The Weaker Sex in War

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Epilogue

With the advent of the American Civil War, middle-and planter-class white women engaged with Confederate political culture and nationalism in new ways. Women undertook actions that had tangible effects on the strength and growth of Confederate nationalism. Confederate leaders in both government and civic society used and projected these women and their work as symbols of the Confederate republic. Women controlled the ways in which they participated in and performed such exercises of national devotion, and they were willing and eager to be used by Confederate leaders to advance the cause. These women not only held social and economic power in the plantation household before the war, they also held nationalistic power outside of the plantation household during the war. From the antebellum period through the war, women’s power was underpinned by slavery. As slaveholders, they exercised social and economic power in the plantation household. As supporters of a republic established for the right to own enslaved persons, they held nationalistic power in their performance of national devotion as “the weaker sex in war.” Working with male Confederate leaders, in action and rhetoric, Confederate women played important roles in the construction and circulation of Confederate nationalism to audiences inside and outside of the Confederacy, before and after the war.

The formative roles these women played in wartime nationalism shows the significance of gendered work in civic society, and the ways in which women’s ideas and labor from civic society permeated the political sphere. Women may not have had full rights as citizens in the political sphere, but they were still able to influence male Confederate leaders and nationalistic ideas in the political sphere through their work in civic society. Emerging from the revolution, women of the antebellum South had indirect and limited relationships with the state mediated through their husbands and their civic obligation was to their husbands rather than to the state. As the daughters and granddaughters of Republican mothers, Confederate women brokered direct relationships with the wartime state as individuals. Despite this expansion in women’s relationship with the state, these women did not lobby for the advancement of their rights
as individual citizens. Instead, they used this new relationship with the state to advance the collective cause of Confederate nationalism.

Such an agenda was in stark contrast to their counterparts in the North. The Northern women’s rights movement championed women’s equality with men through the attainment of the full rights of citizenship across gender. In a liberal tradition, the Northern women’s rights movement advocated rights in the political sphere, whereas Confederate women rejected this progressive campaign and instead embraced conservative political culture. In this way, Confederate women’s engagement with conservative political culture stands as an oppositional counterpoint to the narrative of first-wave feminism; it reveals the ways in which women could make decisive interventions to the mid-nineteenth-century American political landscape beyond individual rights and social reform. Just because these women were not progressive does not mean they were not important to wider debates surrounding nationalism and citizenship. This rejection of this progressive mandate of women’s equality and full rights of citizenship also supported Confederate nationalism. This representation of Confederate women as unequal with men, including in terms of the rights of citizenship, and more broadly as “the weaker sex in war” in need of protection, proved to be a compelling way to frame the cause.

This wedding of gender and nationalism created an arsenal of evocative rhetoric and images ready to be deployed to advance the ideological mission of the Confederate republic. The project of Confederate nationalism was dynamic and fluid, with women decisively shaping the narrative from below. This relationship between gender and nationalism became a key focus of Confederate political culture for both men in power and women on the home front—a relationship that would also become a key focus of Confederate memory from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present.

Virginia Women’s Monument and Sally Tompkins

In 2010, approaching the concurrent 100th anniversary of the congressional passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the 400th anniversary, in 2019, of both representative democracy in Virginia and the first arrival of enslaved persons to Virginia, the Virginia General Assembly established the Virginia Women’s Monument Commission to recommend a monument to celebrate Virginia women. As the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial was unveiled in 2008 in Capitol Square, and “Mantle,” a monument dedicated to Virginia’s Native American tribes was
unveiled in 2018, the commission recommended the erection of twelve life-sized bronze statues of Virginia women on a granite plaza to rectify this inequity and narrate the history of Virginia’s women in Capitol Square (see figure 6). The commission, chaired by Governor Ralph Norcom and composed of Virginia political and civic leaders, sought to address that “From the Founding of the Commonwealth, the genius and creativity of women and their presence and contributions have been evident in every aspect of Virginia history . . . however, they have received very little appreciation, recognition, or official acknowledgment.” The twelve women were selected by the commission, in consultation with historians, to portray the history and regional distinctions of Virginia from the settlement of Jamestown to the late twentieth century. As a collective, the monument is called Voices from the Garden and over 200 names of women are shown on a glass Wall of Honor surrounding the twelve statues representing the contributions of other Virginia women, with space to add additional names in the future:

Voices from the Garden draws visitors into an oval forum to interact with the twelve women who await them. At the center stands a bronze sundial on a granite pedestal. Tempered glass panels, a metaphor for the social filter that has long obscured women’s accomplishments from public view, provide space for the names of additional important women of history, with room to add the names of women today and tomorrow.

The monument lies west of the Virginia State Capitol in Capitol Square.

At the dedication ceremony on October 14, 2019, where Girl Scouts unveiled the first seven statues, Governor Norcom stated, “[This] is the first monument in [the] nation to celebrate both the individual and collective accomplishments of women over four centuries. . . . With the addition of the Women’s Monument to Capitol Square, we’re finally telling a more inclusive story, a more complete story, about Virginia.” Clerk of the Senate and commission member Susan Clarke Schaar claimed, “No pedestals, no weapons, no horses . . . [the commission] wanted it to be approachable. They wanted it to be warm and welcoming. And they wanted to convey a sense of consensus building.” Ivan Schwartz, the sculptor for the new monument as well as the Thomas Jefferson statue already in the State Capitol, reified the comments of Norcom and Clerk on a more national scale, “women have been excised from the marble pedestal of history . . . [This] gentlemen’s club, which has occupied our national living room, our nation’s public spaces, has at last started to admit women, African Americans, and Native Americans.” In October 2019, seven of the planned twelve statues of these women were unveiled in Capitol
Square: Anne Burras Laydon, Cockacoeske, Mary Draper Ingles, Elizabeth Keckley, Laura Copenhaver, Virginia Randolph, and Adele Clark. The remaining five statues—Martha Washington, Clementina Rind, Maggie L. Walker, Sarah G. Jones, and Sally Tompkins—required further funding for their construction. An additional $200,000 needed to be raised per statue to fund its construction by StudioEIS, the sculpture and design firm contracted to build the monument. Donors, which include individuals, nonprofit organizations, and businesses around Virginia, could specify which monument they wanted to support with their giving. For instance, two women each donated $100,000 for the construction of the Cockacoeske statue ensuring its commission. At the start of 2019, only half of the required $200,000 had been raised for the construction of the Tompkins statue. In 2020, the Virginia Women’s Monument Commission announced the successful completion of their $3.8 million fundraising effort.
The project has received criticism. In a less ideological vein, the sundial at the center of the monument depicting the regions of Virginia misspelt Loudoun as “Loudon.” This was quickly noted after the October dedication ceremony by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Loudoun Times-Mirror*. More significantly, some Virginians oppose the inclusion of slaveholders and/or Confederate women in the monument. Community activist Chelsea Wise Higgs lamented, “the Women’s Monument includes indigenous women and multiple African American women, giving many Virginians permission to grant this monument tolerance.” She went on to censure the selection of these twelve women: “Just as many women of color are forced to stand in rooms today where their voices aren’t heard, their bodies are violated, and their narratives are twisted, so are our women heroes being forced to share their legacy with Clementina Rind, Martha Washington, and Sally Louisa Tompkins.” The printing pioneer and wife of the first president were both slaveholders, but only Tompkins was both a slaveholder and a Confederate.

The controversy over the inclusion of Tompkins in the monument highlights debates over Confederate memorialization that have intensified since the June 2015 mass shooting in the Charleston Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church where Confederate sympathizer and white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans at a Bible study group. The August 11–12, 2017, Unite the Right Rally to protest the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, where one counter-protester was killed, further enflamed these issues. More recently, the reignited nationwide debate over the removal of statues of Confederates in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 contributed to wider discussions of race, violence, and inequality in the present-day United States. Namely, is the valorization of the Confederacy acceptable in twenty-first-century America?

The proposed location for the Tompkins statue, in the former Confederate capital city of Richmond, exacerbates these tensions. Confederate statues of J. E. B. Stuart, Matthew Fontaine Maury, and Stonewall Jackson lined Richmond’s nearby Monument Avenue until the city of Richmond removed them in the summer of 2020 and have been a recurrent focus of the statue debate. Monument Avenue’s statue of Jefferson Davis was pulled down by Black Lives Matter protestors in June 2020 and the Lee statue was removed following a Virginia Supreme Court ruling in September 2021. Prior to the statue removals, critics called Monument Avenue a 1.5-mile shrine to the Confederacy. Its defenders called it a necessary part of Virginia’s history and a means to celebrate individual men without celebrating the Confederacy and slaveholding. Artist Kehinde
Wiley created *Rumors of War* (2019), an equestrian statue of an African American man, as a critique of Richmond’s grandiose Confederate statue culture. *Rumors of War* was unveiled outside of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in December 2019, blocks away from Monument Avenue and less than a mile from the Lee statue. In an earlier attempt to diversify Richmond’s Confederate statue culture, as discussed in the introduction, Salvador Dalí proposed a design of a statue of Tompkins to be constructed on Monument Avenue in 1966.

Criticisms of the construction of the statue of Tompkins, as a Confederate, insert Tompkins into this debate over the memory of the Confederacy in twenty-first-century Virginia. The same rationale used to oppose statues of male Confederate political and military leaders (i.e., these men are symbols of Confederate nationalism and valorize the Confederacy) has been extended to include Tompkins (i.e., this woman is a symbol of Confederate nationalism and valorizes the Confederacy). Tompkins is not primarily recognized as a nurse or caretaker in these debates; she is recognized as a Confederate in a similar way to how Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and others are. In processes of memorialization in the present day, at least for some, Tompkins holds a similar nationalistic power as male leaders of the Confederacy. In a similar vein to how Confederate women were used as symbols of Confederate nationalism during the war, such discourses acknowledge the ways in which Tompkins can be interpreted as a symbol of Confederate nationalism in memory. This salient relationship between Confederate nationalism and gender is not restricted to the historical landscape but continues to permeate the present-day sociopolitical terrain in divisive and decisive ways. Representations of Confederate women are an evocative and effective touchstone for controversies addressing Confederate memory and the Lost Cause in contemporary society. The idea of “the weaker sex in war” that proved to be so effective in the Confederate war effort still holds a place in Lost Cause ideology today, and in the case of Sally Tompkins, has intersected with the Virginia state executive and legislative agenda. Confederate women’s performance of and contributions to nationalism in civic society shaped debates and issues in wartime political society, and the memory of these contributions continues to play a role in the nexus between Confederate memory and politics and governance today.