

The American Civil War in the South:

Love, Letters, and Shifting Gender Roles

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Love remains one of the most basic human emotions that provides the motivation and sustains the loyalty of familial bonds. People fight for country and cause due to love and loyalty to those at home. Southern families involved in the American Civil War were no different. Fathers, husbands, sons, mothers, wives, and daughters loved while in the midst of the "cruel war," surrounded by death, destruction, and desperation. These same motivations remain in our society and an examination of correspondence between the homefront and the battlefield sheds light into the inner workings of daily life as well as assigned gender roles.

This study examines the correspondence of families caught in the middle of a war. None were particularly famous or well known in their time, but they made up the upper-middle to upper class of antebellum society. These individuals lived according to socially adopted gender roles and tended to accept them for what they were. This research shows how these families adapted social norms in order to survive the struggles brought by the war.

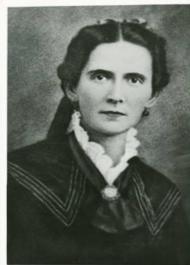
In 1862, when the first shots of the Civil War were fired, the violence interrupted domestic lives along with societal roles, which forced changes in order to meet the wartime needs. The research in this study looks at letters between loved ones to examine the smaller picture, and secondary sources to place the correspondents into the bigger picture. While comparing each of the correspondents with others in this study as well as the secondary sources, one sees the beginning, development, and final impact on the assigned gender roles. Throughout the war, couples exchange information, instruction, and devotion while unknowingly making a record of their shifting gender roles.

In a time without instant communication (telephone, email, and text messaging) the only form was through "snail mail." The words put on paper, sealed in an envelope, and sent on their way reveal numerous aspects of life between 1862 and 1865. Of these, ideas of the iconic Scarlet O'Hare, of *Gone with the Wind*, are aroused. While the trials Scarlet faced are very plausible and happened to many, the women in this study experienced a less dramatized war. Ideas of femininity and masculinity are seen as they evolve and take on new meanings for individual couples and correspondents throughout the war.

This interdisciplinary approach to examining the correspondence of couples from across the South demonstrates the issues of gender, love, and duty, all of which are common throughout life as humans. The combination of history and gender sheds light onto aspects that would otherwise be overlooked.

“ . . . WHEN I THINK OF THE LITTLE ONES AT HOME, THEN *DUTY*, PROMPTS ME TO THEIR PROTECTION.”

Jim Francis provides an ideal example of genteel thinking. His position in society and his family's wealth determined his role in the Civil War. On April 25, 1861, just thirteen days after the first shots of the Civil War, Jim wrote to his father, saying the above. His use of the word "duty" exemplifies the pressures put on men and their socially assigned gender roles. Southern men similar to Jim eagerly joined the Army in order to do their "duty." Whether they consciously realized and fulfilled the assigned gender roles, men similar to Jim viewed protecting the home of prime importance.



Dr. Robert Bone and his wife Minerva
Two correspondents in this study

One Confederate couple struggles to live by the antebellum definition of a woman's role in society. Early in war, George Peddy repeatedly expresses his desire for her to avoid work. This proved unavoidable and prompted this exchange in 1865:

“ALTHOUGH I AM MUCH FATIGUED BY A DAY'S HARD WORK. . .”
~ KATE PEDDY

“HONEY, YOU HAVE A HARD TIME NOW, BUT IF LIFE IS SPARED TO US TO LIVE TOGETHER, I ASSURE MY EVERY EFFORT WILL BE BENT TO PROMOTE YOUR HAPPINESS” ~ GEORGE PEDDY

Even though George acknowledges the affect the Civil War has had on their relationship, he has difficulty accepting the idea of his wife doing physical labor below her class.

“WOMAN WILL BE MORE DEPENDENT ON HER EDUCATION AFTER THE WAR THAN EVER BEFORE.”

A postbellum economic depression forced many Southern families to reevaluate

the importance of education for women. While an antebellum education stressed

the ability to move within social circles, play the piano, and other feminine attrib-

utes, the postbellum South required a practical education that

allowed women to contribute financially to the family by working

as teachers, nurses, and clerks. A letter, written August of

1864, between a son and his mother demonstrates this shift. The author recog-

nizes the different roles women would play in the postbellum South. As a man, he

felt that his three sisters and their future were partially his responsibility, prompting

him to pay for their upcoming academic sessions.



“I PAID TO THE MAN YOU BROUGHT FRANK [A HORSE] FROM THE MONEY HE WANTED. YOU DID NOT SAY WHAT TO DO, AND I DID WHAT I THOUGHT WAS RIGHT...”

One Georgia couple provides an additional an example. In a series of correspondences between November 1861 and January 1862, Kate Peddy asks for and receives specific instructions on paying debts, renting out their slave, and the gardening. In one instance, her husband, George, did not provide instructions on a certain issue. Despite her indifference in this instance, this marks the first time she tells George she was handling their affairs independently. Before volunteering as a surgeon in the Confederate Army, George would have completed such tasks, likely without consulting his wife.