



Southern women and their **new normal**

By Stephanie McCurry

How to cope?

Southern women and children faced a grim postwar reality.

On the afternoon of April 9, 1865, Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee sat down in the parlor of Wilmer McLean's house in Appomattox Court House, Va., and negotiated the terms of Lee's surrender. A few days later, in a ceremony that lasted seven hours, about 20,000 Confederate soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia filed by the victorious Union troops, stacked their arms and delivered their battle flags. The dignity and formality of that series of events lent a finality to Confederate defeat. For those men, at least, war had reached its ceremonial end.

But that was a luxury not afforded many. For civilians in the Confederate South—which of course meant all of the women—there was no clarity, no finality, no ceremonial closure to the war they had lived through. Outside the orderly ritual of Appomattox Court House, all else was chaos. Much of Lee's army had melted away in the attempt to break out of Grant's grip and was still on the roads. Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet were on the run—on April 1, Davis had received a telegram from Lee telling him to get out of Richmond and by that evening, what was left of the Confederate government had been packed up into crates and put on the cars for Danville. Richmond was already occupied. On April 3, 80-year-old Mayor Joseph Mayo had ridden out under a white flag and presented the city seal to Maj. Gen. Godfrey Weitzel, commander of occupying Union forces. By that point large parts of the city were a smoking ruin and the once elegant capitol square was so choked with refugees their condition elicited even the sympathy of Union officers. In North Carolina Joseph Johnston and the Army of Tennessee fought on, and die-hard Rebels looked to him to keep the nation alive.

All over the South women struggled to make sense of events. The Confederacy was a world of rumor. Amid it, women of all conditions, classes and status navigated the historic changes of April and May 1865 moment-by-moment, attempting to keep their little individual boats afloat on the turbulent



■ **Grief among the ruins** Women dressed head to toe in black walk among central Richmond buildings burned by fires that spread as Rebels attempted to destroy cotton and foodstuffs before Federal troops approached the Confederate capital.

seas and to discern the direction of the current. Even in Richmond, where they had seen the Confederate flag come down and Union soldiers occupy their city, Amelia Gorgas and her well-placed friends held out hope for the cause. The city, she said, was a “house of mourning.... We covered our faces and cried aloud.” But still they hung on to the news of Davis’ escape and “tried to comfort ourselves by saying that the capital was only moved temporarily.”

“The end is not yet,” Mary Custis Lee declared, “Richmond is not the Confederacy. General Lee is not the Confederacy.”

Removed from the military action, nationalist women seemed able to summon greater powers of denial than men-in-arms. Already in those spring-time months of confused ends and beginnings, groups of elite Confederate women had begun to display a new and bitter kind of devotion to the Confederacy, one that would provide the backbone of a longstanding cult of the Lost Cause. Even as he was on the run, the



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cult of Jefferson Davis—the formerly much maligned president of the Confederacy—took shape.

Outside Augusta, Ga., Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, a slaveholding woman, displayed some of those instincts. “I live too fast,” she noted in late March as the pace of events overtook her. Pregnant again, already divested of her plantations, her cotton removed to be burned, she faced the future with dread. It took Thomas until May to accept the reality of Confederate defeat. That recognition went hand in hand with a hardening of her opposition to the North and a crystallization of her identity as a Rebel. “The bright dream of Southern independence has not been realized,” she wrote in her diary. “...rebel is a sacred word now.” So began the postwar jour-

ney by which she, like so many women of her class, turned Jefferson Davis from despot to saint. For Thomas, “the climax of our downfall” came in mid-May when the Confederate president was captured, brought through Augusta as a prisoner and the “Negroes” met his arrival by “holding a...jubilee.”

That historical divide—between those who experienced the end of the war as a defeat to be mourned and those who saw it as a victory to be celebrated—was as fundamental to women as it was to men. Above all, Union occupation meant slave emancipation—the liberation of 4 million formerly enslaved men, women and children; the liquidation of an estimated \$4 billion in (human) capital. Ella Thomas was destroyed. All the women she had owned were finally free. Thomas and her husband delayed that recognition as long as they could. Only on May 8 did they assemble their “servants” and relay the news that “it was extremely probable that the Yankees would free them.” It was hardly what you would call a definitive statement,



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■ Southern women clung to the "lost cause" and led memorials to fallen Confederates.

but it set off a fundamental reordering of that household and her world. By the end of May all but two of the people formerly enslaved by the Thomases had left, and Ella Thomas had already lost a series of contests with mothers like her former slaves Sarah and Nancy who, to her fury, returned to claim their children as their own.

And indeed, as historians have long understood, slave emancipation was a process and a struggle. In the newly occupied South, African-American women seized their chance to move out of the house of bondage, as the historian Thavolia Glymph has vividly put it, to set the terms of their labor and claim their children, their bodies and, in the face of mounting paramilitary violence, what they could get of their rights. Plantation mistresses attempted to grasp the new reality defined by poverty, debt, hired servants, and even, as for Thomas, the necessity of paid labor. Along with the South and the nation, the plantation household was transformed.

In the postwar South, especially in the chaotic first year, women who had lived through the military conflict on different sides of the divide struggled not just to accept, but to define a new reality. Her War didn't end in April 1865. □

Stephanie McCurry is the Christopher H. Browne distinguished professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the award-winning Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South.

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