

Desertion from the Cause:
North Carolina Women in the Civil War

Lizzie Dietzen

A Confederate official from North Carolina wrote, “Desertion takes place because desertion is encouraged...And though the ladies may not be willing to concede the fact, they are nevertheless responsible...for the desertion in the army and the dissipation of the country.”¹ Citizens of the Civil War era faced drastic social, economic, and political problems along with constant anxiety over battlefield events. No region of the United States faced these difficulties more acutely than the South. As husbands, sons, and brothers went off to war, women faced a new and dynamic role in the Southern Confederacy. In North Carolina, poor women who initially embraced secession became alienated over time due to inflation, speculation, and impressment by Confederate government officials. Stuck in a patriarchal vacuum and unable to rely on state or national officials for safety and security, many women of North Carolina lost hope in the Confederate cause and encouraged the desertion of loved ones on the battlefield. It is important to analyze the implications that faced these women to clarify a facet of why the Confederacy lost in its endeavor for independence.

The political climate of North Carolina in November of 1860 stood in sharp contrast with neighboring states to the south. Only a small minority of North Carolinians saw the election of Abraham Lincoln as a viable threat to their well-being which secession was asserted as their “only legal action.”² To counter this anti-secession thought, secessionist commissioners from the Deep South were sent to the Upper South states to pass the gospel of secession along. Jacob Thompson, a commissioner sent to North Carolina, stated with oratorical fervor the absolute humility that would face the sacred South should she submit to the authority of the new Republican administration. Despite Conservative attempts at compromise, propaganda and undoubtedly corrupt politics finally led North Carolina out of the Union on May 20, 1861.³

The last state to secede and join the Confederacy, North Carolina faced a political and social dilemma. Arguably, secession was not what the citizens truly wanted. Even Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, initially opposed secession. Historian Paul D. Escott writes that, “the reluctance, regret, and agony with which Davis approached secession made him a more representative southerner than any fire eater.”⁴ This statement is critical in that even the Confederacy’s figurehead had initial doubts with severing ties from the North. In North Carolina, wartime governor Zebulon Vance favored preserving ties with the North up until the fall of Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for volunteers in April of 1861.

A recurring theme throughout this paper and an absolutely critical component of its argument is the aspect of nationalism. Women and their lack of nationalism ultimately contributed to the Confederacy’s downfall. Initially, women were swept up in the fervor

and excitement of the impending conflict, urging their husbands to enlist for the “short” war while they happily adjusted to the changing times. As the war dragged on, however, and as battlefield deaths continued without concrete victory in sight, women and those left at home began to question the cause and their loyalty to it. Historians have argued throughout the years that the Confederacy did not have a sufficient sense of nationalism to survive. Creating a distinct form of Southern nationalism proved to be a difficult process. James McPherson states that “the Confederacy did not exist long enough to give people that mystical faith known as nationalism and patriotism.” A sense of Confederate nationalism and patriotism proved inadequate shortly after secession and was further strained through hardships and privations that the citizens of the South endured as the conflict continued on.⁵

The social order of the antebellum South was based on the concept of paternalism. The females remained in the traditional domestic sphere in which they sought protection and support from the male head of the household. In the largely rural and agricultural South, this pattern was the norm. Men took care of the economic needs of their families and women focused their energy on maternal responsibilities. The war forced many women to become the head of their households which disrupted the comforting and stable paternalistic culture they were so accustomed to. With men gone off to the battlefield, the war “inflicted a devastating blow to the most fundamental structures of the South’s society and economy.”⁶ As a result of the war and the drainage of manpower from the public sphere, women were forced to change their domestic livelihoods and were expected to enter a commanding and sacrificial role in their Southern nation.

This change affected every realm of Southern society. With the breadwinner of the family absent, poorer women faced economic hardship immediately and many white women turned for the first time to rigorous physical toil in the fields.⁷ Women of the slaveholding elite were not left unscathed, for the departure of their protectors was burdensome and meant possible servile insurrection and disloyalty from their slaves.⁸ The difference in class composition would prove disturbing for the Confederate war effort, particularly in North Carolina. The slaveholding elite from the east and the yeomen dissenters from the west would inevitably clash during the war. Whatever social status, women experienced the abrupt and drastic move from traditional paternalism to the necessity of self-preservation.

Women confronted the sectional crisis in many ways. Not only did they have to take care of the family farms, but they were now needed in the public sphere as well. Women in the South before the Civil War never had to engage in work outside of their home to the extent of women in the North. Southern women had to leave antebellum conventions behind and sacrifice their loved ones in order to maintain and sustain the Confederate economy and war effort. Throughout the course of the war, however, the continuance of self-sacrifice put a physical and mental toll on women’s abilities to preserve the Confederacy.

The transportation of women from the domestic sphere to the public sphere upset many Southerners. Though the void in the public industries desperately needed to be filled, many traditionalists were concerned with the sudden movement of women toward jobs outside of the home like teaching, nursing, and, in North Carolina's case, working in the mills. Even many women scorned this change. One woman wrote to her husband that, "Ladies keep the stores here now...their husbands having joined the army. It looks funny in Dixie to see a lady behind the counter, but it would be natural if we were in Yankeedom as it has always been the custom there, a custom however I do not like."⁹ Women constantly encountered personal and ideological qualms when entering the workplace. Did women sacrifice these traditional conventions purely out of patriotism to help the Confederacy? Though many women were dedicated to their new Southern nation, the personal need for survival far outweighed love and patriotism most could effectively give to the Confederate cause.

As the excitement and patriotic fervor of the first climactic months of battle died down, both North and South faced the grim reality of a long war. Lack of industry and the absence of a mixed economy certainly hurt the South during the Civil War. Though there was plenty of food to support those at home and in the fields of battle, railways proved inadequate to transport these goods to where they were desperately needed. It became difficult to repair what railroad lines the South had without the industry to produce the material. Broken down railroads were only part of the problem. Fundamental transportation such as wagons and horses were also limited due to impressment by the Confederacy.¹⁰

Impressment was established as a means for the Confederate government to obtain goods for the war effort. The impressment of provisions- particularly food, animals, and crops- were taken from the civilians and proved to be one of the many Confederate initiatives that led to the disaffection and alienation of Southern civilians. It, along with speculation and inflation, produced a distrustful tension between women and the Confederate authorities. It left women who were already on the margin of survival in desperate conditions. Many letters of outrage entered the government offices of both Raleigh and Richmond, challenging the legality of the Confederate official's decision to seize vital goods that were necessary for survival. One such letter demonstrated the resentment towards these authorities. "The people of Johnston County owe allegiance first to *North Carolina* secondly to the Confederate States, and accordingly, to my humble judgment *protection* is due from North Carolina to her citizens even against the injustice of the Confederate authorities."¹¹ In this letter to Governor Zebulon Vance, the "injustice of the Confederate authorities" pertained to the impressment actions by Confederate officials. Impressment, however necessary for the Confederate war effort, proved fatal to the facilitation and the preservation of patriotism for the Confederacy. In another letter written to Vance on May 4, 1864, the author presents testimony that was the norm throughout North Carolina, particularly in the piedmont and mountain regions. "They stole horses from the wives of volunteers the only horse their husbands had left

them to tend their little crops while they offered up their lives as a sacrifice for the good of their Country.”¹²

Impressment took its toll on the will of women to continue supporting the Confederacy and led to the encouragement of desertion. Impressment, rather than union presence or victory, contributed to disaffection and demonstrated that it was hard to be loyal to a government that stole from its citizens. Governor Vance responded to their plight by writing on the evil of impressment and the devastation it inflicted on families to Secretary of War James Seddon on December 21, 1863: “If God Almighty had yet in store another plague worse than all the others which he intended to have let loose on the Egyptians, I am sure it must have been a regiment or so of half-armed, half disciplined Confederate cavalry.”¹³ Impressment by these “half disciplined” Confederate officials led to a profound resentment of the Confederate government and its policies that strained the yeomen women’s ability to remain selfless and loyal to the cause.

In addition to impressment, women on the homefront faced escalating prices for basic necessities. Mary Jeffreys Bethell, a resident of Rockingham County, wrote on December 6, 1861, “We cannot get coffee without giving a very high price, salt is very scarce and high priced. If the war continues much longer, it will be a gloomy state of things, I’m afraid the poor will suffer this winter.”¹⁴ Bethell, a plantation mistress, could not be more accurate in her prediction of suffering. Even in the first year of war, problems on the Confederate homefront developed at an alarming rate though often overshadowed by military endeavors on the battlefield. The *North Carolina Standard* detailed every aspect of military activities while ignoring the women except when urging them to “live on less and let everything count!”¹⁵ Emphasis on military endeavors demonstrates that the people’s expectations of success hinged on battlefield reports, while largely leaving out the plight of the states citizenry.

As the war continued, speculation and inflation grew worse. The soldier’s pay of eleven dollars a month became drastically insufficient for their families survival. A citizen of Marion, North Carolina pleaded to Governor Vance when he wrote, “in the name of God, of suffering humanity, of the cries of widows and orphans, *do* put down speculation and extortion.” He went on to say, “if this thing [speculation] is not put down, our Country is *ruined* forever.”¹⁶ High prices and shortages of basic necessities plagued the families of North Carolina and heightened animosity between women and Confederate authorities. Women were expected to embrace with graceful poise whatever dilemma that was dealt to them, but over time it became increasingly difficult to sustain both their families and the Confederacy.

As conditions worsened on the homefront, the Confederate philosophy of sacrifice began to lose its value. Suffering and loss, once celebrated aspects of Confederate ideology embraced by women became, instead, a burden and a cause of grievance.¹⁷ As soldiers heard desperate testimonies from home and as the Northern war aim of Emancipation made some Confederates uneasy fighting in a conflict to maintain

slavery, many soldiers determined that their obligation and responsibility to their families far outweighed their service in the Confederate army. Many letters of disaffection and grief began to pour into Confederate lines early in the conflict. One letter to a husband in the ranks demonstrated the privation that faced one woman's family: "I have always been proud of you, and since your connection with the Confederate army I have been prouder than ever before. I would not have you do anything wrong for the world, but before God Edward, unless you come home, we must die."¹⁸ Another woman penned a note to Vance saying that if nothing was done about their conditions, "we wimen will write for our husbands to come...home and help we cant stand it."

Women were unable to contend with the patriarchal vacuum and the physical hardships that they endured as the result of the war.¹⁹ With nowhere to turn and unable to rely on their own government or their wealthier neighbors, women desperately pleaded with their loved ones to return home. The stigma of desertion and its social repercussions were largely thrown to the side as men left ranks. By late 1864, fully two-thirds of North Carolina's enlisted soldiers were reported absent without leave. President Jefferson Davis, in an official proclamation, urged deserters to return to the ranks and for "my countrywomen, the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the Confederacy, to use their all-powerful influence in aid of this call."²⁰ As opposed to answering the president's call, women continued to encourage desertion. To the Confederate government's dismay, loyalty and devotion that was imperative to the South's quest for independence began to disappear. Women who initially propelled men into the ranks, "sending those who did not enlist hoopskirts" were soon begging their protectors to come home.²¹ Disaffection within the state grew and men deserted the ranks to do what the Confederate government had failed to do: take care of their families.

In the Quaker Belt of North Carolina, primarily in Randolph and Montgomery counties, the woods and sloping hills provided excellent hiding spots for deserters, or outliers, as they were called. Women took an active responsibility in encouraging and protecting deserters. This new role, however, did not come without punishment. In an effort to quiet the authorities in Richmond, Vance authorized the arrest of those hiding or supporting deserters. Though women were considered domestic and gentle, the wrath of Confederate guards determined to capture deserters did not stop for gender. Women, children, and aged parents suffered the retaliatory effects of desertion.²² One particular account demonstrates the torture many endured. In a letter to Vance, Judge Thomas Settle talks about what happened to women who harbored deserters: "I slapped her jaws till she put down her baby and went with them, they tied her thumbs together behind her back and suspended her with a cord tied to her two thumbs thus fastened behind her to a limb so that her toes could just touch the ground, after remaining in this position awhile she said her husband was not dead and that if they let her down she would tell all she

knew.”²³ Had the Confederate homefront been a solid and united force, desertion and subsequent instances like these would have been minimal in occurrence.

The desertion situation became such a problem in North Carolina that it spurred correspondence between General Robert E. Lee and the governor of the state. Lee complained to Vance in 1865 that, “The state of despondency that now prevails among our people is producing a bad effect upon the troops. Desertions are becoming very frequent and there is good reason to believe that they are occasioned to a considerable extent *by the letters written to the soldiers by their friends at home...the greatest numbers of desertions have taken place are composed chiefly of troops from North Carolina... They state that the number of deserters is so large in several of the counties that there is no danger to be apprehended from the home guards.*”²⁴ Vance responded in a letter dated March 2, 1865, acknowledging that the desertion of the troops was occurring largely because of the “general public despondency” and admitted that the arrest of deserters would be difficult for home guards to perform for “in many counties they are necessarily inefficient from the great number of deserters.”²⁵

Coupled with the threatening rise of desertion, peace movements swept North Carolina and through the Confederate ranks as early as 1863. One soldier, William Wagner, wrote that “I wish they would holde meetings in NC to stop the war on some fare terms or a nother...we aut to staid in the union in the first plase.”²⁶ Though Wagner did not desert, many of his comrades did to protect their ailing families. One soldier stated the situation facing soldiers and their families perfectly when he wrote, “thank God I have no wife and children to suffer on account of an ungrateful government.”²⁷

The radical changes and tribulations that Southern women faced during the Civil War proved too much to facilitate or encourage any sort of concrete devotion to the Confederate cause. The enduring trials they faced and the separation from their male protectors proved to be too much to undergo. North Carolina is a prime example of selfless sacrifice as it gave and lost the most men to the Confederate cause. This loss destroyed familial bonds and further drove North Carolinian women towards destructive alienation and disaffection.

After the Civil War, a critical component of the Lost Cause ideology portrays Southern women as steadfast and true to the Confederacy, who willingly sacrificed everything for their Southern nation. Though many ceded all that they possessed- loved ones, property, and food- rarely was it out of patriotism for the Confederacy. Many prominent historians of the Civil War era strive to look at external reasons for defeat; attributing Southern loss to the military might of the North, not the internal weaknesses of the South. Though superior Northern military prowess over the Confederates proved to be significant, the internal structure of the South failed long before military defeat faced Confederate armies on the battlefield.

To understand the fall of the Confederacy, the conditions those faced on the homefront must not be overlooked. Through impressment, speculation, and inflation, yeomen women’s loyalty to the young nation became strained and alienated by constant

hardships and deprivation. The physical and emotional suffering endured by women created a detachment from the Confederacy and the cause for which they were expected to uphold. As conditions became unbearable, and as help from the Confederate government was no longer expected, women who had tried to remain patient desperately called for their men to come home. The plight of one woman from Madison county can speak for thousands who were suffering from affliction and disillusionment that the war had caused when she wrote to her husband on the battlefield, "I want you to come home as soon after you git this letter. That is all I can think of, I want you to come home the worst that I ever did."²⁸

Notes

¹ Drew G. Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 243.

² W.B. Years and John G. Barrett, *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 5.

³ Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (University of Virginia Press, 2001), Chapter 2.

⁴ Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 18.

⁵ James M. McPherson. "American Victory, American Defeat," in *Why the Confederacy Lost*, Edited by Gabor Boritt, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992; Drew G. Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 6.

⁶ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 32.

⁷ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 32.

⁸ Drew G. Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War" *The Journal of American History* Vol. 76, (Mar., 1990): 1213.

⁹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 81.

¹⁰ Charles W. Ramsdell, *Behind the Lines in the Southern Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944), Chapter 3.

¹¹ W.A. Smith to Zebulon Vance, 3 January 1863, *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*, edited by Joe A. Mobley, (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1995) 2: 3.

¹² Tyre York to Zebulon Vance, 4 May, 1864, in *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, W.B. Years and John G. Barrett, 201.

¹³ Zebulon Vance to James Seddon, December 1, 1863, in *U.S War Department, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. IV, 2: 1061.

¹⁴ *Diary of Mary Jeffreys Bethell*, December 6, 1861, transcribed by Kristofer Ray, (Documenting the American South Online: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/bethell/bethell.html>.

¹⁵ *The North Carolina Standard*, January 15, 1862.

¹⁶ A.R.L. Abernathy to Zebulon Vance; November 4, 1862, *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*. W.B. Years and John G. Barrett, 218.

¹⁷ Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice", 1125.

¹⁸ John G. Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 191.

¹⁹ Victoria E. Bynum, "War within a War: Women's Participation in the Revolt of the North Carolina Piedmont, 1863-1865" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Vol. 9 (1987): 46.

²⁰ Davis to the Soldiers of the Confederate States, July-August 1863, *ORS* ser. IV, Vol. 2: 688.

²¹ Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice", 1224.

²² Bynum, "War within a War," 46.

²³ Thomas Settle to Zebulon Vance, October 4, 1863, *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, W.B. Years and John G. Barrett, 104.

²⁴ Lee to Zebulon Vance, February 24, 1865, *ORS* ser. I, Vol 47: 1270.

²⁵ Vance to Robert E. Lee, March 2, 1865, *ORS* ser. 1, Vol 47: 1312.

²⁶ William Wagner to his Wife, August 5, 1863, in *Letters of William F. Wagner: A Confederate Soldier*, Edited by Joe M. Hatley and Linda Huffman (Wendell North Carolina: Bradfords Bookmark, 1983), 65.

²⁷ David Williams, *A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom* (The New Press, 2005), 189.

²⁸ Martha Revis to H.W. Revis; July 20, 1863, in *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, W.B. Years and John G. Barrett, 97.