On March 18, 1865, Sallie Thurman wrote a letter to her husband much like the many she had written in the three years he had been away in the Confederate Army. In the letter, she reflected extensively on her relationship with him before the war, voiced her fears for the future, and pondered what a stranger might think of her words. “And then I shall be laughed at as a weak, sensitive woman (just what I am) for I was born to look up to, cling to the oak for support,” she mused. “But now my support is temporarily removed and I sink into utter insignificance.”

Sallie’s description of her role as a woman within her marriage fits within the broader social structure that permeated the South in the nineteenth century. Men and women of the planter class were expected to occupy decidedly separate spheres and assume hierarchical roles within the home and in their communities. Women were to be submissive, moral creatures. “This marvelous creation,” Anne Firor Scott has remarked about the ideal of the nineteenth-century southern woman, “was described as a submissive wife

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1 Sallie to John Thurman, March 18, 1865, folder 17, John P. and Sallie Ecklin Thurman papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household. Physically weak, and ‘formed for the less laborious occupations,’ she depended upon male protection.” As George Rable has argued, elite southern women lacked both the power and opportunity to challenge social expectations about the proper female role. According to Rable, women generally embraced ideas of female purity and therefore preferred “to serve as guardians of the home and the humane values that supposedly flourished there than to enter an evil world that showed little respect for female virtue.”

Women’s attachment to the stereotype of feminine virtue, combined with their limited access to the masculine public sphere, served to keep women subordinated. Few women even considered challenging these

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assumptions of femininity, which speaks to the pervasive nature of the South’s paternalistic structure. Female submission, however, was not one-sided. Antebellum gender relations involved a reciprocal obligation between the sexes. Women accepted a subordinate role in exchange for male protection. As Drew Gilpin Faust has pointed out, “The ‘helpless woman’ held an implicit power of requisition within her very assumption of helplessness.” If prevailing norms required women to position themselves in way that required protection, they also needed a protector.

In the reciprocal relationship between the sexes, men felt obligated to protect their wives and mothers as well as the domesticity these women symbolized. This sense of obligation in part is why individual men chose to support the Confederacy. Southerners supported the Confederacy to protect slavery, one of the many institutions through which this domesticity was expressed. Though some historians have argued that the South possessed no distinct sense of nationality, the fear of a southern future without slavery or white supremacy served to unite whites of all classes in the 11 states that seceded from the Union. The practice of distancing the Confederate cause from slavery is a post-war phenomenon, led by southerners themselves. From the economy to class to gender relations, the antebellum South relied on the existence of slavery. In this white supremacist, paternalistic social structure, every person’s place in society was determined by his or her relationship to white masters and black slaves. Some southern men therefore stressed that they were protecting their legal (and constitutional) right to own slaves when discussing their motivations to join the Confederate Army. Others believed that southerners were God’s chosen people, or that the war was a continuation of the American quest for independence from despotic rule. Most often, however, men fought to protect women. The fulfillment of masculine obligations to protect the “weaker” sex was reason enough for many men to enlist.

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4 I have opted to use the term paternalism here because it encompasses the broader relationship among white and black men and women in the nineteenth-century South. The term signifies a perceived need for guidance and protection for both women and slaves by white men, who sat at the top of the South’s social hierarchy.
When men left for war, their absence upended gender dynamics at home. As Faust puts it, “The very foundations of the South’s paternalistic social order were necessarily imperiled by the departure of the men who served as its organizing principle.” Women were forced to give up the male protection to which they were accustomed in order to support the Confederacy and its aims. Confederate rhetoric that aimed at garnering female support transformed the ideal of female sacrifice from being for men to being of men. To women on the home front, male protection took place on distant battlefields while female sacrifice was enacted at home.

This article examines gender relations and the overall structure of paternalism in the nineteenth-century South through the lens of southern couples’ experiences in the Civil War. As Faust has noted, the breakdown in paternalistic social structure during the Civil War forced women to confront their place in society. An analysis of couples’ wartime experiences illuminates the ways in which women thought about and communicated this change to their husbands. With men gone, women stepped into traditionally male roles that felt entirely foreign. The extent of a woman’s wartime responsibility varied considerably across class lines, especially at the beginning of the war. Many women found themselves left largely alone to manage businesses, farms, plantations, and slaves. Indeed, women of the slaveholding class sometimes chose to move in with extended family rather than take up these responsibilities, while others remained at home but hired an overseer or invited relatives to live with them. The women who took on these new responsibilities faced the greatest breakdown in southern paternalism compared to women who sought other ways to replace their traditional protectors. They assumed masculine roles that contradicted the feminine ideals expected of them as elite southern women. At the same time, they also continued to operate within the societal ideals of their own gender. Women faced the insurmountable challenge of balancing new masculine roles with incompatible feminine identities. A gendered analysis of these women’s wartime experiences illuminates the pervasiveness of paternalism in the nineteenth-century South.

10 Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice,” 1209.
12 Ibid., 33.
Individual couples’ experiences during the war reflect critical dynamics within nineteenth-century southern gender relations, especially among the wealthy slaveholders who were best able maintain them. This article analyzes couples who lived in the Confederacy, were married, and had children before the war. In each case, the husband enlisted in the Confederate Army within the first two years of the war and remained in the army until the last year of the war or his death, such that their wives experienced prolonged separation from their promised protectors. Women wrote letters to their husbands on the battlefront, and their husbands wrote back. These letters demonstrate how individuals interpreted their place within their marriages and society. The letters reveal the problems faced by women as well as the ways that they interpreted and communicated those problems to their husbands. In these letters, women often referred to paternalism as the natural relationship between husband and wife.

This article considers four slaveholding couples who belonged to the planter class. Though not representative of southern women as a whole, excluding women of color and white women of lower classes, the women of this study serve as a cross-section of southern women whose financial privilege and family background facilitated their
adherence to contemporary feminine ideals. Sallie and John Thurman owned 18 slaves on their plantation in western Tennessee and had two of their three children before the war.\textsuperscript{13} Araminta and William Henry Tripp had five children and lived on a North Carolina farm called Mount Hope that included 17 slaves.\textsuperscript{14} Harriet and Theophilus Perry also had ties to North Carolina, the former having been raised on a plantation in Louisburg and the latter having attended the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. In 1861, they moved to a plantation in Harrison County, Texas, and soon after had a daughter, Martha. Harrison County contained more slaves than any other county in Texas by 1860.\textsuperscript{15} Edgeworth and Sallie Bird had two children and came from planter families in Georgia. The Birds owned Granite Farm in Hancock County as well as 21 slaves.\textsuperscript{16} Sallie Thurman, Araminta Tripp, Harriet Perry, Sallie Bird, and their husbands reflect the antebellum South’s social structure, and they experienced its disruption during the Civil War. Their written descriptions of their experiences reveal that, when confronted with problems created by the breakdown of gender relations, women sought paternalistic solutions that would recreate comfortable antebellum norms.

William and Araminta Tripp, in Beaufort County, North Carolina, both felt apprehensive about the prospect of Araminta assuming control of their farm and 16 slaves when William volunteered for service in the Confederate Army in the fall of 1861. William sent his anxious wife regular notes of assurance in his early letters, telling her in June of 1862, “You my dear wife must do the best you can without your husband.”\textsuperscript{17} He acknowledged her fears of failing in a traditionally masculine role, as well as their common concern that she needed him as a patriarch to guide her in that new role. William continued to send his wife detailed instructions on how to manage slaves and crops through the beginning of 1863, but by February of that year he began to refer to them as her slaves and her crops. He became confident in her ability to run their farm in his absence, even as

\textsuperscript{15} Handbook of Texas Online, Randolph B. Campbell, “Marshall, TX.”
\textsuperscript{17} William to Araminta Tripp, June 8, 1861, Folder 3, William Henry Tripp and Araminta Guilford Tripp papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
her doubts persisted. In a reply to her complaints about her brother-in-laws’ insistence on giving her advice, William wrote, “I would far prefer yours and Rhoden’s judgment to theirs in the management of my farm stock.” If she wished for anyone’s advice, he said, she should ask her father because he “is the proper one to advise with and I am perfectly willing for you to take his advice in managing my or rather your affairs ... what is at home is yours and you are mine.”

Araminta Tripp’s experience serves as an example of what women in the Confederacy’s slaveholding class experienced in similar situations. Multiple factors affected the types of problems that women faced and the extent to which they experienced them in their husbands’ absence. Challenges that a plantation mistress could face during the war varied depending on the number of slaves the family owned, the type of labor they performed, and the relationship women had with their household’s slaves. The changes in intra-household dynamics were varied because each woman’s antebellum situation was diverse. However, Southern paternalism and its clearly defined gender roles connected the experiences of all the women in this group. Araminta and William’s marriage was what marriage historian Stephanie Coontz has described as a “sentimental marriage,” founded on love and affection, which had become the ideal only in the eighteenth century. For women like Araminta, the physical absence of husbands often increased the women’s perceived dependence on their husbands. Emotional dependence manifested itself in a variety of ways, but most often it was expressed in the importance of letters and in the physical responses to the stresses and anxieties of separation. The ways in which women talked about these manifestations of emotional dependence reveals the extent to which they felt dependent on their husbands in more practical ways, as well as the changes in this perception over time. This article argues that women’s frustrations with their emotional need for their husbands prevented them from acknowledging their diminished need for practical male support. In search of a solution, women reached for the

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18 William to Araminta Tripp, February 1863. Folder 6, William Henry Tripp and Araminta Guilford Tripp papers. Rhoden was the Trippe’s most trusted slave before and during the war, and William regularly urged Araminta to lean on him for advice when William could not be reached in time. The racial and hierarchical dynamics between Araminta and Rhoden in the absence of William will be discussed further in the following section.

19 Stephanie Coontz, Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2005), 146.
familiarity of patriarchy in ways as varied as the problems themselves. In analyzing these women’s experiences during the war, this article therefore adds to a growing body of scholarship on women in the nineteenth-century South. Although much has been written on racialized relationships among women, an analysis of gendered relationships between spouses reveals the intimate level at which southern patriarchy was reinforced.

Female Discourse in Letter Writing

For literate, elite women in the nineteenth century, letter writing was an important practice. Women received instruction from many sources throughout their lives, including etiquette manuals, literature, and informal education.20 Everything from penmanship to content was thought to reveal a woman’s character. A woman’s image, especially in the antebellum South, was rigidly defined as submissive, something southern women learned from an early age.21 Letter writing, then, was a way for women to demonstrate that they had mastered the ideals of their gender. Women were taught to suppress emotion, especially anger, in letters, even to close friends and

21 Scott, The Southern Lady, 7.
family. *Godey's Lady's Book*, published in 1859, advised women that “an angry letter, especially if the writer be well loved, is so much fiercer than an angry speech, so much more unendurable.” It was preferable that women who wrote an angry letter should “burn it before breakfast.”

During the Civil War, women expressed their thoughts and feelings to their husbands in letters. As historians have noted, while it is tempting to read letters as true representations of their writers’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings, even the most intimate, private letters to a spouse must be interpreted in this context of letter-writing traditions. As Regina Kunzel has observed, “At the same time that these letters shed light onto the experience [of the writers], they draw attention to the inextricability of that experience from its representation.”

The content of letters cannot be disassociated from the fact that they were writing to their husbands. Women’s complaints, worries, and other feelings expressed in their letters cannot be taken at face value. Indeed, as letters always reflect the author’s audience, the writer’s phrasing and subject matter changed depending on the intended recipient. However, as Michele Landis Dauber has noted, this does not necessarily mean that letter writers are untrustworthy narrators of their own lives. Letters, she argues, “certainly do contain empirical statements, most probably true, but not selected and presented in a way likely to produce an unbiased view of reality.”

What women chose to include and how they wrote about it matters. Though Kunzel’s and Dauber’s research deals primarily with letters to political groups or public figures, their approach to using letters as a primary source is useful. Keeping in mind the rhetorical strategies wives employed, whether consciously or not, speaks to the level of importance they placed on certain topics. What women chose to share also reveals some of their goals in writing letters. A woman’s underlying motives were more likely to be personal rather than political when

22 “Be Careful What You Write,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (December 1859), 557, quoted in Mahoney, “‘More Than an Accomplishment,’” 421.
23 Regina Kunzel, “Pulp Fictions and Problem Girls: Reading and Rewriting Single Pregnancy in the Postwar United States,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (December 1995), 1470. Kunzel discusses the use of letters as a primary source in general, though she specifically uses letters written by single mothers to The Children’s Bureau in the early twentieth century.
24 Michele Landis Dauber, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 192. Like Kunzel, Dauber discusses the theoretical use of letters in historical research, which she applied to her research on women’s letters to Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great Depression. Both sources are situated in different centuries than this project, but provide a useful framework for approaching letters as a historical source in general.
writing to her husband, particularly when compared to letters to generals, governors, and other public officials.

The separation caused by a husband’s entry into the war created an opportunity for men and women to reflect on their antebellum relationships in unprecedented ways. This new experience, as described by Faust, “encouraged recognition, acknowledgment, and articulation of emotions that had in peacetime been ignored or taken for granted.”\(^{25}\) Rable has described the value of wartime letters in revealing the nature of family life. “The worries that surfaced in these letters,” he argues, “not only reflected the stress created by danger to loved ones but also pointed to subtle changes in the character of Southern family life.”\(^{26}\)

As Faust has pointed out, the scarcity and expense of paper during the war likely made letters even more emotionally valuable and therefore separation “seemed to encourage a new frankness, a new emotional accessibility, and a new intensity of feeling between husbands and wives.”\(^{27}\) Although these letters, however frank, cannot be taken as unbiased depictions of reality, they provide insight into how women felt as they faced an unprecedented breakdown in gender relations. By analyzing their descriptions of this breakdown, it is possible to understand the way that women interpreted their roles in their marriages and society, as well as the way that gender norms influenced their approaches to wartime problem-solving. The discussion of female dependence in letters reveals women’s attempts to balance societal expectations of their femininity with strong feelings that emerged in response to their experiences during the Civil War.

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27 Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 118.
The Practical and Emotional Need for Men

The expected roles of men and women in the southern planter family and household were almost mutually exclusive before the disruption of the Civil War. Women accepted a subordinate role within the family and society in exchange for male protection and support. A husband’s role was to provide for and protect the family, while a wife was to contribute moral and emotional care. Each gender was thought to be most naturally suited to its own role, and therefore the exchange of protection for subordination did not seem as imbalanced as it might to modern eyes. Sallie Bird put it succinctly when she described her husband Edgeworth to their daughter as “him who is nominally and really the head of our home, the chief of our house.” As the war removed the protection and paternal leadership promised to planter class women by the hierarchical structure of southern society, women began to think more explicitly about the roles of both men and women.

As women experienced increasing difficulties in their wartime roles at home, their perceived need for male guidance similarly increased. Like Araminta Tripp, most women showed remarkable competence in taking limited direction from their husbands and making their own decisions. However, the comfortable structure of male protector over subordinate wife was sorely missed as life at home became increasingly difficult. By early 1863, Harriet Perry had become so frustrated with the dynamics of her household without her husband Theophilus that she made the decision to leave the household entirely and move in with her in-laws. She struggled with the decision, knowing that her husband would prefer she remain at home to manage the slaves, crops, and children herself rather than hire an overseer to do it for her. Toying with the idea, she wrote to Theophilus that she was feeling “tired and afraid to stay here alone” and revealed her

28 Ibid., 242.
29 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 146. Stephanie Coontz provides a detailed history of the political and economic developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that led to women turning their backs on early calls for equality and embracing an ideology of separate spheres for the sexes. Contributing factors include the rise of Enlightenment thinking and the rise of the market economy.
frustrations with the slaves’ refusal to work for her. She carefully described to him the plan his father had devised in the event that Theophilus consented to the move. “I shall endeavor to manage the best I can,” she added, in an effort to placate his worries that she might make a drastic decision.

Despite her tentativeness in asking Theophilus to consent to her move, Harriet took more ownership in the ultimate decision when she later described it to her sister Sallie. “I tried living alone seven months & became so tired & dissatisfied I concluded it would be best to break up,” she wrote, without any allusion to the many conversations between her, Theophilus, and his father on the topic. Outside the gendered power dynamics between her and her husband, Harriet felt at liberty to tell Sallie how happy she felt now that she had “nothing to do but act out my part.” Her husband’s expectations of both her ability and willingness to take over more responsibilities while he fought in the Confederate Army altered the way she talked to him about her desire to give up some of those responsibilities. However, with those dynamics out of the way, she could tell her sister how happy she was in her father-in-law’s household, as she had returned to her “part” as a woman in a household with more traditional gender dynamics. Harriet’s sister echoed her feelings, telling her that she “was very glad indeed that you had broke up housekeeping. I thought so much about your staying there alone.” She told Harriet that by assuming her husband’s role, even temporarily, she had “done more than I could ever be made to do.”

Not every woman sought or had the ability to temporarily replace her husband with a father-in-law or other patriarch. When they opted to remain at home alone, women worried about their ability to do a man’s job. The discrete differences between household gender roles made southerners think that women needed more guidance than men. John Thurman told his wife Sallie of his regret that he would not be able to give her as much guidance as she needed. “No, I can’t advise,” he told her. “You will have to act from the circumstances that surround you which I am afraid will be very

32 Ibid., 96.
33 Harriet Perry to Sallie M. Person, February 18, 1863, in Johannson, Widows by the Thousand, 99.
34 Sallie M. Person to Harriet Perry, May 17, 1863, in Johannson, Widows by the Thousand, 111.
trying.”\(^35\) He had left her in charge of their young children and plantation, a new level of responsibility that was distressing for both of them. “I am trying to do the best I can my dear husband,” Sallie wrote back, “and I wish I knew better what to do.”\(^36\) Though he attempted to fulfill her petitions for

\(^35\) John to Sallie Thurman, March 17, 1862, folder 10, John P. and Sallie Ecklin Thurman papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

\(^36\) Sallie to John Thurman, May 28, 1862, folder 10, Thurman papers.
guidance over the course of the war, John had to either gain confidence in his wife or encourage her to trust herself and the opinions of others. In early 1865 he told her, “I don’t feel competent to advise you as I can’t see what circumstances may turn up.” Instead, he told her, “I must trust you and the advice of your friends.”37 Like John, William Tripp felt that he would not be able to advise his wife as much as she needed. “You must do the best you can dear wife,” he told Araminta, “as I have no time to plan for you.”38 William saw this as a good thing, however. “But perhaps it is best,” he told her later, “and in fact I know it is for you to have some experience about managing affairs before I am dead as in the natural course of nature you will be left a widow if not by the war.” He continued, “The little advice I can give you, situated as I am so far off and not being cognizant of the facts personally, can be of little use to you.”39

In spite of the difficulty of directing and reassuring from afar, most men still attempted to advise their wives to the best of their ability. Most often, they suggested that their wives consult other men. Theophilus Perry gave thorough directions to his wife about when to plant crops and how to handle various transactions, but he always told her to consult with his father. He never fully trusted in her discretion. When Harriet voiced her opinion on a business decision, however, Theophilus listened and gave his approval willingly. “You have acted right in not buying land,” he told her. “I approve your judgment.”40 Despite this affirmation of her decision-making ability, he regularly told her to “consult Papa always.”41 Edgeworth Bird also hoped his wife would consult with nearby men. Though he gave very detailed instructions to Sallie about how to manage prices, organize cotton planting, and divide duties between slaves, he still told her she “must talk with father and others and learn what will be best.”42 Even though his absence made it difficult to give thorough advice, he told Sallie he was still “glad you always tell me of the plantation work,” as it enabled him to guide her from a distance.43 Asking for and giving advice enabled women and men to retain the appearance of antebellum gender dynamics, even though

37 John to Sallie Thurman, February 20, 1865, folder 16, Thurman papers.
38 William to Araminta Tripp, October 9, 1861, folder 2, Tripp papers.
39 William to Araminta Tripp, February 8, 1863, folder 4, Tripp papers.
40 Theophilus to Harriet Perry, March 13, 1864, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 226.
41 Theophilus to Harriet Perry, January 12, 1864, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 195.
42 Edgeworth to Sallie Bird, September 25, 1861, in Rozier, The Granite Farm Letters, 35.
43 Edgeworth to Sallie Bird, February 27, 1863, in Rozier, The Granite Farm Letters, 111.
women were performing roles outside their traditional sphere.

Even with advice and reassurance from their husbands, women never expressed full confidence in their ability to do a man’s job. Araminta Tripp regularly complained about her problems and told William, “I do so need you to lean on.”44 William, whose confidence in his wife easily surpassed her own by 1864, reassured his wife that she had proven to be a competent farm manager. “Be sure your husband will approve of anything you may do,” he told her, “knowing you will always do what you think is best.”45 Harriet Perry told her sister about her problems at home without her husband. “I reckon I am getting on as well as any one under the circumstances,” Harriet told her, “but it is poor doings where there is no man.”46 A month later, Harriet was worried about renting her house after she had moved in with her in-laws. “Oh husband. I don’t know what to do,” she told Theophilus, after describing the situation. “Everything is so unsatisfactory to me without yourself.”47 Women’s problems with their new roles were attributed to gender: men were better suited to do traditionally masculine business, and without real support women were unable to do it as effectively as men.

Husbands also expressed this sentiment to their wives, but men were more willing to give their wives credit for their successes than the wives themselves. Husbands often believed that their wives succeeded at doing traditionally masculine jobs despite their gender. Edgeworth Bird told his wife, “Were I only at home, I know we’d have a greater abundance on the plantation, for it has always been a very peculiar business and one that I love and, of course, I could conduct it more successfully.” He continued, however, “and then we really do very well” with her in charge.48 He explained how he understood his wife’s ability to his daughter, Saida. “She has many trials and burdens at home,” he told Saida. “The care of a plantation is a new onus and not properly belonging to her department, but under necessity she assumes it bravely, and right ably and skillfully does she direct.”49 John Thurman expressed similar sentiments. “I deeply sympathize with you,” he told his wife Sallie. “I know it is hard for a woman

44 Araminta to William Tripp, September 4, 1864, folder 7, Tripp papers.
45 William to Araminta Tripp, February 11, 1864, folder 6, Tripp papers.
46 Harriet Perry to Mary Temperance Person, January 6, 1863, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 79.
47 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, February 8, 1863, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 98.
to meet ... what you will be compelled to until I am free from the duties of a soldier.”
William Tripp, in spite of his confidence in Araminta’s ability to step into a male role, admitted that doing so was difficult for her as a woman. “I do wish from my heart I could be with you love to take all the trouble of the outdoor business off of your hands.” In the meantime, however, she “must do the best you can without me for some time.”

Even as men congratulated and encouraged their wives, women continued to ask for advice and express uneasiness at their new roles throughout the war. The decision to write about such feelings in letters to their husbands serves as evidence of women’s belief in their ineptitude. They found their new roles difficult in contrast to their distinct female duties before the war. Discussion of their problems also reveals women’s efforts to remain loyal to patriarchal expectations. Asking for advice, even after their husbands had assured them that they trusted their opinion, was a way for women to cling to the gender relations to which they were accustomed. Women complained about problems that the war created in a way that did not deviate from gendered expectations of their sex.

Just as women began to consider the extent of their practical need for their husbands during the Civil War, they also contemplated their emotional dependence on men. Choosing a spouse based on love became a social ideal in the United States by the end of the eighteenth century. As men’s and women’s roles in society became decidedly more distinct, home life and marriage became a place of refuge for both sexes. In such sentimental marriages, couples freely discussed the concept of emotional necessity. Edgeworth Bird expressed this idea to his wife when he wrote in 1861, “Precious, I know I am necessary to you. I feel that I form a portion

50 John to Sallie Thurman, June 22, 1864, folder 14, Thurman papers.
51 William to Araminta Tripp, January 21, 1863, folder 5, Tripp papers.
52 William to Araminta Tripp, April 5, 1862, folder 3, Tripp papers.
53 Coontz, Marriage, a History, 146.
in you that if taken away could not be replaced. Every letter you send me
breathes it in every line and my heart tells me of its truth, you precious
darling of my soul.”\textsuperscript{54} Wives articulated similar feelings. Though women
were aware that they depended on their husbands emotionally before the
war, their need for emotional support became more pronounced as the
war prolonged separation. As she considered her wartime feelings, Harriet
Perry reflected on her antebellum relationship to her husband. “I think I
shall be as happy as I desire so you shall have a better wife than you ever had
before,” she wrote him, adding that once they were reunited, “I shall know
how to appreciate you.”\textsuperscript{55} Indeed, Harriet felt more aware of the emotional
support Theophilus had given her before the war once it was taken away.

When discussing their emotional need for their husbands, women
often spoke about the very letters they were writing. Many women
transferred prewar dependence on husbands onto letters from the front,
which served as replacements for the absent men. Without the physical
presence of their male counterparts, women leaned heavily on letters as a
concrete form of news, affection, and emotional reassurance. As the war
progressed and the reality of the war’s length became more apparent,
women increasingly began to express their reliance on letters and their
husbands’ correspondence. As Faust has pointed out, “The emotional
lives of Confederate couples separated by war did in fact depend heavily
on the mundane inadequacies of the new national postal service.”\textsuperscript{56}
Without their husbands, women turned to the next best thing: their
husbands’ written words.

Many women spent a considerable portion of the limited space of their
letters telling their husbands how emotionally important letters were to
them. For many women, letters served the simple purpose of cheering them
up. “Do my own precious husband write as often as you can,” Araminta
wrote William, “for your letters are inexpressibly dear to me. They cheer
me for days after receiving one.”\textsuperscript{57} Harriet Perry wrote to her husband
Theophilus in September of 1862 to tell him: “do write often, for all the
pleasure I have depends on it—Your letters are almost the only sources of

\textsuperscript{54} Edgeworth to Sallie Bird, September 25, 1861, in Rozier, \textit{The Granite Farm Letters}, 34.
\textsuperscript{55} Harriet to Theophilus Perry, September 15, 1862, in Johansson, \textit{Widows by the Thousand},
31.
\textsuperscript{56} Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 115.
\textsuperscript{57} Araminta to William Tripp, December 5, 1862, folder 3, Tripp papers.
joy & comfort I have.” She continued, “But for them & our little darling, life would be a blank to my poor heart.”

Similarly, in describing his letters, Sallie Thurman told her husband, “Next to your dear, sweet self I had rather be visited by one of them than anything else.”

Telling their husbands how much they appreciated and enjoyed the letters served as encouragement for men to write home more often. After describing the difficulties of their new roles at home, women told their husbands that the simple act of sending a letter was a way for men to ease their wives’ burdens.

What to include in a letter was an important decision in light of the great expense and difficulty involved in sending them. During the Civil War, post was unreliable and writing supplies became scarce, especially among soldiers. When such supplies were available, soldiers carried paper, pens, and stamps with them and regularly requested such items from home. Stamps were especially prized. According to one account, a single US postage stamp was worth one dollar and 50 cents in the Confederacy, which, David Henkin has proposed, “reflected more than just the depreciation of Southern money.” In addition to scarce supplies, letter writers faced problems with unreliable and infrequent deliveries. Some southerners reported that they did not receive mail for months at a time during the war. The post office confronted practical problems of delivering letters to and from soldiers in camps that were far from home and, often, in contested territory. When letter writers told their correspondents about the obstacles facing mail delivery, they often did so to stress a letter’s value in addition to excusing infrequency.

Husbands and military officials widely discussed the appropriate content of wartime letters. Confederate officials worried that depressing letters from home would affect their soldiers’ morale and lead to desertion. They turned to newspapers in order to tell women, “Don’t Write Gloomy Letters,” in an effort to ensure all news from home was cheerful. Just as

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59 Sallie to John Thurman, March 18, 1865, folder 17, Thurman papers.
61 Ibid., 140.
63 Henkin, *Postal Age*, 141.
64 Huntsville Democrat, August 21, 1861, quoted in Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 118.
they had before the war, women were encouraged to refrain from including negative emotions in their letters. However, government officials were not the only ones to express opinions on what women should or should not include in their letters. Husbands, too, reprimanded their wives for writing despairing letters. “Sallie you must not be despondent,” John Thurman wrote to his wife. Letters were comforting to men as well: they wanted good news from home rather than bad. John later wrote to Sallie, praising a “soul-changing letter” that she had sent.

65 John to Sallie Thurman, May 24, 1862, folder 10, Thurman papers.
66 Ibid.
In spite of warnings, however, women scolded their husbands in letters. Most often they expressed dissatisfaction at poorly written or infrequent letters. “I beg you my beloved absent one forgive my sad theme this evening,” Sallie Thurman wrote her husband. “It has been so long since I heard from you, I feel depressed in consequence of it.”67 Araminta Tripp was more forceful when describing her frustrations with her husband’s letter writing. She told William in 1863, “Not a single word I have heard from you since Rhoden left you at Mr. Winfield’s and though I have longed for a letter from you, with the most intense longing, not a line has reached me.”68 She expressed frustration that she had not received a letter from him in weeks. “But I cannot will not believe that you neglected me,” she informed

67 Ibid.
68 Araminta to William Tripp, September 3, 1865, folder 8, Tripp papers. Emphasis in original.
him, “so here ends the subject.” Harriet Perry was equally explicit in her frustrations with her husband’s letter writing, scolding him after he failed to adequately respond to questions in her last letter: “Are you going to do so again? If you do, I shall think Husband is not himself, not like he used to be, that Camp life has made an awful change in him—can’t bear to be treated with indifference & especially by you.” Harriet knew that her husband disliked letters such as this. She wrote them anyway, demanding that her husband “must write regularly & often,” preferably “once a week.” Without regular correspondence, she would have “lost all interest in everything.” Anticipating the impact of her letter, she wrote, “Don’t let what I write make you sad.”

Harriet carefully concluded her petition for more frequent letters by assuring her husband that she did not mean to complain or urge him too much. However, several months later, her petitions continued. “You do not do my right Husband by delaying and neglecting to write,” she said. “I know you have little time, but you could write a little.” Theophilus, to his credit, attempted to reassure his wife that he was following her orders. “I write you very often,” he assured his anxious wife. “I fear my letters miscarry. It is said here that letters do not go the other way. They come more faithfully.” Harriet’s willingness to defy her husband’s wishes and chastise him for not writing enough speaks to the importance she placed on his letters. Moreover, she used precious space in letters to do so.

Husbands also chose to focus on how important positive letters were for their morale, rather than reprimanding their wives for despondent letters. They encouraged women to write more often in the same way their wives asked them to do so. William Tripp praised Araminta for a happy letter in January 1863. “You certainly felt cheerful,” he told her, “for it breathes a spirit of cheerfulness through all its lines.” “You can’t form an idea my darling wife of my happiness,” John Thurman told Sallie, “of the morning of the first to have handed me your dear letter.” Edgeworth Bird told his daughter that his wife’s letters “are an inexpressible comfort and pleasure,

69 Ibid.
70 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, January 18, 1863, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 85.
71 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, October 26, 1862, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 48. Emphasis in original.
72 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, January 18, 1863, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 88.
73 Theophilus to Harriet Perry, July 12, 1863, Widows by the Thousand, 149.
74 William to Araminta Tripp, January 5, 1863, folder 4, Tripp papers.
75 John to Sallie Thurman, May 5, 1862, folder 10, Thurman papers.
by far the greatest experience in this miserable war life.” Edgeworth was effusive on the topic. “Last evening the mail man brought me a letter, and two two days before, from my heart’s home,” he wrote Sallie. “Oh! Darling, shall I again say how sweet and consoling, or have you learned the oft-told tale by heart?” Theophilus Perry likewise reminded his wife of how important her letters were to him. “Do not neglect to write,” he told her. “My love, my peace demands it.” For both men and women, letters served as an imperfect substitute for emotional support they had received from their spouse before the war.

Women sometimes expressed their dependence on their husbands through discussions of illness. Women regularly complained of anxiety, nervousness, and headaches. They believed their wartime situation had caused these conditions, and the only cure was a husband’s safe return home. “Though I do not complain to any one,” Harriet Perry wrote her husband, “I have had palpitation of the heart nearly every morning since you left & sometimes so severely if I did not sit or lie down I should fall.... I attribute it to my situation.” These physical responses to the anxiety associated with a husband’s absence and the responsibilities that followed appear to have been chronic for these women. Araminta Tripp complained to her husband that her feelings of nervousness and uneasiness increased each time he returned to war after his furloughs. “I was really glad to get a letter from you so soon,” he wrote to Araminta soon after returning from a furlough in July 1864, “but darling I was extremely sorry to find that parting from me affected you so.” Araminta felt physically ill each time her husband left her for war and held little back in telling him so. “I am feeling much better now and hope to be well soon,” she wrote William in 1863. “I am sure that my ill health is caused by anxiety.” William came to the same conclusion, and told her, “I do really believe dear if I could be at home with you for a month or so you would recover in a great measure your health and perhaps your spirits.”

76 Edgeworth to Saida Bird, August 10, 1864, in Rozier, Granite Farm Letters, 184.
77 Edgeworth to Sallie Bird, September 22, 1861, in Rozier, Granite Farm Letters, 28-29.
78 Theophilus to Harriet Perry, July 9, 1863, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 149.
79 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, August 3, 1862, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 12.
80 William to Araminta Tripp, July 17, 1864, folder 7, Tripp papers.
81 Araminta to William Tripp, September 10, 1863, folder 5, Tripp papers.
82 William to Araminta Tripp, February 11, 1864, folder 6, Tripp papers.
take over some of her new stressful duties, but his physical presence would also provide better emotional support than his letters could. “I should feel so happy and at rest if you were with me and could stay,” Araminta told William. “Now I feel tired all the time, even thinking wearies me.” Men and women associated the physical ailments wives experienced when facing new challenges with separation itself.

The relief wives obtained from letters or furloughs served to reinforce their thoughts on the origin of these maladies as well as the intensity of their dependence on their husbands. Receiving a letter from an absent husband not only provided women with emotional support, but it also relieved women of physical symptoms of stress. Letters themselves were proof of a husband’s survival. “I breathed freely once more,” Sallie Thurman described to her husband John after finally receiving a letter from him. Acknowledging the unreliability of mail service, Edgeworth Bird wrote to his wife, “I trust some of my letters have reached you along, sufficient to keep down a full grown anxiety.” Harriet Perry believed her husband’s presence, even in the form of a letter, would improve her condition. “Oh Husband I feel as if I should die here all alone,” she wrote. “I can’t take any interest in any thing in the world hardly [except] my baby & I don’t think any thing could arouse me but your presence.” She continued, “I reckon it is low spirits or hysterics—I am all low & when I get your precious letters, nothing cheers me like them.” Her husband’s brief return in a furlough or even physical proof of his survival in the form of a letter served to alleviate fears even as it served to reinforce women’s ideas of their own emotional dependency. After all, the only cure for a husband’s absence was his safe return.

Women expressed their emotional need for their husbands in their letters. They expressed their frustration when men did not write often enough. They told men how much letters meant to them. They told them how much joy, comfort, and peace letters brought. Women wrote to their husbands to tell them that their letters had alleviated physical pain. Doing so served to encourage men to write more frequently. Expressing an

83 Araminta to William Tripp, September 4, 1864, folder 7, Tripp papers.
84 Sallie to John Thurman, March 10, 1865, folder 17, Thurman papers.
85 Edgeworth to Sallie Bird, October 21, 1863, in Rozier, The Granite Farm Letters, 156.
86 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, September 24, 1862, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 41. Emphasis in original.
emotional need for a husband reinforced the idea that women depended on men for practical reasons as well: if separation made women sad and physically ill, then they would be even less able to perform male duties. In writing this way, women communicated to their husbands that they felt that they could not survive without them. If a husband’s physical presence was impossible, then letters would have to suffice. This rhetoric reveals the extent to which women believed they needed their husbands and the lengths to which they were willing to go in order to convince them of it. Women were able to talk about their frustrations with the war
by emphasizing a traditionally female concern, rather than complaining about the war itself.

**Women and Slaves in the Civil War**

The southern household, especially the elite slaveholding one, served as a microcosm of greater southern society. Just as social expectations of femininity informed women’s interactions with their husbands, such ideals colored their encounters with slaves. The hierarchical structure of the southern farm or plantation embodied that of southern paternalism as a whole.\(^{87}\) Men commonly employed the metaphor “our family white and black” to describe their understanding of the complex community of the southern slaveholding household.\(^{88}\) In spite of this concept of community, Thavolia Glymph has observed that white southerners “measured themselves partly in the distance that separated them from enslaved (and free) black people.”\(^{89}\) It was through the hierarchy of the household, with men placed firmly at the top as fathers and masters, that women understood their place in the larger world. It is important to examine the antebellum expectations of women’s relationships with slaves in order to understand how their wartime experiences deviated from the antebellum norm.

Women’s and men’s roles as mistress and master reflected their gendered roles as spouses. Women’s authority as mistresses lay primarily within the domestic sphere. Here, their relationship to slaves was perhaps more complex than men’s. Women were primarily in charge of the production and distribution of slave clothing and food, which unavoidably meant assigning specific tasks to slaves.\(^{90}\) In this way, a woman’s role as mistress entailed some measure of mutual dependence between slave and mistress.

A woman’s role as mistress before the war was complicated by the fact that she most often oversaw female slaves. The household served as the primary location for the construction of southern white womanhood, which made the relationship between white mistresses and black female

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\(^{87}\) Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 32.
\(^{88}\) Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 100.
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 88.
slaves even more significant. Mistresses most commonly interacted with the enslaved black women against whom they defined themselves as elite white women. Race and class divisions, argues Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, encouraged mistresses to interpret “any sign of independence as impudence, impertinence, obstinacy.” Slave women resisted their bondage in different ways than male slaves, predominantly in the form of quiet subversion and intentional inefficiency, while men were more likely to rebel or run away. White women, therefore, most often understood their role as mistresses within the larger slaveholding household in terms of their complex relationship to female slaves.

While men held the ultimate authority over a household’s slaves, most preferred not to intervene in the domestic sphere, in keeping with the stark divide of gender roles in the Old South’s social structure. When petitioned for advice on matters regarding household slaves, men were more likely to defer to their wives’ judgment. However, a white woman’s domestic authority was still checked by her husband’s patriarchal sovereignty: even if he did not tend to intervene, he could at any time. Though women managed household activities quite independently, they generally lacked experience in bookkeeping and interacting with predominantly male field hands. The divide between the roles of master and mistress therefore guaranteed that women lacked the necessary tools for the overall management of the slaveholding household.

Many women defended the institution of slavery. Others, like some men of the time, saw it as a necessary evil, while more actively disliked it. The structure of the southern household and society depended on the survival of slavery, and the ideal elite southern woman needed slaves to allow her to be free of the farm chores of a yeoman’s wife. However, tensions between mistresses and household slaves, which were usually born out of their complex relationships, often frustrated white women. It was within this domestic sphere that tensions between women and slaves most often reached a breaking point. When women complained of their household responsibilities, they expressed both frustration with slaves and sympathy

91 Ibid., 65.
92 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 140.
93 Glymph, Out of the House of Bondage, 70.
94 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 140.
95 Glymph, Out of the House of Bondage, 88.
96 Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 134.
for the enslaved condition. Anne Firor Scott has noted a trend in female rhetoric that compared the experience of being a southern woman with that of a slave.\textsuperscript{97} It was likely these sentiments that contributed to unease over slavery among some southern slaveholding women before the war, though such sentiment was not universal and was more likely to be kept private.\textsuperscript{98}

Harriet Perry, Sallie Thurman, Araminta Tripp, and Sallie Bird lived on plantations in the antebellum South. They each participated in the institution of slavery and actively fought to preserve it. Each woman’s household engaged in an antebellum hierarchical structure that reflected broader southern culture. When Theophilus, John, William, and Edgeworth left for war, that hierarchical structure broke down, inevitably altering their wives’ interactions with slaves at home. Each woman assumed total control of her household in her husband’s absence. Araminta’s husband left her in charge of 16 slaves with the expectation that she could depend on Rhoden, William’s most trusted slave, for advice. Neither Sallie Thurman nor Harriet Perry benefitted from such a relationship. All three, however, were expected to manage the production of crops and the activities of slaves. On the Bird plantation, Sallie was expected to coordinate household servants as she had before the war in addition to working with the plantation’s overseer.\textsuperscript{99} A woman’s pre-war situation informed the type and intensity of problems she encountered with slaves during the war, with those who adhered more strictly to the stereotypes of the southern plantation household prior to the war facing more distinct changes.

Araminta Tripp and Sallie Bird experienced relatively little difficulty in assuming authority over slaves. Before the war, Araminta had participated in the domestic activities expected of slaveholding women, sewing clothes for slaves and organizing their household tasks.\textsuperscript{100} William trusted his slaves in general, but held one in particularly high regard. Soon after leaving Araminta to her new task, he told her, “You must do the best you can dear wife as I have no time to plan for you. I think you can rely a great deal on Rhoden’s judgment at least I do.”\textsuperscript{101} Throughout his absence, William gave most of his instructions to his wife in the form of “tell Rhoden,”

\textsuperscript{97} Scott, \textit{The Southern Lady}, 50.  
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 51.  
\textsuperscript{100} Diary of Araminta Tripp, April 8, 1857, Tripp papers.  
\textsuperscript{101} William to Araminta Tripp, October 9, 1861, folder 2, Tripp papers.
demonstrating his confidence in Rhoden’s abilities and trustworthiness. When Araminta became overwhelmed, William advised her to “let Rhoden do most of the management of the farm and stock” while she focused on the household duties to which she was accustomed.102 Araminta’s ability to cooperate with Rhoden and rely on his help allowed their relationship to remain harmonious throughout the war. As the deliverer of William’s orders, Araminta was able to exert authority over Rhoden and the other slaves without fully stepping outside of her sphere. She was only communicating orders, not producing them. By the time William gained confidence in his wife’s ability to make decisions without his constant oversight, Araminta and Rhoden had forged a working relationship much like the one William and Rhoden had.

Sallie Bird took control of Granite Farm and their 21 slaves when her husband enlisted. Though she had a male overseer to help maintain some of the gendered hierarchy of her pre-war household situation, Sallie still held new authority over slaves outside the domestic sphere. In order to ease his wife into her new role, Edgeworth advised her to “take pains to gain the affection of the negroes. You can attach them to you and govern them through their hearts better than any overseer can through fear.”103 Sallie took her husband’s advice. In letters home to her daughter while visiting Edgeworth in Richmond in March 1862, Sallie wrote greetings to slaves by name, and told her daughter to “give my love to them.”104 In this way, Sallie effectively balanced her new authority with affection that was appropriate to her gendered position. Edgeworth’s foresight also provides an understanding of his style of exerting authority over slaves. The precedent of a relatively positive relationship between master and slave likely enabled Sallie to exert new authority with limited backlash. Sallie’s ability to do so encouraged Edgeworth to acknowledge to his daughter that in spite of her gender, “right ably and skillfully does she direct.”105 Araminta and Sallie cautiously stepped out of their domestic spheres to exert more authority than most mistresses possessed before the war. However, their husbands’ pre-war relationships with slaves eased Araminta’s and Sallie’s transitions

102 William to Araminta Tripp, April 7, 1864, folder 6, Tripp papers.
103 Edgeworth to Sallie Bird, November 21, 1861, in Rozier, The Granite Farm Letters, 45.
104 Sallie to Sallie (Saida) Bird, March 15, 1862, in Rozier, The Granite Farm Letters, 77.
105 Edgeworth to Sallie (Saida) Bird, August 10, 1864, in Rozier, The Granite Farm Letters, 184.
into masculine positions of authority.

Harriet Perry’s transition was not quite as straightforward. From nearly the beginning of her husband’s absence, Harriet was uncertain that slaves would accept a woman’s authority. Unlike Araminta, who developed a good relationship with Rhoden, Harriet did not trust her slaves. Theophilus brought a slave named Norflet to camp with him in August of 1862. Harriet advised Theophilus not to share shoes or clothes with the slave. “Don’t give your clothes to Norflet,” she told him. “Keep them yourself, he will be running off with the Yankees the first chance he gets & will not thank you.”\(^{106}\) When Norflet did run away from Theophilus’ camp and returned to the Perry’s home in Texas, Harriet felt vindicated in her distrust. After repeating Norflet’s explanation for how he returned home, Harriet told Theophilus, “This is his story—we know not what to believe.” She continued, “I knew he would have a good tale made up.”\(^{107}\)

This level of distrust reflects the difficulty Harriet experienced when attempting to exert authority over slaves at home. She viewed her femininity

106 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, February 8, 1863, in Johansson, *Widows by the Thousand*, 94.
as the source of her problems. “It is the worst thing in the world to live as I do,” Harriet told her sister when describing her interactions with slaves.108 In the first year of her husband’s absence, Harriet’s relationship with her slaves became increasingly difficult. She worried from the beginning that they would not respect her new authority. “The negroes seem to do as well as when you were here so far,” she told her husband in August, 1862. “I can’t tell how long they will hold out.”109 Harriet found that the slaves became more disobedient the longer she remained their sole authority figure. After President Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September of 1862, Harriet became fearful of her future with the slaves. “I have not been afraid to stay here till now,” she wrote Theophilus after hearing the news. “I feel very uneasy indeed—write often dearest.”110 By February of 1863, Harriet became so frustrated with recalcitrant slaves and single motherhood that she decided to hire out the slaves and rent their home to a refugee. She moved with her two young children to her father-in-law’s plantation several miles away. “I cannot have any thing done at all,” she told Theophilus, explaining the reasoning behind her solution.111 Harriet’s decision to hire out her slaves and rent her house ultimately stemmed from her belief that slaves could not accept the authority of a white mistress. She chose to move to a plantation with even more slaves, though in this case a white master exerted overall power. In this traditional hierarchy, Harriet felt safer than she had alone at home.

Sallie Thurman faced similar problems in exerting authority over slaves. Like Theophilus Perry, Sallie’s husband John waited until the spring of 1862 to enlist. When he finally did, he left his 22-year-old wife in charge of the operations of his entire plantation. Sallie remained more positive toward her new role than Harriet. In May 1862, after two months of John’s absence, Sallie began to experience the first instances of her slaves’ unwillingness to accept her authority. “Some of the negroes are rather refracting,” she wrote John, “but I talked to them yesterday and hope they will do better in future.” Following that conversation, a slave named Jim told her to tell John “that he feels like a house without a top. Says when he saw you walking about the

110 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, October 26, 1862, *Widows by the Thousand*, 50.
111 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, February 8, 1863, in Johansson, *Widows by the Thousand*, 95.
yard he always felt easy but is now lost.” Sallie interpreted this sentiment as an expression of Jim’s faithfulness as a servant. Her optimism for the future, however, did not last. By 1864, she wrote John, “I do not see how I can live without you another year. It seems impossible.” Like Harriet, she interpreted part of her problems as one of gender. “We get along very badly without someone to superintend,” she told him, adding, “and Lincoln’s free labor system is having a very bad effect upon the negroes.”

As Sallie noted, the problems women experienced in attempting to assume authority over slaves during the war did not originate entirely in gendered expectations. Slaves, like all southerners, understood that the war was fought to protect the institution of slavery. Faust highlights the fact that the war encouraged slaves to assert a desire for freedom in unprecedented ways, placing women in charge of increasingly rebellious slaves. Both Sallie Thurman and Harriet Perry noticed that their slaves’ awareness of impending freedom made them more likely to reject authority. Lincoln’s preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 frightened Harriet. By the time Confederate General John Magruder “called for all the negro men on every plantation except one,” Harriet was terrified. “The farmers say no crops will be made,” she told Theophilus, “for the women will not support themselves and the prediction of the Federals to starve us will be true.” Harriet’s fear of slave insurrection originated not only from an understanding of her limited power as a female master, but from a broader societal awareness of slave rebellion as well.

In the face of the difficulty in exerting authority over slaves outside of the domestic sphere, women had several options. They could, like Harriet Perry, find a male replacement to maintain control of their slaves and household while finding another patriarchal household in which to seek refuge. This was by no means the only option. Sallie Thurman remained at home with her recalcitrant slaves until the end of the war. However, as she became less able to exert power over slaves, her patience faded and she began to petition more forcefully for her husband’s return. “If I could have you with me,” she told him in March of 1865, “I could

112 Sallie to John Thurman, May 18, 1862, folder 10, Thurman papers.
113 Sallie to John Thurman, October 23, 1864, folder 15, Thurman papers.
114 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 54.
115 Harriet to Theophilus Perry, January 18, 1864, in Johansson, Widows by the Thousand, 195.
bear the calamities and privations of this war in meekness.”  

Even the women who enjoyed relatively amenable relationships with slaves during the war sought a reprieve from their added responsibilities. Toward the end of the war, Araminta expressed doubt in her ability to run her farm even as her husband conveyed his confidence in her. The solution to her problems was William. “O! how I do want the war to end,” she told him near the war’s close, “and my dear husband restored to me!” She wanted to return to the roles she and her husband had played in the household before war disrupted them.

Yearning for Patriarchy

Patriarchal paternalism was pervasive in the antebellum South. The hierarchy between master, mistress, and slave touched every aspect of the slaveholding woman’s life. Gender lines dictated how women should act as mothers as well as mistresses. Men’s ultimate authority over their plantation and slaves placed them firmly at the top of southern social structure. Men’s physical removal by the war inevitably shattered that hierarchy in the households they left behind. Women remained to pick up the pieces and configure a new social dynamic while they waited for their husbands to return from war. Women stepped outside of their gendered role when their husbands left and faced unprecedented new challenges. Husbands, especially those who were secure in their relationships with their wives, were more willing to express confidence in their spouses’ ability to assume new roles that were outside of their traditional gendered sphere. This confidence may have stemmed from necessity, both in terms of encouraging their wives to continue and because they may have had no other choice while they performed what they perceived to be their duty to the southern cause. Women successfully demonstrated an ability to perform male roles in their husband’s absence, and their husbands were often more willing to acknowledge that success than the women.

Instead of acknowledging any success, women wrote their husbands letters to tell them how much they needed them. They told their husbands that the best solution to their hardship was for men to return home. In using this language, women retreated to their prescribed gender role in order to

116 Sallie to John Thurman, March 16, 1865, folder 17, Thurman papers.
117 Araminta to William Tripp, [c.a. 1865 or before], folder 8, Tripp papers.
express frustrations with the war. Doing so enabled them to remain patriotic and continue to support their husbands. At the same time, women were able to articulate what they believed would be a solution to their problems: a return to antebellum gender relations, in which their husbands were safely at home. As they expressed it to their husbands, women’s perception of their practical need for men was amplified by the emotional support they desired. To them, the best way to obtain this support was through more letters or the return of their husband to the home front.

Elite women’s feelings of deficiency reveal the depth and pervasiveness of paternalistic norms in nineteenth-century gender relations. Women yearned to return to the paternalistic structure that had exacerbated these wartime problems to begin with. They sought new patriarchs in the form of in-laws, overseers, and hirers. They petitioned their husbands to return home and prioritize their families and farms over the war effort. A return to the hierarchical patriarchy would be a return to normalcy in which women clearly understood their place in the household and the world at large.