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Families in the Civil War

JAMES MARTEN

6.1 Introduction: The Civil War as a Family Crisis

Ambrose Bierce's short story, "Horseman in the Sky," is an archetypal piece of short fiction out of the late nineteenth century: crisply written, with a quirky plot twist, and a rather dismal take on human nature. But it is also the perfect representation of the cliché that the Civil War tore families apart. The brother against brother metaphor – or, in Bierce's case, the father against son – has long been a favorite of historians and commentators; it works because, in fact, the war did divide families politically. Abraham Lincoln's Todd in-laws are only the most famous family riven by war. Most of these divisions did not result in a Unionist son shooting his Confederate father (the *denouement* of Bierce's unlikely story), but the power of the metaphor nevertheless provides a useful starting point for a discussion of families during the Civil War.¹

Indeed, reorienting the war as a crisis in the American family has become possible after a generation of historians have explored virtually every facet of the lives of Confederate and Union soldiers and civilians. The sectional conflict developed in parallel to the emergence of two different but related ideas: the construction of childhood as a time of innocence, nurture, and protection, and the idea that nuclear families, based on affection, would form the basis of middle-class life. Nineteenth-century writers and educators argued that childhood was not simply a biological phase, but a period in which parents, teachers, and ministers guided children through distinctive coming of age markers. Children became emotional resources rather than economic commodities; they were more important as sources of love, respect, and companionship than as potential laborers or earners.

1 Ambrose Bierce, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (San Francisco: E. L. G. Steele, 1891), pp. 9–20.

Childhoods were also extended through the establishment of state educational standards and the slow decline in families living on farms, where children naturally worked as soon as they could perform useful labor. Although the model middle-class family would never include most American families – even in the twentieth century – by 1861, it had become the paradigm against which American families and childhoods would be measured.

Even a casual look at the sources produced by mothers, fathers, and children during the war provides convincing evidence that they thought at least as much about family considerations as any of the issues raised by the war. How would separation from their fathers shape young boys and girls? How would shortages impact family holidays like birthdays and Christmas? How would the exigencies of war affect standard coming of age stages like schooling, incrementally increasing responsibility, and courtship? How would relationships between and among fathers, mothers, and children be affected by the unpredictability and hardships of war? The antebellum rise of the modern family assured that the war experience would be inseparable from the experience of families.

Most Civil War families could not claim the middle-class status that led to the protected, extended childhood of myth. Yet one measure of the differences between the ways in which Northern and Southern families experienced the war was how close to that ideal they kept their families. The diaries kept by Carrie Berry and Gerald Norcross, both about seven when the war began, illustrate the extremes of the spectrum on which most white families' experiences can be tracked. Gerald was the son of a prosperous Boston merchant and Republican alderman; Carrie's father was a prominent contractor in Atlanta. Gerald started his diary at the beginning of the war; Carrie recorded her experiences during the siege and Battle of Atlanta and its aftermath. Each chronicles the myriad ways the war affected families' material lives, relationships, and attitudes about the war.

The war barely interrupted the happy, full lives of the Norcross family. Gerald's gradually lengthening diary entries listed the many ways he had fun: family vacations, books and games, toys and scrapbooks, parties and fireworks. He listed the many war books he read, which ranged from "dime novels" like *War Trails*, *Vicksburg Spy*, and *Old Hal Williams; or the Spy of Atlanta*; battle narratives such as *Life and Campaigns of Gen. McClellan*, *Days and Nights on the Battlefield*, and *Following the Flag*; and Oliver Optic's famous trilogies about two teenaged brothers serving in the army and the navy.

Gerald also attended fairs, circuses, military parades, and demonstrations – including a disappointing battle between model ironclads on Boston Common – and political rallies. He listed hundreds of possessions, including war-related presents from his father, who did business with the army, like a piece of hardtack and a tiny, pea-shooting cannon. Tucked into his reports of peaceful play were references to making army hats and playing with paper soldiers named for prominent Massachusetts officers, as well as his participation in a boys' company that regularly gathered to practice the manual of arms.²

The Berrys' lives were quite different. As the fighting raged near Atlanta, the family was forced to move several times due to Union shelling. No one was hurt, but after Yankees occupied the city, Carrie was "fritened [sic] almost to death" when "some mean soldiers set several houses on fire in different parts of the town." Not surprisingly, she could barely sleep, and she spent the days after the fall of Atlanta watching Yankees methodically burn the city until theirs was among the handful of homes still standing. The fear, plus the fact that her father's business was completely disrupted, put pressure on the family that was clearly evident to the ten-year-old: "Papa and Mama say that they feel very poor," she wrote in November. The family's desperate condition was reflected in the diary, which described days chasing the family's last hog (driven off by soldiers); "plundering about" the ruins of the city, trying to find anything that they might be able to use; and sifting through the ashes for nails. She rarely played, could not attend school or church, and mentions her lone toy, a doll, just a few times. She also became one of the chief caregivers of a new little sister, born during the battle.³

The Norcrosses and Berrys represent those untold thousands of families in the Union and the Confederacy whose material, moral, and psychological well-being were shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the war. Gerald's life actually seemed to be enhanced by the war; none of his relatives were killed or hurt (none apparently even went into the army) and the war play and other activities in which he participated simply added texture to an already interesting life. On the other hand, the war blasted Carrie and her family's lives to bits; virtually nothing was untouched by the war. The experiences of most white American families were somewhere along the spectrum between the Norcrosses and the Berrys.

2 Gerald Norcross Diary, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

3 Carrie Berry Diary, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

6.2 Duty, Honor, and Politics

The war became a family project, and some parents – especially in the Confederacy, it seems – purposefully politicized their children. A fifteen-year-old Florida girl, Susan Bradford, was intensely interested in the secession crisis, although she could make up her mind whether she sided with her secessionist father or Unionist brother. The male members of the family attended the first few days of the secession convention in Tallahassee. When her father perceived Susan’s deep interest, he allowed her to skip school to attend the convention’s last day. He did so despite his wife’s disapproval, declaring that Susan would “learn more than she can get out of books and what she hears in this way she will never forget.” The teenager eagerly absorbed everything: the pomp, the speeches, and the seriousness of purpose displayed by the delegates. Converted to the Confederate cause, she remained an enthusiastic secessionist through the war and after.⁴

At about the same time, but halfway across the continent, a Mississippi minister named Steele let his eight-year-old son Samuel stay up long past his bedtime when an old friend visited. Their conversation turned to politics, and Sam witnessed an argument no doubt repeated before countless Southern hearths during the secession winter of 1860–1. The impromptu lesson in politics probably did not turn out the way Rev. Steele had hoped; he feared the war that would follow secession, and painted a lurid picture of Yankee gunboats shelling towns and plantations as they steamed down the Mississippi River. The friend scoffed; the North would probably not have the gumption to resist secession, but even if they did, the Confederacy would place guns on the river bluffs at Memphis and blow encroaching gunboats out of the water. That clinched it for young Sam; although he dreamt about exploding gunboats throughout a fitful night, he “was a rebel from that time on, from heel to head and head to heel.”⁵

Even fathers who left their families for the army framed their decisions to serve in terms of their duty as fathers and husbands. Failure to do their part for the Union or the Confederacy would bring shame not only to themselves, but to their families. One Georgian explained to his sons that although a soldier’s life was hard and dangerous, a true patriot does his duty cheerfully, like a “good little boy that obeys his father and mother for the love he bears them and the kindness he has received from them.” A Rhode Islander

4 Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon: J. W. Burke, 1926), pp. 135–50.

5 Samuel A. Steele, *The Sunny Road: Home Life in Dixie during the War* (Memphis: n.p., 1924), pp. 61–9.

declared in a letter to his children that this “glorious country” had been given to his generation by the previous generation “entire, and we must give it to you, entire and you must give it as you receive it, to those who come after you.” Even more pointed was an Ohio colonel’s declaration “that my fighting in this War will leave an inheritance to my beloved children of more value than all the gold in India.”⁶

Although it is impossible to make general statements about whether or not Civil War era children were permanently politicized by their wartime experiences, it seems clear that, at least in the South, the war remained a central part of their lives. Far more Southern than Northern children recalled the war in full-length memoirs. The children of the Confederacy became the adults who turned the Lost Cause into a civil religion, and they made up the generation who completed the disfranchisement of African Americans by the turn of the twentieth century.

6.3 Present although Absent

Despite many soldiers’ insistence that military service was part of their familial duty, the most heart-rending experience endured by families in the North and South was separation due to that service. Yet it also led to the creation of one of the most notable sources in American history: the many thousands of collections of letters among members of Civil War era families. This extraordinary body of documents – many in print, even more in archives – provides details on every facet of the military and home-front experience, including the myriad responses to the national, community, and family crises that the war set off. They also reveal much about family dynamics in nineteenth-century America, and the extent to which Confederate and Union families had embraced the idea of the “modern” family.

Two sets of letters offer representative narratives of how the war molded the lives of soldiers’ families, as mothers and wives tried to keep their husbands informed of doings back home and fathers tried to remain

6 Josiah Patterson to his sons December 13, 1861, in Mills Lane (ed.), “Dear Mother: Don’t Grieve about Me. If I Get Killed, I’ll Only Be dead”: *Letters from Georgia Soldiers in the Civil War* (1977; reprinted Savannah: Library of Georgia, 1990), pp. 88–9; Isaac Austin Brooks to ____, October 13, 1861, Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievans (eds.), *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), p. 60; Marcus Spiegel to his wife, May 25, 1863, Frank L. Byrne and Jean P. Soman (eds.), *Your True Marcus: The Civil War Letters of a Jewish Colonel* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1985), p. 285.

a presence in the lives of their families. The letters between Grant Taylor of the 40th Alabama and his wife Malinda, the mother of his four children, reveal the worry, love, and anticipation that characterized families kept apart by war. In addition to constant assurances to Malinda that she and the children were never far from his thoughts, Grant's letters described army news, descriptions of his training and camp life, and information about the neighbors in his regiment. Malinda assured Grant that the children "say they want to se you so bad they don't know what to do. Jimmy wants me to wright to you that he prays to God to let you come home. Mathew says you have got a heap of Yankes to kill before you can come home." Little Buddy wanted him to know that "he tries to bee good and works hard." One of the heart-breaking dynamics of absence is that, like three-year-old Mary, children often had trouble remembering their fathers. "Evry man she sees she will say yonder is Pa," Malinda wrote. "That soon fills my eyes with tears. She dident know your likeness." She later outlined Mary's little hand on a letter and circled the spot on the paper where Mary had kissed it.

Grant's absence was obviously hard for Malinda, too. In a letter written soon after his departure that sounds hauntingly modern, she wrote "Grant, you cannot tell my feelings last Saturday" at church. "When they all began to sing when I looked and could not see you no whair. I thought of whair you was. It was almost more than I could bare." Yet she usually bore up well. "I am not very lonesum and not afraid at all," she declared a few weeks after her first bad spell, "God is with me." Like many army wives, she admitted, "I dream of you nearly evry night coming home but I don't feel disappointed when I awoke."

It was not uncommon for family members on both sides of the conflict to draw lessons from their experiences. Malinda wrote a few months after Grant's departure that "All this is for our good. It has done me good alredy [sic]. It has made me humble enough to do any thing that is right." Grant also found solace in a side-effect of their separation: "Oh I never knew half how good I loved them and you until I was separated from. I want to see you all so bad but I do not pine."⁷

An extensive set of letters from James Goodnow, an officer from Indiana, show how many fathers sought to remain involved in their families. Goodnow wrote a separate letter to each of his three sons almost every week. "I want that you and I should be regular correspondents during my

7 Ann K. Blomquist and Robert A. Taylor (eds.), *This Cruel War: The Civil War Letters of Grant and Malinda Taylor 1862-1865* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000).

absence,” he wrote the oldest, Sam, in his first letter home. He urged him to “tell your mind freely,” in weekly letters, to “tell me all about what you are doing – and all about your cares and troubles – and you may be Sure I will always feel an interest in whatever interests or affects you.” He felt the same way about his younger sons. Not surprisingly, teenaged Sam received the most detailed military information, including marches in Tennessee and Alabama, speculations about military strategy, and a detailed description of Goodnow’s lone battle. But Goodnow also filled his letters with affection and gentle nudges toward adulthood. He naturally urged him to work hard at school, for “It will not be long before you will have to go out in the world to make your own way,” he wrote, “and you will then be too busy to study.”

Goodnow shaped his letters to the other boys’ ages. Dan – who was about nine – was addressed as “Master Daniel Goodnow.” After small talk about the upcoming Christmas season, he described the adventure that Dan must have been dying to hear about: “You ought to be out here and See our big armies! If you would have been there you would have thought there was going to be a battle there was So much noise. The men Cheered and yelled and the mules brayed loud enough to make you jump out of your boots.” The youngest son, Johnny, still too young to read, got a short note that began, “I have been wanting to See you for a long time, but I am too far away to go home often.” He promised that when he returned, “we will have a big talk.” In the meantime, “I want you to be the best little boy . . . I don’t want you to Say any bad words – or cry much – I want you to be a man.” Despite his exciting descriptions of his life in the army, Goodnow was also realistic about the war. He reminded Sam, Dan, and Johnny that “for wherever the large armies go here they drive the people away from home and take all they have to eat and all their corn and then burn their houses and fields – and a great many little boys down here do not have enough to Eat and often have no home.”⁸

These are particularly evocative examples of families’ wartime letters. Other soldiers begged for their kids’ “childish thoughts about themselves, papa and mama and all other subjects that enter their little brains.” They shared funny and poignant and even near-tragic experiences with their children, from weird meals concocted out of hardtack and food scraps to descriptions of homely moments in camp when they had time to gaze with relish at family photographs to near-misses when bullets sliced through beards or clipped nearby tree branches. Throughout, they acted like dads and husbands. One Wisconsin soldier deployed a sorrowful description of the

8 James Harrison Goodnow Papers, Library of Congress.

danger and hardships he was facing to make his teenaged daughter feel guilty about defying her stepmother, while a Texan staring up at the stars one night instinctively thought of the children's song, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," and hoped he could teach it to his young boy someday.⁹

6.4 Partisanship and Family Politics

Politics was another force that could divide families. The experience of a young Philadelphian named Maurice Egan was no doubt played out in many households in cities and towns with strong ties to both sections. Although both parents had been Democrats before the war, by 1860 Maurice's father favored Abraham Lincoln and, throughout the war, read positive newspaper articles about Lincoln and the war effort to his nine-year-old son. Maurice's mother was an ardent Copperhead; after Mr. Egan left for work, she would try to convert her son by reading the speeches of Clement Vallandigham from the Congressional Record. Other Southern-leaning family friends taught Maurice and his siblings songs like the *Bonnie Blue Flag*.¹⁰

Another Northern boy, James Sullivan, ended up at odds with his Democratic family, who supported George B. McClellan in the 1864 presidential campaign. James realized that the Democrats' position that the war was a failure would dishonor and render meaningless the death of his brother, who had died at the Battle of South Mountain (and whose adoration for "Little Mac" had been the source of the younger brother's politics). James was tormented by the ambiguity of his family's political loyalties.¹¹

But the divisions were far more serious in the Border States, where thousands of families in the Upper South, from Delaware all the way to Missouri, clashed over the nature of the Union, the role of slavery, the proper response to the election of Abraham Lincoln, the formation of the Confederacy, and the outbreak of hostilities. Political differences could upend family relationships as surely as the war itself: sons defied fathers, brothers stopped speaking to brothers, and cousins fought on opposite sides. In addition to the famous examples of conflicting loyalties in the

⁹ David Coon to Emma Coon, June 5, 1864, Coon Letters, Library of Congress; John West, *A Texan in Search of a Fight* (Waco, TX: J. S. Hill, 1901), 129.

¹⁰ Maurice Egan, *Recollections of a Happy Life* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), pp. 42–8.

¹¹ James W. Sullivan, *Boyhood Memories of the Civil War, 1861–1865* (Carlisle, PA: Hamilton Library Association, 1933), pp. 2–4.

families of Robert E. Lee, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, the Crittendens of Kentucky, General George Thomas, and other notables whose family fights fascinated Americans in both sections, many common families found their relationships compromised by the intensity of the sectional conflict.

The “brother against brother” narrative was an important reality and remains a powerful metaphor, but it is only part of the story. Political differences sparked far more complicated tensions within families, as wives challenged the authority of husbands and siblings struggled to reconcile differing political views. Sectional politics and divergent attitudes about the war threatened long-standing kinship alliances that crossed Confederate and Union lines, and in some cases simply being related to a family on the other side could lead neighbors to suspect one’s own loyalty. Most reconciled at least formally after the fighting stopped – indeed, fictional accounts of families reuniting were an important feature of the reconciliationist impulse in the postwar decades – but the Civil War’s effects on these families complicated economic relationships, the emancipation of slaves, and the remembrance of the war in parts of the South.

6.5 Disruptive Forces

Families are vulnerable to emotional, economic, and countless other kinds of disruptions in the best of times. The Civil War exacerbated these sources of tensions and added a few new ones. Sometimes tensions arose within families when sons declared their intention to join the army. Indeed, one of the stock scenes in the memoirs written by soldiers who had been very young when the war began – many in their late teens – described the debate that preceded their enlistment. Sometimes, parents’ resistance was political, especially when the younger generation had formed more radical opinions (for or against the Union) than their elders. But usually it was over the natural parental concern for the safety of their sons or worry about who would take the place of absent sons in fields or workshops. Still other conflicts occurred when underage boys, who could only enlist with their parents’ permission, failed to receive that permission. Gerald Norcross’s diary contains a story of a fifteen-year-old family friend who frequently joined Gerald in playing “war” with paper soldiers. Forbidden by his father from joining the army, he simply ran away from home and enlisted under a false name. It took several weeks to get him back, but when the friend

returned, the older and younger boy settled back into their play routines as though nothing had occurred. Southern newspapers reported at least two suicides by young men whose martial ambitions were foiled by their fathers.

Not surprisingly, the war sparked other, more basic tensions within families, as the absence of fathers and older brothers, the pressures on adolescents to take more responsibility, and the exciting but often unsettled atmosphere that prevailed in both the North and the South led many children to act out. Youngsters, traumatized by bad news and rumors, by actual or anticipated hardships, by the death, wounding, or uncertain status of fathers, or by the emotional response to wartime strains displayed by mothers, lost their appetites, had trouble sleeping, and talked back. One of the most complete accounts of family tension caused by children's behavior comes from the letters of an East Texas woman, Lizzie Neblett. Although far from the fighting, Lizzie was beset with the responsibilities of managing a small plantation and her increasingly uncooperative slaves, a colicky new baby, a husband serving in the Confederate army, and other family problems. She commented frequently on the oldest, Billy, who refused to do chores and bullied the younger children. The second oldest, preteen Bob, swore in front of Lizzie, chewed tobacco, and abused the horses. Although it is hard to know how large a role simple teen angst played in the Neblett family drama, Lizzie certainly believed that her sons' behavior was substantially worsened by the war. "Children have lost their charm for me," she wrote bitterly to her husband.¹²

These behaviors often spilled into the streets of towns and cities in both sections. Yankee and Rebel boys alike had formed boys' companies early in the war, but that innocent patriotism eventually gave way to somewhat less wholesome forms of military play. The boys' companies of Wytheville, Virginia, called themselves the "Baconsolets" and the "Pinchguts," and blasted away at one another with "cannons" made of sawed-off musket barrels. Northern cities also saw an outbreak of juvenile delinquency, with boy gangs committing burglaries in Chicago, black and white boys in Philadelphia creating public nuisances with huge rock battles. Richmond gangs committed minor crimes, vandalized public and private property, carelessly fired guns (sometimes injuring innocent bystanders), and bullied smaller children and African American refugees.¹³

¹² Lizzie to Will Neblett, October 25, 1863, Lizzie Neblett Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.

¹³ B. H. Wilkins, *War Boy: A True Story of the Civil War and Re-construction Days* (Tullahoma, TN: Wilson Brothers, 1990), pp. 41-2.

6.6 Refugees

The most basic disruption happened almost exclusively to Southern families: being forced from their homes. Well-to-do families who came in harm's way had the resources or family connections to travel to havens far from the fighting. Taking a few possessions and, in some cases, a few slaves, they became refugees for a few weeks or, in some cases, a few years. Hundreds of thousands of Southerners were dislocated. Sometimes Confederate-sympathizing males – fearing arrest or worse – would leave their families behind, at least temporarily. A trickle of refugees began leaving border areas early in the war; Robert E. Lee's wife Mary and their children fled Arlington for Richmond in mid-May 1861.

There were many varieties of refugees, ranging from white Confederates fleeing from Union armies to slaves fleeing toward them to Unionists seeking shelter in loyal regions to families forced to leave their homes because their crops had been ruined or their homes destroyed. The number of refugees increased as Union forces began making inroads along the coast of North Carolina and in Louisiana in early 1862.

The serious "refugeeing" of white Virginians began late in 1862, when the women and children of Fredericksburg fled after their town was bombarded and then occupied by Union forces. The population of Richmond grew from less than 40,000 to more than 100,000 during the war. Fathers, mothers, and older children desperately sought ways to support families in the overcrowded capital. One refugee, the widow of an army chaplain, complained to a government official that she had thus far been unable to work or find a place to live. "I do not know what will become of us unless some kind friend will lend a helping hand." As a refugee, she was "a stranger here & do not know to whom to apply." She had "struggled hard to support myself & children," but the "vile Yankees cross my path at every step."¹⁴

The crowding of refugees into towns and cities worsened shortages of food and other resources, which put pressure on refugee and stay-at-home families alike. It could also lead to tensions between refugees and their somewhat unwilling hosts. Cornelia Peake McDonald and her nine children (all thirteen or younger) had to leave her home in Winchester, Virginia, when the Union army turned her house into a hospital. She packed up her kids and what belongings she could and set up household in Lexington, Virginia, where a number of other refugees had settled. Most of the decent houses were

¹⁴ F. C. Jones to "My Dear Major," Civil War Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

already occupied, and some landlords turned away families with children. As the McDonalds' experience indicates, refugees strained the limited resources and burdened the thinly stretched administrative infrastructure of Southern towns and cities. Despite the less-than-warm reception, the McDonalds eventually found shelter in a hotel, where they scraped by on handouts and the small income the older boys could earn by chopping wood and their mother could earn by sewing. The Stone family, who journeyed from their plantation near Vicksburg to East Texas with a number of their slaves, experienced a reduced standard of living. But the hostility that many of the Texans displayed – mainly due to the refugee community's contempt for the poorer and less sophisticated Texans – was a particularly grating hardship for the Louisianans. When Cornelia McDonald referred to this time as “dark days of misery and uncertainty,” she was speaking for thousands of other displaced Southerners.¹⁵

6.7 Pulling Together

Perhaps the best portrayal of both the challenges faced by Southern families – at least those living in towns and cities, where crowding and inflation tended to exaggerate the issues faced by all families – appears in the famous diary kept by the irascible Confederate bureaucrat, John B. Jones. As the doting father of an adult son and several teenagers, he carefully recorded not only the gossip and machinations that he witnessed in Richmond, but also the ways the war affected his family and how they responded. The details that emerge in *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* show a standard of living spiraling from comfortable middle-class status to near-desperation. But it also shows a determination on the part of the head of the family and his children – often couched in patriotic terms – to make do for the sake of their country.

Late in 1862, he reported a diet of liver and rice several times a week. “We cannot afford anything better,” Jones, admitted, but he also acknowledged that “others do not live so well.” A couple of months later, Jones recorded a story from one of his daughters who, while working in the kitchen, encountered “a young rat [who] came out of its hole and seemed to beg for something to eat; she held out some bread, which it ate from her hand, and seemed grateful. Several others soon followed, and were tame as kittens.” Perhaps, Jones reflected, “we shall have to eat them!” His frequent

¹⁵ Cornelia Peake McDonald, *A Woman's Civil War: A Diary with Reminiscences of the War from March 1862*, ed. Minrose C. Gwin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 191.

references to food – or the lack of food – indicate the extent to which he worried about the health of his family. He reported having lost twenty pounds himself, and in July 1863 he described his wife and children as “emaciated to some extent.” A few months later, he commented several times on the starving family cat staggering about the house. Despite the catastrophic decline in the family’s standard of living, the Jones children, at least according to their father, remained “more enthusiastic for independence than ever. Daily I hear them say they would gladly embrace death rather than the rule of the Yankee.”¹⁶

As Jones’s diary suggests, sometimes the simple effort to surmount hardships and difficulties pulled families together. A tutor in Alabama recalled proudly the many ways that she and the children and young ladies in the family for whom she worked managed to find ways to overcome the “hedged around situation” caused by the blockade and encroaching Yankees: “We explored the seldom-visited attic and lumber-room,” she recalled, and “overhauled the contents of old trunks, boxes, and scrap-bags for pieces of cashmere, merino, broadcloth, or other heavy fine twilled goods” out of which mothers fashioned Sunday shoes. But they also had to learn to like – or at least endure – new foods, from “goobers” (ground peas) and peanuts to substitutes for coffee and tea like blackberry and raspberry leaves, rye, okra seed, and parched sweet potatoes, sugar substitutes made from watermelon or sorghum. Even well-heeled families had to put up with less light, soap, and other everyday items. But framed the right way, even the uncharacteristically dim houses of the wartime gentry could be described as being bathed in “a fairylike light” cast by the unfamiliar weird oils or makeshift candles.¹⁷

Most Southern families made less fanciful adaptations to the war. Each of the 750,000 men who died and additional half million who were wounded or seriously ill was a son; many were husbands, brothers, and fathers. Their deaths caused extraordinary emotional trauma, of course, and the long-term disability suffered by tens of thousands would affect the emotional and material well-being of their families for decades. The famous 1864 painting by William D. Washington, *The Burial of Latané*, showing a group of women, young girls, and slaves burying a young Confederate (a real-life event

16 John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, ed. Earl Schenck Miers (New York: Sagamore Press, 1958; reprinted Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), pp. 137, 164, 176, 258, 351, 358.

17 Parthenia Antoinette Hague, *A Blockaded Family: Life in Southern Alabama during the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888).

romanticized by the artist), represented to “Lost Cause” Southerners the hard necessity of dependents replacing their absent men.

But the more immediate issues raised by the absence or loss of male family members were economic, as families in both the North and the South needed to find ways to replace the income and labor of male family members. Women and children took the places of brothers and fathers in the fields, while members of slaveowning households whose bondspeople ran away gradually took on household duties and did without personal servants. Even in the North, evidence of the widespread need for children to pick up the slack is anecdotal, but illustrative. After his wounded father died, one seven-year-old New Yorker helped his family pay the bills by blacking boots all over lower Manhattan and by performing with a wandering fiddler in the bars and streets of New York, Brooklyn, and Jersey City. Northern children’s magazines constantly reminded youngsters of their duty. In one of the most elaborate parables of family hardship and adaptation, Emily Huntington Miller’s “The House that Johnny Rented,” told the story of the White family. Mr. White leaves his invalid wife and several children, including twelve-year-old Johnny, to become an army chaplain. Johnny takes charge, locating a smaller but cheaper cottage when they are forced out of the parsonage. There, the children raise a garden, help their mother, fret about their father, and teach a contraband boy to read. The children also ease their mother’s stress by being obedient and cheerful. Clearly, young Northerners could do their duty to their country by doing their duty to their family. As a young lieutenant declares in another home-front novel, *Battles at Home*, “Our battles must be just where we are put to fight them.”¹⁸

Once again, two examples – one from the North, one from the South – suggest just some of the ways in which young people were forced to pick up responsibilities and face hardships caused by the war. Benny Fleet, who was a happy teenager living on a prosperous plantation in Virginia when the war began, was basically responsible for his family’s economic well-being by the middle of the war. The seventeen-year-old recorded in his journal in the summer and fall of 1863 numerous references to managing slaves and crops. Early in the war, he had managed to go to school, but the enlistment of an older brother and the increased drinking by their stressed father – or his

18 Emily Huntington Miller, “The House that Johnny Rented,” *Little Corporal*, vol. 1 (July 1865): 7–9; (August 1865): 19–21; (September 1865), 42–5; Mary G. Darling, *Battles at Home* (Boston: Horace B. Fuller, 1870), pp. 244–7.

absence on business or service with the militia – led Benny to take over. As Benny matter-of-factly wrote to his brother, he was “in charge,” with the authority to “give orders without Pa’s knowing anything about it.”¹⁹

Far to the northwest, in the wilderness of Michigan, twelve-year-old Anna Howard’s large family had already endured two years of frontier hardships. Her father had moved her mother and siblings to a virgin homestead fifty miles from the nearest railhead and then returned to his job on the East Coast. He finally joined them after they had endured for two years “the relentless limitations of pioneer life . . . on every side, and at every hour of the day.” Almost immediately, however, he and his two older sons enlisted in the army. Fifteen-year-old Anna became “the principal support of our family, and life . . . a strenuous and tragic affair.” She taught school and helped her mother do sewing and washing and care for boarders. A sister married, gave birth to a child, and died. Life “grew harder with every day.” It was “an incessant struggle to keep our land, to pay our taxes, and to live.” Her health began to fail, as she walked several miles to and from the country school where she taught every day. “These were years I do not like to look back upon,” Shaw wrote fifty years later. They were “years in which life had degenerated into a treadmill whose monotony was broken only by the grim messages from the front.”²⁰

Out of necessity as well as patriotism, thousands of Northern and Southern children and youth helped their families by taking jobs in the factories that sprang up to support the Union and Confederate war efforts. Hundreds made uniforms and other war material at plants in Augusta, Georgia. Southern girls also took jobs at the Confederate Laboratory on Brown’s Island in Richmond, where late in the winter of 1863 an explosion killed three dozen workers and injured thirty more, many of them children. Although the exact number is unknown, contemporary accounts stress the presence of very young, mostly female employees among the victims. The accident was truly a family tragedy, as parents and siblings raced to the scene after the explosion. “The most heartrending lamentations and cries issued from the ruins,” as rescue workers pulled the killed and injured from the smoking rubble. “Mothers rushed wildly about, throwing themselves upon the corpses of the dead and persons of the wounded.” Children “clamored” into

19 Betsy Fleet and John D. P. Fuller (eds.), *Green Mount: A Virginia Plantation Family during the Civil War: Being the Journal of Benjamin Robert Fleet and Letters of his Family* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1962), p. 77.

20 Anna Howard Shaw, *The Story of a Pioneer* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915), pp. 52–3.

ambulances, “crying bitterly in their search after sisters and brothers.”²¹ Similar, if somewhat less noticeable, trends appeared in the North. Enrollment in Baltimore high schools, for instance, fell precipitously during the war when scores of boys chose employment over education. Over 250 “boys” were working in the Washington Arsenal as early as June 1861. And in the early fall of 1862, nearly eighty women and young girls were killed when the Arsenal in Alleghany, Pennsylvania exploded.

Stepping outside their normal familial and gender roles, a number of women in both the North and the South worked in the burgeoning government bureaucracies created by the war, copying and filing documents, signing treasury notes, or performing other office tasks. Confederate secretary of the treasury Christopher Memminger received hundreds of letters from women and girls pleading for government jobs. Some were widows with small children; others were teenagers whose families could no longer support them. One widow with three children under the age of five, a refugee from south of Richmond, wrote that “at the present prices for all articles of necessity, you may well imagine with what anxiety I look at my little helpless babies . . . and wonder how I shall provide for them.” Fifteen-year-old Hattie Hilby, an orphan, needed a job because the relative with whom she stayed was married to a low-paid private. In her third letter to the secretary requesting work, she assured him that “it is urgent necessity, alone that compels me again to trouble you.” A teenaged orphan whose older brother was in the army needed work to provide for her younger sister and brother “and perhaps to continue them at school.”²²

Perhaps the most important result of the necessity of children’s and youth’s increasing responsibilities for their families’ well-being during the war was an unsettling of roles within families, as wives and daughters performed duties normally left to men, as youth contributed in unprecedented and very adult ways, and as the emotional contributions of absent family members were missed. Marion Drury, although only twelve years old, had “to assume the work and responsibilities” of a man because so many farm workers in his Iowa community had gone to the army. A still younger Indiana boy, Levi Keeler, took on even more responsibility – both material and psychological. When the nine-year-old’s mother became seriously ill, he nursed her back to health. Jane Keeler wrote her husband that Levi “sat up

21 Miers, *Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, p. 175.

22 M. L. Clarke to Christopher Memminger, March 5, 1863; Hattie S. Hilby to Memminger, September 17, 1863; and Mary Rankin to Memminger, n.d. Civil War Papers, box 4, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

with me all night and every little while he would ask Mother do you want anything, till one o'clock and then I could not stand it any longer so Levi went after the Doctor." Acknowledging the enormity of her son's contributions to her and the family's well-being, she declared, "Levi was my man."²³

No amount of hard work and perseverance could guarantee the well-being of all families. Communities and states throughout the United and Confederate states instituted unprecedented levels of aid to needy families. These ranged from city and town governments setting up markets where basic necessities like flour, vegetables, and other foods could be bought at lower prices than those charged by opportunistic merchants, and small cash payments to eligible families. Nothing like a welfare system was ever created, however, and such aid was generally limited to the families of soldiers (indeed, families of deserters were usually cut off from public aid). The efforts to provide these small gestures of aid and to raise money for soldiers – supplies, medicine, books – were often family efforts. Adults and children alike participated at every level of the private fundraising, from the massive US Sanitary Commission fairs held in the North during the last two years of the war, to the bazaars and church fairs held in towns large and small, to the individual efforts in back yards and parlors.

Congress contributed to the well-being of Northern families primarily via a pension system established soon after the war began, which set fairly low monthly payments not only to disabled soldiers, but also to widows, children, and other dependents of soldiers who died in the line of duty. Pensions would help veterans or their survivors to keep families together rather than go into soldiers' homes or orphanages or to be split up among extended family members.

6.8 After Slavery

African American families experienced many of the same tensions and stresses as white families, although the extent to which they were affected would have been much more dramatic. The majority of slave families remained on their farms or plantations, where the unsettled nature of wartime society and the absence of white masters caused subtle

²³ Marion Richardson Drury, *Reminiscences of Early Days in Iowa* (Toledo, IA: Toledo Chronicle Press, 1931), p. 45; Jane Keeler to Elnathan Keeler, March 24, 27, 1864, Helen Klaas (ed.), *Portrait of Elnathan Keeler, a Union Soldier* (Wappingers Falls, NY: Goldleaf Reproductions, 1977), pp. 19, 20–1.

or obvious changes. In some areas or individual plantations, it led to small examples of rebelliousness or disrespect toward white people; on some it led to exactly the opposite, as black families' close relationships to their white owners led them to be protective and supportive in the white families' time of need. In the same way that wartime conditions forced white children and mothers to contribute to their families' well-being, the impressment of male slaves by the Confederate government and military took men away from plantations and farms, forcing women and children to take their places. When male slaves ran away without their families, or, worse, joined the Union army, owners often took out their anger on family members left behind.

Most black families took the chance to escape slavery when they could, largely when Union armies passed nearby. Tens of thousands of "contraband" ended up in camps, some of which were more or less organized by the US military or private philanthropists. Others were temporary, makeshift camps where small groups of escapees scrambled to survive. Contraband camps helped keep slave families together – they were no longer in danger of being sold away from one another – but they were also, in their own way, a site of family disruption. The mortality rate in the camps was astonishingly high – 30 percent per year in the larger, fairly well-organized camps. And most of the residents were women and children, since male slaves who ran away with their families were often put to work by the army or recruited into black regiments. Even contraband children were expected to work, but those living in more or less permanent camps could also expect to live with at least some of their family members and, more importantly, to enjoy an experience normal for children in white families but heretofore denied them: attending school.

Even during the war, army chaplains and officers and Northern missionaries tried to reunite black families. They helped locate lost children and parents, performed weddings, and helped former slaves navigate the new but treacherous world brought by freedom.

The refugee crisis in the Confederacy offered another source of instability for slave families, as white planters with the resources to escape the path of invading Union armies chose their strongest and most valuable slaves and headed for points far from the fighting, especially Texas. At least 30,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 were taken to Texas from Louisiana and parts of Mississippi and even Alabama. Children were often left behind as mothers and especially fathers were taken in slaveowners' desperate attempt to protect their investments.

Emancipation gave the war a different meaning for former slaves, of course, a meaning that took on special importance when applied to their children. As one Southerner noted after watching the glee with which a young mother celebrated the news that she was free by hugging and laughing with her little daughter, “freedom was for her child,” who was a “new baby to her – a free baby.”²⁴ After the war, black families continued to be ravaged by the long-term effects of slavery, the spasms of racial violence that wracked the South during Reconstruction and after, the continuing (at least in the immediate postwar) efforts by Southern governments to limit parents’ influence through vagrancy laws, and the failure of the federal government to ease the transition to economic independence. Although it achieved mixed success in ensuring the economic futures of the freedmen and women, the Freedmen’s Bureau did continue the project of educating former slaves of all ages. Most importantly, they were finally recognized as families under the law.

The war did not generally change Americans’ attitudes about gender roles within families, nor did it hinder the growing dominance of the ideas of the middle-class nuclear family and of a nurtured, protected childhood. Yet the war had a huge impact on individual families, when losses or hardships permanently altered relationships. In the South, especially, the ending of slavery and the entire set of gendered and racial constructions that supported it would erode male privilege and power within some families for perhaps a generation, until the Lost Cause and the slow economic recovery created new ways for men to retain their dominance. For a small minority of children, following the deaths of fathers or the inability of veterans to care for children when their mothers died, new “families” were found when numerous states, mostly in the North, established Soldiers’ Orphans’ Homes. Thousands of widows became heads of households, carrying on family farms or business; many eventually remarried. Widows, parents, and children of Union soldiers who remained single could obtain small pensions from the federal government, while by the 1880s Confederate widows were partially supported by pensions from individual states. Although small, this unprecedented application of federal funds would eventually become the model for the social security system, which was also designed to keep needy families together through the Aid to Dependent Children provision. For many Americans, the family crisis spawned by the Civil War did not end with the defeat of the Confederacy.

²⁴ Amelia E. Barr, *All the Days of My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Appleton, 1913), p. 251.

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