new way of life for freedpeople. Since the Freedmen's Bureau regulated and supervised labor arrangements for the Freedmen, white plantation owners were required to negotiate yearly contracts with former slaves in order to employ them on their plantations as farm workers.²⁹⁴ Freedpeople firmly supported the Freedmen's Bureau and regarded it as the government agency that worked on their behalf to smooth their transition to liberty. Although

²⁹⁴ Paul A. Cimbalá, *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997) Introduction, hereafter Cimbalá, *Guardianship*.

planters endeavored to use the Bureau and the code to their advantage and were occasionally successful, others found it impossible to continue agricultural production.²⁹⁵

The South suffered from more than labor problems in the post-war period, however. Widespread and persistent destitution for the Freedmen, their former masters and others in the white community posed one of the most serious concerns. Poverty among both blacks and whites resulted from the effects of the war itself that caused pervasive dislocation due to the huge numbers of people who fled their homes in advance of Sherman's army. It also reflected the poor or disrupted harvests that the South experienced during the last year of the war. Both blacks and whites suffered from starvation and disease in devastating numbers. The desperate condition of the general population led to a period of lawlessness and disorder unknown to previous generations. In large part, a great deal of the misery experienced in Alabama and Georgia resulted from the events of the war. Whole armies had foraged for food, livestock, pack animals and horses throughout the section leaving a dearth of epic proportions in their wake that local governments found difficult to fill. Diseases especially threatened the freedpeople as smallpox reached epidemic proportions in the densely populated areas of the cities and towns where they sought refuge. Hot, dry weather inhibited crop production and famine conditions continued into 1867. The need to seek food for starving family members frequently kept people out of the fields. The Bureau responded to the desperate circumstances of both blacks and whites to solve the immediate problems of the destitute but on only a temporary basis. Only seven days of rations per person were distributed at a time. This response was predicated on the lack of an abundant supply of available food

²⁹⁵ Cimbala, *Guardianship*, Introduction, and Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1867*(New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 167-73, hereafter Foner, *Reconstruction*.

and the idea that too much assistance would inhibit the personal initiative that Bureau agents regarded as an important aspect of the responsibility of freedom. Bureau agents preferred to relocate impoverished able bodied laborers to areas where they could find productive work, which was frequently contrary to the desires of newly freed men and women who preferred to remain close to family and friends. The highest goal of the Bureau was to promote self-help among the former slaves as well as the penurious white population. Freedpeople were encouraged to form self-help organizations that assisted those in need within their own communities. Bureau agents complained of the willingness of people, both black and white, to avail themselves of handouts when they were available and believed that the numbers of those self-identified as needy increased with increased supply. Bureau surgeons also objected when city officials attempted to impose all responsibility for the sick onto the Bureau, believing that the cities should also attempt to contend with the problem of the suffering freed people and white refugees.²⁹⁶

For Laura, the experience of dealing with the Bureau proved “intolerable,” and she questioned whether she would continue to employ former slaves on the plantations. Laura preferred to have things her way. In contrast, the Bureau worked to protect Freed men and women and negotiated with an eye to their benefit.²⁹⁷ Laura enjoyed immensely the ability to dismiss workers with whom she wasn’t pleased and did so without

²⁹⁶ Cimbala, *Guardianship*, 80-7.

²⁹⁷ Walker, *Comer*, 115-22; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 65-70. For a fresh look at the Freedmen’s Bureau and on Freedwomen and the gendered nature of Bureau operations see Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen*, 1-5.

The original Freedmen’s Bureau records, at the field office level on a state-by-state basis, are now available on microfilm through the U. S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Information is available about these records at <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/#field> . A very helpful NARA publication about field records that include employment records, marriage records and a myriad of other exciting opportunities for researchers is available at: <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/brochure.pdf> accessed Aug 6, 1012.

hesitation. That yearly contracts did not allow such freedom for the employer worked to restrict the imperious behavior that sometimes characterized masters' and mistresses' treatment of the enslaved prior to emancipation. This situation was not to Laura's liking. During slavery there was no one who represented the rights, needs and desires of the enslaved as the Bureau did for the freedpeople. Laura also did not care for the company of individuals whom she deemed her social inferiors. At Bureau offices, she was merely one among many citizens and was probably afforded no special treatment. She also had to contend with throngs of freedpeople who came to the Bureau seeking assistance and relief. This certainly did not please Laura Beecher Comer, who previously commanded the coerced labor of slaves and never associated with those she reckoned to be beneath her station in life. She looked forward to a respite from the Reconstruction South and all the disturbing issues that confronted her there. Laura set out for the Northeast to visit Beecher family, in particular her sister Elizabeth and friends in the autumn of 1866.

On the clear, warm evening of Wednesday, September 12, 1866, she recorded that she had come to Washington by way of Virginia where she had visited for a pleasant interlude. She commented "I should not like to live in this city but I like to visit it." At 9:30 that evening she received a visit from "Julia Henson (colored)" who "came to see me about servants she knew in Columbus." The next day, Laura departed for New York City. On September 22, in her New York hotel room, she declared "I have taken my maid, Ada, out with me to show her every place I have been in, but the majority of the human family are ungrateful for kind treatment!" Possibly, Ada did not appreciate the attractions of nineteenth-century New York City, or not surprisingly, she may not have enjoyed seeing those sights with Laura. The next day Laura visited the rector of Trinity

Church who directed her to the General Theological Seminary on “20th between 9th and 10th Avenues” to see the Professors there.²⁹⁸ Laura experienced bouts of depression during her bereavement. She suffered from loneliness and sought relief in her Christian faith and the Bible which was her constant companion. She spent time with friends and family in Connecticut, and in October 1866, returned to Columbus. On October 22, alone in her room at Cowikee after a “delightful drive” in her Rockaway, she recorded that she recovered her health with every mile on the drive. The drive dispelled her summer depression, but the incessant responsibilities on the plantations plunged her into despair once again.²⁹⁹

On October 28, 1866, she declared “To-morrow morning I must go out to the Plantation. I dread the trip.” The trip from Columbus to Alabama was onerous since the destruction of the bridges that crossed the Chattahoochee River from Georgia to Alabama during the Battle of Columbus. But Laura dreaded the plantations more than the trip itself. James Comer had shielded Laura from the work and concerns of plantation management, and after his death she did not enjoy the experience of widowhood that caused her to deal with day-to-day activities of freed house servants and field hands on the plantations. These managerial responsibilities clearly were a major source of her bouts of melancholy. Both on the plantations and in Columbus, the “dark, ignorant and superstitious Freedmen” clouded her days. She commented, “What their tongues speak is not a true index of their

²⁹⁸ LBCD, Sep 12-22, 1866. Per the New York City Landmarks Commission and the National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination form (pdf copy in possession of author), Trinity Church of New York City is located on Broadway at Wall Street. It is the oldest Episcopal Church in New York City and was chartered by King William III of England in 1697. Unfortunately, Trinity registers only record baptism, and burial. A detailed history of the General Theological Seminary is available at http://gts.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1030%3Agts-detailed-history&catid=35&Itemid=52 accessed Aug 2, 2012.

²⁹⁹ LBCD, Oct 22, 1866.

heart or head.” Freedmen were distrustful of former masters and mistresses and behaved evasively as a result. Former slaves were often signed to contracts that perpetuated the conditions of slavery. They were paid a meager annual wage, about \$120 on average, given subsistence rations and medical care, and allowed to live in the quarters. Their movements remained restricted by contract terms, and they were forced to adhere to agreements that they signed by making their mark but were unable to read. In the event that employers did not fulfill their part of a contract by nonpayment or inadequate crop shares, freedpeople were frequently forced by Bureau agents to acquiesce with good humor. Contracts illustrate the arrangements established by Bureau agents between potential employers and former slaves. The following statement appeared on pre-printed contract forms transcribed by John Richard Dennett who wrote a series of articles for a weekly journal, *The Nation*, in Columbus in 1866: “For neglect of duty or – or misdemeanor – or any doubt arising, the same to be referred to the nearest officer or agent of the Bureau or justice of the peace.” Freedmen were expected to be “obedient, honest, and faithful;” in the event that they were not, employers had the power to dismiss them from service and the workers’ wages were forfeited. Dennett illustrated the untenable dilemma of freedpeople in the case of a woman who was whipped by her employer for what was deemed to be sloppy work in her services as a spinster on an Alabama plantation. The spinster sought redress from Bureau agents. She returned to the plantation with a note from a Yankee colonel, which she could not read. The note communicated to the plantation owner the following, “I send back this woman, and advise you not to turn her away from the plantation. Make her behave herself and do her work, and if she needs correcting, correct her.” Interpretation and execution of the terms

of these contracts depended on several variables: the willing cooperation of employers to abide by contract terms and the determination of Union officials and Bureau agents to defend the Freedmen and protect their rights. Freedpeople remained at the mercy of former slave owners and the Bureau. As illustrated here, this predicament often left former bondspersons without recourse, which led to their reluctance to agree to contracts and equivocation in their attitudes toward former slave-owners.³⁰⁰

By 1867, sharecropping became the norm. Freedpeople preferred sharecropping because it afforded them more control over their own lives, rather than wage labor, which rendered freed persons subordinate to the employer. White planters believed that sharecropping gave workers an interest in production and inspired diligence as a result.³⁰¹ These arrangements were not always successful in satisfying the growing demands of freedpeople for autonomy. In Russell County, Alabama, where Laura's plantations were located, armed revolts required military intervention.³⁰²

Planters were adapting to the new demands of the Freed men and women by renting out their plantations in shares. They were given cabins in which to live that were scattered throughout the plantation away from the Big House. This afforded a degree of independence, privacy and dignity to black families contracted to work the land in family groups. Planters often found that sharecropping led to a lack of control over planting and harvesting operations that was disconcerting and unprofitable. Others favored these

³⁰⁰ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 28. For illustrations of Freedmen's contracts and the incident of the spinster, see John Richard Dennett, *The South As It Is: 1865-1866* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 282-93, Henry M. Christman, ed.

³⁰¹ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 34-36.

³⁰² Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 45-6. Josiah Gorgas, diary, Jan 9, 1869, University of Alabama Library as found in Kolchin.

arrangements because it meant the least contact between freed persons and former owners or employers.³⁰³

Among her activities, Laura now counted contending with freedpeople and the Bureau and marketing loads of cotton in Columbus, which she enjoyed much less than the rounds of social calls, teas and dinners that had characterized her married days. Laura longed for the companionship of married life and someone to relieve the burden of conducting the business of the plantations.³⁰⁴ In November, Laura “rejoiced” that she would soon “give up this plantation,” referring to her Uchee property. Laura did not offer explanations in her diary about how she relinquished personal management of the Uchee property; however, it is possible that she rented out her farm at Uchee to sharecroppers rather than operate it herself as described above.

Toward the end of the month, she rode to Spring Hill in her Rockaway to enjoy the wedding of Hugh Moss Comer to Mary Emma Bates.³⁰⁵ She did not enjoy the

³⁰³ Kolchin, *First Freedom*, 47-8.

³⁰⁴ LBCD, Oct 15 – Nov 5, 1866.

³⁰⁵ Ancestry.com, Alabama Marriage Collection, 1800-1968 [database online], Provo, UT, USA, Ancestry.com Operations 2006 and Walker, *Comer*, 160. Wilson M. Bates (farmer) and his daughter Mary are listed in the 1860 Census for the Eastern District at the Eufaula, Alabama, office. Mary is noted to be fourteen years old in 1860. 1850 Slave Schedules demonstrate that Bates owned at least 31 slaves in Alabama in 1850, also available at Ancestry.com http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=8055&iid=ALM432_17-0268&fn=Wilson+M&ln=bates&st=r&ssrc=&pid=109644 and, by 1860, he possessed 101, 1860 Census available at Ancestry.com http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=1&msT=1&gss=angs-g&gsfn=Wilson+M&gsln=bates&msbdy=1817&msydy=1866&msypn_ftp=Spring+Hill%2c+Barbour%2c+Alabama%2c+USA&msypn=25642&msypn_PInfo=8-%7c0%7c1652393%7c0%7c2%7c3246%7c3%7c0%7c232%7c25642%7c0%7c&cpxt=0&uidh=3g5&cp=0&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=1464747&recoff=11+12+13&db=1860slaveschedules&indiv=1 Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. M653, 1,438 rolls.

By the late 1860s, Hugh Moss Comer was living in Savannah, Georgia. He became a factor and cotton commissioner eventually in partnership with his father-in-law, Wilson Bates. Hugh continued this

wedding as she hoped because she was confronted by family members who begrudged her inheritance from James. She longed to be home in Columbus and alone in her room there.³⁰⁶ At this time, Laura faced not only the challenges presented by the plantation workforce, managing her own financial resources, but also the illwill of some family members who treated her unkindly. She did, however, enjoy the good-will and assistance of those, including Katy Comer and her children, who respected James' wishes expressed in his last will and testament.

Since the American Revolution, widows had run plantations and engaged in activities that defied the South's societal norms. Elite white women of the plantation South were expected to live in subservience to their husbands'/masters' will, but when widowed these same women were often expected to take charge of all family business affairs, their own, and those of their deceased husbands. As we have seen previously, Catherine (Katy) Drewery Comer, Laura's closest friend in the Comer family, took charge of her deceased husband's estate and managed the plantations, mills and other concerns that were left in her care. Her sons were all under the age of fifteen and it became her responsibility. Fortunately for Katy, James Comer assisted in her efforts. Now, with James gone, Katy and her son, Hugh, responded to Laura in kind as was customary in networks of Southern kith and kin.³⁰⁷ But even with all their assistance,

business after the death of his father-in-law. He married Mary Emma Bates on November 27, 1866. She was the daughter of neighboring plantation owner, Wilson M. Bates. Eventually Hugh Comer became known as a financial magnate who was actively involved in cotton manufacturing, cattle ranching in both Columbus, Georgia, and in Texas. He was also the driving force behind the construction of railroads in Central Georgia as president of the Central Georgia Railroad and the Ocean Steamship Company in 1874. See also <http://www.visit-historic-savannah.com/comer-house.html> .

³⁰⁶ LBCD Nov 15-28, 1866.

³⁰⁷ On the ties of kinship and power see Edward E. Baptist, "The Migration of Planters to Antebellum Florida: Kinship and Power," *The Journal of Southern History* 62, 3, (Aug 1996), 527-54; and

Laura found her day-to-day dealings with the freedpeople, who were determined to choose their own destiny, equally if not more frustrating than she had when they were enslaved. But contending with free servants was not the only issue that brought Laura dissatisfaction at this time. She also longed for companionship; she had no children to comfort her as did Katy.³⁰⁸

In Columbus, on New Year's Day, 1867, Laura remarked, "Another year has passed and a new one begun." She prayed "Although ingratitude has signally marked the Freedmen's course for many weeks past, and they have caused me great perplexity, expense and trouble, may God forgive them and enlighten their darkened understanding!" On February 10, Major Clemons returned to Columbus and Laura's house after an extended absence. She also received a long letter from an unnamed "friend" who wrote: "Remembering you constantly in my prayers . . . my wish for you is sanctification . . . love and consequent confidence." Major Clemons' presence, and this letter from afar, buoyed Laura's spirits.³⁰⁹

She marked her fiftieth birthday on the cloudy, chilly Wednesday morning of March 6, 1867. Here, she paused in "Life's journey" to survey the past and then prayed to "implore God for future help and strength." Laura went on, "I feel that Thou hast orphaned and bereaved me here that I may wholly give my heart unto Thee & when that

Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

³⁰⁸ Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution to the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Introduction and on the importance of family and kin see Chapter 3, "The Strongest Ties that bind Poor Mortals."

³⁰⁹ LBCD Jan 1- Feb 10, 1867. I suspect that the letter from a friend afar came from Dr. James A. Pleasants in Cuba. Laura did not offer all the information one might like to have in her diaries.

is done Thou canst give me companion or friends or both.” She pleaded: “O Lord . . . leave me not alone, I beseech Thee.”³¹⁰

She entertained her dear friend, Mrs. Benning, and Major Clemons at tea on March 24, but continued to suffer from melancholy to the extent that she contemplated her own death and “repose in the grave!” She grumbled about friends who, likely due to reduced circumstances, now asked for remuneration for favors done. She complained of servants and continually changed housekeepers. In May, James Comer’s monument was raised at the City Cemetery; Laura observed that it was plain but impressive, and it pleased her. It appears to have brought closure for, on May 18, 1867, she declared that she began to feel more like herself. She was “having her wardrobe put in order & laying off mourning because black in this hot climate is oppressively warm.” She had carpenters “building a church for the Freedmen” on her Uchee property. Laura was a devoted Christian who read the Bible daily and prayed regularly with her servants during slavery in her own home. James had left \$1000 to the Baptist missionary efforts among the slaves in his will. Acts of charity were not unusual for the Comers. They had both been very charitable toward the needs of soldiers during the war, and it is possible that Laura believed that the charitable gift of a church and encouragement of the Christian faith might lead to the enlightenment of freedpeople’s “dark” minds. On May 27, she moved pony, carriage and cows from the plantations to Columbus, and she directed workmen to build a carriage house. She duly noted that time had changed everybody since the war. What she missed most was a commitment to honor.³¹¹

³¹⁰ LBCD, Mar 6, 1866.

³¹¹ LBCD, Mar 6 – May 18, 1867.

On May 29, Laura made formal calls with cards in hand for the first time since before the war. She looked forward to the pleasures of society and as she progressed out of mourning and back into social life, Dr. James A. Pleasants, a surgeon in the Confederate States Army Medical Corps under General Robert E. Lee, who had visited the Comers both at Columbus and Spring Hill during the war years, returned from Cuba. Pleasants remained at Laura's home in Columbus for three days.³¹² When the war ended, many officers of the Confederacy feared that they would be arrested and charged with treason. These fears were not unfounded. Also, the plan of Jefferson Davis and his cabinet was to remove to Cuba for safety, regroup and return through Mexico at the Rio Grande. Laura's friends and associates numbered among the most ardent and influential in the highest echelons of the Confederacy. During the war she and James were members of the inner circle of the Confederacy, socializing at the highest levels. Among their friends were individuals like President and Mrs. Jefferson Davis, Vice-President Alexander Stephens, General and Mrs. Henry L. Benning, and General and Mrs. Robert Toombs. Dr. Pleasants stayed at the Comer residence during the war and returned there on his return from Cuba. Perhaps he was one of the many who made the dangerous journey to Cuba to join his compatriots. Since there is no available record of Pleasants'

³¹² LBCD, May 27-9, 1867. See Dr. J. A. Pleasants, CSA medical corps, served with General Robert E. Lee in South Carolina in 1862, see *List of Staff Officers of the Confederate States Army* (United States. War Department, 1891) 130, hereafter *CSA Staff Officers*, pdf copy in possession of author courtesy Google Books and also available at Cornell University Library online texts available at <http://archive.org/details/cu31924030921096>, pdf copy in possession of author, see "Pleasants, J. A., surg., with Gen. R. E. Lee, on duty at Coosawatchie, S. C., January 8, 1862" on p. 130. (J. A. Pleasants listed as medical officer for Way Hospital, Kingsville, South Carolina – not yet documented found at <http://www.mycivilwar.com/facts/csa/hospitals.html> accessed Aug 10, 2012, see also J.S.White, General Hospital, Columbus, Georgia friend of LBC) See also Benning, Seaborn J., capt., A. A. G. to Brig. Gen. Henry L. Benning, January 17, 1863, to November 4, 1864. This is Henry Benning's son, and he is buried at Linwood Cemetery (formerly City Cemetery), Columbus, GA. (Walker General Hospital of Columbus, Georgia, Records 109.8.4 in, Records of hospitals at NARA War Department Collection of Confederate Records 1861-1865 finding aid available at <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/109.html> accessed Aug 10, 2012.

journey, I refer to the experience of General Robert Toombs to illustrate the difficulty with which those who went to Cuba found their way with Union troops ever in pursuit. Toombs trekked on horseback for six months with a faithful aide through the countryside of Georgia. He sought refuge with friends on their plantations along the way. These devoted Confederates hid and protected him and provided him with food and shelter as he meandered along. Toombs travelled incognito at times but most often was simply hidden by Georgians in defiance of their Union occupiers. Eventually, Toombs made his way to Mobile, and the home of Augusta Jane Evans, first cousin to the wife of Henry L. Benning with whom Laura maintained her closest friendship. At the Evans home, Toombs was treated most cordially. Miss Evans cooked his meals and served them with her own hands. Evans received a letter of thanks from Alexander Stephens for her kind treatment of his friend, Robert Toombs. From the Evans home in Mobile, Toombs progressed to New Orleans and finally embarked upon the steamship *Alabama*, and proceeded to Havana, Cuba. Toombs continued on to Paris from Havana in a short while. Mrs. Julia A. Dubose Toombs, who had worked so hard with Laura and James Comer to establish medical facilities for Georgia's soldiers in Richmond early in the war, joined him there in July of 1865.³¹³ The timing of Laura's friend Dr. James A. Pleasants' return from afar in Cuba may indicate that he too had fled for his safety at the war's end. It is also possible to argue that Laura knew Pleasants through her friendship with General and Mrs. Benning. It is clear that Pleasants was known to the Spring Hill Comers also since

³¹³ Joseph Howard Parks, *General Edmund Kirby Smith* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 478; see also Arthur Howard Noll, *General Kirby-Smith* (Sewanee: University of the South Press, 1907), 419; Pleasant A. Stovall, *Robert Toombs: Statesman, Speaker, Soldier, Sage* (New York: Cassell Publishing Co., 1892) 286-310; see also John Eicher and David Eicher, *Civil War High Commands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 8, 12, 13, 22, 216, 532, 620, 665, 789, 806, 811. The aide who attended Toombs on his journey to New Orleans was CSA Lt. Charles Irvin.

he spent an interlude at their home during the war. Unfortunately, there is very little information available regarding Dr. Pleasants. At the time that Dr. Pleasants returned, Major Clemons resumed residence at the Comer home. Clemons also began to accompany Laura on her formal calls. Along with recommencing her social calls, Laura established a Sunday School at the newly built Freedmen's Church at Uchee in the belief that it was an excellent opportunity for missionary work.³¹⁴

On July 19, Laura recorded that on the previous Tuesday she hosted a social for young people with no married couples present except General and Mrs. Benning and Colonel and Mrs. Cranford, and all had a good time. But on July 26, the good times abruptly ended - Laura suffered a rebuff from the man in whom she had placed her trust and hopes, a slight that plunged her to the depths of despair. "How keen & bitter, yea terrible, is the pang we feel when our eyes are opened to see that we have been deceived in our chosen friend." Her words of endearment had been repulsed, and she writhed in the agony of a broken heart, her spirit "humbled, crushed and bowed down to dust," she condemned the one who had hurt her but left him unnamed. "There is one on earth, yes he lives he moves, I despise his contemptible spirit!" she ranted. "Though the world may call him good; of pure principles and honorable intentions, he is not so." Suspicion filled her heart. "He would sacrifice his best friend if that friend came in the way of his own plans and aspirations." The next day Laura took to her bed and contemplated the efforts she had made to maintain sufficient income enough so that she would never be dependent upon others.³¹⁵

³¹⁴ LBCD, May 27-9, 1867.

³¹⁵ LBCD, Jun 28-Jul 27, 1867.

On July 27, when Major Clemons' trunk arrived ahead of him Laura knew he must be near. She did not note where he had been. She did not care; he had deceived her and could not be trusted. She declared that he was a monster. "I care little where he is, for whatever he may be to the rest of the world . . . at one time I thought him an exception among my friends and the very soul of honor," but "a better acquaintance [with him] has proven him to be the extreme in selfish policy and deceit." "He is cool, calculating and selfish." Laura no longer had confidence in Major Clemons as a gentleman, and he had broken her heart. On July 28, she observed that the carriage had taken Mr. Clemons to church while she remained at home in her room.³¹⁶

In her diaries, Laura referred to her desire for "*an intimate and confidential friend*," a "companion," or a "chosen friend," on only three occasions. The first occurred in 1847, when she was a young widow teaching in rural Russell County, Alabama. Within a year after she expressed the desire for "*an intimate and confidential friend*," she married James Comer. The second occurred when she was again a widow in March of 1866, when she implored God to give her a "companion" and not leave her alone and bereaved. The third incidence of this usage results from her disappointment in Major Clemons where she refers to him as her "chosen friend." In the nineteenth century, coded language was employed to express feelings, emotions, and sentiments that social conventions restricted to veiled expressions. Nineteenth-century love relationships were shrouded in mystery, discussed in private and jealously guarded in secret. Historian Karen Lystra observes, "Individuals were taught to reserve their truest or best or most worthy expressions for a single beloved." Part of the mystery that made these

³¹⁶ LBCD, Jul 27-8, 1867.

relationships special to individuals in the nineteenth century was that they created a private world experienced by only the two lovers.³¹⁷ The delicacy and circumspection with which Laura approached this subject on these few occasions leads to my conclusion that the Clemons relationship had entered another level of intimacy. It is for this reason that I suggest that Laura perceived that her relationship with Clemons had advanced to a more romantic, passionate, love relationship at this time, and that she had anticipated a deeper alliance with him. The way that she expressed her desire for an intimate, confidential or chosen friend indicates, based on nineteenth-century customs, that she was seeking such a friend both after the death of her first husband in 1847, and again during her period of bereavement after James Comer's death in 1866. Her emotionally charged reaction to his perceived slights or rebuffs reveals to the reader that she believed that she had found that "chosen friend" in Clemons. Whether this relationship really existed, or was merely the result of Laura's unfortunate misperceptions, she sincerely believed that she had been let down.

On another level, the possibilities are endless for speculation on Laura's relationship with Major Clemons. Clemons was one of James Comer's most trusted friends and associates. Clemons resided with the Comers in their home in Columbus for many years. I suggest that he, with James's expressed approval, provided critical male support and protection on-site for Laura with the challenge of slave discipline since James found it necessary to be at the plantations in Alabama for extended periods of time. Another important fact is that W. G. Clemons witnessed every one of the legal documents in James Comer's estate proceedings, beginning with James's Last Will & Testament that

³¹⁷ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Introduction especially 7.

left the estate to Laura and the Codicil that placed legal ownership of their Columbus residence and half of all his property, both real and personal (i.e. slaves) in Alabama in Laura's name. It seems fair to conjecture that James Comer held Clemons in very high esteem. I also believe that Clemons was much closer to Laura in age and that she already had a strong affection for him when James died. It was Major Clemons who escorted Laura when she resumed her obligations to make formal calls on her friends, a very important act in the traditions of nineteenth-century society. The fact that her husband placed a great deal of trust in Clemons added to the positive feelings that Laura held for him would make him an excellent candidate for marriage. Laura was a woman of considerable means and property. She was not in a position to take that lightly. The individual with whom she aligned had to be worthy beyond reproach. Clemons had served the Confederacy under Robert E. Lee; he had a respectable military record that met with the standards of post-bellum Southern society in which Laura moved. He had been a trusted member of the Comer family's inner circle for many years. Laura had previously expressed fondness for him. It is entirely credible that Laura believed that he was someone in whose trust she could place her affections and her wealth.

Beginning on August 3, 1867, Laura counted the days until she would be released from the plantations, "Free Negroes and slaves." She declared that "so much ignorance" didn't suit her, and she would "feel released from a heavy burden if I live to see next January" when the estate was settled and the plantations rented out. She wrote her will on August 10, 1867 and prayed for God's guidance for the rest of her life. Laura practiced playing the new piano pieces that "Maj. C" brought home with him from New York. She lingered in a kind of limbo waiting for the estate to be settled. She observed

that she preferred to remain at home and “get the estate business all through before I go.” She looked forward to the coming year in which she would be “footloose” for the first time in her life. Many people had gone to “the springs and to the North” for the summer and she longed to be relieved of her concerns, but she remained at home dealing with the affairs of her deceased husband’s estate and worrying that she may have to leave for her health. She prayed that she would not contract a fever.³¹⁸

On August 23, as the end of summer approached, she complained that “Freedmen and women will not work unless you are continually with them encouraging and hurrying them on. Their native indolence is so great!” By October 2, she was alone in Columbus. Major Clemons left for New York. Still suffering from depression, Laura observed that she might give up her house since she could not count on the “Free People.” She contended that voting in the election “ruined them for service.”³¹⁹

But brighter days appeared when Laura learned on October 6, 1867, that the Court in Alabama had released Hugh Comer from his duties as Administrator. She longed for a final settlement of the estate and found that “the stern and pressing duties [of] Man’s business were mentally and physically sinking” her after “three long, long years!” On October 14, 1867, Laura learned from her attorneys that the Court at Crawford had granted her final release.³²⁰

Her spirits restored, Laura began to read guides to England and France. She began to attend church and go to parties. Yet, in November at Cowikee, she found

³¹⁸ LBCD, Aug 3-15, 1867.

³¹⁹ LBCD, Aug 23-Oct 3, 1867.

³²⁰ LBCD, October 14, 1867.

herself surrounded by the usual annoyance of the “Free Negroes.” She hoped to complete every last bit of estate business so that she might depart. She had endured “exquisite pain” from the loss of her “chosen friend,” Major Clemons. She had given him true friendship and a home for years and now she suffered from his neglect. She declared “I am done with deep feeling.” She would be done with “Earthly friendship and love.” She now had confidence only in God. As of January 1, 1868, she hoped to be free of all cares. She prayed that God would forgive her past sins and iniquities and to be freed from the “cross of original sin.” Laura remained wounded and suffering from her disappointment in her “chosen friend.” She would never again entrust him with her life and property. Others now declared friendship and love to her, but their pronouncements of affection fell upon her “broken bleeding heart” unheeded after the many years of professions of love from Major Clemons that she had heard before and that she now knew were untrue. From Laura’s agonized murmurings about “years of professions of love” from Major Clemons, it is also possible to deduce that over the years during which Major Clemons resided in Laura’s home there may have been an ongoing flirtation. Perhaps, in Laura’s mind, the occasion of James’s death appeared to free the couple to pursue fulfillment of the possibilities that a previously harmless flirtation portended, and this may have been a miscalculation on Laura’s part. On the other hand, Laura and Clemons may have had an ongoing physical relationship, sanctioned by James, thereby freeing him to enjoy the pleasures of the quarters on his plantations. Laura’s prayer that God would forgive her past sins and iniquities and free her from the “cross of original sin,” would seem to support this prospect. Although the relationship between Clemons and Laura had caused her such great pain, Clemons continued to live in Laura’s home, an arrangement that

existed as a vestige of James's designs for Laura's safety and security. There were, however, other opportunities for love in Laura's life. She alludes to others' assertions of affection which at the moment failed to reach her heart. Yet she had received word through Colonel James that Dr. Pleasants now resided in Norfolk, Virginia, and in November, Laura considered purchasing property in Virginia, and leaving Georgia behind.³²¹

Laura's fifty-first birthday occurred on March 6, 1868, and Major Clemons had returned from the North. She recorded that the estate was settled, her debts were paid, the plantations were managed by others, and the house in Columbus was in order. She planned to leave for "a season" and intended to leave the "two gentleman in my family" in the house with a housekeeper whom she hoped would work out well. She observed that her old life was in the past and her new life must now begin. She declared that she preferred to depart this life but if God saw fit that she should stay she must submit. On the Sabbath day, March 4, 1868, she had entered the drawing room and had discovered one of the "Sable Africans" lounging in the rocking chair. Outraged, she stated that they were now like "Cats and Dogs" going wherever they pleased in the house. She was alone, not enjoying life, longing for escape, and looking forward impatiently to visiting Cousin Katy.³²²

Laura boarded the steamer *Shamrock* on Tuesday, May 19, for the journey to her much anticipated visit to Eufaula and Cousin Katy. The *Shamrock* sailed that day. She dined at breakfast with several other ladies, and chatted happily with a congenial group of

³²¹ LBCD, Oct 26-Nov 3, 1867.

³²² LBCD, Mar 6-10, 1868. One of the "gentleman in my family" was Major Clemons. The other was Colonel James from Virginia who now lived with Laura. She would call this her "little family."

fellow travelers on what she declared was a delightful trip down the Chattahoochee River. She found Hugh awaiting the *Shamrock's* arrival at the dock in Eufaula the next day. When they reached his home she was greeted on the veranda by Hugh's young wife, "Cousin Mary," and when she entered the parlor her dear friend Katy received her with open arms. Mary showed her to her room and Laura began a pleasant visit and respite from her cares. At tea later that afternoon, she found the entire family and many friends gathered there to greet her and make her feel welcome. She enclosed a letter to Cousin Legare in Lexington, Kentucky, with Cousin Katy's on May 22. That evening she, Katy, Mary, and Hugh called on Mary's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Bates, who lived on a nearby plantation. Laura was having a marvelous visit. This was the life on which Laura thrived. She enjoyed an evening with Governor Shorter on May 23, which she declared "delightful." Governor John Gill Shorter of Eufaula was governor of Alabama from 1861 to 1863. He was an ardent secessionist, and a member of the "Eufaula Regency," a lawyer-planter consortium, credited with significant involvement in Alabama's secession from the Union. At the end of the war, Shorter had returned to Eufaula and resumed his law practice. Refreshed, Laura returned to Columbus from Eufaula a week later. She boarded the *Shamrock* in the evening and went to sleep in her stateroom. When she awoke in the morning, she found that they were moored at Columbus where Colonel James picked her up at the landing in the carriage for the ride home. In the ensuing weeks of June she holidayed with Cousin Wallace and his wife, Carry, arriving on June 14 at their place in Spring Hill. Here she received a cordial reception and enjoyed a visit with Braxton "Bragg" Comer, younger brother to Wallace and Hugh and destined to be governor of the state of Alabama. She returned to Columbus on June 17, to very sad news.

Her “precious friend” Mrs. Benning was ill and dying. The news of her death came on June 29, 1868, and Laura immediately went to the Benning family home. She attended the funeral and assisted the family during this trying time as best she could. Although she had lost her very dear friend, it appears that Laura’s life was not all sadness during this period.³²³

Laura longed for the companionship of a “chosen friend,” and this desire to once again enjoy the pleasures of marriage more than likely reflected several aspects of the society in which she lived. Women of the Victorian era viewed marriage as the perfect state, and she certainly could have desired the intimacy of marriage and the marriage bed. The desire to have the strong arm of a man to lean upon and share the burden of her business responsibilities may also have impelled Laura to seek another mate. She objected to the amount of men’s business thrust upon her since her husband’s death, primarily the execution James’s will and managing the plantations. She would gladly

³²³ May 18-Jun 29, 1868. The Shamrock was built by the Confederacy in 1864 for supply duty and offered passenger service. *Images of America: The Lower Chattahoochee* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2007) 19. John Wallace Comer and Caroline “Carrie” Gertrude Seay of Midway, Alabama, the daughter of John W. and Barbara Leaheart Seay (John Seay was one of the wealthiest landowners in the state), were married on Nov 28, 1866, in Barbour County by W. H. Ellison, Minister of the Gospel available from Ancestry.com at http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=1&msT=1&gss=angs-g&gsfn=j.+wallace+&gsln=comer&msydy=1868&msybn_ftp=Barbour+County%2c+Alabama%2c+USA&msybn=232&msybn_PInfo=7-%7c0%7c1652393%7c0%7c2%7c3246%7c3%7c0%7c232%7c0%7c0%7c&cpxt=0&catBucket=rstp&uidh=3g5&cp=12&mssng0=carry&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=2198640&recoff=6+7+8+38&db=ALmarriages_ga&indiv=1 accessed Aug 20, 2012. See John and Barbara Seay with daughter Caroline, 2 years old, in Year: 1850; Census Place: Division 23, Barbour, Alabama; Roll: M432_1; Page: 162A; Image: 427, available from Ancestry.com at http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=1&msT=1&gss=angs-g&gsfn=carrie+gertrude&gsln=Seay&msbdy=1845&msbpn_ftp=Midway%2c+Bullock%2c+Alabama%2c+USA&msbpn=25731&msbpn_PInfo=8-%7c0%7c1652393%7c0%7c2%7c3246%7c3%7c0%7c411%7c25731%7c0%7c&cpxt=0&catBucket=rstp&uidh=3g5&cp=12&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=19103901&db=1850usfedcenancestry&indiv=1 accessed Aug 20, 2012. On John Wallace and Carrie Comer see Walker, *Comer*, 167-70.

See photo of the *Shamrock* circa 1860s in Lynn Willoughby, *Fair to Middlin: The Antebellum Cotton Trade of the Apalachicola/Chattahoochee River Valley* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993) 51; see also Frank T. Shnell Collection (MC 25) , Item 7 – Table of distances on Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers, Presented by Steamer Shamrock. n.d., Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, Georgia.

relinquish these burdens given the opportunity and the right man. The Muscogee County records show that on April 27, 1869, Mrs. Laura B. Comer married Dr. James A. Pleasants at Trinity Episcopal Church in Columbus, Georgia. The wedding ceremony was performed by Episcopal Bishop Jonathan Beckwith of the Episcopal Diocese of Savannah, which was quite an honor.³²⁴

Laura had corresponded with Dr. Pleasants during the war years and afterward when Pleasants was in Cuba. One can only speculate as to the development of this

³²⁴ Muscogee County Marriage Book, 1866-1872, 121. Mrs. Laura B. Comer married Dr. James A. Pleasants, April 27, 1869 by Jonathan W. Beckwith, Episcopal Bishop of Georgia. Available at Georgia Archives online, <http://cdm.sos.state.ga.us:2011/cdm/compoundobject/collection/countyfilm/id/211233/rec/6> accessed July 29, 2012. Copy of marriage certificate in possession of author. Bishop Beckwith recorded the marriage in his report in the *Journal of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Georgia Held in St. Paul's Church, Augusta, Commencing May 5th 1869* (Savannah: Edward J. Purse Printers, 1869) 31.

Dr. J. A. Pleasants, CSA medical corps served with General Robert E. Lee, South Carolina in 1862, see *List of Staff Officers of the Confederate States Army* (United States. War Department, 1891) 130, hereafter *CSA Staff Officers*, pdf copy in possession of author courtesy Google Books and also available at Cornell University Library online texts available at <http://archive.org/details/cu31924030921096>, pdf copy in possession of author, see "Pleasants, J. A., surg., with Gen. R. E. Lee, on duty at Coosawatchie, S. C., January 8, 1862" on p. 130. Dr. Jas A. Pleasants, 72, a border, born in Virginia, 1880 Census for Spartanburg, South Carolina, available from Ancestry.com at http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=1&msT=1&gss=angs-g&gsfn=dr.+james+a.&gsln=pleasants&msbpn_ftp=norfolk%2c+Virginia%2c+USA&cpxt=0&catBucket=rstp&uidh=3g5&cp=12&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=18442312&db=1880usfedcen&indiv=1 accessed Aug 20, 2012, Year: 1880; Census Place: Cherokee, Spartanburg, South Carolina; Roll: 1240; Family History Film: 1255240; Page: 146B; Enumeration District: 140.

(J. A. Pleasants listed as medical officer for Way Hospital, Kingsville, South Carolina – not yet documented found at <http://www.mycivilwar.com/facts/csa/hospitals.html> accessed Aug 10, 2012, see also J.S.White, General Hospital, Columbus, Georgia friend of LBC) See also Benning, Seaborn J., Capt., A. A. G. to Brig. Gen. Henry L. Benning, January 17, 1863, to November 4, 1864. This is Henry Benning's son and he is also buried at Linwood Cemetery (formerly City Cemetery), Columbus, GA.

J. A. Pleasants, 45, W, born in VA, "Phisition," is listed in the 1850 census for Newport Barracks, Kentucky at Ancestry.com available at <http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=View&r=an&dbid=8054&iid=4193961-00067&fn=J+A&ln=Pleasants&st=r&ssrc=&pid=16959818> accessed Aug 20, 2012. Dr. Pleasants was listed as 45 years of age in 1850, therefore, he was twelve years senior to Laura. Also residing at the inn or boarding house in which Pleasant lived was Lt. J. Potter, U. S. Army who was recorded on the line previous to Pleasants. It is believed that R. E. Lee and Jefferson Davis also served tours of duty at Newport Barracks, KY, in the 1850s which would suggest the connection since Laura and the Comer family had connections to Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens. See also *Columbus Enquirer*, Mar 15, 1870, p. 4, "Muscogee Sheriff's Sale" reference to Mrs. Comer's now Mrs. Pleasants's property near Col. A. H. Chappell's on Talbotton Road.

relationship through letters and occasional visits. Dr. James A. Pleasants reappears in the 1880 U. S. Census at the age of 72, but nothing further is known about him at this time. Columbus lore indicates that Laura may have made a settlement of \$6000 on Pleasants and sent him on his way, never to be seen or heard from again. Laura resumed her previous married name of Comer and continued to use it for the remainder of her life.³²⁵

Volumes of Laura's diary are not available for the period from 1869 to 1871 and in the absence of Laura's diaries for this period, as discussed above, one can only surmise that this marriage did not work out. In June of 1872, Laura lamented that she must begin alone a trip to visit family in New England. Following this she would continue on to see what she called the "Old World." She began her journey by train to Atlanta, where she enjoyed a pleasant interlude with her friends, Governor James M. and Mrs. Smith, at their residence in the "Executive Mansion." Governor Smith was a Confederate veteran of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. He later represented the Seventh District of Georgia at the Second Confederate Congress, and subsequently he practiced law in Columbus and represented Muscogee County in the Georgia General Assembly. He was raised to the office of Governor by the Democrats in a no-contest special election, based on a law of dubious constitutionality, after the Republican Governor resigned. Republicans boycotted the regular general election of 1872, and Smith achieved a landslide victory, an event widely regarded as the end of Radical Reconstruction and the "Redemption" or the return of Georgia to state sovereignty. After several days with the Smiths in Atlanta, Laura continued on to stay with her sister, Elizabeth Beecher Smith, in New Haven. In July, she sailed from Jersey City on the Cunard Line steamship the *Cuba*, and arrived in

³²⁵ Louise Jones DuBose Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, Georgia.

London on July 20, 1872, declaring that she now began her new life. By July 28, she recorded that she had seen Westminster, St. Paul's Cathedral, Buckingham Palace and the London Tower, "a horrible place." Depression and loneliness continued to plague Laura, however, and she prayed to Heaven "to release me from this veil of tears," and grieved that she must "fight the battle of life" alone.³²⁶

Laura dreaded travelling alone, but she was determined to fulfill her dream of seeing Europe. She shopped in Paris where she had dresses and a cloak made by a French dressmaker. Here, she joined her friend, Mrs. Hamlin, and her daughters Lisa and Ella. Together they traveled through Switzerland, Germany and Italy. Laura hated Paris, and she enjoyed Geneva and went for a sail on the lake. In November, she returned to New York via Scotland and London and rejoined her sister, Elizabeth, in New Haven. After visiting with family and friends she retraced her steps to Columbus by way of Atlanta and the Governor's mansion. In January 1873, Laura joined Governor and Mrs. Smith at the "Grand Inauguration Ball." She attended the short legislative session and on Wednesday, January 15, she arrived at Columbus at 4:00 p.m. William, her new driver, picked her up at the depot and drove her home.³²⁷

Commencing in January 1873, and continuing through 1878, the nation suffered from the adverse effects of an economic depression. Due to the effects of the depression

³²⁶ LBCD, Jun 30-Jul 28, 1872. See discussions of Governor James M. Smith's visit to Columbus and the unanimous approval given by the Democratic Party on his behalf, *Columbus Enquirer*, June 4, 1872, 2, available at <http://enquirer.galileo.usg.edu/enquirer/view?docId=news/cwe1872/cwe1872-0090.xml&query=governor+james+smith&brand=enquirer-brand> accessed Aug 20, 2012.

Kenneth Coleman, Ed., *A History of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977) 215-20. Information on the ocean liner *Cuba* available at Cunard online <http://www.cunard.com/About-Cunard-Line/Cunard-Heritage/The-Fleet/Cuba/>.

³²⁷ LBCD, Jul 28, 1872-Jan 17, 1873. "Grand Inauguration Ball," *Columbus Enquirer*, Jan 16, 1873, 1, available at <http://enquirer.galileo.usg.edu/enquirer/view?docId=news/cwe1872/cwe1872-0009.xml&query=smith+inaugural+ball&brand=enquirer-brand> accessed Aug 20, 2012.

in August 1873, it became apparent to Laura that, once again, she would have to resume personal management of her farming interests or lose everything. She removed to Alabama and returned to Columbus in time to prepare for the Christmas holidays. After baking and icing fruitcakes for New Year's Day, Laura wrote that she would not write again until after the New Year.

Available volumes of Laura's diaries end in 1873, and if they exist, subsequent volumes are unavailable, but we know that Laura continued her involvement with the LMA, maintaining her social life and participation in Comer family activities. Significantly, she did not move to the North. She remained in Columbus for the remainder of her life and continued to call herself Laura Beecher Comer rather than Mrs. Pleasants. A few of her letters to Hugh Comer's second wife, Lilla, survive from this time. Laura continued to travel to New Haven to visit her sister and other family, but she always returned to Columbus. She continued her work with the Ladies Memorial Association by giving teas, sponsoring socials, working at bazaars and fundraisers and participating in Memorial Day rituals. She continued to receive guests and give parties in her home. On one occasion she and her guests were treated to a serenade by the Columbus Guards Brass & Strings Band.³²⁸

Like other Southern women during the period, Laura Beecher Comer attempted to reconcile the South's valiant efforts to win independence with the dismal circumstances that attended the defeat of their Lost Cause. Women especially worked to redeem the Cause as a just crusade and maintain Southern honor. Sally Corbell Pickett, widow of General George Pickett, served as a model for the ways that women worked to honor the

³²⁸ LBCD, Sep 14, 1873 Letter to "Dear Cousin Lilla from Cousin Laura."

past, live with the present, and create a future in which they could flourish. Her many published works created a mythical memory of an Old South defined by grace, beauty and plenty that inspired pride in a fairy-tale past characterized by gallant cavaliers and elegant ladies who were served by a loyal and contented slave population.³²⁹ She insisted that the South's cause was just, and that secession was vindicated. It was this narrative of the Old South that inspired the propagation of a distinctly Southern account of conceptions of the events leading up to and including the war and its aftermath.

As millions of freedpeople struggled to survive and define their new freedom, and equally as many poor whites worked to maintain their families in the face of abject poverty, Southern patrician white women carried the banner of the Lost Cause. They hosted and participated in the annual memorial celebrations and other social events that ostensibly honored the Confederacy's Glorious Dead, but in fact, defied defeat. The Ladies Memorial Associations created shrines to honor the dead, and at the same time, created rituals and traditions to honor the Confederate Cause and inspire the living. Through these rituals of honor and devotion to the now mythologized Lost Cause, the women of the Ladies Memorial Associations re-imagined the South as a distinct community with a unique identity. They maintained the integrity of this identity through rituals of memorial celebration that demonstrated and reinforced in the community the belief that, although the Confederate nation was defeated in battle, it lived on in the hearts and minds of its people, and it was led by its strong and defiant women. Rather than bow to the Northern conqueror, Southern women created a new identity out of the old and perpetuated it through traditions and rituals that honored the sainted Confederate

³²⁹ Lesley J. Gordon, "Let the People See the Old Life as It Was: Lasalle Corbell Pickett and the Myth of the Lost Cause," in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: University Press of Indiana University, 2000) Chapter 8, Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds.

fallen. These efforts were based on the dead and the past but were not about them. They were about the living, the present, and the future.³³⁰

In the thirty odd years between the end of the “War for Southern Independence” and the eve of the next century, Laura and the elite white women of the Columbus Ladies Memorial Association, like other elite white women throughout the South, took the point and became the advanced forces in a new war for not only the minds of Southerners, but also for the soul of the South. Mourning rituals held at the sacred altars of fallen Confederate soldiers inspired Southerners with the sentiments of a devout community and reaffirmed the pride and dignity of former times. Above all, to Southerners, it confirmed the honor they held sacrosanct in the face of their conquerors and supplied the stamina to face a future that they believed was not of their own making.³³¹ Rituals of devotion offered a significant means of expression for white Southern societal unity.³³² Emile Durkheim observed that “the sacred ultimately refers . . .to people’s emotionally charged interdependence, their societal arrangements.”³³³ Edward Muir determined that for early modern people “rituals produced and maintained community solidarity.”³³⁴

³³⁰ **Caroline E. Janney**, *Burying the Dead But Not the Past: Ladies’ Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Introduction. See also, Carol Ann Bächl Dennis, “An Invitation to Tea: Ritual and Identity in the British Atlantic World,” *Consortium of the Revolutionary Era*, Selected Papers 2010, 7-9.

³³¹ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1-5.

³³² Muir, 1-5. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1947), 37, as quoted in Muir. David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 67, as quoted in Muir. On the religion of the lost cause see: Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920” *The Journal of Southern History*, 46, 2 (May, 1980), 219-238.

³³³ Durkheim as quoted in Muir, 3.

³³⁴ Muir, 3.

Southern rituals of mourning provided opportunities for a defeated and occupied people to “tell themselves about themselves,” or ratify their self-image.³³⁵ Throughout time, engaging in such rituals has allowed communities to publicly express strong beliefs through the gestures of repeated ceremonies that integrate previous experiences. The placing of floral offerings and military salutes of veterans at memorial ceremonies provided public confirmation of a proud past upon which to base the present, and eventually, the future. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, “we are what we do, not what we think.”³³⁶ Sacred Memorial Day rituals and other events sponsored by the LMAs, and led by Southern elite white women, allowed defeated communities the opportunity to confirm, on a regular basis, their beliefs in themselves as Southerners.

The institution of slavery had provided the foundation and justification for the South’s white ruling patriarchy during the antebellum era. As of 1877, with new constitutions and state governments in place, all of the Confederate states had rejoined the Union. Former Confederate leaders served in the Congress and other high positions in the government of the United States. Old ways die hard, and the antebellum South had been a society founded upon the concept of white hegemony based on the ownership of human property in slaves. The Myth of the Lost Cause ignores the fact of slavery as a major issue that led to the war, and creates an account of the war that, although it was more palatable to the defeated South, is misleading. Laura had feared that she and James would lose everything for which they had worked during the war. She said at the onset of

³³⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 448, as quoted in Muir, 4.

³³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu as well as Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 68 as quoted in Muir, 6. Muir suggests considerations of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) for discussions of *habitus*. Bourdieu defines *habitus* as “deeply held beliefs and assumptions expressed through gestures and repeated actions...” Muir, 6.

the war that she and James “worked continuously to aid in the terrible struggle of battling for a principle of right.”³³⁷ That “principle of right” represented the right to the property that they owned that was worth millions of dollars in 1864; that property was held in slaves. They also fought to maintain a way of life that depended for its existence on the subservience of the slaves. By 1864, the Comer land holdings in Alabama were valued at about \$13,000. Their personal property in slaves was worth millions in today’s dollar values. Four million slaves were freed as a result of the war. The South’s wealth was decreased by 60 percent. Furthermore, the Southern way of life as it existed prior to the war was gone. The South was left with destroyed cities, devastated farming communities, ruined equipment and starving people. The Myth of the Lost Cause helped Southern whites to overcome the emotional devastation of defeat but did little to assuage the dire circumstances faced by poor whites, freedpeople and the general population in the postwar South.³³⁸

White Southerners were well aware that the nation would never accept the restrictions that had characterized treatment of the free black population before the war and emancipation. In the early post-war period, Union army officers administered tough punishment to former bondsmen perceived as lazy or shirking work assignments in the interest of re-establishing order and restoring economic equilibrium. Freedmen’s Bureau agents were, for the most part, Union army veterans. On occasion, planters found reason to object that the Yankees were insensitive to the plight of the Freedmen and often believed that too much credence was accorded to the word of whites. Antebellum

³³⁷ Reminiscences of Mrs. Laura B. Comer, 1898, United Daughters of the Confederacy Collection, MC28, Columbus State University Archives.

³³⁸ Gallagher, *Myth*, 10-13.

paternal sentiment led to procedures designed to support the public interest and was unwittingly reflected in the Union's efforts to protect the freedpeople in the postwar South. This provided the conceptual foundation for postwar Black Codes established during the Reconstruction era.³³⁹ But the South bristled more at the objectionable social changes that Federal agents imposed on Southern communities in the postwar era. Beginning with the fact of occupation to the Yankee's insistence on the institution of schools for freedpeople and above all universal suffrage, the revolution being executed on Southern soil rankled. Violence was integral to Southern conceptions of manhood and used to facilitate social control. Prior to the war, common law and lynch law maintained white rule and supported Southern beliefs in honor. Demonstrations of white solidarity in response to threats of slave insurrections took the form of public theater designed to reaffirm the power of white supremacy. Blacks who politically asserted themselves and the white Northerners who facilitated this activity in the postwar South became the targets for rough justice in a society not far removed from the frontier. Nocturnal whippings and hangings designed to instill fear in freedpeople and teach lessons on social control to those considered to be Yankee interlopers in Southern communities led to community terror. Such incidents filled the South with a prevailing sense of lawlessness and continued disorder.³⁴⁰ Financial dislocation added to societal woe. The ensuing years were characterized by political corruption and vigilantism as whites challenged the societal arrangements established during Reconstruction. Bloody clashes occurred as

³³⁹ Dan T. Carter, *When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865–1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, Kindle Edition, 1985) 3, 182-3, hereafter Carter, *Self-Reconstruction*.

³⁴⁰ Stephen Budiansky, *The Bloody Shirt: Terror After Appomattox* (New York: Viking Press, 2008) Prologue. Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor*, 405-10.

whites fought to wrest governmental control from blacks in positions of authority. Wild rumors of the re-establishment of slavery inspired fear in the black community and many anticipated another civil war. The legacy of slave patrols can be seen in the midnight rides of the Ku Klux Klan in the postwar South. Prewar slave patrol participation was a civic duty pursuant to maintenance of law and order in the slave society. The power of the Klan, like that of the patrol, relied upon the resultant terror that nighttime rides inflicted in the black community. Klan membership consisted of various members of communities from Confederate veterans to poor white farmers along with guerrilla bands whose entire purpose was to disrupt the peace, scare blacks into submission, and keep those whites who sympathized with blacks in line. With the financial crash of the Great Depression in the early 1870s that lasted until the late 1890s, support for continued Federal intervention in the domestic affairs of the South waned. But the brutal intimidation of blacks and those who might assist and support them continued well into the final decade of the century.³⁴¹

In the 1890s, a younger generation of Southern women picked up the banner of the Lost Cause as the United Daughters of the Confederacy. These young women were members of the first post-war generation and their purpose was to continue in the work of the LMAs and also propagate, through education, a Southern understanding of Southern history.³⁴² On April 26, 1898, Columbus celebrated Memorial Day with ritual, ceremony and flourish with the focus on the founding of the first Memorial Day. In attendance

³⁴¹ Elaine Frantz Parsons, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of American History*, 92, 3 (Dec. 2005) 811-36. Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995) Introduction.

³⁴² Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003) Chapters I and II.

were the founders of the Lizzie B. Rutherford Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) who occupied a central role in the festivities. Laura Beecher Comer, widow of James Comer, Jr., proudly joined the honored guests on the dais on this special occasion. Laura had spent her life since her marriage to James Comer as an ardent supporter of the South and the Lost Cause, and was now a member of the revered elder generation of women who, with steely determination, had provided the spiritual support necessary for white Southerners in the aftermath of the war. Her obituary in January 1900 boasted that, although of Northern origins, she cherished the memory of the Lost Cause, and her acts of charity on behalf of the Columbus Guard and the United Daughters of the Confederacy amply demonstrated her value as a true daughter of the South.³⁴³

³⁴³ *History of the Origin of Memorial Day, 1898*, Lizzie Rutherford Chapter UDC Collection, MC006 Genealogy & Local History, Columbus Public Library, Folder 7 See also obituary of Laura Beecher Comer of Columbus, Georgia, in the *Atlanta Constitution* of January 6, 1900 available from <http://search.ancestry.com/browse/view.aspx?dbid=50000&iid=548455772&pid=1442330&ssrc=&fn=ames&ln=comer&st=g> accessed August 7, 2011. See also Gary W. Gallagher, *The Myth of the Lost Cause*, 201.

Conclusion

Laura Beecher Comer (1817-1900) was a member of the prominent Beecher family of New England, yet she was a plantation mistress, a strong supporter of the Confederacy during the Civil War, and an ardent defender of the Lost Cause. This study explores Laura's life through the prism of her diaries.³⁴⁴ There was no extant work about the life of Laura Beecher Comer except for a section of a 1947 book on the Comer family and some minor works done during the 1970s as part of a woman's history project in Columbus, Georgia.³⁴⁵ The life of Laura Beecher Comer changes the landscape of the scholarship on the Beecher family. She lived in the South, at the center of a slave society as the wife of a member of a family that was prominent in the Southern slave-owning plantation patriarchy. When her New England Beecher cousins railed against the injustice of slavery, she supported the "peculiar institution" as mistress of James Comer's plantation household.

Laura's home was in the urban environment of Columbus, Georgia, where James Comer built a house after their marriage. She traveled to the plantations as needed. He, on

³⁴⁴ Antebellum diaries and collections of letters have been published that were written by Northern women who resided in the South. See for example Dolly Lunt Burge, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 1848-1879* edited by Christine Jacobson Carter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), part of the series *Southern Voices from the Past*, Carol Bleser, General Editor; see also *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 1856-1876* edited by Wilma King, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), which is also part of the Bleser series.

³⁴⁵ Walker, *Comer*, 92-4. This information is included as excerpts in Walker from an early volume of Laura Beecher Comer's diaries, which reportedly remains in the Comer family but has yet to be found by the author. See also Louise Jones DuBose Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, Georgia.

the other hand, resided on one of their plantations most of the time. She and James had no children. James died in 1864 leaving her a very wealthy widow. When James died she did not return to the North but opted to continue her life in the South. Laura's life in Columbus, Georgia, where she managed enslaved labor, physically punished slaves, supported the Confederacy, and worked to the end of her days to propagate the Myth of the Lost Cause, adds an important new facet to the Beecher family scholarship. It also sheds new light on the experiences of both the lives of the planter aristocracy and African Americans during the Civil War Era.

The study of Laura's life as viewed through her diaries offers a picture of the early years of her marriage to James Comer, a very successful member of the planter elite, in which she enjoyed the pleasures of James's wealth, honeymoon trips, early married life, and the trials of the everyday concerns of plantation mistresses throughout the antebellum South. Her life draws us into the controversies of the secession crisis, the secession debates and the excitement and fears that arose as the South seceded and the Civil War began. This study demonstrates the difficulty of managing slave labor encountered during the war as slaves began to anticipate possible freedom and the agency that slaves exhibited as a result of their hopes. It offers insight into the desperate moments experienced by those at the heart of the Confederacy when Sherman's army moved ever closer to the defeat of Atlanta and Columbus became an even larger target. We witness the devastation and suffering of family and friends on the homefront who struggle with excruciating losses of loved ones. Included in the pages of Laura's diary are discussions of the effects of war on the emotional stability of men and women in the midst of wartime chaos. Laura's long life encompassed the aftermath of the war in the

South. She and other elite white women developed the coping mechanisms of rituals that mourned the Confederate fallen and redefined their identities, while at the same time, destitute millions looked for ways to simply stave off starvation. Unlike Laura who did not suffer from poverty at the end of the war, most of these women wrapped their pride and dignity around them and concealed their destitution in the folds of the Confederate flag as millions of former slaves, equally as impoverished, wandered the South attempting to find a bit of land on which to begin a new life in freedom. Laura danced at the Governor's inaugural ball in 1870s Atlanta as most Georgians and Southerners in general struggled to simply put food on the table and keep body and soul together. An intriguing outcome of the study is the strength of her relationship with the Comer family and her influence on and financial support of the careers of Hugh Comer, financial tycoon and railroad magnate in Georgia; John Wallace Comer, a major figure in Alabama mining and cotton production; and Braxton Bragg Comer, the future Alabama governor in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

What is clear is that Laura's life was defined by two very different segments of Southern society: her membership in the highest spheres of the ruling white elite community which continued to define itself, well after the war, through its relationship with African Americans. She ended her life as not just a white Southerner but a quintessential one as defined in regional identity construction—the Lost Cause. She in many ways resented her husband's devotion to his plantation interests, yet her life rested on those interests, she inherited them from him, and she lived out her life in relative comfort because of those interests. Laura very clearly disliked and would have preferred to be rid of black people. Her friendship circles, the people whom she admired and those

with whom she socialized, were defined by ownership of slaves, political efforts to maintain slavery, and post-war efforts to replicate slavery and as near as possible, control the “meaning” of slavery, and justify secession and civil war.

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APPENDIX A

John Wallace Comer, CSA, and his body-slave Burrell courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

