Aberration of Mind
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Chapter 6

The Distressed State of the Country

Confederate Men and the Navigation of Economic, Political, and Emotional Ruin in the Postwar South

It is obvious that the emancipation of the slaves and the collapse of our whole social system after the Civil War, the depletion in men, the wreckage in buildings and forests, the years of neglect of agriculture, the penniless condition of the best element among us, and their unfitness for manual labor, would mean ruin for a long time.

— Marietta Minningerode Andrews, Memoirs of a Poor Relation

Combat-related stress goes a long way in explaining the antisocial or self-destructive behaviors of Confederate veterans. But transitioning back to civilian life proved even more difficult for Southern white men, who in the years after the war, already weighted down by defeat and war trauma, faced financial ruin and political emasculation. Unlike the North, the South experienced extensive physical damage that made rebuilding difficult. Emancipation eliminated the chief form of Southern wealth virtually overnight. Financial difficulties, or, to use the phrase of the day, “pecuniary embarrassment,” underscored the failure of men, veterans and non-combatants, to fulfill one of the basic responsibilities of manhood: providing for one’s family. Moreover, indebtedness signaled dependency, severely undermining the basis of masculine identity and privilege.1 The combined weight of financial ruin and embarrassment, on top of political banishment and festering anguish from combat memory, proved too much for some ex-Confederates. As joyous as homecomings were, Southern men could not deny the massive work that lay ahead to rebuild. The physical reconstruction of homes, barns, fields, and infrastructure awaited. The economy, in shambles, offered few opportunities for men desperate to resume their roles as heads of household and as breadwinners for their families. With little or no money, sharply diminished wealth, and dim job prospects, Southern men faced a dismal outlook with little hope for a quick turnaround.

Even the most resilient veterans, those seemingly impervious to battle trauma, who attempted to put the war behind them, faced a present and future that was at once bleak and hopeless. Marietta Minningerode Andrews explained the white Southern outlook at war’s end: “It is obvious
that the emancipation of the slaves and the collapse of our whole social sys-
tem after the Civil War, the depletion in men, the wreckage in buildings and
forests, the years of neglect of agriculture, the penniless condition of the best
element among us, and their unfitness for manual labor, would mean ruin
for a long time.” Business failures and unemployment were endemic in the
postbellum South. The inability to provide for one’s family in an environ-
ment of economic uncertainty beleaguered many white men of the region.

Andrews knew firsthand how the one-two punch of war and postwar eco-
nomic malaise could shatter a man. She recounted in her memoir how her
father, Charles Minnigerode, a former aide-de-camp to Confederate general
Fitzhugh Lee, was struck by a minié ball at Appomattox at age nineteen, leav-
ing him with a lifelong limp. After the war, a series of business failures
bedeviled him and rendered him unable to support his growing family,
which bounced around from relative to relative; young children fanned out
to earn much-needed money. Mounting debt forced the sale of family
silver. As Charles Minnigerode became depressed, anxious, and embar-
rassed by his failings as a provider, his wife grew impatient and frustrated.
The unwelcome announcement that he was about to become a father for
the eleventh time proved to be the breaking point. He committed suicide
in 1888, a casualty of the war just as if he had died from his wound that day
at Appomattox.

Men who had devoted lifetimes to building businesses and cultivating rep-
utations and relationships crumbled in the face of business failures, which
pervaded the Reconstruction South. Seventy-two-year-old Sidnum Grady
committed suicide in 1866 by ingesting laudanum. Friends knew he had been
depressed over losing all his property during the evacuation of Richmond in
1865. He had attempted to kill himself once before, telling friends he would
rather be dead. A slave trader, Grady not only lost all of his property during
the war, but he also lost his profession and means of income with emancipa-
tion. In a note he drafted and pinned onto his shirt, Grady explained that he
had contemplated suicide for some time. The note further expanded on what
was common knowledge in the neighborhood: Grady had no means of sup-
port, had to move in with his brother, which he knew made him a burden,
and so was determined to “rid himself of his troubles that were greater than
he could bear.” Postwar business failings also plagued prominent Knoxville
citizen John M. Hendrix, who drowned himself in the Holston River in
November 1867. Hendrix was driven to suicide, it was believed, by failure in
business and despondency. A sixty-year-old Savannah tailor, Michael Carey,
took an overdose of laudanum to end his life in early 1867. Carey had an ex-
cellent reputation in the city as a good workman and, “until recently,” had a
good business.
Business failure in nineteenth-century America represented a significant challenge to masculine identity. Work, as E. Anthony Rotundo has argued, constituted more than simply a source of income for men. It was, of course, linked to a man’s duty to support his family, but it was so much more. A man’s work, often the culmination of years or decades of hard work and networking, determined his social position and status and comprised the source of social and economic power and pride. Work served utilitarian purposes as well, functioning as a refuge from bad marriages and emotional pain; a man could redirect his energies and focus away from sadness and discord at home by spending more time at work, which proved exciting and rewarding. Catherine Barbara Broun’s husband, Edwin, mourned the lack of business after the war and became despondent. Before the war, he had been a merchant; after, he resorted to farming. “He is such a business character that he cannot be happy without the excitement of business.” Work represented the most important source of masculine identity, especially in the late nineteenth century. Quoting Rotundo, “Work could serve to reassure a man about his manhood and about the freedom and power that manhood betokened.” A white man’s business failure in the postwar South eviscerated his sense of self. Because economic opportunities evaporated after the war, Southern men were unable to channel their emotional suffering into productive outlets like work. Consumed by failure at home, on the military front, and at work, Southern men, many of them, collapsed psychologically. Some committed suicide, while others ended up in asylums. Ludwig Hatje, a German-born merchant from South Carolina, grew despondent, indifferent, and melancholic in response to failure in business and landed in the insane asylum in Columbia in 1878. His patient record indicates that an older brother also had become insane as a consequence of failure in business. William G. Roberts likewise ended up in the same asylum in 1877 because he was a failure in the mercantile business and in deep financial trouble. The patient was both suicidal and delusional: he believed himself to be a Roman Catholic priest; he was, in fact, a Methodist.

Financial calamity and material deprivation awaited Confederate men returning home. The dire situation bred despair and pessimism about the future among Southern men. Money worries and loss of property paralyzed numerous ex-Confederates. Women, too, worried about their families’ financial well-being, but men experienced economic misfortune personally. Debt and financial ruin signaled dependency as well as the inability to fulfill one of the chief responsibilities as head of household: that of provider. Historian Scott A. Sandage makes the point that economic failure fell harder on men because “economic impotence stripped them of the masculine prerogatives to buy and sell, to borrow and repay, to contract and exchange.” Scores of
Southern men struggled in the face of economic failure. For many, the burden proved too great. Following war’s end, Georgia schoolteacher Henry Lewis became gripped with fears he might not be able to provide adequately for his family. Loss of property and worries that his family might starve led the sixty-year-old to make preparations to take his own life, by poisoning, hanging, or shooting himself. A suicidal James Teat, aged fifty-six, from Georgia entered the asylum in 1867. He lost both a son and a long-held office due to the war, the latter which weighed heavily on Teat, who felt the pressure to provide for his large family. Overwhelmed, he threatened suicide frequently though made no any serious attempt. These threatened suicides underscore the irrationality of these men’s thinking: they were consumed by worries about the financial well-being of the families dependent on them, yet their plights and prospects for recovery would only be worsened by the deaths of the heads of household.

“Pecuniary matters” plagued Joseph Burton of Petersburg so that he shot himself through the head just months after the surrender. Known as a quiet, elderly man “with settled habits” and “a good citizen and kind father,” Burton had been very depressed of late about financial matters. The press did not directly reference the ten-month siege of Petersburg that preceded the end of war, but noted that “fears of coming to want, from the dullness of business since the evacuation, have preyed upon his mind.” Burton may have been forced to flee the city during this time, which would have proved quite unsettling. Or, if he had stayed, it would have been a harrowing time for him. As a grocer, the siege specifically and the war generally would have adversely affected his livelihood. Whatever his fate during the siege, business languished afterward, impelling him to “the dreadful deed.” Augustus Buschonce of Atlanta committed suicide in June 1871, the cause of which was reportedly loss of fortune. Hartwell Harding, too, struggled with financial distress after the war. He had “in antebellum times” enjoyed “a fine estate.” Since the war, “like the great majority of Southern people,” he had been “pecuniarily embarrassed.” His personal misfortune weighed heavily on his mind and occasioned “greatest uneasiness.” Such was the explanation when the sixty-seven-year-old North Carolina farmer shot himself in the head with a double-barreled gun in the spring of 1869. Stress about finances overlapped with concern about the welfare of at least one, maybe two, teenaged sons whom Harding sent off to war. Son James survived the war, but he was wounded, hospitalized a few times, and held as a prisoner of war, the kind of stress that took its toll on wartime fathers.

Financial collapse in the postwar South wiped out jobs and businesses, ushering in severe un- and underemployment throughout the region. The inability to find work after the war and the hopelessness that conditions would
improve in the future led some former Confederates to take their own lives. Samuel Hanson served as a clerk in the Confederate Post Office in Richmond during the war but was unable to find employment afterward, which led to his suicide in Washington, D.C., in 1866. Hanson formerly held a position with the U.S. Post Office in Washington, D.C., before war broke out. It is likely that Hanson’s disloyalty in leaving the U.S. post to work for the Confederate postal service in Richmond would have barred re-employment in a post office, resulting in frustration and an inability to find suitable work.\textsuperscript{19}

In addition to diminished prospects for work, Southern white men experienced reversals of fortune and evaporation of wealth and property that also contributed to their mental decline. Concern about loss of property, along with the death of his wife, led to the hospitalization of Lemmon Dunn, a Georgia farmer.\textsuperscript{20} Fifty-eight-year-old Stinson Jarrell, also from Georgia, suffered loss of property as a result of the war, which asylum officials recorded as the cause of his insanity.\textsuperscript{21} Likewise, James Black was institutionalized in 1867 due to mental anguish brought on by “loss of property.”\textsuperscript{22} That same year Georgia asylum officials welcomed the aged Edward Varner, noting that the seventy-six-year-old suffered “paroxysms of excitement” supposedly due to “loss of property under the disturbed state of the country.”\textsuperscript{23} Family members, fearful that John Fricks would act on suicidal threats, committed him to the Georgia state asylum in December 1868. His suicidal tendencies also were attributable to “loss of his property.”\textsuperscript{24}

The amount of wealth Southerners lost after the war was staggering. Comparing census data from the years 1860 and 1870, Jeffrey W. McClurken, in his study of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, finds that the value of real estate per veteran household declined over 63 percent, with the value of personal property dropping even more dramatically, by over 92 percent, an indicator of the financial impact of emancipation on Virginia households.\textsuperscript{25} Emancipation wiped out the wealth of many slaveholding families. Take, for instance, the Virginia family of Charles A. Berry. In 1860, he possessed over $10,000 in personal property, largely slaves. When war came, he enlisted, served in a Virginia cavalry unit as a teamster and wagoner, and survived. In 1870, the extent of his loss in personal property was registered in census records, which showed personal wealth worth a mere $250. Berry drowned himself in the Machodoc Creek in Virginia in 1871.\textsuperscript{26} Sixty-two-year-old William Barrow hanged himself in his gin house in early 1867. He placed a rope around his neck and jumped off a cotton bale. The Natchez newspaper explained that he had lost “a great deal of property in the late war.” Since the surrender, Barrow had tried various ways to recover “his broken fortunes,” but “misfortune attended every effort.” Barrow was also the father of two teenaged sons who served in the Confederate army, both of whom survived, but suffered
from wounds and illness. At sixty-one, Rivers Gunter was too old to have served in the army when the war broke out. Nonetheless, he experienced trauma during the war that contributed to his loss of sanity. He first became symptomatic in 1865 when he was “frightened by Sherman’s raid.” Subsequent loss of property was blamed for aberrational cognitive and psychological symptoms like loss of reasoning, rambling propensities, “furious habits,” and destruction of his bedding. At the advanced age of seventy-six, he ended up in the South Carolina insane asylum. Charlestonian Clarence S. Fishburne was deemed insane in 1876, also ostensibly because of “loss of property.” He was found with laudanum in his possession and so was presumed to be a suicidal threat.

Southern white men beset by “pecuniary difficulties” after the war were embarrassed by their inability to provide for their families. Many equated financial failure with poor character, a holdover from antebellum times, even though intellectually most understood that the war and its aftermath were to blame. Robert Epps, a twenty-nine-year-old father of four, entered the South Carolina asylum in 1878 diagnosed with “monomania,” the cause of which was “depressing effects of his financial affairs.” G. Griffin of Monroe, Georgia, shot himself through the head in 1878, ostensibly due to “pecuniary troubles.” He remarked before his death that “there was only one black sheep in the family and he intended to kill him.” A German-born watchmaker from Richmond who had served in the Virginia infantry during the Civil War, Emil Wacker, made good on an oft-repeated threat and killed himself in February 1871 despite his wife’s pleadings. Wacker replied, “I am done. It is too late,” then shot himself. Wacker suffered from “pecuniary troubles.”

In an extreme case of domestic violence triggered by financial strain, veteran Martin Gilgan killed his wife and then himself in 1867. The thirty-four-year-old grocer, the Mobile newspaper speculated, had labored under a temporary “aberration of the mind” at the time he committed the horrific act, prompted by “pecuniary troubles.” Gilgan, an Irish immigrant, had done well for himself. In 1860, he appears in the household of a well-to-do Mobile merchant as a laborer. The following year he secured work as a porter for an importer and dealer in hardware and cutlery. The war interrupted his civilian life, but by 1866 he had become a grocer and probably owned his own store. The postwar depression, though, threatened virtually everyone’s financial well-being in the South, but Gilgan suffered a personal loss when fire destroyed his store on New Year’s. He had made ominous statements before his death that in hindsight suggest he had been planning at least his own suicide for a while. To one friend he swore that he would have enough money to pay all his debts or “he would never be seen in Mobile again alive.”
The extent to which Southern men became preoccupied with, in some cases obsessed about, their inability to provide for their families in the postbellum South is exemplified by the curious case of Frederick Lamback of Augusta, Georgia. Family members reported that Lamback began showing signs of an altered mental state in late 1865, right after the end of the war, when he displayed classic symptoms of severe depression: he was “low spirited, very desponding and careless in his dress.” By 1870, he had become delusional, believing that he was poverty-stricken and unable to support his family, “moaning, groaning, and bewailing his poverty.” He complained to his physician that he had not slept in fifty years; he believed that a portion of his body was missing. He became suicidal, causing loved ones to take precautions, like nailing shut the windows, removing the pistol from his desk, and notifying local gunsmiths not to sell him any guns. Son George worried about his father overdosing, so he kept drugs away from him, even secretly replacing morphine with quinine in a preemptive attempt to thwart a suicide attempt. He also assigned a servant to shadow his father to ensure he did not attempt to drown himself. Rumors circulated that Lamback had unsuccessfully attempted suicide by a pistol. Despite these strenuous efforts to prevent Lamback from killing himself, he triumphed over his caregivers: he “was determined to starve himself to death, and he succeeded in so doing,” according to his doctor, who diagnosed Lamback with “monomania about property.” The irony of the case is that Lamback was not poverty-stricken; far from it. Despite complaints that he “had no means of livelihood” to buy necessities like medicine and food, Lamback died a well-off man. Court documents reveal that at his death he held several properties. He appears to have been a partner in a manufacturing business that, though it went through some transformations and changes of partners, appears to have survived his death. Attempts to convince Lamback that he was not destitute fell on deaf ears. A former employee, Edward Pierce, encountered Lamback about a year before his death, whereupon he complained to Pierce about being a pauper. An incredulous Pierce countered that surely he must be worth at least $40,000–$50,000. Lamback carped, “What is $40,000. I ought to be worth a million. I have lost everything.”34 Lamback’s delusions about being poverty-stricken, indeed his obsession with financial loss, reflect in the extreme Southern white men’s greatest fear, especially so in the postwar years: the inability to fulfill the basic requirements of paternalism, providing for their families.

Thoughts about loss of personal property preoccupied numerous white Southern men in the postwar South, causing many to become deranged or to contemplate suicide. Delusions, like those of Lamback, often revolved around money and issues of subsistence or starvation, a reflection of men’s deepest fears about their failings as providers. Forty-year-old Thomas Beamish of
Charleston entered the South Carolina insane asylum, driven mad by financial embarrassment. He presented with delusions relating to money: he imagined himself a millionaire, “all powerful with unlimited control in both church and state affairs.”

E. White Fenn of Charleston had fallen on hard times since he lost his teaching position in 1870, the main factor, according to asylum officials, in causing him to go insane. He had become restless, destructive, and violent, threatening suicide several times and once loaded a pistol with the intent of shooting himself, and so he was admitted to the asylum, where he expressed delusional and obsessive thoughts. Fenn believed he and others were going to starve to death. He also was preoccupied with the notion of supporting himself and his wife.

Asylum patient Archie McAlister also harbored delusions related to destitution. The sixty-two-year-old Irish immigrant farmer was believed driven to insanity by loss of property and destitution. He had been unable to provide for his large family of ten children. One of his chief delusions was that his children were going to starve to death.

He had once attempted to kill himself with a gun and often threatened his wife and children. An inability to provide for his family also drove Edward Edwards to try to kill himself. He was discovered in Alexandria, Virginia, in May 1869 with his throat cut and bleeding profusely, an obvious suicide attempt. He had on his body a letter addressed to his wife but divulged very little personal information. Strangers carried him to the almshouse, where he received medical attention, but he refused to eat, saying that he intended to starve himself since he failed to kill himself on the first attempt. The scant information he disclosed was that he had a wife and family that he was unable to support, so he did not care to live.

Indebtedness, like unemployment, scourged the Reconstruction South and plagued nearly all Southerners, but was experienced in a gendered way. For men, debt underscored dependency, another assault on Southern manhood. Moreover, the inability to pay a debt affected a man’s reputation. A man who could not be trusted to honor a debt was not trustworthy and therefore was ostracized from local commercial and business networks. The crushing weight of postwar debt thus had emotional consequences that contributed to suicides, like that of Woodson Jones of Richmond, who hanged himself in 1874 after several failed suicide attempts including jumping into a well. His wife, Mary Jones, explained to a coroner’s jury that his mental well-being was first compromised by troubles that arose from being in debt. The Atlanta suicide of Samuel J. Anderson in late 1874 was believed prompted by an inability to pay a debt. Anderson had brokered an arrangement with Robert Toombs, a former cabinet secretary in the Confederate government, for employment in his law firm, but a misunderstanding emerged regarding the duration of that arrangement. When Anderson attempted to pay a debt on a
draft drawn on Toombs’s account and it was rejected, the embarrassment greatly depressed him. Possessing a “soul of honor,” Anderson could not “bear the idea of his credit being jeopardized” and so ended his life, but not before bequeathing his pistol to Toombs whom he advised to use it on himself.⁴⁰

In addition to financial ruin, some Confederate men fell victim to an amorphous malaise attributed to the “distressed state of the country,” a term that encompassed political distress about the collapse of the Confederacy as well as economic decline. Dealing with the military loss adversely affected veterans and non-veterans alike.⁴¹ Colonel Robert Harper of Covington, Georgia, shot himself in February 1868 after becoming despondent over the “desolate condition of our country.” Although Harper was suffering from ill health, the newspaper account speculated that the main source of his “mental aberration” was likely the “distressed state of the country,” for which Harper had “manifested a deep concern” for some time. Like other suicides among Confederate men, he left behind a family that would struggle mightily without a male head of household.⁴² The Honorable Elijah Hise had just been elected to Congress from Kentucky when he took his life in 1867. The “condition of the country” and his advanced age “led him to seek refuge in death,” according to the newspaper. In the note Hise left behind, he claimed to have “lost all hope of being able to aid in saving the country from the impending disasters and ruin in which despotic and unconstitutional rule has involved her.”⁴³ A wealthy planter from the Charleston area, Benjamin Thompson, similarly lapsed into insanity due to the “gloomy condition of the country” and was committed to the asylum in South Carolina, where he hanged himself in August 1867.⁴⁴ The governor of Florida, John Milton, was widely reported to have killed himself when it was apparent Confederate defeat was imminent in the spring of 1865. “Death would be preferable to reunion,” he is reported to have uttered in his last message to the Florida state legislature.⁴⁵

The volatile political climate after the war, especially in places where significant numbers of Unionists lived and assumed control of the legal, political, and judicial apparatuses and where ex-Confederates lost their political and civil rights, resulted in psychological and emotional distress by men in both political camps. The suicide of one Georgia man was blamed on Congress’s passage of the Reconstruction Acts of 1867. Forty-eight-year-old Ira Taylor of Macon, a successful planter and railroad executive, shot himself to death in May 1867. A native New Yorker, Taylor had relocated to Georgia at age twenty and eventually rose to become the secretary and treasurer of the Macon and Western Railroad Company, but he also engaged in agricultural pursuits. By all accounts his plantation prospered, that is until visited by federal troops led by General William T. Sherman “during his destructive march” to the sea. The newspaper recounted how the invading troops “sacked” his
place, causing him to lose the year’s crop and over 250 bales of cotton. Nonetheless, Taylor landed on his feet when Georgia governor Charles Jones Jenkins appointed him auditor of the Western and Atlantic Railroad. Taylor revived the crippled railroad and resumed his planting activities. Such resiliency, however, proved short-lived when, in the spring of 1867, he ended his own life. The immediate source of his “mental derangement,” claimed the newspaper account, was “the passage of the late military bill,” a reference to one of two congressional acts passed in March placing the former Confederacy under military supervision. This law and “other oppressive acts of Congress” “crushed” Taylor, who despaired “at the present prospects of his once happy country.”

Some Union-leaning Southern men, like Henderson Horsely, fell apart in the wake of Reconstruction-era political retribution and setbacks. Horsely had been a “thorough Union man” throughout the war in Kentucky, a state that never seceded but harbored staunch secessionists. Weeks after the surrender at Appomattox, a squad of “guerillas” descended on his house, though he managed to escape. Convinced they would return, he removed his wife and children from their home and hanged himself in his own house with a bridle. John Boisseau, a tobacconist in Lynchburg, Virginia, shot himself in the forehead with a pistol in August 1872. A newspaper account speculated that the self-murder resulted from a decline in tobacco “speculations” but also blamed recent news out of North Carolina for Boisseau’s “madness.” Boisseau, a “Republican of very pronounced views,” may have become distraught over the tumultuous elections there in August 1872, whereby Conservative Democrats won key congressional seats but lost the governorship to a Republican (though results were not finalized until after Boisseau’s death; on August 2, Raleigh newspapers prematurely claimed the Democratic candidate the winner).

Reconstruction politics inflected news of the purported murder of an Internal Revenue Service assessor in Georgia in 1870. An Atlanta newspaper cast doubt on the charge that the federal official had been “assassinated” by parties unknown, insinuating that “Radical circles” were behind the allegation. Citing “reliable” sources, the reporter promised that a coroner’s inquest, composed of the “leading citizens,” would prove the agent had committed suicide with his own revolver. We cannot know whether the reporter had been assured that the jury intended to alter the findings of the investigation to avoid concluding the agent had been murdered, or whether in fact the jury-men found credible exculpatory evidence and proof that the death resulted from suicide. But the jaded reporter fully expected William Brunt’s death to be “turned into another rebel outrage” and reported to Washington as an act of political terrorism.
In 2011, historical demographer J. David Hacker published his groundbreaking article on the number of Civil War dead. Employing a census-based methodology, Hacker persuasively showed the long-standing mortality figure widely used among historians—620,000—to be too conservative. According to this recent recalculation, there may have been as many as 851,000 military deaths. The article spawned a lively debate among Civil War historians, a few of whom have wondered whether the revised estimate of military dead was really all that significant. Eric Foner, for one, questioned the overall significance of the adjusted figure. “A numbers game gets us only so far in understanding the war’s impact on American life.”

While it might be tempting to dismiss or downplay an additional 14 percent of dead Confederate soldiers as inconsequential, the grief and material loss generated by those additional thousands of deaths increased suffering exponentially. Consider that thousands more widows, orphans, and fractured families resulted. Thousands more families left without a male household head suffered greater financial ruin. One way to gauge the impact of three-quarters of a million soldiers (over 100,000 more lives lost than previously believed)—and thus better calculate the human suffering wrought by the American Civil War—is to consider how an individual soldier’s death affected a family. By examining the shattered lives of Southerners who lost loved ones to the war, the real importance of the increased number of Civil War dead emerges with a vengeance.

Estimates vary, but between 13 and 18 percent of Southern white men of military age died during the Civil War. The total number of Confederate dead eludes historians because of the paucity of Confederate sources and the difficulty in parsing allegiance in the border states. It seems safe to say, though, that over 300,000 Southern men died between 1861 and 1865, more than the 258,000 estimate that had been accepted until recently. Not only had Southerners lost the war, but they grappled with the grief attendant to the loss of men and boys who never returned home. Fathers of sons lost in war acutely felt the loss of their sons and grieved long after the war ended. The larger estimate of men killed in the Civil War thus increases the number of loved ones whose lives were upended emotionally and materially.

The case study of Edmund Bates demonstrates how the Civil War psychologically broke one man, whose demise resulted in the emotional and financial devastation of his family for decades after war’s end. An engineer, Bates operated as a blockade runner for the Confederacy. While he was on one of his runs out of Charleston harbor, his only son died in battle near Petersburg. Bates returned home in “quite low spirits,” but reported back to duty until
war’s end. Once home for good, Bates had difficulty landing gainful employment, which further depressed him. After a few months, though, he acquired a coveted position working on a steamer. But after initially accepting the position, he determined the ship was not seaworthy and walked away from the job. Four more months elapsed before he received another offer of gainful employment, this one also working on a steamer. As with the first opportunity, he found reason to walk away, this time fearing the ship would sink. Bates’s wife, Malvina, attributed this inability to follow through with these steamer positions to his having “lost all confidence in himself.” Indeed, her level of concern grew when she discovered a vial of laudanum in his possession. Her husband’s explanation—he claimed to have purchased the vial in the event his steamer sank—strained credulity when she subsequently found another vial of laudanum after he continued to be “low spirited.” Threats against family members followed his bout with depression; he threatened “to destroy the whole family.” Depressive behavior shifted to mania; he spent every cent to his name under the impression (perhaps delusion) that he was making $300 a week jerry-rigging steamers to use less wood. For two to three months, he had “been on the go day and night,” sleeping only two hours per night. This postwar shift in demeanor contrasted with the man Bates was before the war, when “his natural disposition [was] quiet and reserved.” In July 1867, Malvina Bates implored physicians to examine her husband. They did, declared him insane, and recommended admission that summer to the asylum in Columbia, where he remained for years. 

While Edmund Bates’s institutionalization eliminated the threat of violence and lessened the likelihood he might take his own life, the family nonetheless suffered from his inability to provide financial support. By 1870, Malvina Bates had moved in with extended family (either her brother’s or brother-in-law’s home). Ten years later, she appears as the widowed head of household of her Charleston dwelling, consisting of twelve members including her fifty-five-year-old sister and the two sisters’ children, ranging in ages from thirteen to thirty. The mental illness of Bates’s husband, explicitly linked to the wartime death of his son and requiring institutionalization and likely contributing to his death, altered Malvina’s life in profound ways, including the necessity to live in an unconventional household structure, one in which adult females pooled their resources, in order to survive without benefit of a male head of household. The widow Bates seems to have suffered her entire lifetime because of her husband’s psychological debilitation.

The Civil War death of a son also adversely affected John Batts. But whereas Edmund Bates merely threatened to end his life, Batts put a pistol to his head on a Sunday morning in May 1878 and squeezed the trigger. The deed came as no surprise to his Georgia family. They had been worried for months that
he might do something rash; he showed signs of “mental depression” and was not of sound mind. In hindsight, perhaps family and friends marveled that his violent death had not come sooner. He had made previous attempts to end his life by morphine overdose. The devout Baptist had been a wealthy planter with thirty-five slaves before the war. Batts held important political positions in the state, serving in the Georgia House of Representatives and State Senate, and he was a supporter of John C. Breckinridge at the 1860 Democratic state convention. Then the war came. His oldest son, twenty-three-year-old William “Billy” Batts, enlisted in the Georgia infantry and headed for Virginia. Twice in 1861 word came that Batts was wounded slightly. His luck ran out in August 1862 at the Battle of Cedar Run in Virginia, where Billy was killed in action. The wife of Billy’s company commander, Captain S. G. Pryor, paid her respects to the Batts family in Lee County and reported to her husband that, while the entire family was devastated, “Mr. Batts is worse than any of the rest: he talks of nothing else.” Following on the heels of his son’s death, John Batts faced the defeat of his nation and cause, which surely triggered considerable angst. Like thousands of other former Confederates, Batts applied to President Andrew Johnson for a pardon, which required pledging loyalty to the United States and confirming that he had freed his slaves, whom he was now employing “at full & proper wages.” Unlike most white Southerners, Batts and his family were not financially ruined by the war. He lost his slaves, of course, but retained over two thousand acres and held real and personal property worth $18,000 five years after the war. In 1870, he reported a bountiful harvest: 1,500 bushels of corn and 300 of oats, 141 bales of cotton, 300 pounds of wool, and 500 bushels of sweet potatoes. A visitor to the Batts plantation in 1870 gushed at the high crop yields, crowing there was not “a finer prospect anywhere in Southwest Georgia.” While Batts had much to mourn after the war, he was not destitute. He even appeared to weather the Panic of 1873 well. His will, executed the year before he died, shows that he bequeathed a considerable amount of property to his wife and children. So what, then, drove John Batts at the age of sixty-four, to end his life? Of course, there is no way to know for sure, but we do know he was devastated by the death of his son Billy. Had he ever really recovered from that loss? Did he second-guess his support for a war that cost him his son and that left his beloved region bereft? Did he feel unmanned by being pressured to sign a loyalty oath to the enemy that had taken the life of his son? No extant sources speak to the forces that drove John Batts to put a gun to his head, except that he had been depressed and that the death of his beloved son contributed mightily to that depressive state. Batts, like so many other Confederate fathers who sent their sons off to war, appeared to have carried the weight of that burden to his grave.
Official records may not have listed grief as a cause of older Confederates’ suicides, but that is certainly a strong possibility for many, including Joseph Younger Gudger. A terse four-sentence announcement of Gudger’s suicide appeared in a Petersburg newspaper in August 1869. Gudger lived in western North Carolina and hanged himself in his barn. No other details appear in print, but additional research reveals he was close to eighty at the time of his death, too old to have served in the army himself. As was common at the time, he had a large family, consisting of as many as twelve children, including six adult sons ranging in ages from twenty-four to forty-seven when war broke out, at least five of whom were sons of military service age. There is no evidence that Gudger’s eldest, James McRee, joined the army, but three of his sons did, one of whom died of typhoid in 1862. Gudger descendants contend that second oldest son, Samuel Winslow Davidson, fought and fell at Shiloh in 1862, but no official records substantiate that death, although his wife appears in the 1870 census without him. Three other sons—Robert, John, and Jesse—all fought for North Carolina regiments. Jesse contracted tuberculosis, leaving him “permanently disabled.” John enlisted with the Bethel Regiment and died in October 1863 at home on sick furlough, probably of typhoid-related fever. The death of Joseph Gudger’s wife, Elizabeth, during the war added to Gudger’s considerable grief in the Civil War years. The staggering number of wartime losses of close family members most certainly took a huge emotional toll on Gudger and likely contributed to his decision to take his life.

The suicide of cotton magnate, lawyer, and loving father Henry H. Cumming of Augusta, Georgia, which sent shock waves throughout the state, is another case of an elder Confederate who was deeply affected by wartime suffering. He died by his own hand in his office a year after surrender. The only reference to motive in the newspaper fell under the vague pronouncement that Cumming had been under the influence of “mental alienation” for months. A wealthy man, leading citizen of Augusta, and committed Confederate, Cumming was devastated when Robert E. Lee surrendered. In May 1865, prisoner Jefferson Davis was marched through Augusta en route to set sail down the Savannah River. Federal troops quickly arrested anyone displaying signs of disloyalty, so the throng of curious Confederates who gathered in Augusta streets to catch a glimpse of Davis remained unusually quiet—except for one. Henry Cumming, in an audacious display of respect for the former president of the Confederacy, removed his hat until Davis had passed, defiantly declaring, “Mr. President, I salute you.” Less than a year later, Cumming was dead. Melancholy had consumed him. Five of his adult sons served in the Civil War: Alfred, a West Point graduate, attained the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate army and was wounded three times;
Thomas served in two infantry regiments, was wounded, and was captured more than once; Harford, a physician, enlisted in the 5th Georgia Infantry then transferred to the medical department; Joseph Bryan, a lawyer like his father, rose to the rank of second lieutenant; and Julian, also a lawyer, was an adjutant in the 48th Georgia Infantry. He fought at Gettysburg, was wounded, and was taken prisoner. While at Johnson Island, Julian took ill and died in March 1864. Thus Henry Cumming had sacrificed five children to the cause that was lost; it cost one son his life. Postwar economic difficulties also loomed, which jeopardized his ability to properly provide for his family. He worried his wife would be brought to “poverty and want.” Heralded as “the soul of chivalry,” he was eulogized as a friend to the weak and friendless, “amiable in all relations of life.”

While no suicide notes exist for these elder Confederates who took their own lives, the postwar memoir by Cumming’s son sheds light on what he believed led to his father’s suicide and may well offer insights into the suicides of other elderly ex-Confederates who lost sons to the failed independence movement. Joseph Bryan Cumming’s explanation for his father’s suicide, while conveying circumstances particular to Cumming, privileged grief, mental exhaustion, and financial woes, the source of suffering for many a beleaguered Confederate father. Joseph Bryan described a father beaten down by four years of war that “had been a great strain” on him. Pointedly, five sons served in the military and were never far from his thoughts. “Hardly was there ever any of the great battles in which at least one of these sons was a participant.” Three sustained severe injuries; one died. Cumming also suffered significant financial losses as a result of the war. Non-war-related triggers, too, added to Cumming’s stress. His nephews sued him in his role of executor of his parents’ estate. Upwards of $50,000 of family savings had been placed in the Bank of Augusta, which defaulted as a consequence of the war. Cumming began to worry that he would not be able to prevent his wife’s descent into poverty. LeeAnn Whites has pointed out that white Southern men like Cumming were unmanned by the inability to provide for the wants and needs of their wives and children after the war. Cumming was “unable to ‘protect his wife’ in the face of political defeat and economic loss,” resulting in shame. With his “nervous system broke down,” he sank into profound depression. “His unhappy state of mind and his forebodings of poverty grew worse,” causing him to take his life almost a year to the day Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House. Suicide allowed Cumming to escape the burdens he could not escape in life: financial distress, emotional suffering, and defeat.

Confederate men also grieved the loss of brothers to war, and profound mourning sometimes devolved into despair. Mark Ridgell returned to the land of his birth, South Carolina, for a family visit after the war. He lived in
Texas for years. But plans for a joyous family reunion were upended by Ridgell’s suicide while visiting his brother John. In June 1872, Ridgell shot himself with a Colt’s pistol. There is no way to know why Ridgell traveled to South Carolina or whether he had been back to South Carolina before this time. If he had not, much had changed. A civil war had ripped apart the country; five brothers, reportedly, and his father were dead. The Civil War had a hand in some of the deaths. Ridgell himself had joined the Texas state home guard, a unit composed of boys, older men, and the disabled. At nearly forty, his age likely shielded him from active military service, at least for a while. Or perhaps because he was a schoolteacher, he was permitted to serve in the militia instead of the army. Unlike his brothers back in South Carolina, he saw no military action; he never left the state of Texas with his unit. The eldest of twenty-three Ridgell siblings and half-siblings, Mark had at least five younger brothers who served in various South Carolina infantry companies, of whom three appear to have died during the war. Norris Thomas Ridgell, a year younger than Mark, died in a Mississippi hospital in 1862 following a “Yankee raid at Boonville.” Felix Ridgell, who is listed as age nineteen but was probably much younger, was killed in action at Gettysburg. Tudor Ridgell, a bit older than Felix, died during the siege of Petersburg according to family accounts. Brothers Daniel, and William fought, survived, but succumbed shortly after the war to illnesses seemingly related to ones they initially contracted as soldiers. While records are incomplete, silent, or even contradictory, it is clear that Ridgell lost no fewer than three brothers in the war and an additional two shortly after; Ridgell’s elderly father passed away, too, in 1870. The newspaper account of Mark Ridgell’s suicide did not conjecture about whether grief played any role in fueling his decision to take his life. Any speculation about survivor’s guilt would have been anachronistic, of course, but the oldest brother who was alive while five younger brothers were dead, three of them directly as a result of the war that he himself avoided, might well have experienced deep guilt. Telling, though, was the newspaper’s targeting of “the influence of strong drink,” which, readers were assured, “worked to his destruction.” In fact, it is entirely conceivable that Ridgell turned to drink to ameliorate the mourning of multiple family members’ deaths. Yet no extant source makes that connection, unlike the case of James Green, whose insanity was explicitly linked to his despair over losing three brothers during the war. The twenty-six-year-old entered the South Carolina asylum a year after the war delusional, talking and laughing to himself.

The children of soldiers have been the least studied victims of the Civil War, yet they certainly suffered as surely as other family members did. To quote a Northern woman who had been a child during the war, the Civil War
Youthfulness did not shield the youngest victims from the horrors of war. Children, especially Southern children, experienced the absence, and sometimes the deaths, of a father, brother, uncle. They internalized the emotions of adult relatives around them, those gripped with anxiety, grief, and fear, and they sensed the panic in a household and community when rumors circulated that the Yankees were coming. In short, Southern white children, as James Marten has shown, integrated the war experiences into views of themselves and their world. Homelessness, dislocation, deprivation, and grief profoundly affected even the smallest of children. Older children, especially boys, felt pressure to fill the shoes left by their fathers and older brothers. They suffered guilt and sorrow when loved ones died at the front. When the war ended, fathers returned to find their children virtual strangers, their relationships strained and awkward. Suffering the ill effects of war trauma, veteran fathers displayed short tempers or meted out harsh punishments. Borrowing from studies of twentieth-century wars, we know that children of veterans manifested difficulty sleeping, eating, and toilet training, symptoms of stress within the newly reconfigured household. As children from the Southern war zone transitioned into adulthood, they often displayed physical and psychological symptoms that stemmed from war and its aftermath.

Psychiatric experts later in the century contended that the spike in asylum admissions could be explained in part by the physically and emotionally broken soldiers who returned home and the negative effect their presence had on their children. Struggling veterans imparted to their children “a delicacy of organization and susceptibility to external influences, often leading to mental disease.” Veterans’ children who began turning up in asylums were proof that “the influence of a great and momentous event . . . is made potent through laws of transmission to the present generation by producing mental and physical degeneracy.” They exhibited pathologies like alcoholism and emotional volatility, mimicking their fathers. One such case was that of seventeen-year-old Willie Burnett of Sparta, Georgia, who came home drunk one night around midnight and, not surprisingly, encountered angry parents, who followed him to his room. In the midst of the row, Willie threatened suicide, then grabbed a nearby Derringer, placed it over his heart, and fired, causing almost instantaneous death. Willie’s father, William Burnett, was one of Sparta’s “best citizens” and a Confederate war veteran. The death of a young son is tragic enough, but the news account referenced the suicidal death of an older son, just a few years prior. Suicides by two sons, one of whom may have also taken up drinking, may suggest a household torn apart by the war, and they highlight the unique anxiety of children of fathers gone off to war.
The war and its aftermath unleashed a bevy of changes and conditions that made coping in the wake of loss trying at least, unbearable at most. The “distressed state of the country” enveloped many white Southern men, veterans and non-combatants alike, leaving them incapable of imagining a better, improved life. For them, death promised relief from the dreaded Yankee subjugation, from the untold suffering, and from the humiliation of being unable to protect and provide for their families, as sanctioned by the nineteenth-century code of masculinity.