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Unraveling Confederate Sentiment: The Unfinished Story of a Sock

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Fig. X, Partially Completed Cotton Sock.
Made with Steel Knitting Needles by Mrs. Hugh Holmes Lee in Winchester, Virginia.
The American Civil War Museum, Richmond, Virginia.

The dismal night of November 14, 1864 found Mrs. Mary Greenhow Lee contemplating the unthinkable. "It is said the cars will run to Winchester in a few days," she wrote in her journal,

> telegraph posts have been put up & every sign of permanent occupation is apparent. It is said that they intend going into winter quarters here & that the officers will take rooms in our private houses. Then the dread I have had ever since the war will be realized – the horror of having Yankees in my house.[1]

Nearby defeats that winter signaled an unsettling reversal of Confederate fortunes. From the ruinous losses suffered by General Jubal Early's troops at the Third Battle of Winchester in September, to the disorganized plundering that left them open to a shameful whipping at Cedar Creek in October, rebel dominion in that part of Virginia was on the wane, and civilians friendly to the Confederate cause found the ground shifting under their feet. Mary Lee felt those convulsions acutely, and if there's a touch of the histrionic to her grim forecast, the unusual conditions of this late Union occupation furnished the slave mistress with a plausible cause for concern. Lee had sworn never to allow Union troops into her home from the day they first set foot in Winchester during 1862. Hers had been a lasting pledge to herself and to the Confederacy; a refusal to acknowledge, let alone shelter, the antagonists who had come for her home, her slaves, and her country. Yet while she tenaciously resisted Union advances, General Philip Sheridan's arrival heralded the coming of momentous change for Mary Lee and others of her rebellious ilk.

Winchester itself had certainly experienced its share of change over three and a half years of war. Nestled amid the agricultural abundance of the Shenandoah Valley, the town, like its neighbors, had quickly learned the logistical importance of its locale. The most significant wheat growing region in the Upper South, the Valley not only promised vital sustenance to the military force strong enough to take it – its geographical situation also

offered both sides a means of striking damaging blows to Richmond and Washington alike.[2] By the summer of 1864, this drawn-out contest for control had seen Winchester tossed between Federal and Confederate hands more than 70 times.[3] So it might seem that another Union occupation, hard on the heels of Early's several crippling defeats, was business as usual. It was anything but. While Early had managed to fend off Union invasion long enough to permit the Valley's farmers a summer of uninterrupted growing, the plenty that kept this part of the South free from want's bite prompted Ulysses S. Grant to devise a campaign fit to paralyze the enemy and end the war's stalemate. As Grant put it, Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah would "eat out Virginia clean and clear as far as they go, so that the crows flying over it for the balance of this season will have to carry their provender with them."[4] Burning private barns, livestock, and swathes of wheat fields, Sheridan and his men also cultivated an increasing intolerance for disobedient Confederate loyalists and disruptive bushwhackers. Falling prey to confiscations, raids, and the domestic invasions that came with widespread occupation, civilians across the Shenandoah Valley faced a daily grind of unprecedented hardships as 1864 drew to a close. Early's sudden cluster of losses were more unsettling than anything the Valley's Confederate supporters had yet experienced, and Sheridan's approach brought the realities of those losses to Winchester's door.[5]

Where her fellow rebel civilians quailed at the violences threatened by a Yankee occupation, however, Mary Lee took a different tack. She saw Sheridan's presence as an insult which offended her political sensibilities, and responded accordingly. Threats of domestic invasion alongside the heightened surveillance of Winchester's Confederate sympathizers inspired Lee to escalate her own personal campaign of uncivil warfare. Committed to trying Sheridan's patience, and pointedly excluding his men from the southern social circles in which they seemed so keen to move, Lee delighted in refusing accommodation to Union officers, and snubbing Sheridan's bow of acknowledgement in the

street.[6] And her disobedience ran deeper still. A well-liked member of Virginian high society, Lee exploited her network during the war to become a watchful purveyor of information for the Confederate army. Keeping up an exchange of communications through a number of established channels throughout the war, she took special pleasure in outwitting Sheridan in plain sight, or so she believed. "I went about this afternoon distributing Southern letters," Lee noted in February 1865, "– passed by Sheridan's Hd.Qts. with my pockets full notwithstanding his stringent orders against such treason & I hear nothing but the pique of those Yankees at not being received in our house."[7] Reveling in her insolence, Lee wholeheartedly embraced Confederate rebelhood, although it was her unceremonious exile from Winchester that would become her bittersweet mark of distinction.

For, on the morning of February 23, 1865, Mary Lee received her marching orders. Her initial encounter with one of Sheridan's messengers left her skeptical of the written command banishing her from her home. In fact, she was inclined to challenge the order there and then, demanding that Sheridan defend his actions, which he readily did. "There were no charges made," she dryly reported, "except that we had caused them constant annoyance, the annoyance being really that we would have nothing to do with them."[8] Lee's campaign had been too effective. Provoking Sheridan to recognize her loyalty to the rebel cause, she found herself deprived of the very locus of those loyalties: the rarified refuge of the slaveholding Confederate homestead. If Mary Lee would always profess herself an unabashed rebel, the remarkable memento she preserved of this moment of rupture would reveal the precarious and even paradoxical nature of her position as the war reached its final throes.

The sudden shock of Sheridan's orders had driven Lee's household—of two nieces and as many sisters-in-law, as well as their five slaves—to frenzied packing. Among the possessions that accompanied their exile, a sock Lee had been knitting to warm a soldierly foot was hurriedly gathered up. Lee carried it with her during the nine-month search for a

new home, and into her new life in Baltimore. She never finished her project, though. Knitting needles, suspended mid-stitch, kept the whole from unwinding over time. A ball of cotton thread thriftily produced from unpicked Union tent material was undoubtedly a precious resource in postwar times of want, yet it remained faithfully attached to the unfinished sock, which, as the years wound on, ultimately became a relic of a complex kind of loss (Fig. X). Because for all the boundaries Mary Lee found herself willing to cross during the war in defense of her home, for all her hard-headed declarations of indifference, perseverance, and triumph in her personal campaign of Confederate righteousness, her domestic life had been unraveling with each passing year.

The nature of that unraveling is my concern here, especially as it manifests itself in the material narrative of Mary Lee's incomplete work. Where Lee's diary gives us an almost unbroken, day-by-day account of the gradual transformation of both Winchester and her own private life during the war, I want to suggest that the material remains of her exile speak of this change in a different language. In doing so, they place a different emphasis upon the yarn Lee spun in her written record of the war, drawing our attention to her darning and patches, to the contrivances with which she re-worked her story of a self in decline. This object gives us, that is, a new way of unraveling Confederate sentiment, of understanding its tangled contradictions, and unpicking the stuff that makes it so enduring.

Since Drew Gilpin Faust's seminal study of the wartime journals kept by southern slave mistresses, those written records have engendered shifting questions about white Confederate womanhood. Such sites of disclosure, Faust writes, offered intellectually privileged women "a world in which they found order, a meaning, and a sense of control and purpose too often lacking in their disrupted, grief-filled lives."[9] This was undoubtedly true for Mary Lee, who began writing at precisely the moment she felt her world about to give way. Putting pen to paper on March 11, 1862, as night brought the prospect of Winchester's first

Union occupation, Lee saw in journal-keeping what her southern counterparts saw in it: an intimate space for steadying herself against the disturbances taking place in homes across the Confederacy. “I know not how a letter can be sent, or to whom to address it, as our Post Office is removed to Harrisonburgh,” Lee wrote, “but I feel as if it would help to pass away these dreadful hours of suspense, to tell some sympathizing friend the fluctuations of hope, fear & despair, during the last twenty-four hours.”[10] By the close of her first entry, she had decided she was addressing her close friend Jeannie Mason, who had left Winchester in 1861 when her father James Murray Mason was appointed Commissioner of the Confederate States in Great Britain. Indeed, Lee must have found the sympathetic connection she sought because she continued writing until November 17, 1865, when she finally settled in Baltimore. A journal offered private space for a Confederate woman to mourn the loss of her men in battle while embracing her new roles as head of her household, master of her slaves, and emerging public figure within her community; it offered room, too, to wonder what it meant for her entitlement when emancipation came. If the mistress had once relied on the patriarchal structures of the slaveholding home to preserve the comforts of her subordinate yet privileged concept of self, her journal became a means of regaining self-possession as war took its toll.[11]

We would do well to remember, however, that for slave mistresses, regaining self-possession often meant reasserting and reinforcing the structures of white supremacy. Faust emphasizes the changes Confederate journals enabled slaveholding women to undergo: “autobiographical writing inevitably produces new exploration and understanding of the self,” she writes. “It is as much a process of self-creation as self-description.”[12] For women such as Mary Lee, whose long life had been built and maintained through the stolen labor of her slaves, a diary might also bear witness to the ongoing struggle between adapting to meet the requirements of rebellion and conserving what the war threatened to obliterate. Lee was especially adamant that the war’s twists and turns would never take her by surprise. In

pledging more than once to "write of events, not feelings," she coveted a steely indifference, the power to refuse being moved by goings-on beyond her control.[13] Mary Lee could never render herself completely impervious, but she could certainly try.

So it was that the initial "sorrow" she felt after the escape of Evans, one of her slaves, was re-shaped into a mitigating expression of impatience: "[t]he freedom of the servants is one of the most irritating circumstances" of the war, she told Jeannie shortly after Evans's disappearance.[14] And so it was that Sheridan's threats, in 1865, were re-worked into the petty stuff of "annoyance" and social one-upmanship. Sent in regular installments to Jeannie and her family, Mary Lee's diary became a platform upon which to perform white slaveholding exceptionalism. The privilege of writing brought the privilege of emotional embroidery, of affective strategies played on paper to tighten the relational bonds that held "self" and "rebel" together.

Yet the half-done sock puts a different spin on her narrative of self-preservation. This object is shot through with exigency. Dropped without warning at Sheridan's command, it betrays the stark slackening of control that Lee's carefully wrought narrative disavows. It manifests, that is, the vulnerability of Lee's situation in ways that the customary occlusions and elisions of Confederate women's diaries do not always make us privy to. More than that, it encourages us to read Mary Lee's diary from a different angle, to unpick the counter-narrative threads it carefully snips and tucks away, to reevaluate the very matter of her rebellion. Its preservation also needles us into sharper definitions of what Confederate feeling demands and what forms of coercion have insured its perpetuation.

Reading between the rows of Mary Lee's unfinished handiwork reveals the tensions between self-preservation and unchecked upheaval. Knitting socks for soldiers provided women, both North and South, with an important means of weaving patriotic expression into the fabric of a larger social and political life to which women seldom had access.[15] Knitted

with thread appropriated from Union tents, Lee's sock achieves more militancy than most. For Lee took satisfaction from the direct connection she often raveled between herself and her boys in gray, Confederate troops passing through or those upon whom she pressed her creations in her daily rounds of Winchester's army hospitals. She also delighted in thrift and the cunning ingenuity that came with it. Late in 1863 she relished a rare venture beyond Winchester's bounds to a woolen mill where she procured "five pounds of yarn for myself & the soldiers," professing that "knitting socks for them is the only occupation I enjoy." By April 6, 1864, that resource had evidently run low; Lee began "knitting socks out of tenting."[16] In forcing inventiveness, this want of resources authorized Lee to expand the remit of her rebellion: political agency was to be found in outwitting army sutlers and capitalizing on the leavings of routed Federal forces. Indeed, Lee regularly gathered Union blankets and other army materials abandoned after Union evacuations early in 1864, which explains how she came by that tent thread.[17]

What is less clear, and what Lee quietly re-writes through sock and journal alike, is whose hands unraveled those tents into a usable resource—or whose exertions ultimately enabled Lee to engage in the "soldier work" she so enjoyed. Lee dexterously mutes the labor of her slaves; in a sense, her handiwork's dumb materiality commits a more violent act than her burdened prose. The sock's eloquent silence not only masks the appropriation of black labor by white force but also takes that relationship as given, working black toil into an almost seamless expression of Lee's personal and political allegiance. But only *almost* seamless. If this sock's unfinished state stands for her exile, it also moves us to unpick knottier questions of agency, questions that Mary Lee tried resolutely to ignore. Indeed, the real coup of Lee's sock is its insistence on the fundamental integrity of white authority, despite all signs to the contrary.

As a slave mistress before the war, Lee had taken that authority for granted. Historians from Walter Johnson to Bridget Heneghan remind us that the domestic lives of women like Lee were dependent upon the mediating hands of house slaves. A mistress's domestic work amounted to leisurely "management," a comfortable state in which, Johnson writes, a woman's "composure" went "unscathed by the messy process required to produce the pleasing tableau of her own life."[18] When Union occupation emboldened Lee's two male slaves to escape to freedom in 1862, she became acutely aware of the conditions of her authority and insisted on the *right* to those conditions. After Hugh and Evans took their freedom, Betty, Emily, and Sarah began to explore what liberty felt like, testing slavery's bounds to such a degree that Mary Lee began recording voices she otherwise preferred to keep silent.

While Sarah and her daughter Emily never chose to leave the relative security of Lee's household, and Betty postponed her escape into battle-torn Virginia until the summer of 1864, their occasional acts of insubordination unsettled the status quo Lee had worked to sustain.[19] The arrival of Union cavalry on August 17, 1863 drove Lee to chide her distracted slaves, which in turn prompted Emily to go "off saying she was going to ask the Yankees to take her away." Pragmatic despite her preservationist impulse, Lee acknowledged that "she has the power to go, if she chooses, & I would not raise my finger to prevent it, though I have a horror of being left without servants, as I fear it will be very difficult to replace them."[20] The personal ramifications of "replacing" lost labor quickly became clear: the absence of Hugh and Evans forced Lee herself to take up various forms of manual labor when she couldn't find a neighbor's slave, or hire free labor, to do it for her. Getting her hands dirty meant stooping to the messy business of running and feeding a household: "No one can imagine how I dread servant's work," she confessed.[21] Still having some of her slaves in 1864 meant that Lee could relish the "little jealousy" of her Winchester friends, "because we

have servants & can have guests in the house & enjoy their society without having to perform menial services."[22] New duties meant losing the leisure time in which she might nurture her own agency in journal writing and war work.

The existence of her sock and the thread from which it was fabricated suggest Lee's dogged challenge to emancipation's threat. The full implications of her refutation become clear when her sock is read beside the silences she tries to maintain in her journal. Predictably, Lee reasserted the coercive rhetoric of the slaveholding "family" that Eugene Genovese has unmasked.[23] More than this, though, she re-worked what seemed to her the problematic social and affective logic of black agency. If Evans's escape, for instance, drove Lee to express her "sorrow" at his loss, she didn't hesitate to emend that feeling as her account progressed. "[I]t is needless to tell you,' she wrote Jeannie, "that Evans is a dreadful loss to me, in every point of view; but as I have never had the least confidence, in the fidelity of any negro, at such time as this, I was not at all surprised." "I do not grumble," she continued, "or fret for I am still proud to say, it is not in the power of the whole Yankee nation, to depress or crush me, or to make me say I am sorry."[24] Sorrow turned to indifference and indifference to rebel defiance; refusing to entertain the shock of her loss and its implications, Lee reclaimed her slave's agency and channeled it into her own declaration of political defiance towards his Yankee liberators. It took effort, the labor of Lee's emotional somersaults, but then so did cajoling Betty and Elizabeth, impatient for freedom, into their domestic tasks. It wasn't just, as Sheila Phipps has argued, that slave labor gave Lee the time to engage in her soldier work; channeling black agency *back into* expressions of Confederate sentiment constituted one of Lee's primary methods of self-preservation.[25] In the making, her sock became a neat declaration of a violent and triumphant self that rendered Lee's logic of rebellion more domineering than vulnerable.

Of course, the sock's unfinishedness ultimately frustrated Lee's own political agency: Sheridan's invasion put paid to her dominion with her knitting, just as taking up needles and thread—for all its political cachet—marked a symbolic end to Lee's cosseted existence. Deigning to engage in a form of domestic labor that, she professed, "always depresses me," and was "much the hardest work I do," Lee couldn't escape the feeling that stitching was work meant for hands other than hers.[26] The actual messiness of her wartime life abounds in her complaints about having to sew despite her poor needlework skills, the complaints of a woman used to having clothes made for her. In fact, the real unease of Lee's position is often revealed, throughout her journal, by her use of the language of handiwork to describe moments of precarious instability. Just as her soldierly sock exhibits a stalled act of participation in a wider network of Confederate feeling, Lee frequently confronted the prospect of losing hold of her own narrative thread altogether.

Such moments often coincided with local Union assaults. On December 23, 1862, the same day that Union General Robert H. Milroy took Winchester as his headquarters, Lee recorded a failed attempt to finish a cap for Francis Charles Lawley, a correspondent for the *London Times* who had travelled into Winchester with Confederate troops earlier that year. "Worked to-night on my cap & when I stopped, pulled out all I had done during the day; it is like Penelope's web. I wonder what will have happened this time to-morrow night."[27] Perhaps Lee saw her trust in the Confederate army mirrored in Penelope's devoted craft; woven and unwoven in an attempt to maintain fidelity to the lost Odysseus, Penelope's burial shroud was her revolt, her means of forestalling marriage to a new suitor. Yet it was also, like Lee's sock, a melancholy thing. Weaving its way between rebellion and submission, between the life that comes with an acceptance of loss and a life that would prevail over erasure, Lee's unfinished cap, like her unfinished sock, courted defeat.

On the eve of Sheridan's arrival, another impending assault was followed by Lee's last-ditch attempt to safeguard the things she associated most intimately with her self. While Sheridan and his men thronged Winchester's streets, Lee's household started hiding the provisions that had been saved for Confederate troops. Lee also sent the portion of her diary for 1864 to Jeannie Mason for safekeeping. "[General] Early is moving up nearer to Winchester & many persons think he will leave us to-morrow to the Yankees," she wrote, "[i]f not we'll need the prayers of our friends – I hear Sheridan vows vengeance against Winchester. This is our status at the moment."[28] Milroy's arrival had caused Lee to briefly enact her own undoing. The total destruction Sheridan promised made Lee fear for her life. Abandoning the journal that steadied her, Lee effectively suggested a panicked moment of thrall before the enemy. Her journal's lacuna replicates the unfinishedness of the sock. Here is defeated pause and self on hold, an attempt at preservation and an admission of defeat all at once. Of course, Lee wouldn't let Sheridan win that easily: she started her journal again barely half a day later, vowing "to take up the broken thread where I left off."[29]

She didn't pick up the broken threads of her soldierly sock. Yet where confrontations with the defeat of privileged white womanhood wove their way through her creations, her approach to *keeping* her writing and her handiwork ultimately recast those moments altogether. As ever, Mary Lee had the final word. Amid more recent debates about Confederate monuments and their lasting symbolic power, her sock has something new to teach us about the endurance of defiance. In its silences and sorrows, in the violence its dumb allure conceals, this object entices sympathy and complicity with the fundamental project of white supremacy. Becoming remarkable in the keeping, Lee's handiwork gains its force from an overt acknowledgement of the shabby, melancholic state of white Confederate womanhood.

With Lee's material acknowledgement of this degraded state of affairs comes the possibility of reclaiming and reworking them to her advantage. Initially, the sock's afterlife as an artifact in Richmond's Museum of the Confederacy helped fuel the continuing legacy of the Lost Cause, which cast Lee's expulsion as both defeat and defiance. But of late, this cherished object suggests the enshrinement of Confederate womanhood at its most unstable. For if enacting its imaginative completion helped Mary Lee feel her way back into the Confederacy while reckoning with its loss, then feeling her pain in the associative tug of this thing waiting to be completed also passes that reckoning on to the generations who inherit it. Unlike the monuments intended to rouse Confederate celebration, the pull of this mundane object is an invitation to commune with the Confederacy's intimate violence and to inspect the fingers still itching to pull its threads together again.

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[1] Mary Greenhow Lee, *The Civil War Journal of Mary Greenhow Lee (Mrs. Hugh Holmes Lee) of Winchester, Virginia*, ed. Eliose C. Strader (Winchester, VA: Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society, 2011), 433.

[2] See Gary W. Gallagher, "Introduction," *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), ix-xxi.

[3] Kathryn Parker, *Images of America: Winchester* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 7.

[4] "U. S. Grant to Major-General Halleck, 14 July, 1864" in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, vol. 37, part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 300-301.

[5] William G. Thomas, "Nothing Ought to Astonish Us: Confederate Civilians in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign," *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, 237-240. See also Jonathan M. Berkey, "Civilians and Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign," *We*

Learned that We Are Indivisible: Sesquicentennial Reflections on the Civil War Era in the Shenandoah Valley, ed. Jonathan A. Noyalas and Nancy T. Sorrells (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 121-142.

[6] Lee, 470, 449-450, 486.

[7] Lee, 485.

[8] Lee, 494-495.

[9] Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 153. See also Amy L. Wink, *She Left Nothing in Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Women's Diaries* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

[10] Lee, 1.

[11] For a detailed examination of the material and social structures of slaveholding womanhood, see Elizabeth Fox Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[12] Faust, 162.

[13] Lee, 193.

[14] Lee, 21, 52.

[15] For an in-depth consideration of women's wartime knitting practices, North and South, see Anne L. MacDonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988) 97-133.

[16] Lee, 313-315, 345.

[17] Lee, 322.

[18] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 92. See also Bridget Heneghan, *Whitewashing America:*

Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

[19] Discussions of the limited information available about Mary Lee's slaves can be found in Faust, 76; Sheila R. Phipps, *Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 136-174; Laura Odendahl, "A History of Captivity and a History of Freedom: Race in a Civil War Household of Single Women," *Searching for Their Places: Women in the South Across Four Centuries*, ed. Thomas H. Appleton (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 122-143. Faust notes Betty's escape, which is not mentioned in Mary Lee's journal, but is recorded in the journal of her sister-in-law, Laura Lee.

[20] Lee, 276. Faust comments on Lee's pragmatism and elements of her adaptability in *Mothers of Invention*, 76.

[21] Lee, 190.

[22] Lee, 448.

[23] On the history of the slaveholder's familial rhetoric, see Eugene Genovese, '"Our Family, White and Black': Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders' World View," *In Joy and Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South 1830-1900*, ed. Carol Bleser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69-87.

[24] Lee, 21.

[25] Phipps, 156-174.

[26] Lee, 182, 166.

[27] Lee, 171.

[28] Lee, 413.

[29] Ibid.