

Swaim Porter was an accomplished artist and writer.

As a poet frequently published in nationally circulated periodicals (she used the initials D. or D.E.M.) and the most accomplished Guilford County woman of her time, Delphina Gardner Mendenhall offers one of the stronger clues in favor of an early feminist awakening in the county. If there were means of discovering what books were read at the Jamestown literary groups where she presided, or what subjects were argued in the debating society of the same time, the question might be answered beyond any doubt.⁶⁰

Beyond the anti-slavery, temperance, and artistic interests of women in the county, there are two additional items to suggest some local interest in feminism. The first, appearing in the minutes of the Manumission Society for 1826, suggests that at least one Guilford citizen had by that time become aware of the issue. Chairman Moses Swaim entered a resolution that year thanking the Female Society of Jamestown for its help, and saying: "... an enlarged participation ... in works of Justice, Benevolence, and Humanity ... will enlarge the circle which Custom has *improperly prescribed* to [the women's] action and usefulness and elevate them to *the sphere in which nature intended them to move*."⁶¹ (Italics added.) The second is a notation in the Memorandum and Cash Book kept by Dr. J. Henry and Mary Watson Smith, recording the expenditure of twenty-five cents for admission to a "lecture on Women's Rights" given in Greensboro about the beginning of the Civil War.⁶²

The title

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CHAPTER IV

THE CIVIL WAR ERA

Women in Slavery

The slave trade plus natural increase had resulted in a population of some four million slaves in the South by 1860. Of this number, almost half were women.

Not all had the same experience. The worst that could befall a slave... male or female... was field labor on a large deep-South plantation. There, life was controlled by an overseer who often had little personal stake in the well-being of his charges. A house servant on such a plantation fared better, as did slaves on smaller plantations (such as those in Guilford County) where the master himself was present in the fields.

Nowhere was the slave existence a placid one. Even on reasonably humane plantations, where treatment was less oppressive and slaves were allowed to form more or less stable "marriages," there was always the threat that the children would be forced to see their parents flogged, that one spouse must stand by helplessly while the other was abused, or that the family would be broken apart by sale. Some black couples are known to have been separated after forty years together.

The black woman enjoyed a slightly better position than the man in the slave community. Her relationship to her offspring was often much clearer than the father's, so the master frequently relied upon her to raise and discipline the children until they were able to work. This service, in addition to the field and housework, made her too valuable an asset to sell off the plantation — so she often became the mistress of her own cabin and made her own decisions about family life.¹

White children, who developed strong attachments for the black women who nursed them, often continued in adulthood to seek these women's advice in the matter of which slaves should be sold and to whom. Such women and their families enjoyed a measure of stability which few other slaves ever knew.

There were hazards attendant upon these unique positions, however. In some instances a slave woman's value may have depended upon frequent pregnancy and birth. She continued her housework, even strenuous field work, up to a few weeks before the birth. She might be excused from work for the few days or weeks needed to nurse the newborn; but then she must return to it, taking the child with her to the field, or returning to the cabin regularly during the day to nurse.²

The most prevalent problem slave women faced was unwanted

sexual attentions from the master, his father, brothers, sons, and any visiting male friend or neighbor. This threat was so widespread that the Manumission Society in Guilford County cited it as one of three basic indictments against the institution of slavery and urged that legal provision be made "... for the protection of the female slaves in their rights to chastity..."³

Publishing indictments was the most that Guilford County abolitionists could do, openly, to fight slavery. Like other strong slaveholding states, North Carolina had enacted laws forbidding the emancipation of slaves except under extremely limited circumstances. Under these laws a freed black was no more than a slave without a master. Any white man could take possession of such "slaves" just by capturing them. Then they would be returned to the fields or, as usually happened, sold to the huge plantations further south.

To avoid these perils and still assist the slaves, abolitionists in the county tried some elaborate experiments, such as less than successful attempts to resettle freed slaves in Haiti and Liberia. Another ruse involved the Yearly Meeting's holding title to slaves who lived as free men and women! This arrangement was a very sensible one. While the Quakers did not wish to own slaves, neither did they wish to sell to others such slaves as came into their possession by inheritance or other such means, and freedom would bring the threat of kidnapping and resale. As the legal property of the Yearly Meeting, however, the blacks were safe from all such torments. By the time of the Civil War, it is said, there were two thousand such freeliving slaves in North Carolina, 693 of them in Guilford County. Most of these rented their own small farms or worked as sharecroppers or in tanyards or the textile mill which operated for a time in Greensboro.⁴

The Underground Railroad

These ideas and concerns, working their way through the fertile brains of certain members of the Manumission Society, led to the development of that most ambitious and successful of all the abolitionist efforts, the Underground Railroad. This was an amazingly effective plan, reputedly originated about 1819 by Vestal Coffin of New Garden, to conduct runaway slaves to freedom and the care of Quaker families in Indiana and Ohio. It was put into successful operation with the assistance of Levi Coffin, James and Richard Mendenhall, and certain of the Worths and by 1830 had routes operating regularly from the deep South through North Carolina to Pennsylvania, Ohio, and points north.

The blacks were not lured away from their owners. The initial

escape was made on their own, stealing away from their cabins in the night to a home, barn, church, or clearing in the woods where an "agent" of the Underground Railroad would meet them. Those capable of making the trip would be fed and clothed, then hidden (in the secret room at the old Mendenhall plantation, under the pelts in David Beard's hat shop in Jamestown, in a hole in a creek bank near Guilford College) until they could be ushered along a prescribed route to another "agent" who would repeat the process. Those who were judged too great a risk were quietly returned, the same night, to their quarters.

The road itself consisted of ordinary North Carolina, Virginia and Pennsylvania thoroughfares, marked off secretly with road signs that only the initiated could recognize. When a roadway forked or turned, a stone in the road or a nail driven into a tree trunk or fence rail would show the way. There was nothing else to be seen, and for thirty years the system functioned effectively with few people even suspecting its existence.⁵

The secret was so carefully kept, in fact, that even today little is known of the men and women who ran the Railroad. Even at the close of their lives they remained silent, as Addison Coffin, for years a "conductor" on the Railroad, explains:

The threadbare escapes, the feats of agility in running, the doors that were opened for escape when all seemed closed in, and it appeared as I should pay the forfeit by a violent death, are too startling for even this generation, and as they are not essential to the upbuilding of humanity, will soon be buried with me.⁶

Nevertheless, popular traditions persist as to who some of these people were, even though no one can now know the details of their activities.

Vina Curry was a washer-woman at New Garden Boarding School and a freed slave. When her husband Arch died she lent his "free papers" to fugitive slaves who matched his description. The blacks would then join parties of sympathetic pioneers going west and return the papers through Indiana Quakers. In this way she assisted more than fifteen slaves to freedom.⁷

Martha Coppage Tomlinson, a native of South Carolina, was stolen by Indians in her youth and lived seven years with them. When she was freed and moved to a farm near the Springfield Meeting in High Point, she is said to have operated a depot there for the Underground Railroad. As evidence of this, a boulder dug up on her farm in recent years was found to have odd markings: an arrow, pointing to a star. The north star was a major direction-finder for runaway slaves.⁸

Two other Guilford County women, Alethea Flukes Coffin and Delphina Gardner Mendenhall, are known to have given considerable

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assistance to freed or escaping slaves on the Underground Railroad. Again, little is known of what their actual functions and dangers may have been.

Alethea Flukes Coffin (1798-1891)

Alethea Flukes Coffin came from the land, a woman for whom farming was deeply rewarding and often the only available means of survival. Yet she spent years assisting runaway slaves to freedom, and young women to better educations, before allowing herself the pleasure of her own farm in Indiana.

She was of ancient Irish lineage, a descendant of the aboriginal Albanoid race, the last of whom are said to have come to America in 1787. Her son Addison Coffin claimed to have inherited from her some interesting characteristics of that race: a talent for the "second sight" and what he called a "wonderfully retentive memory and fluent tongue."⁹

Alethea Flukes was born in 1798 at Big Springs, two miles west of present-day Greensboro, but little is known of her until one November day in 1817 when she married Vestal Coffin and joined the Membership of Friends at Sandy Creek. Shortly afterwards the two moved to New Garden, where Vestal struck upon the idea of the Underground Railroad in 1819. Undoubtedly Alethea helped organize the Railroad and covered for Vestal's absences as he served as one of its first "conductors."

Vestal died in the fall of 1826, leaving Alethea, also ill and very weak, with four small children to care for and no provision made for the coming winter. There followed a time of bitter cold, hunger, and terrible poverty, but even in the depths of that miserable winter, Alethea never ceased caring for the less fortunate. She took in homeless boys, washed for them, nursed them, and fed them together with her own children. When she and her family somehow survived, she began to believe that absolutely anything one attempted could be done. Perhaps it was this belief that gave her the courage to continue Vestal's work with the Underground Railroad.

The Coffin farm is said to have been the primary depot in the Guilford College area, and, according to Addison Coffin, his mother took Vestal's place in running it until he and his brother were old enough to relieve her of that duty. The work involved counseling and assisting the runaways, feeding them, hiding them about the farm, then directing them to the next agent to the north. Considering her self-reliance in other ventures, one wonders if this sturdy farm woman might have conducted some of the blacks along the route herself.

As the years passed and more and more of her neighbors moved to the western settlements, Alethea began to feel the urge to go with them, to see the new country, and to work for abolition on the northern end of the Railroad. Through rigid saving and a loan from her brother-in-law she managed to accumulate the hundred dollars needed for an eighty-acre farm in Indiana and joined a wagon train traveling west across the mountains.

Once there, she set out alone on horseback to visit friends and relatives from North Carolina and look for good property. She scoured the land for a hundred miles around, found her farm, then rode back to North Carolina planning to move to the new homestead within two or three years.

Instead, in 1849,¹⁰ she became Matron at the New Garden Boarding School, employing her own good education and common-sense skills of economy and management as driving principles for its success. In expressing his gratitude Dr. Nereus Mendenhall called her a "model of carefulness and economy."¹¹

It was 1852 before she moved at last to the farm in Indiana. There, in addition to the work that she undoubtedly continued with the Underground Railroad, Alethea served for nine years as assistant matron at Earlham College in Richmond. Her last years were spent peacefully spinning, knitting, pruning her fruit trees, and doing the farm work she loved . . . anything to keep from the idleness she could not bear. The strength which had been hers throughout her life kept her healthy and active to the age of ninety-three. Her hair never grayed, her sight never failed, and her energy remained undiminished.¹²

Delphina Gardner Mendenhall (181?-1881)

Though she married George C. Mendenhall, the second or third largest slave-holder in Guilford County, poetess Delphina Gardner Mendenhall reputedly worked with the Underground Railroad and assisted Stephen A. Girard in sending fugitive slaves to the West Indies. She is known to have become a leader among Quakers in the county, and to have seen most of the Mendenhall slaves to freedom before the end of the Civil War.

Reared at Cane Creek, North Carolina, Delphina possessed a rare intelligence and acquired a "broad and thorough" education with refined literary tastes. After their marriage in 1832, Delphina and George set about collecting all the best literature of the English-speaking world — but their life together was to include more than literary interests. Delphina assisted George in his extensive legal prac-

tice (many said she knew as much about the law as he did) and with the work of the plantation.

The slaves which George had inherited from his first wife must have posed a serious moral problem for a firm Quaker like Delphina. For though George professed to oppose slavery, he dallied most of his life before freeing them. His theory appears to have been that it was better for the slaves to belong to him than to someone who would treat them cruelly and that without training in a trade they could not survive in freedom.

For whatever reason, George continued to buy slaves, owning as many as thirty-nine at one time and training them in such varied trades as harness-making, carpentry, catering, shoemaking, toolmaking, milling, tanning, farming, and the use of the cotton gin. It must be said that George did profit from the goods these slaves produced on his plantation. When the blacks were well trained, George and Delphina escorted many of them, by family groups, to Ohio, both remaining with the freed men until they were gainfully situated in their new lives.

Twenty-eight slaves, already in Ohio, were emancipated by one document dated June 28, 1855. Then in 1860, before all the slaves could be resettled in free territory, George was drowned in a flooded river while returning from a distant court and Delphina was left to see to the matter herself.

As George had freed his remaining slaves in his will, and Delphina was named as his executrix, all should have gone well. It was the eve of the Civil War, however, and Delphina had a harsh opponent in George's son (by his first marriage) who felt that the slaves were his. Delphina did manage to start north with one group of blacks but was stopped before reaching the Ohio River. All returned to the plantation.

It may have been the interest of these slaves that motivated Delphina's reputed correspondence with Abraham Lincoln. Though no substantiating evidence has been found, his assistance would help to account for her incredible success in 1864 in transporting most of the remaining slaves through the lines to Suffolk, Virginia, where she put them aboard ship for Philadelphia and the road to Ohio. The few slaves who then remained on the plantation were freed in the general emancipation.

Throughout the war Delphina contributed both money and influence to assist Quaker men imprisoned for refusing to fight, but soon she herself began to feel financial difficulties. By the end of the war her manner of living was almost totally changed. A single horse and small buggy replaced the handsome equipage which had taken her to services at Deep River Meeting before the war. Nevertheless she attended

regularly, taking her accustomed place in the gallery.

After the war she continued to serve as clerk of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting and in time came to sit at the head of the Women's Meeting. Her presence at these meetings (for the discussion of such matters as female memberships and the advisability of proposed marriages) was deeply appreciated. As it was said, "she had the mind of Christ and clothed her thoughts in perfect English."¹³

In her declining years she gave encouragement and whatever financial assistance she could to the Baltimore Association which was rebuilding farming and education in the county. She also attended the young people's literary clubs, sympathizing with their feelings and encouraging them toward their goals. She died in 1881.¹⁴

The Civil War

Despite pockets of anti-slavery and pro-union sentiment in North Carolina, politics and events led inexorably to secession. The split with the Union permeated all aspects of life. Churches divided into Northern and Southern wings in the 1840's. In the 1850's the Whig party broke apart, to be replaced by the Republican party which had no members in the South. The Democratic party also divided along the Mason-Dixon line. Northern teachers, businessmen, and visitors began to go home.

As the secession movement gained strength, a kind of hysteria replaced reason, both in the Legislature and in public opinion. Abolitionists were driven from the state, and anti-slavery literature was banned. "Let the wise cease to be imprudent in speeches, the demagogues cease to light the fires of discord among the masses," Frances Webb Bumpass editorialized in the *Weekly Message*. "The work of righteousness is peace!"¹⁵

When secession came most North Carolinians, whatever their earlier convictions, cast their lot with their native state, whose first real period of progress was halted to prepare for war. Camp Fisher, a "Camp of Instruction," began training Confederate troops near High Point. A gun factory was established at Jamestown, and the old woolen mill there began making confederate uniforms. In 1862 the Piedmont Railroad was built from Greensboro to Danville, Virginia, to serve the Confederacy's military needs and to transport the wounded south from the Virginia fronts.¹⁶

Women and the War

If southern women never developed nationwide organizations like the Loyal League (which gathered petition signatures in the North for

an anti-slavery amendment) or the Sanitary Commission (which organized and assisted in northern field hospitals), it may have been because they found enough concerns in their own communities. The manpower shortage in the South meant that every man or boy who could carry a gun was called to fight, leaving the women, as in the Revolution, to run the plantations and businesses, maintain the food supply (increasing it if possible), keep their communities functioning, and see to the care of the wounded.

Soon they were working as planters, millers, merchants, managers, clerks, and manufacturers of cotton, wool, clothes, flags, tents, and bandages. They took up hand weaving and spinning again and in the worst days of the war even salvaged scraps of leather to make their own shoes.

Men sent back voluminous instructions as to what should be done and how, and women very politely wrote asking their husbands for advice. The truth of the matter was, however, that many women managed surprisingly well by themselves, delighting in a sense of accomplishment and belonging that many had never felt before. Their greatest hardship — what Mary Watson Smith called “the heartache that never lifted”¹⁷ — was concern for the safety of their men.

To care for the wounded, women in the South formed a thousand Soldiers’ Aid societies. Hospital aid societies made medical supplies to be shipped to the front. Many women became nurses, and the heartiest of them became hospital matrons and superintendents, to the horror of many a surgeon.¹⁸

Guilford County, connected to the front lines by the Danville Railroad, was profoundly affected by the war. Military trains passed constantly through Greensboro and High Point, bearing reinforcements north and wounded veterans south, and the women did their best to cheer them all.

A canteen at the Greensboro station functioned throughout the war, providing the troops with whatever refreshment the women could scrape together. Hospitals were established in both towns, and the women gathered regularly to quilt, sew, and roll bandages from hoarded scraps of linen. Food, bedding, blankets, and clothing were collected for the soldiers, and even the carpeting was taken up and sent to the camps to comfort them.

Mary Watson Smith (1836-1924) was one of the most active in this work. She was born in Charlottesville, Virginia, to Judge Egbert R. and Mary Norris Watson and came to Greensboro as a young wife and mother when her husband Dr. Jacob Henry Smith became pastor at First Presbyterian Church in 1859. At the outbreak of the war, with the

church converted to a hospital and Dr. Smith enlisted as a Confederate chaplain, Mary found her mission at home: administering to the sick and wounded, preparing food for them from her own limited larder, encouraging other women in various Soldiers’ Aid efforts, and raising her children, two of whom were born during the war.

An educated, cultured woman,¹⁹ Mary Smith is also credited with fostering much of the enduring literary, intellectual, and religious character of Greensboro. Her writings provide vivid pictures of Greensboro’s village years, and the hardship and uncertainties of its civil war experience — the scant provisions, the ingenuity and self sacrifice of the women, the tattered soldiers singing in nearby camps, on trains, and marching along the streets.²⁰ Without her pamphlet “Women of Greensboro, N. C. 1861-1865,” much of this account could not be written.

Ruth Worth Porter (1805?-1889) was one of the few doctors in Greensboro during the war, and her skills must have been as solid a comfort to the women as they were to the wounded soldiers. She was the daughter of Drs. David and Eunice Worth of Center community (both pioneers in medicine in Guilford County) and was possessed of a certain “strong-mindedness” when it came to getting her way.

When her parents opposed her marriage to Sidney Porter, an agent of the Connecticut Clock Company, she took matters into her own hands. One day in 1824 she set out on horseback in the company of an elderly chaperone, supposedly on her way to a community gathering, and she did not return until she was Mrs. Sidney Porter.

When Sidney died in 1848 Ruth was left with a mortgaged house and seven children under the age of twenty-three. Nevertheless, with the help of her eldest son, Algernon Sidney Porter, she was able to pay off the debt and get the family on its feet within two months. A year later Algernon sold his store and entered the study of medicine, soon becoming one of the most highly respected physicians in the area. Ruth studied medicine with her son and joined him in his practice, becoming one of Greensboro’s first woman physicians.

Though she specialized in obstetrics, Ruth Porter assisted her son in treating the sick, wounded, and dying soldiers brought to Greensboro on the Danville train. Her indomitable spirit and tireless consideration for others comforted hundreds of frightened men and boys while Algernon cared for the most seriously wounded.

Pipe-smoking Ruth Worth Porter continued her practice into the 1880’s, delivering in her forty-year career some two thousand Guilford County citizens. She died in 1889, at the age of eighty-five, from pneumonia brought on by overwork.²¹

Caring for the Wounded

In 1864 the tide of war turned against the South, and conditions in Guilford County worsened. All the news from the front was bad news and didn't improve. Food was scarce. Boys trapped rabbits and muskrats, sold the pelts for a few cents apiece, then dressed the meat for their family dinner.

When the Danville train pulled in with wounded now, there was little to give them but bacon, cornbread, milk, and sorghum molasses. Coffee was made from peanuts, butter was scarce, baking was done with rice flour and no lard. Yet the weary, tattered soldiers came through town daily, needing food and encouragement for the next battle.

On March 19, 1865, in Bentonville, North Carolina, came the last major encounter of the war. The three days' fighting was some of the fiercest that had been seen, and in the night, without any warning or preparation, hundreds and hundreds of the wounded were brought by ambulance, by flat-car and railway coach, and on foot, to be cared for by the women of Guilford County. The Wayside Hospital in High Point's Barbee House Hotel filled to overflowing. When Greensboro's Old Presbyterian Church and the Courthouse could hold no more, other churches were filled, then private homes, businesses, and every space that could be found. The women of both towns and probably the surrounding countryside as well turned out in force to see to the soldiers' comfort.

The women managed, somehow, to feed the wounded. In Greensboro where the bulk of the men had been brought, the women divided the town into districts and each neighborhood prepared food for the soldiers nearest them. In High Point, Mrs. Manliff Jarrell of the Jarrell House Hotel, Mary Jarrell Perry, and others cooked food regularly for the patients at the Wayside Hospital. Other women comforted the soldiers with early March flowers and religious tracts.

Medical supplies were at a premium, and anesthetics were not to be found; yet the women stretched the meager stores as far as possible. It may be that in that desperate hour some woman remembered her grandmother's tales of caring for the wounded at Guilford Courthouse and treated the rebel soldiers with poultices and herbs.

Many of the men had been grievously wounded, and losses were heavy. In the churches the bodies of the dead were laid near the pulpits until they could be carried away to mass graves.²²

Laura Wesson, a young woman from Virginia, had been traveling with her father to join her fiance in Charleston, South Carolina, when their train was stopped in High Point. With contingents of the Union

Army operating nearby, it was dangerous to go further. For three months Laura nursed the soldiers at the Wayside Hospital while she waited. At some point smallpox, the plague of Confederate Armies near the close of the war, broke out in the hospital. To avoid an epidemic, a "pest house" was set up outside town for the infected wounded. Laura Wesson volunteered to serve as its only nurse, and she did so faithfully until she too contracted the disease. She died on April 25, 1865 and was buried in High Point Memorial Park near the mass grave of the men she had nursed.

An unknown Quaker nurse, who had recently been vaccinated against smallpox in the North, also helped to care for the stricken in High Point. She must have just arrived, coming through the lines of battle somehow, because her vaccination had not yet healed. She vaccinated a number of the children of the town by scratching their arms and applying a bit of the scab from her own arm to the scratches. The children's slight fever showed that the vaccinations had "taken," and years later one of them, Eldora English Richardson, survived a second exposure to smallpox thanks to that crude vaccination.²³

Surrender and Occupation

Unknown to all these devoted workers, the Confederacy was collapsing. The county was shaken by the news of Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9th. President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet got the news in Danville and prepared to retreat south along the railroad.

On April 11th, Union Captain Adam Kramer of General Stoneman's Brigade entered Guilford County from the west, burning the depot and railroad bridge at Jamestown and destroying a small-arms factory at Florence. In High Point the depot and a warehouse full of cotton were burned. A freight car-load of cotton, sidetracked near the hotel there, caught fire from the warehouse and threatened to ignite the whole town. Despite sparks and burning tufts of cotton, women, old men, and children — all who were left in town — pushed the boxcar down the track where it could burn out harmlessly.

Meanwhile, Davis and his cabinet dashed south from Danville, crossing the Reedy Fork bridge just minutes before Sherman's troops burned it, and for five days the Confederate Government operated from a drafty old passenger coach standing on a side track in Greensboro. Davis proposed to continue the fight further south. His military advisers and cabinet were aware of the impossibilities of the situation, however, and urged him to sue for peace. Letters were written, a truce declared, and Generals Johnston and Sherman met near Durham to begin negotiations for surrender.

As the talks dragged on, some fifty thousand soldiers camped around Greensboro waiting for orders to surrender or fight again. Thousands of parolees (soldiers who had surrendered with Lee) went from house to house seeking food. Davis and his cabinet continued south by wagon and horseback. Then the terms were finally agreed upon, the papers signed, and the peace announced. "Turn to God," Frances Webb Bumpass editorialized, "and be not afraid."²⁴

It was April 26th, 1865. Abraham Lincoln had been dead for twelve days.

Once Johnston had surrendered, the remaining Confederate stores were turned over to the soldiers and citizens. The women fed their children their first generous meal in some time and hid the rest as best they could. Matilda Eckel Alford and her family buried a cache of Confederate money in their yard. Mrs. Robert P. Dick had her children wear all their clothes all the time, so no one could confiscate them. Women in High Point loosened bricks in the cellars and hid their few remaining valuables back of them. Federal forces were coming.

It was a fine early summer morning when General Cox and thirty thousand soldiers marched into Greensboro. Bugles and trumpets blew, bands played, and new blue uniforms flashed in the sun. To the exhausted women watching from houses along the way, it must have seemed that they had marched into Guilford County from another world.

The officers sent word ahead that they would occupy the largest house in town until their quarters could be established. Blandwood, the home of former governor Morehead, was the largest, but it already sheltered three families and several sick soldiers. Nevertheless, Governor Morehead and his widowed daughter, Letitia Morehead Walker (1823-1908), welcomed the officers as guests of Blandwood. Long known as a charming and innovative hostess, Letitia's graciousness on this and other difficult occasions was credited with helping to maintain level heads on both sides during the weeks of Union occupation.

It was not always easy for her. When General Cox informed her of his wife's arrival in Greensboro and expressed the hope that she and Mrs. J. A. Gilmer would call upon Mrs. Cox, Letitia was beside herself. Finally, in outdated finery, with gloves and shoes provided by blockade-runner, the two women visited Mrs. Cox at the home where she was staying. Even in circumstances as trying as these the traditional rituals of hospitality must be observed. "As you can imagine," Letitia wrote later, "the discourse was on very general topics . . ."²⁵

Wounded Confederate soldiers were moved immediately to the Edgeworth Seminary buildings where a prison hospital was set up. The

women thus lost the task which had kept them occupied for so many months, and until they were allowed to visit the soldiers again the idleness and concern for the imprisoned wounded must have weighed heavily on them.

Despite some disquieting incidents — such as the death of one old man who refused to give his money to a Union soldier — the occupation proceeded without major violence. General Cox proved himself a considerate victor, and his soldiers were generally well behaved.

A Sgt. Sweitzer settled his troops in a meadow near Frances Webb Bumpass's home and lodged his officers in a second-story bedroom overlooking the camp. The following morning the Bumpasses had begun their regular morning prayer service when the Yankee officers were heard coming down the stairs to the parlor door. When the officers explained that they too had come from Christian homes, Mrs. Bumpass invited them in, and the family continued their morning services with the army of the occupation standing all around them.

Ruth Worth Porter struck a bargain with the Union soldiers quartered at Edgeworth Seminary across the street from her home. In exchange for the use of her deep well, whose cool water the soldiers favored, she was promised their protection for her family.

A grand review of the federal troops was scheduled for the first Saturday after their arrival, and a pavilion was built in the center of town for the wives of the officers. Letitia Morehead Walker and Mrs. Gilmer were requested to accompany Mrs. Cox in the Pavilion. Mrs. Gilmer flatly refused to attend, saying that it was a Yankee bullet which had maimed her only son for life and that she couldn't endure it. Letitia also refused but when it was made clear how much depended upon her cooperation, she went. Later she described her feelings at the display:

Sullen, speechless, vindictive, no eulogy was paid the magnificent pageant, the gorgeous display of thousands of new uniforms, glittering sabers and bayonets, and all flushed with victory and marching to the music of splendid bands.²⁶

On Sunday General Cox sent word to Dr. J. Henry Smith that church services should be held at the regular hour. Mary Watson Smith, who accompanied her husband to the service, wrote afterwards:

As we passed along, every street, store, doorway and corner was crowded with federal troops, and the whole world looked blue in unison with our feelings that bitter morning.

I sat throughout the service in blinding tears . . . lest, in sermon or prayer, some word might escape from the turbulent heart of the speaker and cause his arrest.²⁷

In an effort to ease what remained a potentially dangerous situation, Greensboro women provided various entertainments for the idle soldiers during the weeks of occupation. Minna Raven Hildesheimer

sang at every invitation. Dances were held at the Britton House hotel, with costumes designed by Susan Dick Weir and made from curtains and drapes. Young ladies, notably Sallie Lindsay and the six Sloan sisters, entertained almost constantly in their own homes.²⁸

When at last the Confederate armies had been paroled and dispersed and the Union soldiers marched away, Frances Webb Bumpass and her family scoured the town for enough paper to get out the first edition of the *Weekly Message* since the occupation. They found five hundred sheets of poor quality paper — just enough to print a copy of the paper for each community where subscribers lived, plus lists of the subscribers, so the copies could be passed around to all. In that issue Mrs. Bumpass wrote “. . . the storm is over at last . . . our South has out-rocked the deluge of blood and tears.”²⁹ Many things in the South had changed forever . . . not the least of which were the women themselves.

The New Southern Woman

In the difficult years of rebuilding that followed, it became more and more evident to those who observed them dispassionately that women all over the South had gained a new self-confidence and stature from the war. They had been self-reliant. They had made successful decisions for themselves and their families, and they were helping the men to work toward a more positive future.

As an example of the activities of Guilford County women in the years after the war, consider Letitia Morehead Walker. Moving to a son's home in Leaksville in 1875, she became a self-appointed social worker to the children of the mill workers there. For twelve years she invited them into her home on winter evenings and taught them the rudiments of education, as well as such basic health practices as bathing and brushing their teeth. As Vice-Regent for North Carolina in the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, she became the guiding light in the effort to restore Washington's home and lived to see her fifty years' effort in that cause abundantly fulfilled.³⁰

Such things would have been unthinkable for an ante-bellum lady. Nevertheless, the men, perhaps in an unconscious effort to recapture the “heroic” past, continued for another fifty years to speak of these new women in terms and phrases from the world before the war.³¹

CHAPTER V

RECOVERING FROM WAR AND SLAVERY

After the Civil War much of Guilford County and North Carolina, like most of the South, seemed sunk in listlessness and non-progress. The state's promising pre-war industrial growth had been eradicated. One-fourth¹ of the South's million-man army was dead, and many of the living were maimed.

Money was gone. Spirit was gone. Opportunity seemed not to exist. Much of the energy that remained was misspent in hatred and frustration over the political upheavals of Reconstruction. Some older people who had seen their entire lives disappear in the war actually died of despair. One woman wrote that the number of deaths after the war was like the “slaughter of another army.”²

For the blacks freed by the war the problem was how to define freedom and how to live with an almost total lack of preparation for self-support. They had no homes and no skills. How were they to exercise their new-found rights?

Fortunately, the listlessness was neither universal nor permanent. Many women emerged from the war with skills, energies, and enthusiasms sharpened for more challenging work. They found it in jobs or farming or even, later in the century, in professions. Men and women with good lands and managerial skills were able to pull out of their wartime losses ahead of the rest.³

The Baltimore Association

In Guilford County a big helping hand toward recovery came from the Baltimore Association of Friends, and it came as a result of the huge numbers of Quakers who left the county for the west at the closing of the war. The preferred route to the West at that time was through Greensboro, Norfolk, then Baltimore, then West. As soon as the battle lines disappeared, migration along this route — and the old overland route — began again, and tens of thousands of North Carolinians of all denominations headed west. Quakers in Baltimore, called upon to assist numbers of destitute North Carolina Quakers traveling through their city, became alarmed that Quakerism might disappear in North Carolina and decided to do something about it.

First, many of the immigrating Quakers were persuaded to return to their farms and begin again. For those whose farms had lain in Sherman's line of march, returning took more courage than pioneering

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