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North Carolinian Women and Their Desperate Plea for State Support During the Civil War

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Chop, chop, chop...the sound of hatchets severing the storeroom doors echoed through the town of Salisbury, North Carolina. By the early spring of 1863, the wives of Confederate soldiers had finally had enough. After petitioning Governor Zebulon B. Vance for help from the state government to no avail, and after local storeowner Michael Brown had refused to lower food prices, the women of Salisbury decided to take action. A group of about fifty women, hatchets in hand, went to the Brown's storehouse on March 18 to demand food for their starving families. When Brown refused to help them, the women began to chop down the storehouse door and proceeded to take what they thought belonged rightfully to them. In this incident, later known as the Salisbury Bread Riot, the women obtained "twenty-three barrels of flour, two sacks of salt, about half a barrel of molasses and twenty dollars in money."¹ They also attacked Brown for his earlier refusal to assist them: they "rushed him and left him sitting on a log, blowing like a March wind."² After the women raided Brown's storehouse, they did the same to at least six other local merchants.

During the American Civil War, the people of the Confederate

¹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 175-176.

² Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1992), 134.

States of America, especially those in the lower socioeconomic classes, suffered unyielding devastation. Poverty and hunger ran rampant throughout the South. Food production decreased significantly due to the many yeoman farmers who were now soldiers fighting the war. Most wives who were left behind could not grow crops as well as their farmer husbands had. Juggling farm maintenance, caring for the family, and protecting the household was difficult task for these women. Drought, disease, and an early frost also added to the failure of crops. Severe inflation caused the price of food to drastically increase, to the point where a soldier's meager monthly salary of eleven dollars would not cover increased food prices. Wives accused local merchants of extortion and withholding necessary food and supplies from them. These circumstances forced many women on the home front to take action.

While many scholars have written about the numerous food riots that occurred during the Civil War, few have fully analyzed the events leading up to the riots or the emotional turmoil that sparked them. Some historical works do delve into the riots themselves and their long term impact, such as Victoria Bynum's *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*.³ Bynum argues that the violent riots and other "unruly" actions were the women's way of vying for limited control in the male-dominated nineteenth-century South. Other authors illustrate the struggles women had to endure on the home front, such as Gordon B. McKinney and Larry G. Eggleston.⁴ McKinney argues that while some women in Western North Carolina supported the war, others acted to undermine the Confederate cause. Eggleston compiled many personal stories of Southern women during the Civil War, which demonstrate how they were emotionally affected by the war. While these works provide only a glimpse into the decisions and emotions leading up to the violent food riots, they do establish context for the riots themselves, revealing the emotional toll that the Civil War had on the wives of soldiers.

Building from this secondary source material and the analysis of key primary sources, this article will examine the diligent attempts of North Carolinian women to get aid from the state government during the Civil War. Over nearly five years, Confederate women

3 Bynum, *Unruly Women*.

4 Gordon B. McKinney, "Women's Role in Civil War Western North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 69 (1992): 37-56; Larry G. Eggleston, *Women in the Civil War: Extraordinary Stories of Soldiers, Spies, Nurses, Doctors, Crusaders, and Others* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2003).

made many repeated appeals for aid in deeply emotional letters to Governor Vance of North Carolina. These desperate pleas to lower food prices eventually escalated into bold threats to initiate riots if nothing was done. I argue that this threat of violent behavior greatly conflicted with the Southern ideal of women's perceived role of subservience to men during the nineteenth century. As time went on, these threats became a reality when women engaged in violent riots across not only North Carolina, but also throughout much of the Confederate States of America.

The American Civil War began in 1861 after several Southern slave states seceded from the Union to form their own government. Although there was a plethora of reasons behind the Civil War, the dispute over slavery was central. Throughout the 1850s the nation's politics had been in a state of near constant turmoil over this issue. In 1860, Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. Many southerners feared that he would abolish slavery. In order to protect their citizenry's investment in un-free labor, in February 1861 seven Southern states seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. Fighting began in earnest on April 12, 1861, when Confederate forces attacked Union-held Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

The war raged on for four years, destroying many homes, crop fields, and infrastructure in the South. Not only was the Civil War physically destructive, it also remains the deadliest war in American history, resulting in over 620,000 military casualties and an unknown number of civilian deaths.⁵ During a fundraising address Lincoln once said "War, at the best, is terrible, and this war of ours, in its magnitude and duration, is one of the most terrible.... It has destroyed property, and ruined homes.... It has carried mourning to almost every home, until it can almost be said that the heavens are hung in black."⁶ This war had far-reaching consequences for the American South for decades to come.

Although the Civil War brought devastation to states on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, the sheer magnitude of the war's destructive power was most evident in the South, where almost every aspect of society was dismembered. In the words of author Susan Sontag: "War rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War

5 Drew Gilpin Faust, "Death and Dying," *National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior*, http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/national_cemeteries/death.html.

6 National Park Service, "Overview," *The Civil War*, <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/overview.htm>.

dismembers. War ruins.”⁷ Countless homes were burned to the ground and even crop fields fell victim to the annihilation of war, typified by Sherman’s March to the Sea. In addition, the Union blockade of Southern ports, which began in 1861, devastated the Confederate economy.

Soldiers on both sides exploited the circumstances and fundamental inequities caused by the war. Some Northern soldiers offered food and supplies to women and their starving families in return for sex.⁸ A Confederate woman from Atlanta wrote to her husband about such events: Union soldiers told her, “if I wud comedate them I never shold suffe[r] for . . . the[y] wud [fe[tc]h] me anything to eat I wanted.”⁹ Many, like this woman, were steadfast and remained loyal to their husbands and country. But after weeks of little food, some women fell victim to soldiers’ immoral deals in exchange for flour, meat, and sugar to end their hunger. The emotional toll was more than some Confederate women could bear.

Not only did sexual violation devastate the lives of many women, they also faced destruction of personal property. This damage of property included valuable food supplies for both Confederate soldiers and their families on the home front. With the supply of food limited by the war, inflation set in. The normal price of one dollar for a bushel of grain doubled to two dollars during the war and the price of bacon increased from fifteen cents to fifty cents per pound.¹⁰ The Confederate Congress also collected ten percent of particular crops such as corn, cotton, and beans as taxes. Any extra food or supplies were being sent to the Confederate Army, which only made the problem worse for those on the home front.¹¹

Many Confederate soldiers received frantic letters from their wives and family members back home. The knowledge that their loved ones were starving without them degraded the morale of the soldiers

7 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 5.

8 Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 197.

9 Stollenmaier, Jessica. “Rebellion Against the Rebels: An Exploration of White Southern Women’s Patriotism.” *Journal Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research* (2013): 4, <http://knowledge.e.southern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=jiur>.

10 Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 134.

11 Nina Silbur, “A Woman’s War: Gender and Civil War Studies.” *OAH Magazine of History* 8 (1993): 11-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162919>.

as the war raged on and Confederate losses mounted. The Clerk of Green County, North Carolina, wrote to Governor Vance, saying, “How can our Soldiers fight when they know their wives are destitute even of a piece of bread?”¹² Many soldiers deserted the Confederate Army to return to their family farms. No doubt they felt that the need at home was greater than the need on the battlefield. Mary Windsor, the wife of a Confederate soldier, wrote, “He would be great deal more service to his country at home on his farm than he would be on the field. Now you have heard some of my sad condition.”¹³ Life was arguably worse for Confederate soldiers. Surviving on “short rations” of corn meal mush, rice, and worm-infested bacon added to their longing for home and created impetus for desertion.¹⁴

While some women hysterically begged to have their husbands back, others took matters into their own hands. A group of women from Bladen, North Carolina, became infuriated with the high prices of essential food products. In 1862, they created a group known as the “Regulators”. These women sent an anonymous letter to Vance six weeks before the Salisbury food riots, a letter that began with a bold declaration: “The time has come that we the com[m]on people has to hav[e] bread or blood and we are bound boath men and women to hav[e] it or die in the attempt.”¹⁵ Their letter foreshadowed the events of the Salisbury Bread Riot.

Similar acts of desperation occurred in other parts of North Carolina. In March 1863, a group of women in Johnston County broke into a local corncrib and took large amounts of corn home to their starving children.¹⁶ A month later, five women in Bladensboro County raided a grain depot and stole one sack of rice as well as six sacks of corn.¹⁷ A North Carolinian woman named Mary Canaday stole and

12 McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 175.

13 Mary A. Windsor, “Letter from Mary A. Windsor to Zebulon Baird Vance, February 1, 1865,” *Civil War Era NC*, accessed September, 2014, <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/items/show/661>.

14 Richard E. Yates, *The Confederacy and Zeb Vance* (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, Inc, 1958), 42.

15 North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, “Letter: Salisbury Women to Zebulon B. Vance, March 21, 1863,” *North Carolina Digital Collections*, accessed September 2014, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p15012coll8/id/11531>.

16 Gordon B. McKinney, *Zeb Vance: North Carolina's Civil War Governor, Gilded Age Political Leader* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 163.

17 Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 134.

butchered a cow that was owned by another poor woman.¹⁸ As in all circumstances born of the necessity of war, the issue of morality and legality arose, yet these women were not idle in their time of need.

The actions taken by North Carolinian women were especially bold during this period. In nineteenth century American society, women were expected to be quiet homemakers, child bearers, and obedient wives. Southern women especially were portrayed as strong during adversity yet always poised with grace. The unruly women of Salisbury and elsewhere proved this perception wrong.¹⁹ Making threats to government officials was decidedly not “graceful.” The Civil War created desperate situations for those on the home front, and the women who now found themselves as heads of households were forced to take action.

Rioters and thieves were usually women of the lower classes. More affluent women looked down upon these rioters as despicable due to their public defiance. Although well-to-do women generally did not agree with the methods of their poorer counterparts, as the war dragged on, they too began to question it. Instead of acts of violence and threat-infested letters, however, these women privately worried over the fate of their dear young nation. Many of these high-society women were a part of aid societies, organizations that worked to support the cause through fundraisers. As the war raged on, women began to abandon these groups. By 1864 one woman described them as “died away; they are name and nothing more.”²⁰

The Civil War transformed the roles of women in American society. In the face of war, women were now expected not only to care for their homes, but to guard them as well. Protecting their family and crops from destruction presented yet another challenge. While dealing with these issues, the overwhelming dread of possible starvation lingered in the minds of many Southern women. Breaking from their accepted roles as subservient wives women did whatever was necessary to avoid starvation for themselves and their families. Many men were outraged by the behavior of female bread rioters. A Southern judge stated during the war that rioters “ceased to be women.”²¹

18 Stollenmaier, Jessica. “Rebellion”.

19 Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, 3.

20 Stollenmaier, Jessica. “Rebellion”.

21 Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 243.

Governor Vance received dozens of letters from these rioters as well as other women from across the state. Although the authors behind the letters varied, the requests remained largely the same. The women begged for state government intervention to set affordable food prices. Either the state government could regulate the price of food or send their husbands, sons, and brothers home. A group of women from Warren County, North Carolina, wrote, “If you don[’] t provide some way for us to live we will be compelled to take our little children to our husband or they must come home to us.”²² Many Confederate soldiers responded to the desperate plight of their families by deserting to return home.

Some women objected to the reasons behind the war, feeling that it had been initiated without the consent of the people. Some held staunch, religiously-informed beliefs against the institution of slavery, stating that “Slavery is doomed to dy out; god is agoing to liberate neggars and fighting any longer is against God.”²³ They believed that the war was not worth the internal deterioration of the states that made up the Confederacy and their people. For others who, at the beginning, embodied passionate patriotism for the cause, conviction dwindled after dealing with the hardships of war. Some felt that their government and the Confederacy as a whole had failed them when no aid came to them, their impoverished families, and their destroyed homes.²⁴

At first, Governor Vance refused to help in any way, despite the repeated efforts of North Carolina’s women. While other Southern governors sprang into action, Vance and Confederate president Jefferson Davis did not see these women who could not vote as a high priority in contrast to the war effort. Vance failed to send aid to the soldiers’ wives, to regulate inflated food prices, or to give soldiers leave to return home. Instead, he reaffirmed North Carolina’s commitment to the faltering war effort by issuing a proclamation, on May 5, 1863, banning desertion. The consequence of desertion would be death by firing squad, even for those who simply aided the deserter. Vance’s proclamation stated:

Now therefore, I Zebulon B. Vance, Governor of the

22 McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 173.

23 Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 134.

24 North Carolina State University, “Protect Us!': White Female Protection on the Home Front.” *Civil War Era NC*, accessed September, 2014, <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/exhibits/show/protect/intro>.

State of North-Carolina, do issue this my proclamation, commanding all such evil disposed persons to desist from such base, cowardly and treasonable conduct, and warning them that they will subject themselves to indictment and punishment in the civil courts of the Confederacy, as well as to the everlasting contempt and detestation of all good and honorable men.²⁵

The severity of this proclamation attempted to prevent further desertion, but was wildly unsuccessful, as desertion escalated to an all-time high. Vance hoped for peace in North Carolina. On April 9, 1863, a month before, Vance had issued a heated warning to the female rioters to “[a]void, above all, mob violence. Broken laws will give you no bread, but much sorrow.”²⁶

As time progressed, the effects of starvation on the home front became increasingly evident. Later in 1863, a white woman and her child starved to death in the county of Wilmington, North Carolina.²⁷ These harsh realities were the main reasons Vance and the government of North Carolina finally decided to offer some form of aid to soldier’s wives. Vance demanded that farmers stop growing cash crops such as cotton, and instead grow abundantly-producing food crops such as wheat and corn.²⁸

Though Vance may have personally sympathized with the tragedies that the lower class had to endure, politically he remained firm in his refusal to help hungry women. As time went on and conditions continued to deteriorate on the home front, however, Vance decided to change his political position on the matter. In a letter to a North Carolinian woman Vance said that he “will see that they [the “wimmin”] do not starve in the absence of their husbands.”²⁹ After a year of harsh public scrutiny, Vance ordered county officials

25 North Carolina State University, “Zebulon Vance, ‘Vance’s Proclamation Against Deserters’ (1863),” *Civil War Era NC*, accessed September, 2014, <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/items/show/224>.

26 McKinney, *Zeb Vance: North Carolina’s Civil War Governor, Gilded Age Political Leader*, 163.

27 North Carolina State University, “‘Protect Us!’: White Female Protection on the Home Front,” *Civil War Era NC*, <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/cwnc/exhibits/show/protect/intro>.

28 McKinney, *Zeb Vance: North Carolina’s Civil War Governor, Gilded Age Political Leader*, 163.

29 McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 197.

to put soldiers' wives on the relief rolls and the government of North Carolina offered limited aid to women in certain counties, but this inadequate aid did little to combat the ever-growing issue of starvation.

Although the bread riots had a few positive outcomes, some women still felt the hunger caused by the war. Five Regulators were tried and convicted for their involvement in stealing food from a Bladensboro, North Carolina, warehouse.³⁰ They were sentenced to jail, though they were later pardoned. The Confederate government's inability to control these disobedient women on the home front foreshadowed the demise of the young nation. The high rate of desertion only magnified this failure.

While some Southern women were disobedient, others were adamant in their support of the Confederacy. People living in the South made daily sacrifices for the cause, especially the wives of yeoman farmers. From weaving their own clothing to rationing their food and supplies, these women fervently fought for the Confederate cause in all the ways they could. Some wives worked in the Confederate Clothing Bureau sewing uniforms for their Rebel soldiers. Others worked directly at the front as field nurses, caring for the injured, maimed, and sick.³¹ They only disobeyed their government officials when starvation was near.

The Civil War brought many sorrows to the American people. Division across ideological lines tore society apart. Although tragedy was the main consequence of this devastating war, women's roles arguably changed for the better. Not only were women placed in the position to lead and take care of a household by the war, but they also proved themselves equally capable in the workforce. Some women even worked government jobs during the Civil War. Before the war, this was largely unheard of for American feminists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Gage wrote, "the social and political condition of women was largely changed by our Civil War. In large measure, [it] created a revolution in woman herself."³²

Inadvertently, the Civil War granted women many opportunities for independence and leadership. These experiences ignited a desire within many women for equal rights with their male

³⁰ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 175.

³¹ Eggleston, *Women in the Civil War*, 13.

³² Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Homefront," *National Park Service*, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online.books/rthg/chap6.htm>.

counterparts. These same aspirations for social equality were the driving force behind the women's suffrage movement of the early-twentieth century. Without knowing it, the Salisbury rioters and their counterparts across the South were bravely paving the way to political and social equality with men for future generations of women.

The women of North Carolina were mothers, wives, and daughters who wanted to save their families from starvation. Their desperation is evident in every word of their letters. One woman even included descriptions of her frail children to her husband, writing, "Last night, I was aroused by little Eddie crying...he said 'O Mamma! I am so hungry!' And Lucy...she is growing thinner every day... unless you come home, we must die."³³ What began as polite requests quickly escalated into fierce threats, then violence. Governor Vance's indifference to the women's situation forced them to take action. Riots ensued throughout the countryside of North Carolina, where women attacked local warehouses for food and supplies for their families. These acts of violence were integral to the unraveling of the Confederacy.

Union victory only added to the woes of Southern women. Some lost their husbands, homes, and sense of hope. Confederate currency was worthless, and the economy of the South was shattered. Many women were forced to begin new lives and reject the cause that they had so passionately fought for. Despite continuous disasters, these women overcame all odds. Their emotional letters to Governor Vance and subsequent violent riots were only some of the tactics they used in their fight for survival during the Civil War.

Women in today's society are products of generations of strong, rebellious women who fought for survival and eventually equality. Men and women stand side by side in today's culture because of riots, letters, and many other bold declarations by American women. A male-dominated government did not stand in the way of providing for their families. Although they were seen as despicable and unruly at the time, North Carolinian women not only saved their families, but also helped to transform gender roles for years to come. As First Lady Abigail Adams once said, "remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be

33 Yates, *The Confederacy and Zeb Vance*, 43-44.

tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion.”³⁴ North Carolina’s female rioters proved her right.

³⁴ Abigail Adams and John Adams, *Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams: During the Revolution*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Harvard: Hurd and Houghton, 1875), 147.

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