***“It Will Take a Man Person With You To… Keep the Place Up”: Family, Gender, and Power in Confederate Common White Households***

*Abstract:* *This article provides fresh insight on the ways in which the American Civil War challenged and destabilized understandings of familial and gendered power within the Confederate States. It is well-established that the impressive extent of the Confederacy's military mobilization significantly altered the gendered demographics and dynamics of the home front. While not rejecting this orthodox view, this article does challenge its tendency to overemphasize the extent to which the rural South was almost totally sapped of men. In doing so, it not only underscores the important roles some men, most notably those too old for military service, continued to play in ordinary households, but also how this led to the nature and limits of familial power to be unsettled in terms of generation and age as well as gender. Finally, this article endeavors to excavate the more quotidian experience of Confederate common white families and, in order to do so, utilizes three micro-biographies of specific households from the state of South Carolina.*

Writing to his wife in June 1862, yeoman farmer James F. Sloan neatly articulated the bind in which his Confederate military service had placed him and his family. He explained that he would try to get home soon to make arrangements on their South Carolina upcountry farm but, failing that, Captain Sloan felt he would be compelled to resign: “I don’t see how I can stay in the servis… you have every thing to do for you are not able to do every thing that is to do there, for it will take a man person with you to take care of & keep the place up.”[[1]](#endnote-1) For the Sloans, and countless other common white households across the Confederacy, the loss of men to the army - something which was enforced by the state and in more blanket fashion after the introduction of Confederate conscription in April 1862 - deprived their households of vitally important agricultural labor and direction. Unaddressed labor shortages, particularly at critical junctures within the agricultural cycle, would ultimately create shortages of necessities and, in turn, the potential suffering of loved ones. As Sloan’s reflections on his quandary likewise suggest, the impressive extent of military mobilization in the Civil War South also pervasively shaped the nature of the Confederate home front and its gendered dynamics. The absence of fathers and sons, husbands and brothers, not only meant that those left behind faced hardship but that women in the rural South found themselves pushed more to the fore of their households, a development with significant ramifications for the physical, emotional, and interpersonal worlds of these women and their families.

There is little about the above that would strike historians of the American Civil War as unconventional. Numerous important works have shed light on how the pressures of war and the demands of the Confederate war machine destabilized gender relations and identities in the South, with the long-term absence from home of men such as Sloan being only the most obvious way in which the antebellum gender order came under strain.[[2]](#endnote-2) This article does not seek to uproot this familiar narrative but rather to both complicate and refine it. One important way in which it does so is by explicitly focusing on the everyday experiences of common white households. Put simply, historical writing on women, gender, and the family in the mid-nineteenth-century white South, including the Civil War years, has been considerably skewed toward the wealthy planter class. There are sound reasons for this focus, as elite sources are more plentiful and more articulate, and it was the men and women of this class that played the most prominent role in determining and demarcating their region’s conventions in terms of gender, sexuality, and the family. Where the voices of poorer white women have been found is in the numerous appeals that ended up on the desks of state and Confederate officials, requesting relief, lamenting government policies, and pleading for or even demanding furloughs and discharges for soldiers to alleviate suffering at home. Historians have put these pleas to excellent use in terms of probing the political outlook of southern women, their relationship to the Confederate nation, and the significance of social class to that relationship, yet these sources, by their very nature, can only tell us so much about the daily life of common white families and how it was affected by the loss of male kin to the army.[[3]](#endnote-3) After all, petitions and letters to the relevant authorities offer us snapshots of a particular individual, family, and/or community’s experience and, moreover, snapshots in which the temptation to embellish and exaggerate must have been considerable (though their fundamental complaints were surely well-grounded). We do not, therefore, know enough about the quotidian experiences of lower-class white families in the Civil War South, nor how their wartime experience shaped their intimate understandings of gendered and familial power over the course of the conflict. This is something I wish to address in these pages by closely analyzing the wartime correspondence of three common white families.

A detailed consideration of this correspondence allows the historian to glimpse in striking ways the abiding presence and significance of men on the Confederate home front, at least during the initial two to three years of the war. Whether implicitly or explicitly, a good deal of work on the Civil War South paints a picture of an environment almost entirely bereft of men. Drew Gilpin Faust has claimed that “with the departure of so many men to the battlefield, the Confederate home front became a world of white women and of slaves,” while the more recent work of Stephanie McCurry effectively reiterates this point, stating that “the women who described a rural landscape literally stripped of men did not exaggerate.”[[4]](#endnote-4) One should certainly not gloss over the gender imbalance caused by the considerable demands of the Confederacy for manpower, nor the additional burdens this brought for women, yet there are also frequent references to menfolk at home in the letters of ordinary Confederates. As has been noted with reference to Georgia’s piney woods region, furloughs, exemptions, and discharges meant that some military aged men were at home, at least for periods of time, and men too old for Confederate service played a key role in the functioning of wartime communities.[[5]](#endnote-5) There was, then, a permeability between home front and battle front, and the white male population ebbed and flowed depending on time, place, and individual circumstances. The Civil War career of the aforementioned James Sloan demonstrates this point; Sloan enlisted in the Confederate army in November 1861 but in October 1862 resigned on medical grounds, returning home before intermittently serving in state and reserve regiments later in the war.[[6]](#endnote-6) Although the presence of men such as Sloan within their households grew increasingly tenuous as the Confederacy required ever more soldiers in order to maintain its bid for independence, they were nonetheless important and somewhat overlooked actors in the wartime dramas that consumed their households and neighborhoods.

While some historians have noted the presence and influence of southern men at home during the Civil War, they have not fully unpacked the significance that this situation held for familial and gendered power relations. Indeed, the instinctive response to this pregnant fact has been to see soldiers’ fathers and other men who remained behind as a bulwark of patriarchal order, a stabilizing agent for southern society and its gender dynamics.[[7]](#endnote-7) Yet the evidence considered in this article challenges this contention. As we shall see, the presence of older men as either actual or surrogate household heads did not necessarily resolve some of the ambiguities that the war threw up in terms of gender relations and, in fact, could serve to deepen them. These men did so by posing searching questions in terms of not only gendered but generational power. When a household lost older sons, individuals aspiring to independent manhood but still living in a state of domestic dependency, but not its patriarchal head to the army, what did this mean in terms of the wider household hierarchy? And when a household’s head was absent, did the influence of white male kin from outside the household take precedence over that of its wife and mother? Didn’t another man, even one’s father, asserting authority over one’s household inherently question one’s own power and independence? As these complex questions suggest, a careful consideration of the Civil War experiences of common white families, and particularly the ongoing roles of various men at home, illuminates the ways in which gendered, generational, and other familial tensions could be closely interwoven. This analysis not only refines and broadens the work of historians who have emphasized the ambiguous effects of the war on gender relations – the war entailed “Change without change” for women’s roles and status, to quote George C. Rable – but also enables us to better understand the nature and limits of authority in common white households in the American South during the mid-nineteenth century.[[8]](#endnote-8) The end result is a portrayal of white family life in the Civil War South that is more representative in terms of social class, and, importantly, more sensitive to the dynamic intersections between gender, generation, and age within the household hierarchies of ordinary folk.

In order to drill down into the quotidian experience of Confederate common white families, the evidential core of this article will be derived from three micro-biographies, or case studies, of specific households.[[9]](#endnote-9) The three households under consideration were all located in the South Carolina upcountry, the interior section of the state which avoided the specter of Union invasion and occupation for much of the war, and have been selected because they illuminate different aspects of the Civil War’s profound consequences for ordinary family relations and life. The Martin family will be the first to be considered and provides a vivid depiction of how the loss of a household head, a family’s patriarch, could engender considerable strife for those left behind. The correspondence of Elizabeth Martin, the wife and mother of the household, during the summer of 1862 in particular offers us a relatively rare, and thus highly useful, sustained reflection from a common white woman on the war and the sacrifices it demanded.[[10]](#endnote-10) Indeed, Elizabeth’s comments allow us to glimpse how her race, class, and gender collectively shaped her experience of the war and her attitudes toward the Confederacy, underscoring the danger of essentializing the experience of southern women; the challenges Elizabeth and other common white women faced were not unique to their class, but the extent and consequences of these challenges could vary considerably depending on one’s position within the white South’s class hierarchy. The other families to be analyzed, the Boxs and the Langleys, shift our gaze more pointedly to the important role that men too old for military service had on the home front, in this case either as a surrogate household head (for the Box family) or an actual household head (for the Langley family). Close consideration of the conflicts within these two families demonstrates the ways in which the wearisome circumstances of war caused the limits and meanings of gendered and generational familial authority to become contested. It should be noted here that such familial strife was not necessarily unique to the Civil War, but it was uniquely revealed by the war and the sustained correspondence between combatants and non-combatants it prompted. This is an important point and one that underscores the value of this article’s close and detailed focus on individual households.

Before we delve into the experiences of the Martin, Box, and Langley families, it is necessary to define what is meant by the terms “household” and “common white.” To borrow the words of Michele Gillespie, the household was “the nexus of all social relations in the South,” a spatial, social, and economically productive unit in which the white male household head exerted control over both the property and the dependents, whether that be his wife, his children, or his slaves, within it.[[11]](#endnote-11) The phrase “common white” is used here as an umbrella term to encapsulate poor white laborers, tenants, and small landowning farmers, including those who owned up to five slaves (even though the families considered in this article, based on the available evidence, were nonslaveholding).[[12]](#endnote-12) “Common white,” like the similar term “plain folk,” might seem imprecise and somewhat catch-all but, to be clear, the use of this term should not be construed as an implication that the ownership of land or slaves was insignificant. There are, however, two important reasons for deploying this more collective term. First, the lifecycle of a common white male might see him move between the categories of landless laborer, tenant, and landowning farmer, as inheritance and the growth and maturation of his own family shaped his ability to claim land, or greater amounts thereof. On this latter point, and in simple terms, more children of an older age provided more vitally important labor at the disposal of the household head.[[13]](#endnote-13) Second, whether or not a common white man owned land or a handful of slaves, these households relied to a significant extent on the labor of family members. Thus, the loss of men to Confederate military service had distinctive meanings for common white families in contrast to their wealthier neighbors.

Placing common whites in the foreground of the Confederate home front carries methodological implications. These families were not only more likely to have illiterate members but, where written records do exist, they were generally less articulate than those produced by wealthier men and women.[[14]](#endnote-14) Accordingly, the historian must listen carefully to the silences and echoes in these sources, probing not only the direct, first-person testimony contained in various letters but also the fleeting references to other actors whom the extant historical record has rendered mute, and the allusions to important though hazily-outlined events. In doing so, one is compelled to use inference and well-reasoned conjecture (and, as a result, words such as “perhaps” and “seem”) more than one would prefer when attempting to reconstruct the lived experience of common whites.[[15]](#endnote-15) Nevertheless, it is important to do so not only because this experience was more representative of the wider Civil War South than that of the better off, but because the routine challenges engendered by the loss of men to military service had a definite, often profound, impact on the intrafamilial relationships and interactions of these families.

William Waddell Martin was listed as a thirty-year-old yeoman farmer in 1860 who owned $1,000 of real estate, which was comprised of 30 improved and 160 unimproved acres of land. William was also, correctly, listed as being illiterate by the census enumerator (though he would learn to read and write during the war).[[16]](#endnote-16) The Martin family resided in Pickens District, located in the extreme northwest of South Carolina, and the household included William, his wife Sarah Elizabeth (nearly always referred to as simply Elizabeth in their Civil War correspondence and listed as such in the 1860 census), and five children, three of whom were too young to contribute meaningful labor to the household. William Martin enlisted in the 22nd Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers in January 1862, which mustered into Confederate service later that same month. Within weeks of his departure, Elizabeth began to struggle with the additional burdens now placed upon her and, in March 1862, a kinswoman from neighboring Anderson District wrote to her, trying to raise her spirits. “You must keep in good heart,” Elizabeth was told, “for it look[s] like all the wimen will be left awhile but after awhile they will all come back and a what fine times we will all see [.] we had better give them [our men] up a while as to let the yankes come and whip us.”[[17]](#endnote-17) As the year went on, Elizabeth Martin found herself increasingly at odds with the supposition that her loyalty to the Confederate cause, and the absence of William it demanded, should trump her and her family’s claim to their husband and father.

By late June 1862, Elizabeth’s travails showed little sign of abating. With sickness in the family, which further constricted the household labor as their eldest son Alfred, who would have been roughly twelve years of age, was “not able to do anythin at al hardly,” a pregnant Elizabeth told William that, if he did not return home, she might be forced to abandon the household and her children.[[18]](#endnote-18) Pregnancy, given its considerable attendant risks in the nineteenth century, generated fear and anxiety; southern women during the Civil War perhaps tried especially hard to avoid it owing to the absence of their husbands to support and help them during and after childbirth.[[19]](#endnote-19) Possibly owing to her pregnancy, Elizabeth became more assertive in her June 22 letter, dedicating the middle portion of it to her husband’s colonel in what was essentially a request for William’s discharge. Entreating “dear frend,” the request oscillated between appeals for sympathy and declarations of dissatisfaction. Elizabeth hoped that the officer would “take pitty” on her, yet also appreciate that she had given up “one husband to go to war and that is more than most any other femail has done of my age til this war commenced.” Moreover, she was frustrated that the colonel had allegedly “give several [men] a discharge that is a great deal health[i]er than my dear husband is.” Clearly, Elizabeth felt that her plight should be both listened to and addressed by those with the authority to do so, but this letter also demonstrated a lack of familiarity with the most appropriate or effective channels through which to express her views. She sent the letter to her husband for him to presumably show or forward it to his colonel while her language evinced an uncertainty as to the appropriate tone to take. Elizabeth Martin’s perception that military service was not being enforced equitably and that her sacrifice gave her some kind of entitlement would later be given fuller, more forceful expression with the emergence of poor soldiers’ wives as a political constituency across the Confederacy.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Shortly after, William received another letter, this time from his teenaged daughter Sarah. Interestingly, significant portions of it consist of Sarah conveying her mother’s thoughts and concerns, raising the possibility that the letter was orchestrated to underscore Elizabeth’s growing frustration with William’s military service. One can only wonder if the pervasive ventriloquism in the letter was an attempt by Elizabeth to give William the figurative cold shoulder while simultaneously having her daughter reiterate, and thus support, her point of view. Certainly, Sarah repeated her mother’s appeals for her father to try to get a discharge. She also revealingly elaborated on some of the struggles the household was facing in his absence – the weather was too dry, the family were behind with their farm work, and the wheat crop on which they had focused their collective energies bringing in “was not worth saving had it not a bin for the straw for cow feed.” Elizabeth, furthermore, was burdened with the economic responsibilities that were incumbent on the head of household. Worrying that she would be unable to feed all their livestock, this yeoman wife mulled over selling one of the cows, but she wanted – again, as expressed through the words of her daughter – William to advise her what was the least she should take for it. Elizabeth was already struggling in her financial dealings with other men. Sensing this uncertainty when it came to financial matters, a man named Calhoun seemed to smell blood. William Martin held a credit note against Calhoun, but when Elizabeth tried to get him to pay it Calhoun sent word that he had already spoken to William, who had allegedly stated that he did not want the debt settled at that time. Maybe there was some legitimate confusion surrounding when the note should be settled, but what is equally plausible, if not more so, is that Calhoun sought to capitalize on both Elizabeth’s tentativeness when it came to financial affairs and William’s physical absence from the household. William’s daughter implored him to intervene, as Elizabeth believed that Calhoun would renege on whatever their agreement was.[[21]](#endnote-21) The financial affairs of rural southern households had, of course, long been largely the preserve of men.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Feeling overwhelmed, abandoned, and frustrated, Elizabeth Martin seemed unable to separate her lifetime of struggles as a woman in the South from the current sacrifices now demanded by the war. In an undated letter, but one clearly from this flurry of correspondence in late June 1862, she opened her heart to William. “I hav be[e]n put on with heart broken feellings from my cradle,” lamented Elizabeth, before hinting that a previous husband might have abandoned her. “I have had two husbands and I think they both have troubled my mind more than they have ought [to] have done for won could have stayed with me if he would and I think if you was to try you could come back and stay with me.” What exactly happened either to or with Elizabeth’s first husband is a mystery, but she evidently connected her previous mistreatment to her second husband’s ongoing military service. The political and the personal, the institutional and the intimate, were entwined for Elizabeth and, indeed, seeing men she believed to be healthier and stouter than her husband returning from the army with discharges, she calculated that he remained in the service out of an indifference to her plight, and was thus mistreating her. As she opened her letter, “William you have promised me things that I do not think you have tried to do [.] if you had I think you would have be[e]n at home with me now for I think everywone that has tried has come home.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

With a discharge or furlough still not forthcoming, Elizabeth’s ire grew. If previous letters had hinted at a growing frustration and sense of abandonment, there was no ambiguity in her epistle of July 5, 1862. The letter bristled with resentment, and merits quoting at length:

If I was a white man I would be a freeman [.] us poor women had as well have slaves for our husbands if it was not not [sic] for the coullar of them for they [slaves] have more fredom now than you poor white men has for I want to [k]now what they are doing only seting them fre[e] as fast as they can when they take of what men they are talking of taking away what wil hinder them from doing is [as?] they pleas hear a mongst us women and children [.] William I want you to study and think what a great sin al you poor men is standing in every day of your life that has gone and left your wives and little innocent children hear to suffer to protect rich mens property [.] when you took your wives to live with them I thought you was to forsake everything els for them and stay with them in sicknes and in health and now you have al forsaken them for the sake of rich mens slaves not for your own things for the slaves is al the yankes wants [.] if you poor men would al come home and stay and let the rich men take their slaves to fight and get them kiled they would soon make peace [.] William I do not think it is our almity god that has placed you all in the place you are in it is by the cal of rich mean men and I think you al wil have it to anser for… the yankes says they do not intend to hurt a union man or any thing he has got and if I was a man at al I would be a union man and stay at home with my family and try to keep my children from want…[[24]](#endnote-24)

This is a quite remarkable letter, because the equation of material suffering with a fundamental rejection of the Confederate cause and an invocation of clear class rhetoric was rare in the South Carolina upcountry. Elizabeth pointed to a growing resentment of the Confederacy as she tried to nettle her husband and his sense of manhood through her assertion that white men were being treated worse than slaves. Her claim that “poor women had as well have slaves for our husbands” if it was not for their skin color was bound to wound William, drawing a stark contrast between the military discipline to which Confederate soldiers were now subject to and the alleged slackening of the racial order at home. Moreover, Elizabeth’s complaint “if I was a man,” a phrase that appeared in many letters and diaries written by white Confederate women, was also surely intended to needle William, as it (and the letter as a whole) questioned his ability to act as a man should, while simultaneously mourning her own inability to shape her and her family’s fate.[[25]](#endnote-25) Elizabeth painted support of the war as oppositional to William’s support of his wife and children, and she clearly expected his obligation to his family – evinced through her reference to marriage vows – to trump that to nation when push came to shove.

While the war-induced challenges faced by Elizabeth Martin were not unique to her class – wealthy white women similarly lamented the loss of their husbands’ economic role in the household and feared their absence during pregnancy – the implications of these challenges could be profoundly different for common white families. The loss of William, and his agricultural labor and direction, had an almost immediate and detrimental impact on the Martin household and its levels of subsistence. Lacking the labor of slaves and seemingly of meaningful assistance from nearby male kin, Elizabeth and her children tried to do the best they could but invariably there was just too much to do for this pregnant woman and her young helpers. During the summer of 1862, the Martins invested all the effort they could into the wheat crop but, as Elizabeth observed, “I do not think the whole of it wil mak[e] ten bushel and they wil not be any thing els made hear for the want of afence and some won to work.”[[26]](#endnote-26) As such, William’s military service imperiled his manly independence by endangering the sustainability of his household, something which Elizabeth unsubtly alluded to with her references to slavery. Indeed, the hyperbolic picture painted by Elizabeth of increasingly enslaved white men and increasingly free black men was fundamentally an image of inverted Confederate purpose: hadn’t secessionists sold the cause of southern independence to lower-class white men as a defense of the privileges of white manhood?[[27]](#endnote-27) The atypically distressing circumstances of the Martin family during that summer meant that Elizabeth intuited at an early stage that the interests of her household and family were increasingly difficult to square with the demands imposed by the Confederacy. If other common white women did not necessarily share the same growing opposition toward the Confederate cause, nor such a dire labor shortage, they surely would have understood the wellspring of frustration from which Elizabeth’s diatribe stemmed. For wealthier southern women, their husbands’ military service must have been easier to endure because their ownership of slaves, while presenting challenges and frustrations of its own, at least meant they were shielded from a fundamental lack of labor.[[28]](#endnote-28) And, equally, the Confederacy represented a more tangible and overt defense of the race- and class-based privileges of the planter class.

Fortunately for the Martin family, William would be discharged from the army in early 1863 and remained home until late that same year. In 1864 he would join the 1st Regiment South Carolina Cavalry and, consequently, that summer would again see Elizabeth struggle considerably as she was forced to the fore of her household’s agricultural production.[[29]](#endnote-29) While she certainly would have loved for William to come home, Elizabeth’s 1864 letters seemed to convey a greater sense of resignation to his military service in contrast to her 1862 correspondence. With medical discharges clamped down upon, Confederate conscription’s age brackets widened, and certain exemption categories revised, it would have been harder to make a reasonable case from early 1864 onwards that the Martin household had a right to have its patriarch back.[[30]](#endnote-30) Elizabeth surely saw fewer discharged men in Pickens District during the summer of 1864 than she had two years prior, men whose presence at home had irked her considerably. William tried to encourage his wife to be brave and do her best in trying circumstances, yet he also hinted at his own frustrations. He assured Elizabeth that he would take great pleasure in being home and running a critical eye over her crops, “but alas! This unjust War deprives a white man of the privilidges alowed a negro. But we can only hope that ‘There’s a better day coming.’”[[31]](#endnote-31) The “better day” that the Martins hoped for in August 1864 was surely a day in which William could permanently return home, resume his role as patriarch, and thus strengthen his claim to household mastery, a claim that the Civil War and the military service it demanded had threatened.

White families in the mid-nineteenth-century American South, such as the Martins, had nuclear cores, but the social, emotional, and sometimes economic limits of these families often extended to a wider network of kin.[[32]](#endnote-32) Predictably, common whites turned to these wider networks, where possible or practicable, when they faced the problems presented by the Civil War. Men too old for military service, typically fathers and fathers-in-law, proved especially useful for some families in picking up the slack of departed menfolk. This reconfiguration of labor and power in a direction that tended to diffuse authority beyond the confines of the household could, however, provoke conflict between white women, their male relations in the Confederate army, and the men at home to whom they often had to turn for assistance. This was definitely the case for the Box family of Laurens District. At the end of 1859 William Irby Box married Margret Culbertson and, in the census of 1860, the newlyweds were listed as residing in William’s parents’ household. By the time of William Box’s enlistment in the 3rd Battalion South Carolina Infantry on April 1, 1862, he had established his own household. William and his father Joseph were both skilled shoemakers, though they clearly combined this craft with agricultural production. The Box family were listed as being landless in 1860 but, as artisans, it would be wrong to equate their standing with that of mere farm laborers. William and Joseph were common whites, to be sure, but their skilled labor meant they were not poor whites, a fact demonstrated by Joseph’s personal estate being valued at $500.[[33]](#endnote-33)

In the weeks and months following William’s military enlistment, Margret Box experienced the struggles of other Confederate women generally, and common white women specifically.[[34]](#endnote-34) Margret complained of loneliness in the absence of her companion and lamented that she “was lonsom and had no person to speak to hardly except darling Child,” their daughter Rachel Lueller. This solitude surely also generated a sense of vulnerability, especially when thieves stole salt and other provisions from the farm not long after William left.[[35]](#endnote-35) Agriculturally, things had been ticking over as a man named Bill Gaines was laboring on the farm, but he quit in early June 1862. Gaines had wanted to attend a house raising, events that often served as festive communal gatherings, and Margret had forbidden him from doing so. William approved of his wife’s behavior, stating “you dun just rite for not letting him Go to the house rasing and you would of dun rite if you had Got miss Cooper and Mary to hope [help?] you and give him a deason whipping.” Margret and William suspected Gaines might have had something to do with another incident of theft, this time involving the farm’s chickens, and this probably explains why she tried to prevent him from attending the raising.[[36]](#endnote-36)

We know very little for certain about Bill Gaines and his thoughts, feelings, and actions during this incident. The 1860 census listed a forty-six-year-old modest yeoman farmer named William B. Gaines who lived near the Brewerton post office, the approximate vicinity in which William Box established his household.[[37]](#endnote-37) His age would help explain why Gaines was at home and not in the army, though we do not know why he agreed to work for Box beyond the obvious fact that he needed to. Whether this was the Bill Gaines who quit the Box farm we cannot be certain. It seems, however, a pretty safe bet to state that his sense of masculine pride played an important role in his decision to stand down. Prior to the Civil War, it was hardly unheard of for relations between agricultural employers and white laborers to be tempestuous, as latent class tensions could produce conflict.[[38]](#endnote-38) However, given the fact that Gaines and the Box family occupied a similar place in the social hierarchy, this does not get us very far in attempting to make sense of this particular incident. Instead, the decision of Bill Gaines to quit may be seen as a product of the gendered ambiguities that the war, and its removal of significant numbers of white men, intensified. Here was surely the rub: as the household head in her husband’s absence, Margret Box expected to be able to command the farm’s labor as she saw fit yet, conversely, Gaines lived in a society that emphasized white men’s mastery over their inferiors in terms of both race and gender. The laborer evidently took umbrage at being dictated to by a woman and terminated their agreement. William advised Margret to pay what, if anything, was owed to him and let him go, despite his evident annoyance at Gaines’s actions. He probably suggested this course to simply draw a line under the disagreement and move on, but this was also perhaps a tacit admission from William that the hired help was not completely in the wrong. After all, they only suspected Gaines of being involved in the theft and William would have understood that his neighbors might not look approvingly on his wife telling a white man where he could and could not go.[[39]](#endnote-39)

During April and May 1862 William’s father had both visited and received visits from his daughter-in-law and his grandchild. Visiting was an important part of the white southern social fabric prior to the war, as short visits to the nearby farms and homes of friends and kin served as opportunities to discuss crops, exchange goods, eat together, and generally socialize.[[40]](#endnote-40) The importance of these interactions only increased during the Civil War as families tried to help each other out. With this in mind, Joseph Box would have presumably given Margret advice and perhaps provisions during these visits to assist his son’s agricultural operations. A “fracus” in June, however, pushed Joseph to seek a more active and permanent role on his son’s farm. A rumor had gotten out that Joseph had “told some negrows that now was ther time to do ther mischief while the men was all gone,” and this had caused considerable tension in his neighborhood. He was eager to move his shop and get away, and thus proposed that “it would be the best for you and Margret and myself too for me to go to your place and try to have some thing made on the place and your stock and things attended to.”[[41]](#endnote-41) By August, it was confirmed that Joseph was planning to build a residence on William’s land, a scenario that seemed ideal to William because the Mrs Cooper who had been residing at the farm was potentially going to move elsewhere. William Box hoped Cooper might remain – “she is a good woman and a heap of Company to you and takes a good deal of a trust in our a fairs if she will stay [upon?] fair turms I would Get her to stay” – but his father could help out if or when she left. Either way, William was keen for his wife “to have the company you want… I want you to live hapy.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

We might think that for Margret to have her father-in-law move either in or near her household was something of a boon, but she plainly had reservations. It is worthwhile reiterating here that Margret had already lived with Joseph and his wife when she first married William, and that this experience might have made her hesitant. In October 1862, William tried to gently dissuade his then heavily-pregnant wife (she would give birth a month later) from following her plan to return to her father’s home while Joseph moved into theirs. William tried to sell the situation to his wife, expounding that Joseph had vowed to “work to our advantage and not his… I beleave he will [.] he is a… kind father to us and I think you will find him so.”[[43]](#endnote-43) By the end of 1862 Margret Box had indeed given birth to their second child, William Jr., and Joseph, unsurprisingly given Margret’s indisposition, had taken over the direction of the farm. A letter from March 1863 underscored the extent to which the soldier’s father was now running the show in his son’s absence. Margret was away, and Joseph boasted that “I want you to see my wheat it is the best I have seed and every body that sees it sais it is the purtyest they have seed.” Moreover, he now had a firm grasp on the household’s financial affairs, giving Margret funds as and when she needed them and settling what the hired help was owed.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Margret, then, had been away from the household for lengthy periods during the first half of 1863. By July, however, she wanted to return. Perhaps she was fed up of living in somebody else’s household, a situation that could naturally produce its own complications, frictions, and tensions.[[45]](#endnote-45) Regardless, Margret had decided to challenge her father-in-law Joseph’s authority. The struggle over the control of the household is outlined in a July 21, 1863, letter that Joseph Box sent to his son:

William you rote to me that Margret had bin riting to you that she wanted to come back home and wanted me away [.] she never let me know athing about it all though she got so that nothing I could do would please her and I could hear of her talking and vilafying me to other people… I have tryed to please that woman as hard as I ever tryed to p[l]ease any body in my life I think [.] William I come to your place to try to advantage you and her all I could I have done the best I could for you [.] [[46]](#endnote-46)

Joseph went on to outline the considerable trouble and expense involved in getting things straight on his son’s farm since he arrived. He would gather the crop and look to move away, lamenting “o how it hurts my hart to think that I have but one sone and to live at a distance from him [.] women can cause trouble and destress with men.” Joseph also told William that he would divide the crop, but he would be taking his son’s horse and colt as “they would of bin ded long a go if I had not come here.” Joseph insisted that he did not think badly of his son for acting so but, towards the end of the letter, he did note South Carolina Governor Milledge Luke Bonham’s recent call for men from the militia between the ages of forty and forty-five to give six months of state service, a call from which he would have been exempt as he was roughly sixty years of age in mid-1863. William could not have missed this unsubtle allusion to the labor problems the farm might face now that Margret had antagonized her father-in-law.[[47]](#endnote-47)

William Box did not dispute that finding somebody equally capable and not liable for military service to help out on the farm would be difficult. Explaining why he took his wife’s side in this dispute, he exclaimed, “Margret I am glad your going back home,” before remarking, tellingly, “it will be the best for us to have our one [own] things to it self.” It is evident from his letters that William was a devoted, perhaps even doting, husband and father but, as the final section of this quote suggests, concerns about household power influenced his decision to ask his father to leave probably just as much as love for and fealty to his wife. Joseph stressed in his letters to his son that he was working for William’s benefit, not his own, but it is intriguing that he felt it necessary to labor this point; Joseph, it seems, wanted to counter any potential concerns that he might be acting out of economic opportunism rather than parental benevolence. William and Margret’s seeming concerns about Joseph’s intentions must have deepened when he intimated that he would like a more permanent place within the household, not being content to be a mere stopgap due to the amount of time and effort he had invested in William’s farm, and believing that his son’s land could not support two farmers. With Joseph intent on ensconcing himself on his son’s farm, William supported his wife’s position in this dispute to assert his own mastery over his household and his newly established, and thus tentative, claims to manly independence. William had told his “papy that I wanted him to make sum other arangtsments that I wanted you to go back home and take charge of our thing[s] your self [.] I expect it will disapoint the old man but I cant help it for I had rather you was there than him and I will be better Satisfide for you to be with our one [own] things so let him say what hee will.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Challenging, even hurting, the feelings and sentiments of one’s father was sometimes necessary on the path to independent southern manhood.[[49]](#endnote-49)

William’s description of Joseph as the “old man” merits scrutiny for it hints at the intersections between ideals about age, ageing, and power. A growing body of work has explored the connections between age and other markers of identity and determinants of social hierarchy, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality.[[50]](#endnote-50) The term “old man” as deployed by William here seems double-edged, evincing an element of sentimentality towards his father yet also a view of him as marginal and passive. To be clear, this was not a pejorative term – he called Joseph an old man, not an old goat or an oldster – but, equally, it hardly conveyed a sense of generational deference.[[51]](#endnote-51) William’s implicit ambivalence surely owed something to the circumstances his father found himself in as he embarked on the latter stages of his life. Entering his sixties, Joseph Box had leaned on his son during the war as a combination of his age, lack of landownership, and seeming difficulties in getting along with others meant that he at times cut an increasingly isolated and dependent figure. This kind of aged dependency, when coupled with a wider push back against hierarchical authority, caused more negative ideals about old age to take hold in mid-nineteenth-century America.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Returning to William and Margret, there was a certain irony that in order for the former to assert his independence he had to empower the latter in his absence. Margret would indeed run the farm for the remainder of the war. Afflicted by the predicted labor shortages, she managed to get assistance at times, including from her father Y.J. Culbertson. William, who did comparatively well financially during the war due to being on detached service as a shoemaker in Richmond for significant periods, often sent money home and seemed content to leave his wife in charge. As he put it in a letter from November 1864, in which he offered agricultural advice, “you can doo what you think best and I will be Satisfide.”[[53]](#endnote-53)

The Box household’s Civil War experience demonstrates the importance of viewing family relations and power dynamics, where possible, holistically. A historian looking at this specific example solely through the lens of gender, for instance, may well conclude that it offers insight on the ways in which the conflict undermined patriarchy in the South. That is patently part of the story, but to whatever extent Margret Box was empowered during the war, it was at least partly because William saw her as shoring up his own authority in light of the disconcerting efforts of his father to exert a growing influence over his household. Put another way, to interpret this case study only through the lens of gender or generation can only ever give us half the story. The issues of gender, generation, and age were closely entwined in this common white family’s reckoning with familial power and its meanings during the war.

The Box family was not alone in grappling with the ambiguities the war presented in terms of generational and gendered power dynamics within families. Other common whites, such as the Langley family, found themselves navigating similar contestations. William Langley was listed in the 1860 census as a farmer residing in Lancaster District, near South Carolina’s border with North Carolina, where he lived not too far from the district’s courthouse with his wife Mahala and nine children.[[54]](#endnote-54) Thomas C. was the eldest son in the household, being 21 in 1860, and it seems as though he had taken on a considerable amount of agricultural responsibility. As boys became men in the antebellum South they could expect to progressively gain greater responsibilities, supervising specific aspects of the farm or perhaps even managing some fields themselves as they were being prepared for eventual household head status, and Thomas’s initial letters home after his enlistment demonstrated a clear interest in the direction of the farm.[[55]](#endnote-55) The fact that his military enlistment physically removed him from his father’s household and saw him earn his own wage (despite the well-noted irregularities of Confederate pay) surely added to his growing sense of independence.[[56]](#endnote-56) Certainly, while William was too old for service in the Confederate army, the retention of their patriarch did not make the Langley family immune to the intrafamilial power contestations experienced by other common white families and, in fact, the Civil War years would see several clashes between William and his children over a variety of issues.

Thomas Langley’s burgeoning sense that his father should listen to his advice, that he had an important role to play in the agricultural affairs of the household, came to the fore in March 1863. William apparently had plans to sell a horse that his son either believed was his or to which he had a significant claim. Thomas, in his response, tried to maintain a respectful tone with his father, but did not shy away from plainly expressing himself. “I wish you all of the good luck that I can wish a father for I worked for you to help you a long thy Best I could and will as long as I live an can spair it [.] But if you sel Kit I am done helping you… you had Bet[ter?] keepe her.”[[57]](#endnote-57) The young soldier projected himself as deferential to his father, acknowledging that he had worked for him and would do so in the future, yet also clearly felt that he had a legitimate claim to the piece of property under discussion, and that William must therefore respect his wishes. When a fine young colt was born several months later, presumably to “Kit,” Thomas crowed, “I think father tuck my advise a Bout her for I was in earnist a Bout what I wrote to him… it [was] my duty to write what I did and he cant help But say that I was rite.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Thomas’s perceived victory over his father offered more than mere self-satisfaction as he had effectively asserted his claim to a piece of property within his father’s household and proved that his thoughts on the agricultural direction of the farm were worth listening to.

A short while later, father and son found themselves at odds again, this time owing to a wider family feud. The source of this feud was the marriage of “E.J.” – almost certainly Thomas’s elder sister Emily Jane – to a man whom the family disapproved of. Thomas wrote home in April 1863 requesting to “no something a Bout E.J. Wedding [.] She lived to Bee 26 years old and then married the Devel at last.” We, unfortunately, know next to nothing about this “Devel,” but we are given a clear indication as to why he was held in such low esteem – his avoidance of military service, possibly by virtue of his father going as a substitute on his behalf. Thomas’s letter sniped, “tel her to tel him to go to his Company an fight for his country and not send his dady in his plase.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Their brother, J.B. Langley, echoed such sentiments, explaining to his mother that “I hav got my likeness drawed… I intended to send it to Jane But she is maried and I will send it to to [sic] you to keepe [.] I wood like to see him for I no he is a cowerd By him a keeping at home and sending his dady in his Place.”[[60]](#endnote-60) Family, friends, and neighbors, understandably in a rural locale such as the South Carolina upcountry, played a pivotal role in approving and essentially policing the institution of marriage at the grassroots level.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Frustratingly, Emily Jane Langley is silent in the historical record, and so we can only hypothesize as to why she was willing to risk her family’s opprobrium. Perhaps she simply loved this man. Or, conversely, moving into her late twenties, and thus beyond the typical age of marriage for a white woman in the Civil War-era South, perhaps she also feared the fate of spinsterhood, a status not to be envied.[[62]](#endnote-62) If Emily was driven by anxieties about being an unmarried woman, the ongoing carnage of the war would hardly have helped. With newspaper reports and letters from the front carrying news of death, disease, and serious injury, the pool of marriageable men was shrinking by the day, as presumably was the notion that every young woman would ultimately become a wife.[[63]](#endnote-63) A coward or a shirker he might be, but Emily’s chosen husband would at least be able to support her through the war and beyond it.

Emily Jane Langley’s motivations may be elusive but there can be little doubt that her actions were an affront to her father. Thomas, sensing that his father and family would be stung, tried to keep a cool head, imploring, “if she can lie By him we can walk By him and doant quarle with her for she has Ben a faithfull servant for ous [.] all my feelings is hert very Bad a Bout her But if I was to mete her I wood Bee a Blige to speek to her.”[[64]](#endnote-64) Thomas believed that his sister had been a good daughter and, by using the term “servant,” emphasized her years of diligent labor within the household. He therefore believed she should be allowed to depart amicably, if not with the approval of her family.

William proved unable to live up to his son’s advice. By late July 1863, a serious rift had developed and William Langley, in his role as father and patriarch, had barred his daughter from the house and retained her possessions, including her bed, within it. He might have failed in exercising his authority over his daughter when it came to her choice of partner, but he now seemed intent to demonstrate his mastery over his household and the property within it. Thomas, though, again felt entitled to voice his objections and interjected on his sister’s behalf. Thomas told his father to “give her Bead to her and things to her for if they doant Belong to her they doan Beelong to no Boddey for if 25 years labor ant worth a Bit off a old Bed it ant worth having in a house and a nother thing is let her come to see you all and let the Children go to see her.”[[65]](#endnote-65) Here we can glimpse divergent constructions of property; the household head, William, presumably saw himself as entitled to control and dispose of the property within his domain as he saw fit, but his daughter made a claim to an item of property based on a combination of her labor and association with the item, effectively blurring distinctions between possession and ownership.[[66]](#endnote-66)

These kinds of family conflicts of course existed in the antebellum South – an important point we should not overlook – and it is the correspondence generated by the war that peels back the curtain, so to speak, on the internal disputes within the Langley family. But the circumstances of the Civil War not only caused these clashes to be better documented; the war also amplified and intensified them. Thomas Langley, as already noted, occupied a middle ground between dominance and dependence prior to the war as an adult white male in his father’s household.[[67]](#endnote-67) The outbreak of war did not resolve the ambiguities surrounding his liminal position in the household hierarchy but rather deepened them, as his military service enhanced his status. The fact that his service in the Confederate army physically removed him from his father’s household and enabled him to earn his own wage must have contributed to a growing sense of independence. Similarly, soldiering enabled Thomas to grasp a sense of responsibility and duty that would have helped him to demonstrate (or perhaps “perform” would be a more apt word) his manliness to others.[[68]](#endnote-68) Indeed, Thomas sought to make hay out of his military service and use the sacrifice and routine dangers he faced as capital to lend weight to his point of view during some of these family conflicts. When he implored his father to return his elder sister’s bed, for instance, Thomas hoped that William would listen “for I do not no wheather I ever will get home a gane or not and it hurtests my feelings to hear how times is their… I hope to god you all will live Better than that and let her come and get her Bed and things for this may Bee thy last letter that I will ever write home a gane in this world.”[[69]](#endnote-69) Thomas’s enhanced status was presumably not lost on Emily Jane when she wrote to her brother to complain about her father’s behavior.

What did all of this mean for William Langley and his outlook? This is a difficult question to answer with certainty as there is no surviving Civil War correspondence from William, a result of his illiteracy (based on the 1860 census) and the fact that the extant family papers are almost entirely those sent home from the Langley boys in the army. It is probably fair, however, to assert that William’s experience of the war left him with a more tentative grasp on his status as patriarch. This must have been the case in material terms, as the military service of his elder sons meant that he lost vital labor whilst the household was seemingly dependent at times on the financial contributions linked to Thomas and J.B.’s Confederate service, that is to say their bounties and wages.[[70]](#endnote-70) Though pure speculation, one cannot help but wonder whether William’s attitude and actions toward his daughter during the summer of 1863 were not at least in part driven by a bruised masculinity, a desire to assert his manhood by tenaciously clinging to his prerogatives as household head, even if that left him liable to accusations of being unfair or unreasonable. The Langley family correspondence offers clear glimpses of how William’s household mastery was rendered more precarious by the circumstances of the Civil War. Even the retention of a household head was not enough to shield the patriarchal social order from the destabilizing effects of the war with regard to the limits and meanings of gendered and generational familial authority.

Reflecting on the Civil War experiences of the Martin, Box, and Langley families, two questions naturally come to mind – what happened to them after the guns fell silent, and how representative were their experiences? Regarding the former, it is very difficult to provide any meaningful insights. The postwar papers of these families are either non-existent (in the surviving historical record, at least) or very sparse and, indeed, the American Civil War was both an important stimulus for sustained letter-writing between combatants and non-combatants and surely an impetus for preserving this correspondence among future generations. Laura F. Edwards’s insightful history of Reconstruction in North Carolina has noted the difficulties involved in reconstructing the private lives of common whites after the war. Common whites effectively occupied a liminal position between elite whites, who wrote more copiously and articulately, and largely defined the familial and gendered mores of their society, and freedpeople, who experienced greater state intervention and thus were more likely to appear in local court or other official and bureaucratic records.[[71]](#endnote-71) Some scholars have suggested that the growing independence of white women during the war, the humiliating sting of defeat, and the emancipation of the enslaved at the conflict’s conclusion collectively led to an effort to reinforce white male authority and the patriarchal household structure in the postbellum and now former Confederate states, especially amongst the elite.[[72]](#endnote-72) The evidence considered in this article makes it very difficult to appraise this viewpoint, but it is worth emphasizing that the family papers analyzed here do give us a fuller sense of the contested nature of patriarchy and power during the war while also offering us a rare window through which we can glimpse mid-nineteenth-century common white understandings of marriage, pregnancy, parenthood, and gender in the South.

In terms of how representative these three families are, one must acknowledge the fact that the part of the Confederacy in which they resided managed to largely avoid the ravages of invading armies and bitter guerrilla warfare during the conflict. Needless to say, other sections of the Civil War South were not as fortunate and, as Daniel E. Sutherland has neatly put it, South Carolina led “a charmed life.”[[73]](#endnote-73) Yet the principal challenge that they faced in navigating the vicissitudes of war – the loss of men to the Confederate army and resultant ramifications for those who remained behind – was one shared by thousands of other households across the Confederacy. This profound demographic shift occasioned by the Civil War’s demands for military mobilization, demands that were more pressing in the Confederacy due to its smaller man pool, has led to a tendency to overemphasize the extent to which the rural South was sapped of men. As we have seen, during earlier parts of the war, 1862 and 1863 certainly in the case of the South Carolina upcountry, an appreciable number of men remained at home, most notably and influentially those who were too old for military service. Emphasizing this point is not intended to belittle the dramatic changes wrought by the war as it certainly did load new demands and responsibilities on the shoulders of southern women, as well as push their families to their limits. The Confederacy did manage to draw an impressive number of men into its armies and this did have a significant impact on the families, communities, and societies that they left behind. The point here is that paying greater attention to the people, both men and women, who remained at home helps us to better understand the ways in which the Civil War destabilized understandings of power in ordinary households, as not only gendered but generational hierarchies came under strain in ways that were often interconnected. Embedded in these run-of-the-mill rifts over horses and hired help, beds and debts, the historian finds not only telling testimony about the struggle for survival that surely represented the “real” war for many common white families, but also a complex series of power struggles in which the traditional paradigm of gender history – a temptation to see the war as a moment of patriarchal change, continuity, or somewhere in between – can tell us a good deal, but certainly not everything.

1. James F. Sloan to “Wife” Dorcas Sloan, June 22 [1862], James F. Sloan Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC. SCL hereafter. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Notable examples include George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana, 1989), LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens, 1995), Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1996), and Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Rable, *Civil Wars*, 78-90, Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 126-128, Amy E. Murrell, “‘Of Necessity and Public Benefit’: Southern Families and Their Appeals for Protection,” in Catherine Clinton (ed.), *Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South* (New York, 2000), 77-99, and McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning,* 141-167. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Faust, *Mothers of Invention,* 31, and McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 152. Underscoring this tendency, a recent essay on the subject states in its opening sentence, “With three out of four eligible men away from home fighting, the Southern home front quickly became a world of women…”. Jacqueline Glass Campbell, “Women and Families on the Southern Home Front” in Judith Giesberg and Randall M. Miller (eds.), *Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints* (Kent, OH, 2018), 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mark V. Wetherington, *Plain Folk’s Fight: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Piney Woods Georgia* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 148-154, 161-164. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. J.F. Sloan to Col. P.F. Stevens, September 26, 1862, Capt. J.F. Sloan, Company B, Holcombe Legion, *Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of South Carolina*, National Archives, Washington D.C., accessed via Fold3, http://www.fold3.com, and morning report book, 1863-1865 (containing entries from September 1863 to February 1864 for Co. G, 5th Regiment, South Carolina State Troops and from January to April 1865 for 1st Battalion, South Carolina Reserves), James F. Sloan Papers, SCL. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wetherington, *Plain Folk’s Fight*, 148-154, 161-164. Also see Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Rable, *Civil Wars*, esp. 288, and Faust, *Mothers of Invention*. Also see Faust, “‘Ours as Well as That of the Men’: Women and Gender in the Civil War” in James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper Jr. (eds.), *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand* (Columbia, SC, 1998), 235-236, 239. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a recent and excellent book that demonstrates the usefulness of the case study approach in illuminating the more intimate and human aspects of the Civil War, see Peter S. Carmichael, *The War for the Common Soldiers: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies* (Chapel Hill, 2018), particularly 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana, 2000), 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Michele Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789-1860* (Athens, 2000), 22. Also see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 31-32, 82-88, Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1995), 6-15, and Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. My definition of the term “common white” draws upon Bill Cecil-Fronsman’s use of the term with regards to North Carolina, which emphasized the common ground between landowning and/or small slaveholding yeomen and some non-landowning whites, and Lacy K. Ford’s specific definition of a yeoman in the South Carolina upcountry, which included those who owned up to a handful of slaves (and not more than 100 improved acres). Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington, KY, 1992), 12-18, and Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York, 1988), 59, 70-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 56-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Members of both the Martin and Langley families make clear references to illiteracy. See, for example, William Waddell Martin to “Wife” Elizabeth Martin, April 1, 1862, Daniel Mills to “Sister” Elizabeth Martin, January 22, 1863, William Waddell Martin to Elizabeth Martin, June 1, 1864, and William Waddell Martin to Elizabeth Martin, September 8, 1864, William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers, Clemson University Special Collections, Clemson, SC, and T.C. Langley to “Mother, Brothers and Sisters,” December 13, 1863, and T.C. Langley to “Sister” M.M. Langley, September 23, 1864, Langley Family Papers, Harry L. and Mary K. Dalton Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. Attempting to gauge the wider extent and prevalence of illiteracy in the mid-nineteenth-century South is challenging. As Beth Barton Schweiger has explained, “Nineteenth-century literacy was a process, not an event. People learned to read when it was useful, and they learned at different ages, in different circumstances, and only rarely in school… People who were considered literate might not know how to use a book; many could recite from a page without understanding what they read. Until the mid-nineteenth century, reading and writing were taught independently; many readers, particularly women, never learned to write. Others could read print but never learned to read handwriting.” Schweiger, “The Literate South: Reading Before Emancipation,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (September 2013), 341. For more on illiteracy among lower-class southern whites, with an emphasis on its prevalence, see Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York, 2017), 146-151. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. My thinking in terms of scrutinizing the silences and echoes of these sources has been shaped by a number of works that have imaginatively explored source bases that are in many respects more limited and challenging than my own in terms of first-person testimony. I would particularly highlight Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry Into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge, 1993), John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York, 1994), and Wendy Anne Warren, “‘The Cause of Her Grief’: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England,” *Journal of American History* 93 (March 2007), 1031-1049. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See fn14. By the summer of 1864 William was able to read and write his own letters. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Elizabeth Martin to “Husband” William Waddell Martin, February 4, 1862, and Martha H. Martin to “Sister” Elizabeth Martin, March 20, 1862, William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Elizabeth Martin to “Husband” William Waddell Martin, June 22, 1862, and William Waddell Martin to “Companion” Elizabeth Martin, December 28, 1862, *Ibid*. The December letter discusses the naming of a baby, hence the reference to Elizabeth being pregnant in the summer. Indeed, a genealogy included in the family papers lists a daughter, Willie Ann Martin, as being born on September 18, 1862. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996), 101-103, and Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 123-129. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Elizabeth Martin to “Husband” William Waddell Martin, June 22, 1862, William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. For more on the emergence of soldiers’ wives as a political constituency, see McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 133-177. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. S.E.S. Martin to “Father” William Waddell Martin, June 28, 1862, William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden*, 29-31, and Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 128-129. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Undated letter with unidentified sender and recipient [though clearly Elizabeth Martin to William Waddell Martin, circa. June 25, 1862], William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. The date of June 25 is an approximation based on Elizabeth’s reporting of an accident that badly damaged the household’s wagon, something Sarah referred to in her above-cited letter on June 28, 1862. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Elizabeth Martin to “Husband” William Waddell Martin, July 5, 1862, *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. George C. Rable, “‘Missing in Action’: Women of the Confederacy,” in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (eds.), *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York, 1992), 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Undated letter with unidentified sender and recipient [though clearly Elizabeth Martin to William Waddell Martin, circa. June 25, 1862], William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. For the best treatment of how secessionists sought to appeal to nonslaveowners in the upcountry, see Stephen A. West, *From Yeoman to Redneck in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1850-1915* (Charlottesville, 2008), esp. 70-74. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For an insightful discussion of the challenges slave management presented for wealthier women, see Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 53-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Elizabeth Martin to “Husband” William Waddell Martin, July 24 and August 9, 1864, William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Edmund L. Drago, *Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and their Families in South Carolina* (New York, 2008), 84-86, 140-141. Also see William Blair, *Virginia’s Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (New York, 1998), 81-82, 101-103. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. William Waddell Martin to “Wife” Elizabeth Martin, August 15, 1864, William Waddell and Sarah Elizabeth Martin Papers. Although he was learning to write his own letters around this time, it is clear by comparing the handwriting and prose of this letter with later ones that this epistle was written for, rather than by, William. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (Baltimore, 1991), 10-13, and Marie S. Molloy, “‘A Noble Class of Old Maids’: Surrogate Motherhood, Sibling Support, and Self-Sufficiency in the Nineteenth-Century White, Southern Family,” *Journal of Family History* 41 (2016), 404-405. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. For more on artisans in the antebellum South, see Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Philip N. Racine’s discussion of another upcountry wife, Emily Lyles Harris of Spartanburg District, characterises her Civil War struggles as being the product of “overwhelming burdens, loneliness, and sensitivity.” This, it seems to me, is a neat summation of the experiences of many southern wives whilst their husbands were absent. Racine, *Living a Big War in a Small Place: Spartanburg, South Carolina, during the Confederacy* (Columbia, SC, 2013), 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. William Box to “Wife” Margret Box, April 23, 1862, Box Family Papers, SCL. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Margret Box to “Husband” William Box, May 29, 1862, and William Box to “Wife” Margret Box, June 11, 1862, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. A letter from early 1863 suggests that William Box’s household was near the property of Willis Washington, a yeoman farmer whose nearest post office was Brewerton according to the 1860 federal census. Joseph B. Box to “Son” William I. Box, February 22, 1863, *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta’s Hinterlands* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 68, and Merritt, *Masterless Men*, 87-89. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. William Box to “Wife” Margret Box, June 11, 1862, Box Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Robert C. Kenzer, *Kinship and Neighborhood in a Southern Community: Orange County, North Carolina, 1849-1881* (Knoxville, 1987)*,* 20, Cashin, *A Family Venture*, 13-16, and Amanda Reece Mushal, “Bonds of Marriage and Community: Social Networks and the Development of a Commercial Middle Class in Antebellum South Carolina” in Jonathan Daniel Wells and Jennifer R. Green (eds.), *The Southern Middle Class in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 2011), 67-68. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Joseph B. Box to “Son” William I. Box, June 26, 1862, Box Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. William I. Box to “Wife” and “Sister” Margret Box and Frances Box, August 10, 1862, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. William Box to “Wife” Margret Box, October 6, 1862, *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Joseph B. Box to “Son” William I. Box, December 14, 1862, February 22, 1863, and March 7, 1863, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Joseph B. Box to “Son” William I. Box, July 21, 1863, Box Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. *Ibid*. A letter from Margret to William on December 16, 1863, suggests that Joseph did not follow through with his threat to take his son’s farm animals. Margret Box to William Box, December 16, 1863, *Ibid*. For more on Governor Bonham’s call and South Carolina’s military mobilization during the summer of 1863, see Robert S. Seigler, *South Carolina’s Military Organizations During the War Between the States* (Charleston, SC, 2008), IV, 179-180.

    It is intriguing that Margret Box decided not to directly engage Joseph in this instance and instead relay her feelings through her husband William. Perhaps the earlier clash with Bill Gaines was in her thoughts and she did not want a heated exchange with a white man, her father-in-law no less. Or perhaps she feared that he simply would not listen to her. An interesting and analogous example, albeit pertaining to a significantly wealthier family, is that of the McLures of neighboring Union District. At the end of 1862, William McLure, while away in the army, wanted to dismiss his plantation’s overseer, B.F. Holmes, but he instructed his brother-in-law, John A. Reidy, to relieve him of his duties because some feared that Holmes would not leave if Kate McLure, William’s wife, tried to fire him on her own. Joan E. Cashin, “‘Since the War Broke Out’: The Marriage of Kate and William McLure” in Clinton and Silber (eds.), *Divided Houses*, 207. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. William I. Box to “Wife” Margret Box, Undated [circa. mid-July 1863], Box Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. For more on the ambiguities and tensions present within the father-son relationship amongst planter class families, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 166-174, Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1987), 150-153, and Cashin, *A Family Venture*, 22-25, 33-40, 100-101. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. A useful summary of this work can be found in Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, “Introduction” in Field and Syrett (eds.), *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York, 2015), 5-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (New York, 1978), 90-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (New York, 1992), 90-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. William I. Box to “Wife” Margret Box, November 12, 1864, Box Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. William Langley was listed as not owning real estate in the 1860 census’s population schedule, yet as working a farm valued at $500 in the agricultural schedule. The probable explanation for this seeming contradiction is that an elderly woman named Elizabeth Langley – surely a relative of William, and quite possibly his mother – lived two households away and owned $1000 of real estate but had no listed dependents within her household. William (and probably James Langley, whose household was nestled between Elizabeth and William’s in the census listings) presumably worked this family-owned land. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 130, and T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, February 12, 1862, Langley Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. For more on the delays Confederate soldiers experienced when it came to payment, see Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge, 2008), 136-137. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, March 10, 1863, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, May 13 or 15 [exact date unclear], 1863, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, April 12, 1863, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. J.B. Langley to “Mother” Mahala Langley and family, April 12, 1863, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 5, 24, 29-33, 36-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Molloy, ‘“A Noble Class of Old Maids,”’ 405, E. Susan Barber, ‘“The White Wings of Eros’: Courtship and Marriage in Confederate Richmond” in Clinton (ed.), *Southern Families at War*, 120-121, and Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. For more on the ramifications of the Civil War on single southern women’s hopes and expectations when it came to marriage, with an emphasis on the increased anxiety that the war might consign them to the fate of an “old maid,” see Rable, *Civil Wars*, 51-54, Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 145-151, and Cott, *Public Vows*, 77-79. More recent scholarship has suggested that such anxieties were somewhat ill-founded and overblown. See Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 270-277, and J. David Hacker, Libra Hilde and James Holland Jones, “The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns,” *Journal of Southern History* 76 (February 2010), 39-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, April 12, 1863, Langley Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, July 30, 1863, *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. My thinking here is influenced by Dylan C. Penningroth’s remarks on African American slaves and their understanding of property in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. South. See Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 104-108. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. For more on this state of “semidependency” among the planter class, see Cashin, *A Family Venture*, 22-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Peter S. Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, July 30, 1863, Langley Family Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. See, for example, T.C. Langley to “Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters” William Langley, *et al*, April 15, 1862, and T.C. and J.B. Langley to “Mother and Family,” January 16, 1863, *Ibid.* The latter letter makes it clear that Thomas and J.B. are sending money home, partly at least, to pay for corn. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana, 1997), 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. See, for example, Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*, Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*, and Allison Fredette, “’One Pillar of the Social Fabric May Still Stand Firm’: Border South Marriages in the Emancipation Era,’ in William A. Link and James J. Broomall (eds.), *Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom* (New York, 2016), 93-118. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)