

Introduction

Grace Elmore arrived home in Columbia, South Carolina, in October 1860 to a sea of blue cockades and a cacophony of political discussion. The twenty-one-year-old elite southern “belle” had spent her summer, as usual, in the Virginia medicinal springs and New York City. The chaotic nature in which she found her state capital – such a drastic difference from her leisurely summer – prompted a jarring realization that something entirely new, and potentially overwhelming, was happening. To process this, Elmore took to her diary. Spending little time with the topic of the hour, potential secession, her mind jumped straight to the “horrors of war.” She visualized her brother and friends dead on the battlefield, her mother impoverished and childless. “I held, in imagination, the wolf to my breast and it devoured my heart,” Elmore exclaimed, falling to her knees in tears. The entry ended abruptly; these apocalyptic premonitions of war left her emotionally incapable of writing more. The next day, however, found a changed Elmore. She decided to no longer allow her mind to dwell on mere possibility and turned to her Christian faith, explaining that the “Bible says ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.’” Suddenly, she was an avowed secessionist, willing to “suffer all things . . . rather than Carolina should ever be other than she is, the embodiment of ‘Truth and Honor.’” True to her word, Elmore devoted the remainder of the year’s entries to enthusiastic support of South Carolina and secession.¹

Grace Elmore’s two-day, emotional diary entry summarizes in several pages what other South Carolinians took months to rationalize. Even before Lincoln’s election, she feared an imminent, destructive

¹ Grace Brown Elmore Diary, Oct. 19–20, 1860, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina. Hereafter SCL.

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war, but pivoted with religious resignation to patriotically affirm the righteousness of her state's decision. Elmore went about her summer travels as usual, only noticing the abrupt change in her state when she and other South Carolinians returned from their retreats. Finally, she took to her diary to make sense of these strong, political feelings, using writing as a safety valve for her intense emotion until she was too mentally and physically overwhelmed to continue. Elmore's struggle is replicated in countless South Carolina women's diaries and letters in 1860 and 1861 as they used comfortable mediums, such as epistolary correspondence, religious metaphor, and language borrowed from popular novels, to express increasingly political thoughts.

Elite white women's writings reveal that though they and their families were staunch supporters of South Carolina's secession, women reacted to their new circumstances with fears and misgivings that their male counterparts could not, or would not, express. Planter-class women were part and parcel – alongside their husbands and fathers – of their state's ruling class. They were highly invested in the institution of slavery, from which they directly profited, but avoided discussing the politics surrounding the institution due to ideas about southern womanhood. A pure and proper woman, in theory, would not engage in political discussions, understood as masculine and corrupting; she was instead to be domestic and pious, nurturing the spiritual lives of her family, inspiring men to rule morally and wisely for her sake. In 1860, South Carolina's "ladies" harnessed familiar and religious concepts to express political hopes and fears, creating a socially acceptable outlet through which to discuss current events.²

² For the perception of the ideal southern lady in the antebellum South, see Barbara Welter's classic essay "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer, 1966), 150–174. See also Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1935*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). It was nigh-impossible for a woman to meet all the expectations of perfect womanhood; however, many strove to emulate this pious, domestic woman to the best of their ability.

South Carolina women used these concepts to discuss politics during John Brown's raid in late 1859, as well as during the Democratic National Convention in the spring of 1860, during which all but two South Carolina delegates walked out of the convention and the party. They responded to fears of slave insurrection after Harpers Ferry by affirming the happiness of their own slaves, a defense of domestic slavery well-honed in the years since Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prompted white southern women's response. After these events subsided, women quelled their trepidations and resumed the routines of everyday life, where politics were abstract and did not touch them. Though some women referenced the "anxious" or "exciting" times before fall 1860, they did not let this atmosphere overtake their writings, and self-consciously defended their discussion of national events. From 1859 to 1861, their political statements and preoccupations rise and fall like waves, temporal patterns that we can trace through the frequency, length, and urgency of women's writings.

In late 1860 and early 1861 the wave crested, and elite South Carolina women's emotional language concerning politics shifted. Women indicated their political engagement by filtering their growing sense of unease through familiar forms of writing, modeling their words after the popular sentimental novel.³ Women who believed wholeheartedly in the righteousness of South Carolina's cause nonetheless quickly anticipated the death and destruction that would accompany secession, revealing the complexity of their political beliefs at a time when it was considered improper for women to voice them aloud – especially in a fire-eating state that was known to exile Unionists. To describe their uncertain future, women connected their moods to the weather. To discuss the imagined outbreak of war, they wrote of religious apocalypse and God's reckoning.

³ Elizabeth Moss, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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Women managed the overwhelming nature of their emotions by using writing as an outlet to prevent their feelings from erupting around others and to quiet the turmoil in their minds.⁴ We see traces of this emotional distress in their handwriting, and in the length of letter or diary entry. In this way, their writing and feelings are embodied. Women also increasingly contacted friends for assistance, taking advantage of the epistolary (letter writing) tradition between women privileged with literacy. These comfortable modes of expression provided South Carolina's white women with space to grapple with events that would soon destabilize their zealously defended domestic sphere.⁵

Tightly held notions of white southern gender roles shaped political opinion. Southern notions of manhood forbade men from expressing their anxieties concerning secession and its consequences for fear of appearing cowardly. Obsessed with defending their honor and sense of mastery, men strenuously avoided showing any hint of cowardice in the face of future conflict. Young men in particular jumped at the chance for fame as well as adventure, believing that dying for their newly constituted cause and country would bring them the greatest honor and an immortal legacy. These ambitious men, a female contemporary wrote, enjoyed “beyond all measure the excitement of a life which wakes them out of their ‘bovine’ torpor – & which is such an utter change from the quiet of a planters existence.” In contrast, white southern men denied that white southern women

⁴ Steven M. Stowe, *Keep the Days: Reading the Civil War Diaries of Southern Women*, Civil War America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 32.

⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes the importance of diaries and letters in maintaining female bonds, including an example in which a young girl, though insecure about her own writing, felt an “inestimable pleasure” at the “great privilege” of reading a female associate’s diary, as it caused them to “lay our hearts open to each other, it heightens our love.” Quoted in “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America” *Signs* 1.1 (Autumn, 1975), 21. For more on letter writing as a genre with formulaic conventions, and the classed nature of literacy during the Civil War era, see Christopher Hager, *I Remain Yours: Common Lives in Civil War Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). For more on the formal dimensions of the diary and the stability it provided during times of upheaval, see Rebecca Steinitz, *Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 28.

were political at all, an assurance that allowed women to fit within their desired definition of womanhood. Yet, it is as historian Lauren Haumesser claims: “white southern women were no less political than northern women. But their political style – which mostly forwent public speaking or calls for suffrage – distinguished them from northern women.” Thus, elite white men and women alike had to work around the expectations of southern manhood and womanhood within their social class. Their interpretations of the events of 1860 reflect this divide.⁶

This book offers new interpretations of elite white women, politics, and secession, but it is also an exploratory study of how women experienced a pivotal year. It is interested in how we mark the passage of time, what parts of our lives are worth writing down, and how we can recapture the physical act of writing almost 200 years after the fact. To answer these questions, I follow the lives of elite white South Carolinian women from October 1859 to June 1861, recreating their daily rhythms to understand how they gradually incorporated politics into their lives in new and exciting ways, as well as how they reconciled their grave fears with patriotic support for South Carolina. I chose South Carolina as a helpful case study as the state spent the greater part of the nineteenth century attempting

⁶ Sally Baxter Hampton to Anna Baxter, Jan. 11, 1861, in Sally Baxter Hampton, *A Divided Heart: Letters of Sally Baxter Hampton, 1853–1862*, ed. Ann Fripp Hampton (Columbia, SC: Phantom Press, 1994), 97; Lauren N. Haumesser, *The Democratic Collapse: How Gender Politics Broke a Party and a Nation, 1856–1861*, Civil War America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 71. For more on southern masculinity, see Stephen Berry, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters*, New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1990); James Hill Welborn, *Dueling Cultures, Damnable Legacies: Southern Violence and White Supremacy in the Civil War Era* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023); Anna Koivusalo, *The Man Who Started the Civil War: James Chesnut, Honor, and Emotion in the American South* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2022).

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to revoke its Union membership. During this attempt, the state moved quickly, with little time to reflect. Thus, the documents left behind are marked by urgency in a way that those from other states, who had the chance to watch South Carolina act, are not. To better understand secession, it is important to prioritize accounts that record events as they happened, not reminiscences. South Carolina elite women had no time to think through their actions, and many gave no thought to editing their innermost confessions. Their responses are genuine and reveal much about the changing state of affairs in 1860.

Though the wealth of sources from Charleston-based women often sends this study into the Lowcountry, it pays due diligence to women in other regions, including Columbia, the state capital located in the “Midlands”: Greenville, a city at the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains; and Society Hill, a community north of Florence and near the North Carolina border. While Charleston is the center of events during the secession crisis – the site of the Democratic National Convention and the Secession Convention, due to disease, and within sight of Fort Sumter – powerful political elites increasingly hailed from the Midlands and Upcountry South Carolina. Charlestonian women lamented that the founding Revolutionary families of their state, all in the Lowcountry, were dying out. The fact that it was Charleston, therefore, and not Columbia, where the flames of secession burned brightest is due to the city’s urgent need to halt further change. My sources’ attention, and therefore my own, is often drawn to Charleston.

The women in this study range in age from young teenagers to aged widows, and there are some trends among generations: older women were far more likely to predict war and suffering as a potential result of secession, and many younger women viewed the events of 1860 as exciting and even happy deviations from everyday life. This is not an exact science, of course, and should not overrule differences in personality. There are many instances of one woman reacting with trepidation to an event that her contemporary female family member greeted with anticipation. Regardless of individual personality or stage of life, however, elite southern

women shared the same social conventions and thought and reacted along recognizable patterns. Of these women, some voices projected louder than others and warrant introduction.⁷ Keziah Brevard, fifty-seven and widowed, lived on her plantation on the outskirts of Columbia. Sally Baxter Hampton also resided in Columbia and socialized with the elite Preston and Chesnut families. A northern-born socialite and muse of author William Thackeray, she attempted – unsuccessfully – to report on events with an unbiased eye. Grace Elmore, twenty-one, also socialized with this politically and economically revered circle in Columbia. After marriage, her sister Sally Elmore Taylor lived next door to her widowed mother in the state capital, limiting the necessity for correspondence.

Several families resided in Society Hill. Ada Bacot, a young widow, lived miserably with her overbearing father and recorded her thoughts on paper rather than expressing them aloud. Fiercely independent, she resisted her father's requests to tie their finances together, recognizing that any failed investments of his would then deprive her of her "little property." This little property, of course, was a plantation and enslaved laborers. Mother-and-daughter duo Susan and Florence "Flora" Burn frequently corresponded with Susan's son Charles, who was attending school in Greenville, South Carolina. Flora, herself a schoolgirl, was sixteen. The surnames of the Charlestonian women should take no South Carolina scholar by surprise: the Grimball, Vanderhorst, Pringle, and Allston families all wrote voraciously during this transitional period. Mary Pringle, fifty-seven and resident of what is today known as the Miles Brewton House in Charleston, maintained frequent correspondence with her twelve adult children. Meta Morris Grimball kept both a daily diary and "country" and "city" journals in addition to her correspondence. An astute political thinker, the fifty year old passed down this trait to her daughter Elizabeth, twenty-nine. Meta's contemporary, Adele Allston, similarly shared her political musings with her husband, former governor Robert F. W. Allston.

⁷ All ages are taken from the year 1860.

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At fifty, she was responsible for the education of her three young daughters: Adele, Elizabeth (“Bessie”), and Jane, ages twenty, fifteen, and ten respectively. All four wrote frequently to their son and brother Charles Allston, away at school for the duration of this study. Callously, I am grateful for his absence, as it resulted in a marvelous correspondence. Adele the Younger later married Arnoldus, the son of Ann Morris Vanderhorst, who at sixty-five filled her diary with more worldly woes than happiness.⁸

Though there are certainly differences between Upcountry and Lowcountry South Carolinians, the female members of this elite group shared similar writing patterns, hopes, and fears.⁹ I do not see a stark difference between women’s politics and behaviors based on geography, with the exception that women further from Charleston and, to a lesser extent, Columbia were often more anxious for news in their relative isolation. Furthermore, members of the South Carolina elite followed established political and social patterns each year. Both regions attended South Carolina College.¹⁰ They traveled north to Columbia’s legislative sessions, and south to Charleston’s racetracks.

⁸ Bacot Diary, Mar. 15, 1861, in Ada White Bacot, *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada W. Bacot, 1860–1863*, ed. Jean Vance Berlin (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 28. I also will be citing the original Bacot diary; this will be accompanied by the archive name. Adele Petigru Allston and Adele Petigru Allston Vanderhorst share the same name throughout this study. I will hereby refer to them as Adele Allston senior and junior, respectively.

⁹ Though today, the area surrounding Columbia, South Carolina is known as the Midlands, contemporary accounts simply described going “Upcountry” or to the “Lowcountry.” I will indicate whether I am discussing today’s notion of Upcountry South Carolina or today’s Midlands region throughout. William Freehling, Steven Channing, William Barney, Vernon Burton, and Lawrence McDonnell all take great pains to describe the political and economic differences between Upcountry, Midlands, and Lowcountry South Carolinians. For elite white South Carolina women, class superseded this level of political specificity. See William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854–1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1974); William L. Barney, *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father’s House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Lawrence T. McDonnell, *Performing Disunion: The Coming of the Civil War in Charleston, South Carolina* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Today the institution is the University of South Carolina.

During these travels, South Carolina elites from both regions met and forged mutually beneficial marriage bonds. Elite women demonstrated similar travel agendas, mingling at female academies or socializing during the summer either in Virginia, the South Carolina mountains, or the Lowcountry beaches. Women's letters and diaries frequently mention women that are described elsewhere in this study, further establishing the extent to which women's lives were interwoven, thus allowing them to create – and us to reflect upon – a distinct emotional and epistolary community.¹¹

Historians have long examined secession, its causes, and the conditions that made 1860 ripe for action. Many take a “long approach,” slowly tracing the growing sources of disunion throughout US history. At least three focus on a single year – 1861 – as a central organizing premise.¹² Others crafted microhistories of Charleston and South Carolina but removed women from the discussion as anything other than spectators or participants in political ritual.¹³ Women frequently go unmentioned through political analyses of secession. If

¹¹ See William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854–1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 362.

¹² See Andre M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York: Knopf, 2011); Emory M. Thomas, *The Dogs of War, 1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), to name a few.

¹³ For works on the long history of disunion, see William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, vol. I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854*; Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon, eds., *Congress and the Emergence of Sectionalism: From the Missouri Compromise to the Age of Jackson* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008). Elizabeth Varon's *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1759–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). For works with narrower scopes, see David Detzer, *Allegiance: Fort Sumter, Charleston, and the Beginning of the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, 2001); Channing, *Crisis of Fear*. Channing's examination of 1859–1860 South Carolina, which argues that the emotion of fear of a slave rebellion prompted secession, ignores the gendered aspect of this fear and mostly focuses on South Carolina's elite men. Even a published collection of lectures titled “Secession Winter” underutilizes gender as an analytical lens. See William L. Barney, Robert J. Cook, and Elizabeth R. Varon, *Secession Winter: When the Union Fell Apart* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). For an excellent examination of gender and disunion during Bleeding Kansas, see Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

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women actors do appear, it is often simply to describe an event, without much gendered analysis of their viewpoint. Frequently the woman remains unnamed, a mere “wife of a South Carolina rice planter.” Others deliberately exclude women because South Carolina men are focused on other men, actively attempting to “disentangle” women from political discussion.¹⁴ This study is greatly indebted to the voluminous works of William Freehling, yet even his meticulously researched evaluation of secession and its minutia considers women an afterthought.¹⁵

While not specific to secession in South Carolina, recent works have applied a gendered lens to nineteenth-century politics and complement this study. Elizabeth Varon’s long study of disunion as a concept includes ideas of gender and ends right before secession winter begins. Brian Neumann examines Unionists and masculinity while taking women seriously as political actors in his work on the Nullification Crisis, and Lauren Haumesser’s description of gender in fire-eating South Carolina is astute in her larger project on gender and the Democratic Party.¹⁶ Like Michael Woods, my work applies the history of emotions to sectionalism and politics. Woods argues that women and men alike who strongly desired and believed in the righteousness of secession still responded to its achievement with sorrow and grief. This mourning, however, helped “ease the transition from American to Confederate allegiance” by appealing to the Christian concept of resignation to God’s will and hope for the future. The

¹⁴ McDonnell, *Performing Disunion*, 18–19. His well-researched study of “street-level” white Charlestonians during secession argues that these men were primarily concerned with the men of their class. Women were not to be political, and thus were left out of the focus, as were African Americans. However, this does not mean that men successfully did so, as “disentangled” implies that women were, in some way, entangled. Nor should we take patronizing contemporary sources at their word (18–19).

¹⁵ Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume II*.

¹⁶ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Brian Neumann, *Bloody Flag of Anarchy: Unionism in South Carolina during the Nullification Crisis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2022); Haumesser, *The Democratic Collapse*.