

Occupied Natchez, Elite Women, and the Feminization of the Civil War

by *Joyce L. Broussard*

In 1903, Ellen Shields, a matronly spinster living in Natchez, Mississippi, wrote a lengthy genealogical memoir of her life, recalling in detail family relations and how she and her loved ones had survived the Civil War. She remembered precisely the cavalcade of relatives that had webbed her and her family into a slave-holding dynasty of extraordinary scale and scope. She wrote of blood ties, weddings, and the births and deaths of extended family members in an annotated chronicle that spans a century, ticking them off like tombstones in the town's cemetery and the family graveyards scattered here and there throughout the Natchez environs. She especially remembered the rural and town estate houses wherein her relatives had lived, worked, partied, and reigned as elite slaveholders and privileged members of a plantation-based southern aristocracy. She wrote of those mansions still standing in 1900 and those that had burned over the years or were damaged during the Civil War: Rokeby, the Hermitage, Forest, Homewood, the Birds' Nest, Oakley Grove, Highlands, Claremont, Richland, Melmont, Aventine, and her home place, Montebello, where she had resided on the outskirts of Natchez with her parents, siblings, and grandparents for over half a century before it was sold to cover family debts in the 1880s. Her memoir is written in a distant but not depressed tone of mourning. She laments the loss of those grand estate domiciles that symbolized for her a world of mastery, one filled with the certitude of paternalistic authority.¹

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¹ Ellen Shields, "Genealogical Memoir of Ellen Shields," 1903, photocopy provided by Katherine Blankenstein of Natchez, now housed in the Natchez Collection, California State University-Northridge, Northridge, California. The Shields family, headed by the patriarch Gabriel Shields, owned extensive lands and slaves in Adams County, Mississippi,

This same memoir includes an “Account of the many atrocities to which our family was subject by federal officials and men.” It is a remarkable tale centered on the siege of Montebello by a band of mounted Union scouts and the roles played by Ellen Shields and her sister Kate in confronting the enemy. The story she tells captures both the real and the imagined (or creatively remembered) plight of the elite white slave-holding families of Natchez and its rural Adams County hinterland with the arrival of Union troops after the fall of Confederate Vicksburg in the summer of 1863. When taken together with a coterie of letters, memoirs, and diaries penned by other upper-class, white Natchez women, we can begin to see the war’s impact on the community’s elite white women as well as the impact those women had on the war. These accounts illuminate, moreover, two interrelated but seldom connected issues for war-time Natchez and perhaps for the larger South as well: (1) the importance of the Yankee-occupied mansion house, which symbolized for many elite women the failure of southern male mastery both within the patriarchal household and over the larger community;² and (2) the

and Concordia Parish, Louisiana, prior to 1860. He was one of the wealthiest members of the district’s plantation elite, personally owning 444 slaves at Mississippi’s secession. His wealth was magnified by his close ties through marriage to two of the wealthiest planters in the area, Alfred V. Davis and Francis Surget, Jr., men who owned 651 slaves and 456 slaves, respectively. Davis and Shields had married sisters of Francis Surget. They were members of a group of approximately forty slaveholding families, known as “nabobs” because of their immense wealth. On Shields’s status among the South’s wealthiest planters, see William S. Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 12, 20, 100, and 260; for more on the Natchez elite see D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 136-61. A vivid description of the ruins of Montebello was written by Caroline C. Lovell sometime after it was abandoned, probably in the 1890s. Lovell describes the place as “a ruin so beautiful, I catch my breath.” She also tells of the “twenty-four columns” still standing, “creamy pink columns, with Doric capitals, sun-flocked and garlanded with vines.” See undated “Natchez Notes,” by Caroline C. Lovell, Quitman Family Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

² On the character of mastery as a key component of antebellum life, specifically its gendered relationships and the connection between male authority in the public and private spheres as rooted in the dependency of the household and its family members on fathers, husbands, and men in general, see Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), 3–36; Nancy D. Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861–1875* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003); Joan Cashin, ed., *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1–41; Joan Censer, *The*

personal negotiations initiated by many upper-class Natchez women with their Yankee occupiers, mediations grounded in a traditionally gendered but vigorously feminine perspective that these women used to influence how the occupation of their houses and their community could and should be conducted.³

By engaging the Yankees in gendered terms, conventions familiar to both southern and northern males alike, these Natchez women assumed the role of mediators, women who utilized the only weapons available in their personal arsenals for softening the hostility of an invading army: their class-based femininity and their sexuality.⁴ They responded to the Yankees, moreover, within the shadow of their mansion houses, by acting as intermediaries between the world they were accustomed to living in and the vicissitudes of the new era. Through such conciliatory actions they feminized the Civil War on the Natchez home front to a considerable degree.

Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 31–35; Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 15–31, 71–73; Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996): 30–65; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 37–108; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and LeeAnn Whites, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, & the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens, Georgia, 1995), 10, 41–63.

³ Among the most important works on the impact of the Civil War on southern women are Catherine Clinton and Nina Sibley, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Faust, *Mothers of Invention*; George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Giselle Roberts, *The Confederate Belle* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2003); William K. Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House*, 90–121; and Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 159–91.

⁴ To better understand the complexities of the Union occupation of the South overall, and particularly as a “distinctive experience” especially for women, see Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 28-31, 38-75. Ash demonstrates the conflict felt by Federal soldiers during the Union occupation of southern states as they tried to uphold a Victorian ethos that protected and respected southern women while also dealing with them as potentially hostile enemies. See also Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Why did this articulated response come about, how did it play out in the Natchez environs during the war years, and what was the significance of what these elite women perceived at the time and later remembered? To answer these questions one can look first at the reaction of Natchez upper-class women to the mass of Confederate soldiers who came to Natchez in the initial years of the Civil War; second, one can examine how these women dealt with the subsequent arrival of Federal troops, including black soldiers, as an army of occupation; and finally, one can look closely at the memoir of the Natchez spinster, Ellen Shields.⁵

Confederate Natchez

Living in the wealthiest enclave of plantation slavery in the lower South, the white voters of Adams County generally opposed the establishment of the Confederacy by sending two so-called “Cooperationist” delegates to the state’s secession convention.⁶ Once Mississippi sided with the Confederacy, however, most Natchez Unionists supported the war with money, their service as soldiers, and often with an outpouring of supplies.⁷ Up to the time that Vicksburg fell to Union troops in the

⁵ This essay does not address the question of what really happened in contrast to what these women remembered. Nor does it attempt to grapple with the moment of authorship by reading into the remembered narrative those political or cultural developments that might have informed or shaped the stories told as much as the war experience itself. For elaboration on such themes see Sara Elizabeth Gardner, “‘Blood and Irony’: Southern Women’s Narratives of the Civil War, 1861–1915” (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1996).

⁶ In the national election for president in 1860, Adams County citizens voted nearly two to one for the Unionist candidates Stephen Douglas (158) and John Bell (448) over the secessionist John C. Breckinridge (376). When the state convention on secession was called on January 7, 1861, Adams County sent two prominent Unionists, Josiah Winchester and Alex K. Farrar, as delegates. In general, Natchez Unionists tended to be wealthy former Whigs who feared, among other things, that a southern Confederate state would resort to income taxes as opposed to tariffs to raise revenue. See *Natchez Courier*, September 19 1860, and January 4, 1861; *Natchez Free Trader*, November 12, 1860, and December 24, 1860; Percy Rainwater, “An Analysis of the Secession Controversy in Mississippi, 1854-1861,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 24 (June 1937), 35-42; William Banks Taylor, “Southern Yankee: Wealth, High Society and Political Economy in the late Antebellum Natchez Region,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 59 (summer 1997), 79-122; and William Ashley Vaughan, “Natchez During the Civil War” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, 2001), 24-35.

⁷ Key works on the Civil War in Mississippi and the Natchez District include Edwin C. Bearss, *Decision in Mississippi: Mississippi’s Important Role in the War Between the States* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1962); Justin J. Behrend, “Freedpeople’s

summer of 1863, Confederate Natchez served as a staging ground for the recruitment and dispatch of soldiers, sending fifteen home-grown militia units, such as the historic Natchez Fencibles and the newly-formed Adams Troop, composed of the town’s wealthiest men, off to battle with much pomp and circumstance.⁸ Some of these wealthy residents, like William T. Martin, personally financed the horses, arms, and uniforms for the militia units that they organized or sponsored and sometimes even commanded as Confederate officers.⁹ During the first year of the war, nearly every day brought fresh recruits to the town, much drama and ceremony, and substantial prosperity as well. These heady days did not last long, however, as casualties soon replaced recruits and hospitals took the place of training camps. Still, the loyalty of the majority of Natchez citizens to the Confederacy did not falter.¹⁰

Democracy: African-American Politics and Community in the Postemancipation Natchez District,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2006); John K. Bettersworth, *Confederate Mississippi: The People and Policies of a Cotton State in Wartime* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944); Ronald L. F. Davis, “Good and Faithful Labor,” *From Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860–1890* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982); Ronald L. F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720–1880* (Denver: National Park Service, 1993); Kenneth S. Greenberg, “The Civil War and the Redistribution of Land: Adams County, Mississippi, 1860-1879,” *Agricultural History* 52 (April 1978), 69–90; Winthrop Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); S. Griffing Wilcox, “War Times in Natchez,” *Southern Historical Papers* 30 (1902), 36–58; and Vaughan, “Natchez.”

⁸ Designated the Confederate recruitment center for militia in southwest Mississippi, the town became a beehive of militia activity. In a telling letter Mary McMurrin, mistress of Melrose and wife of the prominent lawyer and planter John T. McMurrin, describes the character of the Adams Troop, commanded by William T. Martin: “The Natchez Troop left yesterday week—cavalry composed as an old negro said of the ‘bloom of the county,’ which means all our young aristocrats proud rich & lazy, unaccustomed to any hardships in fact nothing but luxury—yet with a spirit to do & sacrifice anything rather than submit.” Mary McMurrin to Mr. and Mrs. George Austen, Addison Papers, Natchez National Historic Park, Natchez, Mississippi. On the Natchez Fencibles see Randall D. Gates, “An Ornament of the City: The Fencibles of Natchez” (Unpublished paper presented at the *Second Biennial Historical Natchez Conference*, January 30-February 3, 1996, Natchez, Mississippi).

⁹ Rebecca Dresser, “Kate and John Minor: Confederate Unionists of Natchez,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 64 (Fall 2002), 198; and Vaughan, “Natchez,” 31–40.

¹⁰ The entries in the diary of the Reverend Joseph B. Stratton, longtime minister of the Presbyterian Church in Natchez, which served many of the most elite families in the area, reflect a steady stream of funerals for wounded soldiers who had returned to Natchez to die, usually due to diseases contracted in camp. Among the many funerals, he also notes the arrival of two hundred sick and wounded soldiers at the town’s Marine hospital on

For its elite white women, Confederate Natchez ushered in an array of opportunities for fulfilling their traditional roles as handmaidens and servants of the male-dominated community. It also opened new pathways for them, some of which led to experiences that often tested their gendered and genteel upbringing. Answering the call to war, the elite women of Natchez threw themselves into knitting socks and gloves, stitching “Confederate handkerchiefs,” cutting their household carpets into blankets, fabricating homespun clothes, crafting palmetto hats, participating in piece-work groups in town and in the country, and meeting regularly at the city center, often with their enslaved seamstresses in tow, to lend a hand to whatever the town’s Military Aid Society deemed warranted. As many considered it their patriotic duty to do what they could to support their troops and the war with domestic production of every conceivable sort, no day for them was complete without hours spent dedicated to the war effort.¹¹

The unprecedented spectacle of Confederate soldiers everywhere in town proved exhilarating for many of the elite women of Natchez. Hundreds of young Confederate warriors proudly displayed their most dashing and chivalric performances for Natchez ladies, thrilling them as they marched and strutted in the public spaces in and around the municipality. Typically, the young and unattached elite women of the town, in response to these displays of manly prowess, praised and pampered the young soldiers, in some cases promising them their hands and hearts. They baked pies and cookies for their favorites, bundled up gift packages, danced with them, toured visiting gunboats, kept company with them in the camp grounds and town gardens, participated as observers and actresses in the many tableaux conducted for war-related fund-raising efforts, partook of military concerts put on for their pleasure, and generally enjoyed the company of their valiant soldiers in the first year or so of the war.¹²

The extent of such female abandon so unnerved the brother of one Natchez belle, the unmarried Kate Foster, that he admonished her sternly from his post with the Adams Troop in Virginia for performing in

April 19, 1862. See Joseph B. Stratton Diary, Joseph B. Stratton Papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Louisiana State University (hereinafter, LLMVC).

¹¹ Emily Douglas Diary, October 8–11, 1862, Emily Caroline Douglas Papers (LLMVC); Benjamin L. C. Wailes Diary, June 10, 1861, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi (hereinafter MDAH); and Vaughan, “Natchez,” 235–38.

¹² Natchez *Courier*, January 17, 1863; Joseph B. Stratton Diary, December 12, 1861.

a tableau to raise money for the war effort, saying that he did not favor “the appearance of young ladies on the public stage for any purpose.”¹³ Another young single woman publicly rejected the gossip depicting her and her female friends as somewhat obsessed with all the men about town, asking if they should rather “shut ourselves up at home as if our town was garrisoned by the hated Yankees.”¹⁴ Never in their lives had the young elite women of Natchez experienced such concentrated male attention by so many different men day in and day out.

This new circumstances proved a bit disconcerting for other elite women in the community. One young upper-class woman, Elizabeth Brown, wrote in her diary about the unease she felt with the eyes of all those strange men on her—noting how they watched her ankles when she walked amongst them. Their attention did not, however, stop her from venturing to town at a moment’s notice, usually with female companions but sometimes alone, to experience the abundant offering of prime manhood on display, nor did it stop her from actively flirting with them at every opportunity. She once teased a group of Confederate conscript hunters, telling them that several eligible men were hiding out at her father’s mansion house. When the hunters visited the estate and found that she had tricked them, they teasingly told her and her friend that the two of them would just have to be taken in their place. Brown’s diary is filled with similar entries, including those that show her entertaining numerous young Confederates in her father’s parlor until dawn. On one occasion she even confesses to falling in love with three different soldiers at the same time.¹⁵

In yet another elite household, the young Charlotte “Carlie” Mandeville, impregnated by a uniformed stranger from St. Louis, arranged a secret wedding across the river in Vidalia, Louisiana, to avoid having her family’s reputation ruined by her sexual adventures. Although her female relatives rose to her defense and helped care for the child, the episode turned her grandfather and uncles against her for years. Everyone in town seemed to know that she had lost her heart and her virginity to the smooth-talking gentleman. The notice of her wedding

¹³ John Sanderson Foster to Kate Foster, November 29, 1861, Foster Family Papers (LLMVC).

¹⁴ Natchez *Courier*, June 11, 1863.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Christie Brown Diary, January 21, 22, 30, February 19, March 14, 1863, University Archives, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi.

that she had posted without the permission of her family in the town's newspaper only compounded her public shame.¹⁶

From the moment of secession to the fall of Vicksburg in the summer of 1863, the lower Mississippi River Valley vibrated with troop movements and military maneuvers as thousands of Confederate soldiers and home-guard militia men, including cavalry troops, flooded the countryside. More than a few elite Natchez women found themselves playing hostess to total strangers in their homes and on the grounds of their family estates. Confederate soldiers often appeared out of nowhere, in the middle of the night, in need of a bed and food. Most Natchez District families tried to accommodate these military visitors in the early days of the war, and some of the meetings between strange men and local ladies led to sustained friendships, producing in some cases a steady stream of letters by the young belles to the soldiers they had briefly entertained and nurtured. Lizzy Brown's future husband, Rufus Learned, a Confederate soldier on the Virginia front, scolded her for writing so many letters to soldiers whom she hardly knew. She politely but firmly told him that it was "none of his business who I write to."¹⁷ As the war casualties mounted, moreover, many upper-class Natchez women took to nursing young soldiers in an environment unprecedented for its intimacy between men and women not related to each other as family members. Some of these women, known as the "Nightingale Brigade," even traveled in groups to distant camps and hospitals to help tend the sick and wounded.¹⁸ Confederate Natchez pulsated with new experiences

¹⁶ Charlotte "Carlie" Mandeville lived with her upper-class planter-banker grandfather and two aunts, Rebecca and Josie, in Natchez following the demise of her parents when she was a young girl. The two aunts raised her like their own daughter. Carlie (Charlotte) Mandeville to Rebecca Mandeville, May 19, 1861; April 14, 1864; August 18, and September 19, 1865; Henry S. Mandeville to George Rozet, February 12, March 17, 1863; Jose Rozet to Rebecca Mandeville, January 25, 31, March 8, 25, 1862; August 22, 1865; Henry Mandeville Family Papers (LLMVC). See also Connie Tripp, "An Affair of the Heart" (unpublished paper presented at the *Fifth Biennial Historic Natchez Conference*, February 13-16, 2002, Natchez, Mississippi).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Brown's Diary, February 27, 1863.

¹⁸ Natchez nurses ministered at hospitals in Brookhaven, Jackson, and Corinth after the battle of Shiloh. Many of the upper-class women also took wounded soldiers into their homes, where they and their enslaved servants nursed them. Some 240 women were listed among those who volunteered for the Natchez Military Aid Society during the Confederate years. *Natchez Courier*, April 8, May, 1, 3, September, 16, 18, 1862. According to numerous historians, the nursing of wounded soldiers by upper-class women was a common feature in most towns inside Confederate lines for the duration of the war, a situation producing new tensions within the community as elite women mixed not

for everyone in the community, including its upper-class women, many of whom most likely had never before imagined that so many available men would be entering their lives with the onset of war.

Yankee-occupied Natchez

Natchez fell to the Yankees in the summer of 1863 with few, if any, shots fired in its defense. The principal concentration of Confederate forces had been at Vicksburg, eighty miles upriver, and Port Hudson, located the same distance south of Natchez. When both fortresses surrendered to Federal forces, nothing stood in the way of a Union advance on Natchez. Partly because of the Unionist sentiment and close family ties with the North among some of its elite planter families, and partly because of the scant opposition mounted by the Natchez home guard or Confederate regular forces, the town and its hinterland suffered relatively little devastation from wartime engagements,¹⁹ despite the terror the occupation no doubt incurred in the hearts of Natchez citizens. Indeed, the Yankee occupiers stormed into Natchez from the landing on July 13, 1863, "screaming and whooping," according to one elite young woman, "like wild Indians."²⁰ For most Natchez residents, this was the first real experience with Yankee soldiers since a brief but terrifying bombardment of the town a year earlier by a Union gunboat.²¹

When occupation began in earnest after the fall of Vicksburg, the Union Army moved quickly to make Natchez a garrisoned base for

only with the men whom they nursed but also with women from all classes of life. See especially Drew Gilpin Faust, Thavolia Glymph, and George C. Rable, "A Women's War: Southern Women in the Civil War," in *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, eds., Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., and Kym S. Rice (Richmond: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 5; and Whites, *Crisis in Gender*, 11-112.

¹⁹ John Stanford Coussons, "The Federal Occupation of Natchez, Mississippi, 1863-65" (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1958); *New York Times* August 2, 16, 1863, as cited in James Wilford Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1901), 53; Corbett James Peltier, Jr., "Confederate Natchez, 1861-63," (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1948); Vaughan, "Natchez," 315.

²⁰ Margarette Martin to William T. Martin, September 27, 1863, as quoted in Elizabeth Dunbar Murray, *Early Romances of Historic Natchez* (Natchez: The Natchez Printing and Stationary Co., 1950), 74-78.

²¹ The Rev. J. Whitner Kennedy Manuscript, "The Life of the Reverend Benjamin Chase, As Recorded in His Own Hand In a Two-Year Diary" (MDAH); "The Surrender of Natchez, Mississippi," *New York Times*, May 29, 1862; Davis, *Black Experience*, 145-46; and Donald F. X. Finn, "The Bombardment of Natchez, September 2, 1862" (Natchez, Mississippi: Melrose Press, 1978), a copy of which is in the Melrose Archives, Natchez National Historical Park, Natchez, Mississippi.

military operations and a refugee depot for the thousands of black people flocking to Union lines.²² A fortified Natchez, it was reasoned, would help prevent western cattle, supplies, and fresh Rebel troops from crossing the Mississippi River in support of Confederate armies on the eastern front, and the town soon became a fortified encampment with up to 5,000 Federal soldiers stationed there at its peak occupation. Union soldiers pitched tents in nearly every open space, overrunning the town's racecourse, its ample bluff-top park, and the spacious grounds surrounding the stately mansions of the wealthy. The Yankee occupiers quickly established a slave contraband camp in the swampy, mosquito-infested area just north of the steamboat landing known as Under-the-Hill Natchez, built an impressive fort on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, stationed troops across the river in the Louisiana town of Vidalia, laid out picket lines at the town's boundaries, dispersed scouting patrols that ranged widely through the countryside, and promulgated military law.²³

Almost overnight the Yankee occupiers challenged the real as well as the symbolic authority of the town's once all-powerful male patriarchs. They jailed and roughly handled Confederate sympathizers among the planter elite and expected the self-declared Unionists among them to swear oaths of loyalty (especially those "Unionist" women with sons, brothers, grandsons, and husbands in Confederate ranks) or else lose their properties, at least for the duration of the war.²⁴ Official prayers offered for the protection of President Lincoln and the Union replaced prayers for Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy in church services; defiance of such orders left clergy open to charges of being sympathetic to the Rebels and possible arrest.²⁵ All white Natchezians, moreover,

²² Davis, *Black Experience in Natchez*, 125–57; *New York Times*, August 5, 10, 1863.

²³ Matilda Gresham, *Life of Walter Quintin Gresham: 1832-1893*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1919), 239–64.

²⁴ Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 351–55. Not all Natchez residents complied. Frank Shields, a member of the wealthy Shields family, complained in a letter to a relative who had fled Natchez that he could not "conceive what would induce anyone to take the oath to the U. S." Frank Shields to Joseph D. Shields, Sr., October 2, 1863, Shields Family Papers (LLMVC). On northern military attitudes and policy towards southern whites in the Union-occupied South, see Ash, *When the Yankees Came*, 26–29, 36, 112–118, 151.

²⁵ The most notorious incident involving Natchez clergy occurred when Bishop William Henry Elder refused the federal order to say a prayer for Lincoln from the pulpit of St. Mary's Catholic Church. He was placed for a time under house arrest in Vidalia, Louisiana. William Henry Elder Diary, June 4, 25, July 6, 13, 16, 18, 19, 26, 1864, Archives

regardless of their class standing, were required to carry passes and permits to travel within various sections of the town or to the surrounding countryside, making supplicants of even the most prominent white men and women in the community.²⁶ Most important, enslaved blacks were encouraged to abandon their white owners or stop acting like slaves even if they remained on their home plantations and to join the army if they were able-bodied males, or spy for the Union.²⁷

The Union occupiers, in an action signifying the death of mastery, lodged a troop of black soldiers in the old Forks of the Road slave market located just outside of town and within eyesight of several of the most prominent slaveholding families living at the suburban estates of Monmouth, Melrose, Woodlawn, and Linden. Black soldiers and their white officers patrolled the town and the surrounding countryside, striking fear in the hearts of many women and children clustered together in their homes and mansions and most certainly in the minds of their male protectors, especially those away at war. White citizens viewed black soldiers and their refugee families as a plague upon the land, blaming them for the deadly "camp diseases" that killed thousands in the filthy contraband depots and for spreading sickness among the white population.²⁸ Although black soldiers principally performed fatigue duty for the army or labored at construction work, many also served on picket lines and in general surveillance. Sometimes the formerly enslaved challenged their old masters for identification papers and Union-issued passes. Occasionally these challenges turned violent, but generally such confrontations merely humiliated those white men who had known few obstructions in law or custom to their authority

of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi; Margarette Martin to William T. Martin, August 26, 1863, as quoted in Murray, *Early Romances*, 78–79.

²⁶ A friend of Louisa Jenkins complained that Natchez residents were forced to attend a "Yankee ball" thrown by the post commandant or suffer the consequences. Unknown author to Louisa Jenkins, December 11, 1864, Jenkins Family Papers (LLMVC), as quoted in Vaughan, "Natchez," 375.

²⁷ Lt. Colonel James B. McPherson to Brig. General Thomas E. G. Ransom, July 17, 1863, *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* [hereinafter cited as *OR*], Ser. 1, vol. 24, 521. See also Martha Mitchell Bigelow, "Freedmen of the Mississippi Valley, 1862–1865," *Civil War History* 8 (March 1962), 38–47; Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor*, 59–84.

²⁸ Margarette Martin feared that her manor house, which stood within sight of the Forks of the Road slave market, would be taken over "as a hospital for the negro regiment encamped at the Forks." Margarette Martin to William T. Martin, September 27, 1863, as quoted in Murray, *Early Romances*, 77. See also Davis, *Black Experience*, 146–54; Elder Diary, September 4, 1863.

over black people prior to the occupation. In one well-known incident, a black soldier on picket duty fired on prominent antebellum planter and lawyer John T. McMurren, wounding him in the eye when he failed to heed the guard's orders.²⁹

No actions by the Yankee occupiers more dramatically demonstrated the evisceration of the slave-based patriarchy than the occupation and invasion of the many mansion estate houses in Natchez and its hinterland. The Yankees especially targeted those manor houses such as Monmouth and Montaigne, owned by well-known Confederate supporters. They frequently plundered such estates before using them as barracks, barns, jails, or officer quarters. Margarette Martin, a member of the wealthy Connor family and wife of William T. Martin, a much acclaimed Confederate cavalry officer, wrote several letters to her husband describing the damage done to their estate house by the Yankee occupation. When she returned to her mansion, Montaigne, after staying with her uncle at his nearby D'Evereaux estate, she found that her formerly enslaved house servants and a band of Federal soldiers had ransacked it. She learned from a few still "faithful" blacks that "a Yankee officer had paraded all through the house, playing Yankee Doodle on the piano for the benefit of the negroes, who were invited to take seats on the sofa." To make matters worse, according to her letter, an impudent Yankee had put an "insulting note in my own room, leaving it on a dressing table for me to read." By the end of 1863 Montaigne had been completely gutted. All its doors, wooden widows, and mantelpieces were removed; the Yankees defaced walls, cut down and destroyed chandeliers, smashed glass windows, and "carried into the fortifications every fence post, wooden outbuilding, stable, and carriage house, while cutting for timber all the trees on the place...;" the estate's once luxurious garden was "broken down by cattle and horses."³⁰

In some cases elite families accepted the intrusion of Yankee officers as lodgers because their presence afforded some protection for the household from marauding soldiers, deserters, and former slaves. Their acquiescence, however, only highlighted the degree to which the elite mansion household had vanished as a material signifier of the

²⁹ Alice McMurren Diary, January 10, 1865, Historic Natchez Foundation, Natchez, Mississippi (typescript copy); M. L. McMurren to J. T. McMurren, Jr., January 1, 1865, Addison Papers Natchez National Historical Park, Natchez, Mississippi.

³⁰ Margarette Martin to William T. Martin, September 27, November 8, 1863, and January 10, 1864, as quoted in Murray, *Early Romances*, 80–83.

slaveholder's mastery, independence, and power. One of the town's most prestigious mansions, Rosalie, which had been built on the historic grounds of the fort constructed by the French in the 1720s, became Union headquarters in 1863 for the post commandant. Its elite mistress, whose husband had fled with his slaves to Texas, was relegated along with her daughter to a few rooms upstairs.³¹ When an enraged Yankee officer destroyed the majestic Clifton, the grand bluff-top mansion owned by the wealthy slaveholder Francis Surget, Jr., it must have appeared as though the entire world of Natchez mastery lay in shambles amidst its ruins.³²

The Yankee occupation of Natchez placed thousands of enemy soldiers in close proximity to hundreds of its white women. Most of these women had been left largely on their own; those Natchez men still on hand were mostly helpless, virtually emasculated males who had been stripped of their traditional authority as slaveholders, protectors of the household, and providers for their families. Of the invaders, at least 3,100 were the formerly enslaved. Approximately 2,000 white troopers made up the rest, although not all Union soldiers were stationed in the town or county at any given moment.³³ When the Yankees came, 754 unmarried, divorced, or widowed white women aged sixteen and older lived in and around Natchez, and of these the majority (481) were unmarried women between sixteen and twenty-nine years old. Several hundred married women lived in Adams County as well. Not all of these Natchez-area women hailed from the upper class, but at least twenty-five percent could be counted among that number. Most of the upper-class women, moreover, lived in the fifty-some estate houses in town and its immediate suburbs just beyond the Union picket lines. The rest occupied mansion estates within a day's carriage ride.³⁴

³¹ Gresham, *Life of Walter Quintin Gresham*, Vol. 1, 243–44.

³² Stephen Duncan, Jr., to Stephen Duncan, Sr., December 23, 1863; Duncan Family Papers (LLMVC); Theodora Britton Marshall and Gladys Crail Evans, *They Found It In Natchez* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1939), 164–65; Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House*, 348. For a fascinating contemporary description of Clifton, written in 1863 just months before it was destroyed, see Samuel Wilson, Jr., "Clifton—An Ill-Fated Natchez Mansion," *Journal of Mississippi History* 46 (August 1984), 179–89.

³³ Davis, *Black Experience*, 129–57; and Daniel O'Sullivan, "Lost Cause Versus Lost History: Historical Memory and the Black Troops of Civil War Natchez" (unpublished paper presented at the *Sixth Biennial Historic Natchez Conference*, February 11–14, 2004, Natchez, Mississippi).

³⁴ Joyce L. Broussard, "Female Solitaires: Women Alone in the Lifeworld of Mid-Century Natchez, Mississippi, 1850–1880" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California,

Fearful but surprisingly resolute, many of these women of the upper class tended to confront the Yankees as southern “ladies” would deign to meet anyone: with grace, reserve, and a sense of certitude about themselves as women whom no gentleman would dare to harm. Historians have found similar behavior among elite southern women elsewhere in the Confederate South, women who faced enemy troops on their own. Women of the slaveholding class, according to historian Kirsten E. Wood, typically played up their gentility and evoked traditional ideals of chivalry and feminine dependency, often using such nineteenth-century gender conventions to shame and then coax Yankee officers into treating them like the ladies they sincerely knew themselves to be.³⁵

Based on the extant sources, mature Natchez women typically stood aloof, respectfully polite, and acted somewhat matronly in their behavior toward their Yankee occupiers. When the elite head of the Protestant Orphans Home, for example, approached General Walter Gresham, the Union commander at Natchez, to request supplies for the orphan children under her charge, she cloaked herself in all the matronly dignity she could muster. She respectfully but firmly refused to meet the commandant inside Rosalie because she could not bring herself to cross under the U.S. flag draped above its door; she could not make that step even for her own children or the orphans who depended on her for support. Gresham, impressed by her dignity, poise, civility, and resolve, eventually responded as she had hoped a true gentleman would respond to a lady of good intentions: with respect and compassion. He stepped outside to meet her and granted her wishes fully.³⁶

Not all Natchez matrons in 1863, however, appeared to be so mindful of deportment and lady-like conduct in dealing with the Yankees. After visiting Union headquarters to request supplies for her family and slaves, Elizabeth Conway Shields, an aristocratic Virginian, an ardent Confederate, and the aunt of memoirist Ellen Shields, adamantly refused to exit the building through its front door, also draped with an unfurled Union flag overhead. Unlike the situation mentioned above, however, the belligerent and insulting conduct of Elizabeth Shields so affronted General Thomas Ransom, another Federal commandant of the Natchez Post, that he issued a special order banning her, her husband

1998), 300-78, 471-73.

³⁵ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 176-83; see also Ash, *When the Yankees Came*, 70-75.

³⁶ Gresham, *Life of Walter Quintin Gresham*, Vol. 1, 262-63.

Joseph Shields, and their immediate family members from Natchez. He gave the family twenty-four hours to abandon their Natchez mansion, thereafter confiscating their estate, the Birds' Nest, “for the benefit of the Government.”³⁷

For younger women, such as Lizzy Brown, engagement with the Yankees often took the form of a flirtatious dance of sorts in which they used their sex appeal and their femininity to persuade the “Yankee beasts” to conform to southern expectations of proper patriarchal and gentlemanly conduct. They tried their best to “southernize” the Yankees by charming them into behaving like southern gentlemen, in return for which they would honor them with conversation, spirited interaction, and even romance. It was so obvious a method of social intercourse among the young Confederate belles and Union officers and soldiers that General Gresham sometimes warned his staff, half-jokingly, “that they would be surprised and captured some evening when calling on the ladies.”³⁸ These two poles of female femininity—the matron and the maiden—actually complemented one another and reflected the cultural upbringing common to the elite women of the slaveholding class.³⁹

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust argues that fraternization between occupied southerners and Yankees, although not uncommon elsewhere in the occupied South, reached its apogee in Natchez. She credits its extent and cause to the sophisticated character of the place, citing the writings of Annie Harper to prove her point. For Harper, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of a Natchez clothing merchant, Natchez women were mindfully aware of how their decisions to socialize with northern officers and soldiers might be perceived by their Confederate husbands,

³⁷ See Murray, *Early Romances*, 51-57, wherein is included the Special Order No. 49, issued by General Ransom on July 22, 1863. This action, coupled with the infamous “Woman Order,” which had been issued in New Orleans a year earlier by Union General Benjamin Butler, stood as a stern warning to the remaining elite women of Natchez. See Chester G. Hearn, *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 101-09.

³⁸ Gresham, 250. Historian Giselle Roberts adds the important point that much of the flirtation and socializing done by the southern women of the upper class with Yankee soldiers masked a profound sense of rage and a desire for retribution that conflicted with their gendered upbringing. See Roberts, 138-39.

³⁹ See Florence Cook's valuable study on the importance of genteel culture in the upbringing of upper-class women in the American South. Much of her research, moreover, is based on Natchez sources: Florence Elliot Cook, “Growing Up White, Genteel, and Female in a Changing South, 1865 to 1915” (Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1992), 1-121.

fathers, and sons. In the end, many Natchez women thought it was not treason to return generosity with sociability or kindness with hospitality. Still it was a practice that required some twists of logic to accept. The matter went beyond self-serving reciprocity. For Harper, only the better classes, and those “people of the highest culture and dignity can sustain themselves honorably in such an anomalous position, and Natchez was the place to find such people.” Nevertheless, and despite such rationalizations, Natchez elite females participated in social affairs with their Yankee conquerors principally, they told themselves, in the interest of survival. Such socialization protected their households and families and garnered passes and permits that allowed them to travel behind enemy lines to sell pies and vegetables in Yankee camps, obtain reimbursements for confiscated animals and supplies, and escape detention for actions not always legal. For Annie Harper, Natchez women “lavished Natchez hospitality upon the Yankees” because they knew “that no weapon was ever so disarming, so irresistible, so undefeatable as kindness.”⁴⁰

What she did not point out, however, is that these “lavish” acts of kindness offered a sexually charged and clearly gendered package of female “hospitality” to male antagonists in a place where few southern males could object, let alone protect their women, should anything go wrong. Anyone who thought about it probably understood that when Yankee officers attended parties, concerts, and soirees with young southern women, the potential for sexual intimacy and romance might easily ensue. Certainly they knew that absent fathers, brothers, and sons would be upset at the thought of Yankee soldiers dancing and dining with their women, female neighbors, and friends, perhaps even in their own estate mansions. “Irresistible” acts of feminine “kindness” not only “disarmed” the Yankee conquerors, but they also raised the question of sexual transgression, marital fidelity, and broken promises. Some absent Natchez males undoubtedly shared Robert E. Lee’s concern that inexperienced southern belles might be used by the Yankees to gather information harmful to the Confederacy.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Annie Harper married William L. Harper in 1864 and lived thereafter for the duration of the war on a plantation a day’s ride from Natchez. Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 207; Jeannie Marie Deen, ed., *Annie Harper’s Journal: A Southern Mother’s Legacy* (Denton, Mississippi: The Flower Mound Writing Company, 1983), 20–21.

⁴¹ Historian Michael Fellman quotes Lee on the dangers posed by persuasive Yankees over southern women: “I know the Yankees will get out of them all they know. I hope they know nothing to injure us, but the Yankees have a very coaxing & insidious manner,

Not all Natchez women of the upper class, however, opened their homes as quickly as Annie Harper suggests. The gradual acceptance of Yankee “favors” in exchange for feminine hospitality is depicted in Elizabeth Brown’s journal as a heartfelt decision born of a desire to manipulate her oppressors, a craving for male attention, and a human response to kindness. Lizzy Brown, as everyone called her, a young unmarried lady of social prominence and something of a self-confessed “wild girl,” lived with her parents in a mansion estate in Under-the-Hill Natchez, located adjacent to the world famous Brown’s Gardens and a profitable cypress sawmill and lumber yard, which her father, Andrew Brown, owned and operated with enslaved labor. Her father, a wealthy “Natchez Nabob,” had opposed secession but became a committed and ardent Confederate once the fighting began.⁴² Situated at the water’s edge, the Brown estate stood within walking distance of the diseased “corral,” a contraband camp thrown up by the Yankees, using Brown’s confiscated lumber to construct flimsy housing for the refugees from slavery. Prior to the arrival of Union troops, Elizabeth Brown had filled her days by escorting Confederate officers and soldiers on tours of the family garden, flirting and socializing with them in town and on the bluff-like park that overlooked the river and Under-the-Hill-Natchez, and doing what she could to entertain herself in casual engagements within the limits of respectable conduct. She loved being the object of their masculine attention, and she probably would have remembered her Confederate days as the best of her life had the war turned out differently.⁴³

that our Southern women in their artlessness cannot resist, no matter how favourable they may be to our cause or how full of good works for our men.” See Robert E. Lee to Mary Lee, February 16, 1863, as quoted in Michael Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Random House, 2000), 239.

⁴² Morton Rothstein, “The Natchez Nabobs: “Kinship and Friendship in an Economic Elite,” in *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honor of Arthur C. Cole*, ed. Hans Trefousse (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 97–111.

⁴³ Elizabeth Brown’s Diary, 1853–1863; John Hebron Moore, *Andrew Brown and Cypress Lumbering In the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 28, 25–36, 38, 51, 153, 156; Major Steve Power, *The Memento: Old and New Natchez, 1700 to 1897* (Louisville, Kentucky: F. C. Nunemacher Press, 1897), 21, 25. One visiting Yankee officer wrote home to his wife about the splendor of Brown’s Garden: “One continuously wonders that such a Paradise can be made on Earth.” See General Thomas Kilby Smith to Mrs. Smith, July 19, 1863, Smith Papers, Clifton File, Historic Natchez Foundation, Natchez, Mississippi.

With the arrival of the Yankee occupiers, Elizabeth Brown could barely tolerate at first the thought of even speaking to these enemy intruders. Very quickly she found, however, that certain officers and even some soldiers were acceptable companions because they conducted themselves as gentlemen; she soon began to justify treating them pleasantly, especially when her conduct with them brought needed protection to the Brown household. Her change of heart began with the civil attitude exhibited toward her and her family by several Yankee officers who visited her father's gardens, cordially praising the beauty of the estate. More important, Lizzy Brown came to know some of the Federal officers on a more personal basis after Andrew Brown agreed to house one or two in his home, hoping that their presence might prevent marauding Confederate and Union soldiers from stealing his remaining lumber, vegetables, and farm animals. The first boarder turned out to be less than a gentleman, whom Lizzy Brown avoided as much as possible. His successor, however, was well-mannered and a good conversationalist, an officer who not only conducted himself properly and respectfully but who personally prevented looters on several occasions from stealing household property. Here at last was a gentleman who offered the kind of manly protection she traditionally had experienced from southern men before the war.⁴⁴

Although Lizzy Brown enjoyed the company of some Yankee officers, she well understood how her friends and neighbors might misconstrue her actions:

While we were at table Lt. Catherwood came. Pa and he conversed on politics awhile, then Pa went out and left me to play the agreeable. We conversed on a great many subjects and while we were chatting very pleasantly, V. Meyer came. I would have been very glad to see him at almost any time but I did not exactly like him finding me entertaining a Federal officer, not that I was at all ashamed of the Lt., I like him too well for that, but I had a fear lest Victor might think that I had turned Unionist, and so forgotten our dear Confederate boys.

This entry clearly shows how mindfully Lizzy Brown related on feminine terms to this Lieutenant Catherwood, fully aware that playing the "agreeable" hostess involved a feminine posturing similar to what

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Brown's Diary, August 1 through September 27, 1863.

she had done many times before with the young southern men whom she had entertained, especially during the town's Confederate years. It also shows how she made sense of what playing the "agreeable" hostess meant in her mind. It bothered her that Meyer had caught her in the company of a Union officer with no other family member present, and she worried what he might have thought and imagined about their relationship. Did Meyer think, she perhaps wondered, that this was just another flirtation on her part, just another moment when she was being a little bit too "wild" or too familiar with strange men? Or did he question her intentions and her integrity?

No matter how she rationalized her behavior, she could not refrain from relating to the Yankees on numerous occasions, as any young woman might when thrown in the midst of such an abundance of attractive and interesting males. On one occasion she confided—having mixed emotions about a young soldier who had fallen ill—confessing that although she felt sorry for him, she wondered if her attention might be aiding the enemy: ". . . if we cured him it would just be keeping a soldier in the field to fight against us . . ." She finally overcame her troubled mind by convincing herself that if "some of our boys was sick in an enemy's country, wouldn't I feel grateful if some kind person would give them things to make them well." Feeling satisfied with her logic, Lizzy Brown "told Ma of his case and she gave him some medicine, and at night gave him some tea, for which he was very grateful." The unwritten, between-the-lines story here is about exchanged conversations, nurturing medicine, and offerings of tea in the hours after dark when the young soldier stood his picket duty and talked with Lizzy Brown while alone with her.⁴⁵

Lizzy Brown had plenty of company among other young Natchez women who took to the Yankees much as they had taken to the young Confederate soldiers in town prior to the occupation. Martha Gresham, the wife of General Walter Quinton Gresham, Yankee post commandant of Natchez in 1863, spoke of the many dinners she attended, along with her husband and his entourage of officers, at the family home of the avowed Unionist Haller Nutt (the millionaire proprietor of the grand but unfinished mansion known as Longwood). "Many times we had dined there . . .," she wrote, describing one of Nutt's daughters as a "charming young woman" who was "deservedly popular with all, especially our

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, August 18, 1863.

young officers.”⁴⁶ Such private dinners competed with the numerous military balls and musical concerts to which Natchez residents were invited. A piece in the *Natchez Courier* in October 1863, reporting on a military ball given by Federal officers at Institute Hall, notes “the many ladies and gentlemen of the town” who had “crowded into” the grand affair. It is easy to assume that most of these “gentlemen” were Yankees or else elderly Natchez males, as few if any able-bodied Natchez men were still at home in Adams County at this point in the war. The “ladies,” on the other hand, were almost certainly the daughters, widows, sisters, and wives of Confederate soldiers stationed on distant and remote battlefields.⁴⁷

Sometimes fraternization between the unattached Natchez women and Union soldiers blossomed into romance. The young Mary Ker, with a brother in the Confederate militia, entertained a Yankee officer, Colonel Loren Kent, in her home so frequently that it must have seemed that he was courting her. He spoke of her as his “very particular friend” in their correspondence.⁴⁸ Another adventuresome Natchez belle sent a bouquet of flowers every few days to her “Wild American Boy,” a Yankee officer in town.⁴⁹ Two rather matronly women used their friendship with the Yankee wife of the post commandant to make sure that a young soldier served guard duty at their mansion home instead of a “stupid” older one. They got their way, and the lad remained on hand, often playing cards, listening to music, and chatting away for hours with Miss Thornhill, the teen-aged granddaughter in their charge. Obviously, the older women had wanted a young male soldier of suitable character near at hand as a companion of sorts for the younger woman. Apparently, the granddaughter seemed to like the occupiers well enough; she eventually married a Yankee officer stationed in Natchez, moving with him to Illinois after the war.⁵⁰

Not all of the elite women who socialized with the Yankees did so out of class solidarity, in return for personal favors, for reasons of protection,

⁴⁶ Gresham, *Life of Walter Quinton Gresham*, Vol. 1, p. 247.

⁴⁷ *Natchez Courier*, October 9, 1863.

⁴⁸ See John R. Metcalfe to Mary Susan Ker, December 27, 1863; Colonel Loren Kent to unknown, June 21, 1864; Colonel Loren Kent to Mary Susan Ker, May 25, July 1, October 27, 1864, Mary Susan Ker Papers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁴⁹ Richard A. Hall to parents, November 26, 1864, Richard Alexander Hall Papers (LLMVC).

⁵⁰ Gresham, *Life of Walter Quinton Gresham*, Vol.1, 261–62.

or due to their simple attraction to the male soldiers. More than a few of these women interrelated with Yankees to aid the Confederacy as spies and smugglers, and their work was remembered in later memoirs and legend, as well as in comments at the time, to have been constant and largely beyond Yankee control.⁵¹ Yankee soldiers in the field, for example, often imagined that every southern woman they met while on patrol carried information for the enemy.⁵² Annie Harper remembered the frequency with which large numbers of Natchez women from all classes engaged in smuggling and eavesdropping, always ready to pass on whatever they could to the Confederates. Everything from Confederate gray cloth, pistols, and flannel for shirts to boots and belts could be hidden under the long, full skirts that elite antebellum Natchez women favored, including the popular hoop skirt. This especially may have been the case with those elite women who lived in the country and who visited town with authorized passes. What they found and heard easily could be handed over or passed on to Confederates, those men in gray who, with surprising frequency, visited relatives and found momentary shelter in the estate mansions of loved ones and friends who lived just beyond the Federal picket lines. The unannounced visits of Confederate soldiers, or scouts, to those “solitary young women left at home” in outlying estates were “the joy of their hearts and lives,” according to Harper.⁵³

And there is more to be made of these acts of contraband smuggling than the obvious point of aiding the Confederates and defying Federal authority. These stories also reflect how easily Natchez women had used their feminine vulnerability to cajole “southern” behavior from Yankee officers who “could not find it in their hearts to deny the ladies any thing”⁵⁴ According to family and local legend, one upper-class woman, described as a “striking belle,” secreted nearly \$10,000 in U.S. currency beneath the wagon seat on which she sat with her skirt unfurled about her as she passed from her brother’s country estate to town. In this particular episode the young woman flirtatiously dared a shy Yankee lieutenant (who had stopped her) to search under her skirts—knowing full well that no gentleman would ever force a lady to undergo such an indignity.

⁵¹ Isaac Gaillard Foster to Kate Foster, April 17, 1864, Foster Family Papers (LLMVC).

⁵² Newton Culver, “Brevet Major Isaac N. Earl: A Noted Scout of the Department of the Gulf,” *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 64 (1917), 325.

⁵³ Deen, *Annie Harper’s Journal*, 21–23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

The officer knew that the lady in question was hiding something, but he was too taken by her audacity, “charming” femininity, sense of expected propriety, and confidence in his gentlemanly behavior to do the unthinkable. It was, in a sentence, a victory of the defeated over the conqueror on gendered terms established by this “lady” victim of war. The whole episode played itself out like a gracefully conducted and yet sexually-laden minuet.⁵⁵

Even those Natchez upper-class women who refused to accept the Yankees or to condone the actions of those who did, emphasized how they had used their femininity to engage and control their male occupiers. Kate Foster, who would lose both of her brothers to Yankee bullets, had nothing good to say about fraternization. “I think it shows so little character,” she wrote about those young ladies who socialized with the Yankees, “not to resist love of admiration more.” She admitted that some Yankees acted like gentlemen and that their concerts offered well-played and entertaining music, “but we ought to remember that we all have relatives, friends or lovers in our army and if they hear these things it might weaken a strong arm in time of battle and sicken a stout and loving heart.” Kate Foster understood, too, that gentlemanly Yankees tempted young women like herself, women whose maiden years might never be redeemed if the war lasted much longer.⁵⁶

Kate struggled more than most with the ordeal of having Yankees in her presence—men whom she found attractive but who in reality were still the hated enemy. Her journal is filled with remorse about her lonely state in life, about not having a beau or lover, and about the dilemma she faced as a woman alone (one who was once called a “heartless flirt”) in a world filled with so many available males whom she dared not love nor even allow herself to respect.

I had a visit from a Yankee officer . . . , and he stayed nearly three hours. I think his sympathies are with us and his opinion of the Lincoln government is not better than mine. I did not ask him to take a seat but if he was on our side I should have a very good opinion of him, all but his flattery and I dislike that even in a friend, coming from one of our enemies it is an

⁵⁵ Marshall and Evans, *They Found It in Natchez*, 170-701. In this story, the “charming lady” was Ruth Britton, the sister of Natchez banker Audley Britton, who was in town visiting from New York when the war broke out.

⁵⁶ Kate Foster Diary, September 20, 1863, Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

insult. But enough of this Yankee Lieut. Furlong. I could write a great deal about my opinion of him.⁵⁷

No matter how hard Lieutenant Furlong had tried to please Kate Foster, she found his attentions demeaning, as though he thought that she cared so little for herself and her cause as to be charmed by male attention and flirtations. And the humiliation of having him present in her house, a domicile that had sheltered true southern gentlemen, was too much for her to tolerate. Yet she did not turn him away nor did she treat him rudely or let him know what she thought directly; and it is likely that she relished his attention (to have kept him standing there for three hours). On another occasion, she almost gave in, writing regretfully about not being able to accept the advances of two Federal officers whom she found attractive and true gentlemen: “If only they wore our uniform how happy I should be to entertain them.”⁵⁸

The Siege of Montebello

Ellen Shields, writing nearly forty years after the war, remembered how the Federals had confiscated nearly everything of value from the grounds of her family estate, leaving only the mansion house and a few old cows and horses. Most of the enslaved workers, moreover, had left at the first sign of Union troops, with the exception of some “faithful servants,” such as “dear old Uncle Abe.” In an early confrontation with the Yankee occupiers, the provost marshal in Natchez had tried to force Gabriel Shields to release the body of his youngest child, who lay dead from malaria in the family mansion. Gabriel Shields refused to give up the child’s body and vowed that he would defend his Montebello to the death if necessary, claiming that it was his “castle” and that every man had a fundamental right to defend hearth and home. Although the soldiers were under orders to bury those dead from malaria as soon as possible, they eventually backed down. This confrontation undoubtedly left Gabriel Shields feeling somewhat confident about his ability to protect his mansion if not his property and enslaved chattel.⁵⁹

But the threat did not end there. Sometime in early 1864 the lands adjoining Montebello were taken over by a motley assortment of “bushwack-

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, August 16, 1863.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, July 17, 24, 25, 1863; November 26, 1865.

⁵⁹ All quotations regarding this episode can be found in Ellen Shields, “Genealogical Memoir of Ellen Shields.”

ers,” the “lowest white folk one can imagine; ignorant, with no sense of either common decency or truth; deserters from both armies, who were paid spies of the Yankees.” On one occasion Ellen’s father and mother helped nurse several “bushwhacker” children, who were malnourished and “horribly filthy.” After repeated demonstrations of such kindness, one of the squatters “sneaked over” to warn Gabriel Shields of a Yankee plan to “shit the house” that very night.

Gabriel Shields acted quickly, according to the memoir, barricading the mansion’s heavy doors and shuttered windows with furniture. That evening, August 23, 1864, Shields armed himself and his two young sons, Surget, aged seventeen, and Wilmer, aged fifteen, with muskets and prepared for the worst. The two sisters, Kate and Ellen, aged twenty-four and twenty-two, respectively, stayed upstairs in the nursery huddled with their mother, grandmother, and their younger sister. Events then happened quickly: a party of four men rode up, none of whom were dressed as soldiers. After demanding that Shields surrender the house, the men rode off, vowing to return, which they did in good time with ten mounted soldiers in uniform. Again Shields refused to allow them entry without a fight, and again the men rode off. In an “incredibly short time” the force reappeared, numbering “twenty men led by the country’s terror—Earl himself.” The *Earl* in question was Lieutenant Isaac N. Earl, head of a band of mounted scouts under orders from Major General E. R. S. Canby to reconnoiter the surrounding countryside as a special intelligence unit.⁶⁰ Seeing that the “old man” was prepared to die rather than surrender, the scouts assaulted the mansion’s heavy oak doors with axes while firing their weapons into its first-floor glass windows. Shields and his older son, Surget, returned their fire in kind while the youngest son stood guard upstairs.

The battle lasted for nearly two hours before Ellen’s uncle, James Surget, one of the wealthiest of the local planter elites, hearing the gunshots, tried to intervene; but he was immediately arrested. Shortly thereafter, Douglas Rivers, another wealthy member of the planter class who had taken the oath of loyalty, appeared on the scene and convinced the Yankees to let him enter the house to reason with Shields. Telling Shields that he could not win this battle and that he was putting his

⁶⁰ See Culver, “Brevet Major Isaac N. Earl,” 319–48; Michael J. Martin, *A History of the 4th Wisconsin Infantry and Cavalry in the Civil War* (New York: Sevas Beatie, 2006), 373–91; *OR*, Ser. 42, Vol. 2, 196–97.

family in danger of unspeakable atrocities at the hands of the furious Yankees, Rivers arranged surrender terms. Shields agreed to give up the house but only if the Union scouts stacked arms and entered the house unarmed. Earl accepted the terms, and Shields left the house with his seventeen-year-old son and his two oldest daughters walking proudly beside him, while the rest of the family remained in the locked rooms upstairs. Once outside, the Yankees grabbed the young Surget Shields and prepared to execute him on the spot. A wounded soldier gallantly intervened because of the women present, thereby saving the boy’s life. The troop then transported Gabriel Shields, his two sons, and Kate and Ellen to Natchez, turning them over to the local provost marshal, who locked up Shields and his sons in jail. The provost marshal ordered the two young women to return to Montebello or else be confined in the women’s jail at the courthouse, which consisted of several rooms occupied by lower-class women arrested for petty theft, prostitution, public drunkenness, and smuggling.

In recounting this story, Ellen Shields emphasizes the authoritative roles she and her sister assumed, privileging their actions over those of their father and brothers. During the assault on the mansion house, Ellen describes how she had stopped Earl from beating her father by shouting in his face: “You promised behavior becoming an officer and a gentleman.” The challenge had taken Earl aback, but produced the desired effect. At the jail, Kate and Ellen thought about staying the night in the “women’s prison,” but decided instead to try to secure their father’s release by taking their case directly to General Lorenzo Thomas, the officer in charge of the refugee camps in the lower Mississippi River Valley. Ellen described Thomas as a “renegade Virginian” and former friend of the family, dating from his service in Natchez before the war. Kate found Thomas sympathetic but unable to challenge the authority of Earl, who operated independently as the commander of a special force of cavalry scouts reporting only to General Canby, headquartered in New Orleans.⁶¹

After gaining nothing from Thomas, Kate Shields returned to find her sister Ellen under verbal attack from at least eighteen Union soldiers near the downtown street corner, where the two sisters had arranged to meet. The whooping and cursing soldiers threatened to send the women across the river to Vidalia, “where the greatest number of negro troops

⁶¹ Culver, “Brevet Major Isaac N. Earl,” 319.

was stationed.” Fearing for their lives, the two women went tearing off in their carriage, headed for Montebello. Within minutes, however, the women were overtaken by “the rest of Earl’s band, with Earl at their head.” What then followed, according to the narrative, was a night in which the two sisters accompanied the soldiers as they searched the house, urging them at every step to remember that they were gentlemen in the presence of defenseless ladies. Their admonitions, according to Ellen Shields, had a calming effect on the soldiers. At the end of the horrible night, Earl even agreed to take a letter to Shields, assuring him that his wife and daughters were safely at home. What is more, Earl essentially apologized to Ellen Shields, explaining that he was not the uncivilized beast that rumor made him out to be. Instead, he operated as a soldier under strict orders to gather intelligence on those who aided the enemy, using any means necessary. His explanation, at least in the mind of Ellen Shields, sought redemption by words if not by actions, presenting himself thereby as a gentleman tantamount to those southern males so idolized by most upper-class southern women.

Meanwhile, within a few days the Yankees transferred Surget Shields to a military hospital and then released Gabriel Shields with neither a pass nor pardon papers to see him safely home. Shields managed to walk back to Montebello by way of the woods and bayous so as to avoid the numerous Union pickets. He endured the remaining months of hostilities uneventfully, probably confined to his house for the rest of the war, relatively impotent in the face of the enemy. Surget and Wilmer Shields sneaked away to join the Confederate army, returning at the war’s end, along with their older brother, to be reunited with their family. Spending the last of his funds, according to the memoir, Gabriel Shields sent his entire family to France for an extended sojourn with his wife’s relatives. The family eventually returned to Natchez and their Montebello home, but the mansion was never again the same; it was eventually abandoned and reduced to ruins by the turn of the century.

Although it is impossible to know to what extent the narrative of Ellen Shields accurately depicts the events she remembered, the raid on the family’s estate house can be verified. Official military correspondence documents Earl’s attack on Montebello—brought on by the suspicion that Gabriel Shields had been providing guns and ammunition to the enemy—but there is nothing in the military record that supports the

roles played by Ellen and Kate Shields.⁶² There is no reason to believe, however, that Ellen Shields fabricated her recollection of the incident. Even if certain parts of the story might be less than accurate, it is the depiction of her and her sister’s actions that is important. Her narrative tells us much about the role of elite women as mediators capable, in their minds, of stepping somewhat into the vacuum created by the defeat of their formerly all-powerful fathers, brothers, and husbands.

When faced with an unprecedented threat to their world, the Shields sisters insisted that the Yankees act like gentlemen. It was their femininity rather than their father’s manly courage that had tempered the enemy. Imploring the invaders to operate on their terms, these women challenged the Yankees to function within the conventional boundaries of accepted nineteenth-century gender conventions and norms. In this story, a new assertion of elite femininity proved more effective than the manly posturing of their father and the alien enemy in their midst. The two sisters, along with other elite women such as Lizzy Brown and Annie Harper, by acting as delicate and sexually vulnerable females, evoked a deep-seeded recognition of proper conduct and decorum within their Yankee aggressors. The very conduct of these women enticed their enemy invaders into the traditionally gendered position of treating them as women first and as Confederates second. These women insisted on gentlemanly conduct commensurate with those gender norms and conventions generally ingrained from birth in almost all nineteenth-century males, north or south.⁶³ In return for such conduct, these women demonstrated respect, feminine posturing, constrained sexuality, class-engendered graciousness, decorum, and female docility.

When Lizzy Brown heard that General Thomas Ransom, the new post commandant at Natchez, had extended his protection over her father’s mansion house and sawmill, she responded as she had been raised to respond to such paternalistic overtures: “I blessed the General from my heart, and I intend to send him a handsome bouquet as a

⁶² The version of the raid reported in military records and in a memoir written years later by one of the Union scouts in the raiding party plays down the violence. Gabriel Shields is reported to have resisted entry by the scouts under the advice of Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, who had told him that he had a right to defend his house against bushwhackers. Culver, “Brevet Major Isaac N. Earl,” 323; Martin, *A History of the 4th Wisconsin Infantry*, 362-363; OR, Ser. 39, Vol. 2, 351-52.

⁶³ Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 71-87.

slight acknowledgment for his protection to us.”⁶⁴ With this gift, Lizzy Brown demonstrated a continuity of her feminine self, an ability to exchange—at least symbolically and tactically speaking—one master of the mansion community for another. She also demonstrated that she well understood how to play her feminine cards when dealing with men, whether friends or enemies. Women like Ellen Shields and Lizzy Brown, though staunchly Confederate, used their femininity and sexuality to negotiate acceptable boundaries of conduct and propriety that softened and tempered the otherwise volatile encounters between northern soldiers and those remaining southerners on the home front.

Not to be forgotten, Montebello survived the Civil War, as did the Briers (the home place of Varina Howell Davis, the wife of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy), Lizzy Brown’s Magnolia Vale, and dozens of other estate mansions in and around Natchez, such as Monmouth, Montaigne, Melrose, Cottage Gardens, Dunleith, Elms Court, and the elegant but unfinished Longwood. It would be too much to say that these mansion estates survived the Yankee invasion solely due to the conduct of the elite women who resided within them or that the dominant Yankee occupiers were substantially de-fanged by the conduct of these women. Yet it is clear, on the other hand, that few Yankee soldiers viewed Natchez women as “she devils” nor labeled them as little more than prostitutes, as had been the case in Union-controlled New Orleans. Rather, the elite women of Natchez engaged their occupiers on terms that mirrored and reified the gendered perceptions these men had of themselves as powerful agents of civilized conduct.⁶⁵

In conclusion, much of the response articulated by these upper-class women to the Union occupation of Natchez reflected the fact that they

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Brown Diary, August 20, 1863.

⁶⁵ Although not discussed in this essay, it is important to note the larger feminine context within which the elite white women of Natchez operated during the Federal occupation. By this I mean the surprising extent to which other women also were actively involved in shaping the character of military rule, from the wives of Union officers, such as Matilda Gresham, who accompanied their husbands to Natchez, to those northern missionary women who worked feverishly on behalf of the humane treatment of the formerly enslaved. Even Isaac Earl had married a Louisiana woman, who spied for the Union, while in Natchez. Additionally, there were the freedwomen themselves, the wives and families of the black soldiers who insisted on being as close to their men as possible. Then too, there were the camp followers, the women laundresses and merchants, and those women who ran brothels and sold sex to the male occupiers. The full story of occupied Natchez would include all of these players. See Broussard, “Female Solitaires,” 298-370.

had been trained since birth to manipulate all men by exhibiting female docility, deference, and unquestioned support for male authority. For historian Joan Cashin, upper-class women of the antebellum South were patiently resigned to their subordinate role as the gendered help-mates of their patriarchal fathers, husbands, brothers, and adult sons. It was relatively easy for elite Natchez women to continue to act with a similar but yet invigorated sense of resignation when confronted by the male authority of Yankee soldiers and officers, especially when the Yankees responded to feminine acquiescence and moderate displays of sexuality with actions that seemed familiarly paternalistic. The difference between Isaac Earl and Gabriel Shields, between Andrew Brown and Walter Gresham, was not so great in the end. The elite women of occupied Natchez played with male affections and stroked male egos as they had been trained to do all their lives.⁶⁶ And if the survival of the town’s antebellum mansion estates is any indication of their success, such stroking and playfulness seems to have worked.

⁶⁶ Cashin, ed., *Our Common Affairs*, 1–41; Joan E. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis’s Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 2–5, 26–28, 34–36, 44–53, 62, 68, 87–88, 99, 122, 155–56.