The Weaker Sex in War
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Chapter 2

Ladies’ Defense Association

Before she was a fundraiser for the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association in Virginia as discussed in chapter 1, Maria Clopton served as the president of the Ladies’ Defense Association. In the spring of 1862, several ladies’ gunboat associations emerged across the South. These organizations sought to raise money for the construction of ironclads to aid the Confederate naval effort. The Battle of the Ironclads (or Battle of Hampton Roads) over two days in March 1862, off the coast of southern Virginia near Norfolk, was the first battle of ironclad warships. While the battle was a draw, this was a landmark battle in naval history and it held the power to galvanize and intensify national sentiment on both home fronts of the conflict. Furthermore, the battle received international attention. Europe’s imperial powers closely watched this development in modern warfare and its potential to transform mid-nineteenth-century naval fleets. Within the Confederacy, the construction of ironclads gave naval officials the opportunity to diversify and strengthen their naval power to combat the Union’s Anaconda plan to strangle the Confederacy with a naval blockade.

At the same time, in terms of their fundraising efforts, it gave the Confederate home front, and women like Clopton, a new outlet to participate in the Confederate military cause. Historians of ladies’ gunboat associations tend to use these associations as barometers to measure women’s commitment to Confederate nationalism. However, as this chapter demonstrates, a more multidimensional approach shows that women garnered political capital for the Confederacy through their work in the gunboat associations. Women’s wartime actions constitute more than social history, they contribute to political and intellectual history. These women, and the women discussed in the subsequent chapters of this book, not only engaged with political culture as actors, but they also became willing and eager Confederate nationalist symbols. These women carved out new roles for themselves in the Confederate republic and expanded their power in civic society through work in organizations such as the Ladies’ Defense
Association (LDA). In turn, such efforts translated into an expanded influence in the political sphere as male leaders praised and used the LDA’s works as one way to bolster Confederate nationalism.

It is important to note here that these conservative women did not use their new relationship with the wartime state and their power in civic society to pursue a progressive agenda focused on the expansion of their own rights as individual citizens. Instead, they turned to strengthening the collective ideological drive of Confederate nationalism. The conservative women of the LDA used their power in civic society to lobby for the collective interests of the Confederacy and in so doing shored up a government committed to restricting the full rights of citizenship across gendered, racial, and classed lines. With the advent of war, these women brokered new relationships and exchanges with male political and military leaders to champion the Confederate cause and perform national devotion.

Tracking women’s participation in gunboat associations is not just a way to assess women’s commitment to Confederate nationalism, as other historians have done; this involvement meant women helped build Confederate nationalism. Women were active agents in fashioning a narrative of Confederate strength that observers inside and outside of the Confederacy noted. Middle- and planter-class white women permeating the traditionally masculine sphere of military affairs in their work with the Ladies’ Defense Association carried such symbolic value that the LDA became a dynamic source of political capital and nationalist fervor for the Confederate mission.

In terms of its impact and effect on Confederate military and political affairs, the Confederate state’s projection and circulation of the work of the LDA was in many ways more significant than the actions of the LDA. Confederate leaders recognized the potential power of the work of the LDA to strengthen national identity, and they in turn used the work of the LDA to advance this agenda. Through their publicity and fundraising campaigns, the women of the LDA actively collaborated with these leaders and strove to strengthen nationalism. These women forged a new relationship with the state through their active participation in and performance of nationalist devotion.

Women’s Defense of the Capital

Following the establishment of ladies’ gunboat associations across the South, including in Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia, the Ladies’ Defense Association in Richmond was founded in late March 1862, and Maria
Gaitskell Clopton served as its president. Under Clopton’s leadership, the LDA quickly established its organizational structure and mandate that adopted ideals and actions of antebellum Southern womanhood to the exigencies of the wartime context. In early 1862, Clopton turned her townhouse on Franklin Street between Third and Fourth Street into a hospital for Confederate soldiers. Her hospital was lauded for its low mortality rate; of course, such smaller hospitals did not usually care for the most seriously injured soldiers, who often immediately went to the nearby Chimborazo Hospital. Clopton’s daughter Adelaide wrote to her sister Namie (Clopton) Nicholls in July 1862, “Ma works, works, works all the time at the hospital.” After Surgeon-in-Charge Henry Augustus Tatum died, accompanied by mounting complaints from neighbors about the suitability of Maria Clopton’s private residence as a hospital, the Clopton Hospital closed in October 1862. Clopton’s second-in-command, vice president of the Ladies’ Defense Association Wilhelmina Henningsen, also ran a wartime hospital in Richmond until 1863. The hospital work of Clopton and Henningsen fits well into antebellum conventions of Southern womanhood: care and nurturing within the home. Likewise, antebellum Southern women were engaged in fundraising efforts throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but this was a narrow scope of interests mainly restricted to the support of benevolent societies focused on temperance and religious charity. The purpose of the LDA’s fundraising project, a gunboat for the military defense of the capital city, was markedly different from earlier antebellum pursuits and represents a decisive shift in the parameters of appropriate public sphere interests and activities for women. At the end of March 1862, the LDA rapidly set up its structure and procedures of operation: it assigned collectors for each ward as well as leadership positions, set membership dues ($1 for women and $2 for men’s honorary membership), and installed a decentralized network for collecting contributions. The new organization also codified its aims, passed resolutions, and issued its founding mission statement.

In molding its mission statement, the LDA leadership was mindful of its entrance into issues traditionally associated with men. They were explicit in their intentions to support men’s work and how women as the “weaker sex” would shape their activities: “That we, as the weaker sex, being unable to actively join in the defense of our country, will encourage the hearts and strengthen the hands of our husbands, brothers, fathers and friends by all means within our power.” For women to enter this realm in a socially acceptable way, they needed to uphold cultures of honor and shame as well as standards of Southern masculinity. The LDA’s resolution professed not only organizational strength but also
female weakness; women might be entering into new issues and activities, but they would only be doing so as “the weaker sex in war.”

The inclusion of “ladies” in the organization name itself highlights how ideas surrounding class, gender, and race structured notions of elite white women’s weakness. In the antebellum and Confederate South, there was a disconnect between the ideal of the powerless yet civilized and refined Southern “lady” and the lived experiences of white slaveholding women. Slaveholding women were instrumental in the management of plantations, including the supervision and discipline of enslaved persons. They also engaged in the broader economic landscape of the plantation; they routinely bought and sold enslaved persons and were influential financial agents in the domestic slave market. As these women were foundational to the managerial and economic operation of the plantation, they wielded power. This notion of power was dependent upon the use of violence against enslaved persons; in turn, elite white women’s exercise of violence was essential to the functioning of the slave regime. Such sustained and systemic engagement with violence stood in stark contrast to perceptions of women’s weakness and gentility. When the LDA included “lady” in its name, it obfuscated white women’s social and economic power derived through violence against enslaved persons. Instead, the LDA invoked the ideal of elite white women’s subservience, passivity, and weakness to their elite white male relations. Framing their contributions in terms of gendered limitations neutralized the threat of the LDA’s work to Southern masculinity and upheld Southern honor.

Given Jacqueline Glass Campbell’s argument that men and women shared common values, motivations, and goals in their commitments to Confederate nationalism and waging war, it is not surprising that these women were keen to engage with military affairs, albeit in a circumscribed way, to uphold Southern cultures of honor and masculinity. Campbell applies James McPherson’s ideas of “hearth and home” as a motivation for Confederate men to support the Confederacy to Confederate women. Confederate women on the home front were often left to defend their homes from Union occupation and destruction through individual encounters and interactions with Union soldiers. Women civilians had to defend their actual homes, and not just the idea of home, particularly in Union general William Tecumseh Sherman’s “geographic and psychological” campaigns in the final year of the war in Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. For some women, the defense of home was necessary for the physical survival of themselves as individuals and their families. In this sense, women’s collective engagement with military and defense issues in the LDA can be seen as an extension of their defense of individual households. In both
instances, women engaged with military culture and worked to more closely tie the home front and front lines in their individual and collective activities of defense. Moreover, the Civil War strengthened the relationship between military service and citizenship, and women were excluded from traditional understandings and definitions of military service. The LDA was one way in which women could engage with military culture, at a time when citizenship was dependent on military service.¹⁸

After proclaiming the weakness of their sex within the organization’s name and meeting minutes to uphold Southern cultures of honor and masculinity, Clopton used gender to shame Richmond’s wealthy gentleman to contribute more money to the gunboat association. In an April 1862 letter published in the *Richmond Dispatch*, after praising the culture of sacrifice of Southern women contributing to the drive, “All honor to the women of the South! No fairer page of history will be written than that recording their labors of love in this struggle of independence; the ladies need no urging to do their duty,” Clopton immediately indicted Southern men to meet the standard set by their women counterparts. She chastised, “What shall we say to the gentlemen? Especially to those of large possessions and ample means. May we not feel certain that they, too, will come out nobly—not with their hundreds but with their thousands.”¹⁹ Questioning how “noble” Richmond men were, particularly those of “ample means,” implicitly drew on the dueling notions of honor and shame that underpinned Southern culture. Contributing to the gunboat association was not solely to support the ladies’ collective mission but also to prove individual Southern men’s honor.

Furthermore, in one of its first acts as an organization, the LDA passed a resolution to ask Richmond newspapers to print the names of individuals donating one hundred dollars or more to the cause.²⁰ On April 21, 1862, Confederate printer and political organizer Blanton Duncan wrote to Clopton that local newspapers would agree to publish the names of large donors in order to publicize the work of the LDA.²¹ This strategy was two-fold: the work of the LDA and its prominent donors not only would be widely circulated and celebrated but would also expose those in the community of means not contributing to the cause. Moreover, Clopton and Vice President Henningsen ran a committee devoted to “gentlemen” offering at least $1,000 subscriptions.²² The organization created a threshold of elite donors. In this way, Clopton used newspaper culture to shame men who did not contribute to the cause and honor those who did.²³

These ideas surrounding the culture of honor and shame were not only important to LDA fundraising initiatives but also to overarching understandings
of Southern masculinity. The Civil War created a crisis of masculinity in which the expectations of manhood from the antebellum South proved to be unachievable in the lived reality of the Confederacy. Training in honor, avoidance of shame, and ambitious desire were inculcated in the younger generation of planters from an early age within their patriarchal families, social institutions, and wider communities.\(^4\) The protection of women, as “the weaker sex,” was essential to notions of Southern masculinity.\(^5\) Alongside its reverence of white planter women, the denigration and domination of enslaved persons was also essential to Southern masculinity.\(^6\) Men considered their duties to protect their family, including a patrilineal slaveholding legacy, as paramount.\(^7\) The outbreak of the Civil War provided the opportunity for the younger generation, namely those who had not fought in the Mexican-American War in 1846–48, to apply the abstractions of their formal and informal educations to the practicalities of war. The Confederacy and the next generation of the plantocracy would try to prove their nationhood and manhood together. The LDA’s appropriation of this culture of honor to strengthen fundraising efforts reveals the organization’s sharp awareness of the power of masculinity to Southern society and the Confederate cause; the desire to prove and uphold masculinity could be used, or even manipulated, to galvanize individual and/or societal action.

At the same time, this failure to uphold these standards of masculinity could be used, or even manipulated, to shame men and the Confederacy, perhaps seen most clearly in the capture of Jefferson Davis after the fall of the Confederacy. After the fall of Richmond in April 1865, Davis fled the capital and moved south accompanied by a small group of advisors. They temporarily set up a governing body in Danville, Virginia, but were quickly forced to move farther south by the advancing Union army. On May 10, just over a month after the fall of Richmond and Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, Davis was captured outside of Irwinville, Georgia, wearing his wife’s cloak and shawl. This led to reports that Davis tried to escape Union capture by dressing as a woman. In the spring of 1865, in the Northern states, Jefferson Davis was routinely depicted as wearing woman’s clothes while fleeing Union capture; the president of the Confederacy, the pinnacle of Southern political power, was presented as a frightened and weak Southern woman (see figure 3). As Nina Silber has shown, these images were a condemnation of Confederate men and the Confederacy as a whole; Davis can be read as a metaphor for both the weaknesses of Confederate masculinity and the Confederate republic.\(^8\) Davis and Confederate men had been stripped of their masculinity and honor, shamed, and themselves became “the weaker sex in war.”\(^9\)
While pursuing a bold strategy in embedding masculine cultures of honor and shame into campaigns for subscriptions, the LDA also pursued more conventional means to raise money and raise the organization's profile. These traditional fundraising activities, such as organizing bazaars and performances, were consistent with Southern women’s antebellum societal roles and reveal the ways in which some Confederate women adopted and reconfigured established antebellum conventions to accommodate the wartime context. In one of its first meetings, Vernon, who would serve at the LDA’s secretary until her death in May 1862, put forth a resolution to set up a bazaar to collect donations in Richmond. She, in turn, was named chair of the committee to oversee the establishment and operation of the bazaar. The April 19 and 21 editions of

the Richmond Dispatch printed notices of a performance to raise money for the LDA, and news of the performance was widespread across Richmond society. As Eliza Oswald Hill, a prolific chronicler of wartime events in the capital, wrote in her diary on April 18, “the young ladies intend giving next week a concert for the Gun Boat fund.” This participation of the younger generation of white middle-and planter-class women shows the wide appeal of the organization’s aims and the eagerness of this younger generation to contribute not just to the Confederate cause but to the work of the LDA. In total, the LDA raised over $20,000 for the construction of the gunboat.

Similar to strategies deployed in the antebellum era, the women members utilized the power and influence of their male relations to advance their organization’s agenda. Maria Clopton was the widow of Judge John Bacon Clopton and held considerable reverence in Richmond society. The wife of General Charles Frederick Henningsen, Wilhelmina Henningsen, was vice president. The wife of the chief of ordnance Josiah Gorgas, Amelia Gaye Gorgas, was an active member. Martha Maury, cousin of Betty Herndon Maury of the famed naval family, served as treasurer and likely ensured that former superintendent of the U.S. Naval Observatory and Confederate navy commander Matthew Fontaine Maury acted as the LDA’s greatest champion. Matthew Fontaine Maury frequently addressed or hosted the meetings; he also acted on behalf of the organization in some negotiations with the Confederate government. The LDA was so appreciative of Maury’s patronage they passed a resolution to publish a pamphlet celebrating his service to the LDA and the Confederate cause. In this way, the LDA was not simply a barometer for women’s commitment to nationalism as some historians have argued, but rather how the LDA sought to produce nationalist materials (other than the gunboat) themselves.

These familial relations did afford the LDA a greater familiarity with Confederate political and military leaders in the public sphere. For instance, the LDA meeting minutes on the afternoon of April 3, 1862, describe Maury urging the LDA to arrange to meet with Jefferson Davis to discuss their plans to fund a gunboat. The minutes for April 4 detail that the meeting with Davis took place the previous evening and Davis offered them the opportunity to fund the next gunboat the Confederate government constructed. On April 5, 1862, the Richmond Dispatch reported that a delegation from the LDA met with President Jefferson Davis and Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory. The meeting was productive and at its close these two Confederate political and military leaders “tendered to the Association the gunboat now in process by the Government, which will facilitate the consummation of their project very much, and enable
the ladies to afford the Confederate capital a most formidable defence." Davis and Mallory personally met with the LDA and offered them a gunboat to lend the organization’s name hours after Maury had suggested this to the organization, and one month after the organization was founded. Simply put, without the influence and aid of their prominent male relations, the LDA probably would not have been as successful in such a short amount of time in securing its aims. This also illustrates that class was central to the LDA’s success. As E. Susan Barber’s work has shown, lower-class white women in Richmond were given opportunities to contribute to the Confederate military effort through their work in ammunitions factories. However, as the March 13, 1863 explosion at the Confederate Ordnance Laboratory on Brown’s Island in Richmond that left at least forty dead, mostly women and children, shows, this was dangerous work done mainly out of economic necessity as opposed to ideological impetus.

It should also be noted that it is unlikely that Maury considered his work with the LDA to be an exclusively altruistic endeavor. The work of the LDA celebrated the Confederate navy and showcased the ways in which the home front should support not just soldiers’ relief efforts but the navy as an institution as well. After the Battle of the Ironclads, the Confederate navy found itself the focus of attention both inside and outside of the Confederacy. The efforts of the conservative women of the LDA provided an opportunity to extend this interest and support of the Confederate navy to benefit the Southern military effort. The LDA and male Confederate leaders worked together to construct and circulate a narrative of nationalist devotion focused on this single gunboat for the capital.

When the gunboat, CSS *Virginia II*, was finally completed and launched on the James River in June 1863, newspapers across the entire state from the *Staunton Spectator* to the *Alexandria Gazette* reported on its baptism and focused on its important contribution to the Confederate navy. The *Richmond Enquirer* reported on June 30, 1863, “The Richmond fleet will now soon be big enough to do the enemy a good turn in the way of sinking some of his ships, driving his troops out of the way, and damaging his prospects in lower Virginia generally.” The LDA’s fundraising drive had a real impact on the development of Confederate naval strength and technology. These women inserted themselves into the traditionally male sphere of military affairs and helped fund the construction of a gunboat infused with Confederate nationalism in fundraising campaigns and in its use. These conservative women harnessed their new relationship with the wartime state and their expanded roles in civic society to advocate for the defense of the republic. While not enjoying, or even desiring, the rights of full citizenship, these women were able to influence individuals,
like Davis, and ideas, like nationalism, in the political sphere. In comparison to the work and legacy of the LDA, the impact of the gunboat itself was short-lived. Three years later, in April 1865 when the Union invaded Richmond, the gunboat was annihilated.

Although the LDA projected a unified and strong façade to Richmond society, there is evidence of some internal conflict within the organization. Namely, some members and subscribers became divided as to how the newly raised funds should be spent. On May 27, 1862, Anna Logan wrote to Clopton expressing her concern and disapprobation that she had heard that plans to fund a gunboat had been abandoned and the organization now planned to donate the money to sick soldiers. Also symptomatic of these rumors, a letter addressed to Clopton signed only by “A Member” asked for a meeting to be called so the organization could listen to all members’ wishes regarding the expenditure of funds. From Lynchburg, Catherine Speed wrote to the LDA to confirm whether they were still raising money for a gunboat “as it was reported the government would prefer building the Boats without the aid of the ladies.” Speed went on to tell the LDA her auxiliary organization had raised three thousand dollars and would like to contribute some of these funds to the LDA, but only if they could confirm they were still committed to building a gunboat as opposed to another cause. From the organization records, it is clear that most surrogates and members did not support giving money to sick soldiers through the LDA. This money, and this organization, should be allocated to and represent military support for the Confederate capital, not medical support for individual soldiers.

The very name of the organization, Ladies’ Defense Association, suggests an outlook concerned with militaristic affairs and policy. This represents a stark shift from antebellum notions of the purpose of women’s work; the LDA explicitly rejected the prescription of a role to care for sick soldiers and embraced a role to fundraise for military structure and operations. This is not to say that individual members of the LDA did not support caring for sick soldiers; its very own president, Clopton, ran a Richmond hospital, after all. However, and as seen in chapter 1’s discussion of the MVLA, the organizational aims were different from individual members’ aims. Women could support the LDA and support caring for sick soldiers outside of the organization; these commitments were not mutually exclusive. On April 11, 1862, the Confederate Congress, in one of its references to women on the legislative record over the course of the war, issued a joint resolution to commend “the patriotic women of the Confederacy for the energy, zeal and untiring devotion which they have manifested in furnishing voluntary contributions to our soldiers in the field, and in the various military
hospitals throughout the country.” Soldier’s relief and hospital care was acceptable and praiseworthy work for wartime Southern women. However, the LDA would be different. The LDA was clear in its intentions and aims; it would not nurture soldiers, it would strengthen the Confederate navy. This was not a soldiers’ aid society; this was a defense association. This was not about alleviating the pain and suffering of individuals; this was about strengthening the collective defense of the republic.

While there was a growing network of ladies’ gunboat associations across the South in early 1862, the LDA in Richmond was exceptional given its location. Operating in the capital of the Confederacy gave the women unparalleled access to Confederate political and military figures, like Davis and Mallory. This was an advantage not shared by women’s organizations in the lower South. Furthermore, Richmond offered the symbolism of the Confederate capital. The protection of the capital was of paramount importance to subscribers to the LDA. Writing on behalf of Mrs. Col Strange on April 27, 1862, Philip de Catesby Jones informed the LDA that Mrs. Strange wished to donate a large quantity of iron “for defence of our capital.” Given the hardships within the overcrowded and under resourced city, particularly after the Battle of Seven Pines (May 31–June 1, 1862), organization surrogates were eager to praise the people of Richmond. Logan wrote to Clopton, “I am very proud of the citizens of Richmond that they have determined to burn the beautiful city rather than surrender—It required very brave hearts to decide such a question.” Its location in Richmond served as a motivation for some to contribute to the LDA.

Women’s aid societies across Virginia closely monitored and praised the work of the Ladies’ Defense Association. In addition to the above testament of support from Speed and the women of Lynchburg, the Prince Edward Ladies’ Aid Association offered financial support to the LDA. Its president, Cornelia A. Berkeley, wrote to Clopton of their “wish to aid you in this noble enterprise” and offered $150 and several luxury items for the cause. Not only does this demonstrate a network of women’s associations across the state of Virginia working in concert, it shows that Virginia women outside of the capital looked to Richmond and the LDA for guidance and leadership. Many observers both inside and outside the Confederacy were looking to the Confederate capital to help assess the sustainability of this new republic. The LDA’s drive was not simply to fund a gunboat in the city where it was founded, but rather, crucially, to capture the symbolism of greater protection for the Confederate capital, in terms of both military structure and civilian support. As LDA secretary Vernon, a Georgia native, said in an address at one of the organization’s early meetings that was
printed by the *Richmond Enquirer*, “I cannot withhold any effort on my part to which conduces to the defence and safety of the Confederate Capitol, since it becomes the common interest of all Confederate states. The efforts of the best years of my life have been given to the South—the whole South—and I have to rejoice to know that they have not been in vain.”

The LDA’s efforts must be conceptualized not only for their tangible actions in Richmond, but also, and perhaps more important, for the meaning of their actions to a wider audience in dedication to this common interest. Both the conservative women of the LDA and male Confederate leaders worked together, in actions and rhetoric, to present the acquisition of a gunboat as a nationalist triumph. The women of the LDA used their new relationship with the state and their new roles in wartime society to advance the interests of the Confederacy. Neither the Confederate leadership nor its conservative women, like the women of the LDA, were interested in women using their new societal roles to argue for their own full rights of citizenship. Instead, both male leaders and these women were concerned with advancing the ideological drives of Confederate nationalism, an ideology dependent upon race, gender, and class inequality.

**Spartan Motherhood**

The mission of the LDA and the work of its individual members draws parallels to a common trope that captures the fraught relationship between women, gender, and wartime society: Spartan motherhood. Spartan motherhood is a prevalent metaphor in wartime societies across history serving a nationalistic function in its sacrifice of the personal for the political; the sacrifice of the relationship between mother and son for the relationship between citizen and the state. Recognizing the emotive power of the rhetoric of Spartan motherhood, the LDA explicitly compared itself to Spartan mothers of the Confederate capital. On March 28, 1862, the *Richmond Enquirer* published the minutes of one of the first meetings of the LDA. This included an address given by LDA secretary Vernon that outlined the mission of the new organization in terms of women’s sacrifice on the home front to complement men’s sacrifice on the front lines. In a high neoclassical style, she concluded her address:

> The battlefields of the South are drenched in blood of her best and bravest men, and watered with the tears of mothers, whose names will descend to the future in such illuminous chivalrous pages, as consigns to the myth of traditional lore, the best characters of Sparta.
She bends over the lifeless form of her heroic son who lies wrapt in the swathing robes of his country’s glory, and the bloody sword of his valor lies broken and unsheathed beside him. A pang cleaves her heart at the first fearful sight as she feels the song of his milk-teeth on her tender breast, and the voice of his infant prattling falls on her ear.

But hark! The ring of the shrill bugle in the distance, and the canon’s loud roar, reminds her that a ruthless foe is trampling upon the sanctified dust of her slumbering fathers in the genial South land. She turns in her indignant pride from the pale warriors, whose blood-stains have been washed with the tears of his mother, and gathering up the fragments of her broken heart in the folds of her chivalrous mantle, exclaims: Go hence, my darling boy, to your destiny; for what is a son to a mother who has no country! . . . The birth-pangs of nations, as well as individuals, at last are for women to suffer.  

This speech was central to not only the establishment of the LDA, but it was one of the milestones of Vernon’s life. Vernon’s May 19, 1862, obituary in the Richmond Whig details this address, “Mrs. Vernon read an address, prepared by herself, which displayed her ability as a writer, and attested, her devotion to the Southern cause.”  

The closing lines of this address are crucial to the stated objectives of the LDA in two ways. First, it shows that the LDA clearly perceived and positioned itself within the lexicon of Spartan mothers’ sacrifice to the military cause. Second, it shows the LDA envisioned its service to the Confederate military as more than individual sacrifice. After the Southern woman mourned the loss of the young boy on the battlefield, she rose with “indignant pride” to tackle the next hardship because “the birth-pangs of nations, as well as individuals, at last are for women to suffer.” In this speech, women’s wartime contributions to the military effort expanded from a mother’s individual biological sacrifice of her son to a collective social drive to aid and support the Confederate military as an institution. The LDA situated its work within the legacy of Spartan motherhood; its work was a step of progress from the individual to the collective, from the biological to the social, from emotional support to political support. With the founding of the LDA, women organized to support the military as an institution while maintaining the ideological drives of Spartan motherhood. In sum, the LDA used the tenets of Spartan motherhood to support and justify its organizational structure.

The LDA did not hold a monopoly on the usage of Spartan motherhood as a way to frame women’s wartime service and its significance to Confederate
nationalism. Augusta Jane Evans, the celebrated writer and ardent supporter of the Confederate cause, often used classical allusions, like references to the women of Sparta, to articulate women’s roles in the Southern war effort in her canon of published and unpublished wartime writings. In a letter to Confederate general P. G. T. Beauregard dated August 1862, Evans situated the story of Confederate women within a much longer narrative of the relationships between women and war across time and place: “[I] lament the role assigned to us [women] in the mightiest drama that ever riveted the gaze of the civilized world; and to envy the obsolete privileges of the young Hungarian Adjutant, the heroine of Comorn.” Yet, not satisfied to cast women in such powerless roles, Evans continued, “though debarred from the ‘tented field,’ the cause of our beloved, struggling Confederacy may yet be advanced through the agency of its daughters. . . . King Agis found himself unable to accomplish his scheme of redeeming his degenerate country from avarice and corruption, until the Ladies of Sparta gave their support to his plan of reform.” The ladies of Sparta were essential to King Agis’s efforts to strengthen his country, just as conservative white planter women were essential to strengthen the Confederate republic.

Evans is best known for her best-selling Confederate novel that was banned by Union generals, *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice* (1864). The novel portrays Southern women’s self-sacrifice and unwavering devotion to the Confederate cause. It integrates a wide array of classical allusions to romanticize women’s relationship to the Confederacy, but Evans continued to recognize the power of, but perhaps overused, Sparta metaphor to capture the gravity of Southern women’s lives: “Another adjective than ‘Spartan’ must fleck with glory the pages of future historians, for all the stern resolution and self-abnegation of Rome and Lacedaemon had entered the souls of Southern women.” In one of the early and frequent discussions about women’s roles in Southern society, one of the characters, Irene, tells another character, Elektra, “‘Have you forgotten that, when Sparta forsook the stern and sublime simplicity of her ancient manners, King Agis found himself unable to accomplish his scheme of redeeming his degenerate country from avarice and corruption, until the ladies of Sparta gave their consent and support to the plan of reform?’” This is the same passage Evans wrote to Beauregard two years earlier to convey Southern women’s roles in the Confederate cause. Evans used the same language and allusion from her unpublished personal letter to Beauregard and recycled it in her published novel. In her use of Spartan womanhood, Evans identified a powerful frame to present her ideas related to gender, war, and sacrifice first to Beauregard, and then to a wider commercial audience.
As a seasoned writer, Evans’s wartime use of Spartan womanhood highlights the ways in which this trope included all Confederate women, even if they were single and/or childless; women across the Confederacy could read this novel and include themselves in Evans’s definition of Spartan motherhood. The two protagonists of Macaria, Elektra and Irene, never marry or have children. Yet, they devoted their lives to the Southern cause. In this more inclusive social construction, the badge of honor of Spartan motherhood was extended to all Confederate women rather than just those women who gave birth to sons; motherhood was socially as opposed to biologically defined. Still, this new definition of motherhood was restrictive in terms of race and class and only applied to white middle- and planter-class women. Yet for these women at the top of the Southern social hierarchy, this was a more inclusive, accommodating frame to present their contribution to the cause and their new relationship to the Confederate state. This was a collective social construction of motherhood and service, not an individualistic biological function of reproduction. Such claims to the redefinition of motherhood along lines of collective service dictated a new relationship between women and the state. In this relationship, women could offer their services to the state as individuals, and not only through their male relations or the sacrifice of a son. Again, with the advent of war, conservative, middle- and planter-class white women assumed more power in civic society and redefined a more direct relationship with the wartime state.

These parallels between Confederate womanhood and Spartan motherhood were not manipulative distortions of the historical narrative. Some Confederate women’s actions were similar to those of Spartan women; this rhetoric accurately reflects tangible, material actions of a select group of Confederate women. Sarah Pomeroy, using Drew Gilpin Faust’s research in Mothers of Invention, finds that some Confederate women acted in a similar fashion as Spartan women in the sacrifice of their sons to war and state. As one mother wrote in the Winchester Virginian, “I am ready to offer you up in the defense of your country’s rights and honor and I now offer you, a beardless boy of 17 summers,—not with grief, but thanking God that I have a son to offer.”

Just as the LDA framed their mission in 1862, some women selected Sparta as an easily recognizable, emotionally connective lexicon to portray their service to the Confederate cause. This relationship between women and military culture was important not only during the war to Confederate nationalism but also after the war to Lost Cause ideology. Confederate women, writing and speaking about themselves after the war for a mass audience, often articulated the Spartan motherhood metaphor and identified themselves as Spartan
mothers of the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{58} The imagery of women’s self-sacrifice within a militaristic context was an emotive message to Southern sympathizers at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{59} Presenting this gendered devotion through a framework of militaristic contributions, the early twentieth-century memory of Spartan motherhood celebrated and advanced the Lost Cause, just as mid-nineteenth-century articulations of the LDA and Spartan motherhood celebrated and advanced Confederate nationalism.

The rhetoric of Spartan motherhood was used by the Confederate president and also alludes to a longer narrative of American women’s association with the classical tradition. In one of his few references to Southern women in his wartime speeches, on September 23, 1864, Davis evoked the metaphor of Spartan motherhood in rallying Georgians to defeat Sherman on his March to the Sea: “To the women no appeal is necessary. They are like the Spartan mothers of old. I know of one who had lost all her sons, except one of eight years. She wrote me that she wanted me to reserve a place for him in the ranks.”\textsuperscript{60} While this Sparta allusion was common in wartime societies, Caroline Winterer has shown that American women beginning in the eighteenth century more broadly associated themselves with the classical tradition, often with goals of social reform. Most notably, American women described themselves as Roman matrons at the end of the eighteenth century and the establishment of the new republic.\textsuperscript{61} In a similar vein, creating broad, generalized associations with Sparta, perhaps the most iconic and celebrated military society in history, Southern women accentuated the military prowess of the Confederacy. In describing themselves as Spartan mothers, women created a role for themselves in the masculine military affairs of the Confederacy. This was a rhetorical stratagem employed by women to glorify the region as well as their own roles in the war effort. In this way, the Spartan mother during the Civil War echoed the figure of the Roman matron in the eighteenth century. Both inserted women into the masculine tradition of war and the construction of nation and nationalism.\textsuperscript{62}

Members of the LDA were not sacrificing their individual sons to the Confederate war effort, they were collectively engaging with military issues in new ways to serve the Confederate wartime state. The physical space in which the organization operated suggests a sense of conflation between military affairs and women’s work. The LDA held their meetings in the office of Matthew Fontaine Maury just as often as in the Methodist Church on Broad Street. The LDA was entering the physical space of the public sphere of masculine military affairs in measured ways. Just like Spartan mothers, the LDA channeled gender conventions to blur the distinction between private and public spheres, between
social and military causes, between female and male authority. Just like Spartan mothers, the LDA assumed a new role to address the gap between the needs of the Confederate military and the limitations of the Confederate government. Just like Spartan mothers, the actions of the LDA helped shape military affairs from outside of the formal governing sphere. On the outside pushing in, the LDA negotiated a new capacity in which women could contribute to the military effort. This was a more inclusive and less intimate means by which women could contribute to the military success of the republic; Confederate women did not require a biological son to sacrifice to military service. In their work, the LDA extended the roles in which women could have an impact on military affairs beyond the realm of reproductive service. Again, these women did not advocate for roles in the political sphere as individuals and expanded rights as citizens. Instead, they used their work in civic society to show how women could contribute to the war effort and nationalism beyond biological reproduction. These women did not see themselves as full citizens, but they did see themselves as more than mothers.63

**CSS Virginia II**

The work of the ladies’ gunboat associations, and the Ladies’ Defense Association in particular, testifies to the agency of at least some Confederate women in molding and showcasing their nationalist devotion. These women played active roles in the construction of the narrative of their commitment to the Confederate cause. The service and self-sacrifice of women to support the Confederate military was a source of political capital to build and strengthen Confederate nationalism. These women knowingly inserted themselves into a lexicon of rhetoric and actions that would bolster Confederate support. They knew their work would be harnessed for the Confederate nationalist mission and they were proud to serve the cause, in terms of both their actual work and the symbolism surrounding it. In many ways, the representation of women on the home front organizing en masse and collectively committing themselves to the military effort on the front lines was the model, paradigmatic image of wartime nationalism. Such an image obscured internal conflicts on the home front, or any sense of a fractious relationship between the government and its people and fraught communication between the home front and the front lines. Instead, the Confederate government and journalistic accounts projected a homogenizing and simplistic account of the Confederacy; women on the home front supported the Confederate war effort.
This abstract representation of Southern women’s work for the Confederate navy proved to be more valuable to the Confederacy than the actual work itself. The LDA raised over $20,000 to fund a gunboat, the CSS *Virginia II*, but it did not live up to the fame or glory of its namesake, the CSS *Virginia I*. The LDA-sponsored vessel saw its first action in June 1864 and its final action in January 1865 at Trent’s Reach where it suffered severe damage (see figure 4). The CSS *Virginia II* was destroyed by the Confederates upon evacuating Richmond in April 1865. In sum, the CSS *Virginia II*’s track record in battle could hardly be appropriated to strengthen Confederate nationalism.

However, the LDA’s track record could be used to strengthen Confederate nationalism. This was not just about the tangible gains of their work—raising funds for the construction of the CSS *Virginia II*—this was about the powerful political capital garnered from women’s visible support of the Confederate cause. Richmond newspapers frequently reported on the activities of the LDA, with three important emphases: their productive meeting with President Davis and other Confederate political and military leaders; their valorizations and celebrations of the Confederate military efforts in their printed meeting minutes.
and meeting speeches; and LDA president Maria Clopton’s tireless championing of women’s steadfast devotion to the organization’s mission. Women’s involvement in the LDA was not just a measure of their own individual commitment to Confederate nationalism, it was used by Confederate newspaper and political culture to build and strengthen Confederate nationalism. The work of the LDA highlighted the resolve and strength of the Confederate people, not just the Confederate state.

The women of the LDA were cognizant actors throughout this process. These women were active participants in the shaping and projecting of their works and experiences to a wider audience for a nationalist agenda. Confederate leaders recognized the emotive power of these women and deployed them to strengthen their wartime cause. These women claimed a military contribution to and relationship with the state that went beyond the sacrifice of sons to the war effort. With the advent of war, the women of the LDA claimed more expansive roles in civic society that were not dependent on biological motherhood, and these actions in civic society had significant effects in the political sphere. Even though these women did not want to be recognized as individuals with the full rights of citizenship in the political sphere, their work was recognized and valued in the political sphere by male leaders. The LDA may not have been progressive, but it was effective in advancing its conservative agenda through its performance of national devotion.

In April 1863, two months before the CSS Virginia II was launched on the James River, the Confederate government became acutely aware of an episode of white lower-class Southern women undermining Confederate nationalism: the Richmond bread riot. In its response to the Richmond bread riot, the government acted, at least in part, to safeguard the physical security and ideological symbolism of middle- and planter-class white Southern women on the home front, women like those active in the MVLA and LDA.