



The politics of ruin

By Stephanie McCurry

▲ Villain du jour

Andrew Johnson's ascendancy after the death of Abraham Lincoln added to Southerners' fears.

The ends of wars, when they come, are always dangerous moments; ripe with possibilities of every sort. Peace must be made, armies dismantled, enemies held accountable, cities rebuilt, refugees returned, nations and individual lives reconstructed from the ruins. Everywhere after wars, women share that history in ways particular to their sex.

In the newly reunited United States in 1865, that always potent moment was additionally charged by what German-born law professor Frances Lieber called the “massacre...in Washington”—the assassination of the sitting president. “My God: That even this should befall us!” he wrote, his agony plain.

Even as the South grappled with the consequences of slave emancipation and the revolution in family life and social relations it delivered to every door, the politics of Reconstruction—the policy the government would adopt toward the conquered—became entirely unknowable. Catherine Edmonston wrote in early May 1865 of “rumors innumerable of yankee plans, the Yankees intentions toward us.”

“We must learn to live under the new order of things,” another woman told her husband.

But what order was that? President Lincoln’s reputation for forbearance

seemed to assure lenient terms to defeated Rebels. “[L]et ’em up easy,” he had allegedly advised when the Union army took Richmond. But the new president, Andrew Johnson, was another matter entirely. So while some elite Southern women greeted Lincoln’s assassination as justice (“I cannot be sorry for their fate. They deserve it,” wrote Louisiana refugee Kate Stone), wiser heads judged it a disaster for the planter class. “The worst news we have had since the surrender,” as one man put it.

Johnson’s ascendancy to the presidency roiled the fragile country, North, South and West. But it had particularly potent meaning for former masters and mistresses in the occupied South. For if there was one thing Johnson was known for, it was his hatred of the Southern “aristocracy.” And he made no secret of his determination to punish traitors: “We must make treason odious,” he famously said in 1863.

He made good on that promise on May 29, 1865, by issuing a “Proclamation of Amnesty and Pardon” that excluded former Rebels who owned more than \$20,000 worth of property, barring them from public life and leaving them subject to all the penalties for treason, including confiscation of that property. To escape that, each had to individually apply for a presidential pardon. Many blamed Johnson for voiding surrender terms negotiated between Gen. William T. Sherman and Gen. Joseph E. Johnston. “Now that we are surrendered [we] are in a great degree powerless, we can count with certainty upon nothing,” Ella Thomas wrote from Augusta in May. “Our negroes will be freed our lands confiscated and imagination cannot tell what is in store for us.” Hatred of Andrew Johnson ran so deep among planter women that some harbored fantasies of his assassination. Johnson held their fate in his hands.

Above all, planter families feared confiscation of their land. After the forced emancipation of their slaves, land was the only asset of any value left to them. With two-thirds of their personal property already expropriated by the government (slave property they valued at \$4 billion), they now stood to lose title to their land as well. Confiscation and land redistribution were a real possibility in the political life of the nation in that historic moment. Former slaves counted on it as a return on their loyalty and military sacrifice during the war and looked to the federal govern-



■ **Away down south in Dixie** Fernwood, the Memphis-area plantation of the William L. Vance family, quickly decayed after the war. Once-wealthy Southerners faced an uncertain future.

ment to distribute confiscated land and put their freedom on a firm material foundation.

In the spring and summer of 1865, former masters and mistresses stared financial ruin in the face. Floride Clemson noted the condition of planter families in South Carolina's low country, people who had once been among the most rich and powerful in the country. "Men formerly wealthy have literally not wherewithal to make bread," she wrote. "Lands which have been abandoned by their owners during the war, are confiscated to be divided by the 'freedmen's bureau' among the negroes." Planters' private papers and women's diaries are filled with the details of what can only be called the

fall of the planter class: planter sons taken out of school and put to the plow or apprenticed as clerks to grocers in Savannah, belles teaching school for \$35 per month, ladies giving their dresses to their ex-slaves to sell in the secondhand clothing market. Meta Morris Grimball's family, like many from the Savannah River plantation district, saw the "wreck of all....Corn crib empty and no money," her own "family reduced like a lot of the 'old aristocracy'...applying for, and gladly taking, very inferior places." Henry Manigault and his wife were now steward and matron of the almshouse, she reported; William Middleton was renting out his rooms, James Heyward's wife and daughter had taken up sewing, and Mrs. Allston, the governor's widow, had begun keeping a boarding school.

Planter-class women suffered not only the fate of the men, but also the added legal restrictions imposed by marriage that denied them ownership and control of property, including, usually, property they brought into

their marriages. So as their husbands filed applications for pardons and kept their eyes fixed on Johnson, the women warily watched their husbands, anxious about the wisdom of their decisions and doubly dependent on the men in power above them. Grimball could not get access to her New York property because it was held under confiscation laws. Ella Thomas was reduced to "utter beggary" because the "thirty thousand dollars Pa gave me when I was married was invested in Negroes alone." The land to which her husband held title was, she belatedly learned, heavily encumbered with debt as a result of his inept dealings. She would spend the next 20 years watching it go under the sheriff's hammer and trying to keep the family afloat by teaching school.

Much as they all hated and feared Andrew Johnson, the Southern elite had no choice but to ask him for pardons. Susan Darden reported from Mississippi in July "that a good many are taking the oath"; by August two members of her family and many more from her neighborhood had sent their petitions to Washington, each paying \$100 to a broker in Port Gibson. In the end, 15,000 people applied for presidential pardons. About 7,000 were granted.

Alice Gaillard Palmer was a widow. She had to decide on her own whether to take the oath of allegiance and apply for a pardon. Initially she was defiant, saying in May that her in-laws should refuse to take the oath. It was treason to the South, she said, and would "kill the Palmer name." But by August she had faced up to the reality that she had to do it to protect her property. "I am a greater rebel than ever," she claimed, but she nonetheless bent the knee. □

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