“To Suffer in Silence”: Confederate Widows’ Grieving Processes After the Civil War

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ABSTRACT

ASHLEY MICHELLE MAYS: “To Suffer in Silence”: Confederate Widows’ Grieving Processes After the Civil War
(Under the direction of Joseph T. Glatthaar)

The destruction of the Civil War created thousands of widows in the former Confederacy. With such large-scale loss, both Southern communities and, most importantly, the widows themselves, navigated a complex grieving process that balanced community and individual needs. By studying how Confederate widows grieved, we can better understand the psychological impact of the war on southern society. In the aftermath of death, social networks and religious communities encouraged widows to follow a short, public grieving process that did not emphasize one individual’s suffering over another and did not question their faith in God. Widows absorbed these messages, but reshaped them to develop their own prolonged, private grieving process in order to confront their emotions, gradually minimized their identity as a wife, and increasingly accepted the loss of their husband. During this process, widows created a new conception of their self-identity, which shaped their actions during Reconstruction.
To my parents and my wife, for their constant faith and support as I found my own identity
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“When one man dies it’s a tragedy. When thousands die it’s a statistic.”¹ In the Civil War, over six hundred thousand American soldiers died. Individual stories of courage on the battlefield propounded both glory and a sense of lost potential, but, at the same time, the scale of death and destruction during the war forced communities to face costly battles and bloodied hands. While the destruction on both sides was horrific, in proportion to its population the Confederacy suffered more devastating losses than did the Union. By one estimate, ninety-three thousand widows were among the hundreds of thousands of grieving Confederate families.² Because of these staggering numbers, death became a shared experience in which honoring an individual widow’s suffering diminished the attention communities paid to other grieving families, creating a competition for equal membership in a morbid club of Confederate sacrifice. The resulting tension pushed communities to rebuild and move on from their sorrow, conflicting with a widow’s need to grieve slowly. Social networks and religious teachings consistently pressured widows to confine their grieving to a


² James M. Volo and Dorothy Denneen Volo, Family Life in 19th-Century America (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 181. These authors estimate that 36 percent of Confederate soldiers were married. This percentage is highly speculative, since the records are often incomplete. The total number of Confederate dead is commonly estimated at 260,000. More accurately, 36% of soldiers enlisted in the Army of Northern Virginia between 1861-1862 were married, compared to 46.6% of those who entered in 1863-1864. See Joseph T. Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse (New York: Free Press, 2008), 525n15.
short, positive process in order to accept loss. That pressure inevitably shaped widows’
actions; nevertheless, they insisted on their own prolonged, meditative grieving process not
simply to accept loss but also to reconstruct their lost identity as well.

Few widows consciously constructed their identities. Instead, identity developed over
time through the course of daily life. To understand this process better, scholars have divided
identity into two major categories: collective identity and self-identity. Collective identity
defines individuals according to their membership in social groups. Many scholars, including
historians, explain actions based on collective identity, usually grouping people by race,
class, or gender. Therefore, social norms and culture ultimately construct this collective
identity. Other scholars, including psychologists, emphasize self-identity as an explanation
for an individual’s actions. Self-identity is the individual mind’s sense of self. This area of
study places greater emphasis on individual cognition in developing an identity. Research on
the formation of self-identity highlights the importance of understanding how individuals
think about themselves, interpret messages from the outside world, and develop relationships
with others because these internal processes shape the observable actions that historians
study.³

Categories of identity have proved controversial. Historians have become
increasingly uncomfortable with self-identity because it appears static and may be divorced
from historical context. Most prominently, social constructionists have attacked this concept
by citing the enormous impact cultural influences have on individuals and society. On the
other hand, postmodern scholars have questioned collective identity for artificially

³ Self-identity is also known as individual identity. For a more complete discussion of the distinction
between collective and individual identity, see Marilynn B. Brewer and Miles Hewstone, Self and
constructing boundaries that falsely unite unique individuals.\(^4\) These battles have waged strongest over nationalism and gender identity, and have produced many influential and important works.\(^5\) The recent rise in global history has only highlighted the difficulty in developing adequate collective identities.\(^6\) Since these critiques represent some of the most recent, and most influential, research, historians have not yet turned to self-identity as a possible solution. This recent disillusion with collective identity as a successful representation of social groups has opened the door for additional solutions, like self-identity, as a means of interpreting the world and inspiring action.

Research on self-identity could provide a solution by connecting individuals to society without artificially constructed boundaries. William James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, divided self-identity into two components: the mind, or the active consciousness, and various social selves.\(^7\) According to James, interaction with society produced for each individual “as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him.”\(^8\) The mind then pulled together each of these social selves, interpreted them, and formulated the individual’s self-identity. For James, it was this self-identity that acts upon the world.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Ibid., 294.

\(^9\) This is the place where human agency develops. Though modern historiography places great importance on seeking out agency, recently some historians, such as Walter Johnson, have questioned
Today, scholars describe the process as symbolic interactionism, in which the mind gives meaning to the world based on interaction with it and an interpretation of those interactions. In this way, society and culture still influences individual identity, but only through the filter of each individual’s mind. This process produces greater agency for individuals and requires greater emphasis on individuals than studies on collective identity.

If used carefully and supported with evidence, these theories can inform research on grief during the nineteenth century. In times of great loss, like the Civil War, grieving for an individual death takes a central place in both individuals’ and communities’ lives. The experience of grief, however, impacts individuals differently than it impacts communities. In the context of the Civil War, it is important to understand not only the collective identity of the South during Reconstruction, but also the impact of grief on self-identity. Widowhood provides an excellent case study for this research. Though the social construction of collective identity is important, an individual’s self-identity projects actions onto the social world. By understanding how and what constructed social-identity for widows during and after the Civil War, scholars will have a fuller understanding of identity in that historical context.


10 For an interpretation of this historiography, see Richard Jenkins, Social Identity, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 34-7. For some of the most foundational works, see Charles Horton Cooley, Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909); George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self & Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934); Herbert Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method (1969; Berkley: University of California Press, 1998); For a concise summary of symbolic interactionism, see Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism, 2.
Early Civil War historiography overlooked the trauma and tragedy associated with each death. Particularly in military and political history, casualty lists were as impersonal to the historian as to the generals on the battlefield.\(^\text{11}\) The rise of social history in the mid-twentieth century injected people and their personal experiences into the subject matter, but included them as groups or categories rather than as individuals. To insert that discussion into the previous historiography, however, historians often studied social activities within a political framework. This was particularly true in Southern women’s history, which rose on the tide of second-wave feminism. Anne Firor Scott began the conversation with *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, in which she argues that elite women found an opportunity to break free from their restricted social roles following the Civil War, ultimately leading to their political activity.\(^\text{12}\) Other scholars followed by examining patriarchal power structures that limited women’s political power and, later, individual acts of agency that in some measure restored it.\(^\text{13}\)

This quest for agency included widows, but only to examine their power. In *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895*, Jane Turner Censer agrees with Scott that women gained autonomy in the postwar South, but she divides that autonomy


along generational lines. Southern culture held different expectations for different age groups, with the social roles of the youngest ladies changing the quickest. All ages ultimately became caught between their own autonomy and their socially defined gender role. Widows were unique in that external conditions forced them to accept autonomy, but ultimately they were still grouped along age lines instead of by their status as widows.¹⁴ Kirsten Wood largely agrees in her book *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution Through the Civil War*. Even prior to the Civil War, economic changes brought on by their husbands’ deaths forced widows to skip over grief. Instead of mourning, they asserted their mastery over their slaves in order to establish their authority.¹⁵ While both authors, like Scott, view the Civil War as a turning point, neither defines women widowed during the Civil War as a distinct group. Both authors also ignore the grieving process, focusing instead on women’s increased social and political power. In their view, financial necessity propelled widows’ postwar lives, but this conclusion ignores the individual and underlying grief that also affected these widows’ future.

Similarly, the history of religion has ignored the effects of grieving and loss.¹⁶ The field has focused on two different tracks: theology and social religion. Emerging first, the history of theology produced denominational histories that examined the church and church leaders to develop an institutional identity to trace key theological debates.¹⁷ This

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¹⁶ This paper will primarily focus on Episcopalian and Presbyterian theology because the men and women in this paper generally belonged to one of those two denominations.

institutional and intellectual history remained largely isolated from historical context until social history began to dominate the profession during the nineteen-seventies. While maintaining its earlier focus, the history of religion increasingly incorporated contemporary social culture. Most recently, scholars have begun to unite these disparate denominational histories. The culture wars in the late twentieth-century examined evangelicalism in the South, which became an umbrella for many, if not most, denominations. In addition, E. Brooks Holifield has produced a monumental book, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*, which surveys American theology by its intellectual trends. While the history of theology discusses religious debates surrounding death and the afterlife, no work has yet specifically addressed how theology and religious belief impact the grieving process, largely because the field is still somewhat isolated from the broader narrative of American history. Nonetheless, theological history’s consolidation combined with its increasing awareness of cultural context makes the field ripe for such research.

While social history changed the history of theology in America, it also encouraged some scholars to study religion as a social movement. Early works on religion in the South connected the spread of evangelicalism to the development of proslavery ideology in the

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antebellum period. From there, the scholarship jumped to research on the Lost Cause as a “civil religion” after the Civil War, as a method to cope with the defeat of the Confederacy, not individual loss. While this scholarship charted a distinct southern religious tradition, it focused on the political origins and consequences of the Confederacy, rather than addressing the war itself and the death it caused. When research on war and society cleared the path for scholars to discuss religion in the context of the war itself, authors largely focused on religious support for Confederate politics. Perhaps the largest debate pitted scholars who saw religion as a unifying force for the Confederacy, such as the authors of *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, against those who countered that evangelicalism only weakly unified the Confederate population, such as Drew Gilpin Faust. Over the next decade, Christianity’s role in Confederate victory and defeat proved to be a controversial and popular topic, but it mostly ignored widowhood and death in favor of examining Southern political power.

Increasingly, the historical discussions about religion and theology have merged. Their combined efforts in the study of the Civil War have moved away from political history towards using religious belief and, to a lesser extent, theology to explain social change. In *Religion and the American Civil War*, the authors describe a multitude of ways “religion cut


24 Perhaps the best example of this merger resides outside of research on the Civil War. See Elizabeth Fox-Genoe and Eugene D. Genovese’s *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholder’s Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
to the marrow of Americans’ identity and interests” and held a “fundamental place in that war and, at least for the generation that lived through and after it, in defining self and society.”

Even the study of revivalism in army camps moved from its place as a political support for the pervasiveness of religion in Confederate ideology to a discussion on the spread of religion in the South and its impact on the values of the people. Despite the infancy of this new direction, the strength of the current research demonstrates the field’s potential to uncover motivations for political change within individual historical actors.

Though none of these disparate historiographies has examined the topic of grief, they combined recently to create a space for an eclectic cultural approach to studying grief during the Civil War. Drew Gilpin Faust, whose previous works examined religion, politics, and gender, established the field with *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. Faust traces Americans’ efforts to preserve the “Good Death” during a time of war when the means and type of death rapidly changed. Since many soldiers enlisted and died for the Union, the U.S. government contracted the responsibility to provide for soldier’s dead bodies through burial, gravesite identification, and communication to the families. This contractual relationship between the citizen and the state ultimately increased the Federal government’s power. After the war, memorialization also strengthened the unity and power

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28 Ibid., 6-31.
of the dead by highlighting their sacrifice for the national government. Because Faust’s primary focus is to examine the relationship between the citizenry and the State, she ignores differences within the populace and the relationship between individual and communal grief. When Faust does briefly examine the individual grieving process, she uses the funeral sermon as “a primer in grief and consolation,” and from that guide pointed to a tension between social expectations of quick grief and the needs of an individual in mourning.

While her theory is sound, her explanation is inadequate. An understanding of the role of religion, death, and identity requires a more detailed exploration of this grieving process.

Elite Southern white women who lost husbands during the Civil War provide a lens in which to view that process.

Though some might critique such a narrow class and gender focus, such a scope provides a clearer picture of conceptions of identity and cognitive processes. White, upper-class women belonged to an elite group with enough education to record their thoughts and the time and social connections to do so. Although scattered across the South, these women shared a common background since most grew up in wealthy, respectable households, married and were soon dependent on wealthy husbands, had an established Episcopal or Presbyterian faith, and identified themselves as members of the better racial and economic class. Their commonalities provided a shared pool of resources available to act out their grief

29 Ibid., 268-71.
30 Ibid., 165. For a full discussion see Ibid., 165-170.
31 For an additional discussion on death and the Civil War, see Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008). Shantz argues that Victorian culture and religious belief prior to the war developed an understanding of death that emphasized resurrection. This antebellum understanding of death allowed soldiers to be willing to die in large numbers during the war. This discussion does not extend far into the war, however, and ignores the grieving process.
and established a shared expectation for grieving from the community. While few widows outside of these elites documented their emotional reactions, the grieving process of lower class white or black women would likely exhibit unique characteristics. Economic and racial inequalities would have limited their access to mourning activities and shaped their social networks’ ideals about grief. Also, elite white women present an exceptional change in identity through their shift in economic and social status, in addition to their change from a wife to a widow, making their process of reconstructing their identity even more clear. Furthermore, upper class white women, for better or worse, shaped the world around them. Through their own actions and through their powerful male family members, elite white women were leaders within their communities. Therefore, it is essential to understand how they formed an identity that would help reconstruct the South.

While few women left records of their daily lives, let alone their deepest emotions, grief was a particularly unique form of expression. In one sense, it was remarkably palpable in any writings left by widows. Personal correspondence that has survived sheds light on their grieving process, but the most emotive documents were purposely constructed. Memoirs, family histories, and scrapbooks all preserved the memories of the dead, but also reveal the emotions and reality of the living. Much of this literature was compiled from reminiscences, letters, and newspaper clippings. These sources can be read two ways. First, each individual component has meaning in its original form, such as a newspaper article.

32 Documents compiled after the event may prove problematic but still useful. Memoirs may not recount exact detail but they do recount significant emotional events unlikely to fade from memory. Scrapbooks provide a particular challenge. A trend in the late nineteenth-century, people constructed scrapbooks to visually represent themselves and their lives while preserving what was most important to them. For information on the history of scrapbooks and their significance in nineteenth century culture, see: Jessica Helfand. Scrapbooks: An American History (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008). For how scrapbooks can be interpreted for elite white southern women, see Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia P. Buckler, eds. The Scrapbook in American Life (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
Second, these sources can be interpreted as a whole, at the time they were compiled. The collection of primary sources, placed together in a certain manner by the author, expressed a different thought separate from each solitary document. That additional meaning was indicative of the author’s current state of mind. This bifurcated analysis demonstrates grief over two time periods, emphasizing the gradual process of grieving. Both avenues represent the intersection between widow’s private thoughts and their relationship to the world around them.

Though widows received many different messages from their community, their social network and religious teachings provided two of the most prominent and influential messages shaping the grieving process. Each group had one primary form of communication. For the social network, letters of condolence provided the most socially acceptable connection between the widow and her social network to express feelings about grief. Alternatively, the clergy’s funeral sermons and weekly sermons provided a direct connection between widows and religious teachings about death and cultural views on grief. The way in which these messages, as well as the frequency of communication, changed over time demonstrates the social constructions widows used and interpreted to formulate their own grieving process and to reconstruct her own identity.

By exploring the psychological process of grief more deeply, it may be possible to discover how emotional reactions to death shaped the postwar community. As a group previously seen only on political and economic terms, but who in fact had experienced a specific type of acute loss, widows provide an ideal case study into the psychological impact

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33 For a discussion on the rise of sympathy in the antebellum era through condolence practices as an important part of the grieving process, see Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 148-152.
of the Civil War on Southern society. Widows did not simply benefit from their condition by becoming free to earn an independent living, as earlier scholarship has suggested. They first grieved the loss of their husband and, by extension, the loss of a portion of their identity. While an economic agency perspective illuminates female political power, emotional grief points to other social changes.

Southern communities, ravaged by death, attempted to limit grief in favor of community or national remembrance. Widows’ close friends and family, her social network, imposed these social prescriptions through letters of condolence that sympathized with the widow but also competed for emotional attention. Ultimately, circumstances and social networks pushed widows towards economic and emotional autonomy, especially in their public lives. Privately, however, widows grieved over a longer period of time. While that grief would never fully fade, widows could only accept the loss of their husband after they

34 Though historians have long relied on sociology to inform their research, psychology provides the best framework for grief studies. Both sociology and psychology examine individuals to make generalizations about people’s actions and experiences. Sociology, however, studies groups of people acting within the social world whereas psychology studies the human mind acting upon the social world. Because the grieving process occurs within an individual person, research in the psychology of grief proves the most informative. Within the field of grief research and counseling, there are two main frameworks. First, Sigmund Freud viewed grief as a form of work, where survivors actively attempted to break the bonds with the dead in order to regain their energy for life. Later, according to Worden, research transformed this theory into tasks, where survivors take steps, in any order, to recognize the death and move past it. The second major psychoanalytical theory came out of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s work with dying patients. From her research, she compiled five stages of grief, as the person comes to terms with their own death. After a period of denial and isolation, the survivor moves through stages of anger, bargaining to escape the situation, depression, but ultimately accepts their fate. Kübler-Ross generalizes this to all forms of grief, including widows mourning the loss of a husband. Together, these two models provide a framework to understand mourning. Grieving is a cyclical process that involves a myriad of emotions, but it also requires action and work. Combining these theories provides avenues for both personal agency and emotional distress. Ultimately, each attempts to alter the relationship with the deceased by severing bonds and creating a new relationship. See Sigmund Freud. “Mourning and Melancholia” In Collected Papers (New York: Harper Collins, 1959); William J. Worden, Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner, 3rd Ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2002) 26-37; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1969).
reconstructed their own self-image through an active grieving process. In a separate relationship, religious teachings functioned similarly to the social networks by prescribing religious theology to help widows understand the cosmic world in relation to death and grief. Much like the social networks’ letters of condolence, these teachings as a whole ultimately proved ineffective, but widows maintained their religious beliefs and drew on these teachings to construct their own image of their place in God’s world. In both instances, widows selectively interpreted and transformed these social and religious prescriptions to fit their own needs, which produced a synthesis of community and individual conceptions of grief that ultimately reconstructed the widows’ identity.
CHAPTER 2
SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE GRIEVING PROCESS

During and immediately after the Civil War, the American South harbored one distinctive culture of grief. According to Drew Faust, all people, North and South, were united by their emphasis on the “Good Death” in Victorian culture. Support for the Confederacy united some Southerners around a particular set of beliefs, namely an agrarian, hierarchical lifestyle rooted in a slave-based labor system. Battle, hardship, and death created a fraternity of soldiers distinctly linked to an image of an independent South. In addition, married soldiers were bonded to their wives. Upon their death, that bond to the Confederacy was transferred through this bond of marriage, distinctly linking the widow with sacrifice to the Confederacy. The transference of identity created a group of women who were defined by their marital status to deceased Confederate soldiers. Though grieving individually, this specific group of women also formed a culture of grief as a subset of Confederate culture and the culture embodied by Southern defeat.

35 Scholars have recognized grief as partly cultural and partly biological. Psychologists Margaret Stroeb et al. emphasized culture influences in addition to biological origins of grief, though their historical conclusions should be viewed with caution; see Margaret Stroeb et al., “Broken Hearts or Broken Bonds: Love and Death in Historical Perspective,” American Psychologist 47, no. 10 (1992): 1205-1212. On the other hand, culture does not eliminate biology. Charles Darwin indicated that animals and people expressed sorrow; see Charles Darwin, The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (London: J. Murray, 1890). Even today, expressions of grief, similar to that of humans, can be found within the animal world; see Worden, Grief Counseling, 15. Though a specific culture of grief existed in the American South during the Civil War, human nature can serve as a connection, moderated by a careful understanding of culture, between modern psychology and Confederate widows.

36 Faust, This Republic of Suffering.
The death of a husband was a dramatic form of loss, as he represented the other half of a marriage and possibly one strong emotional attachment. Polarized gender roles in Victorian marriage made each person dependent on the other for economic and household needs. Specifically, a wife relied on her husband for money, housing, and, in many cases, a secure attachment. Husbands also relied on their wives for emotional support, as well as managing the household and raising the children. A married woman occupied a specific social role within the community and within social networks. Her role as a wife thus became a part of her self-identity. To the public world, her identity was often expressed through the husband, since the woman lost her maiden name in favor of her husband’s family name and even dropped her name altogether in formal society. Even in the worst relationship, the death of a husband represented the loss of the woman’s social identity as a wife. Though not required for marriage, love often existed in some form, creating an even stronger attachment than one of basic social needs. Congenial marital relationships encouraged women to privately identify as a wife by their desire to provided essential emotional support and care for her partner. In many truly caring and compassionate relationships, the loss of this private identity proved worse or at least compounded the loss of that public identity as a wife, making the death that much harder to bear.

Despite the war, distance did not appear to either cool marriage’s passion or dissolve its social attachments. Letters between many soldiers and their wives indicated a deep level

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37 John Bowlby developed the Attachment Theory to describe an infant’s attachment to its mother. The infant seeks an adult in close proximity to meet its biological needs, but forms the strongest attachment with its primary care giver. This secure attachment then becomes the base from which the infant will expand and grow. John Bowlby, *Attachment*, Vol. 1 of *Attachment and Loss* (London: Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1969); This theory was expanded to adults to suggest that romantic love forms similar attachments. Though this theory focuses on pathologies within relationships, it illustrates that people in a marriage can depend upon each other for their primary needs. C. Hazan and P.R. Shaver, “Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52 (1990): 511-524.
of affection. After two years of separation, Martha Jones wrote in a letter to her husband, Willis, “I am your fondly loving deeply devoted wife—I love you wholly and so tenderly.”\(^{38}\) He showed equal affection when addressing his “loved and loving wife.”\(^{39}\) The prolonged absence did not negate their bonds of marriage, and wives still depended on their husbands for advice, emotional support, and money. Even though soldiers faced high rates of death, many widows, and many communities, expected to be reunited with their loved ones and maintained these loving relationships, instead of distancing themselves emotionally from soldiers in anticipation of loss. Leila Elliot Habersham prepared for her husband to be wounded but not for his death.\(^{40}\) One friend wrote to Leila that she “knew he must pass through the same fire that all soldiers are obliged to endure. Still I had never connected the idea of death with him.”\(^{41}\) Most accepted that death was common in the war, but few translated that view to their loved ones. Because of this, women married to soldiers maintained their identities as wives, delaying the grieving process until notified of their husband’s death.

Widows rarely received first-hand notifications of the death of a spouse. Because the husband was the head of the household, his death eliminated the primary tie between the widow and the war front. Instead, newspaper reports or telegrams from the army traveled

\(^{38}\) Martha McDowell Buford Jones to Willis Field Jones, 28 August 1864 in Mary E Wharton and Ellen F Williams, eds., *Peach Leather and Rebel Gray: Bluegrass Life and the War* (Lexington, KY: The Helicon Company, 1986), 165.

\(^{39}\) Willis F. Jones to Martha McDowell Buford Jones, 17 April 1864 in Wharton and Williams, *Peach Leather Rebel Gray*, 158.


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 190.
through a network of family and friends that often made up the widow’s social network. It became their duty to report the death, which gave the community control over when and how they would communicate with the deceased’s wife. The social network remained restricted to family and friends upon the initial communication of a husband’s death to a wife. When a newspaper reported only that an Avery died, but not which one, William Avery thought his brother Moulton had died, leaving behind his wife, Elizabeth. William wrote to his father that he didn’t know “what to do about letting Sister Lizzie know about the telegram in the paper.”\(^{42}\) He had “retained Sister Lizzies [sic] papers” and instructed the servant to “say nothing about the rumors,” but he feared she would “hear of it from negroes or otherwise.”\(^{43}\) In this case, William’s single brother, Isaac, had died instead of Lizzie’s husband. In many more instances, however, news followed a similar, indirect train, until the widow could be notified in a controlled manner.

In addition to illuminating what would become the social network supporting a widow during her time of grief, this chain of communication identified the widow’s position within the community’s grieving process. As the most immediate connection to the deceased, widows were both the center for dramatic and painful grief but also frequently the last to know. Social networks were not merely protecting the female gender. Oftentimes, female family members communicated the news of death to the widow. Leila Elliot Habersham learned that her husband, Fred, had died from her aunt and female members of her husband’s family. She was the last to hear the news, even after her mother-in-law.\(^{44}\) While a letter or

\(^{42}\) W.W. Avery to his father, 8 July 1863. Avery Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as SHC).

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Habersham, *A Sketch of Frederic*, 160.
telegram may have been faster, most family members avoided this means of communication if possible, since such an impersonal message could convey news but not the comfort they desired to give. Instead, social networks tried to communicate the news personally to the affected wife, who was expected to grieve heavily for her husband.

Once informed of her husband’s death, many widows were overcome by numbness. Within that distant state, they succumbed to acute emotional and physical pain, as they processed the news. Leila Habersham reported “Those first days & nights, are a blank in my memory…my hand trembles now as I write & my heart fails me to tell you of the misery & desolation that in one moment blighted out all the light of life for me forever.”

Turning inward, many widows simply did not recall, or perhaps did not wish to in public, these private and emotionally painful moments. In this dark corner of their minds, widows could not even perceive the world around them or conceive of their own identity.

Because their husbands’ death caused dramatic emotional trauma, sometimes women struggled to believe that it was true. It was not simply that widows did not trust their social networks, but that poor sources and avenues of communication made it difficult to obtain definitive proof of death. There were enough false reports to sustain dim hopes. Wartime disruptions of news services and telegraph lines slowed the spread of this inaccurate reporting and also disrupted attempts to rectify mistakes. The difficulties in communicating the truth made “realizing” grief a challenge for the survivors. Yet they soon found some evidence that eventually forced them to accept their loss. For some acknowledging death was an easy process. Cornelia McDonald discovered her husband’s death when she walked into

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45 Ibid., 161

46 Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 144-170.
her house and her husband’s body was lying inside, just brought from the hospital.47 Others widows, however, tried to retrieve the body. Ellen Long Daniel’s husband, Junius, was brought to Richmond three days after his death, and he was subsequently buried in his home county.48 While Ellen received immediate confirmation, Leila Habersham had her brother-in-law, Robert Habersham, retrieve her husband’s body. She “waited in agonizing suspense from day to day not even knowing if the fatal news was true, doubting, hoping…”49 With the body returned, Robert told Leila, “he had taken the blanket from over his face &…recognized the dear face sleeping in death.”50 When she asked to see him, her brother-in-law answered, “No my sister, that cannot be.”51 Disappointed, she nonetheless trusted her family enough to believe that her husband was in the coffin.52 Hearing confirmation from relatives and physically possessing the body compelled Leila to accept that her husband was dead.

Not all widows received immediate visual confirmation from even a close friend or family member. Soldiers and the “Leesburg ladies” buried Charlie, Sallie Spears’ husband, immediately after his death instead of sending his body home. According to her friend, W. A. Glasgow, Charlie’s “remains were decently buried by his comrades in a church yard at


48 An undated newspaper clipping in Ellen Long Daniel’s scrapbook writes that his body arrived at Richmond the Sunday after his death. Another article says that his body was buried in Halifax. Ellen Daniel Long, Scrapbook, 66, Ellen Long Daniel Papers, SHC.

49 Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic 161.

50 Ibid., 173

51 Ibid.

52 A severe head wound killed Fred Habersham. His face was probably severely disfigured, and her relatives were protecting Leila from such a memory. Ibid., 166.
Leesburg.” Sallie never appeared to question her husband’s death to her relatives, and they similarly accepted the “great shock” from friends, family, and a newspaper obituary. Family discussions about Sallie’s desire “to have Charles remains disinterred” only seemed to confirm his death. While far from her husband, even Sallie was lucky, as some women may have never succeeded in locating and reburying her husband. Ultimately, Sallie appeared to continue with the grieving process and ultimately remarried, which she would not have done if she denied her husband’s death. Though a lack of visual confirmation may have made it difficult to move through the grieving process, the social network’s confirmation, perhaps combined with the prolonged absence of communication from the husband, forced the widow to accept this tragedy.

Once the death was confirmed, the widow began to experience dramatic symptoms of emotional shock and inner turmoil. Emotional despair created physical symptoms rooted in grief. Almost two months after Leonidas Polk was killed in action, his daughter wrote to her sister that her mother “seems much stronger.” The cause seemed to be both the weather and the “Ignatia” the doctor had prescribed. This common herbal remedy was, at the time, used to treat hysteria. Today it is used to treat the physical symptoms of “acute grieving or shock

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53 W. A. Glasgow to Sallie Spears, 5 February 1866, Spears and Hicks Family Papers, SHC.
54 John Spears to Sallie Spears, 7 April 1864, Spears and Hicks Family Papers, SHC.
55 W. A. Glasgow to Sallie Spears, 5 February 1866, Spears and Hicks Family Papers, SHC.
56 Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 146.
57 Sue to Fanny Polk, 20 July 1864, Polk Family Papers, SHC, UNC.
58 Ibid.
following a death.” According to the daughter, the “weakness was caused by excitement and fatigue.” Evidently, Mrs. Polk was suffering from extreme emotional and physical symptoms of grief after her husband’s death. Other widows also suffered from despair. Mrs. Mattie R. Morgan claimed, “for four weeks” she lay “prostrate upon my bed” and even wondered if her “Spirit too would now take its flight.” Widows’ loss had a significant impact on their lives, which caused acute mental and physical distress for months afterward.

To deal with their emotional and physical despair, widows turned inward to their social networks. They remained secluded, writing few, if any, letters and generally removed themselves from public society. Ideally, however, the widow was not alone. From the initial notification of death to the official burial process, family and friends swarmed around the widow. Those present in the local community gathered at the place the widow was living, often not her home. Leila Habersham recounted a long list of people who routinely visited her, and her sister moved in with her and her children as well. She seemed to appreciate the attention from her social network, as she described their comfort as “everything love & kindness could suggest.” Frances Devereux Polk remained with her daughters for her husband’s funeral services. Lily felt they “were all drawn closer to each other” in the months after her father’s death. Few widows describe ways in which these intimate interactions

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61 Sue to Fanny Polk, 20 July 1864, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

62 Mattie R. Morgan to Mrs. Henrietta Morgan, 31 Oct 1864, Hunt-Morgan-Hill Family Collection, MOC.


64 Ibid.

65 Lily to Fanny, July 8th 1864, Polk Family Papers SHC.
shaped their view of the grieving process. With widows’ depleted emotional and physical states, these actions were more a way to maintain rather than rebuild after loss. Still, the social network’s ability to provide physical and emotional comfort communicated a care for the individual that the widow readily accepted.

Wartime often disrupted social networks. Most glaringly, fewer people were able to be physically present. Difficulties in movement, particularly in a war torn country lacking sufficient transportation, meant that widows were either isolated from many family and friends or they had to leave their home and visit them. Because of distance, Mrs. Polk could not draw support from a large family or community gathering and instead traveled across the South to her daughters’ houses. Alternatively, Leila Habersham regularly saw her mother-in-law, but she was forced to communicate with her mother through letter. Cornelia McDonald lived in an area of Virginia frequently occupied by Union troops. When her baby girl died early in the war, she complained, “few could come to me, as I was outside the pickets.” Because McDonald stayed in Virginia throughout the war, along with the Union and Confederate armies, almost constant warfare discouraged travel, even in times of grief. In a similar situation, Union occupation rattled Martha Jones’s Kentucky community when military officials ordered all officers’ wives residing in the area to be banished from the country. After fleeing to Canada, Jones returned to her shattered home community just before her husband’s death. As refugees, these women lacked the familiar and comforting physical

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66 According to Laura Edwards, these social networks were pulled apart by war but did ultimately survive in some form. Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here, 172.

67 Finding Aid, “Biographical Information, Gale and Polk Family Papers SHC.

68 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 72.

69 For an account of her trip to Canada, see Wharton and Williams, Peach Leather Rebel Gray, 160-168. For an account of her husband’s death, see Ibid., 170-171.
presence of their homes and the communities they had built prior to the war. Instead, they mourned in a space where they lacked control and had no personal connections. There would be no reminders of their past identities as masterful wives.

For those who were isolated from loved ones, letters of condolence supplemented the broken grieving process by providing a connection, though more indirect, to the social network. Words from distant family and friends offered sympathy and comfort. While direct contact with the widow had been limited to only intimate family and friends, letters of condolence provided an opportunity for a much broader support network to communicate with the widow. Friends frequently delayed these letters because they feared “intruding at such a moment.” When letters did arrive, the authors expressed their “deepest sympathy in your overwhelming affliction.” Many illustrated their grief, often in boldly emotional and graphic terms. One woman wrote to her grieving sister, “My heart bleeds for you the sadest [sic] severest stroke that could befall you has indeed come upon you.” These comforting thoughts were located at the beginning of the letter, immediately establishing a sympathetic emotional connection. Though surely a comfort, even the most descriptive written expression fell short of traditional physical closeness. Reading or writing a letter did not communicate the warmth of a hug, the comfort of a mother’s voice, or the sight of a familiar face. Many descriptions attempted to recreate this physical contact. Leila’s cousin Mary wished to “wipe the tears from your streaming eyes.” Wishing, however, could not create the physical

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70 Nannie Parkman to Leila Habersham, 19 May 1863, in Habersham, *A Sketch of Frederic*, 185.
72 Louisa to Jessie Webb, 21 August 1863, Walton Family Papers, SHC.
73 Mary Pinckney to Leila Habersham, May 15th 1863, quoted in Habersham, *A Sketch of Frederic*, 185.
sensation. Even though social networks tried to provide the illusion of their physical presence, circumstances hampered their efforts.

In many important ways, however, friends and family succeeded in restructuring a social network that dramatically influenced the widow’s grieving process. Initially, letters established a sympathetic bond that the intimate relationships between the widow and members of her support network only strengthened. Quickly, though, condolers encouraged an end to the outward expression of grief. Social networks intended to support their loved ones with letters of condolence, but ultimately they limited the widows’ expression of grief. The scale of suffering that the war caused across the Confederacy detracted attention from each specific case of loss. To compensate, members of a single social network competed for attention when they needed support. Vocalizing an individual’s grief directed community resources towards that one person but, at the same time, detracted emotional support from others. To reduce competition, social networks tried to channel the fervor of the widow’s grief into a collective expression of grief. This communal attitude allotted attention equally between members of the social network. While many grieving Confederates likely felt this pressure to conform, the widow’s particular role as a woman and a wife produced a unique relationship that emphasized submission. As a result, widows experienced what seemed like mere suggestions as powerful influences when interpreting the messages from their social network about the grieving process.

There were several ways that letters of condolence sought to constrain the level and length of grief that the widow expressed. First, the condoler described, sometimes in greater

74 Most friends and family also aided in constructing the “Good Death,” as Faust indicates. While present in most letters, constructing the Good Death was not the entirety of the letter. Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 15-31.
detail than their expressions of sympathy, the depths of their own grief. Fred Habersham’s mother contacted Leila, but could not “write as many people do, & give you comfort & consolation, when my own poor heart is almost breaking.”

Such expressions were understandable for a grieving mother, but others emphatically insisted that the loss was “felt by all your acquaintances.”

Social networks encouraged the widow to “turn your thoughts from your own sorrow for a few minutes…and weep with us, it may do you good.”

These letters became cathartic for the condoler and perhaps further established a common bond of grief between the widow and her social network. Overidentification, however, could deemphasize individual loss. Becky Warren wrote to her brother’s widow,

> If I do mention my troubles to any one they’ll say “every one is losing friends now” and that is the last they think of it; but Oh! ‘Tis not the last with you and with me, ‘Tis very true most persons are losing someone dear to them but that don’t help me. It don’t replace my loved ones.

By generalizing loss, social networks decreased the social significance of each individual death. Within social networks, the fact that all suffered meant that no individual’s pain was worse than their neighbors’ distress. Grief, as a result, could no longer be a public cry of anguish, even though wartime destruction did not lessen the impact of each death on individuals.

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75 Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 192.

76 Z. Cranford to Jessie Web, 3 Nov. 1863, Walton Family Papers, SHC.

77 Mary Pinckney to Leila Eliott Habersham, May 15th 1863, quoted in Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 187.

78 Beckie Warren to Sallie Gray Spears, 6 Dec. [1863 or 1864], Spears and Hicks Family Papers, SHC.
Occasionally, this pull towards common grief overshot its mark. Ironically, in the same letter in which Beckie Warren bemoaned her support network for ignoring her plight, she sympathetically told her widowed sister-in-law:

Sallie I know you feel alone, sad and distressed but you have so much comfort in Charlie’s death that I reckon you ought not grieve. Just think if it had been Rice [Beckie’s husband] instead of Charlie, I would have no comfort, while you have all except his presence, that is great, but oh! Not to compare with external happiness.  

In this rather extreme case, Beckie suggested that it was better to lose a husband when you had memories of him on earth. Perhaps since Sallie had a daughter, Beckie felt Sallie should have lost her husband before Beckie lost hers. Unwittingly, Beckie perpetuated the same community pressures that plagued her. Since Beckie’s letters dropped off soon after, Sallie probably did not accept this advice easily. By subjugating the individual to the community, social networks discouraged personal grief because it would suggest that an individual death was more important than other dead husbands, fathers, or brothers. Of course, most friends and family were not quite as blunt as Warren, but social networks clearly outlined that the common experience of loss encouraged community regulation of individual widows’ grief.

Rather than focus on the individual, social networks encouraged that each loss be combined as a sacrifice on the altar of the Confederacy. In recounting Mr. McDonald’s

79 Ibid.

80 Sallie Spears papers continue into the twentieth century. See, Spears and Hicks Family Papers, SHC.

81 The concept of Southern nationhood is contested ground. In these letters of condolence, some, though not all, friends and family members referred to a national cause, referring to the Confederacy. Though this proof is inconclusive for the Confederacy as a whole, some Confederates did draw upon nationalism for the process of grief. For more information on Confederate nationalism, see Beringer, Why the South Lost; Faust. Creation of Confederate Nationalism; Gary W. Gallagher, The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could not Stave off Defeat
burial, friends emphasized that he was attended by his West Point associates, high ranking military officials, and the President, and that he was buried wrapped in the Stars and Bars.\textsuperscript{82} Her husband’s connection to the military and society’s corresponding appreciation of his sacrifice became an important comfort to his wife in addition to her own family. Social networks new to the armed forces lifestyle encouraged the military’s appreciation for duty more forcefully. In dying for his country, Fred Habershaw “cheerfully offered up a life that was so precious to his family, and laid it on the altar of his country,” so his field officer and friend suggested.\textsuperscript{83} Leila’s friends thought, “It will be a great consolation for you to feel that a brave soldier has fallen in the discharge of a high duty.”\textsuperscript{84} Though friends and family realized that these sentiments helped little “in the first moments of grief,” they were confident that their comments would eventually “rise up before you as a tower of strength.”\textsuperscript{85} In this way, social networks trained vast numbers of widows to recognize sacrifice in war as an admirable duty and, as a good form of death, something that warranted rejoicing rather than mourning.

This emphasis on community grief did channel the individual grief process into support for the Confederacy, but as a result it also stunted the individual grieving process. By appealing to emotions, social networks encouraged widows to accept their husband’s death as a good, which prevented expressions of anger, ambivalence, or grief over their loss. When

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\textsuperscript{82} McDonald, \textit{A Woman’s Civil War}, 217.

\textsuperscript{83} Major J.P.W. Read to Leila Habershaw, 1 August 1863, quoted in Habershaw, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 198.

\textsuperscript{84} Geo. P. Elliot to Leila Habershaw, 22 May 1863, quoted in Habershaw, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 197.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
Mary Chesnut criticized her husband early in the war for being insensitive when she comforted a widow, he responded that “noisy, fidgety grief never moves me at all; it annoys me. Self-control is what we all need.” Mary encountered several more years of hard war to obtain such a “hard heart,” but staggering losses forced most support networks to come to this conclusion. Social networks suppressed emotional displays, even at funerals. Leila Habersham’s friends and family disdained public emotional outbursts so much that they refused to let her attend her own husband’s funeral unless she promised to control herself.

After social networks repressed outward expressions of grief, they attempted to transform sadness into veneration of the Confederate cause. Poetically appealing to Leila Habersham, a friend wrote, “Fond, cherished wife, thy duteous tears restrain, Thy hero husband has his laurels gained.” By eliminating negative emotions, interpreting death as a positive contribution to the Confederate cause, and molding individual grief into a communal experience, social networks, enacted via letters of condolence, shortened the grieving process. Though support networks initially comforted widows during their most acute pain, letters of condolence communicated a very different message. In the postwar era, widows accepted their social network’s insistence that emotional grief must stay out of the public sphere, but they were increasingly separated from their social network. The isolated, impoverished, and defeated atmosphere of the post-war South maintained the social network’s message even when friends and family were increasingly absent.

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87 Chesnut, *Diary from Dixie*, 194.


Widows could not eliminate their emotions in the face of devastating loss, yet they were forced to modify their expression because they continued to lose their connection to their support network. “Grief may be wrong but it is human nature & we cannot refrain,” a woman commented. Still, such grief had few opportunities for expression. Friends and family gathered and wrote letters of condolence immediately after the death, but circumstances, and their belief that grief should end, increasingly separated them from the widow. The demands of the war and ultimately postwar devastation also continually disrupted support networks within towns and communities. Relatives congregated immediately after the death, and wrote letters of condolence, but few could maintain such support. In November 1865, seventeen months after her husband’s death, Frances Devereux Polk was wholly occupied with writing letters. The letters dwindled, however. By the beginning of 1866, she began complaining that “we do not hear as often as we could wish…our life is so monotonous here, these letters are events.” She admitted that some letters might have gone missing, but that could hardly account for such a dramatic, and ultimately prolonged, complaint. With her daughters spread across the country, Mrs. Polk felt disconnected from them, especially in comparison to her previous connection over Mr. Polk’s death. Because support networks failed to maintain contact for an extended period, widows lost both their companionship and their messages about the grieving process.

Physical relocation not only disrupted support networks but also helped change the landscape of many southern communities. While Martha Jones returned to her Kentucky home, she found her community badly dismantled, since quite a number of locals had fled to

90 Louisa to Jessie Webb, 21 August 1863, Walton Family Papers SHC.

91 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 19 January 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
escape the enforcement of wartime ordinances.\textsuperscript{92} Many widows either did not or could not return home. Leila Habersham moved into a relative’s household in Savannah.\textsuperscript{93} When Cornelia McDonald’s friends and family suggested that she get a job in Richmond and have her children “distributed among the older members of the family,” Cornelia relocated to Lexington with her children to preserve what was left of her immediate family.\textsuperscript{94} While this reduced the pressure from her social network, it also meant that many of her friends were “of a very recent date” and her “friends for long years, ever since I was married, and to whom I had no hesitation in speaking of my trouble, were also gone, and I felt forsaken.”\textsuperscript{95} Because the war removed widows from their support networks and their communities, many felt increasingly isolated emotionally. This is not to say that widows were isolated from people. In many cases, they might have been exposed to more people on a daily basis, as many moved in with family. To express deep, emotional grief, however, widows needed quality relationships rather than a large quantity of them. This isolation reinforced the social networks’ drive to shorten grief, even in the absence of social connections.

In addition to losing strong support networks, widows also lost a source of income and a stable relationship that, in a system of patriarchy, took a leading role in daily life. Some widows moved to cities to escape poverty. Mrs. Bartow worked in the capital cutting bonds, despite her family’s offers to help.\textsuperscript{96} Though historians traditionally view such efforts as

\textsuperscript{92} The United States military issued orders to banish Confederate officers’ wives from Kentucky. Wharton and Williams, \textit{Peach Leather Rebel Gray}, 160-1.

\textsuperscript{93} Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of the Life}, 262.

\textsuperscript{94} McDonald, \textit{A Woman’s Civil War}, 217.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 241

\textsuperscript{96} Chesnut, \textit{A Diary from Dixie}, 166.
widows seizing opportunity for female independence, many widows viewed such tasks as a burden during a time of personal grief. When Cornelia McDonald refused her family’s help and moved to Lexington, her money dwindled. Despite her isolation, she still tried to avoid employment and make her money last, “so that I would not have to go out among strangers to try to earn money when I only wanted to hide myself and my sorrow from the light of day.”

It was not merely gender roles that kept her from work, but her grief. Cornelia’s money ran out and she was forced to seek employment by teaching art classes. She disliked “not having the privilege of retirement in my present state of distress…but the alternative was starvation.”

Her isolated and impoverished situation forced her to abbreviate her grief even further. Sick and unable to work, Cornelia turned to her neighbors, but her “heart ached continually” without emotional or financial support.

Though excited at General Lee’s arrival in Lexington in 1865 to accept the presidency of Washington College, McDonald could not join her town in their preparations for Mrs. Lee’s reception. Cornelia was “wholly occupied with my own trouble” and refused to go with a “sad face and sorrowful heart.”

Widows could not locate a way to gain control of their economic situation, which limited their ability to express their grief. Even though she remained distant from her support network, the widow still lived in a similar community that required participation in the public sphere for survival. In turn, this demanded that they outwardly participate in the public’s ideal version of the grieving process.

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97 McDonald, *A Woman’s Civil War*, 221.

98 Ibid., 222.

99 Ibid., 243.

100 Ibid., 244
Within this public sphere, many Confederates joined in memorial activities to deal with their defeat. Through Memorial Days and cemetery creation and preservation, the people of the South celebrated the Confederate cause and its martyrs. This was a way of coping with defeat. Ladies Memorial Associations led the effort, followed by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, by placing women at the head of this community expression of grief. Community ceremonies did not simply mourn individual deaths, however. For example, the Junius Daniel Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy memorialized their namesake’s birthday along with the birthdays of Robert E. Lee, President Davis, and Matt W. Ransom in one major celebration. These men were singled out and at the same time generalized to represent sacrifice for the Confederate cause. Generals symbolized men or an aspect of Southern society who were lost in the war, and the public intended these memorials to work through a process of community grief. Strongly nationalistic, this rhetoric propounded Confederate glory, and therefore the goodness of sacrifice to its cause. While a speech at Daniel’s birthday celebration recognized that his death “snatched” Daniel “from the arms of a loving wife,” the same article praised those “acts of patriotism, heroism and devotion” that “won a place on the pages of history.” Positive rhetoric largely mirrored the social network’s call to see death as a positive, community activity. These activities certainly affected widows, since Daniel preserved this

101 For an in depth study of women and these organizations, see Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies’ Memorial Associations & the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).


clipping in her scrapbook. Those affects were not all beneficial to the widow, since memorialization pressured widows to keep their own grief to themselves and publically ignore their more ambivalent feelings about loss.

Even in the postwar period, the social network’s messages on grief continued to mold widows long after their letters of condolence stopped. Just because widows lived in this political and social atmosphere, however, did not mean they internalized it. Instead, widows continued grieving. By completing the grieving process, rather than halting it, widows were able to reconstruct their own identity by relying on their own cognitive processes rather than depending on the positive, political identity that social networks constructed in their letters of condolence. In order to finish the grieving process, widows had to redefine their husband’s role. Even though women believed they would be reunited with their husbands, he was still absent on earth.105 Therefore, the widow had to fill that empty role without completely breaking her bond with him. To do so, widows actively reexperienced their grief. The desire to preserve their husbands within their lives motivated widows to continue the grieving process, but, by privately experiencing the socially undesirable stages of the grieving process, it allowed them to finish the last tasks of grief. This process might begin only months after the death, or emotions could lie dormant, only to surface years later. Ultimately, most widows placed their relationship with their husbands in a more minor role and discovered new relationships to fill the significant void.

After death, the body decayed rapidly and personal effects, without their owner, soon disappeared. The very footprint of the deceased gradually eroded. Personal effects embodied their deceased owner, so acquiring and maintaining the husband’s possessions, letters, or

105 Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 175.
even clips of hair became paramount to preserving the presence of the deceased in the earthly realm. Francis Polk wished her husbands’ “letters could be recovered,” particularly those from their engagement.\footnote{Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, May 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.} By preserving their correspondence, those “glorious” letters provided comfort when memories haunted Mrs. Polk.\footnote{Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 11 June 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.} In another instance, Ellen Long Daniels preserved a scrap of a letter that her husband had written just before he was killed.\footnote{This letter is undated and unsigned, but was attributed to Junius Daniel. It is a loose page that can be located in, Ellen Long Daniel, scrapbook, Ellen Long Daniel Papers SHC.} Simply reading the words gave the appearance of live conversation, particularly in a society heavily reliant on written communication. In addition to acquiring writing, widows clung to their household furniture, which was the last evidence of their former lives as wealthy wives.\footnote{Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 19 January 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC} These letters and objects, which had been possessed, touched, or created by their husbands, safeguarded a piece of his essence. For the widow, keeping these possessions maintained a connection between her beloved and the earthly realm and, in turn, preserved her identity as a wife.

By combining the preservation of material objects with a more direct authorship, Ellen Long Daniel kept a scrapbook in the years after the war.\footnote{Even though Daniel’s name is not in the book and there are no letters by her to support the claim to her authorship, the donor, a relative, asserted that the scrapbook was compiled by Ellen. The contents within also suggest her authorship, as many items describe her husband’s death, articles from her county newspaper, and items concerning a widow’s grief. Archivist Laura Clark Brown at the Southern Historical Collection concurs.} She collected various newspaper articles over a range of dates, starting during the war and continuing into the twentieth century. In doing so, she was able to preserve the local events and particular items
of interest from her life. The most prolific component, however, were printed biographies of Confederate Generals, showing an interest in her husband’s compatriots. Several carefully preserved pages also contained documents pertaining to her husband’s life and newspaper articles describing his character, death, and ultimate burial. This particular method of preservation occurred over two stages. First, Daniel clipped newspaper articles, which was common for the time period. In this way, she preserved her husband’s importance to the community, the story of grief, as well as details pertaining to his life and death.

Scrapbooking, a common fad in the late nineteenth century, further preserved these newspaper articles and allowed them to be assembled in a particular manner. This scrapbook, following contemporary trends, replicated newspapers by placing the articles vertically and close together on a page. By assembling the scrapbook, Daniel preserved

111 Further research is needed to locate and date each newspaper clipping. This range represented the range of dates listed in the scrapbook. Therefore, it represents the minimum time span, and suggests that the frequency of collecting decreased over the years, but such conclusions are at this time speculative.

112 The pages in this scrapbook are loose and out of order. Some, but not all have page numbers written in pencil. Ellen Daniel Long, scrapbook 64-66, Ellen Long Daniel Papers, SHC.

113 It is difficult to know when Daniel assembled the scrapbook. It could have been done over a period of time, as she acquired the clippings, or all at once, as a way to preserve a collection of clippings. It seems most reasonable that it was a combination. Some articles were pasted over others, indicating that they were placed in the scrapbook at different times. On the other hand, the date in the front of the book suggested Daniel did not acquire it until 1885. Articles after that date were included, so it seems likely that Daniel collected newspaper articles and later assembled the scrapbook, but continued adding to it over a period of time. While it is impossible to be sure, the real value comes from her attempt at preservation over a long period of time and the act of creating the scrapbook. Therefore, certainty on this information is not required to use the scrapbook as a valuable primary source.

information about her husband, his importance in the community, and kept those events frozen in time. In part, the scrapbook also kept her identity as a wife frozen in time.

In a more traditional manner of capturing the ephemeral imprint of their husbands, widows recorded memoirs to preserve the best possible image of their husband. In one of the first communications, over half a year after his death, Frances Devereux Polk told her daughter, “I wished you would write any little thing you might remember of your father for me.” Later, Polk intimated she had written a “little memoir” which she hoped to incorporate with several other recollections for a larger work by D. H. Hill. Still, such extensive preservation seemed incomplete, since it was “not to take the place of the larger life which I hope will be written.”

Simply preserving a memory was not enough. Mrs. Polk sought to preserve the best memory, as she went to great lengths to defend her late husband from criticism of him after his death. By preserving his reputation, she maintained both family honor as well as a strong bond with her husband. While Polk enlisted her entire family to record small pieces of her husband’s life, many widows saw that job as their sole responsibility. Leila Habersham began *A Sketch of the Life of Frederick Habersham* shortly after his death. In this book-length narrative, she included a history of his life but focused on the time of their marriage, particularly during the war. A mix of her narrative, his writings, letters she received, and

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115 While outside the scope of this paper, print media and other cultural messages may have also influenced widows grieving process, much like social networks and religious teachings. For Daniel’s scrapbook, the messages she constructed from these cultural messages prove significant in themselves and help her privately respond to a public dialogue.

116 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, January 1865, Polk Family Papers SHC.

117 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 16 July 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

118 Ibid.
printed newspaper articles preserved both her husband’s words and the impact he made upon society. Cornelia Peake McDonald undertook a similar path of preservation. During the war, her journal was partially lost and damaged. She preserved what remained and reconstructed the rest to preserve the entire history. Even though the content focused more on Cornelia than her husband, she began the diary at her husband’s request. The project sustained a connection to her husband and resulted in a story he wanted told. Published memoirs not only maintained the husband and the widow’s identity as a wife but also interpreted the husband’s life in a way that memorialized their marriage for public posterity.

Eventually, the act of preservation reopened unhealed wounds. For women who tried to preserve physical objects, economic hardship forced them to reexperience loss and return to the grieving process that social networks had stunted. Mrs. Polk’s struggled to keep afloat as her financial situation deteriorated. At first without employment, her children encouraged her to sell her possessions for money. Simple objects represented the loss of her previously privileged life, which was directly connected to her marriage to her husband. In addition to luxury household items, however, many of her husband’s personal possessions, which she had worked to keep, were sold. Because she had used these items to retain a physical connection to her husband, their loss mirrored the loss of her husband, as his physical presence appeared to diminish. Outside of tangible items, general economic hardship could also encourage reentrance into the grieving process. McDonald, crushed by her husband’s death, also suffered from the loss of her financial security. Despite her family’s attempts to suppress her grief, McDonald could not escape the daily hardships that accompanied poverty.

119 MacDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 21.
120 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 19 January 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
The grief over her husband was often exacerbated by financial difficulty, and her expression of grief intermixed both areas of loss. Though widows maintained a connection to their deceased husband, the economic circumstances of Polk and McDonald continued to chip away at that connection, and therefore their identity as a wife. This conflict forced them to reexperience grief and reenter the grief cycle.

In perhaps a more obvious way, often the very act of preservation required the widow to relive her husband’s death and her lasting grief. For Daniel’s scrapbook, selecting newspaper articles to save and arranging them in a book required reflection. Not only did she collect many articles about her husband’s death, but she also underlined portions of the text, showing that she considered the words deeply while reliving his death.\(^{121}\) Daniels probably chose additional material, particularly poems, on a more selective basis. To preserve an article in that manner, Daniel must have read through many articles and poems, selected those she deemed most relevant, and arrange them within the scrapbook. She then placed most poetry relating to grief on separate pages, suggesting that they were grouped by meaning. This entire process required much reflection, forcing Daniel to not only relive events but also emotions.

Because her scrapbook was intended for personal use, it provided a means of emotional expression unavailable with published works or letters. Southern newspapers published poems that were written in the wake of the war or well-known poems that related to the common experience of grief. Daniel saved numerous poems and carefully pasted them into her scrapbook. On one page in particular, she placed a poem that instructed the

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\(^{121}\) Ellen Long Daniel, scrapbook, pages 64-5, Ellen Long Daniel Papers SHC.
“Widow’d wife, whose heart is breaking” to “Henceforth calm your heartache.”\(^{122}\) Instead of suggesting that she simply get over the death, however, it instructed the widow to “Go and pray beside your sleeper [husband].”\(^{123}\) Rather than simply eliminating grief in favor of the common cause, it recognized her sacrifice and acknowledged her continued relationship with her husband, even though she had moved past the painful emotional stages of grief. Next to this poem, Daniel placed *Gone!*\(^{124}\), which also carried a different message. Interpreting the relationship as a marriage as Daniel probably did, this poem expressed frustration, even anger, that the husband is gone “without a regret, or a tear, or a sigh” leaving the wife heartbroken.\(^{124}\) Instead of accepting that fact, the author wondered, “Is man so noble… or hearts of fair girls merely toys for the vain? To love or to lose, or to break them at pleasure…?”\(^{125}\) Similar to the first poem, these lines recognized the difficulties of widowhood, instead of forcing widows to celebrate the death of their husband. It permitted Daniel to experience the anger and betrayal of her loss, as well as her situation, where society forced women to “laugh in her gladness; to suffer in silence—to weep and be still!”\(^{126}\) Simply by reading and preserving newspaper articles, Daniel began a process that would reopen her grief and allow her to experience its remaining stages without openly challenging her identity as a wife.

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\(^{123}\) Ibid.

\(^{124}\) This newspaper clipping does not include a publication title or a date, but must have had some significance to *In Pace* since those two clippings were the only two on the page. Ellen Long Daniels, scrapbook, page 18, Ellen Long Daniel Papers, SHC.

\(^{125}\) Ibid.

\(^{126}\) Ibid.
While Daniel could trust that her emotional musings would remain private, widows who preserved their husband through memoirs exposed their emotions to either the family or public record. Their expressions were more selected and guarded; still, the process of writing about their husband’s life and death forced them to relive their grief. On the surface, many of these memoirs appear to have accepted the support network’s encouraged interpretation of grief. According to Confederate society, Fred Habersham’s death was a noble sacrifice worth remembering, which Leila corroborated by writing the memoir. Leila deviated from the narrative by emphasizing their marriage instead of Fred’s heroic acts and by writing from her perspective. In constructing this narrative of their married life and Fred’s death, Leila re-enacted their love and her loss. Instead of ending the narrative with Fred’s fall at Chancellorsville, Leila included an account of her reactions, which also allowed her to reexperience her grief.\textsuperscript{127} Constructing a memoir allowed widows to continue the grieving process. This process had two major effects. First, Leila and other widows began to think of their husband as dead as they wrote the story. By producing a memoir, widows also preserved their identity as a wife in a physical and seemingly permanent object, reducing the fear of losing a connection to their husband. This did not remove their grief completely, but it did place distance between the widow and her deceased husband.

By preserving their husbands’ memory, holding onto their identity as wives, and continuing to nurture their grief, widows rejected their social networks’ prescription for a short grieving process because they refused to see the death of their husband as a positive turning point in their lives. Conversely, widows did accept their support network’s message to keep grief private. Affirming this directive posed a problem because the husband filled

\textsuperscript{127} Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}. Cornelia Peake McDonald follows a similar narrative construction in \textit{A Woman’s Civil War}.  

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many essential social roles. Prior to the Civil War, husbands provided financial, emotional, and parental support. In loving and happy relationships, husbands were also a close confidant and a strong secure relationship for wives. In return, a significant part of a woman’s identity was defined by her marriage status and her domestic ability to take care of her husband. Losing a husband eliminated numerous avenues of support and an important relationship. If the widow wanted to preserve her identity as her husband’s wife, she had to find another avenue to fill those roles. As a result, widows had sought a person or persons to take up the roles the husband had filled. Because the husband no longer occupied those roles, but the wife still hoped to meet him in heaven, their relationship had to be redefined. The process of this re-association was often determined by the presence of children. By redefining their husband’s role in their life, widows would in turn redefine their identity by distancing themselves from their role as a wife.

For women with either no children or grown children, their relationship to other people took the place of their husband in their lives. Facing isolation and economic hardship, these widows sought to replace their husband’s supportive role. Without means of external financial aid, Mrs. Polk took a job as a teacher and assumed some personal duties that her husband had filled. She was very attentive at communicating with her children and always signed her letters as “Mother.”\(^{128}\) When giving her children advice, she would reference what “your Father would say” to justify her own opinion.\(^{129}\) Her job itself did not end her isolation or grief. It did, however, provide her with a significant occupation. Letters complaining about

\(^{128}\) For some examples in the Polk Family Papers, SHC, see Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, January 1865; Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 23 March 1866; Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 17 April 1868.

\(^{129}\) Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 1 October 1867, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
her isolation became interspersed with claims that she might be so busy she “could not stop to see you.”\textsuperscript{130} Sporadically at first, her signature began to shift to “your loving mother- F. A. Polk.”\textsuperscript{131} Slowly, she moved away from being identified with her husband and took on the role of support herself. Though her signature still emphasized her husband’s last name, the two initials referred to her first and middle given names. References to her husband’s opinions dropped from her letters. This shift was not permanent, but its prevalence suggested that she was increasingly relying on herself to fulfill her needs. She did not eliminate her husband from her life, but relegated him to the past. When her brother died in 1870, the event recalled “the past most vividly,” but did not resurrect her husband’s ghost permanently.\textsuperscript{132}

While her connection to her husband did not disappear, it did dissipate. In turn, Polk shifted her self-identity from a wife to a more independent woman.

Other methods of reliving grief allowed the widow to redefine relationships. Ellen Long Daniel could reflect upon her past emotions through her scrapbook. Preserving additional newspaper clippings also allowed her to create new memories. Articles about death persisted, particularly during World War I, but Daniel shifted from grief to articles about declining values in homes from the change in racial status. This perception indicated the consequences of not achieving her husband’s cause, mirroring the loss of similar support from her husband. By adding pages, her past, including the death of her husband, became less prominent in the overall memory of her life. In her husband’s absence, Daniel looked to her friends and neighbors to fulfill that role. For her, the community failed, but for McDonald the community provided the support her husband no longer could. Despondent in grief and

\textsuperscript{130} Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 10 June 1870, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

\textsuperscript{131} Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny, 5 October, 1870, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
poverty, her spirits lifted when she discovered she would receive money, intended to relieve destitute widows, from some of her friends. As her material condition improved so did her spirits. When she heard her friends’ intentions, she began calling on acquaintances again. Such a gesture helped restore a valuable network of friends upon which she could rely. Her written narrative indicated that her husband was still an important part of her life, but in a more auxiliary role. The narrative focused on her and her community, rather than her relationship with him. Gradually, for Daniel and McDonald, identity as community members in an impoverished South took precedence over their identity as their husband’s wife.

Instead of focusing on replacing the husband’s role, many widows, especially those with young children, tended to focus on redirecting their domestic energy. The benefactors of such attention were their children, who carried the blood and often likeness of their father. Women with an empty nest, such as Mrs. Polk, tried this avenue but failed because their children were old enough to need less attention. Even those who focused on replacing financial support, such as McDonald, directed their reflections towards their children. Leila Habershham’s sketch was “written for his three little children” to “keep this book carefully, to value it above gold & silver, & to let it descend to their children as the record of a noble life.” While Leila tried to transmit her husband’s memory through all her children, she more directly transferred his identity to her eldest son. During the war, Leila gave birth to a baby boy. She named him Fred, after his father, but the boy died a few days later.

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133 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 244-5.
134 Ibid., 245.
135 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 21.
136 Habershham, A Sketch of Frederic, 27.
137 Habershham, A Sketch of Frederic, 132-133.
Frederic’s death, Leila changed one of her other son’s name from Ralph to Frederic Augustus Habersham Jr.\textsuperscript{138} By writing a biography, Leila had re-created and preserved her husband’s actions in life. By renaming her child, Leila preserved her husband’s blood, the essence of his identity. In turn, this preserved her identity as Frederick Habersham Sr.’s wife.

Widows also spent an increased amount of time with their children. Being a wife provided a self-definition and a set of prescribed roles. Motherhood filled those roles when wifely duties ceased. Often, this attention became remarkably intense. Thomas Jackson and Mary Anna Morrison, married in 1857, grieved over the loss of their first child prior to the war. Another baby was born in 1862, but Jackson was wounded when the child was less than a year old. He passed away in the company of his wife and child.\textsuperscript{139} According to Varina Davis, Mrs. Jackson, the wife of “Stonewall” Jackson, “hid her bowed head among her own people, to live only for her baby.”\textsuperscript{140} Though some friends and family worried that Sallie Spears would “idolize your baby too much,” most encouraged widows to focus on raising their children. One friend urged Leila Habersham to raise her children “with the bright example of their Father’s valor” because by doing so “he from above will look down & smile upon you.”\textsuperscript{141} This focus continued throughout their children’s lives, with many widows only coming back into the public social arena with their teenage daughters. Mrs. Jackson stayed “in strict retirement…until her daughter was grown…and then, to promote her child’s happiness, the mother emerged from the privacy in which she had lived since her husband’s

\textsuperscript{138} Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 285.

\textsuperscript{139} Mrs. Jefferson Davis, “The Widow of Stonewall Jackson,” \textit{The Ladies’ Home Journal}, September 1893, 5. This article was also published in the Southern Historical Society Papers in that same year.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{141} Cap J.P.W. Read to Leila Habersham, quoted in Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 188.
Even when economic necessity drew mothers away from their children, they justified this work through their children. Jessie Webb sent her children to school, but domestic employment and her own family kept her “busy.” She claimed, “if I can raise them [her children] and educate them I will feel reprise for all my trouble.” Both schools and memoirs emphasized teaching children about their past and ensuring its preservation for future generations. By attending to children, widows did not eliminate their identity as a wife, but morphed it into an identity as the mother of their husband’s children.

Eventually, however, widows could no longer dote on their young. Mrs. Jackson’s daughter died unexpectedly at a young age. In grief, she lost both her child and her husband again. Instead of focusing her grief on her daughter, however, she turned to write a biography of her husband that, Varina Davis believed, greatly improved her spirits. Varina’s observation does not suggest that her daughter was somehow unimportant in her life, but that she had made her child her strongest attachment in life, in the absence of her husband. When that attachment was also taken away, she reverted to a representation of her husband, reestablishing that connection. Other widows continued to focus on children, but expanded their scope. Leila Habersham eventually became active in voluntary organizations, namely helping Savannah orphanages. Slightly different from doting on blood relatives, these organizations would redefine the widow’s identity from that of a wife to that of a widow.

Even after widows redefined their relationship with their husband and formed new attachments to take up the roles his death left unfilled, the process of grief would likely

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143 Jessie Webb to Mother, 12 October 1866, Walton Family Papers, SHC.


145 Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 263-4.
resurface in some form, periodically. Grief faded at different rates for each woman, but the experience haunted them for a lifetime. Widowed mothers, such as Varina and Leila, clearly struggled to develop an identity beyond their husband or their children. Other widows, such as Flora Stuart, monitored their husbands’ graves and monuments to soldiers, since they were “at rest” and “cannot speak,” even into the twentieth century.\(^{146}\) It is unclear whether this grief impacted the rate of marriages. With so many Southern soldiers dead or maimed after the war, there would have likely been a shortage of men. Further research is necessary to determine how that demographic shift affected the marriage rate. A change could have stemmed from quantitative problems, social pressure on widows, or by personal choice as a result of grief. For any of these reasons, widows struggled to decrease their attachment to their deceased husband, but many did manage to reformulate new identities that took precedence over their old identity as their husband’s wife. It is likely that women without children were able to distance themselves from their original husband more completely. Widows with children may have needed the financial support, but their grief prevented them from fully embracing a new marital relationship.

While many, or perhaps most, widows never completely shed their grief in private, even if they did in public, they did take action to fulfill their emotional needs as best as possible. Initially, social networks filled that void, especially through communication, human contact, and sympathy. Letters of condolence shaped the widows’ grieving process by encouraging a short, positive grieving process, born out of a competition over community attention during a time of war. As social networks continued to fall apart after the war, widows’ isolation from family, combined with community acts of memorialization,

continued to encourage the values that social networks professed. Refusing to stunt their emotions, widows turned to their own private actions to complete a grieving process that did fulfill their emotional needs. In trying to preserve a memory of their husband and their identity as his wife, widows reexperienced grief and developed alternative conceptions of their identity. This synthesis between the social network’s wishes and the widows’ interpretations formed an important part of the widows’ reconstructed identity but not all of it. Widows contended with more messages about grief than simply their friends and family, however. In times of great crisis, the church provided comfort for wounded souls, theological assurance of God’s righteousness, and a means of understanding life after death. Religious teachings would provide similar comforts and constraints to widows as they tried to navigate the grieving process.
CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AND THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Much like social networks, religious leaders emphasized a quick, positive grieving process. Their teachings provided intellectual fodder to fuel the widows’ burning desire to understand her husband’s death and her subsequent identity in God’s world. Preachers and priests propounded theology from the pulpit to explain how God could righteously cause death. Such a precarious balance between God’s benevolence and God’s will teetered on the fulcrum that resurrection guaranteed reunion in a much more peaceful place than the war-torn earth. Because widows relied on the surety of resurrection to imagine their identity on earth and their husband’s identity in a heavenly state, they had to maintain their belief in God. Widows accepted the encouragement from religious teachings to submit to God by turning to Him for protection and assistance, since they were without a male provider on earth. When deteriorating economic and social conditions eroded the faith that God would restore their former identity, widows drew on religious descriptions of wartime Christian glory to develop their own goals and inspire them to establish a new purpose in life. In the end, widows produced a synthesis of the messages from religious teachings and their own emotional needs to help them navigate the grieving process and reconstruct their spiritual identity.

Prior to the Civil War, many denominations had split along the Mason-Dixon line. For example, Episcopal clergymen in the South seceded with their states. As the seceded
states became the Confederate States of America, the Southern Episcopal Church, and by extension its leaders, ultimately became an agent and proponent of the Confederacy. In this position of political power, clergymen of many denominations tended to the spiritual needs of the Confederacy and its constituents. Together with “our mothers, wives and sisters…the most saintly and reverend pastors in the church of Christ; have been foremost to justify our defence [sic],” so argued Robert Lewis Dabney, a Presbyterian minister. Institutionally tied to the Confederacy, the church infused its religious teaching with political support for the Confederate cause. These messages only gained importance as the clergymen disseminated the institutional theology among the Southern population.

To propagate religious teachings, clergymen published religious literature and preached sermons to soldiers in the camps and civilians on the home front. Facing death, soldiers confronted personal religious beliefs concerning death and the afterlife. To calm these spiritual crises, family members and church publishing bodies sent printed literature to camps, and clergymen travelled with the army to encourage appropriate Christian behavior. Fred Habersham received “tracts & sermons” and distributed them “to a man in our battery who preaches & prayers to the rest,” as did many others throughout the army. Revivals

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149 Frederic Habersham to Leila Habersham, 15 April 1863, in Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 155.
also spread through camps and converted some soldiers to Christianity.\textsuperscript{150} These conversions enhanced the clergy’s claim as the authority on interpreting death and the hereafter. On the other hand, this religious activity affected a small portion of soldiers, since clergymen were stretched thin and vice reigned in camp life.\textsuperscript{151} Even Fred doubted the effect of religious education in his battery.\textsuperscript{152} Conversions may have been sparse, but even minor evidence that soldiers were turning to God could comfort grieving widows concerned about their husband’s spiritual state by linking the Confederate soldier’s identity to that of a Christian soldier.

As religious teachings spread through military camps, they also proliferated on the home front. Religious publications were not only useful to soldiers, but also “instructive to the reading public generally.”\textsuperscript{153} In addition, most clergymen remained at home, and those who followed the army typically remained for only a time.\textsuperscript{154} For example, Bishop Stephen Elliot, the Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal Church for the Confederate States of America, preached many sermons at his home church in Georgia during the war. Some clergy managed to continue to travel across their home states, like Samuel Agnew, a Presbyterian minister in

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\textsuperscript{150} For more information about religious revivals and conversions in the Union and Confederate armies, see Woodworth, \textit{While God is Marching On}.

\textsuperscript{151} Glatthaar, \textit{General Lee’s Army}, 240.

\textsuperscript{152} Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 155.


\textsuperscript{154} In the Army of Northern Virginia, the numbers of clergymen initially serving quickly dwindled. See Glatthaar, \textit{General Lee’s Army}, 238.
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Mississippi.\textsuperscript{155} Through these means, religious teachings permeated the Confederacy and influenced many believers’ lives.

Religious leaders may have been present in a community, but individual access to them was more challenging. The war disrupted religious communication much like it disrupted all other forms of communication. Previously dependent on Northern publishing houses, the Confederacy struggled to print material as its resources shrank year by year. Even the small number of clergy with the army drained local communities of their religious leadership. When Leonidas Polk, Francis Polk’s husband, joined the Confederate army as a General, New Orleans lost its head Bishop. Another pastor wrote, “This time of trouble, like the grave, levels all distinctions, and rich and poor meet together. Factories and shops are closed, schools are deserted, churches are thinned, in every family the husband, or the father, or the son, or the brother has marched, or is preparing to march.”\textsuperscript{156} Southern religious communities suffered the devastating effects of war, but this did not necessarily prevent women, including widows, from accessing and absorbing religious teachings to interpret their own identity in the cosmic world.

Perhaps more than soldiers, many women maintained their previous connection to religious teachings during and after the war. Religious services, community services, and personal reflection all communicated religious teaching. Religious services, consisting of the formal communication between the clergy and his congregants, connected women to the


church. As the southern states began to secede from the Union, Leila Habersham’s daughter was baptized with “4 generations in the female line in that pew—my Mother’s Mother, my own Mother, myself, & the little daughter.”

Leila’s husband merely stood next to her. Pews emptied during the war, as churches like Kent Street “suffered heavily” during the war. Still, Kent Street, along with many other religious bodies, struggled on. Cornelia McDonald frequently noted in her diary Sundays when she “went to church to hear Mr. Graham,” even during Union occupation. Specifically for widows, clergymen preached funeral services, which marked the most salient point of contact between religious services and widows. Because the connection between women and the church remained strong, religious services, especially weekly sermons and funeral sermons, provided access to religious teachings that explained the spiritual world, including death.

Even when churches failed, local communities communicated religious teachings while private reflection included using the bible to buoy religious belief. The war removed many women from their local churches and religious activity. As a supplement, McDonald also attended prayer meetings with other women in the community. These meetings often became a way of communicating with friends. In hearing about the deaths of friends, social networks used these community services and letters of condolence to invoke their own understanding of religious teachings. Just as letters of condolence passed on messages about

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157 Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 63.


159 Dr. Graham took up the pastorate at Kent Street Church in 1851 and served for 58 years. Cartmell, Shenandoah Valley Pioneers, 175; McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 106.

160 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War. For examples of these references, see pgs 91 and 95.
the grieving process, they also presented an understanding of God’s role in the universe, particularly his role towards the grieving widow.

In addition, women privately nurtured their spiritual beliefs at home. As the war raged about her, Cornelia McDonald “could not go to church for fear of intruders while absent,” so she read scripture at home and interpreted it herself in her personal diary.  

Already versed in religious teachings, women interpreted the Bible with authority. Francis Polk dotted her letters to her daughter with religious references. She frequently prayed for her daughter, “God bless you my dear child,” and she trusted in “our heavenly father.” By thinking about religious teachings at home and applying those beliefs to specific situations in their communication, widows interpreted religious teachings based on their personal experience and their own needs. Similarly, widows interpreted religious teachings communicated through religious services and their support network in order to understand the place of death in God’s world and, in turn, developed their own identity within that world.

When it came to grief, both religious services and social networks produced arguments on how widows should cope with their grief. While sermons theologically interpreted the Bible and produced metaphysical descriptions of the cosmic world, social networks applied these teachings in a more practical manner to everyday life, clarifying the connection between theology and the widows’ own loss. Communicated separately, these messages combined to form the religious teachings that shaped widows’ understanding of grief and the Christian world by pushing them to accept a short, positive grieving process.

161 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 114.

162 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 4 March1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC; Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 28 February1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
Religious teachings produced several specific arguments that described God’s role in the universe and His role in wartime deaths. Through church services, clergymen argued that God was a benevolent prime mover who supported Confederate success. This success came at a high cost as the South prosecuted the war. To explain and justify this situation, both funeral sermons and weekly sermons argued that death benefitted the deceased through resurrection and the living by purifying their religious belief. The message instructed widows on the proper grieving method by explaining God’s role in the deaths of their husbands, why the deaths occurred, and what happened to their husbands after death. In each of these arguments, the clergy continued to praise the actions of deceased Confederate leaders in the war. In this way, religious services taught widows how to deal with death, which they hoped would benefit both the widows and the Confederacy.

At the core of religious services’ message, the clergy established God’s role as the prime mover. God shaped the world to fit a predesigned plan that was out of reach for human comprehension. In a funeral sermon for Thomas Jackson, Rev. Robert Lewis Dabney claimed, “every event is directed by his most wise and holy will, according to His plan, and the laws of nature which He has ordained.” Similarly, Cornelia McDonald heard her pastor, Dr. Boyd, encourage his congregants to “obey God and leave results to Him.” When speaking generally about the world, clergymen instructed all of their congregants, men

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163 It is important to include both weekly and funeral sermons in this analysis because, in times of war, the widow would have been exposed to religious theology on death and grieving much before the actual funeral sermon.


166 McDonald, *A Woman’s Civil War*, 94.
and women, to submit to God and His plan. Submission was not mere fatalism. Because religious teachings glorified the Confederacy and those who fought for it, they also emphasized human agency in order to carry out God’s plan. As a result, Dabney also warned against “absolute inaction” because God deployed his plan through human activity. By placing Jackson as an agent acting out God’s will, Dabney glorified both Jackson’s actions and his submission to God. Ministers and priests encouraged male action much more than they advocate female agency. Despite this division of gender roles, widows were subjects of God just like their husbands. The language of male Christian agency was not directed at them, but their participation in religion gave them the opportunity to appropriate that language. From these messages, religious teachings urged widows to identify mostly as a subject, but provided the language to also act as an agent.

Death and defeat challenged human agency and cast God in a vengeful role, forcing religious teachings to justify His actions. To explain military defeats, clergymen argued that God abandoned the Confederacy because of its sins. Therefore, defeat came only in the absence of God. This argument could not explain death, because it would challenge the goodness of Confederate heroes and undermine Christian salvation. Instead, the clergy accepted that God, as the prime mover, caused death. Describing bullets flying, Dabney argued, “His eye gives each one an aim and a purpose according to the plan of his wisdom.” Even though God directed events, clergymen insisted He was not vengeful to either the dead or the living. Describing Leonidas Polk’s death in funeral sermon, Bishop

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168 David B. Chesebrough, “God Ordained This War”: *Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 238-240.
Stephen Elliot claimed “nothing is more beautiful than Death, when it comes to one who has faithfully fulfilled all the duties of life.” Following the funeral sermon, the priest commonly read The Common Book of Prayer’s message “For a Person under Affliction,” which said that God “dost not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men,” but that God’s “wisdom…hast seen fit to visit him with trouble, and to bring distress upon him.” Because God purposefully chose each person’s time to die, the clergymen persuaded their congregants to trust in God’s plan. Even facing traumatic grief, religious teachings encouraged widows to view God as benevolent and trustworthy rather than vengeful.

After proving God’s compassion even in death, religious teachings further argued that death itself was a positive experience, necessary for Confederate victory. Widows heard weekly sermons that counseled, “not without grief and sympathy with the suffering and the bereaved, can we rejoice over a victory.” Funeral sermons also claimed, “individuals may suffer deeply, but the State may be elevated immeasurably,” though many went further because funeral sermons exalted one man’s life and service to the Confederacy.


171 *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America: Together with the Psalter, or Psalms of David* (New York: W.B. Gilley, 1819), 33. This prayer was commonly read at the graveyard during a funeral.


Clergymen praised the soldier’s service in life and in death. “The legacy of Jackson’s prayers,” Dabney insisted, “… will yet avail for us all the more, that they are now sealed by his blood.”\textsuperscript{174} Death concentrated and reinvigorated Jackson’s prayers for Christian glory and Confederate victory. In justifying Leonidas Polk’s military service, Elliot argued, “the bloody fields which have made him conspicuous are but the outbursts of the spirit which has always distinguished him.”\textsuperscript{175} Polk’s death erased his past indiscretions as the “Fighting Bishop” that left his flock for war and permitted his friends and family to glorify his civil and military actions.\textsuperscript{176} According to religious teachings, death created a better example for the community, though probably not the widow, by intensifying and purifying the memory of the deceased.

In weekly sermons, death not only glorified the Confederacy, but it also purified survivors. When speaking about suffering during war, weekly sermons described how congregants should face trials, which could include the loss of a loved one. Thomas Atkinson claimed, “the best men the world has ever seen, are those who have borne great affliction, and by God’s grace have endured the trial,” therefore “Out of the furnace of affliction men come either purified or hardened.”\textsuperscript{177} Even though trials forged men and women into better citizens and Christians, the clergy quickly proved that the trials were only temporary. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”\textsuperscript{178} Those joys would be

\textsuperscript{174} Dabney, \textit{True Courage}, 22.
\textsuperscript{175} Elliot, \textit{Funeral Services Leonidas Polk}, 25.
\textsuperscript{177} Thomas Atkinson, \textit{Christian Duty Present Time}, 10. Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{178} Joseph M. Atkinson, \textit{God Giver of Victory}, 5. He references this as Psalm 30:5.
great, as “the sharper the trial endured the more glorious will be the salvation.” These generalizations encouraged citizens and congregants to endure wartime struggle and privation temporarily because it would prove ultimately beneficial in the afterlife. Funeral sermons made no such claims. Such a message would not simply encourage a widow to look positively upon death, but would encourage the widow to acknowledge they could profit spiritually from the death of a loved one. Still, religious teachings instructed widows through weekly sermons that death or affliction could benefit the community and the survivors in some ways.

As one of the central tenets of Christianity, the salvation of the soul proved especially powerful when war tore many young husbands from the earth. Historian Christina Heyrman identified three “essential doctrines of Christianity— the divinity of Jesus, the authority of the Bible, the promise of life after death.” While evangelical Christianity also required a conversion experience to be fully accepted into the religious community, most Protestant religions emphasized the importance of belief in this trinity of the Christian faith. Either way, the converted feared for their secular friends’ souls and encouraged them to follow the Cross. Christians were particularly concerned for unconverted soldiers facing death. Leading the call, clergymen urged their congregations to “cry to Him… for those near and dear to you… that He would guard and preserve them, body and soul, amid the exceeding fury of this storm which now shakes our land.” Whether or not soldiers actually converted, religious


180 Heyrman used this to describe basic Anglican beliefs and then build upon those to describe evangelical religions. Christine Heyrman, Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 8.

181 Ibid., 4-5.

teachings made it clear to congregants, including widows, that Confederate soldiers could experience salvation only by accepting God into their lives. When words would not reach their husbands, religious teachings assured widows that prayers would reach God.

The promise of salvation also provided comforts to the grieving by explaining what happened to the body and soul after death. Many clergymen, such as Rev. Dabney, described the soul as “the true self, the part which alone feels or knows, desires or fears, sorrows or rejoices, and which lives forever.”183 Through salvation, “the believing soul, is lifted above the reach of bodily dangers.”184 While most clergymen agreed with Dabney’s emphasis on the soul, war destroyed men’s bodies and challenged clergymen to describe salvation in such a way that restored the wholeness of the deceased.185 Some clergymen encouraged their congregants to separate the dead body from the spiritual body. Samuel Benedict comforted his flock by saying, “It is no mere concession to the dulness [sic] of the mental vision that we turn to the graves of our dead ones… and so tenderly guard their resting place…Here he does lie.”186 This justification placed the body, a representation of the individual, in the ground but did not necessarily equate that representation to the true individual. At Leonidas Polk’s funeral, Elliot agreed “that brave heart is quiet in the grave” and so “that faithful

183 Dabney, True Courage, 15.
184 Ibid.
185 According to Faust, the destruction of the body and the manner of death would forever represent that person in eternity. This is a literal translation of the body being resurrected and providing a projection of the individual. While this proves significant for understanding how to physically treat the dead body, it was less a significant interpretation for how to imagine the body of the dead. Faust, This Republic of Suffering, 62.
spirit...returned to its God.”¹⁸⁷ For some, this division proved sufficient, but for others the physical representation of the individual also returned to heaven. Instead of remaining in the grave, “the resurrection day will repair all the ravages of the sword, and restore the poor tenement to his occupancy.”¹⁸⁸ By remaking the body and uniting it with the soul, religious teachings permitted those grieving to develop an identity of the deceased and visualize their future reunion in heaven.

Despite death’s separation, religious teachings explained that those saved by God’s grace would meet again in the spiritual world. Confederate clergymen described heaven as a “happy place, away from this stricken, groaning world, and nearer to the glory of God’s immediate presence.”¹⁸⁹ These messages reassured survivors that their loved one was in a better place. One day, they could join them. In some future time, all those who suffered loss “shall behold and converse with the best and lovliest [sic] we have known on earth,” according to Joseph Atkinson.¹⁹⁰ Death not only ended trials but also united loved ones. As a result, widows did not need to fear death because it only temporarily separated them from their husbands, provided they maintained their belief in God. Clergymen were careful, however, to avoid making death an envied status. Rather than immediately entering this revered place beside God and loved ones, death placed the soul in an intermediate, happy stage. Lost loved ones were “still waiting for us, still delaying their entrance into their highest glory, till we with them can enter.”¹⁹¹ As the dead waited, the living still had work to

¹⁸⁷ Elliot, _Funeral Service Leonidas Polk_, 25.
¹⁸⁸ Dabney, _True Courage_, 17.
¹⁸⁹ Benedict, _Blessed Dead Waiting for Us_, 11.
¹⁹⁰ Joseph M. Atkinson, _God, the Giver of Victory_, 15.
¹⁹¹ Benedict, _Blessed Dead Waiting for Us_, 5.
do. Through weekly sermons and funeral sermons, clergymen provided the theological understanding for death, as well as described God as a benevolent prime mover who promised salvation to those deserving. These religious teachings would be meaningless without an audience. Widows absorbed their messages along with other congregants who would provide another level of interpretation.

Social networks clearly aided and shaped the grieving process in many secular ways, but they also added an additional religious dimension when comforting loved ones. Most social networks had significant access to widows in the most critical points of their grief through close family contact and letters of condolence. In addition to these messages, social networks communicated beliefs about God’s role to widows that provided perhaps a more practical interpretation of religious theology, but also a more self-servicing one.

Whereas religious services described who God was and what His role was in death and dying, social networks described the widow’s role within that theological worldview. According to those religious views, the widow should trust completely in God’s plan and will, as described in sermons, because He is ultimately benevolent. Instead of worrying about her deceased husband’s condition after death, she should “trust him now in God’s hands.”

Similarly, the widows’ grief could only be trusted in God’s hands. When Issa Breckinridge wrote to John Hunt Morgan’s mother, she described, “how my heart aches for his wife. God be with you all!”

Still, Issa could not “attempt to give you comfort now, this can come only from above,” thereby abdicating some responsibility for comforting the bereaved. This

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192 Mary Pinckney to Leila Habersham, May 15th 1863, quoted in Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 186.

193 Issa Breckinridge to Mrs. Henrietta Morgan, 10 September 1864, Hunt-Morgan-Hill Family Collection, MOC.
letter reflected a common assumption that only divine comfort could heal the pain of grief. Some women, especially those also grieving, struggled to accept this view. Frederic Habersham’s mother wrote to Leila that she was “almost wild” in grief and prayed for “submission to God’s will.” By showing she struggled to follow religious teaching, Mrs. Habersham both encouraged her daughter-in-law to conform to religious teachings and commiserated that many people struggled to do so.

Many friends and family recognized that it would be difficult for widows to trust in God and made a special effort to prove His benevolence. Some comforted the widow by emphasizing the blessings God had bestowed upon her. Just as widows viewed children as an important connection to their husbands, social networks placed children as a primary blessing from God. When a close friend wrote to Leila, she said, “I trust you now take some interest in the rich blessings God has given you—these precious bright little children who have their beloved Father’s blood in their veins…” Not only had God already given many blessings, but there would be many more to come. A benevolent God aided traumatized, impoverished survivors through times of affliction. Children also required care and provisions that widows struggled to provide after their husband’s death. In advising these women, social networks claimed, “nobody can help you to bear it but God, & he will support you.” Most benevolently, however, God promised the Christian husband’s salvation. As Betty Warren in her characteristically upbeat manner tried to comfort her sister, she argued that even though death separated Sallie from her husband, “the most lengthy life is short and you will not long

194 Fred’s Mother to Leila Habersham, 6 June [1863], in Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 192.
195 Ellen Coleman to Leila Habersham, quoted in Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 200.
196 Mary Elliot to Leila Habersham, quoted in Habersham, A Sketch of Frederic, 162.
be separated.” Closely reflecting religious teachings, social networks assured widows that their husbands were now in a better place where one day they would reunite.

By citing evidence of God’s benevolence, social networks supplemented religious services that encouraged widows to submit to God’s will, even in their lowest moments. Social networks viewed grief as a positive experience because salvation and God’s blessings demonstrated that God would aid widows in their time of need. Still, these friends and family members did not cite death as a purifying experience, discarding and deemphasizing these religious teachings that seemed impersonal and persecutory by making the widow benefit from her husband’s death. Social networks’ translation, combined with religious teachings, would prove useful, though not exhaustively so, to widows as they navigated the grieving process.

Widows interpreted these messages from religious teachings and social networks by selectively drawing upon them to fulfill specific needs. Few women actually went so far as to reject God, even though tragedy could have called challenged His benevolence. Instead, widows allowed their interpretations to change over the course of the grieving process by embracing and rejecting portions of religious tenets. Widows accepted religious teachings about salvation initially in order to transition from their husband’s presence to his absence. While widows continued to embrace salvation, they increasingly relied upon God as a prime mover as they navigated increasing financial difficulties. Widows accepted their social network’s proof of God’s benevolence rather than the purifying experience of grief, but they

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197 Betty Warren to Sallie Gray Spears, 29 Oct 1862, Spears and Hicks Family Papers, SHC.

198 For one possible example of a woman losing her faith in the face of death and destruction, see McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 241-2. To focus on this single moment, however, relies on a single sentence rather than McDonald’s complex, and variant, thought process.
transformed God’s role and nature into their protector or provider. In this way, God helped fill the role left vacant by their husband’s death. As time went on, widows discovered that human, not spiritual, beings provided sustenance, and even God could not recreate their privileged position prior to the war. Taking control of their lives, widows instead turned to an emphasis on human agency to act out God’s plan. Through their actions, widows began to rebuild their own identity as an actor in the universe rather than a dependent, increasingly relying upon themselves rather than the memory of their husbands or the image of God as a provider.

Upon notification of death, religious services and social networks exposed widows to the highest concentration of religious rhetoric during the grieving process. Widows followed the body to its religious burial, attended a funeral sermon, and, during this time, were often in the care of religious leaders.\(^{199}\) Cognitively, widows worked to understand the nature of death as a transition for both the deceased and the living. Constant exposure to religious teachings, both before death and during death rituals, encouraged widows to accept these messages about salvation. Most widows did embrace salvation as a means to understand their husband’s metaphysical and spiritual transformation and their relationship to him after death. At the funeral service, Leila Habersham looked upon her husband’s casket with extreme sorrow and disbelief, but in hearing “those words of hope that never fall unheeded on the ear, ‘I am the resurrection & the life,’” she realized “Frederic is not here, he is in heaven, he prayed for his soul’s salvation.”\(^{200}\) Initially doubting, Leila accepted salvation as an explanation for her husband’s state at the funeral. At the same time, resurrection only

\(^{199}\) Sue to Fanny Polk, July 20\(^{th}\) 1864, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

provided comfort on the condition that widows accepted the belief and that their husband met the conditions for salvation.

Because resurrection undergirded widows’ understanding of death and therefore could potentially provide comfort, widows went to extraordinary intellectual measures to prove their husband’s salvation. Leila appeared to make the simple leap from resurrection to salvation during her husband’s funeral service, but she was clearly not completely convinced since she continued to compile evidence to prove Frederic’s salvation. In a sealed letter, only to be opened on his death, Frederic assured Leila, “however unchristian I may have been, I have still prayed daily for my soul and I trust yet that they may be heard.” Leila immediately interpreted this as “testimony of his trust in God,” and therefore evidence of salvation. Similarly, Mattie Morgan also interpreted her husband’s prayers in the months prior to his death as proof of salvation. Clearly religious, he had not yet converted. In the month before his death, John Hunt Morgan told an acquaintance that “his wife had almost made a good Episcopalian of him.” Morgan’s statement was a sign of religious interest and even attendance at church that demonstrated Christian deliverance. Before the war this commitment would not be proof of salvation after death. In interpreting these religious teachings to suit their own needs, however, Leila and Mattie, like other widows, used a broad interpretation of proof of salvation. They accepted salvation as a key religious belief in the

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201 For a discussion of this process as a part of reconstructing the Good Death, see Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 23.


203 Ibid.

204 Mattie R. Morgan to Mrs. Henrietta Morgan, 31 Oct 1864, Hunt-Morgan-Hill Family Collection, MOC.

205 A.M.H. to --, 1864, Hunt-Morgan-Hill Family Collection, MOC.
grieving process, but the shaky ground on which they built their convictions continued to haunt them. Further memorial activity, such as writing, continued to rehearse their proof and breathe new life into any evidence of their husband’s new religious life in wartime.\textsuperscript{206} By proving, at least to themselves over time, that their husbands were Christians, widows reconstructed their husbands’ identities as souls in heaven, waiting for the day to reunite with their wives.

Through this interpretation of salvation, widows accessed and interpreted religious teachings about eternity as well. Surprisingly, widows rarely referenced the debate over the nature of resurrection on the body and the soul. Most described their husband simply as they knew him on earth, as the “same caressing, devoted husband.”\textsuperscript{207} The connection between the early and spiritual realm was of much greater importance. For some, religious teachings had little bearing on these images. When Mattie Morgan dreamed of her husband, she attributed her experience as if he was spiritually and physically with her as he purposefully “comes to me at night to comfort me” because he knows “my loneliness and sorrow.”\textsuperscript{208} Religious teachings failed to reach this level of comfort for Mattie. Though present in her dreams, “eternity was between us—Oh! What the heart can bear and not break.”\textsuperscript{209} Some women did, however, use religious teachings to construct a comforting view of eternity. For example, Leila Habersham’s written account of her husband’s salvation sparked ruminations of her own fate. According to her memoir, “now my treasure [her husband] & my heart being in

\textsuperscript{206} For an example, see Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 63.

\textsuperscript{207} Mattie R. Morgan to Mrs. Henrietta Morgan, 31 Oct 1864, Hunt-Morgan-Hill Family Collection, MOC.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
heaven my home must be there too, & then I thought of our meeting there, where then there would be no more parting & sorrow—& then God gave me strength.” Such frank descriptions were rare long after the initial stages of grieving. Widows could only continue to express these views through memoirs, as communications within their social network, which had little sympathy for grief after a short period of time, left few opportunities for these discussions. When widows constructed memoirs of their experiences, they proved their husband’s salvation and hoped for his resurrection. Reconstructing her husband’s identity allowed the widow’s identity to develop along a dual track. One part of her would wait to join her husband in heaven, while another portion could move on without him on earth.

Perhaps even more common in everyday language, widows relied on their interpretation of God’s role in their lives. Both religious services and social networks argued that widows should accept their husband’s death as a part of God’s plan; nonetheless, women rejected the message that death purified the living and sought out proof of God’s benevolence because they could not discard Christianity, which was central to understanding the afterlife and their husband’s place in it. Stability and salvation came hand in hand with subordination to God, the prime mover. To suit their own needs, widows submitted to God and accepted a version of the social networks’ interpretation with their own personal twist. In a harsh world, widows, for the moment, trusted in God to provide emotional support during these turbulent times and to become a primary provider and protector in the first stages of grief. This trust transformed Him into the substitute patriarch representing the husband that the widow had lost and retained the widows’ identity as the subservient but provided for wife.

210 Habersham, A Sketch of Frederick, 174.
In a time of trauma and chaos, a benevolent God proved to be a comforting and guiding presence. Though friends and family provided some initial comfort, many widows took their deepest and most painful emotions to the Savior. When Leila Habersham sought comfort, she discovered, “the blessed Jesus alone could bind up such wounds.”\textsuperscript{211} In a similar position, Cornelia McDonald felt that “there was no ear into which I could pour my tale of suffering and poverty, but that of God.”\textsuperscript{212} Letters and memoirs proved less effective than God’s ear at providing emotional support for widows in their most trying times because His ephemeral and abstract qualities provided a unique source of comfort. Few women laid bare these most vulnerable moments for all to see. While it could be that in these intimate conversations with God widows sought vengeance against God, their writings do not reflect a tempering influence. Generally, most widows viewed God as a caretaker or a guide through life. Francis Polk continued to trust that “God will take care of us” even as her wealth dissipated.\textsuperscript{213} Not only did she place herself under God’s care, but she also told her children she could “leave you in God’s hands, he will guide you wright [sic].”\textsuperscript{214} This means of interpreting God’s role in the face of loss allowed religious belief to have a comforting rather than threatening presence. In effect, widows submitted to God by placing themselves in His hands instead of accepting the effects of his hand on their lives.

As a result, widows turned to their supreme provider and protector when their earthly guardian passed away. By placing themselves in God’s hands, widows, in an abstract way, abdicated responsibility for running a household and transformed God into their new

\textsuperscript{211} Habersham, \textit{A Sketch of Frederic}, 184.
\textsuperscript{212} McDonald, \textit{A Woman’s Civil War}, 239.
\textsuperscript{213} Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 1 Dec 1865, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
\textsuperscript{214} Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 11 June 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
patriarch. In return for submitting to Him, it was God’s duty to provide. Social networks convinced widows like Francis Polk to believe that “God had been so merciful” in the past, making him trustworthy. Polk believed that “bread shall be given” since she had “trust for the future.” Similarly, Cornelia McDonald drew comfort from a friend’s reminder of “the promises of God to the widow and the fatherless. ‘Your bread and your water shall be sure.’” McDonald doubted that God would fulfill this duty until she remembered His promise of resurrection. Quickly, she regained her confidence in God’s position as a provider. Both Polk and McDonald followed the religious advice from their social networks to maintain their trust in God. Their insecurities perhaps stemmed from the fact that their husband, who they trusted to provide for them, left them, though unwillingly. They needed proof that God would not do so as well. Once they had that proof, however, they believed that if submitted to God, as religious leaders suggested, then He would provide for them. In an abstract sense, God became a substitute for the widow’s husband and she retained her identity as a wife.

While widows trusted in God to provide for them in the absence of their husband, they realized that He worked through their social network. Ultimately, God received credit for providing for the widow, yet many widows also recognized their friends and family’s efforts. Though Cornelia McDonald struggled to find a home and food for herself and her children, “He heard, and in His own good time sent relief” in the form of Gen. Pendleton,

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215 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 19 Jan 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
216 Ibid.
217 McDonald, A Woman’s Civil War, 221.
218 Ibid., 222.
who “set himself to provide food and a support for his family.”^219 Physically, Pendleton acted as a substitute patriarch. Communities usually diffused such support among the adult males, reducing their individual role. Since God controlled each man’s actions, He received the credit as the ultimate provider. Francis Polk thanked God whenever she also thanked her friends who helped provide her material goods. When she received money from a friend that paid off her bills, she credited God for being very gracious to her, even though she struggled for daily sustenance.\(^{220}\) One man at a time gave her money, financially sustaining her through debt. Because God acted through each, He became the primary provider.

Though God’s role as the patriarch acting through men on earth remained strong in the initial stages of grief, it increasingly deteriorated as the grieving process continued on. Social networks, often facing difficult financial straits as well, could not provide widows the support that their deceased husbands had been able to prior to the war. Poverty, to these women, was relative, so that even if they could keep their stomachs full the change in quality or quantity mattered greatly. Without a husband, many struggled to improve after the war, and ultimately they found that charity could perhaps sustain but not increase their position. In their lowest moments, widows began to doubt their decision to rely on God as their provider. Just as Francis Polk was about to receive a home, the deal fell through leaving her solely in God’s, and her sons’, hands.\(^{221}\) Cornelia McDonald similarly struggled to find food to feed her family by working, and finally “felt that God had forsaken us.”\(^{222}\) Each woman had her own personal moment of crisis where she had to decide to whom she would look for support,

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^219 McDonald, *A Woman’s Civil War*, 239.

^220 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 28 Feb 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

^221 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 4 March 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

God or herself. Other authors have indicated this economic deterioration pushed women, especially widows, into economic autonomy, but employment did not produce autonomy until widows reconstructed their identity as actors. In navigating the grieving process, widows recognized that God and their community could not provide enough support, financially or emotionally, to regain their antebellum status or even their own expectations for the postwar world. This realization caused a serious emotional crisis. At the same time, postwar religious teachings became increasingly less relevant to the widows’ suffering.

Much like the rest of the grieving process, the intellectual interpretation of their postwar religious beliefs shaped the information widows received about religious teachings to their own needs, rather than relying on a short, positive grieving process. Just as widows dealt with grief in a personal and prolonged manner without emotional support from their social network, widows also countered their financial plight with few tools from religious teachings. Reliving grief became an active process that helped widows redefine their attachment to their husband and reconstruct their own identity. Similarly, reevaluating God’s role in their religious worldview during the grieving process helped widows reconstruct their own identity to take increasing responsibility for their own lives. Instead of waiting and submitting to God’s plan and trusting Him to provide, widows drew upon wartime religious teachings that emphasized agency as inspiration to begin a Confederate and Christian mobilization in the South.

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223 This mirrors an argument put forward by Drew Gilpin Faust that men failed as providers in a contract with women, leading women to crystallize their political identity and sense of self as they questioned, but chose to not overturn, their gender hierarchies. In the case of widows and their relationship to God, however, women accepted some parts of their relationship and rejected other. See Faust, Mothers of Invention, 242-244.
In the postwar era, religious services provided two scripts for looking at the religious effects of the war: vengeance and unity. Even after the war, churches and their constituents remained divided North and South; it would take time for the bitterness to fade. Religious services preached vengeance upon the North, claiming eventually the Day of Judgment would come and vindicate the southern states. While this interpretation of defeat prevented the wholesale abdication of religious belief, these passions were short lived. For example, Aristides Spyker Smith preached a sermon entitled “On Keeping the Heart,” which preserved Confederate virility in the hearts if not the actions of the South, nearly five times in 1866, but after that its use tapered dramatically. Institutionally, some churches began to reunite within a few years after the war, encouraging a gentler rhetoric. According to Smith, internal conflicts weakened Christian strength so that the Church’s “energies have [been] impaired + her influence has [been] crippled.” Smith blamed this negative effect on “Christians, instead [of] endeavoring, as far as possible to heal [the] breach…dwell on these differences, till mole hills [become] magnified [into] mountains.” He encouraged his congregation to “Let [our] recollection [of] these things kindle afresh in our bosoms [and] flame [our] Christian love,” instead of hating former enemies. By ceasing talk of war,

224 Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 242-3.

225 Aristides Spyker Smith, *On Keeping the Heart*, 24 June 1864, Harrison and Smith Family Papers, SHC.

226 The Episcopal Church, for example, was reunified under a national organization by 1866. David L. Holmes, *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 82.

227 Aristides Spyker Smith, *Brotherly Love*, 10 May 1867, Pg. 22, Harrison and Smith Family Papers, SHC.

228 Ibid.

229 Ibid., 23.
religious teachings also ceased discussions on grief and loss. Once reunified, religious services utilized generic material, like that which they had used before the war. For example, one of Smith’s sermons written in 1861, entitled “The Intermediate State,” on Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday was not repeated until the 1870s, but then was used regularly. A unique war demanded unique sermons, but the cessation of organized hostilities against the North prevented wartime themes from extending past the chronological boundaries of combat. Drawing on religious teachings, widows were as connected to the church as they had been even before and during the war. Many continued also to return to wartime rhetoric to see the most personally relevant messages about grief.

When the Southern social structure and economy remained stagnant, widows began to turn away from the acceptable religious worldview. Religious teachings helped them reconstruct their husband’s identity after death and understand God’s identity as a benevolent patriarch. In the aftermath of the war, widows had preserved their identity as a wife partly by looking to others for financial support and to God for a new direction to their lives. Gradually, widows reevaluated God’s role as a provider and prime mover in their individual lives, though they did not reject Him. God remained supreme at the same time as many widows increasingly saw themselves as autonomous beings capable of acting within His world. Many widows began to plan out their own lives to fulfill His plan, instead of relying on God to provide a plan. Though never too far from His side, widows reconstructed their


231 While violence continued during Reconstruction, its nature and scale shifted dramatically from open and organized warfare.
Christian identity in a way that helped them navigate the grieving process and shaped the way in which they acted within their societies after the war.

Economic struggles during the grieving process gradually pushed widows to find a fulfilling direction in life that would satisfy both their stomachs and their ambitions. In the process, widows reevaluated their vision of God’s role in their lives and in the world. Francis Polk, in debt and homeless as a result of the war, provides an interesting example of this transformation. Polk initially looked to God for provisions and for the direction her life would take in the postwar years. When, a year after the war, Polk still did not have her own house or a means of earning an income she began to formulate her own plans for a modest house in New Orleans with a garden full of flowers. Revealing this to her daughter, she recognized that she was “growing in my demands” and quickly arrested her thoughts by writing, “but enough of this, if it is Gods will I should again have a home I shall.” Polk built her own plan instead of simply following God’s, but she still entrusted Him to carry it out.

Months later, however, Polk’s plans for a home or a job remained stagnant, though her big dreams only grew. In her subsequent letters, Polk continued to relegate God’s will to the end of long paragraphs describing actions she wished to take. These references were more like grammatical punctuation than core intellectual positions, and her religious beliefs of God as a provider took a secondary position to her own desires for fulfillment. When Polk still struggled to find her own income, she felt that even though God “has cared for me & mine” she should also “not be passive, but do something for my own support if it pleases

232 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 27 March 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

233 For an example, see Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, May 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.
God to show that his will is to deprive me of all outward means." 234 Clearly upset by God’s failure to provide for her, she recognized the need to act herself. Despite discouragement from her family, Polk did carry out these dreams by starting a school from scratch and acting as a teacher. She even used some of her husband’s personal items to help furnish the school. 235 In that school, Francis Polk cemented her own separate identity from her husband, with his memory still supporting her, and her new independent religious identity, that accepted God’s role but also her own agency within it.

While many widows found purpose and agency in employment, others took responsibility for their lives, and others’ lives, through benevolent organizations often attached to a religious institution. 236 Economic hardship impacted many people, and widows sought to provide for others as well as themselves. As a result, widows morphed the church and its congregants into providers and agents for social change. Leila’s work at the Orphans’ Home represented both her relationship to children as a way of holding onto a piece of her husband’s identity and also represented her religious identity as one of God’s agents that provided for others. Her friends intimated, “she herself was proudest of her work in the Episcopal Church,” for which she often turned her occupation, leading a cooking school, to religious purposes. 237 The increased numbers of orphaned, widowed, and poor citizens provided an avenue for women to become agents of their God. They acted out His plan for others and, in turn, for themselves. Even though God still moved them and provided for

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234 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 11 June 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.

235 Frances Devereux Polk to Fanny Skipwith, 6 June 1866, Polk Family Papers, SHC.


237 Habersham, A Sketch of Frederick, 276.
them, some widows like Leila reconstructed their Christian identity to cast themselves in part as providers and actors.

Memorialization, along with employment and benevolent organizations, provided a site for widows to reconstruct their religious identity. As historians have carefully documented, many women, including widows, participated in memorialization activities that extolled the virtues of the Confederacy and its leaders. Much like writing memoirs, organizations such as Ladies Aid Societies and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) provided opportunities to preserve the memory of widows’ husbands and to relive grief. Both Mary Anna Jackson and Flora Stuart worked to preserve their husband’s memory and the Confederate cause by participating in these organizations. Mary Anna organized the Stonewall Jackson Chapter of the UDC and “was elected president...for life,” while Flora held the First Vice President position for the Grand Division of Virginia and protected her husband’s memorial. Widows could justify their actions from religious teachings from the war. Particularly in funeral sermons, the clergymen praised military glory in individuals


240 Some historians, namely Charles Reagan Wilson in Baptized in Blood, argue that these activities were a part of a Confederate civil religion, which used religion to understand the Confederacy’s political defeat and Southern unity. Other scholars have attacked this categorization for various reasons. Perhaps most notably, Gaines Foster argued that these celebrations were a response to coping with defeat. See Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy, 36-46.
and singled out great generals as religious examples. Perhaps most notably in Robert Lewis Dabney’s funeral sermon for General Jackson, ‘Stonewall’ became a “master-spirit” that “impressed its might upon the souls of his countrymen, not through deportment, but through deeds.”241 It was Jackson’s active defense of the Confederacy that made him a Christian example and gave purpose to his life. Postwar sermons that urged ultimate vindication for the Confederacy implied the vindication of these generals’ death as well. Taken together, religious teachings lauded human agency on behalf of the Confederacy, especially on behalf of the Confederate dead. Memorialization thereby provided an opportunity for widows to act and find a purpose for their postwar lives that maintained their attachment to their husband and to God. By acting on behalf of the Confederacy, widows acted on behalf of God. They reconstructed their Christian identity as agents of God’s plan to provide Confederate victory after the war, fulfilling the promise of Southern vindication.

As Confederate widows navigated the grieving process, religious teachings provided important analysis of the nature of death, God’s role in the universe, and the moral reasons for tragedy. Social networks supplied a mediated interpretation of religious services’ message that encouraged widows to submit to God because he had provided them many blessings in the past. Widows largely accepted religious teachings on resurrection because it helped them conceptualize their husband and his identity as a saved soul. While widows also accepted the basic Christian tenet of God as a benevolent prime mover with a plan for the universe, they interpreted those teachings to fit their own needs for a provider and a protector, which they had lost with their husbands’ death. Because God was benevolent, they felt they could trust in his patriarchy and continued to rely on a passive identity focused on submitting to God.

241 Dabney, True Courage, 19.
Physical conditions proved insurmountable, however, and widows reconstructed their Christian identity to assume some agency in acting out God’s plan and increasingly relied upon themselves for provisions and purpose in the postwar South.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

When the Confederacy surrendered, emancipation and Northern reconstruction transformed the region. By the end of the century, Southern politicians had regained control of their states, but they could not return to their former lives. Death and grief also had wrought changes upon the South. Thousands of fathers and husbands never returned home from the war, and thousands of wives lost their providers and their partners. These women faced new challenges in the ensuing decades, as they struggled to overcome their loss in order to be productive members of society. In the process, widows changed their self-identity to better act within their changing world.

Grief, like death, dramatically impacted individuals as well as communities. Each widow gazed upon her surroundings and absorbed messages from her community. Her mind processed letters of condolence and sermons while her heart experienced pain and loss in a way unique to each individual. By synthesizing this information, the widow worked within the confines of her society to benefit herself. Agency came not from political space, but from the way in which widows cognitively selectively interpreted the messages from their communities in a way that helped them through the grieving process. Widows reconstructed their own identity to suit their personal desires, instead of being shaped by society.

A widows’ need to complete the grieving process did not stop society from trying to mold widows to fit a socially acceptable form of grief. Communities and individuals had
competing interests. The former sought social harmony and a united purpose, while the later also struggled to achieve what was in their own self-interest. Because widows had a strong desire to remain part of society, this conflict of interests did not erode communities. Widows listened to messages from their communities and partially accepted their method of grieving.

Social networks expected widows to be distraught at the death of their husband, but they encouraged widows to keep the most emotionally wrenching pain in private spaces instead of in public. Friends and family offered emotional support through their limited presence and, especially, through letters of condolence. This sympathetic outpouring of assistance quickly dried up because social networks expected widows to channel their grief into a communal expression. By doing so, the community could still mourn each of the many deaths without expending all of its emotional resources.

Religious teachings also tried to shape the grieving process. Death appeared to contradict God’s benevolence, and clergymen sought to alleviate that discrepancy in their weekly preaching and funeral sermons. Even in death, God executed a plan designed to benefit His children on earth. Humans could not understand His plan, and should trust in God to act righteously. After all, clergymen argued, death was not the end, but the beginning of resurrection. All of God’s people would be reunited in heaven, especially those gallant Confederate soldiers. Preachers and priests used the messages to buoy religious belief and encourage submission to God during a time of great trial.

Widows received both messages and developed their own grieving process. They conformed to wishes of their social networks to keep their emotions private. As a result, widows could continue to grieve even after their communities withdrew their attention. By preserving small objects, writing memoirs, hoping to reunite with their husband in heaven,
and looking to God as their new patriarch, widows maintained their identity as a wife as long as they could. In the process of preserving this identity, widows reexperienced their grief and slowly came to terms with their loss. Persistent financial struggles also encouraged widows to take charge of their own destinies, instead of relying on God’s direct action to provide for them. While their husband did not fade from their lives completely, widows redefined their relationship with their husband and ultimately rediscovered a new sense of self. Sermons that encouraged Christian action on behalf of the Confederacy during the Civil War provided rhetoric of individual agency that widows appropriated as they began to believe they could act out God’s plan on earth. Some widows moved onto jobs, others participated in memorialization activities, and those with children, latched onto their identity as mothers. The grieving process changed all of them. Widows’ self-identity changed as a result of their dialectic relationship with their communities and their experience with grief.

This newly developed self-identity shaped the Reconstruction South. Historians have demonstrated that broader female agency and political activity increased after the Civil War. In the South, wartime destruction and defeat seemed to upset the social order, encouraging individuals to either regain a semblance of their past position or seek greater power in their new society. Widows experienced a similar process, but the roots delved much deeper than societal disruption. As it helped reshape self-identity, the private grieving process produced these outward changes in Southern society.

In the North and in the South, widows received messages from their community and paved their own path using the tools available to them. As a result, the time and place where widows grieved influenced the way in which they navigated the grieving process. Those tools and expectations from social networks and religious teachings may have been different in the
Northern states because the Civil War affected that society differently than the former Confederacy. The Union lost a smaller percentage of their population and enjoyed military and ideological victory. In the postwar period, the impact of grief could partially explain how each section approached these attempts to reunify the country. A better understanding of the grieving process could help explain the course of Reconstruction in the postwar United States. Perhaps just as importantly, further research would help identify the way individual minds interpret events, make decisions, and then act on the world. Only by understanding the mind can we understand the actions resulting from it.
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