

“A Noble Class of Old Maids’: surrogate motherhood, sibling support and self-sufficiency in the nineteenth century white, southern family.”

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Single, white, slaveholding women in the nineteenth century south performed key roles within the southern family: as the ‘family’ caregiver, maiden aunt, and in support of siblings during times of adversity, particularly during the tumultuous years of the Civil War. These women, far from being a drain on the southern family as has previously been argued, were frequently harbingers of social change; strong forces that held families together in tough social, economic and demographic times. Through their roles in the family, and increasingly outside of it, these women gained special recognition for their contribution to the family unit, and increasingly to the community, thus enabling them to carve out new identities as capable, independent and reliable women that dovetailed with the rise of the ‘Cult of Single Blessedness’. These more visible ‘public’ roles slowly challenged preconceived ideas on female singleness, gaining single women external praise for their contributions, which led to a new recognition of singleness, and a gradual reconstruction of the boundaries of ‘true womanhood’.

Keywords: single women; southern family; maiden aunt; sibling support; self-sufficiency; constraint; agency.

This article closely examines the role of single, white, slaveholding women in the southern family from 1830-1870, and analyzes the extent to which their various roles and occupations mirrored traditional race, class and gender conventions. It explores the repercussions this had in terms of societal constraints, but also avenues of opportunity for self-growth and personal agency in the way unmarried women conducted their lives.¹ As members of the slaveholding elite, this small subset of southern women operated within the parameters of their social position, which was an important marker that separated them from other women – both from the North and South. They were upheld as paragons of southern femininity, as a result of their elevated racial and class position.² Family was at the core of their identity as southern women, with marriage and motherhood at the helm. Many scholars argue that family was an important prism that enabled *all* women to construct a deeper understanding of themselves, and of their role and function within southern society.³ For slaveholding

women who were single, the family could be a source of support; it also provided an important platform to prove how “useful” they were, as well as representing a route to self-advancement. Women’s attachment to “usefulness” often replicated existing gender roles, and therefore altered societal perceptions of female singleness. This began to reshape traditional notions of femininity in the pre-war South, and inadvertently led to the gradual advancement in opportunities for single women, and enhanced female autonomy.⁴ Conversely, not all single women found their new responsibilities in the family a blessing, and they simply endured their additional responsibilities out of a sense of duty to the family.

This article broadly examines the period from 1830-1870, and gauges the importance of the Civil War as an event that further accelerated a changing sense of self for single women in the family, but also outside of it, even though its roots were firmly embedded in the antebellum era. It will also consider the degree to which feminine ideals, such as the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ and ‘Cult of Single Blessedness’, influenced single women’s daily lives and acted as a constraint to keep unmarried women under control, or whether it provided a platform for autonomy and self-construction.⁵ The ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ was a social construct that inspired and encouraged middle to upper-class white women, to fulfil certain models of femininity, based on marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. It had a strong racial and class bias that was particularly marked in the South because of slavery. Not all women fitted into the mould of the nineteenth-century stereotype of an ideal woman that was so heavily emphasized and encouraged in the nineteenth-century South. Its focus on piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity immediately excluded black enslaved women, frontier women and poorer whites. The racial limitations of southern femininity and the new gender ideology of which it was part, hinged on the exclusion of black women, who were barred from the legality of marriage, motherhood and family life.⁶

In nineteenth-century women’s magazines and prescriptive literature women were praised for being weak and timid, “dependent,” and frail. The *Young Ladies Book* summarised the passive virtues of a good woman, which included “a spirit of obedience... submission,” “pliability of temper” and “humility of mind.” *Godey’s Ladies Book* emphasized “wifely duties and childcare” and said women had to ensure the home was a “cheerful, peaceful place” to keep men satisfied and away from outside temptation.⁷ The ideal

southern woman was expected to be a wife and mother. Men by comparison were the adventurers, the doers, the hardier sex, who thrived in the public sphere of work, politics and business, which allowed their weak and dependent wives to enjoy the peace and quiet of the home and family, which better suited her delicate nature.⁸

Alongside this prescriptive ideal, developed an alternative model of femininity. Even prior to the Civil War, advice manuals, such as *Godey's Lady's Handbook* or *The Young Lady*, began to advise “that no marriage” was better than “an unhappy one contracted out of selfish motives.”⁹ The Cult of Single Blessedness developed alongside the Cult of True Womanhood, and came into its own during wartime. It helped to further expand the boundaries of true womanhood, by giving single women the opportunity to prove *that they too* could be true southern women. It marked a positive step forward in how unmarried women were perceived and treated, as well as providing a platform to self-fulfilment and enhanced personal agency. The state of single blessedness gradually gained acceptance as a viable alternative to marriage, which dovetailed with the new ideal of companionate marriage that emerged in line with it. As its name suggests it reflected a more optimistic attitude to the single state, viewing non-marriage as more of an opening for doing good and hence a blessing, rather than a curse.

As the nineteenth century progressed there was a steady transformation, or what Lee Chambers-Schiller describes as, a “cultural re-assessment of singleness,” that began in the North, but which filtered down into the South for women born in 1840-1850.¹⁰ Yet, the idea of single blessedness or usefulness was a concept hedged within very class driven gender ideals, and excluded poorer, single white women who did not come from financially stable backgrounds. Single women helped to alter their image as redundant women, and proved that they could contribute to the patriarchy of the southern family. They did this by upholding their femininity but also by demonstrating that they were useful and willing participants in their service to others in the family and within the wider community. These women pledged allegiance to an alternative model of womanhood, referred to as the ‘Cult of Single Blessedness’ that began to remove the stigma of remaining single. A recent collection of essays analyzes singleness from a broad interdisciplinary framework and uses it as a way to understand how society constructs various models of femininity as a

means of social control over women.¹¹ Singleness can be interpreted in two main ways: as a failure to achieve true womanhood in the way that it is “traditionally endorsed” or, as a sign of autonomy and independence, the latter of which fits neatly with the premise of this article in enunciating single women’s ability to carve out new roles as capable, *independent* and reliable women.¹²

It is the purpose of this article to explore single women’s roles and responsibilities within the southern family and to understand how the fulfillment of these roles, both replicated and expanded the boundaries of true womanhood. This led to a recognition of singleness as a viable alternative to marriage, which culminated in an enhanced level of self-sufficiency for women who were single. This will be explored by examining three main areas: the role of the maiden aunt and surrogate motherhood; the relationship between siblings as both a source of support and constraint, and finally a consideration of how these familial roles or relationships aided or abated the growth of female self-sufficiency for single women that accelerated in wartime and in the post war years.

The Southern Family

The southern family was “marked by the visibility of race” in a manner distinctive to the South.¹³ The existence of race-based slavery permeated every aspect of southern life, including the family. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese discuss how slaveholders used the “ubiquitous phrase” of “our family, white and black,” to refer to their white kin and their slave property. Its roots went back to colonial times “recurring constantly in the slaveholders’ private diaries, letters and correspondence.”¹⁴ Fox-Genovese sheds light on the way that the planter class “emphasized the persistence of the metaphor of family as appropriate representation for various social relations,” that supported race, class and gender hierarchies that white, slaveholding women were very much a part of.¹⁵ Race, class and gender became inextricably intertwined in southern society and consequently slaveholding women (married and single) had a unique role to play in upholding the southern, white hegemony – and with it the institution of slavery. In this way, the cultural construction of the “Cult of True Womanhood” fused with very specific southern ideals of class and race. Orville Vernon Burton highlighted that, “white Southerners were an especially family-centered people;”¹⁶

they spoke of their ‘slave family’, and in doing so perpetuated the myth of benevolence and contentment in slave life designed to counteract criticism from abolitionists. The family defined women as part of a larger collective and elite white women had a designated role to play in southern society as they were considered paragons of ideal womanhood to which the lower classes aspired.

The nineteenth-century southern family extended beyond the parameters of the ‘immediate’ family, reflecting the patriarchal structure of southern society during the antebellum period, with the husband (or patriarch) at the helm, and the wife, children and slaves dependent on him for protection and support.¹⁷ As Joan Cashin observes “the planter family had a nuclear core of parents and children [but] its borders were permeable and its structure was elastic, including many other relatives, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins – who were intimate members of the family.”¹⁸ Jane Turner Censer describes the southern family as a flexible, “unfixed entity”, and an amalgam of various family members, who passed in and out of its viscous boundary by virtue of birth, death, remarriage, widowhood, or divorce.¹⁹ The structure of the southern family was also affected by the “vivid presence of close relatives” omnipresent through the pattern of visiting (on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis), which further augmented family ties. The popular practice of “child exchange” often involved maiden aunts caring for their nieces or nephews for extended periods of time, if not indefinitely, in the aid and preservation of the family compact.²⁰

The southern family extended far beyond the traditional parameters that might be ascribed to the modern nuclear family, incorporating single women within its broad spectrum. By adopting the language of the family in their wider discourse, southerners knew their place in the antebellum world and where they fitted into the wider schema, which included single women’s place within it.²¹ Other scholars have similarly described the southern family as “an inclusive” institution that extended “beyond the customary boundaries to embrace more than blood kin, common color, or those of equal status,” which set it apart from the northern family.²² Scholars have long spoken of the containment of southern women in the home connected to the ideal of the ‘Southern Lady’, whereas in the North, the development of the women’s reform movement, emerged from the ‘Cult of Domesticity.’, drawing a comparison between them. The role of women in the North increasingly became linked to economic change, with the focus on industrialization and urbanization.

In the eastern and mid-western states, new opportunities opened up for women to work (such as the Lowell Mill girls in the 1820s and 1830s), in addition to the growth of female organizations, particularly for the middle-class.²³ These changes were much slower to take place in the South as the construction of the ‘Southern Lady’ was tied to the maintenance and protection of a slaveholding society. It was part of a conservative worldview that made the experiences of southern women unique.²⁴ There were also fluctuations in age of marriage, with southern women tending to marry slightly younger than their northern counterparts (often by the age of twenty), often to men who were considerably older than themselves. Additionally, if a woman had not married by the age of twenty-five she was considered to have married-late. According to Hacker this figure was steadily on the rise, particularly during and after the Civil War, with women marrying slightly later.²⁵

Catherine Maria Sedgwick, herself an unmarried woman from the North reflected rather critically on the status of unmarried women within the family circle, when she penned *Married or Single*. Writing in 1834, she extolled her view that “Married life is the destiny Heaven has allotted to us, and therefore, best fitted to awaken our powers, to exercise our virtues, and call forth all of our sympathies.”²⁶ Sedgwick stressed the need for women to be ‘useful’ in their single state, that correlated with the ‘Cult of Single Blessedness’ which inferred that in order to be fulfilled as a woman, women must prove their usefulness by gaining external affirmation from their peers. Sedgwick further embellished her point in 1854 when she claimed:

As slaves must be trained for freedom, so women must be educated for usefulness, independence, and contentment in single life . . . as a mode of life in which one may serve God and humanity, and thus educate the soul, the great purpose of this short life. So considered, single life would not long be regarded as either helpless, joyless, or ridiculous,” and that dreaded stigma, “old maid,” would soon cease to be a stigma, and in the lapse of ages possibly become obsolete.²⁷

Northern writers like Sedgwick who argued that single women needed to be “useful” had considerable influence both in the North and South. Sedgwick draws a parallel between race and gender, likening the position of slaves needing training for freedom, with women requiring education and direction in life, in order to attain usefulness inside and outside of the family unit. Thus, single women were advised they too could achieve usefulness by committing themselves wholeheartedly to the service of others, and by focusing their

service on the extended family. Single women could therefore benefit enormously – in terms of self-image and self-worth – by demonstrating an outward compliance with this view, and by replicating traditional gender roles, even though they themselves were not married. Single women honed a sense of identity from their position within the family, which could be further manipulated to their advantage in order to expand their private sphere and to gain a measure of personal autonomy, albeit within certain limitations.²⁸ Marina Oshana describes autonomy as “not [being] forced to do the will of another.”²⁹ If this definition is used as a benchmark, then the overall significance of single women’s place in the family – as systems of sibling support and family caregivers – illustrates how some unmarried women used their position in the southern family as an effective springboard to gain something more tangible in terms of personal autonomy, thus demonstrating an ability to overcome societal constraints and construct a new sense of identity, which altered preconceptions of unmarried women in southern society.

In the post-war setting, elite white women continued to order their lives around the family, but at the same time pushed at the boundaries of their prescribed roles, in large part out of necessity tied to the catastrophic changes in the social, economic, and demographic landscape. By demonstrating an outward submission to feminine ideals, single, slaveholding women eased “the transition to a society in which white women would increasingly be called upon to stand by themselves or to stand with the aid of other women.”³⁰ In a sense, the ideal of womanhood had naturally shifted, or expanded, “to include a more active, outspoken and courageous aspect” of womanhood.³¹ In the formation of the Ladies Memorial Associations in the post-war period, southern women demonstrated a strong allegiance to honoring the Confederate war dead, and fallen heroes of the South, in assuming the responsibility for Confederate memorialization and the creation of the Lost Cause mythology. Inadvertently it opened up another opportunity for single southern women, to demonstrate their ability and usefulness in the post-war context, whilst proving again that they too were true southern women.

The Maiden Aunt and Surrogate Motherhood

There were a handful of roles open to unmarried women of the planter class. One important avenue to self-advancement for single women was the role of the Maiden Aunt. In 1820-1850 significant changes to the

family affected single women's status within the family circle and to their role in helping to raise children.³² The 'Cult of Domesticity' was a gender ideal that had gradually infiltrated nationwide. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg described it as "a rigid gender-role differentiation within the family", "between and within society as a whole" that resulted in "the emotional segregation of men and women."³³ In the North this may have been a conservative reaction to the market revolution, and the rapid urbanization and industrialization of American society. By stipulating that 'true women' belonged in the private sphere of home and family, men used women as an anchor of stability amid turbulent and changing times. In the South, however, the ideology of separate spheres was tied to notions of paternalism, chivalry, and honor which some have argued were becoming redundant by 1850.³⁴

Tied to the separate spheres ideology child-rearing became an increasingly female centered occupation (with unsurprisingly, the mother at the center). As part of this nationwide configuration, single women were frequently seen as vital ancillaries to mothers, because they had fewer household responsibilities of their own and could be relied upon to help at short notice. Americans increasingly bought into the notion that the "mother heart beats in all women" and that "women were born to love" regardless of marital status, which was a critical step forward for single, childless women from propertied backgrounds. This was aided by the Second Great Awakening, an evangelical revival that swept the republic in the first half of the nineteenth century. This revivalist frenzy pushed women (married or single) to the center, and made them responsible for "rekindling the spirit and enthusiasm among the people."³⁵ This onus on women to personify religious purity, provided single women with the opportunity to prove they were useful, by committing themselves to religious activity and the conversion of others, especially men. This had two main consequences: increased responsibility for single women within the household, and an enhancement in their perceived status (but not necessarily their power) in the family, and outside of it.

Commonly held ideas that single women were 'superfluous' to the family unit, and to society in general, gradually died out as unmarried women increasingly became viewed as highly prized assets that could greatly aid in the smooth running of the southern family unit. This critical shift in opinion was tied to the belief that *all* women possessed a maternal instinct, regardless of their marital status. Consequently, women did not

have to be married to be considered ‘true women,’ yet they were able to satisfy their calling as ‘true woman’ by fulfilling their maternal role as maiden aunt, surrogate mother or as an alternative caregiver. Single women could therefore align themselves with the traditional nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood, by presenting themselves as committed in their servitude to others. The so-called ‘servant ideal’ bridged the gap between conventional ideals of femininity, and the ‘Cult of Single Blessedness’, as it was more mutually inclusive, and less bound by marital status.³⁶

Advice author Margaret Coxe advised unmarried women to “take to your heart with fond affection, the offspring of your beloved brothers and sisters, and in their sweet caresses and tender love experience a happiness only second to a Mothers.”³⁷ Coxe, like Sedgwick before her, continued to emphasize the happiness that single women experienced in loving their nieces and nephews, but noted how it remained “second to a Mothers,” thereby replicating the existing hierarchies based on marriage and motherhood. Yet the love and affection that maiden aunts felt for their nieces and nephews is vividly depicted in the letters and diaries of single women who often dedicated their lives to caring for their siblings’ children. One such woman, Margaret Williford, a thirty-five-year-old single woman from North Carolina, cared for her nephew Olly, after his mother’s sudden death. Margaret became alarmed on hearing that Olly’s father (Margaret’s brother) had decided to re-marry, mainly fearing that her relationship to her nephew may suddenly lie in jeopardy due to the arrival of a new mother figure, her sister-in-law. In a letter to her own mother, Margaret anxiously confessed, “As long as my dear little Olly is mine, I feel satisfied, but it would grieve me to death to be separated from him.”³⁸ Margaret’s confession makes plain an important truth, which was that as much as single women’s role in the family was valued and of service to others, it remained vulnerable and restricted, and ultimately hinged on the good will of others, in particularly siblings.

Even though some single women privately voiced their dissatisfaction regarding their role as maiden aunts, rarely did they openly challenge the existing status quo, choosing instead to quietly reinforce pre-existing gender norms, thus demonstrating the limitations to single women’s personal agency. Margaret Williford was not alone when she confessed, “I do not believe any mother could love a child more than I do him,” and whilst she may have been right, it was an opinion that did little to challenge, or alter the existing

social hierarchy.³⁹ Fortunately her new sister-in-law, Carrie Holmes, turned out to be a kind and sympathetic woman who shared in Margaret's sentiments that Olly should remain close to his aunt, which reassured Margaret of her permanent and lasting position in the boy's life, and helped to establish a lasting bond between the two women. Carrie Holmes admitted to Margaret's Mother, "You must not ask to have Maggie at home with you very soon, I cannot let her go, she really seems like an own sister to me, than any one I have ever met. I love her dearly."⁴⁰ Margaret permanently moved in with her brother and sister-in-law, caring for Olly like a Mother and assisting Carrie who miscarried twins in 1850. She remained with her sister-in-law after she was widowed in 1858, and she proved to be a tremendous source of support to her for many years.

The Maiden Aunt possessed few – if any– legal rights over the children in her care, leaving her reliant and dependent upon the good will of family members, often sisters and brothers, in keeping to their verbal agreements with her. Take the example of Mary Susan Ker, a maiden aunt from Natchez Mississippi, who in 1864 took on the care and financial responsibility of raising her two nieces, Mamie and Nellie Ker, after her sister-in-law, Jane Percy, died unexpectedly. Mary felt great apprehension regarding her long-term position in raising the girls, even after she adopted them in 1867. In an attempt to alleviate some of her anxiety, Mary decided to formalize her legal authority regarding the girls and produced a written document that she pressed her brother to sign. A lawyer drafted, an admittedly non - binding but specific resolution that stated that her brother would relinquish all rights to his children to Mary, who was after all raising them as a surrogate mother, thus effectively transferring parental like authority into her hands. The resolution stated, "I, Lewis Baker Ker, do hereby promise my sister Mary S. Ker, that she shall have the charge, keeping and complete control of my children, Mamie and Nellie, so long as she wishes to do so, and she is not to be interfered with in the exercise of such charge, by any person or persons" clearly referring to himself, and any other relevant party.⁴¹ Several points require addressing here. Whilst the drafting of a legal document specifying her 'complete control' or the transfer of complete control to Mary from her brother may have given some reassurance to Mary that she had sole power over the girls and their future with her, the resolution nonetheless remained a non-binding agreement "between relatives." The rights that Mary (and maiden aunts in a similar position to her) had been promised, remained intimately bound to the familial ties with their brother, and the

relationship Mary shared with *him* rather than being based on any firm legal foundation. Perhaps Mary sensed this fact, for in December 1871, she again took further measures to formalize the relationship she had with her nieces, by drawing up a will that divided her property between them in the event of her death. Mary averred, “I have made this disposition of my property according to my judgement and feelings combined,” as if to rein in control over her young charges.⁴²

Mary had a tendency to be swayed by personal preference or favoritism towards the children. A clear illustration of this can be seen in the manner she conducted her relationship with her now grown up nieces, Mamie and Nellie. Most obviously, Mary favored Mamie over Nellie for reasons that are not always clear, and she responded to each niece accordingly. In May 1894, after a fatal illness that resulted in Mamie’s sudden death, Mary confided in her diary, “I have lost every spark of affection for Nellie, since her visit to her dying sister at Moore’s Station. I cannot help her and do my best not to think of her one way or another. Poor Nellie, how I pity her!”⁴³ Her intense disapproval of Nellie, seems particularly marked, in stark juxtaposition to her adoration of Mamie, which was clearly intensified by the events around the time of Mamie’s death, when Mary felt that Nellie in some way behaved inappropriately towards her sister. Undoubtedly this was a major source of friction between the three women prior to Mamie’s illness and death as Mary pitted the sisters against each other, which only served to fuel Nellie’s sense of inadequacy, especially after Mamie’s death. Mary deified Mamie in death, with entries in her diary memorializing her love for “darling Mamie” who she admitted was “constantly on my mind,” whilst at the same time completely ignoring Nellie, who desperately needed her reassurance and help during a tumultuous stage in her own life.⁴⁴ Mary’s actions tell the reader a great deal about her mixed emotions towards surrogate motherhood: and her journey of extreme highs and lows. Just as Mary had freed herself from the financial, practical and emotional constraints of raising her two nieces to adulthood, the death of Mamie Ker rekindled Mary’s childcare commitments as she faced the renewed responsibility of bringing up Mamie’s two orphaned daughters. This fact clearly riled Nellie, who was struggling to raise her own children, due to depression and an alcohol addiction. Yet, Nellie was met with short thrift from Mary at every turn. Evidence clearly suggests that Mary felt overburdened by her responsibilities at times, raising four children across as many decades, in addition to teaching long hours to

facilitate their care was arduous, but she refused to give in and let anyone else take over, keen to manage on her own. On hearing the news of Mamie's death, and in spite of her grief, armed with the full knowledge of what raising two children entailed, her response was immediate, and purely maternal in nature. On April 19th 1894 she anxiously penned in her diary that "My heart and mind were so absorbed in what to do for the five children left motherless – the same as homeless – almost the same as fatherless – entirely moneyless – that I could think of nothing else."⁴⁵

Her instinct propelled her to act according to her maternal nature and to step in as surrogate mother to two of the children, for she could not afford to raise all five. Mary took the children to Natchez and she temporarily split them up to live with various relatives, whilst she organised herself, and ensured she had a job and accommodation to enable her to raise Catherine and Tillie, the two girls.⁴⁶ Mary in her grief demonstrated the tenacity of a single woman dedicated to her goal of bringing up her great nieces and it is clear that her devotion to the girls surpassed the role of family caretaker or maiden aunt, as she became the girls' surrogate mother. Mary worked steadfastly in her vocation as a teacher in order to provide for their practical, social, and educational needs in the post-war years, and as she approached old age, they also cared for her.⁴⁷ In spite of her intermittent protests that raising Mamie's children was a "cruel experience" that she was forced to endure, this was clearly not the case for the majority of the time, for on other days she spoke of how the girls enabled her to keep working, often in difficult teaching posts that she did not enjoy, determined as she was to provide for them.

Mary's diary makes it clear that she found the task of raising her grandnieces a mixed blessing, she was intent on raising them single-handed, but the reality was that she often found them a tiring and exhausting occupation, particularly as she grew older. Added to this, was the important fact that she was not the girl's birth mother, nor were they her sole occupation in life; for she continually struggled to maintain full-time employment, mostly teaching or working as a governess in order to afford their care. Her residential arrangements were often temporary and she had to always prove that she was doing a satisfactory job (as a teacher or governess), in order to keep her accommodation and also to secure longer-term employment, which Mary found stressful and taxing on her emotions, often causing her to become run down and ill. She frequently

resided in her place of work, and was therefore continually forced to negotiate their rules and requirements, which put constraints on her personal autonomy. Yet, when help was offered, Mary rejected it, and she revealed dogged determinism to manage independently, with minimal assistance from others. Her brother, who lived in Port Gibson was also a teacher, and he asked Mary on several occasions to come to live with him and his wife Josie, stating “If you insist on being independent, I think this would suit you much better than the life you have been living,” but she rejected his offer as it would have meant being separated from the children.⁴⁸ Mary Ker clearly preferred her limited independence with all of the stresses that it might bring, in contrast to a life of dependence or breaking her promise of caring for her nieces or grandnieces. On the one occasion that she did move in with brother William and Josie (due to her brother’s ill-health and to help care for him) she argued incessantly with Josie, his wife, and was plagued by her lack of privacy and inability to focus on her preparation for work, and her sister-in-law’s apparent lack of appreciation for her work and personal endeavors. Perhaps then, this was an indication of her drive for personal agency, as her reactions to situations both at home and in school exhibited strong traits of independence, which pushed against the boundaries of true womanhood, and forced them to expand a little further.

Ker’s life developed in various directions that she herself would probably never have imagined as a young girl growing up in a wealthy, southern family. Born and raised like so many other slaveholding daughters, the Civil War had materially altered the social dynamics of the Ker’s lifestyle and stripped the family of their land, property and slaves. Her story is indicative of the lives of many other unmarried women from planter families in the mid-1860s, who similarly found that they were in tightened economic circumstances due to the exigencies of war. Mary, and her generation of single, slaveholding women were particularly important in taking on the mantle of child-care in the service of their extended families. Single women often prescribed to the same ideals of southern womanhood as married women and they hankered after the acceptance of their community in the same way as if they had married. Just because they did not have husbands or dependents of their own, it did not mean that they were any less committed to the ideals of the southern family that represented the bedrock of the South. Historian, Joyce Broussard referred to their commitment as the “servant ideal,” in that it allowed women (from all social classes) to fit into the wider

hegemony of the South by demonstrating their servitude and commitment to the “larger patriarchal order of life.”⁴⁹ In other words, women were able to by-pass social, racial and class barriers that typically barred single, lower class, or black women from obtaining the mantel of true womanhood. By pledging their devotion to the more universal ideals of submission, honour and paternalism, they gained respectability where ordinarily they would find themselves shut out.⁵⁰

The Maiden Aunt provided much in exchange for the reward of familial intimacy and a good reputation. She counterbalanced a mother’s shortcomings and provided a unique service to the family compact and “offered instruction while maintaining perspective and balance.”⁵¹ Mary Telfair, a rich slaveholding spinster from Charleston, South Carolina proved this point exactly. Following the death of her brother Thomas, and coupled with her lack of faith and rather low opinion of her sister-in-law, who was now a widowed mother caring for two children, Mary stepped in and took charge of her nieces, Mary Eliza Telfair and Margaret Long Telfair. Despite Mary’s status as an unmarried woman, she deemed it her *responsibility* to actively intervene in the care of her two nieces, as she believed they were being raised inadequately by her sister-in-law. In this rather awkward situation, what seems most astonishing is that Mary garnered both the power and influence to control the situation, even though, strictly speaking, she fell outside of the parameters of the immediate family. Perhaps it was Mary’s wealth and family connections, or her strong, even pushy persona that enabled her to infiltrate their lives? What remains clear is that her pattern of interference was not an isolated case. In 1839, Mary again intervened when she took charge of her grandniece, when the girl’s parents Pierce Cobb and Mary Eliza Telfair Cobb, died. Mary virtually adopted her grandniece, raising and educating her as if she were her own daughter. However, Mary was soon to discover even her power had limitations and not even her wealth or social position could protect her from it. Regardless of Mary’s authoritarian nature, she remained beleaguered by the difficulties of raising other people’s children within a wealthy, slaveholding southern family. Mary Telfair, in frequent streams of correspondence to Mary Few, her closest friend, admitted, “It is not necessary to be a Parent to feel the responsibility and anxiety of one,” thus emphasizing the commonality of experience with biological mothers.⁵²

In another letter, Mary spoke of the constraints placed on her as the maiden aunt, which are illuminating given the manner in which she rode rough shod over the feelings of her sister-in-law after her husband died.⁵³ Even when it came to apparently minor decisions, such as whether or not the girls should be sent north to continue their education or stay in the south, Mary was simply not consulted on the matter, which made her feel isolated and insignificant. As she confided in Few: “We feel the delicacy of our situation and cannot urge what we wish,” highlighting the vulnerability and limitations of a single woman’s role in the family.⁵⁴ Mary’s case demonstrates that even the wealthiest and most well connected slaveholding women found that their autonomy was circumscribed within existing gender hierarchies when it came to their designated role in the southern family. Similarly, biological mothers found their autonomy was clipped by the dominant male hierarchy, which dictated the parameters of their maternal roles. Slaveholding mothers faced the dual responsibility in that they were mothers to their own children, but also considered themselves ‘Mothers’ to their slave dependents. This strange dichotomy, was further complicated by the fact that their husband (and patriarch) was oftentimes the father of the ‘slave dependents’ on his plantation, illuminating the issue of sexual abuse and rape of their black African slaves.⁵⁵ The injustice of the fact that black enslaved women were subject to sexual abuse with white men, and then denied the right to their own children, who could be bought and sold against their will by the white slaveholder, highlights the fact that gender ideals in the South had clear racial limitations. Slaveholding women’s elevated racial and class position hinged on the total disregard for black women’s maternal nature. Thus the gendered ideal that “the mother heart beats in all women” was ring-fenced by distinct racial and class boundaries.

For some unmarried women, the role of the Maiden Aunt was thrust upon them when they neither expected nor desired it. Ann Lewis Hardeman, a forty-six-year old spinster from central Mississippi, after years of living alone with her brother, sister-in-law and ageing mother, was suddenly commandeered to take charge of her sister’s six children. In early 1849, giving birth to her last child, Ann’s sister, Sarah Stuart fell desperately ill and died, leaving behind six children and an irresponsible husband whom she knew would be incapable of raising their children alone. Safe in the knowledge that her sister was a reliable woman, Sarah in her wisdom decided to nominate Ann to take on the responsibility of bringing up her six children: James,

Oscar, Adelaide, Annie, Elizabeth, Edward and Sarah-Jane. It was a request that shaped the rest of Ann Hardeman's life, but one she could not easily refuse and so rather grudgingly, she took on the responsibility that accompanied her new role as surrogate mother to her sister's children. "Suddenly the spinster aunt of 46 had become a sort of mother. She had no money of her own, was never to have money of her own [and she] lived upon the charity of her brother and sister-in-law," which did little to boost herself-confidence, independence or personal autonomy.⁵⁶ She makes it clear in her diary that she occupied a rather shadowy existence within the family unit, and she often described her position as being compromised by her shared living arrangements with her brother and sister-in-law, as well as her restricted financial independence. This spilled over in the way she disciplined the children as she found her dominant sister-in-law routinely interfered, belittling how she disciplined the children. Mary tried to share parental responsibility with Ann, which caused conflict and confusion, and ultimately diluted Ann's authority, making her appear indecisive and at times weak. Although she spoke with great kindness and warmth regarding her relationship with her brother William, she found that her position as surrogate mother was continually undermined by the presence of her sister-in-law, Mary Hardeman. Historian Michael O'Brien described Mary Hardeman as a "stern, authoritative woman", "watchful of her status", and "chilly in her formality."⁵⁷ Evidently, she was a cold, domineering woman who also occupied the center of the family and she was a woman to whom Ann played second fiddle, rendering her meek and ineffectual by comparison.

Despite these constraints, Ann forged strong and lasting bonds with her surrogate children. Her diary revolves around the minuscule details of the children's daily routines, their likes and dislikes, health and education. Later as the war unfolds, she emits her terrible anxiety for her nieces and nephews safety onto the blank pages of her diary, again reflective of her deep love for the children she has raised. Though she evidently worked hard, she often seemed to lack the authority (or confidence) of a true disciplinarian, perhaps tied in to her feelings of inadequacy within the family. Yet, the home and domestic sphere was all she knew, hence the focus of her diary on domestic reports, chronicling when the children are ill with whooping cough, chickenpox, colds, and scarlet fever. In a typical entry on July 8th 1850 Ann writes, "Our dear little Jane has been quite ill of Diarrhoea for a fortnight. Looks badly – but on balance doing tolerably well – Adelaide improving – Betty

can spell.”⁵⁸ Her time was dominated by caring for them; monitoring their progress with schooling and ensuring they attend church, which buttressed Ann’s religious beliefs.⁵⁹

When the children grew up, matured and left home, Ann missed her former dependents, and continued to worry about each of them – all adults with their own responsibilities – particularly the boys who left to fight in the Civil War. In December 1860 she writes, “This Christmas is lonely for me having only two of my dear ones with us,” a reflection of how much she missed, and drew pleasure from her surrogate family.⁶⁰ Her feelings of loneliness and isolation intensified as the journal progressed, with the secession crisis looming, and then the coming of war. As Michael O’Brien observed, Aunt Ann sunk into a deep depression, “She sat in her room, aging and alone, nursing her health and trying by force of prayer and will to preserve the children she loved,” but to no avail. This picture of Aunt Ann reveals a complicated image of a single woman – on the one hand ageing and alone, and on the other comforted by her lasting attachment her grown children and to her role as surrogate mother. This was not a woman who regretted the role thrust upon her, but an individual who had battled through difficult circumstances, to relish and enjoy her identity as a surrogate mother to her sister’s six children, despite of the personal constraints and heavy responsibilities the position had placed on her.

Ann’s lack of personal autonomy and her rather diluted sense of self within the family compact, must not detract from the fact that her role as a surrogate mother enabled her to enjoy a full and contented life, which drew on the positive relationships she shared with her nieces and nephews. Ann may not have initially chosen her role as a surrogate mother but she certainly seems to have benefited because of it. She may have lacked the fiery independence of Mary Ker, or the economic advantages of Mary Telfair, but she nonetheless shared certain commonalities with them: a commitment to the children and a desire to be *useful*. Ann Hardeman was certainly not an autonomous woman; in fact she found the process of decision making an almost unbearable challenge. However, she represented a good example of a ‘reliable’ woman who could be trusted to hold the family together, particularly in times of crisis. Ann, and women like her, often discovered an inner strength, which enabled them to overcome daily constraints which they were faced within their own

family, and to ultimately prove that they were worthy care givers, on a par with their married counterparts, which gave them a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Not all single women had the same confidence, drive and gumption of Mary Telfair and Mary Ker. Some lacked the wherewithal to manage alone or to secure a job in order to support themselves and their young charges. Others had little motivation to pursue employment as they had grown up in wealthy aristocratic families that sheltered them from the necessity of working for a living. Yet, these distinctions notwithstanding, what this section has shown is that single women were often equally dedicated to domesticity and the family unit as their married sisters were, even if this was solely to gain acceptance and respect within the family unit. After all, if single women were willing to take on the responsibility of raising other people's children, surely they deserved some recognition for their efforts, even if those responsibilities were thrust upon them? Single women therefore demonstrated their commitment to the family by taking on various roles within the family circle. The details of each individual story whilst distinct, collectively illuminate general trends or patterns that reveal a great deal about single women's relationship to the southern family. Even in exceptional cases, when slaveholding women came from extremely wealthy families who retained wealth during, and after the war, such as the Telfair's, the Maiden Aunt discovered that her role was limited by the paternalistic structures of a male-dominated world that did not *visibly* crumble until the American Civil War and beyond.

Sibling Support

Sibling relationships could provide an excellent source of practical and emotional support for single women. At their best, a strong network of reciprocal support was forged between siblings that was mutually beneficial to both parties. Conversely, single women also found they were vulnerable to constraint and exploitation, especially if their sibling was a brother. Fraternal bonds were a vital relationship that could either make or break a single woman's fortune, in terms of the support she was given, where she lived and, how she was perceived by family members. George W. Mordecai, a successful and wealthy lawyer and businessman from Raleigh, North Carolina, proved to be a loyal and supportive brother to his sisters, in addition to other members of his extended family.⁶¹ He had a special relationship with his never-married sister, Emma Mordecai who shared a communal living arrangement with George, his wife Margaret, and their sister-in-law, Rosina Ursula

Young. Rosina was a widow, who suffered from poor health. Emma often supported Rosina during times of sickness and offered support to the wider family unit. As a single woman, Emma Mordecai was a rock of support to several members for the family, but especially to her brother who could count on her reliable and steadfast manner to take care of herself (practically and financially in her role as a teacher) but also, in the care that she provided for their sister, Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, who was widowed in 1824.⁶²

Caroline Plunkett had left the family home in Richmond only to return during an extended period of ill health, (she suffered from a nervous disorder), during which time her sister Emma cared for her. Unfortunately, the situation did not easily resolve; Caroline was so unwell and her mental state so unstable, that she eventually required hospitalization in an insane asylum. Throughout the ordeal, Emma Mordecai remained stoic, and even though the situation at home must have put enormous pressure on her, she remained dogged in her determination to assist in the family compact. The relationship that Emma shared with her brother George, was an on-going source of support to both of them, and provides an illustration of sibling relations at their most positive. In a letter to her brother George on September 29th 1862, she notes wistfully, “How often and how gratefully I think of you, and what ought to be told sometimes, how much I love and admire you.”⁶³ Yet, it was clear that the adoration and support were mutual.⁶⁴ Emma was a stoical character. She cared for her sick mother, Rebecca Myers, who died in 1863. During this bleak period, she remained undeterred in her pursuit to do “good” despite the daily constraints placed on her. After her mother’s death she threw herself into war work at a nearby military hospital, using the skills she had developed at home caring for her sister and mother, by putting them to use for the good of the wider community. This crossover between the private and public sphere, particularly in wartime, helped to alter perceptions of single women’s place in southern society. Personal stories such as Emma Mordecai’s resonate with a collective number of unmarried women who also moved from the domestic realm into the public realm in their wartime work to care for soldiers, or to partake in other useful work, in aid of the Confederacy. Single women like Emma Mordecai remained deeply committed to their birth families, but they were also clearly impassioned by a broader commitment to the South.

Not all single women were as strong and resourceful as Emma Mordecai, nor were all brothers or male relatives as supportive as George Mordecai. For example, a name that frequently appears in George Mordecai's personal correspondence is his niece, Ellen Lazarus Allen Shutt, a woman who was widowed when her first husband, John Allen, died in 1858. Ellen embodies the stereotype of the desperate widow, a woman who was left financially destitute after her husband's death, with several children to support. John Allen had never been good with money and the couple were seldom prosperous even when he was alive. However, after he died, the situation got even worse, as nothing had been settled regarding his limited estate. Ellen, right from the outset, proved to be both needy and on occasion, manipulative in sourcing money from George. Rather than expressing a desire to be independent, Ellen regularly turned to her Uncle for advice and financial support. Even when she was offered money from her sister, she refused it, and explained to George that, "I feel assured you would prefer my continuing to make known my wants to you, to resorting to my sister or any other source. Is it not so?"⁶⁵ Her continual reference to George in all domestic and financial matters was more common than we might otherwise assume, and she constantly re-iterated her need for a male patriarch to replace her husband. She was unwilling to take on advice from anyone else or to trust her own judgements, and instead relied on the good nature of Uncle George to solve all of her familial, financial and legal problems.

In Ellen's case, the indoctrination of appropriate gender roles and behavior had a lasting effect, and prevented her from developing a direction and voice of her own, which negated her personal autonomy as she constantly reached out for protection and provision from an alternative figure of male authority. Ellen Shutt's predicament highlights several points: the vulnerability that some single women encountered, particularly widows who were used to having a male protector. Second, it shows how critical a single woman's personality was in coping alone, and the value that she placed on having an extended family to turn to. Ellen Shutt was fortunate that she could rely on the support of her Uncle George who was more than accommodating during her hour of need. At the same time, the ease of having a male figure to turn to negated any need for her to foster new skills of self-sufficiency. In many ways George replaced his own father as the family patriarch after his death, and he frequently demonstrated his ongoing commitment to upholding his role in the family

on numerous occasions. Historian, Emily Bingham observed how family came first to the Mordecai clan, regardless of each individual's marital status. Each member "grounded their identity in and found their place in the world through service to the family" and single siblings were no exception.⁶⁶

In the Cameron household the philosophy was much the same. Siblings Margaret and Paul Cameron from Orange County, North Carolina demonstrated their continuing commitment to their family throughout their lives. The familial bond, which they shared, was a constant source of support that was reflected in their personal correspondence over several decades. When their father, Duncan Cameron was dying in March 1853, Paul wrote to his sister, "I wish it was in my power to go to you in this time of need, I know I would be a comfort to you," which he evidently was.⁶⁷ Even after Margaret married George Mordecai in 1854 the sibling pair continued to rely on one another for emotional and practical support. Margaret was able to trust and confide in Paul regarding her deep attachment to their birth family, safe in the knowledge that he echoed her desire to be constantly present for their siblings. In regards to their sister Mildred (who suffered from neuralgia and partial paralysis) Margaret felt a special commitment. She confessed to Paul, "I sometimes think that it is my duty to take her to Philadelphia for medical aid," following a particularly severe bout of ill health and spasms for Mildred.⁶⁸ It was in the dialogue with her brother that Margaret felt at ease to express her innermost thoughts and concerns; a sentiment that never diminished throughout their lifetimes. The strong fraternal and sororal bonds that existed between many siblings reinforces the ethos of the 'collective family' which at its best proved to be a loving, communal and nurturing environment in which single women rooted much of their identity.

Undoubtedly, the fraternal bonds between single women and their brothers were an important aspect of their everyday lives. Whilst not always positive, the significance of the sibling bond remained of fundamental consequence in single, white, southern women's lives. Unmarried women often poured considerable time and energy into their relationships with their siblings and they were naturally left devastated if their siblings were ill or worse, died. Mary and Margaret Telfair sisters from a wealthy slaveholding family in Savannah, Georgia, tended to their sick brothers on more than one occasion. Firstly to Alexander in 1817, which was a long and arduous occupation for Mary, as she describes herself as isolated on a rural plantation,

surrounded by slaves, with only her sister, Margaret for company.⁶⁹ Fortunately, Alexander did recover, leaving Mary to reminisce: “I sometimes think that I was endued with uncommon firmness to have gone through what I did, but I was so constantly engaged that I had no time to reflect. I only felt as though my existence hung upon his.”⁷⁰ Her choice of words are instructive in that she describes herself as possessing an “uncommon firmness,” which in many respects was an unladylike characteristic, but one that she seems almost proud of. In fact worse was to follow, when Mary’s elder brother Thomas died on February 18th 1818, at thirty-one-years old, which had a devastating effect on Mary, and turned her world upside down. In her grief, Telfair entrusted her thoughts in a letter to her lifelong confidante, and close friend Mary Few. “You knew how beloved was the object I lament, how much I esteemed his virtues, and how I delighted in his conversation; he was Brother, friend and instructor, indeed he was everything to me *and the separation was hard indeed.*”⁷¹ The separation, of course was a metaphor for death. Mary’s heartbreak over her brother’s death plunged her into an extended depression. Nevertheless in time, Mary recovered sufficiently to go on with her life. She re-focused her energies on the care, upbringing and education of his two daughters, Mary Eliza and Margaret Long Telfair. She also developed a close relationship with her eldest brother Alexander, who she lived with, with her two unmarried sisters Margaret and Sarah. Their living arrangements reflected the idea of a collective family that flourished on the ideals of mutual companionship and interdependence. It also demonstrated the fluidity of the family unit discussed in the opening of this article.

The relationship that single women shared with their sisters, particularly unmarried ones, also had tremendous significance. Single women frequently clustered into female-headed households, or lived in ‘female only’ residences. Historian Glenda Riley describes these relationships as a subtle subversion of southern culture in reaction to the patriarchal rule in the nineteenth-century South.⁷² Unmarried sisters, who lived together, particularly after a parent’s death, provided company and support to one another, and typically shared households and responsibilities. Amanda and Josephine Varner were sisters and close friends who lived together and ran the family hotel, The Varner House, for over fifty years. The pair maintained a strong and successful partnership, and collectively managed the family hotel ‘The Varner House’, located in the Indian Springs, Georgia. This well-respected pair were well-known in the vicinity and were addressed with the

familiarity reserved for a married couple, as their companionship was so strong and enduring. The pair had gained recognition and admiration due to their successful management of the family business and as such they were often consulted for their advice in the local community. Rather than being considered as an oddity, these women were highly esteemed because of the important contribution they made to the Indian Springs area. Following Amanda Varner's death in 1915 (thirteen years prior to her sister Josephine) an obituary paid homage to her, highlighting how she had been "a devoted companion for a great many years," to her sister Josephine. Friends and family also acknowledged the importance of their relationship and wrote letters of sympathy to Joe Varner, recognizing how "lonely" Josephine must have felt without her closest companion to help guide her through life.⁷³

Sibling pairs were not uncommon. Angelina and Sarah Grimké, the infamous sisters who spent a lifetime campaigning on an anti-slavery platform and for women's rights, lived together throughout their lives. Even after Angelina's belated marriage to the anti-slavery campaigner Theodore Weld in 1838, the sisters remained living under one roof. The Grimkés were a well-known duo, daughters of the slaveholding judge from South Carolina, yet exceptional in their abhorrence towards the institution of slavery despite of their southern roots. In 1819 they fled to Philadelphia, and later to New York, where they became the first women to lecture for the Anti-Slavery Society.⁷⁴ Their shared opinions on women's suffrage and abolition bound them together as one, and resulted in a lifelong commitment to activism. Further examples of sibling pairs living together in all female households included the Edmundson sisters of Montgomery County in Virginia. Mary, Rebecca and Sally Munford were unmarried sisters who had been provided for in their father's will. In a contracted agreement, the girls were each paid one hundred dollars per year to support their living arrangements, which had been one of the conditions of their late father's will administered and paid for by their brothers, David Edmundson and William Radford Edmundson.⁷⁵

The Holladay family from Prospect Hill Plantation, Spotsylvania County in Virginia are an excellent example of a female cluster of unmarried sisters who lived together for many years, offering companionship and support to one another throughout their lives. Waller and Huldah Fontaine Lewis Holladay were blessed with a large family, which included six daughters, five of whom were unmarried at the time of Waller's death

in 1860. Nonetheless, the daughters were well provided for in their father's will, and they each received what would have been considered a traditional provision of being granted permission to live together in the family house, that had been passed on to their brother in their father's will. His will stated: "To my single daughters I give the right to reside in my dwelling house with their brother James M. Holladay if they wish it, so long as he may be the owner of it. In the event of the marriage of any one of them, the right, to such one, shall cease."⁷⁶ There are two key points raised here. First, the women were given the right to live together in a numerically female dominated household, in recognition of the fact that they supported each other in their daily lives. Second, their autonomy nevertheless remained checked by their brother, who ultimately owned the house, and they were therefore subject to his desires in regards to whether he wanted to keep it, or sell it on. As single siblings living together, they may well have shared a special camaraderie and kindred relationship, but the boundaries of this relationship were curtailed by the ultimate authority of their brother – the new patriarchal figure – despite the fact that they had not married and did not have husbands. Single women exhibited a degree of personal autonomy by living alone in all female households, but this freedom was almost always restricted by the higher authority of male dominance in its variant forms: father, brother, or society. Fraternal bonds were consequently of critical importance to single women, and had the power to make or break the living arrangements between sisters, which could be either a source of support or a source of constraint on single women's lives.

The Holladay sisters were fortunate, in that they shared a good relationship with their brother, but also between them, on whom they each depended. These women were practically and emotionally connected, and their letters demonstrate their unwillingness to sever this tie, even when they reached adulthood and their parents passed away. Long before their father's death, in the spring of 1848, Eliza Holladay penned a letter to her cousin Elizabeth Travers Lewis in which she confessed her great apprehension that her unmarried sisters *might* someday marry and break up the intimate sororal circle shared between them. "We have always lived so happily together that I should almost be afraid of any of us to get married for fear that we would not be so happy afterwards, when separated from each other," Eliza admitted nervously.⁷⁷ For Eliza, her sisters represented a central part of her life and they became the embodiment of what the southern family meant to

her. Fortunately her sisters also shared in her sentiments, and none of them ever married; they all continued to live together on the family plantation throughout the course of their adult lives. Having lived together for over thirty-two years, the sisters were loath to alter their living arrangements after their parents' death. The ties that bound single women like Eliza Holladay to their birth family transcended childhood and kept siblings together on a far more permanent basis. As Eliza freely confessed to her cousin Bet, "I always feel so miserable when I have been from home for any length of time without any of my sisters," qualifying this by adding that her parents also disliked being parted from their children. She noted, "Of course we cannot do so, so long as they object to it" almost immediately shifting responsibility on to their shoulders, and reflecting a pattern of mutual interdependence.⁷⁸ The fact that Eliza and her sisters continued to live in the parental home, even after their parents passed away demonstrates a freedom of choice connected to their class and familial wealth. Women who inherited money (or property) as single women had the ability to remain single or to offer assistance or communal living arrangements to relatives or friends, a privilege not afforded to poorer white women without property. Equally, single women who did not inherit money often found themselves in the situation that co-residence with other similarly situated women or with family members was less of an option and more of a necessity, whether they liked it or not, which was especially true during the Civil War.

Single women did not have to live alone to validate their desire for autonomy. Records reveal that single women often lived in sibling pairs, or in groups, or part of a larger family group. In the Mordecai family two distinct family groups had formed separate living arrangements following the death of its patriarch, Jacob Mordecai in 1838. Jacob's son from his first marriage to Judith Myers headed the first and it was based in Richmond, Virginia. Members of the household included Samuel's sisters Ellen (1790-1884), Emma (1812-1906), both of whom were single, and Julia, a widow (1799-1852), half-sister Laura, and finally Eliza Kennon (a widow) in 1849. Rosina Young also joined them after her husband died. Rosina suffered from chronic health problems which rendered her unfit to manage her farm, Rosewood, and household alone and she was quickly embraced within the family fold. The second family group lived in Raleigh, North Carolina. George W. Mordecai headed it. The group included Nancy Lane Mordecai (George's sister-in-law), Sisters Harriet and Temperance Lane, Moses and Margaret Lane Mordecai's children and in the 1840's, Mary Lazarus. In

the 1850's Margaret Cameron married George Mordecai and she joined them along with her invalid sister Mildred Coles.⁷⁹ As these two groups illustrate, the nineteenth-century southern family accommodated various living arrangements that incorporated single women into the fabric of the family. The Mordecai family consisted of men and women of various marital statuses who often pitched in and lived together, as a result of shifting family circumstances including marital breakdown, bereavement, widowhood or re-marriage. These individuals were able to live contented lives, coming together as a family group, yet each willing and able to exert personal autonomy in the way that they chose to conduct their lives. For example, Ellen was a teacher in the family school and later a private governess; she also wrote several books including 'The History of a Heart' which described her conversion to Christianity.

Emma Mordecai was the family caregiver but after the war she pursued a successful teaching career, which her family were evidently delighted about, which reveals a great deal about single women's changing roles outside of the family. "I am so glad Emma has occupation which she naturally so much desired," wrote Ellen Mordecai to her brother George on October 16th 1868, "I am very anxious to have a letter from her informing me of everything that I would know if we were together – I am sorry we are so far apart, but if she is prosperous and contented I can find my consolation in that reflection."⁸⁰ In the case of the Mordecai family, each member derived great pleasure from the success and well-being of its fellow members, reflecting a strong reciprocal bond of love and concern. For instance, when George suffered a period of ill health, his sister Emma, wrote to him from her teaching post and expressed her concern for his well-being. As she poignantly shared, "You do not know that everything that hurts you, hurts me – how often I think of your many anxious cares, and how I pray for your welfare and happiness," again reiterating the reciprocal nature of sibling bonds between single women and their loved ones.⁸¹ Not all women could rely so heavily on the solid support of their brothers. Mary Scudder was a never-married woman who had tended to her sick parents for two and a half years. After their deaths, she was shocked to discover that the bonds of mutual dependence, which she thought she shared with her siblings, were on shaky ground. Whilst Mary never regretted the decision to invest the days of her youth in the pursuit of a care-giving role, she openly admitted her disappointment. She had willingly fulfilled her role as the family helpmeet during times of crisis; she often found that she was left

isolated and unsupported after the crisis had passed. Mary constantly reminded her brothers of the painstaking care she had taken of their dying parents. Despite this, she discovered that she and her widowed sister were left destitute, without the financial means to live an independent life.⁸²

In spite of the fact that it had been her father's last wish that his two daughters be provided for, the reality was that his request was ignored and the girls had to fight for what was rightfully theirs. Due to complications in their father's will, that had originally been written prior to ill health, nothing had been specified in writing as to what he intended to leave them. Consequently, Mary's fate had been left in the unsympathetic and greedy hands of her brothers who refused to share out the family estate. Their actions ultimately clipped her wings of independence, (or at least her free choice in the life she may have chosen, or where she might live) and devolved power into her brother's hands. For Mary Scudder and for other single women in her position, the loss that resulted from her father's death was therefore taxing on a number of different levels: emotional, financial and practical. Mary had not only lost her father, whom she had devoted so much time and affection to, but she had also been robbed of any degree of personal autonomy. Her brother had stolen her key to personal independence, and tightly controlled the limits of her private and public life. With limited options open to her, and heavily circumscribed by her own family, Mary eventually decided to accept the proposal of marriage from her suitor Mr. Magie. She exchanged her life as a spinster for the security of a home and future that had been denied to her by her brothers.⁸³

These case studies reveal an acceptance of female-only households within certain limitations, and demonstrate that sibling support worked best on a reciprocal basis. Sibling relationships, when they were strong and durable provided an enviable source of support to unmarried women. There were several advantages of living in a sibling pair, such as Hannah and Susan Wylie from South Carolina. The women offered each other a lifetime of companionship; they also retained a close bond with their late-married sister Mary Mobley. In fact when Mary became gravely ill on October 6th 1857 Susan rushed to Mary's bedside, irrespective of the fact that she was unwell herself "and there gave her unwearied attention" to her dying sister. In a cruel twist of irony, Susan also became "dangerously ill" and the two sisters died within a day of one another. Susan Wylie was described in her obituary as a person one had to "admire," and it also stated, "her

faults were but few and were overshadowed by her virtues,” (note, however, that it does refer to her as having faults, perhaps a slight at her single status?). “She was the bedside attendant of the sick, the comforter of the bereaved, the friend of the oppressed, and the personification of benevolence, charity and virtue.”⁸⁴ This underscores how ‘womanly virtues’ were upheld as indispensable qualities in a society that continued to value piety, purity, submissiveness and care giving in women. Although Susan Wylie was never-married, the words in her obituary homed in on her ‘womanly virtues’ that gained her acceptance and admiration as an unmarried woman who exemplified the best of ‘single blessedness.’

After the devastating loss of her dearly loved sisters, Hannah Wylie continued to show the same resilience, hardiness and resourceful characteristics share by the triumvirate. She maintained a close relationship with Mary’s widower, William Mobley, who held Hannah in high regard, repeatedly seeking to persuade her to move out West to Mississippi in order to be closer to him, though there does not seem to have been a romantic connection between them. In his frequent correspondence to her, he tells her how much he misses her friendship and good advice and he worries profusely about the effect her sisters’ deaths might have on her. “Hannah, I often think of you sitting alone brooding over your great bereavement,” he writes. “I think if I were with you I could comfort and sustain you some in your troubles, as I know you could with me – if ever we get near each other again nothing, so far as I am concerned, none shall part us.”⁸⁵ It is fitting that he writes that he wishes to “sustain her” in the absence of her sisters, and in doing so reveals an intuitiveness regarding their relationship that was now lost. It is clear that the relationship between single women and their male relatives, especially their brothers (and brother-in-law’s) was potentially strong and supportive, and prior to marriage at least, single sisters acted out the role of a pseudo-wife to their brothers, minus the sexual dimension of marriage. It was a training ground for them both in the nurture and care towards another, which was of mutual benefit to both parties.

Josephine Blair Harvie from Amelia County in Virginia was another single woman who felt equally devoted to her family. During her time teaching in 1852 Josephine wrote regularly to her mother regarding her desire to return home; “Is home the same pleasant place that it used to be? Or is it changed at all?” she questioned. “I feel that if I could only get there I should be the happiest person in the world.” It was in the

quiet moments of sitting alone, far from home, that ‘home’ took on the rosiest hue. “I feel very low spirited indeed in my solitary room, my thoughts are far from here, they are at home that sweet far away place,” she mused.⁸⁶ Home for Josephine was a sacred place; it was familiar, safe and comfortable, a place where she could be true to herself and accepted as such. Connected to this was her strong attachment to her siblings who she took great pleasure in. For example, she could not disguise her regret when she learnt that her brother would not be home for Christmas. In a letter to him she disclosed, “I can’t tell you how disappointed I am that you’re not coming home. Xmas will not be Xmas for me without you or any one of my brothers or sisters.”⁸⁷ The correspondence between the Harvie family members revealed a close relationship between siblings and reflected the mutual dependence between them. Each member of the family gained something from their relationship with their siblings. When Josephine’s eldest brother, Edwin James Harvie was serving in the U.S. Army in Washington Territory, he frequently wrote to his sisters, and confided in them the details of camp life. “I like to share my feelings, happy or unhappy, with my sisters,” Edwin wrote, possibly because it helped maintain a feeling of closeness, even though they were miles apart. This argument appears justified by his parting sentiment that “I love you more than I ever did.”⁸⁸

The evidence in this article suggests that single planter class women disguised their departure from traditional gender models, which required them to marry and have children, by ensuring they were indispensable to the family unit and increasingly to their local communities. Single women’s roles in the family replicated conventional gender roles for women as caregivers, helpmeets or maiden aunts, which coalesced with traditional notions of nineteenth-century femininity. This was partially out of choice, and in part out of necessity. By demonstrating an outward compliance with the ‘Cult of Domesticity’ or ‘True Womanhood’, single women improved their self-image in southern society, gained acceptance, respect, and paradoxically, a route to greater autonomy. In the antebellum world, old attitudes of social scorn towards unmarried females remained, but they were slowly being replaced by new ideas of single blessedness that had particularly taken root in the urban centers.⁸⁹ In areas such as Charleston and Savannah, networks of single women gradually sprung up as early as the 1830s. Propelled perhaps, by a desire for moral influence and usefulness, elite, white women involved themselves in benevolent and philanthropic organizations, before and

after the Civil War. They were not considered as challenging the status quo, but rather fulfilling a service to the community, especially as most of the benevolent work was connected to the church.⁹⁰ For elite, white women who came from wealthy slaveholding families, the advantages of their social class and race position granted them certain privileges over lower class whites and blacks, including the opportunity to find fulfillment in benevolent organizations.⁹¹ As a result they benefited from the advantages of their elevated social position that afforded them the opportunity to reject marriage, but still continue to show that they were useful members of their families or communities, which enhanced other people's perception of their femininity. However, it was critical that these women clearly understood the importance of patriarchy in their lives that was perhaps most defined by their role in the family. To repeat again the words of Fox-Genovese, the planter class "emphasized the persistence of the metaphor of family as appropriate representation for various social relations," that supported race, class and gender hierarchies.⁹² It was about more than *just* the family; it was also about the overarching patriarchy of southern society.

Self-Sufficiency

The Civil War altered the social and economic fabric of many planter class families. As the Mordecai family illustrate the Civil War acted as a catalyst that further accelerated changes in the lives of single, white slaveholding women, in the family, but increasingly outside of it as well. As Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation eventually freed four million slaves in the South, planters watched on in horror as their property and wealth literally ebbed away from them.⁹³ As a consequence, the nature of the southern family altered significantly, as middle-to -upper class families were devastated by war and its aftermath. The mounting need for female labor to help support the family, led to a growing acceptance within the old elite that in certain circumstances it was acceptable for single women to pursue paid when the need demanded it.⁹⁴ This in many respects proved to be a double-edged sword as it acted as a springboard for female autonomy in the workplace, but at the same time started to threaten the male hegemony as women gained more independence. The drive for women's work thus came from a conservative ethos tied to the preservation of the southern family. However, in the post-war years, the transition to paid work also threatened conventional models of femininity.

Likewise, the expansion of southern women's public role in benevolent and voluntary associations, such as the Wartime Aid Societies during the war, and the Ladies Memorial Associations post-war, led to the "politicization of domestic relations."⁹⁵ Historians have contested whether wartime memorialization was a sign of liberation for women, or an attempt to rekindle their pre-war roles as 'true women.'⁹⁶ Either way, it was another clear example of how race, class and gender fused together to ring-fence the experience of elite, white women.

The burgeoning of women's work and the growth of self-sufficiency in single women's lives proved that unmarried women could be "useful" to their communities and devoted to the Confederate cause. The war intensified social change in elite women's lives, as it forced them, on an unprecedented scale, to respond to the needs of the Confederacy. This so-called Confederate womanhood meant that "southern society encouraged all women to support the cause through work as well as material and familial sacrifice."⁹⁷ It drew attention to the growing trend of single blessedness that had taken root in the Old South but which came into sharper focus in wartime. As Lee Chambers-Schiller argues, the Cult of Single Blessedness reached its heyday in the South during wartime, meaning that women born in the 1840s and 1850s benefited most from the opportunities it opened up for them.⁹⁸ Some women, like the domestic novelist Augusta Jane Evans, celebrated it as an opportunity for single, southern women to cement their new place in post-war society as respectable, southern women. She even used it as a framework for her wartime novel, *Macaria*.⁹⁹ In doing so, she championed the view that the war and its aftermath demanded a reconsideration of women's roles and a broadening of the boundaries of true womanhood.¹⁰⁰ As Jennifer Lynn Gross suggests, "Evans was not a feminist visionary, she was a social visionary. Recognizing the plight the war had created for Southern women, she suggested a solution – an expansion of the definition of true womanhood to allow those women who could never marry to find usefulness and social acceptance in their lives as manless women."¹⁰¹ It was almost as if she was suggesting that single blessedness should also include other categories of unmarried women (including widows), but still within the limitations of race and class.

The war acted as a catalyst for expediting an expansion of women's traditional home-based roles and transposed them into a public setting. The war required women to develop a new set of feminine characteristics

in support of southern independence, which, rather paradoxically meant that the ideal model of southern womanhood had to be revised or expanded. Phoebe Yates Pember, who worked as a Confederate nurse, famously said, “A woman *must* soar beyond the conventional modesty considered correct under different circumstances” because of the necessity of wartime.¹⁰² Pember was referring to the role of female nurses in the context of the Civil War. However, she highlighted an important point, which was that the war acted as a catalyst that accelerated changes in women’s working lives that had already been set in motion in the pre-war period. As Anastasia Simms suggests, the Southern Lady diversified during the Civil War and “different elements of her character” were emphasized to “suit different circumstances.”¹⁰³ Unmarried women had more flexibility and maneuverability than their married counterparts and therefore they were able to step into certain wartime roles more easily than married women were, which had both immediate and, longer-term consequences. For women who were single this included their ability to be self-reliant, brave and stoic, particularly in their work as nurses on the front line. For women like Phoebe Yates Pember, it was important that women demonstrated that they could be “hard and gross” in their working lives, not as a challenge to patriarchal authority, but in order to do their job well.¹⁰⁴

The war was a catalyst that accelerated social changes that had already begun in the antebellum era.¹⁰⁵ Nursing and teaching were two important areas of work for single women that had firm foundations in the antebellum South. These vocations expanded out of fairly traditional nurturing and care giving roles that were already present in the pre-war South. They had their roots in the southern family and rapidly expanded into a more public arena during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Teaching was a vocation that had its roots firmly in the home and family, yet in the pre-war setting it had not developed into an established vocation for women in the public arena.¹⁰⁶ Before the war, few elite women taught in an official capacity, although they often worked tirelessly in helping to educate children and sometimes slaves in the private setting of the home and family. As elite women came from wealthy families, they seldom had the financial motivation to work outside the home (before the war at least) and were usually discouraged from doing so by their families. In North Carolina it is estimated that only seven per cent of women were teachers in 1860, which rose to fifty percent by 1865.¹⁰⁷ Yet, they often spoke of the ways in which they helped care for brothers and sisters, nieces

or nephews, or gave Bible readings to the slaves as part of their daily routine within the domestic setting. Plantation mistress, Anne Hobson noted in her diary that she had taught two classes of slave children in the morning and met with the older bonds people in the afternoon. Later in 1864, she described her usual morning routine, which included “reading the scriptures and prayers,” “attending to household matters,” and “teaching some of the colored children before breakfast and my own little ones.”¹⁰⁸ Teaching the slaves involved reading from the Bible and prayers; religious instruction intended to civilize black slaves and converting them to Christianity. It was part of a woman’s traditional role on the plantation, and it was considered appropriate behavior for upper-class women.

Prior to the war, single women also managed large plantations when required to do so. Rebecca Pilsbury, a social widow from Brazoria, Texas, spent long stretches of time alone, managing the family farm, when her husband, Timothy Pilsbury served in the House and the Senate of the Republic of Texas and was a member of the United States Congress from 1846-1849.¹⁰⁹ In his absence, Rebecca Pilsbury, had to take on unaccustomed responsibilities that were extremely taxing at first. In her diary she recorded the new household and farm duties she must attend to in her husband’s absence. She noted the new chores were “entirely novel to me” and she described how much she missed the “kindness and support of her husband.”¹¹⁰ The expansion of her domestic role was arduous to her and she often commented that she was “not designed for a worker.” Nonetheless, she was determined to make her husband proud of her, proving that she could manage in his absence.¹¹¹ In December 1848, she wrote: “There is a pleasure in doing things you know will meet the approval of those you love, beyond the mere sense of having done your duty, and received the approval of your own conscience.”¹¹² Rebecca Pilsbury’s words reveal the importance of gaining external affirmation for her efforts on the plantation in her husband’s absence.¹¹³ Paradoxically, in pleasing her husband, she also developed new skills, which made her more independent. Virginian Ellen Moore also echoed the difficulties of managing alone without her husband. On one occasion she bemoaned the fact that the slaves “all think I am a kind of usurper and [that I] have no authority over them,” during her husband’s prolonged absence. Her shrewd observation underlines how slaves also recognized the differences between male and female slaveholders, and in some instances helped to replicate existing gender conventions, simply by recognizing this.¹¹⁴ Daily life

tested female slaveholders in several capacities. They honed a variety of new skills – including farming knowledge, business management, and dealing with their slaves (including reprimands and punishments).

Thrice widowed, Ada Bacot from Darlington District, in South Carolina recalled in her diary on February 11th 1861, how she dealt with disobedient slaves. Bacot made it clear that she *would* be obeyed. She also intended to exert control over the slaves regardless of her gender, and in doing so replicated class and racial hierarchies, which channeled power into her hands. Ada Bacot proved that the barriers of her gender could be overcome even when dealing with slaves, if women were from privileged and extremely wealthy backgrounds. Bacot exercised a heightened degree of personal agency, by replicating hierarchies of a male dominated world, rather than transcending them. Female autonomy in these cases was linked to dominance over others, mostly over slaves and poorer whites, which had already become well established before the Civil War. Single women successfully managed large plantations in the absence of their husbands from the early 1800s. In so doing, they clearly demonstrated an adherence to upholding conventional ideals of femininity. Kirsten Wood describes this as widows' manipulation of ladyhood.¹¹⁵ In other words, single women used their femininity as a disguise in order to successfully manage plantations and manage slaves, whilst simultaneously adopting new characteristics and manners that were required for them to do so effectively. Simply put, by being seen to operate within gender lines, widows inadvertently gained greater autonomy.

The vagaries of war significantly altered the economic landscape of the Confederacy and “propelled women into work outside of the home” in an effort to contribute to the domestic economy. The conservative ethos that led to an expansion of women's roles into the public arena in the Civil War and post-war era, led to a re-assessment, and broadening of, working roles outside of the home, and resulted in an increase in personal autonomy for women.¹¹⁶ As more and more women went out to work in order to help contribute to the household economy they started “to rely less on the hierarchical relations of the slaveholding family and assert instead a sense of independence,” which dovetails with the evidence in this article.¹¹⁷ The war, therefore, seems to have again, acted as a catalyst in expanding women's traditional roles as nurturers and educators in the home, to outside of it, which made them more acceptable and widespread in the Civil War and post-war

era. It highlighted trends that were already occurring in the antebellum years and accelerated the pace of social change in single women's lives by expanding the rigid ideologies surrounding true womanhood.

Therefore, it is clear that the war had a liberating effect on single women's lives, in terms of not only the way that they were viewed, but also in regard to the opportunities and obstacles which they faced as unmarried women. The longer-term impact of single women's wartime work was that it expanded women's opportunities to find self-fulfillment in work. In a post-war South that was scarred by military defeat, demographic loss, material, and cultural devastation, the reality was that women were often required to fill certain post-war roles (such as teaching and nursing). Women from the elite class found that their lives had altered beyond recognition by the end of the war. Many spoke of the changed routine of their daily lives and their contribution to the household chores in the absence of the slaves. Although this was difficult at first, women quickly fostered a new sense of satisfaction and pride in their work in a way that they had not expected to before the war. As slaveholding families suddenly became families without slaves, the altered racial and class dynamics of southern society affected single women's lives in the type of work they did, but more importantly in the breakdown of the rigid boundaries of femininity. The changes brought by war meant that a new generation of women started to work to earn a living, in order to supplement their families' income and to make ends meet. The initial motivation for the expansion of single women's working roles therefore sprung from a conservative ethos of protection and provision for their families, but also resulted in the gradual breakdown of patriarchy, and with it a revised version of the Southern Lady.

The Civil War therefore had a dual significance for slaveholding women— it challenged gender roles but also the patriarchy that was already creaking under the strain of emancipation. For slaveholding women, defeat in the Civil War not only brought with it the end of race-based slavery, it also challenged the conventional definition of southern womanhood. For the typical plantation mistress, who had benefited from her position at the center of the family, the post-war years posed a combination of threat and insecurity to her elevated status in the southern hierarchy. Yet for the single, slaveholding mistress, the war should be considered in a different light, since she already proved to be an inexact fit with the existing models of southern femininity. The war and post-war years can be interpreted as an opportunity to further accelerate the pace of

social change for single women. For them it was less of a “crisis of gender” but more of an opportunity for self-fulfillment and an opportunity to be recognized and praised for the good deeds done. It seized upon the notion that single women of various descriptions could still be valuable and useful members of the family, community and country, in spite of being single. As so many more women were left to manage alone in wartime, the perceptions of female singleness were forced to change in line with altered circumstances. The war shone a bright light on single women’s lives and highlighted the fluidity of the boundaries between married and single women.

Evidently, there is a strong intersection between single women’s roles in the family and the gradual expansion of their roles outside of it during the antebellum, civil war, and post war era. This article has explored three main areas and examined their value and meaning of the familial roles of maiden aunt, surrogate mother, and sibling support, to a burgeoning of self-sufficiency in single women’s lives. In the antebellum South, single women’s roles and responsibilities were tied to the home and family that re-enforced the rigid ideologies of true womanhood. Within this context, single women often took on additional roles, such as acting as the temporary head of household, and managing plantations and large numbers of slaves. This inadvertently led to the honing of new skills, an opportunity for self-fulfillment and a chance to prove that single women were useful.

The on-set of the Civil War resulted in an increased demand for women’s labor, and a temporary expansion of their working roles. The war therefore expedited social change and offered unmarried women new opportunities to demonstrate that they were useful in southern society. The question whether or not the Civil War changed the roles and responsibilities of single women in the southern family is complicated. Certain patterns of dependence remained in place in the antebellum period, right through to Reconstruction, and hinged on the bonds single women did or did not share with parents, siblings and other family members. Yet, additional changes relating to women’s legal standing and property rights were already underway in the pre-war period, which also gave some southern women more authority within the family in terms of inheritance and residential living patterns, which offered them a limited but unprecedented degree of autonomy. Single women’s place within the southern family was increasingly viewed positively, hence Kemp

Plummer Battle's reference to Mary Susan Ker and other single women like her as: "A Noble Class of Old Maids" who offered unparalleled service and commitment to their families, in their role as maiden aunts, surrogate mothers, and through the provision of sibling support.¹¹⁸ These roles eventually gained the respect and recognition of the family and also outside of it, leading them to covet new roles in the more public arena of work, as plantation mistresses, nurses and teachers. Whilst planter class women were seldom gainfully employed prior to the Civil War, they had clearly demonstrated their burgeoning role within the family and domestic setting. From this starting point, a small number of single women had begun to tentatively venture beyond the home and family, when they were required to contribute to the household economy. From this conservative basis, single women opened up a doorway to greater opportunity, which was accelerated by war and its aftermath. As Cornelia Phillips Spencer wrote in "The Young Ladies' Column," in 1870:

Girls who are growing up at the present day ought not to compare themselves with those of even twenty years ago. Every year is adding to their opportunities and advantages. Door after door is being flung open to them, and the question must be...which shall I enter...with the strongest conservative principles it is impossible to believe that they continue to move in the same narrow ruts as heretofore.¹¹⁹

The blossoming of new opportunities for women was connected to the respect and admiration that they had gained during wartime. For women who were single, this reflected the growing popularity of the 'Cult of Single Blessedness'. Paradoxically, the fact that unmarried women responded so positively to the demands of war, demonstrated their motivation to do "good" in their duty, to the family and, to the Confederacy. Many of the temporary changes in women's lives had a liberating effect on them, and led to more permanent alterations in women's lives in the post-war era.

Notes

¹ For an excellent discussion on 'Agency' refer to Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (2003): 113-124.

² The slaveholding (or planter class) are defined as planters who owned in excess of twenty slaves. Laura Edwards argues that the planter class accounted for less than 12% of slaveholding households in the pre-Civil War era, with fewer still holding over 100 slaves or more. It was commonplace to hire or own one or two slaves, even in urban areas, where upper-class whites used slaves as house servants. Laura Edwards argues that this included urban slaveholders who also benefited from the social and economic ties to slavery. Slavery supported various family members in different ways, and supported their social status regardless of where they lived. The term "slaveholding" in this study is understood in its broadest possible sense. It refers to large slaveholding families and families who had owned plantations, but who gave them up, or who had turned to other ways to make a living, such

as running a family hotel, or a school. Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 16.

³ See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family," *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South* ed. Carol Bleser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15-32; Eugene Genovese, "Our Family White and Black": Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders' World View in Bleser, 69-88; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions. Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 104 -148 & 260-314; Christine Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness, Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 65-95.

⁴ Anne Byrne in "Negotiating Singleness" argues that "interdependence could be fruitful, indeed indispensable" for single women, and that it could lead to autonomy. See Anne Byrne, "Negotiating Singleness," in Rudolph M. Bell & Virginia Yans eds., *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 6.

⁵ The term 'The Cult of True Womanhood' was coined by Barbara Welter in the "Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18: 2 (1966): 151-174. The term "Cult of Single Blessedness" is used by Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

⁶ The exclusion of enslaved black women (in addition to other groups of women, such as Native American women, frontier women, and poorer whites) is critical in understanding the racial and class dynamics of southern society. Racial and class distinctions undergirded southern relations, and in doing so provided an important contrast that elevated the perceived status of elite, white women. Single women benefitted from this contrast, by emphasizing their womanly nature, and their possession of a maternal instinct, that was denied to black women.

⁷ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰ Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*, 13-15. My research suggests that this cultural process of change towards female singleness actually began for women born earlier than 1840-1850, but that there was a clear acceleration of changing attitudes towards singleness in the period that Schiller suggests. Several reasons preempted the slower rate of change in the South: a slower rate of industrialization and urbanization, the dominant presence of race-based slavery, and a variation in outlook and family size.

¹¹ Rudolph M. Bell & Virginia Yans eds., *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³ LeeAnn Whites, *Gender Matters: Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Making of the New South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15.

¹⁴ Eugene Genovese, "Our Family Black and White: Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders' World View" in Carol Bleser (ed.), *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69.

¹⁵ Elizabeth-Fox Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family," in Carol Bleser (ed.), *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage*, 18-19.

¹⁶ Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press), 104.

¹⁷ In the war and post-war period this was to change, as the patriarchal structure disintegrated in line with military defeat and emancipation of the enslaved. As Jane Turner Censer argues the changes in the elite southern family "mirrored changes taking place elsewhere in the world" as the "patriarchal family had become weakened in much of western society – from Western Europe to the United States." As Censer argues, "women clamoured for expanded access to education, jobs, and the public sphere in the North, but it was followed albeit later in the South." See, Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 277.

¹⁸ Joan Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families 'The Ties that bound us was Strong.'" *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. LVI, No. 1, (Feb 1990), 56.

¹⁹ Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana University Press), xiv & 57.

²⁰ Joan Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families", 60-62.

²¹ *Ibid.* Fox-Genovese describes how the "Family figured as a central metaphor for southern society as a whole – for the personal and societal relations through which individuals defined their identities and understood their lives."

²² C. Vann Woodward, *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South*, edited by Carol Bleser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxi. The northern family was not defined by race in the same way as the southern family was. A more advanced pace of industrialization and urbanization, impacted family life, women's working roles, an increased age of first marriage and a gradual reduction in family size.

²³ For a discussion on the development of the North see: Christopher Clark, 'Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Rise of Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860,' *Journal of Social History*, 13 (1979): 169-89; Thomas Dublin, 'Rural Putting Out Work in Early Nineteenth-Century New England: Women and the Transition to Capitalism,' *The New England Quarterly* 64 (1991): 531-573; James Henretta, 'Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-industrial America,' *The William & Mary Quarterly* 35 (1978): 3-32; John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty; Ambition and the Eclipse of the*

Common Good (Cambridge: CUP, 2010); Winifred Rothenburg, 'The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1855,' *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981): 283-314; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Alan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 46 (1989): 120-144. For a discussion on the alleged differences between North and South refer to: Edward Pessen, 'How different from each other were the Antebellum North and South?' *American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 1119-1149; Robert. E. Shalhope, "Race, Class, Slavery and the Antebellum Southern Mind," *Journal of Southern History*, 37:4 (1971): 557-574; J. William Harris, ed. *Society and Culture in the Slave South* (London: Routledge, 1992), Chapter 1.

²⁴ Jane Turner Censer argues that northern and southern ideals regarding femininity "might have been closest in the 1870s and 1880s". See *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood*, 278.

²⁵ Historians, such as Drew Gilpin Faust have argued that the Civil War resulted in a "marriage squeeze" resulting in "a generation of southern women [facing] the prospect of becoming spinsters reliant on family support" as a consequence of the catastrophic loss of southern men during the war. This argument has been contested by J. David Hacker who utilizes the federal decennial censuses from 1850 to 1880 in order to explore the long-term demographic impact of war on marriage patterns. According to Hacker's findings, 92 percent of southern white women who came of marriage age during the war, did eventually marry. Whilst their average age may have been somewhat higher, this coalesced with a "gradual increase in the age of marriage" tied to economics. For more information, refer to J. David Hacker, "The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns," *The Journal of Southern History* Vol LXXVI. No.1, February 2010, 40 & 42.

²⁶ Maglina Lubovich, "'Married or Single?' Catharine Maria Sedgwick on Old Maids, Wives and Marriage," *Legacy* 25:1 (2008), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Marina Oshana, *Personal Autonomy in Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2006), 3. Marina Oshana argues autonomous persons are "beings in actual control of their own choices, actions and goals," and a "person in possession of de facto power to govern himself."

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Whites, *Gender Matters: Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Making of the New South*, 91. Also refer to chapter 5, 85-94 for a fuller discussion of the creation and role of the 'Ladies Memorial Associations and The Reconstruction of White Southern Manhood.'

³¹ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 12.

³² Lee Chambers-Schiller, "'Woman is Born to Love': The Maiden Aunt as Maternal Figure in Ante-Bellum Literature," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 10:1 (1988): 34-43.

³³ Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (Autumn 1975), 9.

³⁴ On the question of honor see: Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) & Edward Crowther, 'Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South,' *Journal of Southern History*, 58:4 (1992): 619-636.

³⁵ Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth-Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984), 43. Clinton argues that the "feminization of American religion" afforded women an opportunity to exercise control, to state a preference" and to exercise autonomy.

³⁶ Joyce Broussard, "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, Mississippi 1850-1880" (PhD thesis, University of Southern California, 1998); Chamber-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*. Since Schiller, other important work has emerged on single women: Zsuzsa Berend, "Cultural and Social Sources of Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England," (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1994); Bridget Hill. *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660-1850* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2001); Amy Froide. *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005); Jenea Tallentire, "'Everyday Athena's': Strategies of Survival and Identity for Ever-Single Women in British Columbia, 1880-1930" (PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2006); Christine Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Rudolf Bell & Virginia Yans (ed), *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Margaret Coxe in Chambers-Schiller, "Woman is Born to Love," 36. Note how Cox places mothers first and single women, second.

³⁸ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South 1800-1865*, 84.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Frank Shaw to Mary Susan Ker, 30 October 1867, Mary Susan Ker Papers, Southern Historical Collection. (Hereafter cited as SHC).

⁴² Memorandum Mary Ker to Mamie and Nellie Ker, 10 December 1871, Ker Papers, SHC.

⁴³ Mary Susan Ker Diary, 11 June 1894, Ker Papers, SHC.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 May 1894.

⁴⁵ Mary Susan Ker Diary, 19 April 1894.

⁴⁶ Mamie Ker had five children: Albert, Mary, Matilda, Catherine and Percy.

⁴⁷ In September 1894 Mary joined the staff at Mrs. Blake's school in New Orleans where she remained for a year.

⁴⁸ William Henry Ker to Mary Susan Ker, 4 February 1878, Mary Ker Papers, SHC.

⁴⁹ Broussard, "Female Solitaires."

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- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Chambers-Schiller, "Woman is Born to Love," 35.
- ⁵² Betty Wood (ed.), *Mary Telfair to Mary Few: Selected Letters, 1802-1844* (The University of Georgia Press: Athens and London, 2007), 93 & Schiller, "Woman is Born to Love," 35.
- ⁵³ Betty Wood (ed.), *Mary Telfair to Mary Few*, 62.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Whites, *Gender Matters* (2005), 13-14.
- ⁵⁶ Michael O'Brien (ed.), *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South 1827-67* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia), 32.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 33.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 8 July 1850, 222.
- ⁵⁹ Ann was evidently a religious woman, and saw to it that the children attended church and read regularly from the Bible. She is typical of a woman affected by the Second Great Awakening and the spirit of religious revival in the early to mid-nineteenth-century.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 6 December 1860, 314.
- ⁶¹ George Mordecai was born into a prominent and well-connected family in Warrenton, North Carolina in 1801. He became the President of the Bank of the State of North Carolina in 1949. He also held a number of other titles and posts, in addition to his job as a lawyer. For further information refer to the biography in the George W. Mordecai Papers, SHC.
- ⁶² The Mordecai Family Papers, SHC. Caroline was born in 1794 and died in 1862. She married Achilles Plunkett and the couple had three children, all of whom died in infancy. Achilles died in 1824, leaving Caroline as a young widow. During her widowhood she tried, unsuccessfully, to run the family academy in Warrenton. She taught her brother's children before opening a small school in Mobile, Alabama. Eventually she moved back to the family home in Raleigh. Following a turbulent period of poor mental health she was institutionalized in an insane asylum where she eventually died in 1862.
- ⁶³ Emma Mordecai to George Mordecai, 29 September 1862, George W. Mordecai Papers, SHC.
- ⁶⁴ This reiterates the idea of the 'collective family' and the reciprocal nature of single women's relationships with their siblings. For example, in a letter from Emma to George Mordecai on 18 November 1844 she expresses her deep affection for George, her "guardian brother", for whom she had the "tenderest gratitude". "Never, my dear brother, can I forget all that you have suffered for me and all your noble and touching kindness to me" she wrote with fondest affection. Microfilm Series Southern Women and Their Families, GMP 522, Reel 6, Davis Library, SHC.
- ⁶⁵ Ellen Allen to George W. Mordecai, 30 August 1860, George W. Mordecai Papers Microfilm Series, Subseries 1.2.4 1861-65. Reels 10 and 11, Davis Library, SHC.
- ⁶⁶ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill & Wand, 2003), 42.
- ⁶⁷ Paul Cameron to Margaret Cameron 15 March 1853, Cameron Family Papers, SHC. Paul is referring to the loss of their father and the continued ill health of their sister, Mildred Coles, who was never-married and supported by both Paul and Margaret Cameron.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Charles J. Johnson Junior, *Mary Telfair: The Life and Legacy of a Nineteenth Century Woman* (Savannah: Frederic C. Beil Publisher, 2002), 49.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 49-50.
- ⁷² Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 1990; reprint, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
- ⁷³ Henry E. Hutchens to Josephine Varner, Washington DC, 5 April 1915, Varner Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society. (Hereafter cited as GHS).
- ⁷⁴ In a speech in March 1838, reported in the *Liberator* newspaper, Angelina spoke of her reasons for leaving the South. "I stand before you as a southerner, exiled from the land of my birth by the sound of the lash and the piteous cry of the slave. I stand before you as a repentant slaveholder. I stand before you as a moral being."
- ⁷⁵ Edmundson Family Papers 598a 998-1006, section 28, Virginia Historical Society. (Hereafter cited as VHS).
- ⁷⁶ Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 113.
- ⁷⁷ Eliza Holladay to Elizabeth Travers Lewis, 22 May 1848, Holladay Family Papers, VHS.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ Inventory to the Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.
- ⁸⁰ Ellen Mordecai to George W. Mordecai, 16 October 1868, George Mordecai Papers, SHC.
- ⁸¹ Emma Mordecai to George W. Mordecai, Columbus, 23 April 1869, George Mordecai Papers, SHC.
- ⁸² Mary Scudder to John Scudder, 20 July 1856, Scudder Family Papers, GHS.
- ⁸³ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 71.
- ⁸⁴ Obituary, 6 October 1857, Gaston, Strait, Wiley and Baskin Papers, South Caroliniana Library. (Hereafter cited as SCL).
- ⁸⁵ William Mobley to Hannah Wylie, 12 November 1859, The Wylie Papers, SCL.
- ⁸⁶ Josephine Blair Harvie to Sarah Harvie, 30 January 1852, Section 3, Harvie Family Papers 1807-1913, VHS.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., Josephine Blair Harvie to Charles Old Harvie, Dykeland, 23 December [undated year], VHS.
- ⁸⁸ Harvie Family Papers, VHS.
- ⁸⁹ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness* (2006).

- ⁹⁰ Ibid., 118-149.
- ⁹¹ Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-15.
- ⁹² Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South", 18-19.
- ⁹³ Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness*, 183.
- ⁹⁴ Victoria Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 95. Also refer to Chapter 3, 'The Self-Sufficient Daughter,' 73-99. Ott describes how southern women responded to the needs of their family during the four-years of war. Though they in many ways envisaged returning to their pre-war roles in the home once the conflict had ended, the reality of a ravaged southern economy "and the abolition of slavery had wiped away any hope of returning to a world of dependence." Therefore the expansion in southern women's roles from the private to the public sphere was seen an aide to the southern family in a time of crisis, rather than the pursuit of independence, 99.
- ⁹⁵ LeeAnn Whites, *Gender Matters: Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Making of the New South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89. For more information on The Ladies Memorial Association, see 85-94.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., 89-90.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.
- ⁹⁸ Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband* (1984), 22-28.
- ⁹⁹ Jennifer Lynn Gross, "'Lonely Lives are not Necessarily Joyless': Augusta Jane Evans's *Macaria* and the Creation of a Place for Single Womanhood in the Post war South," *American Nineteenth Century History* Vol 2:1 (Spring 2001): 33-52.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 46-49.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., 48.
- ¹⁰² Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond*, ed. Bell. I. Wiley (Marietta, Georgia: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1954), 105.
- ¹⁰³ Anastasia Simms, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), 2.
- ¹⁰⁴ Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story*, 105.
- ¹⁰⁵ For example see, Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- ¹⁰⁶ It is important to note that that the growth of teaching among single women in the North preceded that of southern single women for whom the catalyst for the move from private tutoring of relatives to more public teaching was the Civil War.
- ¹⁰⁷ Faust, Glymph & Rable, *A Woman's War*, 9.
- ¹⁰⁸ Anne Hobson Diary, 24 January 1864, 12 November 1864, Hobson Papers, VHS.
- ¹⁰⁹ Rebecca Pilsbury Diary, SHC.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid., 20 November 1848.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹¹² Ibid., 2 December 1848.
- ¹¹³ This links to what Joyce Broussard has called the "servant ideal" which is the idea that servitude was an avenue to self-fulfillment and female agency. See Joyce Broussard, "Female Solitaires" (1998), 12.
- ¹¹⁴ Faust, Glymph, & Rable, *Southern Women in the Civil War*, 2.
- ¹¹⁵ Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- ¹¹⁶ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 111-133.
- ¹¹⁷ Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 98-99.
- ¹¹⁸ Kemp Plummer Battle. *History of the University of North Carolina from its Beginning to the Death of the President Swain, 1789-1868* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1907)
- ¹¹⁹ Cornelia Phillips Spencer in "The Young Ladies' Column," *North Carolina Presbyterian*, 1870, in Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 105.

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