

At Home and in the Field

The Newsletter of The Society for Women and the Civil War

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Our mission statement: To increase awareness and understanding of women's roles related to the Civil War through education



Wartime Letters

Meg Galante- DeAngelis

Letters and diaries are one of the mainstays for learning about the lives of women in the Civil War. This makes us think about how the letter has almost disappeared from most people's lives. What does this mean for future historians:

For some things to think about check out the following:

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/email-is-changing-the-way_b_90050

<https://northwesthistory.blogspot.com/2013/06/open-letter-to-historians-of-22nd.html>

<https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2015/07/preserving-social-media-for-future-historians/>

Duty on the Home Front: Elizabeth Porter and Civil War Women by Kevin McQueeney

A blog that many of our members may already know about and visit regularly is

19thcenturylives: Researching and writing about the lives of nineteenth-century Americans

It is a collaborative blog authored by students enrolled in Professor Mary Niall Mitchell's history courses at the University of New Orleans. The contributors have chosen to study the lives of particular nineteenth-century individuals - some

well-known, some more obscure, at least in our own time - in order to deepen our understanding of this pivotal era and how it has shaped contemporary society and culture.

It is a wonderful way to check in on the work of developing scholars. Some of the posts are process posts - short posts that tell us about the progress of a young scholar as they begin work on a new topic - these lead to a final or series of final posts about their most important thoughts about their topic. Although many of the topics that are tackled are topics that some of our members may have a great deal of experience with, seeing the topics through the discovery of new eyes can be a rejuvenating revelation.



[Two unidentified women reading letters]

ca. 1860-1870

1 photograph : approximate ninth-plate ambrotype,
hand-colored ; 7.4 x 6 cm (case)

Library of Congress

Introduction

Ken Burns's *The Civil War* documentary, viewed by more than forty million

Americas when it first aired in 1990, introduced its viewers to a little-known Union major from Rhode Island, Sullivan Ballou, who was killed at the Battle of Bull Run in 1861. Ballou's last letter to his wife, written just hours before he was killed, predicted his own death and fascinated viewers with its poetic language. He promised his wife that he would watch over her, that they would meet again after death, and that "when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name."

Ballou's letter may be the most well-known of letters written by soldiers of the conflict, but it is not the only one to receive attention and analysis. Historians have repeatedly turned to letters in a quest to find a larger narrative for the war. Scholars and non-academics alike have continually used letters to try to understand the experience of the common soldier, as a way of humanizing and relating to the participants of the war.

Yet, often left out of this narrative are the voices of women. Women have been part of the dialogue, but more frequently as the intended audience of the soldier's letter home, than as contributors themselves. Much like the omission of Sarah Shumway, Ballou's wife and the subject of his pre-death musings, historians have largely omitted the voices of the wives of soldiers.

This work seeks to address that issue, focusing on the wartime letters of Elizabeth Porter of Auburn, New York, to her husband Lansing Porter, a captain in the Union Army from 1861-1863. This article examines the larger overall topic of the

home experience during the conflict, expanding the scope beyond the battlefield, and seeking to address some of the following questions. How did the war affect the lives of those at the home front? What did the wives of soldiers think of the war? How did the absence of their husbands change their day to day lives and activities? This work argues that by examining the experience of Elizabeth Porter and other women we can understand how women during the Civil War became active heads of households and entered the "public space."

Elizabeth and Lansing Porter

Lansing Porter was born on March 18, 1817 in Auburn, NY. He attended Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, graduating in 1838. He attended Wesleyan University for a year and was then enrolled in Yale Theological Seminary from 1839-1842. He returned to Auburn after and married Elizabeth Curtis, born on 1822, on August 22, 1844. They eventually had three children, two daughters (Elizabeth, born 1847, and Anna, born 1850) and a son (Lansing, born 1852). The couple moved to Rockford, Illinois, where he served as pastor of the Congregational Church from 1844-1846, and then a series of other churches throughout the state until 1855. They returned to Auburn, NY, where he, like many Americans, worked as a farmer until the war.

Lansing enrolled in the New York 75th Volunteers on October 9, 1861. Her served as a captain in Company I, primarily stationed at Fort Pickens in Pensacola Florida and later served in Louisiana. Granted a leave of absence in March 1863,

he was granted discharge the following month. Elizabeth died in 1895 and Lansing died in 1902.

The correspondence between Elizabeth and Lansing help us understand the war time experience of women at the home front through her explicit purpose in writing the letters, which was to fill him in on the events taking place at home. The correspondence also reveals her experiences as the head of household. Elizabeth informed Lansing on February 18, 1862: "so you see I plan to let you know something about everyday." She described for him the friends of his that asked about his well-being, the sermons at church on Sundays, the changes in the weather and the impact upon the farm's crop; the illnesses of the children and her father; the progress of the children in school; the raising and selling of livestock; and the general events in town. Her life was kept busy with her many tasks; in the same February 18th letter she wrote: "You wonder what I find to do...But somehow every day brings its cares and its duties. How well it is so."

Elizabeth attempted to recreate for Lansing as much as possible the home life he had left behind through her words; she also sent care packages that included local food, asking him in her February 18th letter "Did it not taste like home?" She also described how she tried to keep herself busy with work around the house and farm: Yet, she feared boring him with the details of her life: "I hope I do not write too often that you get tired of reading them" (January 22, 1862).

Elizabeth also shared with her husband the news she had heard of the war, noting events like the capture of New Orleans, the Union losses at the battle of Fredericksburg, and the problems with recruiting new soldiers at in Owasco. In February she described her feelings over the surrender of Fort Donaldson:

there was a merrymaking last evening and today the reports are confirmed that Savannah is ours...There is a great rejoicing and a very general feeling that the tide is in our favor. Rather that the Lord is on our side. But what a wicked costly war it is, and how little need of it. I mean of the causes, for I know that as a nation we needed such a judgment, for we had sinned, and thus it seems could we be brought to see it. Our punishment has been great, may be we by it be purified and forsake every evil way. May prosperity soon be in all our land and peace in all our borders. And oh, how much this means, for how many are desolate, how many hearts mourn. How many must mourn while the nation rejoices at this great victory we have gained, but we do not forget the brave men who have fallen. On for peace, peace founded upon righteousness, justice and mercy.

Elizabeth's belief that the cost of the war was a punishment for the country having the system of slavery was similar to the views of others in the North during the time period.

Much of her writing spoke of anxiety and uncertainty, and guilt that her personal wishes conflicted with the sense of civic duty. Elizabeth lamented that her commitment to the war was tested by her desire to have her husband home. She noted in January 22nd that not everyone in Owasco was doing their full duty in

support of the war effort, and questioned herself: "the fault may be in my own heart...I have not had that earnest desire I have sometimes felt" and again on February 13th: "Oh dear! I do not think my patriotism will hold out much longer as I do believe you must come home."

Elizabeth continued to try to support the war, even telling her husband in the January 22nd letter that she would join the fight if able: "but what of all these little trials-it must be done and if I were a man I too would shoulder a musket and go." Yet, she struggled to understand the larger overall significance of the war: "do let me ask, why does not the work go on? What does it mean?" and on December 11th: "I cannot yet comprehend this long journey by sea, this strange country and work in which you are engaged. What does it mean? When the end be? What will it be?" On March 23, 1863, she described her unease on whether or not the "vengeful proud rebels" would accept the federal government if they are defeated.

A further source of anxiety concerned money. Lansing complained in several letters of not receiving his money on time to send to his family. Elizabeth told her husband on February 16th of her difficulty in paying the family's bills and mentioned two days later she had discussed with her father the possibility of selling twenty acres of the farm to ease their financial burdens.

Uncertainty and anxiety were heightened by the difficulties in communication. On December 11th, 1861 she wrote that one of her letters had been sent back because the post office had been unable to determine

where he was stationed at the time, a common occurrence during the war. In May and July, she despaired of her lack of correspondence from her husband, particularly troubling as others she knew had received letters. Rumors further agitated the situation. In September she noted that there was talk that the regiment was being sent North but was upset as she did not know where he was at the time.

Perhaps hardest to deal with was the December, 1862 rumor that he had been captured or killed in combat. She spoke of her spirituality as a comfort in the trying situation: "our trust is in He who orders all things...Oh is it not a comfort then to commit all into His care? Surely he will watch over and keep you so that no evil shall befall you. We are safe everywhere in his keeping." Lansing was not killed or captured during this incident but the delay in information led to days of uncertainty.

One small source of comfort or connection for Elizabeth may have been a photograph of Lansing. A marked difference in the way that separation was endured in the Civil War and previous wars was the proliferation of photographs. Elizabeth was able to look upon Lansing's photograph while he was away, making it perhaps the first war in which wives and children could look at photographs of the departed soldier. She also sent him a picture of the children when he was stationed in New Orleans. She wrote in her letters of looking at his photograph when she was lonely, although, she told him on February 13 that a dream had in which he told her he was coming home "was better even than looking at your picture."

Analysis

One could examine these letters and conclude Elizabeth Porter's life was difficult in the year a half of her husband's absence. She had no way of knowing how long he would be away, whether he would be wounded or killed, anxiety exasperated by long stretches of no letters home and rumors in town; she had to tend to the farm, raise her children, and take care of elderly family members while worrying about having enough money to pay the bills; and she had to grapple with her own support for and understanding of the war.

However, an analysis of the letters also reveals the significance of Elizabeth's new role during her husband's absence. Better understanding her life and the lives of other women on the home front helps to create a more complete picture of the Civil War, demonstrating how the conflict affected not just soldiers in the battlefields and camps but also the families and friends they had left behind. Women became the heads of families while men were away-about one third of soldiers were married; this change challenged the existing system of patriarchy. Elizabeth Porter was both the head of the household and the manager of the farm; she was a businesswoman who engaged in the selling of her crops and livestock on the market; she was in charge of the family's finances; and she also served as a teacher and helped run the town's asylum.

Elizabeth also viewed herself as a participant in the war effort through her roles. She wrote several times to her husband of her "duty" at home as being

similar to his duty as a soldier. Both she and her husband spoke of taking pride in the patriotism of their children as well; pointedly, Annie told her father in a letter on November 29, 1862, that she did not want him to come home until the war was won. Clearly another one of Elizabeth's role was a teacher to her own children of patriotism and political values. She also repeated her wish that she could fight in the war, noting in a June 12, 1862 letter that as a woman her "wings are clipped." Yet, this did not stop her, despite being considered a non-political actor due to her gender, from expressing her political beliefs including her support of the passage of the Confiscation Act in summer 1862, an act allowing the seizure of and freedom for slaves that were used by the Confederate army and any captured slaves whose masters were supporting the rebellion. She also wrote of her support for using African American soldiers on July 8, 1863: "We long to see the slaves their own avengers."

Conclusion and Further Research Suggestions

Elizabeth Porter's experience demonstrates the change in the roles of women during the Civil War; yet women are often left out of the focus of most research on the time period. This work contributes to the existing literature on women during the Civil War and urges similar research on related questions.

A second area of further research would be on the post-war impact upon marriage and families. How did the return of Civil War soldiers impact family relationships? How did the long periods of separation, as long

as four years for some soldiers, affect their relationships with their spouses and children? Divorce petitions, for example, can be studied to determine if there was a rise in divorce rates nationwide between ex-soldiers and their wives. Court records and coroner reports can be studied to see if there was a rise in domestic violence and other incidents of violence when the soldiers returned.

A further area of research unrelated to gender concerns age. Although the primary focus of this work was on Elizabeth Porter, one fact about Lansing Porter that warrants future attention is his age. Lansing was forty-four years old at the time of his enlistment and forty-six when he left the military. This fact is worthy of attention because of the rarity of men his age serving; the average age of soldiers in the Union army was 25.8 years and less than 10% were over the age of 30, with soldiers in their forties extremely atypical. Porter's age in fact placed him outside of the 18-35 age range that was set for the first Union draft in March 1863, meaning he would not have had to serve unless he had volunteered.

Soldiers within his age group, however, have generally received little scholarly attention. Instead, there has been a focus on the opposite end of the age spectrum, child soldiers like John Lincoln Clem; an estimated 10% of soldiers were under the age of 16. However, minimal research has been done on older soldiers. In general, research on Civil War soldier demography remains a neglected field.

The Civil War is one of the most studied time periods in American history. The

proliferation of scholarship, though, does not mean there are not further areas to explore. The incorporation of understudied groups like women and the turn away from an exclusive focus on the battlefield to include the experience of the home front offers new opportunities for research. These new works will help contribute to a more holistic picture of the conflict and its aftermath.

Sources

-“Two Unidentified Women Reading Letters” AMB/TIN no. 2075, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.36461>

-The correspondence between Elizabeth and Lansing, as well as letters to and from their children, can be accessed at the Louisiana Research Center, Tulane University. Lansing Porter family papers, 1861-1863. LaRC/ Manuscripts Collection 1065. Louisiana Research Center, Tulane University.

Further Reading

-Sullivan Ballou's letter and life are the subject of an 864 page 2006 work by Robin Young. Robin Young, *For Love and Liberty: The Untold Civil War Story of Major Sullivan Ballou and His Famous Love Letter* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006).

-An example of scholarly work that analyzes the writing of soldiers is Chandra Manning's 2007 book on the meaning of the war to soldiers on both sides. Manning argued both Union and Confederate soldiers understood slavery to be the cause of the conflict and used she used their writings to explore

their understandings of and attitudes towards slavery and emancipation. Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

-For an analysis of the writing of soldiers and the way they conceptualized ideas see Peter S. Carmichael, "Soldier-Speak," in Stephen Berry, ed. *Wierding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011): 273.

-Further information about Lansing's life can be found in the 1850 and 1860 federal censuses as well as biographical backgrounds in the *Auburn Seminary Record Volume 1: 1905-1906* (Astor, Lennox, and Tilden Foundations, 1924) and the *General biographical catalogue of Auburn Theological Seminary, 1818-1918* (Auburn, NY: Auburn Seminary Press, 1918). His Civil War enrollment and discharge can be found in the New York State Archives, Cultural Education Center, Albany, New York; New York Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1900; Archive Collection #: 13775-83; Box #: 304; Roll #: 1178-1179.

-Lansing and Elizabeth ran a farm before and during the war. The most common profession amongst soldiers was farming. Forty-eight percent of Union soldiers and 69% of Confederate soldiers were farmers. "Civil War Facts" National Park Service(2014).

<http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/facts.htm>.

-There is a growing field of scholarship on women during the Civil War. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) examined the impact of the Civil War on patriarchal attitudes for elite white women in the South.

-Victoria E. Olt, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008) looked at the experience of adolescent women from slaveholding families.

-George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) argued white women in the South were strong defenders of slavery.

-Anya Jabour, "Days of lightly-won and lightly held hearts: Courtship and Coquetry in the Southern Confederacy," in Stephen Berry, ed. *Wierding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011) and Steven E. Nash, "Love is a Battlefield: Lizzie Alsop's Flirtation with the Confederacy," in Stephen Berry, ed. *Wierding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011) looked at the changes in Southern courtship patterns, arguing there was a relaxing of social norms allowing women more freedom in courting.

-Joan Cashin, "Hungry People in the War Time South: Civilians, Armies, and the Food Supply," in Stephen Berry, ed. *Wierding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011) and Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) examined the impact of food shortages which led to women petitioning the Confederate government and leading food riots in some cities.

-Alecia Long, "(Mis)Remembering General Order No. 28: Benjamin, Butler, the Woman Order, and Historical Memory," in *Occupied Women: Gender,*

Military Occupation in the American Civil War, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009) argued women in New Orleans were political actors through their resistance to federal occupation.

-Several works have focused on women in the Northern home front, particularly looking at the impact of women's role in medicine and other forms of soldier relief. See Judith Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Jeanie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994).

-Betty L. Alt and Bonnie D. Stone, *Campfollowing: A History of the Military Wife* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1991). Michele Nancy, *Members of the Regiment: Army Officers' Wives on the Western Frontier, 1865-1890* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2000) looked at the role played by women who lived with their husbands in military camps.

-An example of work on marginalized women like immigrants, African American, and working class women is Judith Giesberg's *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

-For an in-depth analysis of mail during the Civil War, including the differences between the North and the South, see Harry K. Charles, Jr., "American Civil War Postage Due: North and South," *Postal History Symposium* (November 2012). <http://stamps.org/userfiles/file/symposium/presentations/CharlesPaper.pdf>.

-Hacker et al. (2010) looked at changes in white marriage patterns from 1850-1880 based upon

census information; the article, focusing primarily on the South, argued there was a "marriage squeeze" due to the high number of Confederate casualties leading to a delay in marriage for many Southern women or marriage to "less appropriate" husbands. J. David Hacker; Libra Hilde; and James Holland Jones, "The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns," *Journal of Southern History* 76 (2010): 39-70.

-David Silkenat's 2011 work on North Carolina during the Civil War time period offers one model of scholarship that looked at post-war changes. Silkenat argued strain from long separation and changing values led to an increase in divorce between veterans of the war and their spouses. David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011).

-Stephen Berry, "The Historian as Death Investigator" in Stephen Berry, ed. *Wierding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011) examined court records and coroner reports and concluded there was a dramatic drop in spousal abuse, suicides, and the murder of babies during the war due to the majority of men being away from home to participate in the war.

-For further information about the demographic makeup of soldiers on both sides see James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

-For more information on children soldiers in the Civil War and other American wars see Eleanor C. Bishop, *Ponies, Patriots, and Powder Monkeys: A History of Children in America's Armed Forces, 1776-1916* (Del Mar: The Bishop Press, 1982).

Missouri Woman Writes to Her Soldier Husband

The following letter is published several places including **The Black Military Experience**, p. 244-45, in **Families and Freedom**, p. 97 in **Free at Last**, p. 464, and in **Freedom's Soldiers**, pp. 117-18. Martha Glover, who was enslaved in Missouri, wrote to her husband Richard:

Mexico Mo Dec 30th 1863

My Dear Husband I have received your last kind letter a few days ago and was much pleased to hear from you once more. It seems like a long time since you left me. I have had nothing but trouble since you left. You recollect what I told you how they would do after you was gone. they abuse me because you went & say they will not take care of our children & do nothing but quarrel with me all the time and beat me scandalously the day before yesterday- Oh I never thought you would give me so much trouble as I have got to bear now. You ought not to left me in the fix I am in & all these little helpless children to take care of. I was invited to a party to night but I could not go I am in too much trouble to want to go to parties. the children talk about you all the time. I wish you could get a furlough & come to see us once more. We want to see you worse than we ever did before. Remember all I told you about how they would do me after you left-for they do worse than they ever did & I do not know what will become of me & my poor little children. Oh I wish you had staid with me & not gone till I could go with you for I do nothing but grieve all the time about you. write & tell me when you are coming.

Tell Isaac that his mother come & got his clothes she was so sorry he went. You

need not tell me to beg any more married men to go. I see too much trouble to try to get any more into trouble too- Write to me & do not forget me & my children-farewell my dear husband from your wife

Martha

Martha to My Dear Husband [Richard Glover], 30 Dec. 1863, enclosed in Brig. Genl. Wm. A. Pile to Maj. O. D. Greene, 11 Feb. 1864, P-91 1864, Letters Received, series 2593, Department of the Missouri, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393 Pt. 1, National Archives.

Maintained by Steven F. Miller (sfmiller@umd.edu)

Part of the History Department of the University of Maryland, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project is supported by the university and by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Web accessibility (University of Maryland)
<http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Glover.html>

'Dear Husband': The Civil War Letters of Sophronia Joiner Chipman, Kankakee County, Illinois, 1863-1865

A wonderful article on the letters is written by one of our favorite scholars, Vicki Betts from the University of Texas at Tyler. This article 'Dear Husband': The Civil War Letters of Sophronia Joiner Chipman, Kankakee County, Illinois, 1863-1865 appeared in the journal, *Military History of the West* and is available at

https://scholarworks.uttyler.edu/cgi/view_content.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1022&context=pres_pubs

From H:Net - The Journal of the Civil War Era Publishes a Special Issue on Civil War Veterans

The March 2019 issue of *The Journal of the Civil War Era* is now available—it is a special issue focusing on Civil War veterans, guest edited by Susannah Ural. Below you will find the abstracts of each article. It also includes book reviews of the latest scholarship on the Civil War era.

It can be accessed via [Project Muse](#) and is also a membership benefit for those in the Society of Civil War Historians.

As always, you can stay in touch with the JCWE on Facebook, Twitter (@JCWE1), and on our blog, [Muster](#).

Caroline E. Janney - "Free to Go Where We Liked: The Army of Northern Virginia After Appomattox"

Relatively few works on the Army of Northern Virginia have looked closely at what happened to the army after the surrender on April 9, 1865. A closer examination of the immediate post-surrender period, however, suggests that many of Robert E. Lee's men did not experience surrender as a definitive conclusion to their experience as Confederate soldiers. Because of the generous surrender terms, they dispersed from Appomattox more like soldiers than vanquished rebels. But their journeys also revealed the degree to which a substantial portion of Confederate civilians continued to support them even in defeat and highlighted the ways in which Confederates might continue to fight the

results of emancipation. The disbanding of Lee's army thus foreshadowed much of what would play out in the years to come as Confederate soldiers-turned-veterans continued to resist changes to the southern social and political order.

Sarah E. Gardner - "When Service is Not Enough: Charity's Purpose in the Immediate Aftermath of the Civil War"

This essay argues that antebellum notions of charity persisted during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. Sympathy, rather than an obligation owed those who had served their nation in good stead, remained the criterion on which relief workers judged petitioners. To make the case, the essay considers how the largest wartime private relief agency, the United States Sanitary Commission, provided aid to soldiers who made the wartime transition to veteran status due to injury or illness and those veterans who were mustered out of service in 1865-1866. Equally important, it surveys intellectual and cultural currents that informed the war generation's understanding of charity. Sympathy, it demonstrates, demanded affinity, a shared sense of feeling, an appeal to the heart rather than to reason, but it did not demand inclusivity.

Susannah J. Ural - "'Every Comfort, Freedom, and Liberty': A Case Study of the Mississippi Confederate Home"

This case study of Mississippi's Confederate veteran home, popularly known as Beauvoir, challenges historians to see these southern facilities as more than relics of the Lost Cause. This state-run home had a diverse resident population that included women as early as 1904 and that also included three African-American residents. It provided well-trained

physicians in the Beauvoir hospital, and a powerful and popular woman superintendent ran the home as early as 1926. This article analyzes the lives of the veterans, wives, and widows of Mississippi's Confederate home as well as the state's policies for them, revealing a facility connected to the Civil War, but grounded in New South efficiency, regulation, and reform.

Kurt Hackemer - "Union Veteran Migration Patterns to the Frontier: The Case of Dakota Territory"

Recent scholarship argues that newly minted veterans of the American Civil War found reintegration into civilian life difficult, and that their wartime experiences led many to migrate away from their antebellum communities, often to the frontier. However, closer examination of almost 6,000 veterans who settled in Dakota Territory reveals that they had been mobile their entire lives rather than only after the war, that they had been pushing westward before the war even faster than veterans in general, and that their westward momentum continued at a faster pace after the war. In addition, their wartime experience included longer service and more exposure to combat trauma than most Union soldiers. This sizable group was distinctly different from the larger body of veterans that the current scholarship has over-generalized, highlighting the need for more regional studies.

REVIEW ESSAY

Ian Isherwood - "When the Hurlyburly's Done / When the Battle's Lost and Won: Service, Suffering, and Survival of Civil War and Great War Veterans"

This essay examines recent historiographies of the Civil War and First World War, highlighting the benefits of recent emphases on cultural history and interdisciplinary scholarship in both fields. The essay argues that the comparison of these respective historiographies breaks down the "chronological and geographical barriers" that separate them, allowing a broader and fuller understanding of the unique lives and experiences of veterans in modern history.

OAH Annual Meeting Crossroads New Directions in the History of Veterans of the American Civil War

The OAH Recorded in April 2018 at the OAH Annual Meeting held in Sacramento, California as part of the Mellon-funded Amplified Initiative. shares the Chair and Commentator: Paul Cimbala, Fordham University

An Organization of Brothers: The Grand Army of the Republic, Civil War Veterans, and Coping with War
Kathleen Thompson, West Virginia University

Mapping Loyalty: The Persisting Social Networks of Civil War Veterans
Katharine Dahlstrand, University of Georgia

"Played Out": Veterans' Interpretations of Mental Illness
Dillon Carroll, Hunter College, City University of New York

Since the war ended, Americans have been fascinated with the Civil War. Arguably more books have been written about the conflict than any other event in American history. But for all we have learned about

every general and battle of the war, we know remarkably little about the war's veterans. Appomattox marked the end of the war, but not the end for the men who fought it. This panel, filled with diverse young scholars, seeks to point the way for new directions in studying Civil War veterans. Most of the recent scholarship on Civil War veterans has focused on trauma, and deservedly so. Eric T. Dean, Jr.'s "Shook Over Hell" was a groundbreaking monograph that compared Civil War veterans with Vietnam veterans, and argued that veterans of the Civil War may have suffered with PTSD or something like it. Since its publication, a coterie of historians such as James Marten, R.B. Rosenburg, Patrick Kelley, and Rusty Williams have turned their attention to Soldier's Homes in the post-war North and South. David Silkenat and Diane Miller Sommerville have published research exploring the rising rate of suicide among Confederate veterans. Other scholars, among them Brian Craig Miller, Brian Matthew Jordan and Frances Clarke, have explored physical trauma and how amputees shaped post-war society, culture and the memory of the war. While these works are important and deserve mention, they ignore the inner lives of Civil War veterans. Using archives from around the country, and varying methodologies, the work on this panel explores the inner lives of Civil War veterans after the guns were silenced at Appomattox. Kathleen L. Thompson explores the Grand Army of the Republic as a coping mechanism for Civil War veterans in the postwar years. Katharine Dahlstrand, an East Tennessee native and combat veteran, attempts to understand the social network of Tennessee veterans in the postwar years. She combs through over 1,500 responses of Tennessee Civil War veterans to a questionnaire sent

to them by state library archivists, and created GIS maps that document the critical moments of their lives. Finally, Dr. Dillon J. Carroll examines how veterans' perceptions of mental illness was different than that of asylum physicians. Veterans tried to carve out a space of legitimacy to protect themselves and their comrades from the shame of mental illness. In contrast to asylum doctors, many Civil War veterans described mental illness among themselves, and other soldiers as a result of being "broke down" or "played out" a vague term that gave a sense of the multiple stressors of war. "Played out" was less clinical, and organically became popular among the soldiers. This would protect them from shame during the war, and help them win pensions after it. All of this work explores little known aspects of Civil War veterans, namely, what their communities were like after the war, how they coped with trauma, and how they perceived that trauma in new and different ways.

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'Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South'
Wilson on Sommerville

Diane Miller Sommerville. *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 448 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-4356-4; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-4330-4.

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Diane Miller Sommerville's *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* is an impressive contribution to the growing scholarly literature on the physical and psychological costs of the American Civil War. It joins Drew Faust's *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), Jim Downs's *Sick for Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2012), and Michael C. C. Adams's *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (2014) in exploring the ways in which the war and its aftermath exacted a significant toll on the health of Southerners beyond those killed and wounded on the battlefield. Sommerville focuses on suicide among Confederate soldiers and veterans, Confederate women, and African Americans under slavery and freedom during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Because data does not exist for a statistical portrait of suicide in the period, Sommerville bases her conclusions on the study of hundreds of individual cases revealed in diaries, letters, newspaper accounts, and legal documents. These documents give her insight into the mental and physical distress that led white and black men and women to voluntarily end their own lives. She found that suffering and suicide in these years was often related to wartime effects and their long-term consequences. She also discovered that suffering and suicide were racialized and gendered. Whites suffered differently than blacks, slave or free, and consequently ended their lives for different reasons. White Confederate soldiers and veterans, whether they had experience in battle or

not, suffered their own set of mental and physical pains that sometimes led to suicide. These differed significantly from those of white women, whose distress often lay in the challenges and hardships of maintaining family and plantation in the absence of their husbands and then rebuilding after the war. Blacks, Sommerville writes, took their own lives to end suffering or to avoid punishment, not as acts of resistance against their masters or against the slave system. Sommerville acknowledges that she cannot know for certain why any of her subjects committed suicide, but she makes a compelling case that the effects of the war and its troubled aftermath contributed substantially to the psychological and physical suffering that led men and women to take their own lives. In chapter 1, "A Burden Too Heavy to Bear: War Trauma, Suicide, and Confederate Soldiers," Sommerville argues that the war must be considered a direct or indirect cause for the suicide of Confederate soldiers and veterans. She uncovered "bountiful evidence" of "widespread mental duress experienced by Civil War soldiers" (p. 26). She interrogates the "relationship between suffering and suicide generally and gendered notions about manhood, cowardice, and martial success, all of which came into play for Southern men in the military" (p. 25). Interestingly, the soldier suicides contributed to a heightened level of understanding and sympathy for those who killed themselves during or after their military service. Both battlefield and non-battlefield experiences, such as being away from home for the first time, training camp, or capture and imprisonment could induce the suffering that led to suicide. Sommerville also documents the changes in Southern attitudes toward soldier and veteran suicides. She argues that "suicide offered

Southern men a way to maintain mastery and control over their deaths amid circumstances that were disordered, frightening and capricious" (p. 47). They chose the manner and timing of their death. For some, suicide came to be seen as a way of preserving honor; it "replaced a coward's death with that of a hero" (p. 48).

Chapter 2, "A Dark Doom to Dread: Women, Suicide, and Suffering on the Confederate Homefront," details how "feelings of despair, frustration, and foreboding plagued many Confederate women" and led some women to end their suffering by ending their lives. Women, however, were more likely than men to consider suicide than to actually do the deed. Contrary to the Lost Cause mythology of resilient Confederate women, many fell apart under war and postwar stress. Many women were admitted to Southern insane asylums in these years. Social, economic, political, and financial factors associated with wartime conditions were not the only precipitating factors for white women. Post-partum depression often contributed to suicidal thoughts and actions. The war and its chaotic aftermath were key catalysts driving women to self-harm. Depression and anxiety resulted from the absence of their husbands and the burdens of unexpected and unwanted responsibilities for families and farms.

Part 2 of *Aberration of Mind* considers suicide among African Americans during the Civil War era. Chapter 3, "De Lan' of Sweet Dreams: Suffering and Suicide Among the Enslaved," addresses suffering and suicide among slaves while chapter 4, "Somethin' Went Hard agin Her Mind: Suffering, Suicide, and Emancipation," takes up self-destruction among freed men and women following the war. Sommerville discusses the evidence for and

causes of suicide by slaves as well as white attitudes about slave suicide. She argues that the master class discounted the possibility of slave suicide because to accept the possibility that slaves killed themselves meant accepting that the supposedly happy slaves were in fact suffering and deeply unhappy. They also believed that slaves were too cowardly to take their own lives. Suicide, she argues, became a "marker of racial identity and white superiority: whites killed themselves, the enslaved did not. Suffering was an attitude of whiteness, not enslavement" (p. 88).

The evidence that Sommerville presents is irrefutable: "The enslaved did suffer and, on occasion, kill themselves despite white claims to the contrary" (p. 88). For her, "documenting incidents of slave suicide ... constitutes one step toward reclaiming the full array of experiences, moods, and feelings of the enslaved, while taking seriously the psychological effect of the multitudinous conditions of slavery on the enslaved" (p. 88). Although Sommerville documents numerous instances of slave suicide, she also acknowledges that we cannot know "exactly" how common slave suicide was. However, "testimony by the enslaved and formerly enslaved suggests that slave suicide in America occurred regularly" (p. 93). She argues that slaves who took their own lives were "individuals whose personal suffering rendered voluntary death a plausible response" (p. 98). Sommerville concedes that it is very difficult given the paucity of slave suicide notes to know the reasons an individual slave committed suicide. The evidence she has, however, suggests that "the most common reason attached to slave suicide was an attempt to avoid punishment and physical pain" (p. 99). Slave men and

women became suicidal when “they reached a saturation point after protracted periods of abuse and ill-treatment, a limit that is both highly individual and subjective” (p. 115).

Sommerville also critiques a theory developed by a number of historians that slave suicide represented an act of resistance against a particular master or against slavery in general. She argues convincingly that the resistance theory of slave suicide “is both flawed and unsatisfying, as it risks ignoring or discounting slaves’ suffering as a motive for suicide” (p. 97). Her research led her to conclude that “slaves who contemplated or effected suicide” likely gave “little thought, if at all, to the impact of their deaths on their masters. Instead, suicide brought an immediate end to emotional or physical pain” (p. 99).

In the four chapters of part 3, Sommerville addresses the suffering and suicide of whites in the post-Civil War era. Chapter 5, “The Accursed Ills I Cannot Bear: Confederate Veterans, Suicide, and Suffering in the Defeated South,” explores the challenges Confederate veterans had in adjusting to civilian life in a defeated nation. She argues that these veterans exhibited symptoms and behaviors that today would be labeled as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that they contributed to a crisis of manhood in the postwar South. Although data does not exist for a systematic study of suicide, she found that “anecdotal accounts and asylum records substantiate significant suicidal activity among Confederate veterans” (p. 156). In addition, she uncovered numerous asylum records of insanity and violent behavior as well as alcohol and drug abuse in this population. Surviving suicide notes

suggest that feelings of desperation and hopelessness about the future led to self-destruction. Interestingly, most Southern commentators on individual suicides failed to make a connection between postwar suicide and wartime service. Suicide seems to have occurred in part, at least, as a way to restore “limited elements of mastery and control,” end “emotional or physical suffering,” and provide an “exit from failed manhood” (p. 178).

Chapter 6, “The Distressed State of the Country: Confederate Men and the Navigation of Economic, Political, and Emotional Ruin in the Postwar South,” takes up the toll that postwar conditions had on the Southern male psyche. Sommerville demonstrates that “the combined weight of financial ruin and embarrassment, on top of political banishment and festering anguish from combat memory, proved too much for some ex-Confederates” (p. 179). Business failures proved particularly hard to withstand. While women “worried about their families’ financial well-being,” men “experienced economic misfortune personally” and sometimes chose suicide as an escape (p. 181). Self-inflicted death, she observes, “promised relief from the dreaded Yankee subjugation, from untold suffering, and from the humiliation of being unable to protect or provide for their families, as sanctioned by the nineteenth-century code of masculinity” (p. 196).

Suicide among postwar white Southern women is the subject of chapter 7, “All Is Dark before Me: Confederate Women and the Postwar Landscape of Suffering and Suicide.” Confederate women suffered psychologically and physically in their defeated nation following the war and when that suffering became too

burdensome it led to insanity and sometimes suicide. These women faced three challenges: surviving the postwar chaos, reconstructing their families as men and boys returned from the war, and rebuilding their communities without slaves and in the presence of freed men and women. While most women suffered to some degree, the causes of individual suicides are often opaque, owing to the lack of documentation. One fairly obvious trigger for a woman's emotional collapse was the death of a loved one. Some women escaped the psychic stress by using opium, morphine, and laudanum, while others took the more extreme step of suicide.

Chapter 8, "Cumberer of the Earth: The Secularization of Suffering and Suicide," focuses on the June 1865 suicide of the South Carolina Confederate Edmund Ruffin, who chose not to live under Yankee rule. Ruffin's widely known suicide and his reasons for deciding to end life resonated throughout the South and led to a reconsideration of the meaning of suicide among former Confederates. His example among the chaos and distress of the postwar era led many Southerners "to reconsider their harsh attitudes toward self-murder and embrace a more sympathetic, compassionate view of suicide and those who killed themselves" (p. 236). Sommerville claims that "suicide in the post-bellum South came to be viewed less as a sin or sign of moral weakness and more as the result of tragic circumstances, a sad but expected result of war-generated suffering" (p. 237). Some Southerners even found ways to glorify war-generated suicide as an honorable response to the suffering imposed on the South and endured by individuals. Suicide "became a badge of honor, for white Southerners, emblazoned unto their refurbished

identity" (p. 237). Of course, Southern freed men and women were excluded from this valorization of war-induced suicide.

In her conclusion, Sommerville ties this secularized conception of suicide to the emerging myth of the Lost Cause and a resurgent Southern nationalism. "War's end," she writes, "forced a defeated and demoralized people to reconceive the meaning of suicide" (p. 256). Southern whites rejected the negative associates of suicide with "weakness, cowardice, and insanity" in favor of "a new construction of suicide as heroic self-sacrifice, embodied in the self-inflicted death of Edmund Ruffin" (p. 256). This re-conception of "heroic suicide helped launch Confederate nationalism and became central to the Lost Cause ethos of sacrifice, instilling meaning into the vast suffering in the failed effort at independence" (p. 261).

Aberration of Mind is a compelling exploration in considerable detail of the psychic suffering endured by white and black Southerners in the era of the Civil War. This suffering ranged from mild to completely disabling and sometimes ended in suicide. Though hampered by a lack of data that could support statistically valid conclusions, Sommerville's careful mining of individual cases of suicide yields useful insights. In addition, her familiarity with modern theories of wartime stress and their links to emotional distress and self-harm informs her discussions of Civil War-era suicides. She humanizes the men and women who took their own lives even as she acknowledges that she cannot fully know why any of these individuals killed themselves. But she also argues convincingly that Southern white suicide can be understood in larger cultural terms as a response to diminished manhood, threats to masculinity, and challenges to

traditional conceptions of women's role in the family and the nation.

Sommerville advances two important arguments regarding African American suicide in this period. First, she makes it quite clear that contrary to nineteenth-century white Southern opinion, slaves did suffer and did commit suicide when pushed to their psychological and physical limits or when facing certain punishment. Second, she challenges recent historians who have viewed slave suicide as evidence of resistance to particular masters or to the slave system as a whole. She found little or no evidence to support this theory.

Sommerville's impressive study of Southern suffering and suicide illuminates how disabling psychological and physical pain could become. Though most who were disabled by emotional distress in this period did not commit suicide, Sommerville has given voice to those men

and women, white and black, who found they could not go on and chose to end their lives. It is a powerful reminder that the casualties of war extend well beyond those left on the field when the battle ends.

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Next edition of *At Home and in the Field* will continue our look at women, pensions and photographs of the period. I encourage our readers to contact me to send in interesting stories of their own connected to this and other connected topics.

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