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A Noble Duty: Ladies' Aid Associations in Upstate South Carolina During the Civil War

ABSTRACT. The contributions of women during the American Civil War have been typically examined within the broader picture of a nation or state-wide mobilization of citizens during a time of war. In this paper, I seek to show the mobilization of women during the Civil War from a regionalized perspective limited to the Upcountry of South Carolina and the effect their development of aid societies had on the war as well as on their place as white women in the Confederacy. Female-run aid societies began for the purpose of gathering supplies for soldiers. Within two years they had founded hospitals and were charged with the welfare of not only soldiers but of their own communities. In examining the aid societies of several Upstate counties, I argue that there is a clear progression from the private to the public, reflecting a challenging of gender boundaries. These changes to the role of white women in the South would have a lasting impact. It would influence a memorialization of the Confederacy in later years. By examining the words and deeds of such women, I outline exactly how they moved from traditional "women's work" to highly public leadership roles. The nature of their involvement also shows that women were quite capable of vehemently supporting the Confederate cause, and its associated ideology. Through this study, I intend to portray this changing concept of white womanhood in the South brought about by the Civil War, its causes, and its impact within Upstate South Carolina.

ELIZABETH ARANDA

I first got involved in researching the activities of women living in the Upstate during the Civil War through my History 300 course. The project was initially for the final paper due at the end of the semester. It became a kind of passion project as well because I developed a real interest in the topic. Perhaps the most unique aspect of the project is that it is a niche area of South Carolina history that has been largely untouched. The part of the research process I enjoyed the most was examining documents, some of which I was able to see in person. I used many historical newspapers and books. It was the first time I took a close look at these links to the past and pieced together my own conclusions. This project showed me that I was capable as a writer and researcher. It also solidified my love of history. I hope to pursue a career in history and have accepted an offer from the postgraduate program at the University of York in the United Kingdom. For students interested in carrying out historical research, the best advice I can give is to have patience and perseverance. The process can be long and sometimes disappointing, but it is worth it.



CARMEN HARRIS

My field of research and publication is southern agricultural history focusing on the African American experience. I have presented at numerous professional association conferences. My body of work includes articles and



book chapters including: "The Extension Service is not an Integration Agency": The Idea of Race in the Cooperative Extension Service" which is frequently cited by scholars of agricultural policy and "You're just like mules, you don't know your own strength: Rural South Carolina Blacks and the Emergence of the Civil Rights Struggle" in Debra A. Reid and Evan Bennett, eds., *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction*, University Press of Florida, June 2012. The chapter emphasizes the determined activism of rural Afro South Carolinians who lived under oppressive conditions (such as those in Clarendon County, South Carolina where the Briggs' v. Elliot case was filed) in pursuing racial equality despite physical and

economic reprisals. Currently, I am working on a book manuscript entitled *The Heart of White Supremacy: The Courtship of Benjamin Ryan Tillman and Sallie Starke Tillman*.

Elizabeth's paper was written in my historical methods class in the fall of 2020. While many students confined their research primarily to online resources, she braved the dangers of Covid and went to the Greenville County Hughes Public Library's South Carolina Room in search of primary sources for local history. She decided to focus on activities of South Carolina's white women—primarily those who were elite—in supporting the Confederate War effort. This was a topic that I had some familiarity because I teach a course on the Civil War. She marshalled an impressive array of primary and secondary sources to build her argument regarding the significance of white South Carolina women's activities on the home front during the Civil War. The paper shows how white southern notions of patriarchy and gender were bent by the war. Rather than permitting men on the home front to dictate their operations, these women claimed and held space for their right to serve their nation—the Confederacy. Thereafter, they never fully returned to the Victorian pedestal on which they were ostensibly elevated before 1861. While her paper focuses on the war, it provides a context for understanding these women's post-bellum organizing activities to honor the Confederate dead, and to push for a white version of progressive reform in the early twentieth century. Elizabeth's original paper placed first in the IDS paper contest in Spring 2021.

Introduction

The failings of the Confederate Army are numerous. Among them is the lack of adequate supplies to keep soldiers clothed, fed, and healthy. Its unpreparedness at the outbreak of the Civil War created an environment in which certain groups rose to the occasion to meet the needs of Confederate soldiers. Southern white women, namely those from highly privileged backgrounds and slaveholding families, were able to form societies dedicated to caring for soldiers. The work these women carried out ranged from sewing clothing to tending to the more gruesome aspects of war as the conflict progressed. By the last two years of the Civil War, where there were supplies to be gathered or gangrened limbs to be amputated there was often a Confederate woman to assist.

For the women left at home during the Civil War, opportunities presented themselves and were enthusiastically seized by ladies seeking to support the Confederate Cause. This Cause was, at its core, the fight to preserve slavery and the economy which the institution underpinned. In South Carolina, white women mirrored their counterparts across the whole of the Confederacy in the organization of societies dedicated to aiding in that fight. As their men departed in various regiments decked out in gray and butternut, South Carolinian women found the means to mobilize themselves. They first acted in the most effective way they knew - by taking up their needles. These societies were often dubbed Ladies' or Soldiers' Aid Associations and gave Confederate women the chance to have an impact on the course of the Civil War in ways which were socially acceptable from within the "female sphere". From Upstate South Carolina several large aid associations were organized in Greenville, Spartanburg, Anderson, Pickens, and Abbeville counties. The elite of these counties' female populations sought to help the Confederate cause by making clothing, fundraising, and gathering supplies for the Confederate Army.

The introduction of female-run Confederate aid organizations during the Civil War contributed to a changing concept of white southern womanhood. While Ladies' Aid Associations operated strictly within the confines of the feminine, domestic sphere of society in the early part of the war, the latter part brought changes to established gendered divisions of labor. As the war intensified and the front drew closer to home, the Upstate Ladies' Aid Associations came to challenge gender

roles and ideas of propriety by operating Wayside Hospitals and taking an active, highly public role in the war.

Methods

To understand the extent of the involvement of Confederate women in the Civil War, it was necessary to view them through a contemporary lens whenever possible. Publications from all relevant counties in this study- Greenville, Spartanburg, Abbeville, Pickens, and Anderson- were used as the main form of primary source material. The University of South Carolina Library System's archive of Historical Newspapers of South Carolina was used to access papers within the date range of 1861-1866. It was from these newspapers that much of the primary source material originates. They include founding documents of aid societies, minutes of meetings, and reports on the work performed by the organizations. Detailed information was also obtained from a volume of the minutes of the meetings of the Greenville Ladies' Aid Association, which was accessed at the Carolina Room and archive of the Hughes Library in Greenville. This was a valuable resource as it contained both the proceedings of the group's meetings as well as itemized inventories of each package sent to the soldiers based in Virginia and Columbia. Accounts from former members of aid societies compiled around the turn of the 20th century were consulted for the firsthand recollections they provided. Caution was used in the consideration of these books as primary sources, however. It was important to mitigate the risk of romanticization of the events they described, given the era in which they were published and the amount of time that had passed since the Civil War at that point. Also examined were the letters of the Anderson, Brockman, and Moore families of Spartanburg County as edited by Tom Moore Craig. This was used for their detailing of the social aspect of the work aid societies carried out, and the opinions held by women in the Confederacy expressed in their own words. Secondary source material used in this study served to place the information gathered from the primary source documents into the context of the broader picture of the Confederacy and Civil War. Works focusing on gender in the Confederacy such as Libre R. Hilde's *Worth a Dozen Men* and Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention* were useful in showing the regional efforts of Upstate women's organizations as part of a societal shift provoked by the Civil War.

Results and Discussion

The world of war and politics was historically marked as a masculine one. Prior to the outbreak of war, women in the Upstate were accustomed to existing in a private sphere largely apart from their male relations. Men could easily act within the public sphere, as well as have direct involvement in the war by volunteering as soldiers. Ladies were confined by social mores to quietly expressing themselves in a subdued manner. When South Carolina's secession from the United States occurred, followed four months later by civil war, there could scarcely be a South Carolinian of either sex who did not hold a strong opinion on these weighty matters. Women in the Confederate south could match the patriotic fervor of their menfolk. The difference lay in the expression of these emotions, as women had no direct outlet for their energies. [1]

In an 1861 letter to her nephew Hettie Brockman of Spartanburg County expressed her reluctance to leave "my dear old State in this hour of trial" for North Carolina, as "we are prone to love the land of our birth and in times like the present would wish to share her every trial and affliction." [2] Confederate patriotism and state-based loyalty were felt by women like Brockman, namely those belonging to the wealthy planter class.

In 1861 while the war was still young, the divide between male and female society remained strong. Spurred on by an extreme reluctance to sit idly and await Confederate victory, women in Upstate South Carolina began to organize. Just three months into the war, Ladies' Aid Associations began to form, first in the counties of Greenville and Pickens. This occurred simultaneously with the foundation of over one thousand female volunteer aid organizations across the whole Confederacy. Members of these groups had found a way to devote themselves to the Cause while remaining within the bounds of the mystical female sphere [1]. The women of Pickens County specified their purpose in their first meeting on July 9, 1861. They declared that "as the ladies are not permitted to take up arms and go on the tented field in defense of our glorious rights, they believe they can do effectual service at home." [3] This service would come in the form of donations of either money or supplies to send to the front. Committees were formed and leaders appointed to efficiently carry out the work of the Ladies' Association.

A need which was paramount to Confederate soldiers was that of clothing. Sewing was a necessary skill held by most women, rich or poor. There were uniforms to be made, patterns to be cut, and underwear to be stitched. The ladies of Greenville County were aware of this need. After the volunteers from Greenville departed for Virginia in the Butler Guards or Brooks' Troop, their female counterparts set to work. The Greenville Ladies Aid Association held their first meeting on July 19, 1861. Their main objective, as stated at this first gathering, was "to relieve the sick and wounded among soldiers, by forwarding to them linen, underclothing, cordials, bed ticks [mattresses], socks, etc. Secondly, to make winter clothing for the volunteers of the Confederate Army." [4] Their main work in the early days after the association's formation was in the purchase and cutting of fabric into patterns, which members would then take home to sew into clothing.

Women in Abbeville and the surrounding areas formed their own robust Soldiers' Relief and Aid Association in August 1861. Their first meeting opened rather dramatically with a preamble condemning the Union's "fiendish outrages amongst us" and its desire to "take from us, at once and forever, the life, liberties, rights, honor, and independence of our people." It was then resolved that the ladies would "emulate the spirit of our brave men who have gone to defend their country...we feel it our privilege as well as our duty to relieve their sufferings and to minister to their comfort..." These women were the equal of their menfolk in the fervor of their devotion to the Cause and militant hatred of the Union [5].

Membership in volunteer aid groups was almost entirely comprised of matrons. All administrative roles were given to ladies bearing the title of "Mrs." Moreover, the women who joined, or at least took active roles in the associations, were members of the local elite. In Greenville, a Mrs. Harriet McBee was vice president of the Ladies' Association and was the daughter-in-law of Vardry McBee, the acknowledged founder of Greenville. The Ladies' Association in Ninety-Six (then associated with the Abbeville District) was presided over jointly by the mother and widow of the late Rep. Preston Brooks. They were ladies of important families who had experience running large households and managing plantations, thus administrative work was not unfamiliar to them. Their ability to achieve personal agency through their involvement in the war effort hinged on financial security and the labor of enslaved peoples [1].

Needlework remained paramount among the activities of Upstate aid organizations for the first year of the war. Some sewed uniforms for local regiments or even wove the fabric themselves. Materials became more difficult to acquire due to Union blockades on Confederate ports which choked supply lines. As a result, homespun textiles were soon commonplace. The Greenville Aid Association received a donation of some 600 yards of homespun for their work [4]. In addition to sewing, knitting was a high priority. Groups dedicated solely to knitting winter garments formed from larger associations, namely in Abbeville. A former member of the Greenville association, Mrs. Sarah Brunson, recalled in 1899 that some of the ladies knitted so diligently "as to be able to knit as they walked or rode along." Wool was regularly distributed among the Greenville ladies for the knitting of socks, which were always needed. In Abbeville, the knitting society contributed

around fifty pairs of socks every two weeks [6]. In addition to the numerous garments handmade by Upstate women, a wide variety of supplies were packed off to Virginia and Columbia. The Greenville Ladies' Aid Association kept a detailed record of fifty-three boxes sent to various destinations in the Confederacy between 1861 and 1863. Items ranged from necessities such as vegetables, hospital supplies, and bread to small comforts like blackberry wine, hard candies, and magazines. One reason for this variety was that the items were donated by residents seeking to provide whatever relief they could afford to the Confederate Army [4]. They were goods that may never have been sent had there not been a band of organized women to procure them.

Events were arranged by Ladies' Aid Associations. These were intended to raise funds for the Army, but they also provided opportunities for socialization which attracted the younger members of the female community. The Spartanburg association held a tableau vivant for the benefit and entertainment of the State Guards in the spring of 1862. In Greenville, the ladies hosted a fair in McBee's Hall in October 1861. It was likely a type of bazaar as it was advertised as having numerous articles for sale, the proceeds for which would go towards the association "and their work of ministering to the wants and necessities of the soldiers." [7] Mary Elizabeth Anderson, a native of the Spartanburg area, recorded her activity with the county Soldiers' Aid in letters. She details her fundraising efforts for the building of a gunboat for the Confederacy in March 1862. Her extensive rounds of social calls for the purpose of soliciting funds from friends and neighbors were evidently successful. In the end, \$110.00 were collected and contributed to the fund. A South Carolinian gunboat purchased with the funds was unveiled later that year, so the Spartanburg ladies' endeavors were not in vain [2].

The social aspect of aid work was something at which southern women had the chance to truly excel. Activities like raising funds for gunboats were not particular to South Carolina alone but occurred in all Confederate states. A network of women eleven states strong was constantly at work to provide material and financial comfort to their military. Notably, events such as bazaars and raffles were entirely managed by women with no male involvement. They welcomed men to open their wallets for the Cause but drew the line there [8]. The Confederate female sphere now included community organizing and logistics. It was soon to cross more gendered boundaries.

The cruel war showed no sign of being over in a matter of weeks as had been previously believed. Four arduous years lay ahead for Confederate citizens. An obvious effect of the prolonged war was an increase in casualties. As the dead mounted, so too did the sick and wounded. Undersupplied hospitals could only brace themselves for the inundation. From this situation rose the crowning achievement of the aid associations of the South: The Wayside Hospital.

The first Confederate Wayside Hospital was founded in Columbia, South Carolina by its own Ladies' Association in March 1862. As the volume of sick and wounded soldiers increased, it became necessary for volunteer groups and charitable societies to step in and alleviate the crush. Casualties arrived by rail in the Upstate following the battles taking place further north. With no real medical system in place nor centralized command over hospitals in the early part of the war, the Confederacy was unprepared for the mounting number of soldiers in need of care. Yet, in keeping with the cause of "states' rights" each state was responsible for its own hospitals even after the need for coherence was felt so keenly [9].

Ladies' Aid Associations in the Upstate were founded in relatively urban areas near rail depots, making the shipping and receiving of supplies easier. Now their locations would become doubly important. The Greenville Ladies' Aid Association managed the largest and most efficient Wayside Hospital in the region due to the town being the terminus of the Columbia--Greenville Railroad. Prior to the opening of the Soldiers' Rest hospital, wounded men were being kept in the homes of Greenville residents. When this arrangement failed due to the strain on the resources of individual citizens as more soldiers found their way to the Upstate, the Ladies' Aid Association moved to establish an official hospital. Colonel C.J. Elford of the 16th South Carolina Infantry

gave the women the use of the old Male Academy building for the purpose. By August 1862, it had been renovated and was opened for patients [4]. This situation was occurring across the Confederacy as women plunged headfirst into wartime nursing. Within the Confederacy there was a general distaste for female nurses, as it was considered one of the least modest occupations for otherwise respectable ladies [9]. There were no female doctors in Confederate hospitals, and the overwhelmingly male staff opposed the involvement of women in the world of wartime medicine. President Jefferson Davis even discouraged his wife from attending wounded men due to the immodesty of the work, as it involved the viewing and touching of male bodies [8].

The opening of entirely female-operated Wayside Hospitals was a defining break with the traditions of patriarchal southern society. Elite white women like Mrs. McBee of Greenville and the ladies of the plantation owning Adger family of Pendleton in Anderson County found themselves as the leading members of these establishments. An 1862 law gave women authority in Confederate hospitals and allowed for their promotion as matrons [10]. Not only were these women acting outside of the private sphere, but they were also now in positions of power and exercising administrative authority in a non-domestic setting. Hospital work was not easy and few women who took up nursing during the Civil War were spared the more harrowing side of things, regardless of their status as elite ladies or the families to which they belonged. For the Confederacy, it looked as if this was one area of life from which gender had been almost entirely removed. The aid associations of the Upstate each ran their own Wayside Hospital at some point from 1861 onward and did so with little to no masculine interference.

Greenville was the main hub of activity, owing mainly to its rail connections. Its Wayside Hospital, along with those of Abbeville and Pendleton in particular, all operated similarly but on varied scales. Trains bearing soldiers from battle were welcomed by committees of women assigned to the task. Some were only in need of a meal, others were stricken with disease, and many were wounded. The Greenville Ladies' Aid Association requested the use of an ambulance in 1863, implying seriously injured patients were common enough to require such transportation [11]. Like the original in Columbia, Upstate Wayside Hospitals were positioned as close to the rail depot as possible, allowing for medical care directly off the train and the provision of food, clothing, and beds to anyone not in immediate need of nursing [12]. While the Greenville hospital was housed in the former Male Academy on College Street and could accommodate a fair number of patients, its counterparts were often less spacious. The Pendleton Wayside Hospital in Anderson County had once been a one-room schoolhouse. But the Soldiers' Aid Society saw that it was furnished and kept the building "always ready to welcome the suffering, hungry soldier returning from the seat of war." [6]

Confederate nurses faced some issues not often experienced by Union nurses. The blockades on southern ports meant that medicines were often in short supply and far more difficult to obtain. Thus, necessity forced some women to make their own from medicinal plants. A near constant dearth of essential hospital supplies was frustrating and resulted in a lack of pain relief. All nurses, however, had their fair share of ghastly sights [10]. For all that the Upstate seemed somewhat insulated from the thickest action until the latest part of the war, its women did witness the horrors it created. Mary Simpson Wallis' 1901 recollections of work at the Pendleton hospital mentions soldiers "poisoned with gangrene and eaten up by vermin" being cared for by the likes of Mrs. Calhoun (possibly the widow of John C. Calhoun). At the Abbeville hospital there was at least one case of smallpox. The afflicted soldier was noted to have been attended by an immune Black man, but ultimately died "never able to tell his name." [6]

Although regimented and well scheduled, Civil War hospitals were, like all hospitals, constantly subject to the unexpected and worst-case scenarios. The women who acted as hospital matrons, such as the ever-present Mrs. McBee in Greenville, worked long hours that could encompass entire days and nights. They risked contracting diseases as well as extreme exhaustion [13]. Yet whether they were motivated by militant devotion to the Cause, their home state, or a kind of maternal feeling for the soldiers, they persisted until it became impossible to do

so. The members of the Greenville Ladies' Aid Association made their intentions for their Wayside Hospital clear: "...when this fearful war is over, and peace smiles upon the land, the inhabitants of Greenville will point to it with pride and say 'Here is the dwelling where our soldiers found shelter, food, clothing, and sympathy.'" [14]

Female-run Wayside Hospitals proved successful. The Simms Report of 1862 on the running of Confederate hospitals found that women were entirely capable of efficiently commanding medical establishments [9]. This was evident in the Upstate. The Soldiers' Rest at Greenville took in 347 patients from July to December 1863 and recorded just four deaths among them [11]. As the war was drawing to its close, Ladies' Aid Associations began taking in an increasing number of southern refugees. Citizens fleeing Charleston, Columbia, Atlanta, and other locations in the Confederacy made their way to the Upstate as a last hope for refuge. General Sherman's March had displaced countless people. Greenville and Spartanburg counties provided temporary shelter to many of them. The ladies of the Upstate now served not only soldiers, but the general populace as well [15].

The Union presence made itself known in early 1865 with Sherman's March through the Carolinas. With it came the end of Ladies' Aid Associations, as the war had now arrived at their doorstep and was no longer far-off. Many associations had ceased operations before this point due to economic hardship. The Pendleton Wayside Hospital was forced to close when food shortages became too severe, and the women there had "not so much as a pot of cowpeas to send down." [6] When the citizens struggled to feed and clothe themselves, they were unable to part with their meager stores on behalf of the Army. Donations recorded by the Spartanburg Soldiers' Aid and Relief Society in June of 1864 include small, curt entries of simply "old clothes," "rags," "bottle wine." [16] As food and supplies became scarce some Aid Associations essentially disappeared. The Greenville Ladies' Aid Association held out the longest, with the Soldier's Rest Hospital remaining open until a Union raid in May of 1865 [9].

While many aid associations disbanded due to a simple lack of donations at the end of the war, not all did. Some instead underwent a change of focus. The families of soldiers had been so profoundly affected by the deprivations of war that some aid associations began taking donations on their own behalf instead of that of the soldiers in Virginia. Yet, with the official end of the war, an even greater shift was to take place among these organized white women. The mass memorialization of Confederate dead began almost immediately following the Civil War. White women throughout the South who had worked to support living Confederate soldiers through the war refocused their energies on mourning those who had died. They took their newfound personal agency and used it to reorganize into memorial societies. One such group formed in the Upstate was the Ladies' Memorial Association of Pendleton. By 1866, this organization was hosting large scale events for the decoration and maintenance of Confederate graves.

While they remembered the war dead, these white southern women were also mourning something less tangible. Confederate woman had given everything to their Cause. Defeat was not enough to crush the devotion which had driven them to change the face of white womanhood in the slaveholding South. They had inextricably linked themselves to the Cause and that link would perhaps only intensify with the bitterness of defeat. These women would spend the post war years erecting monuments to memorialize and romanticize the Cause and the war to, in a sense, ensure that everything had not been given in vain. In this way, the same women who had acted as mothers of the Confederate Army became the mothers of the Lost Cause mythos. General Wade Hampton praised the work of Confederate women in a speech to the Pendleton Association: "Had every man but done his duty as nobly as the women discharged theirs, the Southern Confederacy would not now be among the things that have passed away." [17]

Conclusion

The American Civil War permanently altered many aspects of society. In the case of women in the Confederacy, it changed the concept of white southern womanhood within society as much as in relation to war. Elite southern women proved themselves capable of acting in the public sphere independent of male leadership when the war led to an increasingly feminized society. Their unwillingness to be separate from the realities of war and confine themselves to the private, domestic roles traditionally afforded to ladies of their class resulted in a large-scale movement of women to organize. Within Upstate South Carolina, women formed aid associations to make clothing and gather supplies for soldiers, but their involvement in war soon stretched beyond acceptable feminine occupations. By establishing female-run Wayside Hospitals, they challenged notions of propriety which had previously prevented women from entering the overwhelmingly masculine world of wartime medicine. For four years, women in the Upstate devoted themselves body and soul to caring for the Confederate Army until the final days of the war rendered them unable to continue. The fervor of privileged white women in the South who had discovered a new form of personal agency and the ability to influence the narrative of the war would not be buried with the Confederacy, however. A precedent for the organization of such women was set by the formation of Ladies' Aid Associations during the Civil War. White Confederate women continued to organize long after the end of the war and found new ways of supporting the Cause to which they had inextricably linked themselves. Through these women's memorialization of the Confederacy and the determination to be active in public life the war had necessitated, they became the earliest curators of the Lost Cause.

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