“The Women Are The Devils!”: Winchester, Virginia and Women’s Narrative Authority in the Civil War, April 1861 - March 1862

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Introduction: “The men are all in the army, and the women are the devils!”

Strategically located in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, Winchester and the surrounding Frederick County straddled north and south and were major targets for both the Union and Confederate armies during the American Civil War.¹ The occupied and contested region was home to a remarkable group of female writers, who recorded the events of the war and interpreted their significance. The women of Winchester dealt with the diminishing distance between the battlefront and the homefront in myriad ways. They engaged in verbal altercations with enemies and tried to appease commanding officers. They sacrificed the best foods for the troops, recycled old dresses instead of buying new, and tried to maintain a degree of normalcy by socializing at church and at home. Several Winchester women kept written records, indicating that their public roles during the war provided them with the authority to narrate events of both personal and political importance. This article argues that by setting words down on paper, Winchester’s women - particularly Harriet Griffith, Kate Sperry, Julia Chase, and Cornelia McDonald - claimed political agency.

In wartime Winchester, both occupying armies interacted with the civilian women who remained in the town. According to one female diarist, Union Secretary of State William Seward commented that “the men are all in the army, and the women are the devils” upon his return to Washington, D.C. from a visit to Winchester in the spring of 1862.² Although we do not know Seward’s audience and cannot know which specific women he meant, this statement indicates the important public role women in Winchester achieved in the absence of their men. The women of Winchester did not passively stand by as the Civil War entered their town; rather, their efforts to counter the enemy armies gravely affected those soldiers. The Confederate women resisted Union restrictions, and the Union women did likewise when Winchester was under Confederate control. By recording the occupations they endured, Winchester women on both sides documented and legitimized their increasingly political actions.

² Mary Greenhow Lee diary, April 8, 1862, 41; Sheila R. Phipps, Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 164. Although Lee is not a focus of this paper, her record also demonstrates how the town’s women claimed political power through their writing. It’s unclear how Lee, who was in Winchester at the time, heard this statement. Also note that Seward’s comment inspired the title of this paper.
To fully comprehend Seward’s comment, one must consider nineteenth century American opinions on war and women. The accusation of devilry reflects the tendency since colonial times to rely on Christian frameworks to make sense of seemingly secular phenomena such as war. Historian Edward Blum maintains, “references to biblical evil functioned as rhetorical devices.” Blum explains that calling Confederates “devilish” actually allowed Unionists to forgive in the future. Being “deceived by the devil” was a character weakness, it demonstrated that southerners were “vulnerable and weak” but it absolved them from being “evil,” since it meant that the devil was the one responsible for slavery and secession. Although the name-calling went both ways, Civil War scholar Kimberly Harrison maintains that Confederate women were frequently the targets of these rhetorical attacks during the Civil War. They were called “she-rebels,” “demons,” and “secesh,” a shortened version of the word “secession.” Perhaps as a means of fighting back, the women sometimes embraced these pejorative terms, turning them into nicknames that spoke to their heroism.

Seward’s statement must also be viewed within the context of national opinion on women’s involvement in politics. Almost incomprehensibly, women were supposed to be “patriotic” without becoming too “political.” Especially in the South, “Republican Mothers” were expected to nurture love for the nation in their sons. When the nation divided, this allegiance turned political, as patriotism became a choice between two competing bodies. Seward labeling the female writers in Winchester “women,” instead of “ladies,” could also be interpreted as an insult. Historian Elizabeth Varon describes the significance of the word “lady” in Southern society. It indicated “race and class status, whiteness and wealth.”

Seward shared the national stage with Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglass, so his words about the women of Winchester must have carried weight. It is also important to note that in the years leading up to the Civil War, Seward was deeply involved in attempts to reconcile the two regions without war. Historian Daniel Crofts found that “Seward and most southern unionists… saw war as the greatest danger to reunion.” Seward’s previous efforts for a “hands off policy” that would reunite the United States peacefully might have affected his temperament in Winchester in 1862. He might have felt bitter towards the town’s women, instigators who used their fiery rhetoric to ruin his attempts at peaceful reconciliation.

Why Write? Literary and Political motivations of the women writers of Winchester

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6 Varon, We Mean to Be Counted, 5. This connotation continues through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Historian Drew Faust remembers her mother teaching that “the term ‘woman’ was disrespectful, if not insulting.” In her family, all “adult females - at least white ones” were to be called “ladies.” Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xi.
The Shenandoah Valley’s Civil War story began in October 1859, with abolitionist John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry, which focused national attention on slavery and prompted Winchester’s men to form a militia. While the raid at Harper’s Ferry affected all the residents of Winchester, the female writers at the center of this paper - Harriet Griffith, Kate Sperry, Julia Chase, and Cornelia McDonald - did not record it. Because the first of these women did not pick up her pen until the spring of 1861, this history will begin then. Choosing to follow the lead of these women, to begin telling their stories and the story of their town when they chose to begin it, necessitates some explanation. These writers, of course, did not have the perspective of history. Although they could not have known the true importance of the events they recorded when they first picked up their pens, something motivated their initial decision to write. What was that catalyst? What inspired these women to write? What led them to decide to tell their own stories in their own voices, to craft their own narratives? How did their motivations change over time?

Before attempting to answer these questions, the writers’ identities must be considered. Although each woman studied here was her own distinct person, the four shared some important characteristics. They were all white. They all received some education, at least enough to be literate. They all enjoyed comfortable homes and sufficient resources, at least until the war’s disruption. Although they hailed from different regions, followed different faiths, and obviously preferred different policies, their identities were more alike than not, according to studies of class identification in the Civil War era. American historian Drew Faust’s evaluation of antebellum southern society found that, “white men and women of the antebellum South defined and understood themselves in relation to a number of categories: race, which marked the difference between bound and free, superior and inferior; [and] gender, which was designed to distinguish independent from dependent, patriarch from subordinate.” Although white southerners did acknowledge other identifying factors - education, wealth, religion, place of birth, age - they were secondary in self-definition.

While these four Winchester women had much in common with one another, they stand out when compared with Civil War era white women as a whole. Ongoing debates in Civil War history dispute the political agency of this larger population. Did white women, in the North and South, see themselves as political actors? Did others recognize them as such? Scholars such as Stephanie McCurry argue that the Confederacy did not consider women political beings until forced to by women’s protests of the Confederate government. Even then, disenfranchised women were not taken as seriously as the men who were supposed to make decisions for them. Although white women were technically citizens, McCurry finds that they still did not “figure in anybody’s political calculations.”

Jean E. Friedman, in her study on women and community in the evangelical South, comes to similar conclusions as McCurry. She finds that southern women’s close ties to church and family inhibited the development of a

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8 Roger U. Delauter Jr., Winchester in the Civil War (Lynchburg, Virginia, 1992), 1-2.
9 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 3-4.

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political “women’s reform movement” akin to those in the north.\textsuperscript{11}

On the other side of the debate are historians such as Caroline E. Janney and Elizabeth Varon, who argue that elite women combined their antebellum roles with support for the Confederacy to claim their own political place. Janney expands the definition of “politics.” Politics, she explains, “is the ability of individuals or groups to wield influence in their communities, state, or region.”\textsuperscript{12}

Following this logic, the nonpartisan “patriotism” of Victorian-era women should actually be seen as political. Intellectual and social historian Lori Ginzberg points out the paradox of nineteenth century women in politics. Although “virtually all antebellum female activists… recoiled from the potentially partisan nature of their efforts,” Ginzberg finds that “they lived with the contradictions of exerting their influence in decidedly political ways toward clearly political ends.”\textsuperscript{13} According to this wider interpretation, the women of Winchester most definitely engaged in politics. They employed actions and rhetoric to express their political views, and they recorded not only their personal opinions, but also political events in journals and articles that would survive for centuries.

Close study of Winchester makes it clear that the women who wrote during the war years there were political. But it may also be important to note that Winchester’s women differed significantly from the Civil War era women whom McCurry and Friedman deem apolitical. Winchester’s unique situation, located on the border between Union and the Confederacy, with culture and economy more akin to the urban north than the rural south, might have provided the town’s middle and upper class white women with opportunities for political involvement that were unavailable to their contemporaries in plantation communities of the deep south.

The Civil War also led many Americans to reconsider conventional gender roles. Historian LeeAnn Whites argues that wars can prompt gender crises by compelling women to challenge traditional notions of womanhood as they respond to the new demand imposed on them.\textsuperscript{14} The Civil War increased opportunities for Southern women to assert and act on their political beliefs. In the antebellum period, men frequently “represented” their wives, daughters, and even mothers in the public spheres related to politics and business.\textsuperscript{15} Although individual women certainly proved exceptions to this rule, it became more common for women to speak for themselves in public when men were no longer there to do it because of the war.

Each Winchester writer had her own reasons, but each individual’s


\textsuperscript{14} LeeAnn Whites, \textit{The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 11 and 14.

\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, \textit{Within the Plantation Household} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 30 and 195. Fox-Genovese elaborates that both black and white women “belonged” in family and household units governed by men and were therefore not entitled to publicly voice their own political opinions. Even within the woman’s “narrower sphere” of the household, the mistress “lacked the full authority of the master” (308). Instead, her husband or father “held ultimate sway.” She executed the daily tasks, but he made the big decisions (135).
situation also fits into the larger category of increasing literacy especially among white women in the Southern states during this time period. Historian Michael Nelson explains that southern women contributed to the Civil War era, and to our understanding of it, through their letters, journals, and articles, many of which have been uncovered, edited, and published in recent decades. War provided women with the opportunity to engage in the literary tradition, and the drama and trauma of the Civil War provided additional impetus for women to write.16

The journals by Winchester women during this first phase of the war also speak to historiographical questions about the role of white Southern women generally during the Civil War. The women recorded the birth of their Confederate sentiments or their evolving loyalty to the Union, they detailed the effects of the soldiers’ proximity on their daily lives, and they documented their reactions to the increasing confusion and misinformation. The Winchester women’s writing aligns with other research of women’s writing during this time period. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that before the Civil War, women primarily used their journals to track their own personal development. With the coming conflict, women began to “comment upon the society around them” in addition to “chronicling [their] personal, intellectual, or spiritual progress.”17 Historian Sarah E. Gardner explains that the Civil War not only “engendered a transition in journal keeping,” but also “provided Confederate women the opportunity to analyze political events to a heretofore unprecedented degree.” With the change in subject matter came new ramifications. Since a diary naturally places the writer at the center of the narration, writing about politics allowed women to carve a place for themselves in the political world. Therefore writing, even if intended for a small audience, provided women with literary authority and with the opportunity to attain political sway.18

The event that sparked the writing of the first Winchester diarist, Harriet Griffith, was Fort Sumter’s fall to the newly formed Confederacy in 1861. Soon after, Virginia voted to secede from the Union. The voices of the Winchester women capture the tremendous changes they experienced during the first months of the war. In July of 1861, General Joseph E. Johnston led Confederate troops through Winchester on their way to Manassas.19 Sperry, Chase, and McDonald all detailed the troops’ march through town and recorded news of the First Battle of Bull Run, which took place on July 21, and later came to be known as the first major battle of the Civil War.20 A few days later, the surviving Confederate soldiers returned to Winchester; many were wounded and cared for by the diarists and their peers. Throughout that summer and fall, Winchester civilians dealt with increasing difficulties: most of the town’s young men were away with the army, and its remaining residents were cut off from the regular flow of food and mail.

“Brother warring against brother”: Harriet Griffith’s Unionist perspective

17 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 252.
19 Delauter, Winchester in the Civil War, Appendix A, 109.
20 The Battle of First Manassas, also known as the First Battle of Bull Run, on July 21, 1861 was the first major battle of the Civil War.
Harriet Griffith began her journal on April 18, 1861, several months before the other Winchester women who wrote during the Civil War. Griffith came from a prominent Quaker family whose ancestors had settled in the Shenandoah Valley in the 1700s. She was born near Winchester in 1839 and was educated in Quaker schools in Pennsylvania and Indiana. Although the Griffiths’ pacifist religion argued for neutrality, the family, and others in Winchester’s Quaker community, ultimately sided with the Union. Harriet Griffith’s brothers fought for the Northern army, and she served as a nurse in “makeshift” Union hospitals and engaged in “underground” letter writing to spread news about the war. The Griffith family also became close with the Union officers, hosting and socializing with the generals and their staff.21

Griffith’s journal tells the story of her wartime experience, and also records the everyday life of an educated white woman of twenty-two years of age. Her lived experience included romance as well as work. Griffith met Captain William Irving Ellis, a member of General Sheridan’s staff, towards the end of the war. They married in October 1865 and moved to New Orleans, then settled in Massachusetts in 1867. In Melrose, Massachusetts, Griffith was active in the movements for temperance and women’s suffrage and continued working as a nurse.

Griffith’s writing is valuable for its perspective on the beginning and end of the war in Winchester. As a Unionist, Griffith’s view differed from the majority of the women in the town who were Confederates. Griffith’s first entry marks what she considered to be the beginning of the Civil War. On April 18, 1861, she wrote: “… the War now really commenced. There is fighting in South Carolina, and we fear Virginia will secede. Things in the future look dark and threatening.

21 See A. Glenn Crothers’s Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth: The Society of Friends in Northern Virginia, 1730-1865, for the influence of religious beliefs on 19th century Quakers’ sectional politics. In Chapter Eight, Crothers explains the “moral dilemma” that Northern Virginia Quakers faced: Friends credited the Union with their religious liberty, yet supporting the Union war effort violated the Quaker “peace testimony.” Many Quakers compromised, leading to the emergence of “a more permissive and individual Quakerism” after the Civil War. Harriet Griffith’s papers support this finding: in September 1861, Griffith’s cousin Jonah Rees received a letter from friend Will Lupton explaining that “the Quakers are all turned to fighting men” (Griffith diary, 53).
now. But may an All wise Father direct us.” Choosing to begin her account of the war earlier than the other Winchester women writers suggests that Griffith was more tuned into national events. The other women picked up their pens when the first Confederate soldiers marched through town, when the war was right in front of them and inescapable, whereas Griffith’s beginning with the “fighting in South Carolina” suggests that she understood the implications of problems two states away.

Griffith next wrote several weeks later, when her “loved and honored America” had officially taken up arms. This entry conveys Griffith’s strong identification with the United States of America, which she called “our Beautiful country.” She was distraught that the country should fight itself.

“Brother warring against brother, and what for. Methinks ‘tis hard to tell. The sister states that have loved one another as one family are now in arms against each other. My heart is up, very sad, this morning. So many of America’s sons are in the camp today where there is no Sabbath. But there, as in the town and cities, all is excitement. Oh, how uncertain is life; “we know not what a day or an hour may bring forth”. Oh, that we may place all trust and reliance on that Arm that is ever able to sustain his weak depending children. That we may seek to know and love him more and more as time rolls on, is my sincere desire. I have thought much about dear Sisters and Brothers this morning, they are now in the United States - that foreign country.”

With relatives in both sections of the nation, Griffith felt personally affected by the division of the United States. She compared the experience of the country to that of a family divided against itself, and she emphasized the very real consequences of this political break by lamenting how much she missed “the mails,” which had ceased to run “between that country and this ‘Southern Confederacy.’” Griffith’s quotation marks around the words “Southern Confederacy” emphasize her view of the newly formed Confederate States of America as illegitimate. She disapproved of the chaos: “Now we have no laws, no government, and our country is a disorganized state of affairs.” And, like other Winchester residents, Griffith was strongly attached to Virginia and was dismayed at her “once honored State” becoming “a traitor to the Constitution.”

Historian Daniel Crofts identifies trends in the upper south that provide context for Griffith’s pacifist writing. Crofts finds that “many northerners and southerners believed that section differences were negotiable and looked forward to peaceful perpetuation of the Union,” right up until the conflict. Many community and national leaders (such as Seward) focused their efforts on peaceful reconciliation rather than fortifying one side to defeat the other.

22 Griffith diary, April 18, 1861, 1.
23 Griffith diary, June 9, 1861, 3-4.
24 Griffith diary, June 9, 1861, 4.
25 Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, xix.
Kate Sperry’s chronicle of love and war

In the next month, Sperry, Chase, and McDonald joined Griffith in writing. Eighteen-year-old Kate Sperry was the first of the Confederate women to record her daily experiences, “commencing” to write on Saturday, July 13, 1861. Sperry was born in 1843 in Winchester, with her family’s roots tracing back to the first settlers of the lower Shenandoah Valley, in the century prior.

During the Civil War, Sperry and her two sisters, Mary Anna and Jenny, stayed with their grandfather, Peter Graves Sperry, in his Winchester home on Loudon Street, while their father served the Confederate army with the 2nd Virginia Regiment. The eldest of the three siblings, teenaged Kate helped her “Aunt Wardy” run the household. Sperry also spent a portion of the war away from Winchester, with her friends, the Sturmans, in neighboring Newtown, about four miles away. Even when she was not physically in Winchester, Sperry’s diary reflected that her thoughts were always with her friends and family in the occupied town. She made frequent and increasingly risky excursions into town to see family and friends, get news, and sometimes simply to provoke the soldiers. During the war, Kate met and married Dr. Enoch Newton Hunt, a Confederate surgeon from Mississippi. When the fighting ceased, Kate and her husband moved to Mississippi, where they raised six children. She died in 1886 at the age of forty-three.

Sperry’s diary is considered valuable for its descriptions of conflicts both on and off the battlefield. In addition to recounting the news she heard from Confederate soldiers, Sperry recorded her own interactions with the Yankees. Over the course of the war, she flirted with Northern men, nursed them back to health, and argued against their politics. Sperry dedicated her journal to her best friend, Miss Joanna Barbara Krebs. Although the two young women saw each other most days and told each other nearly everything when they were both in Winchester, Sperry needed an audience to inspire her written work. An audience suggests that the author is creating a record for the future. Sperry admitted that she could write “much better” when she addressed Jo, perhaps because picturing Jo reading the diary made the solitary writing feel more like a shared conversation.

26 Sperry diary, July 13, 1861, 3.
27 A twentieth century news reporter claimed that the pages of Sperry’s diary displayed “that this young lady had inherited the courage, intelligence, love of the State of Virginia, exemplified in the legendary lives of her forefathers” (“Memorial Service Thursday Inspired by Sperry Diary,” Winchester Star, 1974).
28 Mary Warden was Kate’s father’s youngest sister. Kate Sperry’s daughter Lenoir Hunt described Mary as a “beloved and courageous” woman who managed the Sperry household in Winchester and mothered the three Sperry girls after their mother’s death and their father’s second marriage (Sperry diary, 514). Aunt Wardy was also known for her “tempestuous love affair” with General Sheridan, which Kate consciously omitted from her diary since she did not approve of her beloved Aunt’s Yankee beau: she “would not burden the pages of her diary with an account of any abolitionist’s love” (Sperry diary, 594).
29 “Memorial Service Thursday Inspired by Sperry Diary.”
30 Sperry diary, July 13, 1861, 3. Full name from Sperry intro p. xi, from here on known as “Jo.”
31 Sperry’s first several months of journal entries attest to the fact that she and Jo saw each other very frequently.

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Sperry’s daughter Lenoir Hunt later suggested that her mother wrote to record the events of the war, which she initially could not imagine extending beyond 1861. Hunt said that Sperry “felt confident the Confederates in a few weeks would administer a crushing defeat to the invading Yanks.” Hunt also claimed that Sperry’s decision to write was inspired by watching the troops from Northern Virginia march through Winchester. Kate Sperry’s own words tell a slightly different story: While “the beat of drums and the sound of marching feet” in July 1861 did entice Kate and Jo to leave the comfortable parlor of the Sperry home to join “the excited throng” outside on the “sultry” sidewalk, the first few pages of Sperry’s journal chart the course of her many romances as well as following the unfolding of the Civil War. The opening sentence of Kate Sperry’s journal typifies the merging of personal and political: “This morning about 11 o’clock [came] a note from Mr. Thomas D. Houston.” The note included a rose bud, and Sperry described its sender as “a real jovial chap,” whom she liked “tremendously.” She continued, “our acquaintance began very romantically - when the Alabamians came through here en route for Harper’s Ferry,” and Mr. Houston stayed across the street from her and sent her notes with “complimentary” messages. Here Sperry’s writing seems as inspired by love, or by the hope of love, as by the excitement of war. She never would have met Houston, of the 4th Alabama Regiment Marion Light Infantry, had there not been a war, but it seems doubtful that she would have written anything had she not had romantic interest in him and in the many other soldiers she met over the course of the war.

Sperry’s initial focus on friends and flirting rather than politics and war suggests that she was driven to write by a combination of personal and political motives.

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33 Lenoir Hunt, Introduction to Sperry Diary (Houston, Texas, 1941), xii.
34 Hunt, Introduction to Sperry Diary, xi-xii.
35 Sperry, July 13, 1861, 3-4. Underlines come from the Sperry diary manuscript.
circumstantial factors. She wanted to tell someone about the men she met and the other ups and downs of her social life. Yet she could not escape the fact that many of these introductions would not have occurred without the Civil War, and she did not neglect the opportunity, presented by the war, to comment on local and national political developments. While Sperry was aware of the historic import of her time, her desire to make sense of the changes occurring around her - the soldiers’ constant comings and goings, her father’s departure for the army, her own lengthy visits to places beyond Winchester in an effort to avoid Union governance - were equally important in motivating her writing.

Sperry discussed the war more directly on Thursday, July 18:
Oh mercy here I am a poor disconsolable lass - this morning all our army, 25,000 men, rec’d orders to march from here to the [Manassas] Junction [at Bull Run] to assist [Confederate General] Beauregard who was having a glorious fight with the Yankees. I never felt as sad in all my life. I went to the door to see them go by. First person who came to bid goodbye was Theo Chestney - he rode up dismounted got his haversack filled bid us goodbye and went off… Dr. Hunt, the dear, came up to say, “fare thee well but not forever.” … I am miserably depressed.36

This passage is another demonstration of Sperry’s motives: she followed the war in part because she was attached to so many young men fighting in it. Other young women operated similarly. Emma Riely, like Sperry, lived in Winchester and in neighboring localities during the Civil War. Unlike Sperry and the other women featured in this article, Riely wrote her “Reminiscences of the Civil War” decades after its close, in 1896. Riely wrote “at the request of her daughter,” so that future members of the family could hear her story. Riely was “but thirteen years of age when the war began.” She and her elder sister Kate could no longer attend school, which closed because of the war, and so they fled from their home in Winchester to stay with friends in less dangerous places. Riely married her husband, Reuben Conway Macon, seven months after the close of the Civil War, in November 1865.37 Riely’s memory that the girls all had “a good time, for brass buttons and gold lace were very attractive” supports the argument that Sperry may have initially been more concerned with the elegant ceremonies of war than with its morbid realities.38

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36 Sperry diary, 7-8. Where I have placed ellipses, Sperry mentioned at least half a dozen other men to whom she bid farewell. Sperry’s mention of Dr. Hunt is of interest because he was the beau whom she finally married.
37 Emma Cassandra Macon Riely, “Reminiscences of the Civil War” (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1911), Preface, 5.
38 Riely Reminiscences, 11.
As the conflict continued, Sperry conveyed concern for the health of soldiers on both sides, but initially she only worried about her own social wellbeing. What was she to do without any “beaus” to court? The day after the army’s departure for Manassas Junction, Sperry complained about her boredom: “The streets seem deserted and but for the few sick soldiers here I believe I’d die a natural death.” However, despite her focus on romance, Sperry made her political leanings clear. When writing her address on the first page of her journal, Sperry recorded her country of residence as the Confederate States of America, making a political statement from the outset. The extent of her support for the Confederacy was also revealed in regular conversations with friends. The increasing focus Sperry gave to political topics in her journal indicates her maturing political persona.

One day in August, the topic of discussion was “whether a lady engaged to a gent would go north with him.” Sperry opined that being asked to leave the Confederacy would be a true “test” of love. In October, Sperry was visited by Miss Kate Wilson, a young woman “from Maryland [who] hadn’t got her Union principles fairly worked out of her.” So, Sperry and her friend Kate Schulz “pitched into her like vengeance and left her considerably crestfallen - it seemed to be a mutual understanding… that we should pick at her union sentiments.” Sperry’s experience shows that young women of the nineteenth century, although seemingly absorbed by the rituals of courting and coupling off, also engaged in politics.

Literary scholar Kimberly Harrison’s definitions of the terms “rhetoric” and “public” allow critical examination of the political activity of Sperry and other women in her class. Harrison argues that the responses of “elite and middle-class white Southern women [to] new wartime audiences such as Union and Confederate soldiers, former slaves, and family and community members” can be understood as rhetoric that women used to present themselves to their own publics. Rhetoric can extend beyond public speeches with one man addressing a

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39 Sperry diary, July 17, 1861, 8.
40 Sperry diary, July 13, 1861, 3.
41 Sperry diary, August 5, 1861, 16.
42 Sperry diary, October 23, 1861, 70.

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crowd and a written record of the event that exists to this day. If we broaden the definition of rhetoric, then Sperry’s diary itself becomes a political object, because as rhetoric, the journal asserted that women had a place in the wartime debates, and placed Sperry in the midst of those disputes.

**Julia Chase’s lonely longing for peace**

Julia Chase was another woman who left behind a written record from the Unionist perspective in Winchester. Born in Maine in 1831 to Charles and Nancy Chase, Julia Chase is remembered as “an avid supporter of the Union.” She never married, and lived with her parents on Loudoun Street (where Kate Sperry’s grandfather’s home was) when the war began. Historians have determined that Chase’s diary is representative of the “small but passionate” group of Loyalists in the Shenandoah Valley. The “Unionist sympathies” that Chase displayed throughout her diary are as important as Sperry’s Confederate tirades in debunking the myth that women at this time were apolitical creatures.

Chase began her diary a week and a half before Sperry commenced hers. Launching into an account of the regiments leaving town for Martinsburg, Chase left no direct clues about what motivated her to write. However, her frequent expressions of concern for herself, her family, and her town suggest she wrote in part in order to cope with the trauma she faced. As a political minority in a town mobilizing for war, Chase likely felt traumatized earlier in the war than did women like Sperry. With her aging parents ailing, her town turned against her, and no husband to confide in, Chase turned to pen and paper for comfort.

While Sperry initially emphasized the romantic nature of the war rather than its political meaning, Chase encouraged peace at any cost. Although she supported the Union, she would have rather the seceded states be let go without a fight than become embroiled in armed conflict. As the war progressed, both Sperry and Chase became more forceful in their political support for South or North, reflecting their maturing nationalism and the increasing proximity of the war. The duration of the conflict and trauma provided women with a way to find their narrative and political voices.

At the beginning of the war, Chase promoted peace far more than she lobbied for either side. While she did support the Union, she frequently wrote about her hope that the two sides could soon arrive at a peaceful agreement. Chase bemoaned the fact that the country she loved was divided against itself. On July 4, 1861, she wrote, “few rejoicings in this state, or any other Southern States, in regard to this day when Independence was declared by our forefathers. Into what a sad condition our beloved country has fallen.”

Chase recounted the same event that Sperry opened her diary with, the mass movement of the Confederate troops out of Winchester in mid-July. Of it,

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46 Chase diary, July 2, 1861, 1. (Note: the page numbers I use for the diaries of Julia Chase and Laura Lee correspond with the diaries as published in Michael Mahon’s *Winchester Divided*.)  
48 Chase diary, July 4, 1861, 3.
Chase said:

Our troops are ordered out, it is thought in the direction of Strasburg. Gen. McClellan’s forces are supposed to be drawing near that point, cutting of thereby all communication between the army here and at Richmond… The troops of the Confederate army are now passing by - they number I believe 4,500 men - they will have a warm march in the heat of the day. Their artillery consists of 10 large cannons. The wagons containing baggage extend from Taylor Hotel to our house. 110 wagons more have passed in rear of the troops besides others up Piccadilly Street… We have just heard that the army are moving to Manassas Junction & that they have been fighting for 24 hours, that Gen. McClellan’s troops are advancing in very large numbers. It is now near 4 PM and the Confederate troops are still on the move - having commenced leaving about 2 o’clock… All the army have left, excepting the sick, who will move on as soon as able. We are without any sugar in our town. The merchants have advanced on all their goods, and if this state of things continues, I know not will become of us.49

Chase’s retelling of this event differs from Sperry’s. Her perspective was less emotionally invested, perhaps because she was not in love with half of the troops, as Sperry claimed to be.

Chase’s use of the word “our” might complicate the image of her as an obvious Unionist at the beginning of the war. Her wording implies a feeling of possessiveness of the troops from her town; even though they were fighting for the Confederate side, Chase considered the men and boys from Winchester to be her own. Chase distanced herself from the Confederate army as a whole, describing the group as “the Confederates.” This terminology does not differ much from the way she discussed the Yankee forces; here they are “McClellan’s troops.” In short, in the summer of 1861, Chase seems to have felt no personal connection with the armed forces of the North or South. She rooted for peace rather than victory for either side, and her political identity seems primarily tied to pacifism and loyalty to the town of Winchester. Historian Jonathan Berkey picks up on that sentiment when he argues that in the lower Valley, civilians on both sides realized they needed to cooperate to survive the hardships of war. Their “true feelings of neighborliness” ultimately outweighed sectional divisions.50

Chase’s fervent hope that the Yankee troops would perform well on the battlefield and “not prove cowards - what a disgrace it would be to them” illustrates that although she supported the Union, she did not have much faith in its military.51 She frequently disparaged the troops and their leaders for not being

49 Chase diary, July 19, 1861, 4.
51 Chase diary, August 14, 1861, 6.
brave enough or smart enough to ward off the enemy. Again, Berkey’s assessment of civilians in the lower Shenandoah Valley aligns with Chase’s views. Berkey explains that, “despite their political views,” many civilians in the region “did not support heavy-handed military action against their neighbors.”

However, Chase differed from some other Southern women who remained loyal to the Union. Legendary spies like Elizabeth Van Lew and diarists such as Cyrena Stone displayed more openly steadfast support to the United States of America. Unionist and abolitionist Van Lew led a network of Richmond spies in tunneling classified information and war prisoners out of the Confederate Libby Prison. Her political involvement culminated in appointments to positions as postmaster and clerk after the conclusion of the Civil War. However, like Chase, Van Lew’s loyalties were local. Historian Elizabeth Varon characterizes the celebrated spy as clinging “tenaciously to her Virginia identity until her dying day.” Van Lew viewed Virginia’s secession as evidence that her “own” people were going crazy. This sentiment mirrors Chase’s disappointment in the Union army. Both women felt connected to a political entity - Van Lew to Virginia and Chase to the Union - but also expressed doubts. Van Lew loved her state, but disagreed with its decision to secede. Chase supported the Union, but was skeptical that it could succeed in its fight against the Confederacy.

Another Southern Unionist, Cyrena Stone, seems more motivated by morals. A New England transplant to the South, she kept in touch with the few loyal Federalists who lived in Atlanta during the war and kept an American flag hidden even though it risked her safety. Her husband and fellow Unionist, Amherst Stone, described Cyrena as “an enthusiastic women… separated from friends of her early years and her relations with few around to sympathize with and discouraged in hope of relief, freedom and protection under the flag she loves.”

By comparison, Julia Chase would probably not have been described as a politically “enthusiastic” individual. She would have rather everyone get along than be forced to pick a side. Chase also, crucially, differs from Stone and Van Lew because beyond recording her wartime experiences from a decidedly Unionist perspective, she did not act on her sectional tendencies. Chase’s lack of political action might be more representative of the typical “Loyalist” woman in the South than Stone’s active political response. She believed in the United States government, but as a nineteenth century churchgoer, she had stronger faith in God than in any political leader. She supported the Union, but she would have rather

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52 Berkey, War in the Borderland, 125.
55 Varon, Southern Lady, Yankee Spy, 38.
56 Thomas G. Dyer, Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 8, 154.
57 Dyer, Secret Yankees, 125-126.
the two sides make peace than inflict casualties on each other. However, Chase’s pacifist tendencies do not undermine the current scholarship that American women were more politically involved in the Civil War than was previously thought. Her writing became more aggressive in its support of the Union as the war went on, and her early lobbies for peace can be interpreted as political messages.

More than loyalty to North or South or even to Winchester, Chase demonstrated her devotion to God. She fervently believed that the outcome of the war and therefore the fate of the country lay in God’s hands. On July 27, 1861, she described the skies as being “very dark.” “The Federalists were completely routed at this battle at Manassas,” Chase reported, “& unless God interposes, I fear that this Government will not be able to maintain itself.”58 Here again, Chase lacked faith in the Union army. She did not see how the North would win without a miracle, so she prayed to God. Berkey notes that many of the Shenandoah’s well-known Unionists were Quakers.59 Although Chase was not, and her specific religious affiliation remains unknown, her faith in a Christian God may have contributed to her strong preference for peace over war.

Like Chase, Cyrena Stone had many Unionist hopes for God. Becoming desperate during the course of the war, Stone wrote: “How have I hoped & prayed each night, that the morning would find us free! Last night the clash of arms sounded so near, it seemed as if the Union Army would surely march in before another sun would rise… So I have hoped each day & night.”60 Although both writers addressed God, their intentions differed. Stone asked God to help the Union army to prevail, to defeat the Confederacy. Chase’s priority, on the other hand, was peace. While she asked God to assist the North, she did so more out of a concern for safety than because of a desire to dominate the South. Chase also differed from Stone in that she did not have a close-knit “Union Circle” with whom to organize. Chase’s mother and father were Unionists like her, but the family did not engage in political activity akin to that of Stone and her comrades. Berkey explained that although the Unionists who remained in the Lower Valley “relied upon one another for support,” many individual Unionists “adopted a neutral stance.”61 This refusal to cast one’s lot with either the Union or the Confederacy would have undermined the ability of civilian supporters of the Union to do anything other than commiserate.

Historian Thomas Dyer’s analysis of the members of “the Union Circle” in Confederate Atlanta also sheds light on Chase’s political situation. Dyer concluded that loyalty and disloyalty during the American Civil War were not easily defined. According to Dyer, each side needed the other to define its own identity.62 Confederates, for example, used people like the Unionists in Atlanta,

58 Chase diary, July 27, 1861, 5.
59 Berkey, War in the Borderland, 131-132.
61 Berkey, War in the Borderland, 146-148.
and like Julia Chase in Winchester, to clarify what loyalty to the Confederacy meant. “Neutral Yankees” were common, but were politicized by the more radical ideologies of the people around them. Chase may fit into this category of “Neutral Yankees,” because while she supported the Union cause, she was not terribly active in fighting for it. In the years following the war, however, Chase has been lauded as one of the exemplar Unionist women in Winchester, perhaps to offer a comparison to the strident “she-rebels” that populated the town.

The works of historians Daniel Crofts, John C. Inscoe, and Robert C. Kenzer help contextualize the wide variety of southern unionism discussed above. Crofts argues that at the beginning of the Civil War, “the spectrum of antisecessionist ideas ranged from unconditional Unionism to a qualified willingness to remain in the Union for a short time.” In 1860, some who were amenable to staying in the Union would only remain on the condition that Northern Republicans compromise on certain issues. Inscoe and Kenzer’s study of Unionists in the Civil War South adds to Civil War historiography on Unionists in the South. The authors explain that the scholarship is likely lacking because so many of the southern “Unionists” fit the description above - their support for the Union was “conditional” on certain concessions which were not met, therefore they quickly “capitulated to the Confederate cause and war effort.”

Only in hindsight can we place Julia Chase and Harriet Griffith in the categories created by these historians, because of course groups of distinct Southern Unionists could not be recognized as such until long after the war’s close. Additionally, modern historians remain divided over the conditions that “firmly decide” the identity of a Unionist. It seems likely, however, that both Griffith and Chase would fall somewhere in the middle of the range Crofts identifies. They supported the Union’s ideals, but did not condone its military prowess. They wanted the country to reunite, but desired peace above all.

**Cornelia McDonald’s Civil War writing: a “complex interweaving of past, present, and present transposed upon past”**

Cornelia McDonald began her journal with her husband in mind. McDonald was born in Winchester in 1822, the youngest of the seven children of Humphrey Peake and Annie Linton Lane. After the family moved west to Missouri, Cornelia married an attorney twenty-three years her senior, Angus W. McDonald, in 1847. The newly wed couple soon returned to Virginia, where they had nine children (in addition to the nine Angus already had from a previous

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63 Dyer, *Secret Yankees*, 63-64.
64 Other Unionist women in the region included Harriet Griffith (discussed in this paper) and schoolteacher Rebecca Wright who risked her safety to send a crucial message to General Sheridan (Riely Reminiscences, 106).
65 Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 104.
They lived in Winchester when the Civil War began. When Angus left for war he “begged” Cornelia to keep a diary, and to “record every day’s event” for him to read when he returned. His willing wife started to write upon his departure in March 1862, and continued to write even after his death in 1864.69

During the course of the Civil War, the first part of McDonald’s diary, from March to November of 1862, was lost, so in 1875 she tried to recreate from memory what she had written before. Although McDonald’s diary ended in June 1863, she recorded July 1863 to October 1865 in 1875, when she was writing the story of her life for her children. At this time, McDonald also wrote “Recollections of the Year 1861,” which described her experiences leading up to the Civil War and during its first months. McDonald’s mix of diary entries and autobiographical reflections distinguishes her writing from that of other white, educated women who wrote during the Civil War, whether in the North or the South. Minrose Gwin, the literary scholar who edited the latest edition of McDonald’s diary, explains that McDonald “copied past segments of writing, reconstructed lost portions of that past writing, and wrote several sections based entirely on memory of events, rather than the secondary memory of lost diary entries.” McDonald’s mechanics are different from those of “other white southern women of the period,” who created written works in memory of their experiences during the war years. The others “either revised and added to their journals after the wars, simply wrote memories, or copied their diaries with little revision.” McDonald, on the other hand, crafted “a complex interweaving of past, present, and present transposed upon past.”70

When comparing McDonald’s work with that of the other women who wrote in Winchester, it is important to consider the complicated nature of her “autobiographical narrative.”71 Her writing does not follow the same chronological order as that of the others, and therefore might disclose differences

69 McDonald, *A Woman’s Civil War*, 269.
70 Minrose Gwin, introduction to *A Woman’s Civil War*, by Cornelia McDonald (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 9.
71 Ibid.
about how Winchester women’s understanding of their narrative authority changed over time in the years after the war. McDonald’s motivation for writing was political from the very start. It stemmed from her husband’s request to record the events that transpired in his absence, and he was gone because he was fighting for the fledgling Confederacy. McDonald’s pride in and connection to her family and Virginia provided the foundation for her identification with the Confederacy. She and her husband were both proud to be from the Commonwealth. McDonald reported that upon Angus’s return from Europe in November 1860, he “exulted that he was an American and a Virginian,” especially the latter.

Virginia historian Peter Cozzens supports the idea that although “commitment to the Union ran deep” in the Shenandoah Valley, “loyalty to Virginia rivaled that to the Union.” Before John Brown’s raid, public opinion in the Valley was “averse” to secession, and even after October 1859, Southern nationalism was only “moderate.” Valley newspapers urged their readers to remain loyal throughout the 1860 presidential campaign and “mass meetings” of citizens tried to sustain the “spirit of compromise.” In December 1860, for example, Winchester residents met at the courthouse “to consult together and adopt such measures as… will best promote the peace of the county and maintain the rights of the South.”

Delegates from the Valley, such as lawyer John Baldwin of Staunton, argued at the 1861 Virginia Secession Convention that the federal government did not pose a threat to the liberty of southern states. Baldwin and the other Unionists won the first vote on April 4, but the fall of Fort Sumter on April 13 and President Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops on April 15 pushed opinion in the other direction. On April 17, the convention voted to leave the Union. Virginia voters followed suit at the polls on May 23.

McDonald’s personal political evolution echoed this pattern. Her strong identification with Virginia ultimately resulted in her choosing to support the Confederacy, but she initially displayed doubts about seceding from the Union. McDonald wrote that after South Carolina’s secession in December of 1860, other people in town thought that separation of North and South was inevitable, but she “had always loved the Union, and gloried in the stars and stripes.” McDonald continued to say that by spring of 1861 the collective “joy” she experienced in Winchester was infectious. McDonald, like many of her fellow townspeople, changed her mind about the Confederacy. She was surprised at her positive reaction when she first saw the Confederate flag “at the head” of a march:

I felt my pulses bound… Ah! I did not know then what a portentous sight it was, I only thought of the attempted coercion of our free state and

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72 On New Year’s Day 1863, McDonald wrote: “I am proud that all my people are Virginians; father, mother, husband, and children, were all born on her soil; and I feel as if for love of her, and to defend her honour I would give all I have; I think even my six boys if they were old enough…” (107). The familial basis for McDonald’s sectionalism is reminiscent of historian Jean Friedman’s work on women and community. Friedman finds that southern women affiliated more strongly with “networks” of kin and church than did their northern peers (p. 6-7).
73 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 246.
country, and that no sacrifice was too great to ensure their defeat. I knew that blood must be shed, but the trial would soon be over, and we would be forever free.\textsuperscript{76}

McDonald’s sense of the “attempted coercion” of Virginia probably influenced her change of mind. For McDonald, the Commonwealth was more than a state. It was a “free state and country” whose people deserved independence that was inhibited by Lincoln’s call for troops to suppress the so-called rebellion. Although McDonald did not cite the president’s proclamation explicitly, its issuance was likely a factor in the evolution of her thinking. This signals that McDonald was aware of political events when she wrote the first pages of her journal.

Other reasoning for the development of McDonald’s southern nationalism can be derived from her personal history. McDonald recognized the dangers of war, yet still believed that southern “freedom” was worth the fight. She probably also feared for her husband’s personal safety. According to Cozzens, Angus McDonald recognized that his glory days “had passed;” he and his wife were probably both anxious about his return to the battlefield.\textsuperscript{77}

Her realistic outlook distinguished McDonald from many of her contemporaries, who were excited to “separate” from the Union but naively believed the process would be “peaceful,” or at least quick. In April 1861, McDonald observed University of Virginia students celebrating the prospect of freedom from the north. Her description of the young men “gaily marching through the town, in their red shirts and black trousers, utterly unprovided with such sordid things as overcoats and blankets, but full of ardour at the prospect of encountering the Yankees” contextualizes the youthful glee voiced by Kate Sperry and Emma Reily.\textsuperscript{78} These young ladies were probably similar to the group of Confederate supporters McDonald described - their support for the Confederacy was steadfast, but they were not aware of what it would take for the South to become an independent nation. They were ready, like the young soldiers, for a battle of wills, but they were not equipped with the physical and emotional supplies necessary to last them through the years of conflict to come.

The war comes to Winchester: diminishing distance between battlefront and homefront

When Winchester’s women began to record the Civil War in 1861, battles had not yet been fought, blood had not yet been spilt. But the war was approaching, and a feeling of anxiety hung in the air. Cornelia McDonald felt “a constant sense of coming evil” and was “almost certain that such a matter could be only settled by war.”\textsuperscript{79} Julia Chase prayed that her father’s pessimistic prediction that the war was to last five years was incorrect. She worried that “this

\textsuperscript{76} McDonald, \textit{A Woman’s Civil War}, April and May 1861, 250-253.
\textsuperscript{78} McDonald, \textit{A Woman’s Civil War}; 248, 251.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 248.
Sperry did not express similar premonitions, but she noted her father’s departure for the army lines and her touristy visits to the soldiers’ camps outside of town. Sperry’s lightheartedness when recounting these events demonstrates that the war’s dire effects were not immediately perceivable. Some Unionists also felt that the war was interesting but not yet devastating. In August 1861, Harriet Griffith went to see Federal defenses:

I have visited the breastworks or fortifications out on the Martinsburg pike with Father and Johnnie. Was exceedingly interested. First work of the kind I’d ever seen. The first time I was ever so near a cannon. I looked into them. The cannon balls weigh 42 pounds each. There were four canons planted and much ammunition there. A great many men were working around. An officer talked with us and showed us things… I was much interested, and don’t think I shall ever forget it. Surely it is something to be remembered, but I hope it will never be used.

Although the symbols of the war were only as far as a day’s trip for Griffith, the fighting had not yet reached her home.

Even in its early stages, the war affected Sperry’s daily life within her home. Although the Emancipation Proclamation had not yet freed her household slaves, in 1861 Sperry still had more chores to do than before the war began. She sewed shirts and gloves for the soldiers. Like Sperry, Emma Riely remembered sewing for the soldiers in the first year of the war. Riely admitted that she “did not prove adept” at sewing: “I succeeded in finishing one sock in the four years but the man would have had to be deformed to wear it for it was a succession of bumps all down the leg.” Harriet Griffith also noted that the only obvious change because of the war was an increase in the number of daily chores. “Our home life has little variety save that we have more to do now than we have had,” Griffith wrote on July 21.

The economic effects of the war were another motive for increased industry among the young women of Winchester. Sperry, still eighteen years old, seemed apprehensive about work:

Our colored woman is going to Strasburgh this evening and we’ll be without “help” for two weeks - and I’ll have an opportunity to learn

80 Chase diary, July 4, 1861, 2.
81 Soon after the Battle of Kernstown (March 23, 1862), Sperry recorded her visit to the battlefield: “a charming day, we walked where the fight was the thickest - in a thicket - the tress were scarred all over and branches shot off by the balls - the ground discolored by the blood of our men and Yanks - I got a bullet that one of the Yanks fired at our men when our men were behind the stone wall… Mr. M. assisted to bury our men - 79 in a tiny trench - side by side and a rail fence around them - it was truly sad to see them… It seemed so queer that I should be walking over a battlefield” (April 3, 1862, 159-160). This passage shows that the significance of the battlefields was not lost on Sperry even though sometimes treated excursions there lightheartedly.
82 Griffith diary, August 21, 1861, 35-36.
83 Other times that Sperry wrote explicitly about work include: November 15, 1861 and December 31, 1861.
84 Reily Reminiscences, 10.
85 Griffith diary, July 21, 1861, 24.
house-keeping before I’m married, which I’m trying to persuade myself I will be after the war is over, but if I don’t learn the art I’ll have to take one of these soldiers who have been cooking ever since they have been in “camp” - Dr. Hunt, for instance, can make as good biscuit and fry meat like the best of them - after the war the “masculines” will cook, wash, and iron and the ladies attend to business - whew! Won’t we have fine times - voting, attending to patients - electioneering etc. We’ll have a little heaven below - husbands in blue cotton aprons with dishcloths on their arms.\(^{86}\)

In addition to detailing her daily chore routine, this passage illustrates Sperry’s imaginings of a reversal in gender roles. The circumstances of war were largely responsible for planting this idea in her head: Sperry observed male troops cooking and cleaning for themselves in the camps, and she watched women take on typically male responsibilities outside the home to maintain their husbands’ economic enterprises. By causing a deviation from normal activities, the war planted ideas of political activism and gender equality in women’s minds.

Scholars Clinton and Silber note that Confederate women seized the opportunity provided by the Civil War to “claim an increased reciprocity in gender relations,” and found that the war might allow more female independence.\(^{87}\) As a young woman, Sperry perhaps hoped that the war would lead to permanent change in the gender roles in her society. Of course, Sperry’s dream may have been more motivated by her strong aversion to housework than by any lofty ideals of gender equality. On the next day, August 24, 1861, Sperry elaborated that she would “rather do anything” than wash dishes. “Of all greasy dirty work - washing dishes is the awfullest - not only did I scald my fingers but splashed my clothes, broke a few plates etc.”\(^{88}\)

It is also interesting to note how few words Sperry spends on her “colored woman.” Although her thinking on gender roles seems progressive, she did not directly consider whether it was right or wrong for her slave to leave, or for her to have a slave in the first place. Jean Friedman notes that historians have traditionally credited slavery with feminism’s relatively slow development in the South. Although Friedman disagrees - she argues that Southern social structures were maintained even after the demise of slavery and “only gradually changed with… modernization in the latter part of the nineteenth century” - this moment in Sperry’s journal illustrates why the end of slavery might lead to more liberated white women.\(^{89}\)

Even though wealthy southern women did not engage in the drudgery of housework - their slaves did the heavy lifting - the overseeing of cooking and cleaning still filled their sphere of influence. It seems that slavery held white

\(^{86}\) Sperry diary, August 23, 1861, 27.  
\(^{87}\) Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 17.  
\(^{88}\) Sperry diary, August 24, 1861, 27.  
\(^{89}\) Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden*, xi, 92, 107-108, 130. Although I used the word “liberated,” I do not mean to compare wealthy white women’s situation with that of their slaves. Even though the women writers in Winchester and others of their class were beholden to their men to some extent, they enjoyed immeasurably more freedom and privilege than slaves.
women back. Shielded them from the true toils of housework diminished their desire to fight for more public, political prominence. The housework they did engage with was on a higher level; the power to direct domestic workers might have satisfied some women's thirst for autonomy. The institution of slavery allowed the southern “lady” to stand high on her pedestal, because she didn’t have to do the dirty work that slaves did for her. Sperry’s slave leaving forced her to do more housework and to notice the imbalance in the roles played by men and women.

In its first months, the Civil War’s manifestation on the homefront looked different to Cornelia McDonald. Left alone to care for her nine children, McDonald was more concerned by her husband’s absence than by the presence of hundreds of young men in town. She was also influenced by the war as the armies began to encroach on her physical freedom, specifically, her house and the outdoors space around it. American studies scholar Clara Juncker argues that McDonald’s experience demonstrates how the Civil War was fought privately as well as publicly, and that it was in those private battles that the women acted like soldiers. Juncker focuses on the McDonalds’ “medium-sized white-columned home” as the site of McDonald’s private battles, but even before the beginning of the disputes over the home, McDonald articulated a “sense of violation and disruption” in response to the Union soldiers’ invasion of her previously tranquil outdoor spaces.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, McDonald assessed the initial inconveniences of the first few months of war in Winchester as not as bad as the traumas she suffered later. When she completed her memoirs a decade later, McDonald wrote: “These outrages roused all our indignant feelings, but when we had a closer acquaintance with war, we wondered how such things could have disturbed us so much.” Looking back, she assessed the presence of troops and the scarcity of goods as mere annoyances compared to her suffering as a refugee later. McDonald summarized her emotions during the first months of war as peaceful and “securing,” once “things had settled down.” “When anything annoying or distressing would happen,” she explained, “[I] would try to find comfort in the thought that my children were all with me, and we had a home.”

Like Sperry, McDonald engaged in war-related “daily tasks,” but she gained perspective by writing years later. Although she “worked unceasingly” to prepare lint, bandages, and other supplies for battle, those days were “holidays compared with what came after.”

McDonald depicted the same mid-July march that Sperry and Chase watched:

Thursday, the 18th day of July, Gen. Johnston received a dispatch from Gen. Beauregard informing him that McDowell was about to attack him.

90 Some scholars argue that slavery transformed the elite southern woman into a “lady.” See the discussion of the different connotations of “woman” and “lady” on page 4 of this thesis.
91 Jane Turner Censer discusses how soldiers’ entering women’s homes could be seen as even more as invasive and could even be construed as sexual assault (The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 247-248).
92 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 26-27.
93 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 27.
94 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 252.
The whole army was soon in motion, in gallant array, and a proud sight
it was, with the Confederate banners waving, the bands playing and the
bayonets gleaming in the noonday sun. They passed by our gate and we
were all there to bid them good bye and to fill their haversacks with the
food we had prepared for them in haste. Many of the companies were
made up of mere boys, but their earnest and joyous faces were fully as
reassuring as the martial music was inspiring. Then we watched them
out of sight, and saw the last of them; of some the last we should ever see...  

Like Kate Sperry, Cornelia McDonald stood outside to send off the
Confederate troops. Like Julia Chase, her relative age and maturity allowed her
to see beyond the immediate emotions of the day. She felt proud of the soldiers
that passed, but nonetheless worried that she was seeing some of them for the last
time. For now, the overt signs of war - troops and their accompanying bands and
banners - left Winchester, but their presence had awakened the first sectionalist
sentiments in the town’s women. Sectional loyalties increased throughout the
remainder of 1861 and the beginning of 1862, as the war in the Valley further
developed. Although McDonald and Sperry’s relative comfort during this time
allowed their sectionalism to strengthen, Union women’s suffering had already
begun.

In August, Harriet Griffith wrote that, “the news this week has been
discouraging.” Her wish that the war were over, and that she and her family were
again in their “old position,” indicates that the Griffiths lost a great deal of social
status and material comfort as a result of the war. In October, she noted the
difficulty she had obtaining everyday items as a Unionist in what she derisively
called “This Southern Confederacy.” She planned to write sparingly in her
current journal, because she could “get no more” as long as she remained in the
Confederate “prison.” The war also took its toll on Griffith’s spirits. By January
of 1862, she was feeling worn down. She wrote less frequently - “there seems
little of pleasure to tell you” - and admitted that she had “been so low spirited”
during the past weeks.

Griffith’s dreariness coincided with an increased Confederate presence in
and around Winchester. In November 1861, General Thomas J. Jackson arrived in
Winchester to command military operations in the Shenandoah Valley. In January
of 1862, the Confederate troops briefly left Winchester to wage the unfortunate
Romney Campaign, which was led by Cornelia McDonald’s husband Angus. The
next month, Union troops led by General Nathaniel Banks began their
advance into Virginia. By March they had crossed the Potomac River and come
within miles of Winchester.

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95 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 260.
96 Griffith diary, August 16, 1861, 35.
97 Griffith diary, October 27, 1861, 44.
98 Griffith diary, January 2, 1862, 58-59.
“How strange it all seems now, but horribly real then”: remembering the Civil War

The importance of March 1862 was reflected by the work of Kate McVicar, another Winchester female writer. Like Sperry, McVicar was eighteen years old when the Civil War began, but rather than keeping a daily diary, McVicar waited decades before she wrote about her experience of the war. Under the pen name Vale, McVicar published her *Echoes of the War* in *The Winchester Evening Star* in 1901. A few years later, with a new pseudonym, Nemo, McVicar wrote a series of articles dedicated to remembering the war.

McVicar remembered the eleventh and twelfth of March as “anniversaries of events that agitated Winchester in the long ago.” It was “the first of many evacuations” of the town, and was “the first time that the ‘Boys in Gray’ marched away.” McVicar’s history of the Civil War in Winchester sounds almost like a fairy tale. To her, the events of those years acquired legendary status, and she acted as the town elder, a wise grandparent, telling the story of the past to the future generations sitting at her knee. McVicar asserted her authority by emphasizing her personal experience. Although the Civil War might seem “strange,” she assured her readers that her articles on it tell the truth: it was “horribly real then.”

The details McVicar included further legitimized her authority on matters of historical and political import and created a narrative order for her story. For instance, the “full moon” on the night of the Confederate evacuation in March prevented many Winchester residents from sleeping, and it also suggested that even Mother Nature was aware of the significance of the day to come. McVicar’s admittance that her memory sometimes became “confused as to the exact time of events” furthered her claim to authority. McVicar’s saying that she was unsure of one aspect of her story guaranteed the truth of its other components. Even though she may not remember exact days and times, she could write on the feelings of fear and hope that pervaded Winchester at the start of the Civil War.

McVicar’s work presents a mixed message. She asserted women’s authority on the war by writing about it for a wide audience, yet she also could be perceived as hiding behind her pen. Although many in Winchester came to know McVicar over the course of her long career, she never wrote under her own name. Instead, her published pieces appeared under the authorship of “Vale” and then “Nemo.” The latter is commonly understood by Winchester historians to be a play on the Latin for “no man.” Nemo was either referencing her single status and the devastating effects of war on the male population - although popular with the soldiers during the war, she never married after its close, perhaps because so many of her suitors died in battle - or she was calling herself “nobody.” Did McVicar, even as she wrote week after her week, consider her femininity a barrier to public writing? Did she still ascribe to the nineteenth century ideal that a woman’s voice should not be heard in public?

McVicar used her first nickname, “Vale,” less frequently, and historians have not speculated on its meaning. However, like “nemo,” the word “vale” also

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101 Conversation with Jerry Holsworth, February 3, 2015.
has a Latin meaning: “goodbye.” Perhaps McVicar imagined her writing as a way of bidding goodbye to the war and its combatants. Whatever she meant by her pseudonyms, Kate McVicar’s writing created a public presence for herself, even if her true identity was concealed. She addressed the people of Winchester every week for years, and became a guide for the present as well as a guardian of the past. After McVicar had retired from her post at the paper, one loyal reader wrote a letter to the editor in 1918, wondering what had become of “dear Nemo.” The writer requested that Nemo pick up “her facile pen” again, this time in support of the American soldiers fighting in Europe’s Great War. The letter’s urging Nemo to become involved - “No greater bit can be done for Uncle Sam than to increase the morale of his soldiers” - demonstrates the importance of Winchester women’s writing about the Civil War.

Through their words, Winchester’s women who wrote during and after the Civil War asserted their role in the conflict. They recorded their involvement in sectional debates with the enemy soldiers and the fighting they engaged in to protect what was theirs. In writing about the Civil War, they presented themselves as important players in it, and their continued writing after the war’s close conveys that their experiences in the war conferred upon them the authority and legitimacy to write a history of the war for a wider audience. These women of Winchester took part in the national trend of increased writing, but their contested location provided them with an unusual opportunity to witness and become part of political events.

\footnote{Letter to the editor, Winchester \textit{Evening Star}, February 22, 1918.}