Aberration of Mind
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Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War–Era South.

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Suicide is decipherable only through a reconstruction of the complex setting and social meaning of the action.

—Victor Bailey, “This Rash Act”: Suicide across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City

“The theme of violence runs deep in the life and legend of the South.”¹ C. Vann Woodward’s reflection in his review of John Hope Franklin’s seminal work The Militant South (1956) reflects a maxim, then and now, about the American South. Violence in myriad forms—dueling, eye gouging, whippings, insurrections, lynching, rebellion—pervaded the region from its earliest settlements through the modern era. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to identify violence as a defining feature of the South, as Sheldon Hackney did decades ago: “A tendency toward violence has been one of the character traits most frequently attributed to Southerners.”²

Historians have spilled considerable ink analyzing the many forms of violence and their influence on Southerners and their culture.³ Nearly all of the scholarship on Southern violence, however, considers violence that radiated out: a master whipping his slave, a mob torturing and hanging a freedman, an aggrieved planter defending his honor in a duel. Only recently have historians of the South considered violence turned inward: suicide.⁴

An examination of suicide, especially on the micro level, presents an opportunity to explore the multitudinous pressures nineteenth-century Southerners confronted in the context of war-related social, political, cultural, and economic dislocations, as well as how they talked about, understood, and experienced those pressures.⁵ We know remarkably little about how those pressures shaped the day-to-day lives of Southerners. Slavery and emancipation, civil war and its aftermath: these powerful forces unleashed unprecedented stressors that greatly affected Southern men and women, blacks and whites, in myriad ways, including, in the most severe cases, suicidal ideation and behavior. By turning to Southerners who considered suicide or took their own lives in times of considerable stress, we learn much about the practice of suicide—how suicide was experienced—about which we know little. By
contrast, the theological, legal, and cultural tenets of suicide—the formal knowledge about the theoretical concept of self-murder—are well-trodden ground. An approach that privileges individual instances of suicide affords a view of how it was both practiced and received in local communities. While religious, legal, and cultural institutions may have condemned self-murder, an individualized case approach to suicide on the local level permits an interrogation of suicide that goes beyond rhetoric and discourse. Understanding suicide as practiced and experienced by local actors, and assessing the responses it engendered in local communities, better situates our grasp of its meaning in the lives of ordinary people, especially the nature and impact of the sources of stress that otherwise remain invisible. An analysis of individual cases of suicide and communities’ reactions to them facilitates a better understanding of everyday life in the wartime and postwar South and the experiences of ordinary Southern men and women, as well as an exploration of the meaning of suicide for Southerners during and after the war. Under what circumstances did Southerners contemplate suicide? What were the apparent triggers? How did Southerners respond to incidents of self-murder? Did gender and race shape decisions about suicide and its reception by community members?

Incidents of suicide also offer an avenue into understanding personal suffering—its extent, how it was experienced, and responses to it—in the specific context of enslavement, civil war, and emancipation in the South. It is tempting to view suicidal behavior as a simple index of human suffering with suicide rates quantifying the amount of suffering different groups experienced. Yet not everyone who suffered killed himself or herself; self-destruction occurred only infrequently, even in the face of profound and pervasive human suffering. Obviously, however, suicide was and is one outcome of extensive suffering, a way of escaping despair and hopelessness, so it is impossible to separate suicide from the historical context of emotional, physical, and psychological suffering, which pervaded the wartime and postwar South. Nearly all who turned to self-destruction did so to end their suffering. At least, that was the belief of many nineteenth-century Southerners. Southerners routinely correlated suicidal activity with suffering, which they associated with the war and its aftermath.

While much scholarship on the Civil War South acknowledges, implicitly or explicitly, the extent of suffering, no historian has yet focused solely on suffering in the Civil War South in a sustained way. Drew Gilpin Faust comes closest in her wartime study of elite white Southern women, whom she situates in a milieu of material and emotional suffering. White Southerners, Faust argues, linked suffering to sacrifice and nation; a woman dutifully gave up husband or son for the cause. But as the war dragged on, and as material conditions worsened in the South, faith in cause eroded and support receded.

2 Introduction
Protracted suffering no longer bore fruit. So while both South and North experienced war-generated hardships, preservation of the Union and an end to slavery redeemed the extensive loss of life and injuries in the North. Redemption eluded conquered Southerners, who, in the wake of defeat, eventually conceived of suffering differently. The realization that the high human cost of the ill-fated rebellion was for naught cast a dark shadow on the South, deepening the despair and further bonding the community of suffering. Faust’s work shows the impact of increased suffering on Confederate nationalism, not on the individual psyches of war-weary Southerners, which is one of the aims of this book. How did Southerners experience suffering? How did they make sense of that suffering, and how was suicide connected to the suffering of Southerners?

The suffering and suicidal behavior of Southerners during and after the war was highly gendered. Men and women of the South experienced suffering in fundamentally different ways that in turn shaped the circumstances of suicidal activity and ideation. During the war, most Confederate men left their homes and joined the war effort. They battled homesickness, cramped quarters, boredom, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements; they contracted diseases, were wounded in battle, and were nursed by strangers; they were traumatized by what they saw and experienced in combat. Confederate soldiers faced challenges to their manhood: Would they be able to comport themselves with courage and composure under fire, or would fear get the better of them? Would they be able to resist the temptation to run or hide when under fire? Southern men who failed to live up to expectations, or worried they might, sometimes seem to have chosen voluntary death to avoid living with the moniker of failure or, worse, coward. Confederate men also worried about the well-being of the dependents they left behind. The core creed of nineteenth-century masculinity, man’s role as provider and protector, the essence of Southern male identity, existed in tension with the martial commitment to nation and cause, prompting much angst and apprehension among soldiers.10 Veterans lucky enough to survive returned home, sometimes wounded or disabled, often carrying emotional baggage, and suffering. For many of these men, self-destruction represented a plausible alternative to living depressed and broken in a defeated nation with dismal prospects for a better future. Having failed to save their nation, and thus disappointed their families, Confederate men turned to self-inflicted death as a way to end their suffering.

Mastery and control were central to the identities of Confederate men.11 In war, for the first time hundreds of thousands of white Southern men, long steeped in a culture of honor and proselytized by the propagators of paternalism, departed for the battlefront, plunging into unfamiliar roles requiring
subservience and dependency, the very antithesis of manhood. For some Confederate soldiers gripped with fear or anxiety, suicide became the antidote to loss of control. While men may have been unable to control their emotions in battle, suicide assured men mastery over the outcome of their lives. Suicide afforded them the chance to die with dignity and honor rather than live disgraced and dishonored.

Mastery continued to elude Southern men in peace, as in war. Confederate veterans returned home to find the markers of manhood stolen from them: fortunes evaporated, slaves gone, political rights revoked; many struggled to provide for their families. Quite a few brought home with them the visible scars of war including missing limbs, disfigurement, and unhealed wounds. Mental scars, less visible, were just as debilitating. The physical and emotional wounds, coupled with a crippled economic climate, chipped away at their manhood and identities as men. As in other societies plagued by economic chaos, the failure to live up to standards of masculinity, including the ability to provide for one’s family, triggered male suicides. For Southern white men, like long-suffering men in Weimar Germany, “suicide was the most radical expression of the failure of man’s traditional role as pater familias amidst the socio-economic deprivation” of the period.12

Confederate women suffered, too, but differently than men. As has been well documented, the Civil War significantly altered gender roles and relations. Husbands, fathers, and brothers, the very men who had pledged to be women’s natural protectors and providers, abandoned them for war. Confederate women stepped into male roles, though, to protect and care for themselves and their children. They inherited unfamiliar responsibilities in farming and business for which they had been told they were constitutionally ill-suited: they supervised slaves, negotiated with debtors and creditors, stared down invading armies, procured food, butchered hogs, harvested crops, and sold cotton, all while deprived of the emotional, as well as financial, support of their husbands. They mourned the deaths of their children and other relatives without the ballast of spousal support. Many became sick with worry about sons, brothers, and husbands on the front. When their husbands died, young women, mothers of small children, panicked, wondering how they would survive alone in the midst of war, especially when the traditional extended support systems on which they depended were also stretched taut and often unavailable. Whereas the suffering and suicidal impulses of Confederate men emanated most directly from their ties to military service and especially to war trauma, those of female civilians were more often connected to the economic, material, and personal hardship they suffered as a consequence of war. The Civil War pushed the limits of traditional gender norms and sorely tested Southerners’ abilities to adapt to unfamiliar roles. Quite a few South-
ern women failed to adapt to wartime changes, which added to pervasive personal suffering.13

Much of Southern women’s physical and psychological suffering during and after the war, unlike that of men’s, derived from their reproductive and maternal selves, namely postpartum disorders and child-rearing, rather than military service. That said, exigencies of war shaped those experiences and exacerbated their compromised mental health, forcing many to weather a difficult childbirth without a husband’s support, care for another child with an absent or dead father, or face a beloved child’s death alone. Postpartum depression and psychoses existed apart from war, but the conditions under which pre- and postnatal women maneuvered were situated in a war zone. Having to bear and raise children under the strain of war intensified symptoms for women prone to childbirth-related disorders.

Southern white women, especially elites, also suffered differently from men because of the ideological and cultural strictures of nineteenth-century paternalism. The rigors of childbirth and child-rearing, the scarcity of food, and dislocation ushered in by moving armies left quite a few Southern white women physically compromised and psychologically weakened. Having been told for generations that they were innately and emotionally ill-equipped for the rigorous demands of commerce, credit, and management, quite a few Southern white women, lacking sufficient self-confidence to persevere during the war and after and unable to turn to the safety net of extended kin and community members who were also suffering, collapsed in utter despair. Unable to bear up under the new demands of life, many ended up in asylums. Some, for whom the anguish proved unbearable, resorted to suicide or suicidal attempts in increasing numbers after the war.

The region’s African American population also suffered extensively during and after the war. While African Americans emerged from war emancipated and as beneficiaries of the war, they nonetheless operated in a war zone during and after the conflict and so faced many of the same stressors as Confederates. They also confronted unique challenges, as they had in slavery, that engendered suffering. Southern whites insisted that enslaved men and women were content and rarely depressed, the prerequisite, in their minds, for suicidal behavior, and so they concluded the enslaved lacked a self-destructive impulse. To acknowledge that the enslaved experienced emotional pain would have required an unthinkable concession: slaves were not happy. Southern whites, therefore, constructed a racialized worldview in which they, slave owners, provided their bondsmen and bondswomen all the essentials in life—food, shelter, clothing—thereby removing any material basis for their unhappiness. With masters providing every need, the enslaved had no cause for anxiety or worry. Because white Southerners also projected that the
enslaved lacked any capacity for intimate and lasting attachments, they refused to entertain any possibility that the enslaved experienced emotional pain, another basis for depressive and suicidal behavior. Bonded laborers, who had “no social tenderness” and who manifested “insensibility to the ties of kindred,” lacked feelings of intimacy and affection and so could not feel heartache. In short, Southern whites constructed ideas about the emotional nature of the enslaved that precluded the possibility of their suffering.

Enslaved men and women, though, did suffer. Extreme or protracted torment led many slaves to consider suicide or to take their own lives as a way to escape, contrary to the beliefs of their enslavers. Escaped slaves, visiting Northerners, and especially abolitionists, challenged the fiction of contented slaves by evincing numerous instances of slave suicide, which came to be embraced by many outside the white South as a measure of slave misery. The stressors experienced by the enslaved largely differed from those of free people, but could overlap. Triggers for slave suicide included ill-treatment, sexual violation, corporal punishment, fear of recapture or punishment, dislocation, and sale. For the enslaved, suicide ended misery, just as it had for white Southerners, but the sources of their torment differed markedly.

Emancipation removed many of the stressors that had led enslaved people to end their lives, yet they continued to suffer, even as the shackles of slavery were removed. Recent works by Jim Downs, Gretchen Long, and Martin Summers have uncovered physical, material, and emotional struggles of newly freed slaves. Studies of emancipation have long emphasized “Jubilee”—the celebrated end of slavery. New emancipation scholarship balances an understandable impulse to revel in the end of human bondage with the realization that the formerly enslaved encountered formidable obstacles in their freedom journey. My research shows that the challenging path to freedom cost many freed people their psychological well-being as they faced formidable pressures both familiar and new. Like white Southerners, they, too, lived in a war zone and inhabited a decimated region after the war in which they faced scarcity, uncertainty, starvation, and exposure. Indeed, the transition from slavery to freedom made African Americans vulnerable in new ways: Where would they live? How would they provide for themselves? How would they secure medical care and food? How would they keep their families intact? Freedmen and freedwomen in the wake of civil war encountered new ordeals like confrontations with employers over the terms of free labor, geographic dislocation, exposure to the elements, hunger, as well as racial violence and abuse. The financial and personal struggles experienced by freedpeople bled into African American households, sites of contest over roles
and power, further contributing to emotional and psychological distress that sometimes resulted in suicidal behavior. Confronted with evidence of psychological afflictions among freedpeople in the postbellum period, Southern whites acknowledged that blacks suffered, but blamed freedom, for which, whites believed, African Americans were ill-equipped.

Methodological challenges for the historian of suicide abound. Historians like Olive Anderson favor the statistical approach to measure the frequency of suicide in a locale to draw conclusions about the state of the society or community they are studying. Copious, detailed records of vital statistics, such as those in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, enable this kind of a study. Such a cache of records does not exist for the nineteenth-century South, which, for the most part, did not require the reporting of vital statistics until the twentieth century. Moreover, coroners in many parts of the South were particularly inept, and records, many quite spotty, were maintained locally, not mandated or collected by a central state authority. During the war, the Confederacy’s efforts at maintaining medical records, including cause of death, were anemic compared to those of the U.S. military. In short, the records do not exist to craft a research design based on quantitative methods. Consequently, it is impossible to know with certainty whether suicidal activity in the South rose during and after the war.

Questions that go beyond mere numbers and that address specific meaning in historical context, nonetheless, can be raised and answered by alternative sources, such as letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, coroners’ reports, and military service and asylum records. These types of evidence invite close, granular interrogation of individual cases of suicides: What was the meaning of suicide for Confederates in the context of the Civil War? What did it mean when a Confederate soldier killed himself before arriving at the front? Or when a young widow, bereft and alone to care for a large family, contemplated suicide? How did slave views of suicide differ from those of white Southerners? What were the attitudes toward suicide in the Civil War South, and did those attitudes change over time? How did race and gender shape the experiences of suicide and responses to those suicides? What are the broader implications of suicide in the Civil War South?

Sources on nineteenth-century suicide cases can be frustratingly scarce, incomplete or brief, plagued by reporting problems, and unreliable. Extant records also reflect gender and racial biases. Overwhelmingly, for instance, American men, then as today, committed lethal (completed) suicides at much higher rates than women, despite the fact that women thought, wrote, and talked about committing suicide more often than men did. Women also
attempted suicide at much higher rates than men. Limiting the scope of this study to completed suicides would have skewed the focus toward men and overlooked critical evidence of nonlethal (uncompleted) suicides and suicidal ideation—ideas about self-destruction that may never have resulted in even an attempted suicide and that are most often associated with females. Expanding the scope of suicide to encompass suicidal behaviors that did not end in death enlarges the pool of actors beyond those culminating in death, mostly male, and includes female actors who entertained suicidal thoughts or tendencies. As a result, I consider a broader scope of suicide, one that includes cases resulting in death, but also suicidal behavior (nonlethal or attempted suicide), suicidal tendencies or thoughts (suicidal ideation), and death wishes or fantasies. Employing a less restrictive definition of suicide especially illuminates the experiences of women, notably those of poor and working classes, and the circumstances that led women to consider death by their own hands. Embracing nonlethal permutations of suicide, importantly, includes self-destructive activity and thought by females, which was robust, but would be lost by relying on the traditional (more restrictive) definition of suicide.

Expanding the analytical framework of suicide to include non-completed acts and suicidal thoughts opens up a wider range of sources including those of asylums, where suicidal people often ended up and from which we gain access to sources about poorer women, who were less likely to write letters or maintain diaries. Those sources also provide access to the agents’ words (sometimes conveyed through family or caregivers, but emanating from suicidal actors themselves) about motives, and answers to questions like why they contemplated killing themselves, why they tried to kill themselves, and why they did not, information unavailable when limiting studies to completed acts of suicide.

Historians of suicide also grapple with the thorny issue of causation, which the limitations of fragmentary and pithy source material only compound. Those who adopt a Durkheimian approach to causation privilege external, structural factors. This analytical framework, however, marginalizes or dismisses the particularities of individuals’ lives, in effect, failing to account for how individuals weathered pressures or suffered, or did not. It fails to honor the lives, the struggles, and the difficult choices Southern men and women faced when contemplating self-destruction. Suicides do not occur in a vacuum, however. The Civil War era provides the social and cultural context for suicidal activity. Any attempt to consider causality of suicide must also take seriously the lived experiences of Southerners as they navigated the shoals of war and its aftermath. In my analysis of suicide causation, I view external pressures and personal circumstances as complementary, not mutually exclu-
The war wreaked havoc on the South’s postwar economy, which shrank opportunities for employment (external forces), but a Southern man’s suicide, ostensibly because he was unable to find a job, might also be linked to additional personal experiences (war trauma, chronic pain from a war wound, death of a family member). *Aberration of Mind* situates suicide in the maelstrom of civil war and the economic, political, and social dislocations of Reconstruction, times of considerable flux and instability, which left Southerners more vulnerable to suicide than before the war. External factors—war trauma, invading armies, scarcity, hunger, property loss, extensive loss of life—bore down on the region with a vengeance, making Southern men and women more susceptible to psychological breakdown and suicidal impulses than in the antebellum period. But this study also considers the lived experiences of Southern men and women and how they handled, or not, the various challenges war and loss laid at their doorsteps.

Motivations for those undertaking voluntary death are complicated, multilayered, and largely obscured. To be clear, it is unlikely that a historian could identify with certainty the cause of any subject’s suicide. The best we can hope for is an “assigned” motive, one attributed by a witness, a coroner, a loved one, or the victim. As historian Victor Bailey concedes, “The real motives that impel a person to suicide are ultimately unfathomable.” Determining the etiology of suicide at any time and under any circumstances poses a significant challenge for the historian who is unaware of myriad factors, hidden from contemporaries as well as historians, that might have played a role, major or minor, in a person’s decision to take his or her life. Yet, much of the suicidal activity in this study occurred in the context of war and its aftermath, including emancipation and defeat. At the very least, then, that the war served as a proximate cause for suicidal behavior in many cases seems likely, and it helps explain why Southerners turned their violent proclivities on their own bodies.

Despite the elusiveness of suicide causation, limited sources, when refracted through the lens of modern psychiatry, can yield important findings about the links between aberrational psychological behavior and war trauma. To take one example: a veteran’s wife, who saw, and reported, no connection between her husband’s military experience and his suicidal behavior, nonetheless, may have informed asylum officials that her husband’s attempts at self-injury surfaced after his return from the front. Pairing current understanding of the psychological effects of combat on a soldier’s mind with this important clue about timing permits reasonable speculation that his suicidal impulses might be linked to his military experience. Combining stingy clues that exist in the historical record with recent findings in medical, neurological, psychiatric, and sociological studies aids in piecing together an
interpretation of nineteenth-century cases of mental illness and suicide that, though not definitive, can lead to plausible conclusions about causation, even when the principal actors themselves remained unaware of the connection.

The knowledge divide between nineteenth-century medical experts, practitioners, and laypeople and the historian also poses a challenge for the study of psychological debility in the Civil War era. Men and women in the Civil War–era South constructed meaning about aberrational behaviors based on their own cultural understanding of medicine and health, shaped as it was by nineteenth-century notions about race, gender, religion, and class. They wrote and spoke about psychological maladies using words different from our own, making it difficult to correlate their observations to our own understanding of the etiology of mental illness. Inhabiting the pre-Freudian world, they possessed limited capacity to link traumatic and stressful experiences to a diminished mental health. Today we speak of clinical depression, stress, anxiety, and mental illness; laypeople are familiar with complicated medical and psychiatric diagnoses, like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, paranoia, and postpartum psychoses. Those living in Civil War America used a different lexicon; they remarked about those plagued with “nerves,” “melancholy,” and “the blue devils.” They described extreme or unusual forms of mental illness generally as “insanity” or “lunacy.” Medical practitioners tending to Civil War soldiers offered diagnoses like nostalgia and irritable heart, no longer recognized by the medical profession. Trying to discern what medical terms meant to Civil War–era actors, through the lens of scientific and psychiatric advancements that followed, is tricky and requires careful consideration of the historical context. Moreover, medical case histories, the best source for studying nineteenth-century psychiatric maladies and treatments, lack adequate personal information to draw even remotely definitive conclusions.

These significant caveats notwithstanding, my interpretation of Southern sources is greatly informed by modern medical and scientific findings and by research in a variety of disciplinary fields including sociology, psychology, neurobiology, and medicine, many of which emanate from studies of twentieth- and twenty-first-century wars. While acknowledging that circumstances and conditions of war differ markedly, and that wartime experiences are not universal, I do believe that participants in warfare, regardless of setting, experience similar feelings and reactions, including fear, apprehension, guilt, and anxiety. It is instructive, therefore, to view accounts of Southern suffering and trauma through the lens of modern science and research. To take just one example, many Southern women during and after the Civil War seemingly suffered from clinical depression. Their own words—in diaries and letters—describe feelings or symptoms associated with depression. In
fact, many Southern women plainly stated they were depressed because of the war. Contemporary studies of warfare in Asian and Middle Eastern war zones document high to very high rates of depressive behavior or stress among civilian populations. So, while nineteenth-century Southerners may not have diagnosed themselves or those around them with depression (though some did), or have linked depression to the stress of war (though some did), social scientists examining these issues today provide a greater degree of certainty that in fact what these diarists and letter writers experienced was war-related depression.25

Recently, historical treatments of psychological disorders like PTSD have been especially scrutinized, and rightly so.26 The most recent edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) requires the presence of multiple and very specific criteria in diagnosing PTSD. An extensive patient history, one based on many questions regarding exposure circumstances and symptoms, is integral to the diagnosis.27 Obviously, nineteenth-century practitioners, unaware of such a condition, would not have asked the questions necessary to determine whether a veteran suffered from PTSD. It is impossible, therefore, for a historian to claim, with assurance, that a Civil War soldier’s behaviors indicated PTSD.28

Given these complicated symptoms and diagnoses, and evidentiary holes, what are the options for a historian who, nonetheless, wishes to understand how a group of people in another time period experienced a traumatic event like war? The first option, not a very satisfying one, is resignation, that because an inconclusive analysis is the only likely outcome, we should avoid the topic altogether. The second, which I adopt in this book, is to concede that no matter how cautiously a historian proceeds, much of what we conclude about how nineteenth-century Americans experienced a variety of mental health ailments is grounded in conjecture. Though imperfect and imprecise, this approach nonetheless advances our understanding of how Southern men and women experienced suffering and suicide in the context of civil war and emancipation. Following in the pathbreaking work of Eric T. Dean Jr. and building on some more recent studies of Civil War medical and military history, I find that voluminous evidence strongly indicates pervasive psychological suffering in the Civil War–era South.29 And I vociferously reject the notion that because nineteenth-century Southerners lacked command of modern scientific information and therapeutic protocols, historians cannot or should not interrogate cases of mental distress in the context of the Civil War. I concur with Jeffrey W. McClurken, who, though he concedes the importance of proceeding cautiously when considering nineteenth-century psychological ailments, nonetheless asserts that caution and skepticism should
not “preclude acknowledging the significant impact” of myriad war-related stresses and demands on Southerners’ mental health.\textsuperscript{30}

While the American Civil War is the most studied event in American history, the psychological and emotional impact of the Civil War on Americans has received far less coverage. Over twenty years ago, historian Maris A. Vinovskis chastised social historians for ignoring the effects of the war on the lives of ordinary Americans. Although much good social history on the Civil War has emerged since then, especially on gender and race, scant attention has been paid to the personal and psychological impact of loss and suffering on Southerners. In part, historians’ insufficient attention on the topic might be explained by concern that any attempt to take seriously the emotional, physical, and material suffering of white Southerners, instigators of civil war in the eyes of many, might be misconstrued as sympathy or implicit support for slaveholding secessionists. After all, much of the popular and scholarly treatment of the war and Reconstruction that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries privileged the “white Southerner as victim” model with insidious and long-lasting results. Yet if we are to comprehend fully the human costs of the Civil War and then consider the impact of those costs, it becomes imperative to consider the circumstances in which many Southerners took their own lives and how these actions shaped perceptions and meanings of self-murder. A fundamental aim of this study, therefore, is to survey the psychological and emotional damage of the Civil War on Southerners in order to provide a fuller accounting of the war’s costs on its participants.

This book heeds Vinovskis’s clarion call to consider the impact of the Civil War on ordinary Americans in other ways. First, it explores the emotional culture of the wartime South, as well as the psychological costs of the American Civil War, by tracing the “emotional footprint” left by war.\textsuperscript{31} American historians are latecomers to the history of mental illness and especially suicide. This work, then, contributes to a thin but growing body of literature on the history of mental illness generally and on suicide specifically, in the Southern region, but with implications nationally. The Civil War took a great toll psychologically on both Northerners and Southerners. It is not an exaggeration to suggest the war triggered a psychological crisis nationwide. However, certain factors dictate that Southern men and women bore a greater emotional cost than their counterparts in the North. First, a higher percentage of males served in the Confederate military, meaning that more families in the South were affected adversely by the loss or absence of a male family member or by an emotionally scarred veteran.\textsuperscript{32} Sec-
ond, antebellum Southern families were larger than Northern families, so
the burdens fell harder on Southern households. The responsibility of
providing for many children pushed quite a few mothers and fathers to their
limits. Third, because the majority of fighting took place on Southern soil,
Southerners suffered greater material and financial deprivation than North-
ers. Fourth, and finally, white Southerners had to deal with the specter of
defeat. So in addition to individual suffering, Southerners had to process
the added burden of losing a war and forging a future, a future many white
Southerners deemed hopeless.

A study of the psychological impact of the Civil War on ordinary South-
ers also offers insight into the issues of national reconciliation and iden-
tity. My book follows the thread of suffering and suicide through the war and
after to show that white Southerners crafted, through the collective experi-
ences of suffering, sacrifice, loss, and despair, an identity that helped them
make sense of the vast personal and national ruin. So while the findings of
this book render a fuller picture of the human suffering caused by civil war,
I also argue that ex-Confederates, steeped in the shared experiences of per-
vasive material and emotional misery that sometimes culminated in suicide,
refashioned their identity on the basis of that suffering, the wellspring of
important new signifiers of regional and racial difference. The experiences
of defeat and war, and the suffering each engendered, forged a “community
of suffering,” a bond that united white Southern men and women, poor and
elites, low-country and up-country, artisans and farmers, educated and un-
educated, the faithful and the profane. To be sure, suffering figured promi-
nently in the religious and cultural life of Victorian America, but the war and
its devastation plunged Southerners into unprecedented depths of grief and
distress, which tested the capacity of Southerners to endure emotional pain.
No Southerner went untouched by death, deprivation, anxiety, or fear gen-
erated by war and its aftermath. The shared experience of suffering, while
varying in degree and duration, helped cultivate an identity of a defeated
people during the war and sustained them after surrender. As Anne Sarah
Rubin has shown, Confederates’ sense of self outlasted the demise of the po-
litical edifice that was the Confederacy. Suffering, and its most dramatic
manifestation, suicide, anchored that identity by both politicizing and racial-
izing misery in the postwar white South and framed who they were as a
people. Misery emerged from war as a marker of distinction among white
Southerners, and suicide, an emblem of patriotic sacrifice among a chosen
people. The cause that was lost was honorable in no small measure because
of the suffering they endured and shared. Suicide victims, among the most
extreme examples of Confederate suffering, were lauded as martyrs of the
cause.
Of late, it has become fashionable to speak of the “dark turn” in the historiography of the Civil War.\(^{36}\) Eric T. Dean Jr.’s comparison of the psychological effects of war on veterans of both the Vietnam War and the American Civil War, *Shook over Hell* (1997), stands as the first big work to focus on the underside of battle, although Drew Gilpin Faust’s seminal monograph *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008) is certainly the most influential treatment of a “dark” Civil War subject. Since then, Civil War historians increasingly have been drawn to topics that speak to the gritty, realistic side of the war: death, suffering, cowardice, disease, amputation, atrocities, and mental illness.\(^{37}\) Implicitly or explicitly, the authors of such works counter triumphalist treatments of Civil War history that privilege generals, military strategy, and battlefield heroics, and that too often sanitize war’s uglier side, ignoring or minimizing the suffering and failings of common soldiers and civilians. Historians of “the dark turn” insist that the consequences of battle tactics, technological advances in weaponry, military leadership, and politicians’ machinations, important to be sure, receive their due. Besides illuminating topics—death, amputations, ruined landscapes, and war trauma, for example—that largely have escaped the attention of historians, the “new revisionists” seek to uncover the ordinary lives of men and women affected by the war. In essence, these historians seek a more realistic, comprehensive view of Civil War history. A major aim of this book, to unlock some of the hidden histories of ordinary men and women, and to gauge how they were affected by war, aligns with the focus, sensibilities, and approaches of “dark turn” history.

It is important to note, however, that merely focusing on “dark” topics like suicide and psychological distress does not imply these experiences were typical in the Civil War-era South. Many, if not most, Southerners emerged from seismic events like civil war and emancipation with their psyches seemingly intact. The majority of Southerners did not require institutionalization, nor did they take their own lives. Many soldiers proved resilient under trying conditions; most appear to have successfully reintegrated into civilian life after the war, although there is no way to know for sure. Historians lack the means to measure the pervasiveness of mental strain or illness among Southerners during or after the war, so it is impossible to speak of a “typical” experience. Certainly those who killed themselves or who ended up in asylums represented the most severe cases of those suffering from war’s fallout. But bringing scholarly attention to war-related emotional and psychological struggles of the South’s men and women does not “overemphasize” trauma, as a few critics of “dark turn” scholarship have charged. Instead, it better in-
forms us about the broader social, cultural, and personal landscape of the wartime and postbellum South, provides insight into the meaning of suffering for a wider spectrum of people in the nineteenth-century South, and both enhances and complicates our understanding of the varied Civil War experiences. Within these pages are the men and women for whom war truly was hell.38

In addition to examining the effect of war-related pressures on the mental well-being of Southerners, a study of wartime suicide in the American South, steeped in dislocation and pervasive suffering, reveals social and cultural developments ushered in by civil war. Among the most salient of these was the change in attitudes toward those who took their lives, which evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. Most antebellum Americans roundly condemned suicide in moral and religious terms. Religious doctrine decried suicide as a mortal sin, as ministers and priests railed against the act as an encroachment on God’s supreme authority. Virtually all Protestant sects in nineteenth-century America regarded suicide as a form of murder and so denounced it as sinful.39 Antebellum Southerners’ views on suicide mirrored those of the major national denominations’ teachings. A prewar novel, for example, written by an Alabama senator, denounced “the cowardly grave of the suicide.”40 A poem published in 1860 by a Georgia woman, titled “The Grave of a Suicide,” mocked a female suicide victim: “The child of guilt and pride; / Who scorned to live with those who spurned her here.” The poetess admonished, “Tears cannot wipe the sin from off thy soul, / Nor blot from off her lifeless form its stain.”41 A University of North Carolina student, recounting in February 1861 that a classmate of his had overdosed intentionally on laudanum, acknowledged the horrific consequence of suicide: “A self-murder as this has received the awful doom which sentences him to eternal death.”42 Secular and religious minds in the antebellum South concurred: suicide was sinful and disgraceful.

When despairing Southern men and women took their own lives before the Civil War, the acts were viewed as evidence of spiritual failing and the victims judged as unwilling to bear life’s trials as Christ had modeled. A Louisiana newspaper in 1841, for example, reprinted a Baltimore account of a young woman who hanged herself because her beau refused to marry her. “Had she feared God as much as she appears to have loved man,” the newspaper chided, “she would have wiped her lover’s last kiss from her lips, and been resigned to the loss of a heartless wretch.” The newspaper ridiculed the love-struck woman for her fatal deed and withheld compassion because she
had failed an earthly test. Instead of trusting God to see her through her tribulations, she succumbed to one of many life difficulties and became a cautionary tale of what happens when God’s followers fail to heed calls to forbearance in the face of adversity.43

The war helped to temper the harsh, judgmental and contemptuous posture toward suicide that prevailed before the Civil War. A more empathetic ethos regarding self-murder emerged during the war and then flourished after, eventually transforming a societal and religious taboo to, at times, a heroic act often associated with patriotism, sacrifice, and bravery, which, by century’s end, became embraced as an emblem of Confederate identity that outlived the nation that created it.

The rigid, intolerant antebellum views on suicide, propagated by doctrinal and theological precepts, gave way to a more humanitarian, secular, and sympathetic view, in no small part, I argue, due to the widespread and pervasive suffering experienced by Southerners. With the experience of thousands of lives cut short by violent means, white Southerners began to rethink victimhood by one’s own hand, too. The postwar discourse of suicide in political, medical, personal, and literary texts reflects a change in the cultural meaning of suicide in the wake of war and Confederate loss, though, to be sure, theological doctrine on suicide stubbornly resisted relaxation and was by no means completely upended. But by the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, suicide in the South came to be viewed in many quarters as heroic and patriotic, signaling a sea change in how self-murder came to be viewed throughout much of the South. Heroic or tragic suicides emerged from the culture of sacrifice, so closely linked to the ideology of the Lost Cause and to the development and perpetuation of Confederate nationalism.

While suicide came to symbolize the ultimate sacrifice for white Confederate ideals in the postbellum years, it developed into something entirely different when committed by black Southerners. In reconfiguring the New South without slavery, the defining feature of the antebellum South, cultural markers were needed to further differentiate the races. Long-suffering white Southerners had sacrificed limbs, treasure, lives, and a way of life in a failed attempt at independence. The elevation and glorification of (white) suffering and sacrifice required the denigration or denial of black suffering. Black suicides therefore had to be sullied to further distance the experience from that of whites. African American Southerners, accused of possessing inferior and lower-functioning faculties, came to be regarded as impervious to depression and therefore only rarely suicidal. Suicide, noble and tragic, became an indicator of (white) civilization in the postwar period as measured by the extensive war-related suffering.
My commitment to explore how all Southerners—black and white, male and female, soldier and civilian—experienced suffering in the Civil War-era South requires an organizational and conceptual structure that is more asymmetrical and unconventional than is ideal. Several factors dictate a quasi-chronological organization framed around the segregated treatment of my subject groups, namely the size of the source bases, the types of sources, and the disparate circumstances of each of the various groups. For example, while soldiers generated voluminous service records, Confederate women and African Americans did not, yielding a skewed evidentiary base. Any attempt, therefore, to frame a wartime chapter that integrates all three groups, usually the preferred model, would disproportionately focus on the male soldiers. Additionally, the perennial problem of archival silence regarding African Americans precludes a separate wartime chapter for the enslaved, as I have done for Confederate Southerners, or even coverage in the same chapter as Confederate men and women, because there are so few records documenting suicide incidents among the enslaved during the war years. And because the stressors for each group varied according to their circumstances, starkly so in some cases, separate analytical treatment is warranted.

I therefore have opted to frame the book in several sections, loosely around war and emancipation and around subjects: two chapters on Confederate men and women during the war and three chapters after the war and two chapters on African Americans, one focused on slavery, the other on emancipation. In a final chapter, I step back to consider the major changes in the cultural and religious landscape of suffering and suicide in the long nineteenth century that, I argue, resulted in large part from the war. This final chapter, chronologically self-contained, is distinct methodologically from the others because it focuses on the intellectual and theological discourse of suicide, so it merits separate treatment.

The experiences of Confederate men during the war years are the subject of my first chapter. Until recently we knew little about the psychological impact of the war on Southern soldiers. Historians did not consider that a nineteenth-century war, lacking the weapons of mass destruction of modern wars, could cause serious psychological trauma among soldiers. Sources on Confederate veterans are more elusive than those on their Union counterparts, so the few published works that examine war trauma among Civil War soldiers are heavily skewed to Northern subjects. Nonetheless, Confederate soldiers maneuvering in the war zone suffered debilitating psychological effects that sometimes resulted in institutionalization or suicidal incidents. Not surprising, Southern soldiers exposed to combat and the gruesome images of
battlefield death and mayhem (external war-related pressures) at times struggled emotionally. Southern white men also battled with cultural expectations for masculine performance in wartime (internal pressures). Constrained by masculine codes of behavior that required soldiers to display courage and honor on the battlefield, many collapsed emotionally under the combined weight of war trauma and fear of masculine failure. A number of them conceived self-inflicted death as an honorable exit from perceived dishonor and shame, even if relatively few acted on those thoughts.

Confederate women, too, suffered psychologically as a consequence of war. Building on well-established scholarship that casts the Civil War as a crisis in gender, I examine in chapter 2 the impact of emotional trauma on Southern white women living in and around the war zone and suggest that many Confederate women, unaccustomed to new roles as provider and household head, found the added demands of war unbearable and succumbed to mental illness and sometimes suicide. War necessitated the withdrawal of menfolk from their households, which had dire consequences for women. The most vulnerable white women in the South, young mothers and widows, suffered disproportionately as measured by their higher rates of institutionalization and by their more frequent engagement in suicidal activity. They may well have comprised a minority of Confederate women’s experiences, but their stories and trials merit telling in the story of gender and the Civil War.

Chapter 3 surveys suicide among the enslaved, a practice long recognized by historians of slavery. While most historical treatments of slave suicide frame it within the resistance model, I argue for the adoption of a neo-abolitionist perspective (initially embraced by antebellum anti-slavery activists) that looks to the individual circumstances of the enslaved who killed themselves, in part because this approach more fully honors the suffering (and full humanity) of the enslaved and their decisions to end suffering with self-inflicted death. As the formerly enslaved welcomed emancipation, they, too, suffered emotionally in the postbellum period as they negotiated the terrain of a war-torn region. Some of these died by their own hands. This is the subject and focus of chapter 4. Although fewer records of African American suicide exist, I have located a number of suicides by formerly enslaved people, like the unwell Virginia freedman described as “dispirited and apparently without aim or object.” Southern whites, though, refused to concede that the region’s African American population suffered and clung to the belief that they were not prone to suicide, despite a postwar explosion of black inmates in insane asylums, including some who were suicidal. Southern whites constructed racialized explanations and diagnoses for the rise of black insanity in emancipation, for which, they claimed, ex-slaves were ill-prepared.
Chapters 5–7 return to white Southerners and their experiences in the postwar South. Veterans returned home, many of them mentally broken and barely recognizable to loved ones. The scars of battle trauma were now compounded by the humiliation of defeat, the destruction of the Confederacy and fears for the future of the former slaveholding republic, financial ruin, political impotence, and damaged farms and plantations. The daunting challenges of the postwar period, to rebuild the devastated region, to repair the shattered economy and infrastructure, and to reconstitute families, fell to men, whose identities as men had been undercut by war and defeat. Chapter 5 traces the trek of Confederate veterans as they attempted to reintegrate into civilian life, despite the myriad struggles related to their military service. Former POWs, amputees, alcoholics, and addicts struggled to regain status in the home and in the public sphere. Chapter 6 examines the plight of Southern white men, who faced financial ruin and deprivation in a postwar South in which employment opportunities and personal fortunes vanished. “Loss of property” and “pecuniary difficulty” account for many Southern men’s suffering and suicidal episodes after the war. Financial failure fell especially hard on male heads of household, whose identities fused with their ability to provide for their families. Scores of Southern men after the war struggled to cope with economic ruin and loss, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Jane Turner Censer has noted how little scholarly attention has been paid to white women after the war, surprising given the voluminous works on white women in the antebellum and Civil War South.\textsuperscript{45} Chapter 7 seeks to address this imbalance by exploring the emotional and material suffering of white Southern women after the war. Scholarly and popular treatments of Confederate women after the war, abetted by Lost Cause efforts, overwhelmingly have emphasized their resiliency and fortitude. This emphasis, while not without some basis in fact, obscures the extent to which many Southern white women struggled in the wake of postwar economic disaster and personal tragedies tied to the war. This chapter surveys the numerous challenges ex-Confederate women faced and the psychological toll they sometimes exacted. Mounting debt, high taxes, loss of property, geographic dislocation, altercations with former slaves, troubled marriages, and grief over the deaths of loved ones contributed to profound individual suffering that resulted in the institutionalization or even suicide of many white women. A reconfigured South depended on a bedrock of resilient families and communities. With Southern families fractured and tormented, the foundation on which a defeated, demoralized people expected to raise a healthy, new edifice would prove shaky.

The final chapter, chapter 8, surveys the long nineteenth century with an eye toward assessing how suffering and suicidal activity during the war
ushered in cultural and religious changes in ideas about suicide and the importance of those changes in laying the groundwork for a new Confederate identity. The psychological crisis that grew out of the Civil War remapped the cultural and intellectual contours of the region. The scourge of war-related psychiatric casualties altered long-held axioms about suicide, yielding, if haltingly at first, a more tolerant, nuanced understanding of self-destruction as a response to suffering, one that found expression in sympathy and compassion for suicide victims. As (apparently) increasing numbers of men and women died by their own hands, suicide became more familiar in Southern society. All Southerners knew someone who had committed or attempted suicide, if not personally, then from newspaper accounts. Suicide was no longer a mere hypothetical act of desperation most Southerners had been socialized to despise and condemn. Many may not have approved, but they understood. More routinely, denunciations of suicide were replaced with compassionate resignation. The act of suicide denotes, Lisa Lieberman writes, “dissatisfaction with the present and a repudiation of hope in the future.” All white Southerners, and many African Americans as well, remained deeply unhappy with their circumstances during and after the Civil War and saw little reason for optimism in the future. Death by choice, “the ultimate way out of emotional, social, or economic problems that appear insoluble,” as an avenue of escape, made sense. Southerners killed themselves foremost as a way to end their suffering and to exit an inhospitable, unfamiliar, frightening world. It was their new reality.

Historian Stephen Berry, musing about future trends in Civil War historiography recently offered that “war is about damage, even at its most heroic, even when certain people and things deserve to be damaged.” While wars often bring out the best in people, including heroic displays and great personal sacrifice, and introduce opportunities that did not and would not exist outside of war, war has an ugly side. It damages. It damages landscapes. It damages economies. It damages infrastructure. It damages people, their minds and their souls. What follows in this book is simply a story about how the Civil War psychologically and emotionally damaged Southerners, and how that psychological injury shaped the contours of the New South.