The American Civil War in the South: Love, Letters, and Shifting Gender Roles

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“...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.

“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 attributes, 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 recognizes 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.

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.

“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 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.