



Women **on the warpath**

By Stephanie McCurry

▲ **Outraged women**

turned the streets of Richmond into a battlefield, venting their wrath on local merchants

“Bread or blood!” The cry rang out across the South in the starving spring of 1863, when a wave of violent food riots, all of them led by women, swept the Confederacy from Mobile to Richmond.

The riots were spectacular, and they were numerous. Mobs of women numbering from a dozen to 300 or more, armed with Navy revolvers, pistols, repeaters, bowie knives and hatchets, carried out at least a dozen attacks (there were rumors of more) on stores, government warehouses, Army convoys, railroad depots, salt works and granaries. The attacks occurred in broad daylight, and they were all perpetrated within the space of one month, between the middle of March and the middle of April 1863.

Southern officials could hardly say they hadn't been warned. For months their mailbags had been filled with angry letters from poor white women demanding relief from their suffering condition: the return of husbands and sons from the army to help them make bread, more food or money from the commissioners of the poor, government controls on runaway inflation in food prices, crackdowns on speculators, revision of conscription laws. Some had threatened to take matters into their own hands.

And then at least some of them did. In Atlanta first, on March 18. Then Salisbury, N.C., the very next day. Then came Mobile, Ala., then Petersburg, Va., and Macon, Ga. Richmond, the biggest street action of all, happened on April 2—followed by six more riots. It was an unnervingly coherent set of events, each local, but so closely spaced, so similar in pattern, that by the time the wave hit Richmond, conspiracy theories abounded. “That they are the emissaries of the Federal Government...is

difficult to doubt,” the *Richmond Daily Examiner* claimed. Such seemingly connected and highly organized events were beyond the capacity of mere women; this had to be the work of men, professionals, Yankee operatives.

But it was not, and that much became clear as the Confederate public learned about the leadership, recruitment, organization and collective discipline of women that culminated in the riot on Richmond's streets. In previous riots there had been suggestions of prior

organization—the way women just materialized “in a body” at an apparently predesignated time and place, with banners, slogans and speeches at the ready. In Atlanta witnesses reported a tall woman led the others (15 or 20 of them) through the downtown streets, publicly queried a merchant about the price of bacon and then protested the “impossibility of females in their condition” paying such a price—all this before drawing a pistol and, holding the owner at bay, ordering the mob to help themselves from his stores. In Salisbury 40 or 50 women who announced themselves as “respectable poor women...all Soldiers' wives or Mothers” descended in one moment on merchants they identified as speculators. How those earlier riots were organized we don't know. But in Richmond the sheer numbers, about 300 women with a crowd of more than 1,000 following behind, negated any possibility of spontaneous eruption.

Richmond put to rest any question about how the riots were organized or women's leadership in them. Shocking as it must have been to many Southerners, what came out during the rioters' trial in city court was indisputable evidence the riot had been in the planning stage for 10 days. Preceded by a big public meeting, it was the work of Mary Jackson, soldier's mother, farm wife and huckster in meat at the public market. Jackson and the other women had organized and pulled off the biggest civilian riot in

Confederate history. "Mrs Jackson is the prime mover and chief instigator of the riot," the *Richmond Daily Examiner* confirmed a week or so after the investigation began.

Court testimony confirmed something else: Jackson was one of the thousands of angry Confederate women who had first tried to solve their problems by appeals to governors or the secretary of war. A clerk in the war office recognized her from her repeated visits and pleas to get her son released from service. But unlike most of the others, when Jackson got no satisfaction, she crossed the line from protest to direct action. She recruited hundreds of women to attend a meeting at the Belvidere Baptist Church on April 1—some from as far as 11 miles away—and together they planned the riot. "All were women there except two boys," one woman recalled. By all accounts it

was a rowdy meeting, but Jackson was clearly in command. She climbed up into the pulpit to rally her troops, asking them to gather the next day at the entrance to Capitol Square. She also directed them to come armed—and leave their children at home.

The following morning Jackson was seen at the market, armed with a bowie knife and a six-barreled pistol. She was soon joined by a throng of women who surged out of Capitol Square up onto Ninth Street, marching silently, as Jackson told them to. All of them were heavily armed, one witness reported, with domestic implements and the contents of an old armory: axes and hatchets, "rusty old horse pistols, clubs, knives, bayonets stuffed in belts, and specimens of the home made knives with which our soldiers were wont to load themselves down in the first part of the war."

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They stopped first at the governor's house, demanding an audience—a sign of reasonableness as well as a public relations strategy. But when they got no results, they hit the streets. For a good two hours they wreaked havoc, targeting speculators, smashing their way into stores, looting at gunpoint and loading stolen goods onto wagons that they impressed on the street. They stopped periodically to explain themselves to sympathetic onlookers. At least 12 stores were looted before the public guard was called out and, threatening to shoot, managed to restore order. Many of the women were later arrested with their haul in working-class neighborhoods and farms around the city. Around noon the authorities got the ringleaders, including Mary Jackson, who was looting to the bitter end. When they picked her up she was brandishing a bowie knife and shouting, yes, "Bread or blood!"

Like all the riots that hit the CSA that spring the one in Richmond was violent. But the response was everywhere the same: immediate public acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the women's position and demands. In Atlanta *The Intelligencer* covered news of the riot under the headline "Relieve the Distressed." For the first time, securing subsistence for soldiers' wives and families emerged as a Confederate policy and budgetary priority. In coming months, government authorities—local, state and federal—moved to build a public welfare system that would dwarf anything undertaken in the Union. □

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Richmond rioters are depicted as downright savage in the May 23, 1863, edition of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, showing how war and want had transformed them.