The Weaker Sex in War

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Introduction

Sally Louisa Tompkins was born into a slave-owning Virginia family at Poplar Grove, about thirty miles west of Richmond on the Pamunkey River, in 1833. She attended the Norfolk Female Institute for one year and moved to Richmond in 1854. At the outbreak of the American Civil War, she opened the Robertson Hospital in the prewar home of Judge John Robertson in an affluent part of the new Confederate capital. Even in the first few months of the war, women’s work in wartime medical care was a salient issue for Confederates to rally around to support the newborn republic. Mary Chesnut visited the Robertson Hospital in August 1861 and admired Tompkins’s efforts: “The men under Miss Sallie’s care looked so clean and comfortable. Cheerful, one might say.” The hospital received glowing praise from the Southern press throughout the war: “The hospital is often in [the] charge of a solitary young lady, who reads prayers to the men every morning . . . their [the soldiers’] gratitude for the kind treatment they receive is frequently very touching.”

A few months into the conflict, the Confederate Army Department surgeon general Samuel Preston Moore ordered the closure of all private hospitals in the Confederacy. In response, on September 9, 1861, under guidance from Confederate president Jefferson Davis, the first secretary of war, LeRoy Pope Walker, commissioned Sally Tompkins as an unassigned captain in the Confederate army so her hospital could remain open under military leadership. Given the Robertson Hospital’s low death rate—of over 1,300 patients over the course of the war, only seventy-three died—the Confederate government recognized the success of Tompkins’s work. Of course, smaller hospitals such as hers did not usually care for the most seriously injured soldiers, who often immediately went to the nearby Chimborazo Hospital. Still, Tompkins was the only woman to be a commissioned officer in the Confederate army. In accepting the commission, Tompkins stipulated that she “would not allow my name to be placed upon the pay roll of the army.” In a clear expression of the wartime culture of self-sacrifice, Tompkins would only serve the Confederacy without financial recompense.

It is important to recognize that Sally Tompkins was a slaveholder; enslaved persons, including five of her own, labored in the Robertson Hospital, as they did
in hospitals throughout the South. One of her enslaved persons, William, was arrested for burglary in November 1864. He had stolen a jar of brandy peaches and ten pounds of chewing tobacco from a confectionary behind St. Paul’s Church. This incident was reported in the local press; the report did not focus on Tompkins’s exemplary record at the Robertson Hospital, but it did describe Tompkins as a slaveholder. Just as the physical and ideological survival of the Confederacy relied on slavery, so, too, did the work of the Robertson Hospital.

Sally Tompkins, “the Florence Nightingale of the Confederacy,” and the Robertson Hospital continued to receive praise and support from the Confederate government, the Richmond press, and Confederate citizens until its closure in 1865. After the war, Tompkins worked in charity and nursing efforts around Richmond. In 1905, after exhausting her own financial resources, she moved to the Home for Needy Confederate Women, where she died in July 1916 and was given a military burial. Tompkins became a prominent feature of Confederate memory and Lost Cause ideology in the last years of her life and after her death. In May 1889, a portrait of Tompkins was presented to the Confederate Literary Memorial Society at the Confederate Museum in Richmond. In December 1910, the Robert E. Lee Camp, Sons of Confederate Veterans, erected a bronze tablet at the site of the former Robertson Hospital commemorating its work. Tompkins unveiled the tablet at the ceremony. In the centennial of the Civil War, the St. James Episcopal Church in Richmond (Tompkins’s church), installed a stained-glass window depicting Tompkins with an angel evoking her nickname, “Angel of the Confederacy” (see figure 1).

In 1966, the Women of the Confederacy Memorial Committee sought to erect a statue of Tompkins on Monument Avenue in Richmond to sit alongside the likes of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. The famed Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dalí submitted a proposal, sketched by Richmond artist Bill Wynne, for the design of the statue: Dalí’s Tompkins was an adaptation of St. George as a Grecian goddess slaying a dragon while standing on a mushroom pedestal held up by Dalí’s finger (see figure 2). Just like the male military heroes of the Confederacy went to battle against the Union on the front lines, Tompkins went to battle against the dragon of disease on the home front. However, the Richmond public found Dalí’s proposal to be too radical for the traditionalism of Monument Avenue and too focused on the artist. As General Edwin P. Conquest queried, “Are we erecting a Sali or a Dalí?” Following this outcry, the Women of the Confederacy Memorial Committee soon withdrew their plans for a Tompkins statue on Monument Avenue.
The narrative of Sally Tompkins’s gendered service to the Confederacy is a familiar one: she supported the Confederate cause through work consistent with the cult of womanhood and the domestic sphere. However, what is less familiar are the ways in which male leaders in government and civic society used her gendered work to strengthen Confederate nationalism. When the Davis administration made her a captain, it was not simply ensuring the continued operation of her hospital under military command, it was molding Tompkins into a symbol for the Confederate cause. The government’s militaristic endorsement afforded an increased legitimacy to Tompkins’s work, and, at the same time, the government harnessed Tompkins’s unrivaled track record in patient care to strengthen the perceived efficacy and strength of the Confederate medical effort and the Confederacy writ large.

Figure 1. Captain Sally Louisa Tompkins memorial window, design drawing, installed September 10, 1961, St. James Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
Moreover, when the Richmond press fastidiously reported on the establishment and work of the Robertson Hospital, especially Tompkins’s leading role in its progress and success, the press was not just reporting the news, it was making Tompkins a household name in Richmond and throughout the region. Circulated through print culture, Tompkins became a touchstone for the reading public to process the significance of individual wartime service to the Confederacy. Officials in government and civic society shaped, projected, and circulated Tompkins, and her work with the Robertson Hospital, as an evocative symbol of Confederate nationalism predicated on her womanhood. Sally Tompkins served the Confederacy as a nurse and she served the Confederacy as a nationalist symbol; she engaged with Confederate nationalism in tangible actions during the war and was projected as a symbol of the Confederate cause both during and after the war. Like the other women discussed in this book, she was both an actor for and a symbol of the Confederate cause; she became intertwined with both Confederate political culture and Confederate nationalism.
The rich and abundant body of scholarship exploring Confederate womanhood has shown how Southern women experienced the Civil War in different ways according to a number of interlocking factors. Race and class status defined a woman’s position in the antebellum social hierarchy and would continue to do so throughout the Civil War period. Race and class privilege insulated some women at the top of the social hierarchy from the worst horrors of war and exacerbated it for those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Women’s age and kinship networks, particularly marriage and motherhood, worked to shape their expected contributions to the war effort. An individual woman’s loyalty to the culture of self-sacrifice was defined through what she herself could sacrifice to the cause, whether it be a husband, a son, or simply her personal devotion under previously unimaginable dire circumstances. Women in the North not only experienced the war differently than those in the South, but within the Confederacy, women’s experiences of war varied according to state and region. Those in the Upper South were often forced to confront the advancing Union army and the prospect of occupation earlier than most, though not all, women in the Lower South. Some women, often those who were educated and literate, left written accounts of their experiences of war, in diaries, letters, or even published fiction based on loosely veiled versions of their own lives; others did not. Regardless of these differences, Southern women did share some significant commonalities across their wartime experiences. Women had to grapple with new physical dangers on the home front; they had to negotiate new catalysts of family separation; and, crucially for this book, the most important commonality shared by all women inside the Confederacy was that each individual had to decide, sometimes to others and sometimes just for herself, would she support the Confederacy?

At its core, this book explores the relationship between middle-and planter-class white Southern women who supported the Confederacy and the emerging ideology of Confederate nationalism, and it argues that Confederate leaders used these women to advance the Southern cause. This is not to say that women were passive in this process: women were in control of their contributions to national devotion and were knowing and keen participants in shaping and circulating a gendered nationalist narrative.

Older histories on Southern women and nationalism tend to focus on the fluctuations in women’s commitment to Confederate nationalism over the course of the war: Did women’s commitment to Confederate nationalism wane over the course of the war? If so, when and why did it do so? This book moves this conversation forward by using women in Virginia to explore how,
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precisely, Confederate leaders recognized, mediated, and amplified middle-and planter-class women’s devotion to the Confederacy to strengthen national sentiment and to recover women’s active and decisive roles in fortifying this relationship between gender and nationalism.

Through their contributions to Confederate nationalism, these women forged new relationships with the state. This book uses the term “state” to denote the Davis administration and central government structure of the Confederacy. This emerging Confederate state recognized the power of middle-and planter-class white women in a new and different way than had the United States during the antebellum years; Confederate leaders harnessed women’s gendered work of national devotion and projected it to a regional audience to strengthen nationalist sentiment. These women were engaged not only in making symbols of the new republic, like Confederate flags and Confederate soldier uniforms; rather, they themselves were made into symbols of the new republic. These women might not have had, or even sought, a role in the political sphere, but the Confederate political sphere recognized women’s value to strengthen nationalist sentiment across both civic and political society.

This book will not examine all Confederate women, only middle-and planter-class white women who supported the Confederacy, because, as the story of Sally Tompkins exemplifies, these were the women the Confederate leadership used to advance its agenda. It will explore the triangulated relationship between gender, political culture, and nationalism to complicate current understandings of the roles of women on the Confederate home front: In what ways did women’s actions support or undermine Confederate identity and political policies? How did women themselves negotiate the process of the construction of national identity and their relationship to the Confederacy? How did the Confederate government use women to help build its nationalist mission, both inside and outside the Confederacy?

“The weaker sex in war” of this book’s title is taken from the Ladies’ Defense Association’s mission statement (as discussed in chapter 2) and also draws on the familiar rallying cry across war cultures that men are dutifully bound to the physical protection of women as the weaker sex: men’s wartime service is (at least partially) motivated by safeguarding their vulnerable wives and daughters. While the Confederacy certainly deployed this trope, it pushed it further. In the Confederacy, the state used middle-and planter-class white women to advance its cause. This was not just about individual men fighting for their households, this was the collective Confederate state marshalling the symbolism of middle-and planter-class white womanhood to strengthen Confederate
nationalism.\textsuperscript{24} While certainly not a goal of male Confederate leaders, this strategy challenged nineteenth-century notions of women's weakness and the ideal of the Southern lady.\textsuperscript{25} In using them to advance their own cause, intertwining women with political culture and nationalist discourse, the Confederate state implicitly recognized the potential strength of women on the ideological battlefield for hearts and minds.\textsuperscript{26}

For frequent readers of gender and Civil War history, the cast of characters presented in this book will be familiar. What will be less familiar is the analytical frame through which these women are presented: Confederate nationalism was shaped and projected to wider audiences through women's bodies and gendered politics. With few exceptions, the women discussed in this book played active roles in shaping their symbolism. They were not merely manipulated as passive pawns by Confederate leaders; these women frequently decided when and how they would contribute to their performance of national devotion, in terms of both rhetoric and action. While male leaders then co-opted and circulated this performance to a wider audience, these women defined and controlled much of this nationalist narrative. In this way, women inextricably tied themselves to the creation and circulation of Confederate nationalism.

Historians have continued to challenge the mythology of the Southern lady to examine the active, and often eager, roles elite white women played in sustaining slavery in the nineteenth-century South.\textsuperscript{27} This book contributes significantly to this historiography by showing the ways in which these women built and strengthened Confederate nationalism, an ideology that justified the establishment of a republic based on slaveholding. These women were not only socially and economically invested in slaveholding as individuals, they were also ideologically invested in the idea of a slaveholding republic. This is not to suggest that all middle-and planter-class white Southern women played crucial roles in this process. Rather, the following chapters examine the activities and actions of individuals and organizations that did play important roles in the production of Confederate nationalism, and in doing so, this book offers a new lens through which to consider women's relationship to the Confederate state.

Both the Union and the Confederacy were aware of the ways in which Southern women could undermine their respective causes.\textsuperscript{28} For the Union, Confederate female spies, like Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd, threatened military operations. Also, unruly Confederate women in Union-occupied areas, like General Benjamin Butler's New Orleans, undermined the Union's social and civic control.\textsuperscript{29} For the Confederacy, some of its women became an “enemy from within,” contributing to networks of unionism or desertion and undermining
the collective commitment to the Confederate cause. Furthermore, some lower-class white women in the South challenged traditional domestic policy to advance more radical social and welfare reforms in their own interests. Stephanie McCurry focuses on the ways in which both the Union and Confederacy recognized the potential of Southern women across class (and race) lines to disrupt and weaken their respective causes, whereas this study examines how the Confederacy recognized some middle- and planter-class white Southern women’s potential to strengthen their cause. White Southern women held political capital that could be used to either embrace nonprogressive or progressive agendas, or more specifically, to either support or undermine Confederate nationalism.

Gender and Nationalism

As an ideology, Confederate nationalism needed to grapple with the relationship between change and continuity, and, at the same time, “be at once elitist in purpose yet popular in appeal.” Uniting Southerners across the socioeconomic spectrum under one nationalist ideology was a challenge for the Confederacy throughout the war. Positioning itself in the legacy of divinely sanctioned American movements, particularly the Puritans’ journey to New England and the American Revolution of 1776, the Confederacy portrayed secession as an act of purification from the ungodly and sinful North. Both political and clerical leaders adhered to this doctrine of the South as “God’s chosen people.” The Confederacy not only looked back inwardly to the American past, but outwardly to European struggles for revolution in order to contextualize and legitimize its own radical conservatism. Both the home front and front lines looked to military leaders, especially Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, as instruments of Confederate nationalism in which to take pride and unite understandings and symbolisms of nationhood and identity. The cultural maintenance of the Southern way of life as well as the Old South’s social hierarchy; the perpetuation of the institution of slavery; the political doctrine of states’ rights and republicanism; and the rejection of the free labor market economy (as seen in the urban North) were all key ideological constituents of the definition of Confederate nationalism. In this way, Confederate nationalism must be conceptualized as both political and cultural, as both a movement of political legitimacy and a republic forged through shared culture.

However, Confederate nationalism was defined not only through ideas but also circumstances. While historians have debated the strength of Confederate nationalism over the course of the war and its role in the Confederate defeat,
it is clear that it did face structural challenges. Desertion, class antagonisms, struggles over centralization, and political conflicts over slavery were all tangible realities that posed a threat to Confederate nationalism as an ideology. Furthermore, lower literacy rates and a weaker printing industry compared to the North, compromised the Confederate state’s ability to produce and circulate nationalist messages through print capitalist structures. This is why the Confederacy’s engagement with supportive women was so important; it allowed leaders to circulate a nationalist message through women’s bodies and actions.

Two analytical frameworks, one applied inside the household and one applied outside of it, are particularly useful in interrogating the relationship between middle- and planter-class white women, power, and nationalism. First, inside the household, Thavolia Glymph argues that historians can better understand the power of planter white women by not just comparing them to elite white men or to Northern white women, but to the power of enslaved women over time. With the breakdown of the planation household during and after the Civil War, as planter white women’s power waned, former enslaved women gained power: “the transformation of the plantation household—that space where the ideology of southern white womanhood was constructed and reproduced through the denigration of black women—came to be viewed by slaves as central to the redefinition of freedom, citizenship and womanhood.” Glymph reveals the growing precarity and insecurity of white women’s position within the household over time. Dependent upon the violent brutalization of enslaved women, white women’s power in the household was conditional and, under threat with the advent of war, gradually eroded. However, looking outward, their power outside the household strengthened in terms of their new relationship with the state as individuals in their own right.

Second, bridging the domestic and the public spheres, Linda Kerber argues that as women received more rights from the state, they received less rights through their husbands. In the early republic and antebellum America’s constructs of coverture, obligations were gendered, rights were restricted according to gender, and most white women’s relationship to the state was mediated through their husbands. After the American Revolution, the legal relationship between husband and wife based on the British model of coverture remained intact: “married women’s obligations to their husbands and families overrode their obligations to the state [. . .] married women owe[d] their primary civic obligation to their husbands.” The Confederacy knowingly disputed the early republic’s understanding of federalism, and it also unwittingly challenged the foundations of coverture, not on legal terms but on social terms. With the
advent of war, Confederate women were able to forge unmediated relationships with male political and military leaders as individuals in their own right without their husbands. The Civil War not only reformatted Southern family and gender roles, it reformatted women’s relationship to the Confederate state.

In both the Union and the Confederacy, the Civil War strengthened the ties between military service and citizenship. Excluded from military service, Confederate-supporting women found new ways to meaningfully contribute not only to the wartime cause outside of bearing arms but also outside of their husbands’ oversight. With the withdrawal of men from the plantation household and home front, consistent with most wartime societies, Confederate women adopted new roles out of necessity to ensure societal survival in an immediate and tangible context. At the same time, Confederate women also contributed to the ideological drivers of the republic; they helped build and strengthen Confederate nationalism. In order to do this, the women discussed in this book forged new relationships with Confederate leaders outside of their households. They became more outward-looking and engaged with issues that were less focused on their family’s lived experiences and more focused on issues affecting the entire Confederate republic. These women shifted their focus from their families to the state. They shifted their lobbying efforts from their husbands to Confederate leaders. They shifted their location of activity from inside the plantation household to outside the plantation household.

This is not to say these women completely turned away from their husbands, they did not. Rather, with the advent of war, women constructed a new relationship with the state that was not mediated through their husbands. Women had direct, and sometimes impactful, relationships with Confederate leaders that were oriented around issues that affected the Confederacy as a whole, and not just issues that affected women as individuals or family matriarchs. While Kerber’s thesis is focused on rights and citizenship, it does hold a wider valence of power relations and women’s changing relationship to the state relevant to this book. The women discussed in this book were not concerned with the expansion of their individual rights in a liberal tradition and the attainment of the full rights of citizenship, as seen in the Northern women’s rights movement. In the Confederacy, these conservative women’s new relationship with the state was centered on collective interests, and the ways in which women could give to the state through their devotion to the Confederate cause. These women were concerned with strengthening collective nationalism for the Confederate republic as opposed to expanding individual rights for themselves as citizens.
Given this new relationship with the state, outside of the political sphere, and often framed through civic duty, Confederate women were informed and engaged with wartime political and social issues in decisive ways. An exclusion from political rights did not translate as women’s exclusion from political culture. Kerber’s notion of Republican Motherhood defines women’s service to the newly formed late eighteenth-century American republic in terms of civic duty. Women were responsible for educating their sons in civic virtue as the next generation of leaders as well as supporting their husbands as the current generation of leaders. An educated citizenry was a prerequisite for a healthy democracy, and women played an instrumental role in ensuring the sustainability of the American experiment in democracy. Restricted to the domestic sphere, women did not have direct access to the electoral political sphere; their access was mediated through their husbands (and, again, their civic obligation was to their husbands rather than to the state). Decades later, Confederate women were still excluded from the electoral political sphere, but they now contributed to political culture and civic duty as individuals rather than merely through their sons and husbands. Confederate women were the daughters and granddaughters of the Republican mothers who emerged from the American Revolution, but the advent of the Civil War allowed them to foster more direct relationships with the state and political sphere. As such, and consistent with recent works in Southern women’s history, this book adopts a more capacious and inclusive definition of political culture. Political culture is not restricted to the electoral political sphere but permeates civic society in both the public and private spheres. While historians have examined conservative Virginia women’s antebellum and postwar relationship to political culture, this book addresses this temporal gap in the historiography to examine conservative Virginia women’s wartime engagement with political culture.

The political culture of the Confederacy unfolded on the back porch of Mount Vernon and in the pews of the Methodist Church on Broad Street in Richmond. Southern women lobbied Union military as well as Confederate military and political officials at varying levels for various causes. These Confederate women had definite political effects, inside and outside of the Confederacy, even if the women themselves would not identify these ideas or actions as “political.” Moreover, these women held power in civic society. As Glymph shows, white women were intrinsic to the management of plantation slavery and were actively engaged in the required systemic violence of the institution. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers expands on Glymph’s work to show how white women gained economic power from slavery: white women bought, sold, and perpetuated
violence against enslaved persons, and in doing so, worked to shape the domestic slave market economy. Both Glymph and Jones-Rogers reveal that Southern white women might not have had access to the electoral political sphere, but they did have social and economic power in civic society through slaveholding. Building on this work, with the advent of war, this book shows how white slaveholding women extended this power in civic society, as both actors and symbols of the Confederate cause, through their engagement with Confederate nationalism.

Virginia

*The Weaker Sex in War* uses Virginia as a lens to examine overarching issues addressing gender and nationalism across the Confederacy given the state’s central role in Confederate social and political history. Moreover, Virginia offers a diverse demography consisting of both urban and rural communities as well as a geography consisting of coastal, mountain, and piedmont regions. In terms of urban studies, Virginia was home to the capital of the Confederacy; Richmond and its environs were at the vanguard of Confederate political, economic, and military life. The capital attracted Southerners from across the region, bringing a constant flow of visitors to Richmond. In 1860, Richmond was home to about 38,000 residents; by 1863, the Confederate capital’s population was estimated to be approximately 100,000 people. Such fluctuations in migration to the capital led to serious issues for civic authorities to remedy, including food and housing shortages as well as the struggle to control and regulate crime and labor.

Virginia became an unrelenting battleground: From the First Battle of Bull Run, the first major land battle of the Civil War, in July 1861, to the surrender at Appomattox in April 1865, the state was a central site of battles and troop movements throughout the war. Virginia suffered more than 120 battles throughout the war, over three times the number of the next highest state, Tennessee, and far fewer than Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Virginia was at the heart of Southern civilian and military life, as well as Confederate political culture during the war. Virginia was the most populous state of the Confederacy; in 1860, the year before the war, nearly 1.6 million residents lived in the state. With almost 500,000 enslaved persons within its borders, Virginia also had the highest enslaved population. According to the 1860 Virginia census, 52,128 people were slaveholders out of a total population of 1,596,318 people: approximately 32 percent of Virginians owned enslaved persons on the eve of the Civil War. However, only 25,355 people owned five or more enslaved persons, placing them in the top 15.8 percent of the total population.
Virginia was not quick to embrace secession. In the 1860 presidential election, Virginia did not vote for the Southern Democratic candidate John C. Breckinridge, but was one of three states that voted for John Bell of the short-lived Constitutional Union Party. Virginia was one of the last states to secede, and its convention voted against secession on April 4, 1861. In her diary, Samuella Hart Curd described the Union sentiment in Virginia in early 1861, “Virginia convention in session, strong by Union, but I fear, there can be no compromise.”

Less than two weeks later, on April 17, the convention voted to secede after the Battle of Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for 75,000 volunteers. On May 23, Virginians voted to support secession. Not all convention delegates or Virginia voters supported secession. Unionism was particularly strong in the western counties, with lower levels of slaveholding and a tighter economic relationship to the neighboring Union states of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Indeed, West Virginia broke off from Virginia and was admitted to the Union as a state in June 1863. There were also collectives in Union-occupied areas of the state from early in conflict. Like other states in the Confederate South, there were Unionists scattered across the state of Virginia.

The state of Virginia eventually joined the Confederacy, but not all Virginians pledged themselves to the Confederacy, including its women. Southern women’s loyalty to the Union (or disloyalty to the Confederacy) could be shaped by a variety of issues, including moral imperatives on the slavery question and/or if they were enslaved, economic survival, opposition to Confederate policies as well as family and cultural ties. Some women, like Richmond-based Union spy Elizabeth Van Lew, actively supported the Union and tried to undermine the Confederate cause. Other women were ambivalent and uncertain about the future of the Confederate cause, like the First Lady of the Confederacy and wartime Richmond resident Varina Howell Davis. Enslaved women engaged in various strategies of resistance throughout the war undermining not only plantation mistresses in their individual plantation households but the foundations of both slavery as an institution and slavery as “the cornerstone” of the Confederate republic. While this book examines Virginian women who supported the Confederacy, not all women in Virginia supported the Confederacy; these other women contributed to the war culture of the Confederacy in significant ways, though the Confederate state did not use these women as symbols to strengthen its nationalist agenda.

The Virginian organizations and women discussed herein held wider links to the Confederacy beyond the state of Virginia. While the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union was based in Mount Vernon, the organization sought vice regents to run auxiliary state organizations and to represent state interests in
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during the war, the organization had Southern state vice regents from Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, and Florida. The Ladies’ Defense Association in Richmond was established in March 1862 to support the capital in a highly publicized campaign, but other ladies’ gunboat associations sprung up across the South in the spring of 1862, including in Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina. The Richmond bread riot was not an isolated event. In the spring of 1863, a series of food riots took place across the South, including in Atlanta, Georgia; Salisbury, North Carolina; Mobile, Alabama; and Petersburg, Virginia. As the final chapter considers, the establishment of the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond in 1898 served as a model for the construction of Confederate women’s homes across the South in the early decades of the twentieth century, homes such as the Confederate Women’s Home in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1915. The organizations and causes discussed in this book may have originated and/or had the largest following in Virginia, but these ideas had a greater valence and presence across the South. The book’s focus on Virginia provides a prism to consider these local and state issues on a regional level in terms of their greater impact on Confederate nationalism and political culture.

The following chapters interrogate the relationship between gender and nationalism on the Confederate home front to show how conservative middle- and planter-class white women actively worked to build nationalism in both their tangible works for the cause and their abstract symbolism of the cause. Each of these chapters reveals how the state recognized the power of women as both wartime actors and symbols, and responded in different ways and to different ends, to women’s wartime activities. Women’s wartime activities were not monolithic and women supported different initiatives across the war, but these activities helped to shape women’s relationship to the state. Likewise, women’s relationship to the state was not static, but it was central to building and strengthening Confederate nationalism. These women may not have had power in the political sphere, but the political sphere recognized their power to shape nationalist engagement and discourses.

Chapter 1 examines how women in the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union (MVLA) tried to adopt a posture of “neutrality” during the secession crisis and early war to leverage women’s roles as symbols of virtue and as social mediators. The chapter shows that this neutrality was a sign of their antebellum politicization and was a strategy for intervening in public life, but that such a stance became deeply contested. As founding regent Ann Pamela Cunningham’s
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exchange with Massachusetts politician Edward Everett dramatizes, for the “ladies” who worked on behalf of the MLVA and various Confederate causes, so-called neutrality was both a rejection of the Union and an assertion of the legitimacy, as a belligerent power whose citizens deserved access to American symbols, of the Confederacy.

Chapter 2 shows how pretenses of neutrality fell away in the Confederate capital in the spring of 1862 as Confederates faced the specter of “invasion” from Union general George McClellan’s army and of Union occupation. The Ladies Defense Association (LDA) both asserted women’s right to intervene in military matters and provided a useful symbol, for Confederate culture more broadly, of women’s patriotism.

Chapter 3 discusses the Richmond bread riot and class conflict among whites to show that the Confederate government sought to protect elite women against the unruliness of the “unworthy” poor. In its connection of the conscription laws and the draft riot, this chapter argues that elites displayed not just insensitivity but outright animosity to those deemed unworthy.

Chapter 4 interjects women and gender into the historiography on foreign recognition of the Confederacy. This discussion uses the examples of Rose Greenhow and other emissaries and propagandists to show that advocates of foreign recognition framed their case in gendered terms, with an emphasis on women’s victimization designed to demonize the Union and undercut its claims to humanitarianism.

Chapter 5 shows how women attempted to render female descendants of soldiers’ families as “living monuments” to the Confederacy, who deserved the literal support of the government; the chapter thus shows that Confederate memorialization was not about mourning but about keeping the Confederacy “alive” in lineage and in spirit.

The epilogue comments on the controversies over including Sally Tompkins in the Virginia Women’s Monument and illustrates that Tompkins should be regarded, in light of women’s centrality to the construction of Confederate nationalism, as a political symbol, and not just as an apolitical caregiver.

Overall, *The Weaker Sex in War: Gender and Nationalism in Civil War Virginia* highlights the centrality of gender to Confederate identity and nationhood, both for its (mostly female) population on the home front and its (mostly male) governmental policy architects and influencers. Conservative women played crucial roles in creating, and, at times, problematizing, the idea of the Confederate republic. Middle- and planter-class white Southern women who supported the Confederacy were central to these processes not only as individual actors with
agency but also in their projection and circulation as potent symbols reinforcing foundational principles of the Confederate republic. These women were not concerned with expanding their individual rights as citizens nor were they passive in political culture; rather, they actively defined the terms of their engagement through performance of national devotion. Confederate male elites may have mobilized these women as archetypes to advance a Confederate agenda, but conservative women were complicit in this process. Seen in this way, Confederate nationalism was more dependent on gender than has been previously argued. This fundamental relationship between the Confederacy and the conservative middle- and planter-class women on its home front eludes a simple, uniform narrative. In offering a more layered and interdisciplinary account of this relationship, this book aims to come to terms with the fraught reality between the government and its people, between the construction and reception of nationalism, and between the possibility and impossibility of a Confederate victory.