This book examines white women who supported the Confederacy from middle-and planter-class families. Most of these women came from slaveholding families and their wartime actions and relationships show how class functioned as a gendered political concept at the top of the racial hierarchy of the Confederate South. Such a study puts social history into dialogue with political and intellectual history, and the source material consulted reflects this approach: first-person narratives and the records of women’s organizations are juxtaposed with political speeches, military orders, and legislative records. In doing so, it becomes clear that women’s and gender history is a significant constituent of political and intellectual history. This methodology draws connections between the abstract ideology and the tangible lived reality of nationalism. It bridges the gap between intellectual and social history, between the political elites and the people: How did the people experience nationalism in their everyday lives? In this way, ideologies must be understood as more than intellectual history, but how they were represented in first-person experiences of war.

At the same time, generalizations cannot be made about wartime gendered lived experience. Women’s accounts and experiences of the war underpin this study, and some women joined together and formed organizations to pursue common aspirations in support of the Confederacy. This methodological focus on women’s voices reveals the lack of uniformity between their experiences of and ideas surrounding the Confederacy; women had a variety of concerns and varying levels of investment in the Confederate republic throughout the war. Adopting an approach that weds individual women’s voices in the private sphere, collective organizations in civic society, and political ideology and policy in the political sphere reveals the ways in which women’s wartime experiences shaped Confederate political culture and not simply the ways in which Confederate political culture shaped women’s wartime experiences.

Particular to the context of the Civil War, the hardships and conditions of war often meant that these women had to prioritize their physical safety and survival over documenting the war or contributing to civic organizations. Often, the level of women’s activity—as individuals writing first-person accounts or
as a collective organization lobbying for a set goal—was dependent upon their proximity to the severity and frequency of military action. The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union was unable to organize a meeting of its state vice regents from 1860 to 1864 given the war. Furthermore, during and in the immediate aftermath of the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, the activities and writings of the organization came to a virtual standstill. Sarah Tracy, the personal secretary to the founding regent, Ann Pamela Cunningham, and the representative of the organization at Mount Vernon during the war, was eager to monitor the first major land battle of the war and guard her own safety from the violence less than thirty miles away. The ideological aims of the organization were subjugated to the lived realities of war. Participation in these wartime organizations required a level of privilege. Women needed to be removed from the physical dangers of war to some extent in order to focus on more abstract and less immediate concerns. Individual physical survival needed to be secured before collective institutional survival could be pursued.

Likewise, with Union occupation, communication networks were compromised. Even if letters and dispatches were written, there was no guarantee these writings would reach their intended audience. Communications between the founding regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, Cunningham in Rosemont, South Carolina, and Tracey at Mount Vernon were limited after South Carolina’s secession in December 1860. Communications between the Ladies’ Defense Association in Richmond and auxiliary organizations in Virginia were also limited and often faced the arduous hurdle of traveling across Union lines. In addition, the Union blockade severely restricted communication between the South and the rest of the world. It was difficult to export not only goods but Confederate propaganda to the British and French markets. Commanding general of the Union army General Winfield Scott’s Anaconda Plan not only strangled the South into a sense of economic isolation but to some degree a sense of ideological isolation. As discussed in chapter 4, the difficulty in transporting the case for Confederate recognition, in term of both physical emissaries (like James Murray Mason and John Slidell) as well as ideological propaganda, made the Confederate cause more reliant on European surrogates and sympathizers to craft, circulate, and lobby the cause abroad.

The hardships of war also manifested in a shortage of essential materials for survival on the home front; the amount of women’s writings can also be understood as a response to this scarcity of physical materials. Living in Richmond during the war, Clara Minor Lynn recalled, “in many Southern libraries the curious visitor will notice the fly leaves in some of the old books are missing. If
he is of an inquiring turn of mind, he will be told ‘they were torn out and used for paper during the war.’” On June 11, 1863, Emily Noble wrote to her brother Richard stationed in Richmond: “I have not got paper to write you a long letter. Brother you will not think hard of me for such a short letter. Times is hard here but crops is good.” Simply put, documentation of the war required the necessary physical materials to do so. These materials, and the privilege of time to write and the education to do so, were often restricted to the upper classes. Women were also selective in the topics they wrote about in their wartime diaries and letters. Most women did not discuss slavery outside of Suzanne Lebsock’s definition of personalism. According to Lebsock, slaveholding women fleetingly discussed their personal relationships with individual enslaved persons rather than offer political commentaries on the institution of slavery. Using this personal frame of reference to engage with slavery, these women were keen to showcase how they treated their enslaved persons as members of the family. This relative silence in the archive should not be read as ambivalence or opposition to slavery. Recent historiography has shown, through elite white women’s actions and through Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews with former enslaved persons, elite white women were actively engaged with the administration of the plantation household and slavery, and its attendant processes of violence. These women may not have written about their roles in slavery in detail as they may have considered it too mundane to record. These women’s wartime writings are an incomplete record of their wartime activities and concerns, but they still reveal important information in their changing relationship to the state, and in doing so, the greater context of war.

This book was a long journey, and I am indebted to many in its completion. This project developed as a PhD dissertation under the supervision of Betty Wood. Betty passed away as this book went to press. Her work ethic, brilliance, and, most of all, her kindness will be admired by scholars for years to come. Michael O’Brien also generously supported this project from the start and also sadly passed away far too soon. Michael always pushed me to consider the intellectual history of gender history; I hope he would be (reservedly) pleased with this book. Catherine Clinton has been a fatigueless supporter of my work and I am grateful to have her in my corner. Sarah Meer, Paul Quigley, and Andrew O’Shaughnessy have consistently offered their time and expertise to develop this project into its best and final version, as seen in the forthcoming pages.

The series editors, Liz Varon and Orville Vernon Burton, offered unwavering support of this project from the start. My editor, Nadine Zimmerli, has been a
tireless champion of this work and has consistently provided sharp and helpful feedback. I am lucky to have her as an editor. The anonymous readers, particularly reader 2, pushed me to refine my arguments and make this a better book.

Several organizations generously funded this research: Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington; Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello; Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech; U.S. Embassy/British Association of American Studies Small Grant Fund; College of Charleston Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture; Virginia Museum of History and Culture Andrew W. Mellon Fund; Association of British American Nineteenth Century Historians Peter J. Parish Memorial Fund; German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C.; Cambridge Overseas Trust; and Sara Norton Fund at Cambridge.

This work has benefited from the expertise of archivists across Virginia, especially in extended trips to the Library of Virginia and Virginia Museum of History and Culture. Rebecca Baird and Mary Thompson at the Washington Library went above and beyond to help me pull together my work on the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union (MVLA).

Colleagues at Keele University—especially Kate Cushing, Siobhan Talbott, Alannah Tomkins, Nick Seager, and Oliver Harris—have offered timely guidance and support. Friends and loved ones on both sides of the Atlantic have supported me over the course of this project and made life outside of this book much more enjoyable: Joe Boyle, Clare Walker Gore, Melissa Yates, Lara Talverdian, Natalie Thomlinson, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Laura Kounine, James Lawlor, Jasper Heinzen, Laura Crombie, Cara and Bradley Maitland, Arddun Arwyn, Matt Phillips, Bjorn Weiler, Sadie Royal Collins, Rachel Williams, Erin Baugher, Susan Royal, Udeni Salmon, and Ignatius.

The last debt is to my family. Betsy Hansen has been one of my favorite people from my earliest memories. Martin’s love is the best thing about my life; I’m lucky to share a life with him. My grandmother raised me with unconditional love and selfless generosity. She was the best person I have ever known. This book is dedicated to her.