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### **Book chapter :**

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## 1 18 | Civil War Diaries and Reminiscences

2 David Anderson

3

4 Keenly aware they were living through a momentous period in  
5 the nation's history, many literate southern whites of the Civil  
6 War era began keeping private diaries, recording daily happenings  
7 and key events as the drama of secession, war, and defeat  
8 unfolded. Whether kept with regular enthusiasm or sporadically,  
9 then abandoned in moments of despair, keepers of wartime diaries  
10 reveal not only the difficulties and demands that four long, hard  
11 years of war visited upon them, but also their own sense of  
12 themselves as historical observers and actors grappling with  
13 continuity and change in their experience and their understanding  
14 of themselves. Diaries both reveal and conceal much about  
15 writers' selves and silences -- and their ability to remake  
16 themselves -- as the factual and the reflective are mixed  
17 together to create a purposeful narrative.

18 Civil War soldier diaries like Randolph H. McKim's A  
19 Soldier's Recollections: Leaves from the Diary of a Young  
20 Confederate (1910), for example, begin and end with the war, thus  
21 inscribing the import and centrality of national events onto  
22 one's own lived experience and ways of being and seeing. Born in  
23 1842 in Baltimore, Maryland, McKim served the duration of the war  
24 with the Army of Northern Virginia, first as a private, then as a

1 staff officer, and finally as a chaplain with the 2nd Virginia  
2 Cavalry, a journey from raw recruit to experienced veteran.  
3 Inspired by what he saw, heard, and did while in camp, on the  
4 march, and on the battlefields of Virginia and elsewhere, McKim's  
5 diary entries, which the author reworked and revised, are  
6 revealing not only for descriptions of battles and prominent  
7 officers but also for the writer's allusions and ambitions in  
8 such seemingly "spontaneous" writing.<sup>1</sup>

9         Scrutinizing the rhetorical practices and strategies  
10 employed by approximately one hundred Confederate women in their  
11 wartime diaries, Kimberly Harrison has argued for the importance  
12 of what southern women's words meant to themselves in the context  
13 of their own lives and circumstances and as a wider reflection of  
14 Confederate patriotism and nationalist sentiment, crediting these  
15 diaries and journals, as forums for elite white women to exert  
16 their rhetorical power, with a significant role in shaping  
17 identities, values, relationships, and faith. Whether caught up  
18 in the war directly as nurses, or chafing under wartime  
19 occupation and oppressive conditions on the home front, or forced  
20 into exile to live the life of a refugee and rely on the kindness  
21 of friends and family, Confederate women were forced to step  
22 beyond traditional antebellum feminine conventions to enter a  
23 world of wartime responsibility and political conversation.  
24 Confederate women's diaries became important spaces to express

1 support for the Confederacy or contempt for the Union, not least  
2 its soldiers and officers for whom they reserved particularly  
3 venomous invective.<sup>2</sup>

4 A number of Virginia women have produced some of the most  
5 important, candid, and moving journals and diaries chronicling  
6 civilian life and home front activity in the state during the  
7 Civil War. The best known female diarists from Virginia include  
8 Judith W. Brokenbrough McGuire, Sallie Brock Putnam, Cornelia  
9 Peake McDonald, Lucy Rebecca Buck, and Ida Powell Dulany.

10 Intended as "a private record" for "friends and kindred,"  
11 the publication of Judith McGuire's wartime journal in 1867  
12 afforded the Richmond-born author an opportunity to present "a  
13 true record" of "wonderful scenes" and "points of great interest"  
14 relating to the "War of Secession." Diary of a Southern Refugee  
15 During the War (1867), among the first of wartime diaries  
16 published after the war, details McGuire's flight from  
17 Alexandria, her home city where her husband, the Reverend John P.  
18 McGuire, was principal of the Episcopal High School, to various  
19 towns across Virginia where friends and relatives provided  
20 shelter before she and other family members settled in Richmond,  
21 where they were living when the city fell and where McGuire  
22 obtained work with the Commissary Department and volunteered in  
23 the city's hospitals. A knowledgeable, well-read, and a  
24 passionate advocate of the Confederate cause, McGuire reveals the

1 destitution, desolation, and despair of those caught up in  
2 war-torn Richmond.<sup>3</sup>

3         Fellow Virginian Sallie Brock Putnam, writing under the  
4 pseudonym "A Richmond Lady," also published an eyewitness  
5 account, Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal  
6 Observation (1867). Living with her well-to-do parents in the  
7 Confederate capital at the outbreak of war, Putnam offers a  
8 detailed account of everyday civilian life in Richmond during  
9 wartime, covering "The Gala Days of War" and "The Gathering of  
10 the Troops" through "Sufferings of the Wounded -- Lack of  
11 Supplies" and "Trouble with the Negroes" to "Evacuation of  
12 Richmond -- Burning of the City." By turns comprehensive and  
13 anecdotal, Putnam's account is less a traditional diary and more  
14 an extended historical narrative embracing aspects of memoir and  
15 retrospective observation. A final chapter, "Life in the Old Land  
16 Yet," suggests Richmond, the City of Seven Hills, will rise  
17 phoenix-like from the flames of war with the rebuilding of  
18 shattered infrastructure. Pleading with the "rising generation"  
19 to "forget not" her homeland's "ancient prestige," Putnam  
20 confidently predicted the resurrection of her beloved Virginia.<sup>4</sup>

21         Away from the Confederate capital and its war-weary  
22 denizens, a large number of Confederate women's diaries have  
23 contoured the effects of the war on Virginia's other towns,  
24 cities, plantations, and farms, revealing the economic and social

1 upheavals of war on families and communities across the Old  
2 Dominion. Cornelia Peake McDonald's wartime diary of unhappy  
3 events in the besieged town of Winchester, supplemented by  
4 reminiscences added at a later date, remains a classic of the  
5 type. First published in 1935, McDonald's diary, which covers  
6 March 1862 to August 1863 (other parts of which were lost or  
7 destroyed during the writer's years as a refugee), was kept at  
8 the insistence of her husband, Colonel Angus William McDonald,  
9 who left Winchester on the eve of its evacuation to find  
10 employment with the Confederate War Department in Richmond.  
11 Recording facts and incidents of Winchester's occupation and  
12 subsequent counter-occupations, and of Lexington, where she lived  
13 as a refugee until the early 1870s, McDonald's Civil War was one  
14 of hardship, worry, and uncertainty. She offers a firsthand  
15 account of the burning of the Virginia Military Institute and  
16 Virginia Governor John Letcher's home by Union soldiers,  
17 recounting the assistance she rendered to the governor's wife and  
18 small children. At war's end, McDonald's husband, stepson, and  
19 baby daughter were all dead, the family's estate, Hawthorn,  
20 stripped of its resources, and she and her young family were in  
21 penury.<sup>5</sup>

22        Located twenty miles south of Winchester, Front Royal, the  
23 home town of another well-known female southern diarist, Lucy  
24 Rebecca Buck, was also the site of many skirmishes and battles

1 between Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War. In her  
2 late teens when war came to Bel Air, her father's successful  
3 plantation, Lucy began her diary on Christmas morning 1861 and  
4 continued to record her thoughts and opinions on wartime events  
5 through April 1865. Sensitive to her altered surroundings and the  
6 changed circumstances of the household, she eagerly anticipated  
7 news from the front lines where her two brothers, Alvin and  
8 Irving, served in the Confederate ranks. "We were so rejoiced at  
9 getting a letter from them that I would not long harbor the  
10 thought of danger to them," she confessed to her diary in March  
11 1862. Like many other Confederate diarists, Lucy suddenly  
12 discontinued her writing efforts as the war neared its end.<sup>6</sup>

13 Begun to escape wartime boredom, young Lucy Breckinridge of  
14 Grove Hill plantation in Botetourt County, Virginia, abandoned  
15 her diary on Christmas Day 1864 and intended to destroy it prior  
16 to her marriage to a young Confederate officer. Given to blunt,  
17 pessimistic introspection, Breckinridge was frustrated by the  
18 patriarchal norms of southern plantation living and mightily  
19 depressed by the twin prospect of marriage and frequent  
20 childbirth. Less concerned with the military or political climate  
21 of the day, Breckinridge's diary reveals a plantation belle in  
22 fear of a future of submissiveness that would suppress her own  
23 talents and interests.<sup>7</sup> However, any inability, or unwillingness,  
24 on the part of Virginia's Confederate citizenry to elaborate

1 further on postwar prospects, not least the consequences of  
2 military reversal and collapse, was not universal. From her  
3 farmhouse in Fairfax, Virginia, Anne Frobelt kept a diary from  
4 1861 extending through the Reconstruction era and beyond to 1879.  
5 As Union forces moved onto the family lands, taking over their  
6 farmhouse, destroying crops, and killing livestock, Frobelt's  
7 diary entries increasingly bemoan the rude intrusion into her  
8 domestic world.<sup>8</sup>

9       Ida Powell Dulany, like countless other diarists, found her  
10 world completely transformed by the turmoil of the Civil War, the  
11 crumbling of slavery, and the innumerable trials of the postwar  
12 world, a world without slaves. Dulany's diary, published as In  
13 the Shadow of the Enemy (2009), is a gracefully written chronicle  
14 of a young Virginia Piedmont woman's daily struggles to protect  
15 her plantation home and family in one of the war's most hotly  
16 contested regions. When Hal, her husband, joined the Confederate  
17 army shortly after the outbreak of war, Ida assumed  
18 responsibility for running Oakley, their sprawling plantation  
19 estate in Upperville, Fauquier County and home to over sixty  
20 slaves. In addition to managing the labor force, an increasingly  
21 difficult task for many middle- and upper-class plantation  
22 households given the exigencies of war, Dulany worked hard to  
23 provide for and educate her three young children, maintain  
24 relationships with her neighbors, and satisfy social obligations

1 in the wider community. As Union forces gathered near Oakley,  
2 many of the Dulany's more restless slaves fled. While some  
3 remained with the family and others returned shortly after their  
4 initial flight, the promise of emancipation and freedom gradually  
5 expedited enslaved blacks from across the South to Union army  
6 lines, where some found employment or were entered into military  
7 service.<sup>9</sup>

8 Daniel W. Cobb, a cotton farmer of modest means in  
9 Southampton County, also lost his slaves to the Emancipation  
10 Proclamation. Cobb was a regular diary keeper, and his writings  
11 provide a useful ingress into the often overlooked small farmers,  
12 or "plain folk," of the rural South in the nineteenth century.  
13 Kept from 1842 to his death in 1872, Cobb's writings, like many  
14 other male farmer-diarists of antebellum southern society, cover  
15 the inclemency of the weather, seasonal rhythms on the farm, and  
16 his slave workforce, particularly their health. Conn also  
17 provides more intimate comments on his unhappy marriage, his  
18 Methodist faith, and the difficulties of maintaining race and  
19 class relations in the Cotton Belt. Cobb, who lost his oldest son  
20 during the Appomattox campaign, struggled to farm successfully in  
21 a postwar world shorn of the system of forced labor upon which  
22 the region's economy had rested. If, even after emancipation,  
23 southern agricultural routines remained relatively unchanged,  
24 labor relationships and incentives to subsist on the region's

1 farms and plantations became decidedly more composite, with the  
2 advent of share-cropping and tenant farming. Reflecting these  
3 changes to planting and harvesting arrangements and organization,  
4 Cobb's diaries narrate his unhappy transition into the  
5 post-emancipation world.<sup>10</sup>

6 Edmund Ruffin, agricultural reformer, states' rights  
7 advocate, militant secessionist, and renowned planter and  
8 slave-owner of Prince George County, recoiled at the prospect of  
9 Yankee dominion and the transition to free labor, so much so that  
10 at war's end he shot himself through the head. Ruffin's diary, a  
11 comprehensive chronicle, covers Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor  
12 (where Ruffin purportedly fired the first shot of the Civil War),  
13 Union campaigns in Virginia, the Emancipation Proclamation, and  
14 the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army. It is a  
15 crucially important eye witness account of the South during the  
16 Civil War.<sup>11</sup>

17 A large number of journals and diaries by Confederate  
18 soldiers and civilians in government positions have also captured  
19 the drama of advancing Union armies, battles and their  
20 aftermaths, occupation, the deprivations of city living and camp  
21 life, and gnawing uncertainty of what the following months and  
22 years would bring, from the trivial to the consequential, in  
23 towns and cities across Virginia. Spanning civilian and military  
24 worlds, the diaries written by administrators from behind their

1 government desks provide valuable insight into the Confederate  
2 War Department. Regularly consulted for its assessments on the  
3 inner workings of the Confederate government in Richmond, the  
4 diary of war clerk John B. Jones, which was published in two  
5 volumes in 1866, remains something of a classic, providing a  
6 day-to-day record of the South's war effort as well as judgments  
7 on Confederate bureaucrats: the war secretaries he worked under,  
8 high-ranking officers, and prominent politicians.<sup>12</sup> Of comparable  
9 value on civil affairs in the government offices of the  
10 Confederate capital, the irregular diary of devoted Virginian  
11 R.G.H. Kean offers discerning analysis on the internal goings-on  
12 in the Confederate Bureau of War, of which he was Head, and all  
13 manner of Confederate military and political matters which fell  
14 under his purview. Kean, like Jones, wrote colorfully -- and, at  
15 times, critically -- on some of the Confederacy's leading actors.  
16 General Joseph E. Johnson, commander of Confederate forces in the  
17 west, is summarily dismissed as "a very little man, has achieved  
18 nothing, full of himself. . . eaten up with morbid jealousy of  
19 Lee and of all his superiors in position, rank, and glory."<sup>13</sup>

20 Among the scores of soldier-diarists who fought in the Army  
21 of Northern Virginia under General Lee, two of the best known are  
22 John Dooley and Jedediah Hotchkiss. John Dooley, Confederate  
23 Soldier (1945) is an articulate account of campaigns, camps, and  
24 confinement. Son of an Irish-born Richmond businessman, Dooley

1 left his studies at Georgetown College in 1862 and enlisted as a  
2 private in the First Virginia Infantry. He saw action at Second  
3 Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg, where he was  
4 seriously wounded in both legs. Dooley was subsequently taken  
5 prisoner and detained for many months before his release in  
6 February 1865.<sup>14</sup>

7 An edited version of Hotchkiss's diary, Make Me a Map of the  
8 Valley, appeared in 1973. Born in New York, Hotchkiss moved to  
9 Virginia in the late 1840s. He entered into service with the  
10 Confederate army shortly after the outbreak of the war and soon,  
11 despite any formal training, gained assignment as a topographical  
12 engineer, beginning his diary shortly thereafter. In March 1862  
13 Stonewall Jackson, preparing for the Valley Campaign, instructed  
14 Hotchkiss to reconnoiter the geography of the Shenandoah Valley  
15 from Harpers Ferry to Lexington with a view to producing a  
16 detailed and accurate map of the region. Supporting operational  
17 planning and strategy in the Virginia theater, Hotchkiss's maps,  
18 carefully drawn with colored pencils to better illustrate the  
19 terrain, were an important boon to Jackson's -- and his  
20 successors -- achievements in the field. A significant primary  
21 source for those interested in Civil War mapmaking, Hotchkiss's  
22 diary yields import information on topographic and cartographic  
23 survey during the Civil War, as well as the military operations  
24 he produced maps for and the prominent officers he served under.

1 After the war, Hotchkiss remained in engineering, working hard to  
2 promote his adopted state's mining and timber resources. He also  
3 composed the Virginia volume of Confederate Military History  
4 (1899), a vast compendium of battles, campaigns, and biographical  
5 sketches of officers drawn from the memories of participants and  
6 protagonists.<sup>15</sup>

7 After-the-fact reminiscences of the Civil War, whether from  
8 soldiers or civilians, trace how memory infiltrates, shapes, and  
9 transforms history and how it portrays individual and collective  
10 identity. Their economic and social system of slavery in tatters,  
11 with the fall of the Confederacy and the onset of Reconstruction,  
12 many white southerners struggled to work through the emotional  
13 defeat and unnerving political uncertainty that followed. Writing  
14 memoirs and reminiscences to reflect upon their own life and  
15 times, usually published many years after events described have  
16 passed, southerners recorded their wartime memories in first  
17 person accounts, embracing both soldier and civilian  
18 perspectives. Memorial groups encouraged efforts to preserve and  
19 document memories of wartime sacrifice and heroism. The United  
20 Daughters of the Confederacy, for one, promoted the "truth" of  
21 southern history in schools and universities across the region,  
22 even going as far as to amend, edit, or censor "biased" classroom  
23 textbooks.

24 After the Civil War, many of Virginia's high-ranking

1 Confederate officers and soldiers, alongside other individuals  
2 who had simply experienced the war in the state, committed their  
3 personal narratives to print, taking aim at former enemies and,  
4 on occasion, each other, as well as mitigating their war record  
5 and the justness of the cause. Prominent among them were many of  
6 Lee's Virginia born or raised generals who had served inside  
7 Virginia and the eastern theatre, or in the west, over the  
8 duration of the war. James Longstreet, Joseph E. Johnson, Jubal  
9 A. Early, Sterling Price, Dabney Herndon Maury, Richard S. Ewell,  
10 and George E. Pickett all published their memoirs and  
11 reminiscences of the war in the decades after Appomattox.  
12 Stonewall Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart, dead heroes of the  
13 battlefield, were denied the chance to compose their memoirs of  
14 life and career, yet did not want for admiring nineteenth-century  
15 biographers and essayists keen to exploit their name and fame.

16 One of the most compelling and critically acclaimed  
17 post-Civil War reminiscences by a Confederate officer is Edward  
18 Porter Alexander's Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical  
19 Narrative (1907), which offers a descriptive account of his Civil  
20 War career from First Manassas to Appomattox, latterly as  
21 Longstreet's chief of artillery in the First Corps of the Army of  
22 Northern Virginia. An earlier and more personal memoir written  
23 and compiled before Military Memoirs and intended for family  
24 members and friends, was edited by Gary Gallagher and published

1 in 1989 under its original title Fighting for the Confederacy:  
2 The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander.  
3 Alexander's narrative is notable for its forthright yet  
4 respectful criticism of leading Confederate officers, including  
5 Lee and Jackson. Lee's decision to take on General George  
6 McClellan at Antietam was, according to Alexander, his "greatest  
7 military blunder."<sup>16</sup>

8 Another eminently readable memoir from one of the most  
9 famous and celebrated officers in the Confederate army is The  
10 Memoirs of Colonel John S. Mosby, published posthumously in 1917.  
11 Born in 1833 in Virginia and raised on his parent's farm in  
12 Albemarle County, John Singleton Mosby was educated at the  
13 University of Virginia and was a member of the bar at the  
14 outbreak of war in 1861. Lukewarm on secession, Mosby  
15 nevertheless entered the ranks of the Confederate army as a  
16 private with the First Virginia Cavalry. Given his own command,  
17 the 43rd Battalion of Virginia Cavalry, Mosby's partisan unit  
18 wreaked havoc on Union supply trains and lines of communication  
19 with their daring covert raids into enemy-held territory in the  
20 counties of northwest Virginia, providing valuable reconnaissance  
21 reports for J.E.B. Stuart, whom he admired greatly, and useful  
22 intelligence for Robert E. Lee at Confederate Headquarters.  
23 Mosby's volume of reminiscences, though dubious in places, draws  
24 on his writings, newspaper articles, letters to his wife,

1 Pauline, and official correspondences to capture these exploits  
2 and actions, as well as muse on operational tactics and command  
3 decisions made by the Confederate hierarchy. After the war, the  
4 unorthodox Mosby became a southern scalawag, a sympathetic  
5 Republican, and supporter of President Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>17</sup>

6 As wives and daughters of planters, politicians, and  
7 lawyers, elite white southern women's autobiographical forays  
8 into memoir and reminiscence are especially revealing for the  
9 Civil War period in Virginia, demonstrating how public and  
10 private worlds of privilege and prosperity dovetail in the  
11 historical imagination. Born in Halifax County, Virginia in 1830,  
12 Sara Rice Pryor, whose lawyer husband Roger A. Pryor was a member  
13 of Congress and colonel in the Confederate army, composed two  
14 memoirs at the turn of the twentieth century, Reminiscences of  
15 Peace and War (1904) and My Day: Reminiscences of a Long Life  
16 (1909). Both delight in memories of happy race relations and a  
17 charming antebellum Virginia upbringing at Cedar Grove and  
18 Shrubbery Hill plantations, as well as high society in  
19 Charlottesville, where her aunt and uncle had a house. Residing  
20 in Washington in 1861 where, prior to the outbreak of  
21 hostilities, she had mixed in social circles with presidents  
22 Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, Sara's memoirs record the rising  
23 sectional tensions and enmity in the nation's capital among  
24 politicians and diplomats who looked on with either calm or

1     fright as news filtered through of South Carolina's secession  
2     from the Union. By 1865, after a spell of wartime nursing in  
3     Richmond, Sara relocated to Petersburg and witnessed its fall.  
4     After the war, she and her husband settled in New York, where he  
5     resumed his career as a lawyer then as a judge. Sara devoted her  
6     final years to entertaining, charitable work, and writing.<sup>18</sup>

7             Louise Wigfall Wright, the daughter of influential Texas  
8     politician Louis T. Wigfall, gathered together her "sad and happy  
9     memories" of the Civil War era in A Southern Girl in '61: The  
10    War-Time Memories of a Confederate Senator's Daughter, which was  
11    published in 1905. Including numerous extracts from family  
12    letters, Wright's reminiscences suggest that the war, when viewed  
13    through memory's mirror, was not that bad after all. She  
14    remembered struggling to pay attention to lessons in Mrs.  
15    Pegram's school in Richmond when "such 'beaux soldats' were  
16    marching, with drums beating, and banners flying, by our very  
17    doors"; singing and dancing at a Culpepper ball to which "flocked  
18    all the Virginia belles of the country side" and the "flower of  
19    the chivalry of the Army of Northern Virginia"; and picnics in  
20    Charlottesville "that infused a spirit of gaiety to the little  
21    town." Regardless of disheartening news from the battlefield and  
22    crippling scarcities of supplies and resources, Wright claimed  
23    that "defeat was not contemplated, nor discussed as a  
24    possibility."<sup>19</sup>

1           Constance Cary Harrison, a descendant of Thomas Jefferson  
2 and the wife of Burton Norvell Harrison, private secretary to  
3 Jefferson Davis during the Civil War, recalled her childhood in  
4 Alexandria, Virginia and the war years in Recollections Grave and  
5 Gay (1911). Like Pryor's and Wright's reminiscences, the  
6 distinguishing tone of Harrison's memoir is one of nostalgia for  
7 a world consigned to memory. She describes working alongside her  
8 mother as a nurse to wounded Confederate soldiers in Richmond  
9 after the Battle of Seven Pines, the destruction of their  
10 plantation home, and, with the close of the war, the harrowing  
11 wait for news on the whereabouts of her brother, Clarence, a  
12 midshipman in the Confederate States Navy.<sup>20</sup>

13           Two memoirs from nurses who served opposing armies in  
14 Virginia provide insight into medical services and hospital  
15 experiences during the Civil War. Born into a prominent Jewish  
16 family of Charleston, South Carolina, Phoebe Yates Pember  
17 recorded her duties as Chief Matron of a division at the  
18 Chimborazo military hospital in Richmond, where she remained  
19 until the end of the war, in A Southern Woman's Story (1879).  
20 With thousands of patients under her care during the war, Pember  
21 narrates a myriad of stories relating to her onerous supervisory  
22 responsibilities in the hospital. Amid much opposition from  
23 doctors and surgeons who did not yet recognize the importance of  
24 women nurses, Pember's account of courage and nerve and privation

1 and want in the care of sick and wounded Confederate soldiers,  
2 which intermingle in a conversational and anecdotal style, is  
3 among the most important sources for the study of the medical  
4 history of the Civil War.<sup>21</sup>

5 Jane Stuart Woolsey, an experienced wartime nurse and  
6 administrator in the North, relocated to Virginia in 1863 to  
7 serve as Superintendent of Nurses at the Fairfax Seminary  
8 Hospital, a Union medical facility, where she continued to work  
9 until August 1865. Hospital Days (1868), her memoir of her  
10 experiences and responsibilities there, describes the importance  
11 of cleanliness, good diet, and strong management on the hospital  
12 wards, as well as the letters she and her colleagues wrote for  
13 hospitalized soldiers, thus maintaining their mental and  
14 emotional equilibrium in often distressing circumstances: a  
15 crucial aspect of wartime nursing.<sup>22</sup>

16 Medical activities in the beleaguered city of Petersburg are  
17 covered by John Herbert Claiborne's memoir Seventy-Five Years in  
18 Old Virginia (1904), which provides much of interest about  
19 civilian life amid the chaos and confusion of the city's  
20 bombardment and eventual evacuation. During the war, Claiborne, a  
21 military surgeon on the medical staff of the Confederate army,  
22 was tasked with establishing a hospital in Petersburg to  
23 recuperate sick and wounded Confederate soldiers. Displaying an  
24 aptitude for Confederate hospital administration, he soon found

1 himself in charge of all military hospitals in the city. Born to  
2 a wealthy plantation-owning family and raised in "The Red Oak  
3 Neighborhood" of Brunswick County, a locality known for its  
4 "culture, refinement, and hospitality," Claiborne insisted on the  
5 importance of the Commonwealth to the history of the nation, a  
6 nation "founded on principals enunciated by Virginia statesmen  
7 and established by the prowess of Virginia soldiers." He  
8 positions Virginians as natural born leaders in society,  
9 politics, and war.<sup>23</sup>

10 Plantation reminiscences, a body of autobiographical  
11 life-writing to which Claiborne's volume belongs, were an  
12 important Gilded Age and Progressive Era genre. Though little is  
13 known today about the authors of these works, of which many were  
14 Virginians, across the late nineteenth and early twentieth  
15 centuries scores of sentimental volumes were published. In their  
16 celebration of the benevolent paternalism of the antebellum  
17 plantation and gentile Old South civilization, most plantation  
18 reminiscences chart a narrative course through southern history  
19 signposting themes of prewar plenty through wartime privation to  
20 postwar ruin, rarely deviating from formulaic plotlines across  
21 memoirists and publishing houses.

22 Memorials of a Southern Planter, published in 1887 by Susan  
23 Dabney Smedes as a glowing encomium to her late father, Thomas  
24 Smith Gregory Dabney, may be the most widely known narrative of

1 the genre. Smedes's volume details her father's remarkable  
2 lineage, his early years at the family's ancestral Tidewater  
3 estate, Elmington, the family's relocation to Burleigh, a large  
4 cotton plantation in Mississippi, plantation life there during  
5 the 1840s and 1850s, along with their trials and tribulations  
6 during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Thomas's life at  
7 Elmington was, according to his daughter, "the ideal life of a  
8 Virginia gentleman." The plantation house, "red brick, quaint and  
9 old fashioned in design," was built near the water's edge. The  
10 plantation grew corn, wheat, rye and tobacco; cedar, oak, walnut  
11 and pine trees dotted the land. Gloucester County 'had been  
12 settled by the best class of English people" who "brought to  
13 their homes in the New World the customs and manners of the Old."  
14 Everybody there "kept open house," and "entertaining was a matter  
15 of course, anything and everything was made the occasion of a  
16 dinner-party."<sup>24</sup> Memorials of a Southern Planter is, for the most  
17 part, authentic, faithful, and devoted though anachronistically  
18 sentimental in its portrayal of southern plantation life.

19 Like many post-Civil War veteran memoirs, the opening pages  
20 in most plantation reminiscences, perhaps in recognition of the  
21 artifice of the genre, insist on the accuracy and veracity of  
22 what follows. H. H. Farmer, born in Lunenburg County, Virginia,  
23 in 1825, and educated at Jefferson Medical College, endeavored to  
24 present a fair and true account of his life in Virginia before

1 and During the War (1892). Opposed to secession in 1861, Farmer  
2 hoped readers would "form a truer estimate of the state of  
3 society and of opinions in the South and especially in Virginia,  
4 than usually prevails."<sup>25</sup> Myrta Lockett Avery's A Virginia Girl  
5 in the Civil War (1903) marks out and stakes a claim for the  
6 ability of memoirs to bring readers "close to the human soul." By  
7 entering the personal world of how "people thought, felt, and  
8 lived" in a "vital and formative period in American history,"  
9 Avery hoped her volume would capture "what history can never show  
10 us" and "what fiction can unfold . . . only in part." Though  
11 Avery lauds the "veracity" of her narrative, she actually uses  
12 aliases to hide her identity, and that of her husband, as they  
13 travel across the South during wartime.<sup>26</sup>

14       Plantation reminiscences often establish an ancestry that  
15 gives their authors a fresh sense of themselves and a historical  
16 understanding of their state. Marion Harland claimed in her  
17 autobiography to be a "remote ancestor" of Godfrey of Bouillon,  
18 leader of the First Crusade against Jerusalem. Aware of her own  
19 proximity to important history, Harland turns to discuss Richmond  
20 before the outbreak of hostilities and how the war affected  
21 family and friends.<sup>27</sup> Other Virginia memoirists narrated in  
22 detail familial pedigrees and legends with a generous joie de  
23 vivre, an invitation to a sentimentally heroic viewing of their  
24 ancestral traces and a glowing pride in the achievements --

1 accurate or otherwise -- of distant relations. Sallie Alexander  
2 Moore of Lexington, Virginia, traced her ancestry to Scottish  
3 earls in Stirling and reckoned she was a descendant of Robert the  
4 Bruce.<sup>28</sup> Stories were told, legends weaved, history embroidered.

5 Many plantation memoirists, often writing for their children  
6 and grandchildren and adopting a didactic tone, dwell on memories  
7 of their own childhoods in antebellum Virginia. Some, like Andrew  
8 J. Andrews's A Sketch of Boyhood Days (1905), Alexander S.  
9 Paxton's, Memory Days in which the Shenandoah Valley is seen in  
10 Retrospection (1908), and P.A.L. Smith's Boyhood Days of Fauquier  
11 (1926), as their titles suggest, are almost entirely given over  
12 to recollections of childhood adventures remembered in old age in  
13 memories that seem as vivid as yesterday.<sup>29</sup> The aptly titled The  
14 End of an Era (1899) by John S. Wise, a lieutenant in the  
15 Confederate army who spent time in the trenches at Petersburg and  
16 fought in the Battle of the Crater, laments the passing of his  
17 blissful childhood, "days belonging to a phase of civilization  
18 and a manner of life which are as extinct as if they had never  
19 existed."<sup>30</sup>

20 The nostalgic cast in many plantation reminiscences was  
21 enhanced greatly with the repeated use of a "memorialist,"  
22 usually the author who wrote in the alleged "voice" of an  
23 erstwhile slave in dialect reminiscent of the melodramatic local  
24 color stories innovated by writers such as Joel Chandler Harris

1 and Virginians Thomas Nelson Page and George William Bagby; the  
2 former butler or maid now a "commemorator" for "the lost pieties  
3 and sanctions" of plantation life.<sup>31</sup> Sallie May Dooley's Dem Good  
4 Ole Times (1906), written as a conversation between a young girl  
5 and her grandfather, a former slave, in the local color dialect  
6 that the author had known as a child on her grandparent's tobacco  
7 plantation in Lunenburg County, provides a requiem for departed  
8 days. "I ruther live one yur in dem times den five in dese,"  
9 confirmed the old-timer, in a comment that symbolized an unhappy  
10 transition from slavery to freedom.<sup>32</sup>

11 The veneration shown to devoted and indispensable black  
12 servants, especially "Mammy," a figure epitomizing the faithful  
13 slave and a powerful political and cultural symbol in  
14 twentieth-century America, particularly in advertising and film,  
15 served to maintain a notion of white privilege and harmonious  
16 race relations while masking hardening social boundaries with the  
17 implementation of racial difference and ideology through Jim  
18 Crow. Even during wartime, when "old Virginia was one great  
19 camping ground, hospital, and battlefield," the region's slaves  
20 shunned emancipation and freedom and "remained faithful" to their  
21 erstwhile owners, "manifesting kindness, and in many instances  
22 protecting the white families and plantations during their  
23 masters' absence," according to Letitia M. Burwell's 1895 memoir  
24 A Girl's Life in Virginia before the War.<sup>33</sup> Given the late

1 nineteenth-century fascination with Old South plantation life in  
2 novels, dramatic plays, minstrel shows, and popular songs, it is  
3 hardly surprising that Virginia authors turned sympathetically to  
4 the plantation in praise of antebellum southern society.

5         The written accounts of those soldiers and civilians who  
6 experienced the Civil War in Virginia have enduring value. Their  
7 diaries and evocative reminiscences, which grew and multiplied in  
8 number in the decades following Lee's surrender at Appomattox,  
9 help reveal what life was like for participants in and witnesses  
10 to one of history's great struggles, one that would fundamentally  
11 transform the structure of southern and, by extension, American  
12 society. The protagonists themselves understood the import of  
13 their historical role, however large or small, as evidenced in  
14 how they read, recorded, and remembered the great drama into  
15 which their lives were cast.

1 Notes to Chapter 17, "Civil War Diaries and Reminiscences"

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