

ABSTRACT

LYON, MEGHAN RUTH. Southern Womanhood in Transition: The Writings and Reminiscences of Virginia Clay Clopton. (Under the direction of Dr. Susanna Lee).

Historians have a love-hate relationship with Virginia Clay Clopton's 1905 memoir, *A Belle of the Fifties*. Although frequently referenced for its descriptions of the antebellum South, its character sketches of Civil War heroes, and its relentless defense of the Confederacy, many historians have concluded that its exaggerations, biases, and unreliable narrator make it little more than a generic textbook for the Lost Cause. This thesis challenges that perception by comparing the memoir with the C.C. Clay Papers, an archival collection from the nineteenth century, which includes extensive correspondence, writings, and diaries by Virginia Clay and her family. A close reading of *Belle* in parallel with its corresponding sources exposes the "real" Virginia Clay, allowing us to distinguish her public post-war persona from her true thoughts and experiences as a white, slaveholding, Southern woman in the mid-nineteenth century.

Both versions of Virginia have value for historians. Understanding the personal motivations and manipulations behind Virginia's portrayal of herself as an idealized Southern woman in *Belle* reiterates the power of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in the early twentieth century and their promotion of the Lost Cause for political and social gain. The Clay Papers both validate and contradict Virginia's memoir; annotations present on the physical documents attest to the choices she and her editor made in recounting her life for a Lost Cause audience. The archives also allow us to recover a version of Virginia that does not strictly adhere to the typical post-war conception of idealized womanhood. Her personal tragedies, private fears, and deliberate rejection of societal expectations—all exposed within the C.C. Clay Papers—are subsequently downplayed, manipulated, and reshaped in *Belle* in order to better conform to UDC guidelines for Confederate women's memoirs.

Throughout her life, Virginia assumed many roles: some traditional, others exceptional, especially when we consider the typical opportunities available to white Southern women in the Civil War period. Her well-documented charm, combined with her ambition and love of the spotlight, enabled her to cross political and social boundaries normally closed to upper-class women. Furthermore, her husband's political career and post-

war legal troubles, as well as her own lack of children, gave her an unusual amount of freedom, allowing her to escape the isolation of plantation life. Her very ability to write about Washington society and politics in *Belle* stemmed from her exceptional level of independence and autonomy. This thesis demonstrates that though her memoir has many historical flaws, it nevertheless documents a woman whose strong sense of self extended throughout her life—beginning long before the emergence of the UDC and its new opportunities for women’s public participation. The Lost Cause movement was only the latest avenue for Virginia to win friends and admirers. Though her devotion to the South was genuine and certainly impacted the construction of *Belle*, it was not the only driving force behind her decision to reshape and refashion her identity to appeal to her post-war audience.

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Southern Womanhood in Transition: The Writings and Reminiscences of Virginia Clay
Clopton

by
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DEDICATION

To my son: his impending arrival encouraged me hurry this thing along.

To my husband: he's my best friend and will be an amazing dad.

BIOGRAPHY

Meghan Lyon is a Terrapin, a Wolverine, and now a proud member of the Wolf Pack. This is her second and final master's degree.

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INTRODUCTION

Born into a wealthy family in 1825, Virginia Caroline Tunstall Clay Clopton hobnobbed with socialites and politicians throughout 1850s Washington as the wife of Clement Claiborne Clay, a senator from Alabama.¹ When the Civil War broke out, the Clays eagerly backed the Confederacy, and Virginia Clay spent part of the war entertaining in Richmond while her husband served in the Confederate senate. When Clement left the South in 1864 to campaign for the Confederacy from Canada, Virginia became a refugee, traveling throughout the South during the final year of the war. Following Abraham Lincoln's assassination, Clement Clay was arrested along with Jefferson Davis on suspicions of treason. The ordeal of his imprisonment and Virginia's active role in his release led both husband and wife to public prominence across the South as martyrs and heroes of the Confederacy. Her local fame as a Confederate heroine continued for the remainder of her life, long after the death of both her first and second husbands. Until her death in 1915, Alabama newspapers adored her as "the queen of the South, the one great woman to whom all bend the knee."²

Today, historians know Virginia Clay Clopton best for her memoir, *A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama*, first published in 1904 and re-issued in 1905.³ Rather than focus strictly on the Civil War, Virginia's memoir extended from her childhood

¹ Throughout this thesis, I will refer to most historical figures, particularly Virginia Clay Clopton, by their first names. I mean no disrespect through this practice; my intention is merely to simplify the text and make it easier for readers to distinguish Virginia from the many other Clays discussed in this work. For the time period discussed in this thesis, Virginia was married to or widowed by Clement Claiborne Clay. In 1887, Virginia remarried to David Clopton, a judge on Alabama's supreme court, and after remarrying referred to herself as Virginia Clay Clopton. David Clopton died in 1892. For a biographical sketch of Virginia Clay Clopton, refer to Ruth Nuernberger's *The Clays of Alabama: A Planter-Lawyer-Politician Family* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1958).

² Untitled clipping, Scrapbook II (Vol. L-719), undated, 17. C.C. Clay Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. [Collection hereafter cited as C.C. Clay Papers; archive hereafter cited as Duke.]

³ The text was first published in 1904 and re-issued in 1905; the 1905 edition is regarded by most scholars as the definitive version. See "Introduction" in Virginia Clay Clopton, *A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama, Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-1866* (1905; repr., Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), xvi.

through early Reconstruction. By the time of *Belle*'s publication, Virginia was eighty years old, having “the precedence, in years, of these court ladies whose memories have rescued the brighter side of our national life, as well as vivid scenes of the darker days of the Confederacy,” summarized one reviewer. “How delicious her courtship in Alabama in the early forties!”⁴ Virginia’s memoir can be roughly divided into thirds: a celebration of idyllic pre-war gaiety in Washington during the 1850s; a dark yet heroic summary of wartime in the Confederacy; and a dramatic review of her 1866 exploits back in Washington, where she petitioned and challenged government officials to secure her husband’s freedom. Though Virginia expounded on antebellum and Civil War life in great detail, the book ended abruptly following her husband’s release. Virginia wrote that in gaining his freedom, Clement was finally at peace and “fell wearily to sleep,” leaving her alone to watch over his grave in a somewhat happy, if melodramatic, ending.⁵

Studying memoirs like *Belle* requires a dose of skepticism and an investigation into the work’s provenance. Besides being written forty years after the end of the war, the memoir was the product of a joint effort between Virginia Clay and Ada Sterling, an author and journalist from New York credited with compiling and editing the memoir.⁶ Considering Virginia’s age, Ada likely contributed to the memoir extensively. Ada credited herself in a revealing annotation on a copy of *Belle* preserved in the Huntsville Public Library, which includes her note that Virginia’s “descriptive powers” led “to the most extravagant departures from the truth; so much so that her nephew, Mr. William Clay, warned me that ‘Auntie couldn’t speak the truth if she tried.’” Ada continued, “I have therefore retained her spirit only in writing this book, drawing my facts from several thousand letters, written during the

⁴ Celina E. Means, “The Reminiscences of Four Southern Women,” *The Sewanee Review*, 13.4 (Oct. 1905): 481.

⁵ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 378. She neglected to clarify that C.C. Clay actually lived until 1882.

⁶ Not much is known about Ada Sterling’s life. She is also credited with writing *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1921) and *The Jew and Civilization* (1924). Research in the 1910 U.S. Census uncovered an Ada Sterling living in New York and working as an author; presumably she is the same woman who helped write *Belle of the Fifties*. In 1910 she was 38 years old, lived alone, and earned wages as an author in the “Publishing House” industry. The same woman appears in the 1920 census, although there her age is listed as 40 years old. Sterling’s occupation in 1920 was as an author, self-employed in the “Editorials” industry.

war, and relying upon no human memory for them.”⁷ This private inscription, intended only for a friend, certainly included a few exaggerations of its own--for one thing, correspondence between Ada and Virginia contradicts Ada’s claims of being *Belle*’s lone author. Letters reveal that Ada initially intended them to write memoirs that were “light and gay, and incautiously put together, so that they would serve as a summer’s reading, and so please or at least be taken by publishers who provide popular reading.” Virginia disagreed with Ada’s approach, forcing the editor to change tactics, particularly for *Belle*’s discussion of the Clays’ activities in the post-war period. Because Virginia wanted to include somewhat controversial content about Clement’s imprisonment, Ada knew that the memoir “must compete boldly with the most authoritative and permanent of historians.”⁸ The women communicated regularly by mail between 1902 and 1905, hammering out the details of the drafts. Ada also spent months in Alabama interviewing Virginia, compiling documents, and corroborating accounts of the incidents she described, so as to “saunter forth to meet the eye of critics panoplied with all the armor against attack.”⁹ Technically, therefore, both women could claim authorship of *Belle*; it was Virginia, however, who got the credit. Although Virginia undoubtedly romanticized and exaggerated her story, editors of *Belle*’s re-release in 1999 agree that Ada verified Virginia’s claims and validated history “to the best of her ability.”¹⁰

The long delay between the war’s end and the memoir’s publication, along with Ada Sterling’s undeniable influence over its content, combine to make *Belle* a product of 1905, rather than a document that can be attributed to the actual antebellum or Civil War period. Despite its acknowledged problems as a historical source, however, scholars have long used Virginia’s memoir for insights into the mindset of a nineteenth-century upper class, slaveholding, white Southern woman. Civil War historians mined *Belle* for its descriptions of Southern men’s political activities – perspectives on secession, for example, or her accounts

⁷ “Introduction,” *Belle*, xxviii.

⁸ Ada Sterling to Virginia Clay Clopton, 14 July 1903. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁹ Ada Sterling to Virginia Clay Clopton, 14 July 1903. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁰ “Introduction,” *Belle*, xv.

of Jefferson Davis's surrender.¹¹ Numerous studies cross-reference Virginia's descriptions of pre-war Southern society with other memoirs and contemporary accounts from the antebellum period. Recent scholars have studied her memoir for evidence of the dissemination of Confederate ideology in the early twentieth century.¹² Virginia's unapologetic praise for Old South society and manners, the benefits of slavery, the validity of states' rights, and the heroism of the Confederate people exist as unrelenting themes throughout her text. These components speak to Virginia's development of her public identity as a Confederate spokeswoman and document an early-twentieth-century translation of her mid-nineteenth-century experience, regardless of historical facts. Her construction thus proves problematic for historians who cannot and should not believe everything she claims to have done, thought, or felt during the period covered by the memoir. It appears, however, that many historians have swung too far in the other direction and now discount Virginia's experience and her memoir entirely in their assessment of her life. Though *Belle*'s subject matter parallels other memoirs from the period, such as the better-known *Diary from Dixie*, historians have noted that Virginia "did not have, or at least did not exhibit, any of the introspective habits of mind that illuminate Mary Chesnut's *Diary*, and the tragic perspective eludes Virginia." Another historian concluded, "Virginia's love for the region was unreserved," noting that her memoir had an "unrelentingly positive depiction" of pre-war plantation life in the South. As one historian recommends, *Belle* "must be used with caution as it contains many exaggerations and numerous errors."¹³

Belle's relevance to modern historical scholarship can be recovered through the Clay family's private archives. Using the C.C. Clay Papers, which include records from Virginia

¹¹ See, for example, H.E. Sterkx, *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970) and Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*.

¹² See, for example, Sarah Gardner, *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003).

¹³ "Introduction," *Belle*, xix; David Anderson, "Down Memory Lane: Nostalgia for the Old South in Post-Civil War Plantation Reminiscences," *Journal of Southern History* 71.1 (Feb. 2005): 129; and Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 300.

and the rest of the Clay family, allows us to downplay Ada Sterling's influence and interpretation as much as possible, simultaneously recovering Virginia's personal voice. It is too easy to disregard *Belle* as a work of political post-war Southern propaganda. This thesis analyzes how Virginia chose to reflect on her life in 1905's *Belle*, comparing her memoir to the common themes seen in her writings, scrapbooks, and correspondence from 1850 through 1866. Such an exercise demonstrates that Virginia Clay manipulated her persona and self-image throughout her life, enabling her to win favors and friends, pursue political power on behalf of herself and her husband, and assert her independence and celebrity following his death. She easily transitioned between being a pre-war Southern belle; to a wartime Confederate patriot; to a post-war independent woman speaking out and defending her husband's honor: all roles which she subsequently owned and celebrated in her memoir as exemplifying an ideal Southern womanhood. *Belle*'s questionable authenticity has long overshadowed Virginia's thoughts and experiences as documented in her papers. Rereading the memoir in parallel with the Clay Papers offers a much more complicated portrait of an elderly woman staking her claim as a worthy Confederate spokeswoman operating under the new rules of the New South.

Challenges necessarily arise in this process. To start, the C.C. Clay Papers available in the archive today represent a mere selection of the original letters, sorted and weeded by the Clays and their descendants, including Virginia herself, long ago. The records are inherently incomplete and biased. In 1930, an agent of Duke University purchased the collection, stretching about 20 linear feet and including about 8000 items, from one of Virginia Clay's descendants. Accession books now held in the Rubenstein Library document that the Clay Papers were purchased as part of a group of other Southern manuscript collections for the total price of 3350 dollars.¹⁴ It is possible that pieces of the Clay Papers were subsequently removed to different collections within Duke's manuscript department, a separation that would be impossible to retrace today.

¹⁴ A separate portion of the family's papers, formerly held by a different relative, are housed today at the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library in Alabama. This thesis will refer to the collection of C.C. Clay Papers at Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, unless otherwise noted.

Besides being incomplete, the remaining papers present another challenge by occasionally under-representing Virginia Clay's activities. As the title of the manuscript collection suggests, most letters in the C.C. Clay Papers are to and from her husband, Alabama senator Clement Claiborne Clay.¹⁵ Extant evidence suggests that Virginia wrote the most when she was separated from Clement, and she spent the majority of the 1850s and 1860s with him. Letters from Virginia to the rest of the Clay family are fairly scarce during this period, although some do exist from the Clays to Virginia, oftentimes referencing her incoming correspondence. Therefore we know that Virginia was writing home to Alabama; the letters themselves, unfortunately, are often missing. A similar disparity pertains to letters between Virginia and her friends: the archive includes her incoming, but rarely outgoing, mail. Virginia's activities are documented in more detail through in her private diaries and scrapbooks, several of which are preserved in the Clay Papers. In particular, a diary from 1864 and early 1865 offers an unparalleled glimpse into her life at the close of the Civil War; it is examined extensively in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Other diaries date from the post-war period, and typically served more as notebooks or appointment books than as private diaries. Some periods covered in *Belle*--such as the 1850s--have no correlating diary in the papers. Virginia appears to have grown more introspective as she aged, and began writing in daybooks and clipping articles for her private scrapbooks in the late 1860s. These sources offer a glimpse into her private understandings of her life and situation in a way that even personal letters cannot achieve.

Furthermore, the archive grew and changed over time as Virginia revisited her earlier writings and expanded them with additional notes, usually explaining a letter's context or identifying correspondents. As Ada Sterling explained in her inscription to her friend, she edited *Belle* with the Clay archive at hand, "drawing my facts from several thousand letters."¹⁶ For the most part, the C.C. Clay Papers held at Duke appear to be a subset of the collection Ada used in editing *Belle*. These fascinating materials are now essentially artifacts as much as records, telling a story beyond what appears on their pages -- oftentimes the edits and

¹⁵ Clement Claiborne Clay was also occasionally referred to as C.C. Clay, Jr.; his father, Clement Comer Clay, was also a U.S. senator from Alabama and would occasionally be referred to as C.C. Clay, Sr.

annotations made by Ada and Virginia during the preparation of *Belle* remain on the paper, offering additional insights into the process of *Belle*'s construction (see Figure 1). The Clay Papers also include numerous typed transcriptions of letters or documents, usually created by Ada and corrected by Virginia (see Figure 2). Using the original documents and their subsequent manifestations gives new layers of authenticity to Virginia's voice and story as it appears in her memoir. It is also possible to use the archives to deduce which documents were not referenced or used to write *Belle*. The physical records in the Clay Papers therefore offer an enlightening glimpse into what the women valued and what they ignored as they wrote the memoir in 1902 and 1903. Exposing their choices and biases will not make *Belle* any more reliable as a historical account of the Civil War, but it will provide us a new framework for understanding the memoir and its relationship to memory creation.

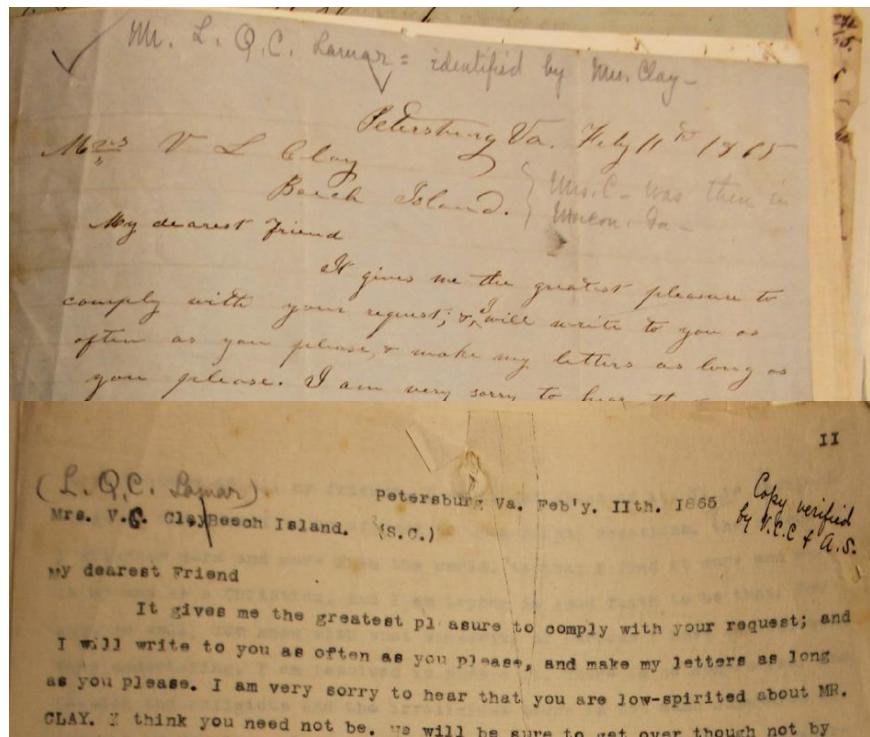


Figure 1. An original 1865 letter with Virginia Clay's annotations (top) and a transcribed version of the letter with annotations by Ada Sterling, in ink, and Virginia, in pencil (bottom), in the C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Model of Southern Womanhood; Missionary for the Lost Cause

Virginia's life both before and after the Civil War was shaped by Southern society's conception of womanhood. "Wherever men spoke there was praise of Woman," summarizes historian Anne Scott in her description of the antebellum Southern Lady, "and exhortation to further perfection."¹⁶ Post-war commentators recalled that antebellum Southern women had excelled "in native womanly modesty, in neatness, grace, and beauty of person," and "in laudable pride of family and devotion to home, kindred, and loved ones."¹⁷ Devoted caretaking, obedient subservience – these traditional traits of womanhood were fondly remembered in the post-war period as essential components of pre-war Southern culture. Nostalgia for old Confederate values was also often used as a means of whitewashing historical discord. "The virtues that adorn and ennable the Southern woman of to-day find their explanation and origin largely in that womanhood which for the last fifty years and more has been the product and the pride of the Southern people," reflected one columnist in 1891. "No matter what may be one's sympathy with or prejudice against the institution of slavery, there is no denying the fact that American civilization has nowhere produced a purer and loftier type of refined and cultured womanhood than existed in the South before the war."¹⁸ The reference to slavery in this assessment confirms a popular consensus in the post-war period that sectional reconciliation outranked any disagreements between parties over the causes or outcomes of the war. Idealizing the "cultured womanhood" of antebellum days was a way for whites to reunite across the North-South divide.

The Civil War offered an opportunity for traditional Southern women to begin pushing into public spaces. "By the eve of the Civil War a psychological Geiger counter would have detected growing discontent with woman's assigned role," observed Scott in

¹⁶ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970; repr., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 4.

¹⁷ Wilbur Fisk Tillett, "Southern Womanhood as Affected by the War," *The Century Magazine*, Vol. XLIII (Nov. 1891): 9.

¹⁸ Tillett, "Southern Womanhood as Affected by the War," 9.

1970.¹⁹ More recent scholars have expanded, elaborated, and challenged Scott's work, and in doing so have further broadened the understanding of the roles of women in the Civil War era. Historian Stephanie McCurry makes an interesting argument in her analysis of the changing roles of women during the Civil War itself. As the war progressed, she explains, the frequency and necessity of citizens' communications with their state officials "increased exponentially and a growing portion came from women."²⁰ The "steady stream" of petitions offer "an index to a new politics, a surprising archival record of the emergence of a collective public voice," writes McCurry. Without their husbands or other men to intercede on their behalf, women increasingly began representing themselves as "soldier's wives," becoming a powerful political constituency who "emerged into salience in the Confederate body politic by the middle of the war."²¹

Petitioning and campaigning on behalf of their men was a trend among Southern women that only increased during the Reconstruction period. The development of a public voice was accompanied by the growing necessity and opportunity for women to assume public roles as property owners, schoolteachers, charity workers, and authors. Despite the ongoing idealization of antebellum belles, women in the post-war period were neither voiceless nor powerless. "The demure image that so many parents and teachers had earlier sought to foster lost much of its appeal for young women" after the war, explains historian Jane Censer. The realities of war had introduced an ideal of womanhood that, "along with traditional values of self-sacrifice and duty, had come to include a more active, outspoken, and courageous aspect. This female self-reliance could be channeled into different forms of usefulness – benevolent and politically and socially conservative activities, as well as reforming ones – but the genie of engaged womanhood could never again be wholly bottled up."²² Virginia hailed from the generation of Southern women whose feet were firmly

¹⁹ Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 78.

²⁰ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 141.

²¹ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 146.

²² Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 12.

planted in both the Old and New South, and her memoir's contradictory representations of herself aligned with this broader culture shift. She was a woman raised with a traditional conception of Southern womanhood, transformed by the demands of war into a vocal and active advocate for her husband, and subsequently encouraged by society to be self-reliant and useful.

The publication of *Belle* coincided with a rise in the publication and popularity of Confederate women's memoirs at the turn of the twentieth century. Authors like Virginia were responding to calls from Confederate memorial groups, led by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Publishing histories and memoirs like *Belle* was only the latest strategy by the UDC to reclaim and reassert white Southern power and influence in the post-war period. As early as the 1860s, women's memorial groups formed across the South in order to bring "home" their dead soldiers for proper burial in Confederate cemeteries. These groups of Southern women removed Confederate bodies to "their own dominion and promptly took control for mourning them."²³ Along with mourning their dead, however, Southern women were also confronted with the living – their broken, ruined Confederate men whose fortunes and worldviews were destroyed in the war. No longer able to serve as protectors, Southern men's incapacitation threatened the very concept of the devoted, subservient Southern woman. As a result, according to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, "the rehabilitation of southern white men became a central post-war responsibility for Confederate women."²⁴ Memorial organizations served as a viable option for elite women like Virginia to participate and shape their community's policies while still remaining feminine ladies. "Memorializing Confederate men did not threaten prescribed gender patterns and was generally accepted as an extension of women's domestic role as caretakers," writes historian Karen Cox. "Members ... were simply traditional women, promoting traditional virtues associated with the Confederacy."²⁵

²³ Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895*, 195.

²⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 252.

²⁵ Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of*

Women's organizations approached the pain of failure that followed the surrender and "redefined it" to celebrate noble sacrifice and transform the South's loss into a moral victory.²⁶ By 1900, the overarching purpose of the UDC centered on what Cox refers to as "vindication for the Confederate generation."²⁷ Vindication of the South relied on the moral righteousness and Constitutional legality of Southern secession; the celebration of Old South culture, including the institution of slavery; and the heroism and noble sacrifice of the Confederate population – all of which merged into a socio-political movement that became known as the Lost Cause. Above all, the Lost Cause promoted a nostalgic view of Southern history and sought to indoctrinate future generations with conservative, antebellum principles of community, political, and racial order. The UDC adopted this mission wholeheartedly, extending its support through community service, civic events, veterans' nursing homes, and educational agendas, including sponsorship of textbooks, histories, and memoirs. The South must "not only write, but she must use her own histories, or she will be judged by those written from a Northern standpoint, which place the South wholly in the wrong," explained UDC leader Kate Noland Garnett in a 1905 address.²⁸ The UDC mission extended beyond the battlefield and reached across gender and generational lines to include the entire white Southern population.

Having survived the war as an adult, Virginia belonged to the UDC's oldest generation of members. Cox points out that for women like her, "becoming a member of the Daughters was just another stage in their evolution as Lost Cause women."²⁹ Even before contributing her own memoir, Virginia actively participated in the Southern heritage movement by speaking at UDC events and serving as honorary chair of a Huntsville UDC branch. Some drafts of her UDC speeches and essays remain today in the Clay Papers. "We must teach our children to uphold the lofty standards of southern womanhood," she

Confederate Culture (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 10.

²⁶ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 252.

²⁷ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 3.

²⁸ Sarah Gardner, *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 118.

²⁹ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 34.

instructed at one UDC gathering, “and prove themselves worthy to shape the moral and social destiny of the fairest region.” Referencing this moment, Cox points out that the UDC agenda had “serious consequences” for the South: “the Lost Cause narrative provided more than lessons on the past; it served as a political and social road map for the future,” particularly for perpetuating the traditional racial and social order.³⁰

Although the Lost Cause arose within the South as a means of coping with and recovering from defeat, it was subsequently adopted throughout the country as a pathway to national reunion and reconciliation following the end of Reconstruction. The concept appeared in a number of different venues, from soldiers’ reunions to memorial services to popular culture. Northern publishers in particular were essential in embracing and promoting Lost Cause literature; one editor explained in 1890 that “It is well for the North, it is well for the Nation … to hear in poem and story all that the South burns to tell of her romance, her heroes, her landscapes; yes, of her lost cause.”³¹ As a journalist based in New York, Ada Sterling was well aware that Confederate memoirs needed Northern publisher support, and therefore her contributions to *Belle* voluntarily aligned with this trend. One letter in the Clay Papers revealed that Ada wanted to write a book “so accurate and literary, that its interest will command a value, permanent, in the North, even more than in the South, for book-buyers as a rule, are more numerous in the North.”³² Americans loved a tragic story, as historian David Blight explains, and by the mid-1880s, “in the interest of reconciliation, questions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in the war and its aftermath were all but banished from political discourse.”³³ A later letter from Ada revealed her intention to tone down *Belle*’s “sectional feeling,” undoubtedly stemming from her awareness that Northern publishers wanted sentimentality and romanticization instead of partisanship.³⁴ As we will see in

³⁰ Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 122-123.

³¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 275.

³² “Introduction,” *Belle*, xiv.

³³ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 219.

³⁴ Ada Sterling to Virginia Clay Clopton, 24 June, 1903. C.C. Clay Papers. Chapter 3 will delve into these issues more extensively.

Chapter 3, Virginia's unwillingness to set aside her personal opinions during her discussion of Clement's imprisonment eventually forced Ada to pursue different editorial strategies in order to finally win a contract for the memoir. Their struggle to find a willing publisher speaks to the widespread promotion of sectional reconciliation in Civil War texts of the early twentieth century.

At the time of its publication, most of the press reviewed *Belle* favorably. “Excellent reading and rich in anecdote is the book entitled ‘A Belle of the Fifties,’ issued yesterday,” praised *The New York Times*. “This book might well have for its sub-title ‘Anecdotes of Our Century.’”³⁵ *The Washington Post* agreed that *Belle* was “one of the most interesting books of the year.”³⁵ Northern reviewers usually delighted in Virginia’s emphasis on antebellum society, her gossipy stories about different Washington personalities, and her inclusion of rich details about fashion, entertainment, and drama among politicians during the “charming” 1850s. Southern reviewers appreciated Virginia’s unreserved Southern loyalties. Memoirs about the Confederacy proved very popular in the South at the turn of the century, and in many ways *Belle* adhered to an established template of Lost Cause requirements. Her memoir conformed so well with the UDC’s mission to vindicate the South that the group included it on their Textbook Committee reading list as worthy of study. Reviewers also loved its light-hearted tone and somewhat happy ending, when Virginia successfully freed her husband from the outrageous charges of treason. “It is admirably written,” judged the *Sewanee Journal* in 1905, having “rescued from old age a lovely picture of gracious, winning young womanhood.” “It is full of vigor, pith and individuality,” cheered the *Atlanta Constitution*. “Mrs. Clay Clopton’s personal charm and magnetism makes this book of utmost importance,” concluded the *Montgomery Advertiser*. “Rarely has the world known so delightful a personality, never has any personality of charming womanhood been so

³⁵ Martha Young, “New Anecdotes and Piquant Tales From A ‘Belle of the Fifties’: Mrs. Clay’s Memoirs Replete with Interesting Stories of the Famous Men and Women of Ante-Bellum Days,” *The New York Times*, 18 Sept. 1904, and “Washington Personages in the Fifties: Extracts from ‘A Belle of the Fifties,’ the Memoirs of Mrs. Clay, of Alabama,” *The Washington Post*, 2 Oct. 1904.

delightfully depicted.”³⁶ Virginia’s ability to flexibly adapt to the conditions demanded of Southern women enabled her to assume a public voice in advocating for the Lost Cause, even while she was simultaneously celebrated for being a beacon of traditional Confederate values.

Thesis Roadmap

The arrangement of this thesis corresponds to the chronological arrangement of *Belle of the Fifties*. Each chapter delves into different phases of Virginia’s life -- her time in 1850s Washington; her Civil War experience; and her account of her husband’s arrest during Reconstruction. Throughout her memoir, Virginia’s early twentieth-century politics and status as a Confederate celebrity inevitably colored her observations and descriptions of her nineteenth-century experiences. Until now, historians have been preoccupied by the Lost Cause message that dominates every chapter of *Belle*. Reading between the lines, with the help of the C.C. Clay Papers, allows us to better understand which pieces of Virginia’s memoir reflect her legitimate experiences; which pieces are more theatrical nostalgia than true memories; and which pieces were left out of *Belle* lest they muddy the mission of the Lost Cause.

Chapter 1 focuses on Virginia’s account of her time in 1850s Washington, D.C., comparing her descriptions in *Belle* with contemporary correspondence from the Clay Papers. Whereas Virginia’s reflections on the antebellum political and social scene dominated the first portion of *Belle*, private letters centered on other topics such as slave management, family politics, and a tragic miscarriage in 1854. Her nostalgia for the Old South in *Belle* overshadowed the couple’s private grief. *Belle* also downplayed her active role as a politician’s wife, highlighting instead social events and fashion -- just as a Southern belle would traditionally behave. As it turned out, although Virginia’s barrenness was personally

³⁶ Means, “Reminiscences of Four Southern Women,” 479; “A Belle of the Fifties,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 13 Nov. 1904; and Martha Young, “New Book News,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, 11 Sept. 1904.

devastating, it afforded her a relatively unique position in the nineteenth century South. As a wealthy, married, white woman with no children, she was able to reclaim her belle-hood as a vivacious socialite in Washington and later refashion and cull that experience when appealing to her memoir's readers. By emphasizing her femininity and political naiveté in *Belle*, Virginia attempted to assume a position of disinterested amusement over the ongoing sectional tension in the 1850s. Her letters reveal that she was actually very involved in Clement's political career and supported his interests through her socialite status. The disjunction between these two realities further confirms the influence of Southern womanhood expectations on Virginia's post-war persona.

Chapter 2 contains an in-depth analysis of one of Virginia's diaries, dating from April 1864 through February 1865, and contrasts her private hopes and fears with *Belle*'s coverage of the Civil War's final years. In her wartime diary, written during Clement's long absence in Canada, Virginia displayed a vulnerability and loneliness that contradicted the confident, independent woman she presented in the memoir. *Belle* neglected to mention her constant fear over her husband, her dependence on others' hospitality, her financial challenges, her family's slave management issues, and her grief whenever the war took her loved ones. Instead, *Belle* portrayed the Civil War as a lively adventure. The Clay Papers shed new light on her wartime experiences, providing a counterpoint to the censuring *Belle* has received over the past century by historians who used it as proof that Virginia was completely selfish and self-absorbed. As it turns out, her wartime persona in *Belle* again capitalized on Old South nostalgia at the expense of her actual activities.

Finally, Chapter 3 analyzes the drastic shift in tone found in *Belle*'s concluding chapters, which described Reconstruction in the South and Clement's post-war imprisonment by the federal government. This portion of the memoir documented just how easily Virginia transitioned between the many different manifestations of Southern womanhood. When she needed to escape her responsibilities in Alabama in order to rescue Clement in Washington, she assumed the part of an independent woman unencumbered by traditional familial obligations. When she needed to win favors from federal officials, she played the role of a

devoted wife lost without her husband's presence. Even as she ably adopted different tactics for different circumstances, Virginia's memoir consistently applied a twentieth-century Lost Cause spin to every situation she had faced during the post-war period. Virginia used *Belle* to extensively document the abuses faced by the South as a whole, and by Clement Clay in particular, during Yankee occupation and Reconstruction. In particular, she lashed out at government prosecutor Joseph Holt, pursuing her personal grievances to such extremes that it threatened to derail *Belle*'s publication. This chapter also demonstrates how Virginia and Ada selectively used the Clay Papers to support *Belle*'s occasionally controversial claims. Unlike in the memoir's earlier chapters, Virginia extensively quoted and cited her family's letters and her own diary as a means of verifying her assertions. Recognizing that public sentiment and Northern publishers preferred texts appealing to reconciliation instead of sectionalism, *Belle* attempted to assume a formal, historical approach that legitimized Virginia's story while still pushing for vindication for the family. Furthermore, by claiming the role as heroine of the story, Virginia ended her memoir as an independent, modern woman who preserved her Old South credentials for her Southern audience.

Even when accounting for Ada Sterling's involvement, *Belle* remains a post-war construction of Virginia's life story and identity, intended for a public audience and created with political motivations. The memoir capitalized on the Clays' fame in order to promote the Lost Cause to a new generation. However, analysis of the Clay Papers reveals Virginia's private vulnerability, fear, and hopelessness, all wholly unsuited to the post-war Lost Cause narrative of Confederate self-reliance, bravery, and ultimate vindication. By suppressing these aspects of her experience, Virginia used her memoir to align herself with the publicly and politically acceptable memory of the Civil War. This thesis uncovers portions of the C.C. Clay Papers long overshadowed by the politics of the Clay men and the infamy of Virginia's memoir. Furthermore, it refocuses attention on the relationship between Virginia's memoir and her actual experiences as a Southern woman during such a transitional period of history. *Belle* becomes a better historical source when we acknowledge its shortcomings and attempt to understand its author's motivations. Furthermore, Virginia becomes less of a flighty

gossip, and a more nuanced and authentic person, when we consider the portions of her papers that did not make the cut for publication.



Figure 2. Portraits of Virginia Clay, circa 1860s, and Clement Claiborne Clay, 1867.
From the C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

CHAPTER 1

Playing Many Parts in 1850s Washington

To an extent, Virginia's memoir followed an established formula: it portrayed the antebellum South as a rosy and idyllic place; the Civil War as a tragic yet inevitable conflict; and post-war Reconstruction as a brutal and oppressive punishment by the Northern victors. Virginia devoted a full one-third of her text to her reminiscences on her time in 1850s Washington. This exaggerated emphasis, which extended even to the title of the memoir -- *A Belle of the Fifties* -- aligned with and at times exceeded the typical Confederate memoir's nostalgia for the antebellum years. She spent much of the 1850s portion of *Belle* celebrating Southern society and fashion, meanwhile blaming Northern abolitionists for causing the war. Her contemporary letters revealed competing priorities, focusing on her role as a politician's wife, her health and family concerns, and challenges she and Clement faced in managing their slaves. Virginia's memories and description of that period therefore offer a useful point of departure in attempting to understand her motivations and choices as she wrote her memoir a full fifty years later.

Belle was first published in 1904, and reissued in 1905, and therefore arrived during a period of transition between late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century interpretations of the Civil War and its causes. Historians have long studied the literary tradition of glorified plantation life, a conception which began in the eighteenth century but which really took off following Reconstruction. As early as 1924, historian Francis Gaines identified the "shift to sentimentality in the attitude toward Southern life and its typical institution" as one of the "more interesting episodes in the history of American literature." Whereas immediate post-war accounts vilified slavery, Gaines finds that by 1870, "abolitionism was swept from the field; it was more than routed, it was tortured, scalped, 'mopped up'" and replaced with tales that celebrated the plantation and its loyal slaves.³⁷ By the early twentieth century, "a large body of plantation writing, much of it consistent with the romance of domestic sentiment,

³⁷ Francis Gaines, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition* (1924; repr., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962), 62-63.

[was] the work of Southern women.”³⁸ More recent scholarship has connected the rise of Southern women’s writings with the emersion of the UDC. Historian Sarah Gardner has found that post-1877 reminiscences by Southern women, particularly those written in partnership with the UDC, tended to focus on recovering “the true history of the South.”³⁹ By the early twentieth century, women’s memoirs assumed a narrative style and personal tone that allowed the author to incorporate her personal experience into the larger story of the Lost Cause. Still, reverence for the Old South remained essential. *Belle* included each of these attributes: the loyal slave, the love of Southern culture, the rejection of “abolitionism,” and the assertion of constitutional righteousness were all noticeably emphasized during the memoir’s chapters on antebellum life.

Following the style of many Southern women’s memoirs in the early 1900s, Virginia began her story with a narrative background on her family history and bloodlines. The whirlwind chapter “Childhood, Girlhood, and Marriage” offered readers her credentials as a Southern woman of class and social standing, briefly recounting her education at various female academies and her courtship with Clement. The memoir naturally included a bit of drama to spice up their love story, as Virginia admitted to being practically betrothed to another man. She “resisted his pleading for a binding engagement,” telling him that she had previously met “the young legislator, Clement C. Clay, Jr., and had then had a premonition that if we should meet when I returned from school I would marry him. At that time I was an unformed girl, and he, Mr. Clay, was devoted to a young lady of the capital; but this, as I knew, was a matter of the past.” Virginia’s “premonition” proved correct. Ten days after she and Clement were reacquainted, they were engaged.⁴⁰

Most historians describe a “belle” as a single young woman looking to wed; therefore, Virginia’s marriage to Clement in 1843 would normally have signaled the end of her belle-hood. “Mythology pretended that every woman could think herself a belle,” posited historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “and at the same time offered no inkling of the distresses of

³⁸ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 83.

³⁹ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 119.

⁴⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 15-17.

motherhood that awaited most belles.”⁴¹ Virginia and Clement did not have children, however, and Virginia’s life as a white Southern woman of means revolved solely around her husband and his political pursuits. She was fortunate to travel with him during his term in the United States Senate; her accompaniment was relatively unusual, as many Southern politicians left their wives at home to manage the plantation and raise children.⁴² The Clays’ relocation to Washington in 1853 allowed Virginia, free of the “distresses of motherhood” and most other commitments, to reclaim her role as a belle, an opportunity she clearly relished. Her memoir’s emphasis on beauty, wit, fashion, and cleverness demonstrate the value she placed on her status as a Southern belle. She spent the first third of *Belle* focusing on the eight years she and Clement lived in the capital, ending with his resignation from the Senate following Alabama’s secession in January 1861.

Virginia highlighted her belle-ship status through her ongoing involvement in Washington politics and society. In her memoir’s chapters on antebellum life, Virginia portrayed herself in several different capacities, often shifting between them as suited her purpose in appealing to her early twentieth century audience. Her status as a politician’s wife gave her behind-the-scenes access to the tense and unsettled political scene of the 1850s, which often revolved around sectional divisions over issues such as slavery and states’ rights. But Virginia also played the role of a wealthy socialite, and used her husband’s political connections to her advantage. Her closest friends were powerful Washington figures, and her excursions and outings in the city often included trips to Congress, foreign embassies, and the White House. Her depictions of Washington events and gatherings dominated the first half of *Belle*, particularly during the 1850s.⁴³ Even her chapter on secession and the beginning of the Civil War baldly accused Northerners of “palpable envy of the hold the

⁴¹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982): 234.

⁴² Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 76.

⁴³ The word “society” appears dozens of times in *Belle* before page 169, the beginning of Virginia’s chapter on Richmond as a Civil War capital. After that point it disappears altogether, evidence of the memoir’s sudden shift in tone and content. A similar drop-off occurs for the word “fashion.”

South had retained so long upon the Federal City, whether in politics or society.”⁴⁴ The Civil War, according to Virginia, stemmed both from Northerners’ intrusion on Southern slaveholding rights and Northerners’ jealousy of Southern culture and lifestyle. She easily and convincingly played the complementary roles of politician’s wife and wealthy socialite in her memoir.

While tales of political disagreements and fashionable society filled the pages of *Belle*’s early chapters, a comparison with the C.C. Clay Papers reveals other topics which remained noticeably absent from the memoir. Her status as a slaveholding mistress and her intense desire to become a mother emerge as two more complicated roles that preoccupied her time in the 1850s, but which she purposefully minimized in *Belle*. As mentioned previously, the Clays never had children, but it was not for a lack of trying. Virginia delivered a stillborn child in early 1854, ten years after her marriage to Clement. Her memoir briefly touched on the tragedy, but quickly moved on to happier subjects. *Belle* also stayed selectively silent on the role and value of slaves during the Clays’ time in 1850s Washington. To clarify, Virginia repeatedly denounced the political ideologies of Northern abolitionists and Black Republicans, but resisted discussing the management of her family’s own slaves in relationship to the Clays’ plantation economy. These topics emerge much more frequently in the Clay Papers, offering another point of comparison between Virginia’s private and public self. *Belle* was an opportunity for Virginia to capitalize on her post-war celebrity while galvanizing support of the Lost Cause; divulging too much in the way of personal tragedy or private business would have distracted from the memoir’s nostalgic spin on the Old South.

A Politician’s Wife

Virginia’s stories of Washington politics and politicians during the 1850s assumed an air of discreetness as she carefully reconstructed the scene for her readers without compromising her femininity. “For myself,” she wrote, “I knew little of politics,

⁴⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 143.

notwithstanding the fact that from my childhood I had called myself a ‘pronounced Jeffersonian Democrat.’ Naturally, I was a hereditary believer in States Rights, the real question, which, in an attempt to settle it, culminated in our Civil War.”⁴⁵ Virginia’s explanation of her politics placed their origins entirely on her family and her upbringing, insinuating that, as a proper belle, she only believed what she had been taught by the established Southern patriarchy. She carefully made no mention of her own wealth, inherited through landowning and slavery. By the 1850s, the issue of states’ rights centered almost exclusively on the rights of states to allow slavery, an institution most Southerners, including the Clays, strongly supported. And yet *Belle* focuses much more intensely on denouncing Northern agitators than it does on defending Southern slavery. In doing so, Virginia applied a tactic commonly used by pro-slavery Southerners. “As anti-slavery and abolitionism grew during the nineteenth century and political conflicts over slavery became more frequent,” summarizes historian Eric Walther, “[Southern] defensiveness gave way to a peculiar new idea: slavery in fact benefited the slave as well as the master. Enslavement of African Americans was a positive good, rather than a necessary evil.”⁴⁶ These tactics reemerged following the Civil War and were promulgated more widely by groups like the UDC. An essential component of the Lost Cause was that the Civil War was fought over states’ rights, and not slavery, even as Lost Causers simultaneously emphasized the benevolence of slavery. Although Virginia’s accounts stemmed from firsthand experience, she was hardly alone in writing about antebellum politics -- many women’s memoirs published in the early 1900s included discourses on states’ rights and pro-slavery ideologies, and in fact, the UDC encouraged authors to not shy away from these themes. Memoirs like *Belle* purposefully contained “political and military discussions” in what, on the surface, were “‘social’ reminiscences,” argues historian Sarah Gardner. “Ostensibly centering narratives on fashion and the social activities of prominent southerners, these women utilized every opportunity to

⁴⁵ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 26.

⁴⁶ Eric Walther, *The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2004), 8.

defend the Confederacy.”⁴⁷

Virginia’s depictions of Washington players revolved around their politics, keeping slavery as a constant subtext in *Belle*’s antebellum chapters. Virginia offered readers a taste of the growing tension between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions that emerged over her residency in Washington, but she disguised it under social commentary and political gossip. Upon arriving in the city in 1853, she found that “it did not require the insight of a keen observer to detect in social, as in political gatherings, the constantly widening division between the Northern and Southern elements gathered in the Government City.”⁴⁸ Politics and social life were inextricable, and Virginia recalled that “gradually, by a mutual instinct of repulsion that resolved itself into a general consent, the representatives of the two antagonistic sections seldom met save at promiscuous assemblages to which the exigencies of public life compelled them.”⁴⁹ When describing the late 1850s, she gleefully admitted ignoring or spurning anyone who was not a pro-slavery Democrat. At one point, she and Clement moved lodgings after finding a building “too heterogeneous, and therefore less congenial to our strictly legislative circles.” By 1857, she recalled, “our ‘mess’ is a very pleasant one. … We keep Free-soilers, Black Republicans and Bloomers on the other side of the street. They are afraid even to inquire for board at this house.”⁵⁰

Along with recounting Washington’s political atmosphere, *Belle* included plenty of gossip and opinions about its leading men. Virginia claimed that her husband was very close with President Franklin Pierce, a Northern Democrat in office from 1853 through 1857. “From the first my husband was known as one of the President’s counsellors,” recalled Virginia, “and none of those who surrounded the Nation’s executive head more sacredly preserved his confidence.”⁵¹ Her descriptions of Pierce suggest a warm familiarity, and her memoir implied they saw each other often. “Especially a loveable man in his private

⁴⁷ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 130.

⁴⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 26.

⁴⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 27.

⁵⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 43.

⁵¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 59.

character,” Virginia felt that Pierce “was a man of whom our nation might well be proud to have at its head.”⁵² While fairly popular among Southern Democrats, Pierce’s handling of the Kansas territory and its subsequent violence threatened to split the national party. Virginia alluded to his political troubles in *Belle*, confessing that Pierce was “a very harassed man” whose “bold pro-slaveryism startled even his friends.” She surmised that “his defeat at the next Presidential election was doubtless at least partially attributable” to his antagonism of Northerners.⁵³

In reality, Pierce withdrew from the 1856 campaign, leaving the Democrats to nominate James Buchanan, another Northerner with Southern sympathies who went on to win the election. Apparently, Clement Clay lacked any closeness with President James Buchanan, and no anecdotes of them chumming together appeared in the memoir. Virginia’s descriptions of his administration in *Belle* largely ignored his term’s early years, referring to them only as “brilliant” based on the many entertaining parties she attended during the late 1850s. Her evaluation of the man himself proved fairly negative, centering on the “alarming” “incertitude” of his behavior during the secession crisis of 1860-1861.⁵⁴

Undoubtedly, Virginia’s portrayals of both the Pierce and Buchanan administrations were colored by post-bellum perceptions of their presidencies. While Pierce was remembered fondly by Southerners for his unswerving support for states’ rights and the expansion of slavery, Buchanan left office in March 1861 as a very unpopular man. In one of his last speeches as president, he denounced secession as illegal, even as he concluded that he had no constitutional power to prevent it from happening. In doing so, he alienated both the South and the North. The ensuing war, in the minds of many across North and South, stemmed from Buchanan being “too afraid” to stop the violence.⁵⁵ Considering his reputation, Virginia’s distancing herself from him perpetually through her memoir can hardly be surprising.

⁵² Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 61.

⁵³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 59.

⁵⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 114 and 143.

⁵⁵ Walther, *The Shattering of the Union*, 187.

The open discussion of politics in Virginia's memoir points to a change in public perceptions of women's political activity in the nineteenth century, a phenomenon explored most recently by historian Elizabeth Varon. Varon asserts that traditional scholarship has assumed that "white Southern women were excluded from participation in the male arena of politics." In her own research, however, Varon finds that "many a Southern lady harbored fierce partisan loyalties and served as an intellectual mentor and moral advisor to her politician husband."⁵⁶ The Whig campaigns of 1840 represented a turning point, as the party blatantly recruited female supporters and encouraged its women to participate through petitions, writings, and speeches. Over time, Democrats also embraced this tactic, equating the support of partisan women with the patriotism of the Democratic agenda. "Focused as they have been on men," concludes Varon, "histories of Southern nationalism have overlooked an important truth: Southern women, as consumers and producers of political discourse, were deeply implicated in the transition from partisanship to sectionalism."⁵⁷ Virginia's memoir attested to her personal shift in behavior; upon first arriving in the city, she preferred to socialize with members of her husband's party, but recognized the role of a senator's wife in building bridges across partisan divides. By the time of secession, however, she pushed all courtesies aside in the name of sectionalism.

The C. C. Clay Papers both complement and complicate *Belle*'s discussions of 1850s politics. Correspondence in the family's papers included plenty of letters to and from Clement Clay and his associates, fellow politicians, and strangers writing to praise or question his latest speech in Congress. More interesting are the letters directed to Virginia, either by friends, family members, or random constituents, which, after formalities and family news, proceeded to ask for Virginia's intervention with Clement on their behalf or to discuss recent Washington news. The frequency of these letters attests to the valuable role that Virginia played as the senator's wife. Furthermore, they support her memoir's claims about her partisan, pro-slavery opinions and political agenda during her time in Washington.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1 and 73.

⁵⁷ Varon, *We Mean to be Counted*, 102.

In many instances, the letters offer evidence that beyond just serving as an “intellectual mentor and moral advisor,” to quote Varon, Virginia and Clement were actually partners pursuing the same goals.

As a politician’s wife, Virginia provided an access point for Clement’s constituents, and many letters from their friends and contacts addressed her directly in their requests for various favors. “Have you forgotten to send me Mr. C’s speech against Sumner?” closed one writer. “Do send it to me if you can do so without trouble.”⁵⁸ Other letters asked Virginia to intercede regarding political appointments. “Please write her and say what you think, about the possibility of Father’s obtaining the Consulate here, and if his presence is necessary or not at Washington,” reads a letter from Virginia’s friend Rose Kierulf, then residing on St. Thomas.⁵⁹ “Since I wrote your good husband I have learnt that my brother has been nominated by the President and it has gone to the senate for confirmation and I am most anxious waiting to have it taken up and I felt that my appeal to your noble husband would be granted and should the case be objected to use his influence to see it,” pleaded another friend in 1859.⁶⁰ One letter played on Virginia’s status as a lady, begging, “Do, my dear Mrs. Clay, whenever you can say a good word for my friend Rhinn. It could not be used in a better cause. With the many calls upon Mr. Clay I fear you may think me importunate in mentioning him so often, but I know you admire his character and I like him so much I would urge your kind offices for him when I might feel a delicacy in asking them for myself.”⁶¹ Some letters even requested Virginia to confer with other politicians on the writers’ behalf -- for example, Virginia’s friend William Thomson asked her to “please present my best regards to Mrs and Gov. Fitzpatrick” before adding, “I beg you to ask the

⁵⁸ Henry Myers to Virginia Clay, 30 July 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. Myers was referring to a speech Clay gave on the Senate floor on June 28, 1854, denouncing Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner’s opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law. According to Clay biographer Ruth Nuernberger, Clay accused Sumner of “falsifying the Senate records, of ‘want of personal courage,’ of ‘readiness to commit moral perjury,’ and of a ‘disposition to instigate other men to crime.’” Following the speech, Clay was “acclaimed throughout Alabama.” See Ruth Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 125-126.

⁵⁹ Rose Kierulf to Virginia Clay, 16 January 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶⁰ Eliza Warrington Chubb to Virginia Clay, 20 December 1859. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶¹ Henry Myers to Virginia Clay, 4 April 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Governor if he got my letter, and if he saw Mr. Appleton on the subject referred to in it.”⁶²

Many of Virginia’s correspondents, both male and female, revealed a lively interest in national politics, and their letters to her suggest she was viewed as knowledgeable woman possessing informed and valuable opinions. “Your President Pierce is the most veto-sing President I ever heard of – I do wish he would treat his Senate and House of Representatives with more respect,” ranted a female friend from Petersburg in 1855.⁶³ Virginia must have offered her friends a safe space to share their political opinions and judgments. Even the occasional gentleman wrote to Virginia and discussed political news. “In the last day or two, I have rec’d a letter from your good man, and also from yourself,” wrote an Alabama bishop in 1854. “Both were read with no small interest: for we love you very much and my wife says she prays the prayer for Congress with much more unction than she ever did before.”⁶⁴ “I suppose Mr. Clay with all Southern men feels much regret at the defeat of the Kansas bill in the House of Representatives,” surmised one of Virginia’s friends, a sailor. “Douglasses apostacy [sic] was of course counted upon as certain and therefore did not take any one by surprise. His conduct will destroy within the South all confidence in Northern men.” The author then revealed that his anger at Stephen Douglas largely stemmed from personal interests: “I am afraid Bleeding Kansas has so absorbed Congress that nothing will be done this session for the Navy.”⁶⁵

Many letters in the family’s papers addressed Virginia as equal in political stature and influence to her husband, the senator. “I answered your prized letters of October about six weeks since I write again without waiting for another from you, for I suppose you are so buried up in diplomacy politics &c that I must for the present consider you dead to me,” fretted one letter from Rose Kierulf.⁶⁶ Rose assumed that Virginia was swamped not with parties, but with politics. Perhaps those things were one and the same in Rose’s mind.

⁶² William Thomson to Virginia Clay, 11 March 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶³ Cary Ann Gholson to Virginia Clay, 23 February 1855. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶⁴ Henry C. Lay to Virginia Clay, 13 March 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶⁵ Henry Myers to Virginia Clay, 4 April 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶⁶ Rose Kierulf to Virginia Clay, 7 January 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Despite its salutations, another letter from the Clays' relative, Jonathan Winters, initially reads as if intended for Clement, instead of Virginia. "After I heard you were elected a Senator from Alabama, I thought your time would be so entirely engrossed with matters of a National character, that I refrained from obtruding [sic] upon your time and patience, any more than was absolutely necessary." Only later in the letter is Virginia confirmed as Jonathan's intended recipient: "You may rest assured, however, that I am constantly and earnestly watching, with feelings of unfeigned delight, the proud race you are running (Cousin Clement and you are one and the same, you observe), and shall always enjoy, though I may not express it, as much pleasure at your successes as though they were my own."⁶⁷ Within the Clay family, at least, Clement and Virginia shared victories equally. Another cousin explained it thusly: "I've often thought of you and yours and said, 'I know Cous's cup of joy is filled since Mr. C's triumph.'"⁶⁸

As mentioned earlier, Virginia's political commentary and her constant reinforcement of states' rights in *Belle* make it impossible to fully distinguish her political views from her views on slavery. In conjunction with the memoir, the Clay family's letters also offer useful insights into the increasing importance slavery played in politics and everyday life both in and outside of Washington during the antebellum period. In *Belle*'s antebellum chapters, Virginia touched on the issues of states' rights and the perceived abuses of the Northern Republicans against slaveholding states, but did not specify the issues themselves. This again demonstrated her post-war Lost Cause perception that the North's abuses of states' rights, not the opposition of slavery, led to the start of the War. Letters between the Clays and their friends were more explicit, often including fascinating details about how the ongoing political tension over slavery played out in reality. One of Virginia's letters, for example, included details on her and a friend's upcoming shopping trip to Philadelphia and New York. Almost as an aside, she wrote that "neither of us dare to take servants, tho Hogan is anxious

⁶⁷ Jonathan Withers to Virginia Clay, 26 June 1855. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁶⁸ James H. Williams to Virginia Clay, 5 February 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

to go.”⁶⁹ With the recently passed Fugitive Slave Act facing severe opposition in Northern states like New York, presumably Virginia felt it too dangerous to travel with slaves, even though her memoir claimed she trusted them absolutely. Virginia’s friend Rose Kiernuf also frequently updated the Clays on the ongoing drama facing the island of St. Thomas, which emancipated its slaves in 1848. According to Rose, “we have nothing to desire but good servants.... since the Emancipation all the Estates have gone to ruin in our Islands, the negroes wont work, live by robbing their masters.” Rose speculated that “if some of your abolitionists could only come here and learn from experience what is the result of free niggers in a country, I reckon they would soon change politics on that subject.”⁷⁰ Freed slaves also worried the Clays’ friend Henry Myers, a sailor who toured the colony of Liberia while on a voyage to Africa in 1858. “We started from Monrovia that pet hamberg of pseudo-philan-thropists,” Henry wrote to Virginia, adding that “I am satisfied from what I saw of it, if they were left to themselves without aid from their white friends, the Colony in a very few years would be numbered amongst the things that were. The few negroes who are educated are enabled to rob their less favored brethren, and improve their conditions whilst the majority struggle along, and are as poor and miserable as it is possible for them to be.” His journey convinced him “that we at the South are the only true philanthropist in regards to the condition of the negro.”⁷¹

The Wealthy Washington Socialite

Although she clearly enjoyed the ongoing political drama, Virginia’s love of gossip, parties, and fashion largely dominated the first third of her memoir. For her, politics and society served as two sides of the same coin, meaning that both were essential pieces of her life. “In the days of Presidents Pierce and Buchanan, Washington was a city of statesmen,” she mused in *Belle*, “and in the foreground, relieving the solemnity of their deliberations in

⁶⁹ Virginia Clay to [H.L. Clay?], 11 April 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁷⁰ Rose Kierulf to Virginia Clay, 31 January 1857. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁷¹ Henry Myers to Virginia Clay, 19 June 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

that decade which preceded the Nation's great disaster, were fashion and mirth, beauty and wit.”⁷² Virginia's recollection of the 1850s differed drastically from her memoir's later chapters on the wartime and post-war periods. Her memories of antebellum Washington emerged in thematic anecdotes and sketches, centered on the various acquaintances she made and events she attended. She created an impression for readers of her life as a whirlwind of social gatherings and extravagance, all of which came to a crashing halt with the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. “The four years' war, which began in '61, changed these social conditions,” she bemoaned in her chapter on 1850s fashion. “As the result of that strife poverty spread both North and South. The social world at Washington, which but an administration before had been scarcely less fascinating and brilliant than the Court of Louis Napoleon, underwent a radical change; and the White House itself, within a month after it went into the hands of the new Black Republican party, became degraded to a point where even Northern men recoiled at the sight of the metamorphosed conditions.”⁷³

Despite her regular commentary about the ongoing political crisis, Virginia painted the 1850s as a blissful time, when she was surrounded by money, fashion, and power. She recreated the period in her memoir through stories and anecdotes featuring high-powered men and wealthy socialites. She fondly recalled the elite and restrictive society that stemmed from being a Washington insider. “In the fifties, when the number of States was but two dozen, the list of representatives gathering at the capital was proportionately smaller than in the present day,” she explained, “and society was correspondingly select.”⁷⁴ *Belle's* accompanying illustrations document her point: of the twenty-four portraits included in the book, two are presidents, two are opera singers, one is an ambassador, five are congressmen, and ten are congressional wives. Virginia's emphasis on her participation in numerous parties and her descriptions of her many friends and confidants served to solidify her social status as a worthy member of this rich and exclusive crowd.

In a sense, Virginia's status in society stemmed from and relied upon her status as a

⁷² Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 87.

⁷³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 86-87.

⁷⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 87.

politician's wife. She carefully integrated politics into her social life, falling into the category of society women who, as argued by historian Drew Gilpin Faust, rejected the idea that only men should be interested in politics.⁷⁵ Women occupied an important role in representing and upholding their husbands' political alliances, a practice that frequently played out during Washington's many social gatherings. "To be sure," Virginia explained, "courtesies were exchanged between the wives of some of the Northern and Southern senators, ... but, by a tacit understanding, even at the entertainments given at the foreign legations, and at the houses of famous Washington citizens, this opposition of parties was carefully considered in the sending out of invitations, in order than no unfortunate *rencontre* might occur between uncongenial guests."⁷⁶ In *Belle*, Virginia recounted several instances of her publicly rejecting a courtesy from an offending politician, even when her husband was on decent terms with the man. One notable example was William Seward, then a "pronounced Northerner" in the Senate, who "had made numerous efforts in the past to meet me, ... but my Southern sentiments were wholly disapproving of him, and I had resisted even my kinder-hearted husband's plea, and had steadily refused to permit him to be introduced to me." A masquerade in 1858, during which Virginia was entirely committed to her chosen costume, finally brought the two together for the first and last time.⁷⁷ She avoided an "unfortunate *rencontre*" by interacting with Seward only in character.

Fashion was an essential piece of a woman's social status, and Virginia clearly adored clothing from the 1850s. At one point in her memoir, she commented that "the fashions of the times were graceful, rich and picturesque. Those of the next decade, conspicuous for huge chignons, false hair, and distorting bustles, rose like an ugly barrier between the lovely costuming of the fifties and the dressing of to-day."⁷⁸ Her detailed descriptions of various styles and trends read like a paean to Victorian fashion. Readers unfamiliar with fashion history would assume after reading *Belle* that Washington was a fashion capital. In reality,

⁷⁵ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 10-12.

⁷⁶ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 27.

⁷⁷ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 135-136.

⁷⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 88.

this was not the case; Virginia admitted that she imported her clothes or purchased them from fashion houses in New York, a widespread practice adopted by most society women of that period. Nevertheless, fashion functioned as a powerful weapon in Washington, as one's clothing choices were frequently perceived as a statement about one's political power. *Belle* explained that newcomers quickly learned this lesson, as illustrated by Virginia's anecdote about her own arrival in the city in December 1853. "At that period it was the almost universal custom for Southern gentlemen to wear soft felt hats, and the fashion was invariable when traveling.... My husband and the other gentlemen of our party were so provided on our journey northward, and upon our arrival, it must be admitted, none in that travel-stained and weary company would have been mistaken for a Washington exquisite of the period." After their arrival in the city, Clement and his colleagues were repeatedly turned away from a hotel, until finally Virginia confronted the desk clerk. Upon learning that the party included congressmen, the shocked clerk quickly offered them rooms. The experience struck a chord for Virginia: "It was by reason of this significant episode that I first realized the potency in Washington of conventional apparel and Congressional titles."⁷⁹

After surviving her own initiation, Virginia frequently equated others' fashion mishaps with general unsophistication. On one occasion, Virginia escorted a "daughter of an important constituent" around the city, remarking that she was "a typical, somewhat callow schoolgirl, over-dressed and self-conscious." For Virginia, the girl's lack of fashion sense foreshadowed what turned out to be a dull day, where "nothing appeared to interest my guest or lessen what I was rapidly beginning to regard as a case of hebetude, pure and simple."⁸⁰ At another point in *Belle*, she fondly reflected on the city's "favorite mantuamaker," "within whose power it lay to transform provincial newcomers, often already over-stocked with ill-made costumes and absurdly trimmed bonnets, into women of fashion!" She concluded her praise for the woman's skill with a joke for her post-war audience: "Mrs. Rich was the only Reconstructionist, I think I may safely say, on whom Southern ladies looked with unqualified

⁷⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 25.

⁸⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 125.

approval.”⁸¹

Political leanings could also be gleaned from one’s appearance. Virginia’s conservative politics likely influenced her memoir’s critical panning of Bloomers, the first ladies’ pants, as an “eccentric” trend she attributed to “the first radical efforts of women … toward suffrage.”⁸² Virginia was hardly alone in her derision of the Bloomer Movement, which was widely ridiculed by both men and women.⁸³ However, it is notable that though Virginia criticized Bloomers and the women who wore them, she herself was an active suffragist at the time of *Belle*’s publication in 1905. The difference lies in the fact that women wearing Bloomers in the 1850s were almost exclusively Northern radicals, the arch villains in her descriptions of that period. Another example of a fashion statement being translated into a political statement can be seen in Virginia’s depictions of Senator Sam Houston, whom she clearly respected despite his standard outfit of a “leopard-skin vest, with a voluminous scarlet neck-tie, and over his bushy grey locks rested an immense sombrero.” His “remarkable garb” set Houston apart in a good way; Virginia recalled that the “Senatorial Hercules received all such attentions from the public with extreme composure, not to say gratification, as a recognition to which he was entitled.”⁸⁴

Many chapters in *Belle* included anecdotes and narratives on Virginia’s particular acquaintances and friends, commenting on their fashion sensibility and appearance alongside their personality and manners. Focusing so intensely on such trivialities leaves an impression that Virginia was shallow and flighty, but newspaper reviews confirm that her 1905 audiences adored these details as glimpses into “charming” antebellum life.⁸⁵ Furthermore, they served the greater purpose of balancing the glories of the Old South with the tragedy of war and struggles of Reconstruction that Virginia recounted later in her text. Many Civil War

⁸¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 93. “Reconstructionist,” in this case, refers to Mrs. Rich’s skills in remaking dresses, not to her political views.

⁸² Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 98.

⁸³ James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 183.

⁸⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 98-99.

⁸⁵ Martha Young, “New Anecdotes and Piquant Tales From A ‘Belle of the Fifties’: Mrs. Clay’s Memoirs Replete with Interesting Stories of the Famous Men and Women of Ante-Bellum Days,” *The New York Times*, 18 Sept. 1904.

memoirs followed this script, as Sarah Gardner discovered in her recent study of Southern women's post-war writings. "What strikes us [modern readers] as derivative, sentimental, or simply false affected late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century readers differently," she claims. "They were reading something new." Authors were able to capitalize on their audience's love of beautiful things and wistful nostalgia for what was seen by the twentieth century as a more luxurious, less complicated time. In doing so, they both advanced the Lost Cause and simultaneously "created a new cultural identity for the postbellum South."⁸⁶ Extensively recounting Washington society and fashion allowed Virginia to present herself as an authentic Southern lady to her post-war audience, a strategy that allowed her to also include her political commentary in a publicly acceptable way.

In the C.C. Clay Papers, Virginia's concerns about fashion far exceeded her discussions of society life. One explanation could be that because Virginia's outgoing letters are so infrequent in the collection, much of her original gossip and musings on Washington elites have been lost to time. More likely, however, is that social events, while news, were not as important as the political or personal news that make up the majority of the Clays' letters. While stories about socialites and public gatherings are missing from the family's letters, Virginia's correspondence thoroughly documented her and her peers' ongoing preoccupation with fashion and clothing among the Washington elite in the 1850s. Even those letters largely devoted to discussing another topic nearly always included a line, if not a paragraph, about women's clothing. For example, in 1854, Mary Withers spent the majority of her letter to Virginia recounting Christmas news and encouraging Virginia to get plenty of rest during her pregnancy and recuperation. Withers' prescriptions for beauty sleep then transitioned to news about clothing: "Maria told me she expected you would not be very well pleased with the New York purchases as she did not consider them handsome – hers, she said were quite pretty, but the dress goods were dreadfully moth eaten – the wrapping quite new in style here – I have not seen them, nor her much since you left."⁸⁷ Another letter from

⁸⁶ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 11.

⁸⁷ Mary Withers to Virginia Clay, 9 January 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Virginia's friend Rose bemoaned a missed opportunity to say farewell to Virginia before leaving for the British Isles. After urging Virginia to "persuade our Clay to bring you to St. Thomas," she concluded with the addendum that "I did not bring you the scarf you desired as I found that sort of lace 'punit applique' is no more the fashion. It is expensive and not real."⁸⁸

Virginia's friends were not the only ones sharing the latest fashions; Virginia, as a Washington insider, was also a style resource. One letter from her sister-in-law, Celeste Clay, fretted over Virginia's reports about the newest Washington trend in undergarments and children's clothing. "Scarlet Petticoats are not yet worn here [in Huntsville, Alabama]. I will have to set the fashion, as you are not here. How in the world are they worn?" wondered Celeste. "If I tell Melia, about the [trend] in W., she will have a scarlet petticoat on [the baby] before a single day passes."⁸⁹ Other fashion news came from Virginia's contacts in London, such as her friend William Thomson, who in 1858 detailed the latest styles from across the pond. "I did think of sending you and Mrs. Fitzpatrick one of the new style of petticoats," he wrote, "so novel, it seems at the seat of Gov. But upon enquiring for the material my bachelor wits were outdone, for I could not even guess what size might suit both you ladies." William did not give up, however, continuing later in the letter that "since sending a few lines to you, I spent a day at Brighton, which is in my district, and I saw quite a new style, and a decided improvement on the petticoat. A reversible crimson and black striped 'linsey wolsey' ... this style of the new garment is very distingue to my feeble bachelor eye, and wd. attract amazingly in Washington just now."⁹⁰ William's letter about linsey wolsey made such an impression on Virginia that she quoted it line-by-line in her memoir.⁹¹

Virginia occasionally travelled separately from her husband on extended shopping trips for clothing in the latest styles. She found the best fashions in New York City, usually journeying with her friends and at least one gentleman as an escort for the party of ladies.

⁸⁸ Rose Kierulf to Virginia Clay 3 October [1856]. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁸⁹ Celeste Clay to Virginia Clay, 15 February 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁹⁰ William Thomson to Virginia Clay, 20 March 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁹¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 91-92.

Being apart afforded Virginia an opportunity to write to her husband, which probably explains the disproportionate volume of letters in the family papers recounting her shopping trips. Or, perhaps she just went shopping frequently and enjoyed writing about her excursions. “Of course we went to shopping immediately after getting Sally Wilkinton[?] to pioneer us,” she wrote to Clement in 1856, “and continued it until last evening, determining to give to today to cutting and fitting....” On that occasion, Virginia wrote following a hiccup in the group’s plans to return to Washington. “But lo! and behold on going to Hollingshead ... we found [the seamstress] poor Mrs. H. almost gone from consumption, having had an awfully frightful hemorrhage yesterday. I was shocked – she has not worked for nearly a year.” Of course the trip was not cancelled; the group found another seamstress. Unfortunately, the complication meant the trip was extended as the new seamstress was unfamiliar with their sizes. “So, my darling,” Virginia’s letter concluded in a deferential tone, “I hope my decision will meet yr. approbation, as I know you wd. prefer me to accomplish what I came for, than to return prematurely and as I came. We will then bring all or nearly all our pretties with us.”⁹² Virginia’s shopping trips appeared to regularly extend beyond their anticipated end date. One letter from Clement to his wife in 1859 confirmed his receipt of one of her purchases, sent by train, although “I feel some anxiety about your and hat’s trunks for which Mr. Rust had not time to get checks. If I had not run to him and taken your tickets and ran back at the top of my speed, you would not have gotten them. My jump from the cars, as they moved off, sprained my back somewhat, but it is quite well to-day.” His letter closed with logistics and the hopes of seeing her soon: “I send Adams’ express receipt for a box containing hat’s dresses, which I sent off this morning, having found it at Sally Smith’s when I got back there last night at 9:30 o’clock, the Senate having sat till 9 PM. I shall look for you Monday, at the farthest, and be glad to see you Saturday.”⁹³

The extreme value placed on fashion, occasionally at the expense of politics, is demonstrated in another amusing letter from Celeste, who begged Virginia at the height of

⁹² Virginia Clay to C.C. Clay, Jr., [22 November 1856]. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁹³ C.C. Clay, Jr., to Virginia Clay, 8 June 1858. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

the secession crisis to please ship home a bonnet before leaving Washington. “I was afraid you would not feel the importance of getting my bonnet right off, and you know that I am in the condition of ‘Miss Flora McFlimsey of Madison Square.’ Get it and express it as soon as possible.” As if she knew how Virginia would likely respond, Celeste continued to justify her demands. “Don’t stop to talk about the rights of the South. Now is no time to talk but to fight. I want my bonnet to fight in, if necessary -- mind you get it very modeste, in character with the person who is to wear it.” Celeste’s bonnet needs outweighed even the coming war; at least as she closed her letter, she seemed to remember her brother-in-law’s recent ill health. “Tell [Clement] to take things quietly and not to fret over those mean abolitionists for that is what they are, in my opinion, and there is no use to call them Republicans any more.”⁹⁴

The Would-Be Mother

Many antebellum women became mothers, but Virginia never did. She delivered a stillborn child in January 1854, shortly after her and Clement’s arrival in Washington, and never had another one. Historians apparently have no framework for a Southern woman like Virginia, whose loss of a child and subsequent barrenness appears to have inflicted no long-term psychological trauma or punitive repercussions from her spouse. The loss of a child during the early nineteenth century was a common occurrence. The 1860 census shows that children under five years old accounted for 43 percent of all deaths in the United States.⁹⁵ What set Virginia apart was that her first pregnancy appears to have been her last; no evidence exists to suggest that she ever had subsequent pregnancies or stillbirths after 1854. Having only one non-surviving child placed Virginia in stark contrast to many Southern women, who on average raised seven or eight surviving children.⁹⁶ The childfree life was an anomaly for slaveholding women, who “looked to motherhood as the livelihood that

⁹⁴ Celeste Clay to Virginia Clay, 5 January 1861. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

⁹⁵ Katherine McVane Armstrong, “Thy Will, Lord, Not Mine: Parents, Grief, and Child Death in the Antebellum South” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2011): 5.

⁹⁶ Armstrong, “Thy Will, Lord, Not Mine,” 6.

occupied their time, as the calling that made them important to their families and to society, and as the primary source of companionship, love, and affection.”⁹⁷ Childlessness was normally a serious affliction for plantation women. Historian Wyatt-Brown estimates that “the married woman who disappointed her husband and relations in this respect could scarcely help having feelings of incompleteness. Moreover, it cut her off from a source of personal power -- the duties of nurture -- and from sense of fulfillment as a woman.” Neither Virginia’s memoir nor her personal papers convey this drastic level of loss, even as they documented her sorrow over the death of her child. All indications suggest that she and Clement had a happy marriage. Her lack of children did not appear to interfere with her relationships or her prominent social status. “Barrenness in women,” argues Wyatt-Brown, “had always been a point of shame, and sufferers were contemptible or at best pitiable in the eyes of others.”⁹⁸ His pronouncement falls short when evaluating Virginia’s experience. The family’s papers include no evidence of contempt or shame, even among Clement’s parents, who presumably looked to Virginia to provide an heir.

Historians have cited Virginia’s status as a childless woman in their occasionally critical analyses of her active political and social life. Most notably, *Belle* editors from the 1999 edition suggest that “if her only child had not been stillborn during her first Washington winter, Virginia might not have been tempted to play the role of belle so long.”⁹⁹ Their hypothesis likely stems from the somewhat flippant way that Virginia described her loss in her memoir. She touched on the tragedy only briefly, and within the context of the Washington social scene: “Though a sad winter for me, for in it I bore and buried my only child, yet my recollections of that season, as its echoes reached our quiet parlours, are those of boundless entertainment and bewildering ceremony.” By not dwelling on the death, Virginia quickly reverted her memoir to its upbeat and jolly tone, explaining that even though she was unable to participate, she was kept abreast of the “notable” season by her “ever kind friend, Mrs. Fitzpatrick, who for months was my one medium of communication

⁹⁷ Armstrong, “Thy Will, Lord, Not Mine,” 35.

⁹⁸ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 236.

⁹⁹ “Introduction,” *Belle*, x.

to the fashionable outside world.”¹⁰⁰

Correspondence in the family’s papers barely touched on Virginia’s pregnancy, which must have been fairly advanced as she and Clement relocated to Washington in December 1853. One of the only hints of anticipation can be found in a letter from a friend on January 7, 1854: “What is my dear ‘Jenny’ doing? The 25, 1st & now the 5th (Mr. B’s birthday) has passed & yet no tidings of that most anxiously expected visitor – well I pray God I may have the happy news ere long, I shall be greatly relieved when I know you are a happy mother.”¹⁰¹ Another letter from Virginia’s aunt, Mary Withers, spent several lines complaining about the “aggravating circumstances” Mary had faced, having been forced to spend Christmas “surrounded by the whole troop of children, sneering, coughing, and blowing of noses.” Mary’s letter, dated January 9, was full of practical advice for the expectant mother, including the warning, “Take good care of your breast, Jenny, and put that plaster of mutton suet, sweet oil, and bees wax on it, and it may save you much trouble. Hot brandy is very good to apply to the nipple to harden it, and after it a little sweet oil.” Mary worried about the toll that labor could take on Virginia’s beauty, and therefore advised that she “try and content yourself (after all is over) as much as possible in the house,” so that “you can come out blooming in the Spring.”¹⁰²

Another letter dated January 9, written from Clement Comer Clay to his son, assumed a different tone: “You must let us hear from you frequently – more particularly till Va. is restored to health. She must write also when she can. Give her my love, and best wishes.”¹⁰³ At this point, presumably, the Alabama Clays had heard of Virginia’s miscarriage. Despite her memoir’s implications, it appears that Virginia’s physical recovery proved very difficult. “Times here are very hard,” confessed Clement in a letter to his father later that January. “Va. read all yr. letter with ease and pleasure. She and I are as well as usual.”¹⁰⁴ Throughout

¹⁰⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 25.

¹⁰¹ E.K. Brown to Virginia Clay, 7 January 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁰² Mary Withers to Virginia Clay, 9 January 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁰³ C.C. Clay, Sr. to C.C. Clay, Jr., 9 January 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁰⁴ C.C. Clay, Jr. to C.C. Clay, Sr., 18 January 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

the spring, family correspondence wavered between expressing relief at Virginia's returning health and expressing concern over her condition. A letter to Virginia from Clement's brother, Lawson, articulated the Clays' anxieties: "I fear you are not recovering as rapidly as brother Clement's letter gave us reason to hope you would; indeed, I doubt very much whether you are so well. The newspapers do not announce that he has resumed his seat in the Senate, and no letters, since one to Aunt Mary under date of 22d ult., have reached us giving any information of your condition. Father is becoming uneasy, and has more than once remarked, 'I am afraid Virginia is worse, since Clement does not write.'"¹⁰⁵ Lawson was right: Virginia faced several medical complications stemming from her stillbirth, and ended up leaving Washington for several weeks that spring to recuperate in Petersburg. A rare letter from Virginia herself to Susanna Clay, her mother-in-law, begged pardon for being so delayed in writing, explaining, "I am not yet well, as you may suppose, as milk leg is not gotten rid of in a month. I have been absent from Washington city one month this day."¹⁰⁶

Letters from Virginia's friends shortly after her child's death expressed sympathy as well as hope that she and Clement would soon have another child. Their assumptions fell in line with the general practices of the period; women were supposed to resign themselves to God's will and judgment in both giving children and taking them away.¹⁰⁷ The Clays' minister, based in Huntsville, wrote to Virginia shortly after her delivery that he was "glad to hear that you have the prospect of being soon restored to your usual health." Unable to resist imparting spiritual advice, he continued, "nor will I preach to you now except to ask that you will for my sake, and as a memorial of what has happened, commit to memory the first 20 verses of the third chapter of Lamentations: it seems to be written for you. ... Humility + hopefulness are set forth as the rewards of affliction remember and proved."¹⁰⁸ Mary Withers, ever tactful, filled a letter with complaints about the ongoing "pestilence" afflicting her own children. She then transitioned to warm wishes for Virginia: "Happy I am dear Jenny

¹⁰⁵ H. L. Clay to Virginia Clay, 2 February 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Clay to Susanna Clay, 1 April 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. "Milk leg" is form of deep vein thrombosis, historically common among pregnant or newly-delivered women.

¹⁰⁷ Armstrong, "Thy Will, Lord, Not Mine," 116.

¹⁰⁸ Henry Lay to Virginia Clay, 13 March 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

to congratulate you on your returning health and may that the choicest of God's blessings soon be yours to the utmost. ... My pen has been silent Jenny but believe me my thoughts and sympathies have been daily with you and my feelings towards you are I believe those of an elder to a younger sister.”¹⁰⁹

Virginia's private thoughts on her pregnancy, the death of her child, and her subsequent childlessness are hard to recover; she kept no diary during this period and her memoir, as mentioned, was fairly restrained in its depiction of the event. One letter appears to directly address the issue. Dating from 1856, Virginia, writing to an unnamed cousin, began with a bit of gossip about Mrs. Pugh, acknowledged in *Belle* to be the “most beautiful woman in Washington.”¹¹⁰ “I may enclose you a letter of his which Mr. Clay forwarded me. Mrs. Pugh, beautiful as she is, is still a woman, and this month must pass the fiery plough-shares or fall amid them. She will soon be, what I, poor mortal would give all else on earth to be, a mother.”¹¹¹ Virginia's rare candor revealed her true feelings, even as she used a bit of sarcasm in her description of Mrs. Pugh. She continued, “Mrs. Fitz is again enceinte but I am in status quo. But I am growing more content for I have had a most delightful summer, giving and receiving happiness at every turn, all my mothers and many of my fathers relatives have been to see me, some of whom had not been here, since the balmy days of the queenly Mrs. Isaac Hilliard St., when ‘Millbrook’ was the Kenilworth of N.C.” Rather than dwell on her inability to conceive, Virginia then admitted that “I am somewhat reconciled to not being a mother,” since it meant she could now do other things with her life. She concluded, “In earnest, sweet Cousin, I now live on the hopes of going abroad, as I have seen well nigh all worth seeing here.”¹¹²

Though Virginia did not revisit her loss directly in *Belle*, she does appear to reference her miscarriage in later stories about her friends and activities. For example, in describing the appearance and activities of Jane Pierce, whose young son died on their way to Franklin

¹⁰⁹ Mary Withers to Virginia Clay, 28 February 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹¹⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 46.

¹¹¹ Mrs. Pugh later lost her child, Alice, a tragic story which Virginia recounts in *Belle*, 46-48.

¹¹² Virginia Clay to “Milbrook,” 10 December 1856. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. According to *Belle*, “Milbrook” was the North Carolina home of the Hilliards, Virginia's cousins.

Pierce's presidential inauguration in 1853, Virginia mentioned that "my own ill-health proved to be a bond between us."¹¹³ Another *Belle* anecdote about the separation of two lovebirds ended happily with Virginia intervening with the Secretary of the Navy on their behalf. The woman, Virginia's friend, was expecting a baby while her husband was stationed in Italy. Virginia wrote that after Secretary Dobbin allowed them to be reunited abroad, "they kept a promise I had exacted, and named the baby, which proved to be a boy, after my dear husband!"¹¹⁴ *Belle* revealed that Virginia hosted various young ladies throughout her several seasons in Washington, and Clement served as godfather to Joseph Davis, the son of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his wife, Varina.¹¹⁵ Virginia appeared to relish her role as a chaperone and mentor to young people, even as she was busy playing "belle" herself.

It is interesting to imagine what Virginia's life might have been like had her child survived. She was already unusual for accompanying Clement to Washington. Having a child would have further complicated their lives. Considering the network of Clays back in Alabama, including Clement's elderly parents, it is not unrealistic to expect that Virginia and her child would have returned to Huntsville to assume the management of the Clay plantation during Clement's senatorial term. As it happened, however, Virginia's barrenness afforded her the chance to reclaim her belle-hood in Washington. Establishing herself as a politician's wife and a Washington socialite was only possible as a result of her physical presence in the capital during the 1850s. If she had borne children, *Belle*'s very existence would have been unlikely. As Gaines argued in his assessment of plantation literature, "the mistress of the plantation is a dim figure, as though matrimony faded womanhood into rapid indistinctness. The plantation belle, however, is one of the delights of popular fancy."¹¹⁶ Virginia stayed on the right side of popular culture by presenting herself as a politically engaged, socially active belle throughout the antebellum period.

¹¹³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle* 66.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Davis later died in childhood during the Civil War. See Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 196.

¹¹⁶ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 16.

The Slave Mistress

Another critical piece of Virginia's identity that she downplayed in her memoir was her role as a Southern slaveholder. Her choices in *Belle* reveal a selective emphasis on the details of her slaveholding experience. The memoir avoided discussing details about her slaves' lives, even as her family's letters were full of news about individual slaves. As mentioned earlier, an important component of post-war literature was the tribute to the Old South's loyal slaves. Emancipation, argues Faust, had "the most significant impact of the war on the lives of white southern women" like Virginia. Faust quotes one "Carolina matron" interviewed in the 1890s as saying that ladies had fallen "from being queens in social life" in the antebellum South to being "mere domestic drudges."¹¹⁷ Memoirs promoting the Lost Cause, such as *Belle*, depended on tropes like the loyal slave and the wise mammy, who loved their mistresses; likewise, the mistress loved them like she loved her children. "Despite emancipation and trying financial times," explains historian Thavolia Glymph, a white woman in Reconstruction "still defined herself as a mistress. That was her identity, and when the basis for its creation and existence was destroyed, maternalism was all she had left."¹¹⁸

Virginia's comprehension of the new, post-war world inevitably influenced her descriptions of her former life in *Belle*. In the words of Virginia, the Clays did not have slaves; they had "servants" and "maids." Throughout *Belle*'s chapters on the 1850s, slaves in their various capacities rarely appeared except in supporting roles for Virginia's social life. Although they were not central to Virginia's discussion of 1850s Washington, slaves emerged later in the memoir, playing an anonymized but important role in vindicating the motives of the Confederacy and culture of the Old South. The antebellum exception was Virginia's "invaluable maid, Emily (for whom my husband paid \$1,600)" who accompanied the Clays to Washington and who stayed with Virginia throughout the Civil War.¹¹⁹ Emily

¹¹⁷ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 250.

¹¹⁸ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 220.

¹¹⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 101.

appeared at several points in *Belle*'s pre-war period: once with a fortifying eggnog, once with a "shocking-box" to revive Virginia before a party, and once as a witness to Virginia's excellent costume for the aforementioned masquerade.¹²⁰ Throughout *Belle*, Emily essentially stood in for all of the Clays' slaves; she played an endearing, loyal, and wise character, and occasional comic relief for the audience. As Gaines would say, Emily served as *Belle*'s "mammy of a thousand lullabies," a familiar character-type "firmly lodged in public consciousness."¹²¹ Of course, the Clays owned more slaves than just Emily. The 1860 census reveals that Clement and Virginia owned 10,000 dollars' worth of real estate and 35,000 dollars' worth of personal estate. The 1860 slave schedule lists only three slaves owned by Clement, although it is possible that the registrar only counted the Clays' house slaves in Huntsville and not slaves working elsewhere.¹²² Letters in the Clay Papers referenced many individual slaves who are entirely absent from *Belle*.

Discussion of antebellum slave management fell outside of standard Confederate memoir scripts. *Belle* was much more concerned with reminiscing about happy Old South slaves than it was with explaining Virginia's role as a slave mistress to her post-war readers. Correspondence from the Clays during the antebellum period suggested Virginia was seen by her relatives as a maternalistic and kind mistress. How her slaves viewed her is impossible to know. One letter Virginia wrote in 1854 included salutations on the behalf of Hogans, one of her slaves with her in Washington, along with the note that "I wish someone wd. write whether or not he, Martin, recd her letter, + why doesn't he send her children's hair!" Presumably Martin was Hogans's husband. Though not cruel, Virginia appears to have thought of Hogans as more of a pet than a person. "She is well + fat as a bear, + I will send her the first good opportunity, tho' she seems loth [sic] to travel with any but home folks. She sends love to all, husband, children, and owners, + the further she is from home the more

¹²⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 61, 101, and 130.

¹²¹ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 16-17.

¹²² U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860).

affect[ionate] she seems in her feelings.”¹²³ Although Virginia noticed and commented on her slaves’ happiness, the possibility that Hogans may have been homesick and afraid of travelling with strangers appears to have escaped her comprehension.

Although away from her plantation, Virginia remained actively engaged with her brother-in-law’s work in hiring out the Clays’ slaves. Her purported concern over her slaves’ well-being occasionally led to him accusing her of being too soft-hearted. Antebellum letters from Lawson Clay to Virginia included detailed accounts of each slave’s position and earnings for the upcoming year. In an 1855 letter, for example, Lawson explains that “your + bro’s Clement’s negroes have been hired for \$90 more this year than they brought last year, and Dan, who has been sick but now is well and in my office, not yet found a home. Milton hired for \$130 and Richmond for \$190 and my work gratis. I am sorry that I could not get Milo in a regular shop, but, I could not do so at any fair price and hire his wife with him.... I believe I got better prices and better homes for all the negroes than any body that I know of.”¹²⁴ Lawson conveyed a similar report in 1856: “All your negroes, but Lucinda, are hired to good places and are satisfied with them, so far as I know or can learn.”¹²⁵ But Virginia appears to have been concerned with more than just the money her slaves earned; she wanted to ensure they were content as well. This clearly frustrated Lawson at times. In 1855, he scolded her for interfering in his management of her slaves. “In your letter to Sally and again in the one to me, you say Tempy was dissatisfied with her home. I don’t know how you got your information, but she told me the 28th Dec. last that she was never better treated or more contented in her life than during the past year.” Lawson continued, “You are wrong, too, in telling them they shall be removed, if dissatisfied – that would be impossible, besides, if it were not, it would be giving them license to change their homes upon the slightest pretext and live anywhere or nowhere at their option. I permit them to choose their masters for the year, see that they are well-treated and have their clothes and then they must behave themselves and give me no trouble. This rule is the same that governs my own servants. I

¹²³ Virginia Clay to Susanna Clay, 1 April 1854. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹²⁴ H.L. Clay to Virginia Clay, 2 January 1855. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹²⁵ H.L. Clay to Virginia Clay, 14 January 1856. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

have heard no complaint of ill-treatment or want of kindness from any of your negroes; and I have always seen that they had justice done them.”¹²⁶

As historian Thavolia Glymph would argue, Virginia, as a white woman, “wielded the power of slave ownership.”¹²⁷ The documents suggest that Virginia took the lead in managing her and Clement’s property, even from a distance. In many ways, however, her situation differed from the stereotypical plantation mistress profiled by so many historians and writers: she was not in the “big house” and her life did not revolve around “managing her household and caring for her family and slaves in sickness and in health.”¹²⁸ Being away from the plantation suited her; she could leave the disciplining to her overseers and relatives, like Lawson Clay, and play the role of the kind-hearted mistress instead. But although no evidence of violence by Virginia against her slaves exists in the Clay Papers, she remained undisputedly in charge of her property. As Glymph explains, “To act independently in all matters, mistresses did not have to be masters. (Nor did they have to be political, social, or civic equals of their husbands, fathers, and brothers.) Allegiance to slaveholding was the only prerequisite.”¹²⁹

Conclusions

Virginia’s choices in sharing certain pieces of her life with her memoir’s readers, while essentially ignoring other pieces, provide a useful point of entry in understanding both her memory of the antebellum period and her reconstruction of her life story fifty years later. *Belle*’s relentlessly upbeat tone, particularly when describing the 1850s, allowed Virginia to pursue a Lost Cause agenda, in parallel with other women’s Confederate memoirs from the time period. The first third of *Belle* included plenty of political ammunition, as Virginia defended slavery and states’ rights while blaming Northern aggression for starting the Civil

¹²⁶ H.L. Clay to Virginia Clay, 2 January 1855. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹²⁷ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 4.

¹²⁸ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 19.

¹²⁹ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 28.

War. Much more prominent, however, were Virginia's lighthearted accounts of her friends, 1850s fashion, and the notable social engagements they all attended in Washington. Her insights and details allowed her to draw her early-twentieth century audience into her representation of the Old South. Her reminiscences about the 1850s rely on what David Thelen describes as an "imagined community," a shared identity built through identifying, exploring, and agreeing on memories.¹³⁰ Virginia's memoir allowed her to link distinct topics, transcending specialization through her first-hand experience. She appealed to her readers' nostalgia for antebellum life by reconstructing that world for them.

However, *Belle*'s depictions of the 1850s appear to have served more than just an early twentieth century political cause. Writing her memoir allowed Virginia the opportunity to construct and share her life with a broader audience. She could skim over tragedies like her miscarriage, and conveniently avoid unpleasant topics like slavery, and instead focus on the dresses, parties, and gossip that made the 1850s such a memorable and fabulous time in her life. At one point in *Belle*, Virginia describes her memory as a "Herculaneum, in which, let but a spade of thought be sunk, and some long-hidden treasure unearthed."¹³¹ Just as Washington society in the 1850s gave Virginia a second chance at belle-hood, it appears that in writing her memoir she seized the opportunity for a third time.

¹³⁰ David Thelen, "Memory and American History." *Journal of American History* 75 (Mar 1989): 117-29.

¹³¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 119.

CHAPTER 2

Remembering and Reshaping the Civil War

The Clays spent the early years of the Civil War in Richmond, where Clement served as a Confederate senator representing Alabama beginning in 1862. Crowded conditions in the capital forced Virginia and her sister-in-law, Celeste, to stay in Macon during the 1863 session. Virginia rejoined Clement in Richmond in January 1864, resuming her role as a socialite. Clay historian Ruth Nuernberger claims that the Clays' life "was as little changed as possible by war conditions; they were safe from the enemy; they endured no starvation diet; and they were well supplied with clothing and many luxuries that came in through the blockade."¹³² Although they lost significant property over the course of the war, they fared better than did Clement's parents, who were forced to take in Yankee boarders during the Huntsville occupation. While he was respected by his peers, Clement's popularity with the electorate took a downward turn in 1863 when he voted against a wage increase for Confederate soldiers. He was defeated in his run for reelection and left office in February 1864. Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed him to a secret mission in Canada that April; he left Virginia in Petersburg on April 30 and sailed from Wilmington, North Carolina, on May 6, 1864. It was only then that Virginia's Civil War experience really began.

This chapter seeks to compare *Belle of the Fifties* with Virginia Clay's actual diary from the end of the Civil War. The C.C. Clay Papers include several volumes of personal notebooks and diaries written by Virginia, beginning in 1864 and extending through the early 1900s. She used these volumes over time for a variety of purposes, and they include Tunstall and Clay family genealogies, to-do lists, finances, drafts of essays and letters, and other miscellaneous notes in her hand. But the volumes' most interesting component lies in Virginia's narrative entries, particularly for the earliest volume. Of the group, it is the volume most explicitly treated as a diary; entries begin 30 April 1864, the night of her husband's

¹³² Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 220.

departure for Canada, and continue regularly through early 1865.¹³³ In analyzing the two texts side-by-side, it becomes clear that the diary influenced the memoir. Just like the letters from the 1850s, Virginia's 1864 diary includes annotations, indicating that she and Ada Sterling used it in preparing *Belle* for publication (see Figure 3). Heavy pencil underlines and crosses mark the entries that are usually referenced in the memoir.

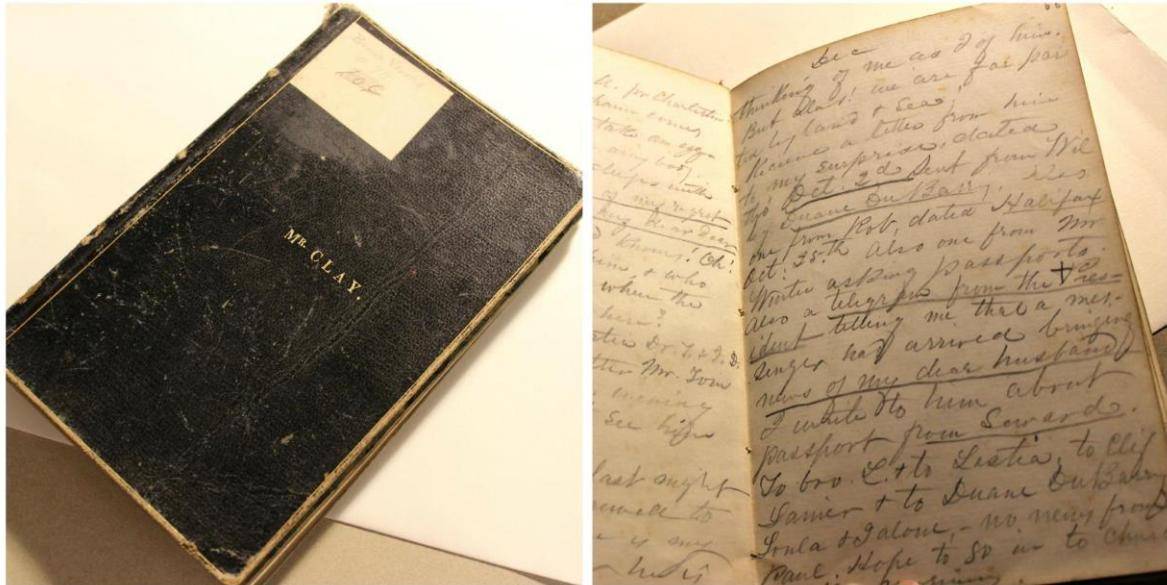


Figure 3. Virginia's wartime diary (left), opened to a page from December 1864 (right), in the C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

However, some scenes from the diary never made it to the memoir. Likewise, some episodes highlighted in the memoir have no correlating entry in the diary. Where these two texts intersect, and where they do not, reveal two very different versions of Virginia Clay Clopton. Her private diary, written for personal or perhaps family consumption, offers a fascinating counterpoint to her public memoir. Comparing the two texts thus sheds

¹³³ It is safe to assume that Virginia ceased using the first volume as a diary when her husband returned to her. The last entry of that diary is 7 February 1865, and in her memoir Virginia wrote that her husband met her in Macon on 10 February. See Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 241.

significant light on Virginia's self-fashioning of her identity and her choices as a public, political figure in the New South. What pieces from her diary did she downplay, and what made the cut as worthy of publication? Virginia's diary during her husband's absence reveals a vulnerability, fear, and hopelessness wholly unsuited to the Lost Cause narrative of Confederate self-reliance, bravery, and ultimate vindication. By suppressing these aspects of her Civil War experience, Virginia used her memoir to align herself with the publicly and politically acceptable memory of the war.

In comparing Virginia's diary with her memoir, it is easiest to start with the departure of her husband, Clement, on 30 April 1864, for it marks the beginning of her diary entries. "A sad, sad day to me!" read the first line. "My precious husband left me at ½ past 10 o'clk for a long and perilous journey."¹³⁴ Clement sailed from Wilmington, to Bermuda, then on to Halifax, Canada, as part of a mission to disrupt upcoming elections in the Union in an attempt to form a "Western confederacy, with such advantages as will enable [the Confederate States] to dictate terms of peace to the United States Government." Their plans included buying Northwestern newspapers and disseminating pro-South propaganda, rigging the gold market, negotiating the release of Confederate prisoners, and general fomentation of rebellion and dissent. Clement also planned the poorly executed St. Albans Raid, whereby a group of Confederate raiders robbed banks in St. Albans, Vermont, in October 1864 and then fled with the money back to Canada.¹³⁵ None of these operations worked. The seven-month enterprise cost the Confederacy around a half million dollars with no visible impact on the war.¹³⁶

Virginia's reticence in discussing specifics about her husband's travels in her diary probably resulted from her general caution about recording too many details that could fall into the enemy's hands. However, her distress and worry over Clement's health and safety recur constantly in her diary entries during his long absence. In the days immediately

¹³⁴ Virginia Clay diary, 30 Apr. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹³⁵ More information on St. Albans Raid and Clay's involvement can be found in Nuermberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 256.

¹³⁶ Nuermberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 236 and 260.

following his departure, she felt both anxious and depressed and withdrew from friends in a form of mourning. “Lay thinking of weeping for my precious absent husband,” she wrote on 3 May 1864.¹³⁷ “Can’t go to church,” read another entry, “but invoke the prayers of the church for my precious husband on the great deep.”¹³⁸ Communication between the couple was difficult during this period, as blockades prevented mail service and letters often took months to reach their intended recipient, if successfully delivered at all. Six weeks passed before Virginia heard through a friend that her husband’s ship, the *Thistle*, reached Bermuda safely.¹³⁹ By late June, Virginia had received only seven letters from her husband, none of which comforted her nerves over his travels. As the months passed, her diary became a sort of account book, recording day after day of her “bitter disappointment” at “no letter from my darling.”¹⁴⁰ Beyond just missing Clement, Virginia deeply regretted not accompanying him, and throughout 1864 her entries vacillated between loneliness due to his absence, worry over his safety, and determination to join him in Canada. “I half resolve to go to him,” she noted in September, but Confederate Secretary of State “Benjamin opposed it.”¹⁴¹ Her desire to go north was so persistent that she went so far as to obtain a passport before finally being dissuaded by Clement himself.¹⁴²

By December 1864, Virginia expected her husband to return any day, but he repeatedly failed to emerge through the North’s blockade of Southern ports. Her diary entries alternated between hope and disappointment. “No moon apparent – maybe ships may come in,” she noted 16 December. “This is the night the ‘Helen’ may enter Wilmington,” Virginia hoped a few days later. “Can I live till Xmas in my present anxiety?” By Christmas Eve, Virginia had worried herself into a physically ill state and appeared to lose all faith that her husband would return. “I exist, I do not now live,” she insisted. “I am utterly wretched. Feel

¹³⁷ Virginia Clay diary, 3 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹³⁸ Virginia Clay diary, 15 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹³⁹ Virginia Clay diary, 6 June 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁴⁰ Virginia Clay diary, 11 Sept. 1864 and 12 Sept. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁴¹ Virginia Clay diary, 19 and 24 Sept. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁴² H.E. Sterkx, *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1970), 70.

forsaken of God + man.”¹⁴³ Even upon receiving word in 1865 that Clement was finally back on Confederate soil, Virginia celebrated only briefly before relapsing into stress over their delayed reunion. “Went to the Depot … to meet my darling - but he was not there! Sadly disappointed,” she complained on 6 February. She was even more impatient the next day: “Cars in + no husband! … Am miserable + sad.”¹⁴⁴ Unfortunately, there are no entries documenting Virginia’s reaction when her husband finally reached her in Macon. The diary ends just before his return on 10 February 1865.

Virginia’s decision to begin her diary just when her husband left her demonstrated how his departure served as a watershed moment in her life. She joined a movement of diary-keeping that had flourished when the war began. Throughout the South, the Civil War “engendered a transition in journal keeping, as southern white women increasingly turned to their journals to comment on the surrounding world.”¹⁴⁵ Since Virginia had spent the early war years as a socialite in Richmond, her husband’s leaving her marked the real beginning of her Civil War experience. With him gone, she became like countless other southern women whose men were off in the army. Many of these women began their diaries with their husband’s departure. Since they could not physically join their spouses, women like Virginia used their diaries to keep “true” accounts of the war, to reflect on political and military events, and to calm themselves through a type of leisure activity.¹⁴⁶ Virginia’s persistent anxiety over her husband’s safety and her eagerness for his return paralleled the common experiences of many Confederate women during the Civil War. Unreliable mail service, the high casualty rates of Civil War battles, and wives’ general feelings of vulnerability and uselessness on the home front strained Southern marriages and exacerbated the difficulties of a long separation between spouses.¹⁴⁷ Virginia’s diary, whether she recognized it at the time or not, addressed all of these factors.

¹⁴³ Virginia Clay diary, 16 Dec., 19 Dec., and 24 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁴⁴ Virginia Clay diary, 6 and 7 Feb. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁴⁵ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 14.

¹⁴⁶ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 19-21.

¹⁴⁷ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 114-122.

Virginia's memoir, although it recalled her husband's departure, contained little of the anxiety and melancholy she confessed so frequently in her diary. "Early in the spring of '64, Mr. Clay felt it his duty to accept the high responsibility of a diplomatic mission to Canada," she stoically explained in the chapter titled "C.C. Clay, Jr., Departs for Canada." As she described her solo travels around the South, Virginia admitted that "the ensuing months to me were a time of indecision."¹⁴⁸ The closest she came to revealing the depression present in her diary was when she admitted that "my life was one of continual suspense, notwithstanding the arrival of special couriers who came from time to time from Richmond bearing tidings of my absent husband." But, she trivialized her suffering in the next line by adding, "All lives that lie in close parallels to governments carry heavy anxieties."¹⁴⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Virginia's memoir focused on her experiences, instead of her private fears about Clement, and sought to portray her activities as both comparable to but more dramatic than those of other Confederate women. She described her situation as frustrating, rather than miserable, by focusing on her struggles to maintain her value as a woman. "I was homeless, husbandless, childless, debarred from contributing to the comfort of my husband's parents," she expounded in her memoir, "and I chafed at my separation from those to whom my presence might have proved useful."¹⁵⁰

Belle reveals a total reshaping of Virginia's priorities between the Civil War and the early 1900s. By downplaying her depression over her husband's absence, and reframing it as a challenge to her self-worth and feminine identity, Virginia's memoir assumed a twentieth century interpretation of Southern womanhood. It would hardly behoove Virginia, who by 1904 was a UDC spokeswoman, suffragist, and community leader in Alabama, to depict her wartime self as weak, vulnerable, or depressed – even if those were her honest sentiments. Vindication of the Old South required women's memoirs to conform to the Lost Cause narrative of courage, devotion, righteousness, and sacrifice in the face of struggle.¹⁵¹ Reviews

¹⁴⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 204 and 208.

¹⁴⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 229.

¹⁵⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 237.

¹⁵¹ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 118.

of Virginia's memoir suggest that her projected persona of devotion to her husband, rather than despair over his absence, struck the perfect tone for her readers. "Although these women were factors in every society they entered, were petted and admired, toasted and sought after," praised one review of Virginia's and other Confederate women's memoirs, "we are never tempted for one moment to forget that they are the wives of their husbands."¹⁵²

The Belle Turned Refugee

While Virginia fixated on her husband's safety, she was also forced to look to her own situation and safety for the first time in her marriage. Almost immediately after Clement departed, the Union Army advanced uncomfortably close to Petersburg. Virginia needed a safe place to stay, and her Huntsville home was not an option. Although she never accused her husband of abandonment outright, Virginia's diary repeatedly mentioned her stress over her safety, particularly her lack of a permanent safe haven during the closing months of the war. Escaping the Union Army became an ongoing task. Days after Clement left, Virginia wrote in her diary that she heard "the enemy was in 6 miles of Petersburg. City wd be shelled ere night! Packed + skedaddled in double quick, bag and baggage."¹⁵³ In *Belle*, Virginia combined her departure from Richmond with Clement's departure, even though the events were not simultaneous. Rather than dwell on her sadness over Clement's leaving, *Belle* immediately transitioned to Virginia's next move. "When the parting came, the shadow of impending evil fell so blackly upon my soul, I hastened away from disturbed Petersburg," Virginia claimed in her memoir. "It was one of the best cities in the Confederacy at that period to get away from."¹⁵⁴

Clement's departure essentially made Virginia a refugee, a status she alluded to in her diary and subsequently defended in her memoir. During the Civil War, the term "refugee" acquired a negative connotation among Southern civilians, because it typically referred to the

¹⁵² Means, "Reminiscences of Four Southern Women," 479-480.

¹⁵³ Virginia Clay diary, 7 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁵⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 205.

“wealthy individuals who had chosen to abandon their customary place of residence, frequently with an eye to keeping property, especially slave property, out of Union hands.”¹⁵⁵ *Belle* revealed how her choice to leave Petersburg, “accompanied by my faithful maid, Emily, and her child,” spawned resentment among her friends who stayed behind.¹⁵⁶ Virginia’s sister-in-law, Celeste, reportedly accused her of cowardice, insisting that “you will never catch me running from Yankees!” Virginia’s memoir mentioned this anecdote before elaborating that Celeste herself had fled the chaos of Petersburg a few weeks later and joined Virginia in Georgia.¹⁵⁷ In *Belle*, rather than admit her refugee status emerged over her need to protect herself and her slaves, Virginia justified escaping the state of Virginia by focusing solely on the destruction and havoc wreaked by the Yankees. However, even though she avoided addressing the protection of slaves in both her memoir and her diary, her urgency and her decision to head to the interior of the Confederacy both indicate that concern. She was well aware that her family in Huntsville, Alabama, suffered extensive property losses, including a large number of slave defections, when the Union Army invaded the region in 1862 and 1863.¹⁵⁸ Without her husband or other male relatives present, Virginia was forced to assume responsibility for protecting the family’s remaining assets, whether they be “faithful” or not.

Virginia’s need for protection while traveling resulted in a constant quest for a proper male escort. Even with her slaves accompanying her, her class and social status prevented her from respectfully traveling between towns in the South without the presence of a white male. Without her husband to join her, she most often relied on sympathetic Confederate officers, many of whom she had known in Richmond, who allowed her to accompany their troops’ movements. Her diary usually acknowledged which men helped her travel safely. “Am now in cars for Macon thank Heaven,” she noted at one point. “Maj. Dilliard my kind escort.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 40-41.

¹⁵⁶ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 205.

¹⁵⁷ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 206-207.

¹⁵⁸ Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 214.

¹⁵⁹ Virginia Clay diary, 13 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Relying on army officers turned tedious at times, since many were simply unavailable to help a rich woman and her party of slaves. In early 1865, Virginia was essentially stranded in Augusta until she heard that General H. Cobb had arrived in the city. She wrote immediately to beg his company in order to properly travel back to Macon. “Am relieved of a great weight of solitude,” she recorded when he agreed. “If I must turn away from my precious one I am thankful to go in such good care.”¹⁶⁰ Her turn of phrase reiterated that her husband’s presence would have been preferable, but in his absence, Cobb would do.

Virginia’s lack of a designated male protector extended beyond simple transportation hardships. Along with acquiring a persistent fear over their men’s safety, Southern women during the Civil War lost the privilege of relying on their local community for security – from raiders, from Yankees, even from slaves. The sudden and near-total absence of white men from Southern households threatened all white women’s right to protection, which had previously been so assured in antebellum culture. “Only the white man’s strength could provide adequate and necessary protection,” explains historian Drew Gilpin Faust, a “fundamental right” of the South’s traditionally vulnerable white women.¹⁶¹ The constant anxiety Virginia felt over her physical safety pervaded both her diary and, to a lesser extent, her memoir. She missed having a steady male companion most of all during her three-month stay with her cousin Loula Hammond at Redcliffe, Governor James Henry Hammond’s estate on Beech Island, South Carolina. Governor Hammond died shortly after she arrived. In the waning months of the war, home guard duties frequently called away Loula’s husband, Paul Hammond, leaving the two white women undefended on a plantation directly in Sherman’s path. “Loula + I alone + lonely,” Virginia noted on several occasions, alluding to Paul’s absence from the home.¹⁶² Her diary claimed she was most explicitly concerned about raiders and Yankees; she never confessed to fearing Hammond’s slaves. As Sherman’s army drew closer, however, Virginia’s entries grew slightly more frantic as she realized that in

¹⁶⁰ Virginia Clay diary, 21 Jan. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁶¹ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 59.

¹⁶² Virginia Clay diary, 29 Nov. 1864, 30 Nov. 1864, 13 Dec. 1864, 29 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Paul's absence, "this island is entirely undefended."¹⁶³ In the end, Virginia left Redcliffe before it was totally overrun by the Yankees, but had to leave Loula behind in ill health. "Distressed that she cannot go with me. Hope she will soon follow," Virginia noted, before praying God's "blessing on this little home" as the Union troops advanced toward the island.¹⁶⁴

The Slave Mistress Without Her Slaves

Fear of slaves was an omnipresent but confused anxiety that confronted Virginia during this period. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, Virginia's relationships with her slaves were more complicated than she publicly admitted in *Belle*. Whereas she was very involved in their management and care during the 1850s, she appears to have had very little contact or concern over her plantation's slaves during the Civil War. Throughout her wartime diary, Virginia rarely mentioned her other slaves. She appears to have been close with Emily, her personal maid, and also occasionally mentioned Emily's four-year-old son, Matt, in her diary. She conveyed a fondness and general concern for Matt, whose father, one Clay historian claims, was a white man.¹⁶⁵ "Matt + I walked," she sometimes noted, suggesting it was a common activity for the pair. "Poor little Matt sick all night," she recorded a few months later. "Devoted to Lestia + Matt."¹⁶⁶ Aside from Matt, a child who appeared to offer companionship and amusement more than anything else, slaves in Virginia's diary existed only in the background, never misbehaving or acting in any exceptional way worth recording on paper. Furthermore, she was not their mistress. The one event centered on slaves that made it to Virginia's diary pages were her notes about two "Xmas frolics of the negroes," which she attended at neighboring plantations while staying at Redcliffe. Again, however,

¹⁶³ Virginia Clay diary, 3 Jan. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁶⁴ Virginia Clay diary, 28 Jan. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁶⁵ Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 233. Unfortunately, Nuernberger offers no explanation or evidence to support her claim.

¹⁶⁶ Virginia Clay diary, 30 April 1864, and 16-17 Oct. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. Lestia was a nickname for Celeste Clay.

her description of the events revealed nothing more than amusement at her slave Shawn's "playing for them."¹⁶⁷ Virginia's diary suggests that slaves were a constant, steady presence in her Civil War life, meeting all of her expectations and therefore requiring no extra thought or reflection.

Letters to Clement Clay from his mother in the Civil War period reveal a much different situation unfolding on the Clays' plantation back in Alabama. Many of Susanna Clay's letters centered on the troubles she and C.C. Clay Sr. encountered in managing their slaves in the face of Yankee occupation. Virginia's slave Tempe, for example, "came here and wished me to pay her hire to Severs and let her pay me. I have not the money and would not if I had under the circumstances. The negroes are worse than free - they say they are free. We cannot exert any authority. I beg ours to do what little is done." Although most of Susanna's letter detailed her own slaves' rebellion, she hastened to add that "Your negroes are free as ours. Where masters are they do better, but all I have heard speak, expect that all the negroes able to go will do so when the cars run or the Y[ankee]'s get here."¹⁶⁸ Clement's response revealed his shock and helplessness in handling the situation: "I am sorry that my negroes behave so badly. I expected better of them. Like you my ultimate trust is in a just and wise God who is scourging us for our sins. He will bring us out a free people in the end. Our cause is right and must prevail."¹⁶⁹ Susanna's struggles are cited by Thavolia Glymph as evidence that the Clays' ongoing conflict with their slaves during the war reflected the broader steps towards freedom being taken by enslaved people across the South. "Susanna Clay resorted to "'moral suasion'" to get slave women to do their duty,' which generally got her nowhere," according to Glymph. "Not only did they not see meeting her needs as a matter of ethical behavior, they no longer saw any need to meet them at all, and said so."¹⁷⁰

Virginia's thoughts on slaves in *Belle* reveal a transition in her mindset that probably occurred between her owning slaves during the war and her losing them afterward. While

¹⁶⁷ Virginia Clay diary, 27 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁶⁸ Susanna Clay to C.C. Clay, Sept. 5, 1863, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁶⁹ C.C. Clay to Susanna Clay, Nov. 11, 1863, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁷⁰ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 110.

slaves barely made it to the pages of Virginia's diary, in the memoir they appeared frequently, playing an important role in vindicating the motives of the Confederacy and culture of the Old South. Although Matt did not appear in the pages of *Belle*, Emily continued to play the recurring role of an indispensable, trustworthy servant. At one point in *Belle*, when describing managing Redcliffe during Paul Hammond's absence, she remembered that "my maid, Emily, and I kept the armory of the household, now grown more and more fearful of invasion with its train of insult and the destruction of property."¹⁷¹ However, even while proclaiming her devotion to her slaves, matched only by their love of her, Virginia could not fully trust them. In *Belle*, Virginia included a classic Confederate anecdote where she and Loula buried the Hammond family silver on the grounds of Redcliffe. "Though there was little doubt of the loyalty of the majority of the Hammond slaves," she noted, "it seemed but prudent to surround our operations with all possible secrecy." Presumably she excluded Emily, too. The diary included a similar note that "Loula buried her silver," but the version in *Belle* added dramatic details about secret markings in the woods, tricking a slave driver, and sneaking away from the house at dawn.¹⁷² Virginia's memoir implied that her worries over Paul's absence had as much to do with Hammond's slaves and their possible "destruction of property" as it did with Sherman's advancing army.

Stories about Emily were only the beginning. Virginia spent almost an entire chapter in *Belle* recalling the "departed glories of the South Land," which she described as "an undisturbed, peaceful, prosperous democracy, based upon an institution beneficial alike to master and servant."¹⁷³ The tradition of slavery, she insisted, centered on the "throng of well-fed, plump, and happy coloured people" that were subsequently reduced to "ragged and destitute communities" during Reconstruction.¹⁷⁴ Her memoir's depictions entirely ignored the struggles faced by her own family in managing their slaves during the Civil War. Virginia showed no concern over her slaves' welfare in her diary – but by 1904, Southern women, led

¹⁷¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 232.

¹⁷² Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 232-233; Virginia Clay diary, 4 Jan. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁷³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 211.

¹⁷⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 221.

by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, had launched a relentless campaign to “educate the nation” by compiling and disseminating historical data justifying slavery as good for the slave.¹⁷⁵ UDC members in the 1900s resented the accusation that slaveholders were cruel and immoral, and sought to perpetuate “a benevolent image of their ancestors as kind masters of faithful servants.”¹⁷⁶ Virginia intended for her representations of her slaves, combined with her generalizations about the entire slave system, to support the UDC’s claim that slavery in the Old South was far preferable to the horrible treatment of Southerners, including freedmen, during the dark days of Reconstruction. As a UDC leader and Confederate patriot, Virginia’s descriptions of slavery in her memoir conformed perfectly with her public identity in the post-war period.

The Impoverished Confederate Patriot

Virginia’s memoir delighted so many of its readers because she was a wealthy woman with an extravagant lifestyle. Reading her diary, however, reveals that by the end of the war, her finances were in terrible condition. Constant traveling drained Virginia’s savings, and her diary contained an accounting of her many expenses, including transportation, lodging, and food. From Petersburg she traveled via Danville, Greensboro, and Charlotte to Columbus, where she stayed with Celeste’s sister, Victoria Winter, until October, before leaving to go to Beech Island. “Will soon be broke at this rate,” she worried during the trip. “Had to open my bag + get out another hundred dolls. Leave G[reensboro] with \$137 in my purse.”¹⁷⁷ Notes about her medical bills, tips, and clothing expenses also reached the pages of her diary – for example, a dental appointment for a filling that cost 100 dollars.¹⁷⁸ Having no income and no means of support forced Virginia to rely on savings, loans, and money transfers from family members. She also sold some belongings.

¹⁷⁵ Gardner, *Blood and Irony*, 163-164.

¹⁷⁶ Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 97.

¹⁷⁷ Virginia Clay diary, 10 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁷⁸ Virginia Clay diary, 8 Aug. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

In her memoir, Virginia avoided talk of her personal finances. She only briefly elaborated for her readers the hardships that the Confederacy faced during the war. “Food was enormously high in cities and in locations which proved tempting to foragers,” she explained. “Delicately bred women were grateful when they were able to secure a pair of rough brogan shoes at one hundred dollars a pair.”¹⁷⁹ Virginia did not linger for long on such an unpleasant subject. After all, “compared with those of many of my friends in other parts of the South, our surroundings and fare at Beech Island were sumptuous.”¹⁸⁰ Rather than dwell on starving people, her memoir spent much more time reminiscing on the beautiful grounds of Redcliffe, and sharing the creative solutions Virginia and her friends found to supplement their wartime deprivations of cloth and coffee.

Even during her descriptions of wartime loss and sacrifice, the memoir continually reverted to an irrepressibly amused, upbeat tone, suggesting that as she reminisced, Virginia spent much of the memoir laughing at herself. As proof that her “love of pretty things was not dead,” she included in *Belle* a copy of what she admitted was an “unconscionably” long shopping list she mailed to Clement in November 1864, asking him to bring silk dresses, corsets, combs, pins, gloves, and dozens of other luxury items back from Canada.¹⁸¹ This letter has become infamous among scholars as “an unfortunate revelation of vanity and selfishness.”¹⁸² Though the list was genuine, and certainly supplemented Virginia’s antebellum “belle” persona, it defied the traditional image popularized in the post-war of a Confederate woman sacrificing everything for victory. Why, then, would Virginia present this angle of herself in her memoir, when she could so easily have focused instead on the financial hardships she stressed about in her diary? One explanation looks back to the political motivations behind *Belle*’s publication. Virginia’s expressed love of luxury in her memoir could have been a means of comparing Old South extravagance to New South poverty -- a tempting exercise for any adherent to the Lost Cause. Laughing over her folly of

¹⁷⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 222.

¹⁸⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 224.

¹⁸¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 226.

¹⁸² Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 432.

wishing for silk dresses allowed Virginia to recall the general hope she had felt in the South's righteous cause. Many memoirists during this period approached their writings in similar ways, expressing "nostalgia for the old given the realities of the new."¹⁸³

A simpler explanation, based on the economics of publishing, sheds light on the role of *Belle*'s editor, Ada Sterling. It is possible Ada came across the letter in Virginia's papers and included it as a way to brighten the wartime section of the memoir. Recall the editor's initial hopes that the memoir would be "light and gay, and in-cautiously put together, so that they would serve as a summer's reading, and so please or at least be taken by publishers who provide popular reading."¹⁸⁴ Ada was determined to sell *Belle* in Northern markets. The inclusion of the letter, even if embarrassing for Virginia, could have easily been part of Ada's effort to increase the memoir's public appeal.

Historians have also criticized Virginia's wartime service to the Confederate cause. Correspondence in the C.C. Clay Papers during the Civil War period contain limited mentions of any sort of war work. Scholars have repeatedly quoted a particularly damning letter, written by Celeste Clay at the close of the war, as proof of the Virginia's uselessness during war: "Sister and myself deserve no credit for any thing - We have done as little for our country as any other two worthless women I know."¹⁸⁵ Likewise, *Belle* included very few anecdotes about nursing wounded soldiers, despite the fact that such stories appear to have been practical requirements for any Confederate woman's memoir. While in Richmond, she confessed in *Belle*, "my visits to the hospital wards were by no means so constant as those of many of my friends."¹⁸⁶ After Clement's departure in 1864, Virginia's memoir suggested that her sacrifice and service to the Confederacy occurred only through happenstance, such as when one of her hostesses, Victoria Winter, discovered a delirious captain and brought him to her home to recuperate. His presence "put us all to more serious work," Virginia explained, as the women cleaned and cared for his wounds. It was "a terrible ordeal,"

¹⁸³ Anderson, "Down Memory Lane: Nostalgia for the Old South in Post-Civil War Plantation Reminiscences," 117.

¹⁸⁴ Ada Sterling to Virginia Clay Clopton, July 14, 1903. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁸⁵ Celeste Clay to C.C. Clay, Jr., 16 Feb. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁸⁶ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 201.

Virginia recalled, as his “frenzied words conveyed most vivid pictures of the experiences our men were meeting in the deadly fray.”¹⁸⁷ Virginia’s time caring for Captain Vallette was one of the few instances in her memoir where she directly interacted with the carnage of war. Her story about Vallette was not enough to defend her reputation, as scholars have largely concluded that “the burdens of war fell lightly on Virginia. . . . Except for two instances, [Virginia and Celeste Clay] visited no hospitals, nursed no wounded, and engaged in no war work of any kind, unless helping to keep up morale by their charm and high spirits could be counted as such.”¹⁸⁸

The harsh judgments that arise when reading Virginia’s memoir ought to temper a bit when considering her wartime diary. Granted, this volume only covered the final months of the war, but within it Virginia mentioned visiting hospitals several times after arriving in Macon. “Find young Moore + Nicholas + many other Alabamans [sic],” she logged after one such visit in May 1864. “Am resolved to try to help them all.”¹⁸⁹ She also elaborated on her meeting and nursing Captain Vallette in Columbus. “Find Capt. Vallette of N.C. a gallant soldier + gentleman their guest,” she wrote upon her arrival at Victoria Winter’s home. “His arm in awful condition. God grant he may live.” Although her memoir highlighted only the captain’s ravings about the war, her diary detailed her worries over his prognosis. “This wound is fearful,” she fretted after a few days of caring for him. “If nursing can save him he will live.”¹⁹⁰ The diary included near-daily updates on Vallette for the next month as he recovered -- far more time than she allotted to his story in her memoir. Once she moved to Beech Island that autumn, Virginia’s hospital visits stopped, apparently due to her isolation rather than her apathy. The “high spirits” so derided by scholars were largely missing from her diary, as she frequently recorded receiving bad news about the advances of the Union Army and the deaths of loved ones. The death of her friend, James Donegan, left her “shocked inexpressibly,” since she had just visited him days earlier while he convalesced in

¹⁸⁷ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 208.

¹⁸⁸ Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 220.

¹⁸⁹ Virginia Clay diary, 27 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁹⁰ Virginia Clay diary, 20 May and 23 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Augusta. “Went in to my dear friend Donegan’s funeral, + sad, sad it was!” she recorded on 5 December. “Mrs. Morris + I both ‘kissed him for his mother’ – took from his head some locks of hair, as mementoes.”¹⁹¹ Evidence of how deeply James’s death affected Virginia can be seen in the presence of his hair in the C.C. Clay Papers. Recall that Virginia curated the family papers at the beginning of the twentieth century, and yet purposefully kept James’s locks of hair.



Figure 4. James Donegan’s hair, in the C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Beyond caring for wounded soldiers, the vast majority of Virginia’s time during this period appears to have been spent caring for her own family members. She recorded nursing both Celeste Clay and Loula Hammond back to health for weeks at a time in the summer and fall of 1864, including managing their doctor’s visits and medicines. Loula in particular suffered a devastating loss when her youngest daughter, Kitty, died in December. “She died most suddenly,” Virginia mourned in her diary, “Impossible still it seems, tho!” With Paul

¹⁹¹ Virginia Clay diary, 4-5 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Hammond again absent on guard duty, Virginia stepped in to “try to comfort” her cousin, despite her own overwhelming sadness over the death of the “sweet, beautiful little ‘angel in the house.’” “But for Loula I wd cry aloud in my grief,” she confessed in her diary, “so sad is my loss.”¹⁹² Virginia’s entries during this period are among the darkest she recorded in her diary. Yet, despite their significant emotional impact on Virginia, the deaths of Kitty Hammond and James Donegan never made it to the pages of her memoir; nor did most of Virginia’s hospital visits or the details of Vallette’s long recovery. Conclusions about Virginia’s vanity and selfishness, which stem almost entirely from her portrayal of herself in her memoir, should be counterbalanced with these private moments as recorded in her diary. Virginia was spoiled and vain, and suffered lightly compared to many on the war’s home front; but she was not heartless, nor entirely isolated from the hardships and losses of total war. Her memoir was undoubtedly seeking to maintain a lighthearted, happy tone, which suited her purpose of projecting an image of an undefeated socialite who easily brushed off Yankee-induced hardships.

The role of faith and God in Virginia’s life during this period offers another interesting point of comparison between her diary and her memoir. Southern women during this period “found solace in their faith,” even as the war made attending church difficult for many women.¹⁹³ Attending church was expected of elite Southern women, and many Southern ministers equated the nationalistic vision of the Confederacy with a divine calling by God to follow “in the glorious footsteps of the Revolutionary generation.”¹⁹⁴ Despite her frequent travels, Virginia appeared to have attended church on a fairly regular basis, suggesting it played an important role in her life. Mentions of attending church filled her diary, with entries occasionally including summaries about which minister preached, what scriptures they discussed, and whether the sermon appealed to her. More than simply an occasion for religious reflection, church also served as an important social activity for

¹⁹² Virginia Clay diary, 11-12 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁹³ Lisa Tendrich Frank, “Religion,” in *Women in the American Civil War* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007): 63.

¹⁹⁴ Frank, “Religion,” 61.

Virginia, who often met friends and learned war news after services. “Went to church with auntie, Bro W., and [nephew] Clement. News of Forests’ being in Huntsv.,” she recorded in May 1864. “God grant it may be so!”¹⁹⁵ Church services also comforted Virginia, who recorded reminiscing over “happier days” while listening to a sermon by her old pastor, or delighting when the Christmas decorations in an Augusta church “recalled home” back in Huntsville.¹⁹⁶ For someone like Virginia, who moved so frequently during this period, the act of attending church must have served as a calming routine in the midst of constant upheaval.

A deeper question to consider is how Virginia’s internal faith paralleled her publicly demonstrative commitment to religion. To a small extent, the pro-Confederacy sermons she heard alongside other Southern women seeped into her private diary entries, revealing a genuine faith in God’s grace and mercy, accompanied by regularly documented prayers. Already we have seen that Virginia often wrote to God to cope with her husband’s absence, whether she was praying for his safe travels or feeling “forsaken of God and man” when he did not return when expected.¹⁹⁷ Virginia’s private prayers served as a coping mechanism within her diary, whether she was worrying over her husband, her friends, or herself. She also freely admitted her fear and doubt, at times praying to God for more faith to sustain her. “My patience is gone + almost my Hope,” read one such prayer. “Oh! That I was a Xtian + had faith to bear me w/o under any sorrow.”¹⁹⁸ Her addresses and prayers also extended at times to the fate of the Confederacy, which by that point suffered loss after loss on the battlefield. “God bless my dear husband + my country + speed the deliverance of both I humbly pray!” read one such multi-faceted plea.¹⁹⁹ Whenever she reported war news, such as “News of fall of Atlanta,” she frequently followed it with expressions like, “Pray God it is not so!”²⁰⁰ Virginia’s diary suggested that even in weak moments of despair, she relied heavily on her faith during the war, directly addressing God with both prayers and praise.

¹⁹⁵ Virginia Clay diary, 29 May 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁹⁶ Virginia Clay diary, 31 July 1864 and 24 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁹⁷ Virginia Clay diary, 24 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁹⁸ Virginia Clay diary, 22 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

¹⁹⁹ Virginia Clay diary, 1 Jan. 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁰⁰ Virginia Clay diary, 4 Sept. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Virginia's memoir portrayed her church-going as a fairly rare occurrence. In the entire text, she seldom mentioned attending church, and in the portion of *Belle* directly corresponding to her diary at the end of the war, the only time it surfaced was in her elaborate description of a service she attended among the slaves of James Henry Hammond on the grounds of Redcliffe plantation. Another notable anecdote in the memoir described the invasion of Huntsville, which Virginia did not witness but which occurred while she was a refugee in Georgia. "For months the only hope of our beleaguered neighbors in Huntsville lay in the prayed-for advance of General Bragg, though their prayers, too, were interdicted when made in the church," Virginia claimed. "Upon the investment of the town, our pastor, Doctor Bannister, was quickly instructed as to the limited petitions with which he might address his God on behalf of his people."²⁰¹ Church attendance, in Virginia's memoir, became more of a political statement instead of a reflection on her personal faith. As *Belle* explained it, Christian congregations in the conquered South found themselves silenced by Yankee rubes who attempted to curtail their direct supplications to God. This sort of story epitomized the cruelty of the Northern invasion during the war. Meanwhile, the story of Hammond's plantation church included nothing about Virginia's personal spirituality, and instead focused solely on the role of church in "the civilizing of the negroes" that had been accomplished by bringing in white preachers and forbidding "religious excess" in services. "My own commingling emotions were indescribably strange and sad," Virginia recalled as she described the "solemn and impressive scene." "Would abolitionists, I thought, could they look upon that scene, fail to admit the blessings American 'slavery' had brought to the savage black men, thus, within a few generations at most, become at home in a condition of civilization."²⁰² Virginia designed both stories of wartime church attendance – neither of which appeared in her diary -- to support her post-war political motivations of further bolstering the Lost Cause and its many components. At Redcliffe, slaves benefited from their masters' spiritual guidance, which uplifted the black race and made it worthy of God's love.

²⁰¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 183.

²⁰² Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 220.

Meanwhile, in Huntsville, Yankees obstructed the freedom religion of pious Southerners.

Conclusions

Significant differences emerge when comparing Virginia's wartime diary with her post-war memoir, suggesting a great shift in her persona, image, and motivations between the Civil War and the early twentieth century. Virginia's diary conveyed a decidedly somber, depressed tone – Virginia missed her husband greatly, obsessed over his safety, and loathed being alone. “I feel as if a widow of Years Years length!,” she confessed in late 1864. “Long + sorely have I been tried by this painful ordeal.”²⁰³ Her sadness over her husband’s absence would overwhelm the diary, were it not for her frequently negative reports of war news and the repeated illnesses of her close relatives. Virginia’s diary also revealed some of the hardships she faced as a single refugee woman during the war, without a reliable male protector. Her worries over her finances, raiders, and Yankees constituted an ongoing background of stress for her in the war’s final year. She looked to her husband, to her friends, and to God for comfort, recording her hopes and fears in the diary as a way of privately coping with her anxiety.

Belle of the Fifties, on the other hand, served an entirely public and political purpose. For Virginia, *Belle* was the culmination of forty years of service to the memory of the Confederacy. The memoir would cement her and her husband’s status in the Southern public’s eyes as legitimate Confederate martyrs, particularly thanks to their post-war trauma and subsequent triumph over the federal government. Its depictions of the Civil War fulfilled the UDC’s checklist for Confederate histories, complete with Southern patriotism, vindication of the right to secede, and the defense of slavery as a well-loved and beneficial institution. Virginia deliberately toned down the pieces of her diary that portrayed her as too anxious, too needy, or too fearful. Admitting these vulnerabilities would have contradicted the post-war life she built for herself as a Confederate heroine, spokeswoman, and defender.

²⁰³ Virginia Clay diary, 16 Dec. 1864, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

The disparity between her private diary and her public persona is most evident in comparing her portrayal of her husband's absence. Privately, in her diary, Virginia affectionately referred to her "precious husband," her "darling one," dozens of times in the course of nine months. Her memoir, although it mentioned her husband's news and correspondence, avoided such sentimental talk, focusing instead on Virginia's own exploits rather than memorializing her year of worry over her husband. The memoir subsequently downplayed the importance of Virginia's church and faith, her physical safety, her financial struggles, and her heartbreaking personal losses and grief, all of which loomed large in her diary, but which would have clouded the purpose and mission of the memoir. More relevant to the Lost Cause were the lost luxuries of plantation life and the destroyed happiness of the loyal slave. The Old South, and Virginia's position in that world, were the beloved stars of *Belle* – even at the expense of the Old Virginia Clay.

CHAPTER 3

Reconstruction, Rescue, and Revenge

In January 1866, eight months after her husband was imprisoned on charges of treason, Virginia Clay found herself face to face with President Andrew Johnson, accusing him of cowardice. After months of petitioning the president to parole her husband, her patience ran out upon receiving news from Alabama that Susanna Clay, Clement's mother, had died. Furious, she went to the White House and confronted Johnson, asking, “Who *is* the President of the United States?” *A Belle of the Fifties* describes what happened next:

“At last, my opportunities for an authoritative action growing greater, the President burst out with every evidence of deep feeling:

‘Go home, woman, and write what you have to say, and I’ll read it to my Cabinet at the next meeting!’

‘You will not!’ I answered hotly.

‘Why?’ he asked cynically.

‘Because,’ I replied, ‘you are afraid of Mr. Stanton! He would not allow it! But, let *me* come to the Cabinet meeting, and *I* will read it,’ I said. ‘For, with my husband’s life and liberty at stake, I do not fear Mr. Stanton or any one else.’”²⁰⁴

As discussed in earlier chapters, Virginia’s account of her life and activities in *Belle* should be regarded with some skepticism. We have no way of knowing the details of her conversation with President Andrew Johnson, although it seems unlikely that she would have behaved quite so boldly in his presence. Anecdotes like this one demonstrate *Belle*’s dramatic shift in tone when comparing its concluding chapters to the first and second sections of the memoir. Whereas *Belle*’s chapters on the 1850s established Virginia as an authentic Southern belle for her post-war audience, and the chapters on the Civil War depicted her as a strong woman empowered by the righteousness of the Confederate cause, the final third of *Belle* focused nearly exclusively on her independence, outspokenness, and bravery as she sought to free her husband from the government’s outrageous charges of treason. Virginia’s actions

²⁰⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 341.

following Clement's arrest allowed her to assume the starring role of her own memoir. Rather than watching and supporting his political ambitions in Washington, or patiently waiting for his return from Canada during the Civil War, she confidently pursued justice on his behalf, boldly transgressing the boundaries of traditional Southern womanhood. Essentially, the third part of *Belle* documented Virginia's transition from an antebellum belle to a modern, New South woman. Once again, her status as a wealthy, white wife without children offered her opportunities typically unavailable to Southern women of her class and situation, and she gleefully capitalized on them. *Belle*'s finale, while intending to vindicate her husband and clear the Clay name, also sought to firmly establish Virginia as a legitimate Confederate heroine and spokeswoman in the early twentieth century.

Unfortunately, Virginia's diaries during the post-war period were far less introspective and thoughtful than her Civil War diary discussed at length in Chapter 2. However, the Clay Papers do include a small volume used as part daybook, part diary, which contains some of Virginia's notes and private thoughts during this tumultuous period. Furthermore, this volume was heavily used in writing *Belle*, as evidenced by the accompanying transcription and notes made by Ada Sterling. Virginia's correspondence from 1865 and 1866, also held in the Clay Papers, supplements her diary's content. This correspondence revealed her post-war activities in substantial detail, especially as compared to the antebellum and wartime periods. With her husband imprisoned, Virginia wrote and received many more letters than usual, leaving records that offer a more in-depth account of her actions. Though there are discrepancies between the 1865-1866 diary and correspondence when compared to the memoir's claims, the original diary and letters are quoted and cited far more extensively than some of the Clay Papers' earlier documents. Reading the materials side-by-side offers new insights into Virginia's shifting priorities between 1866 and the memoir's publication in 1905.

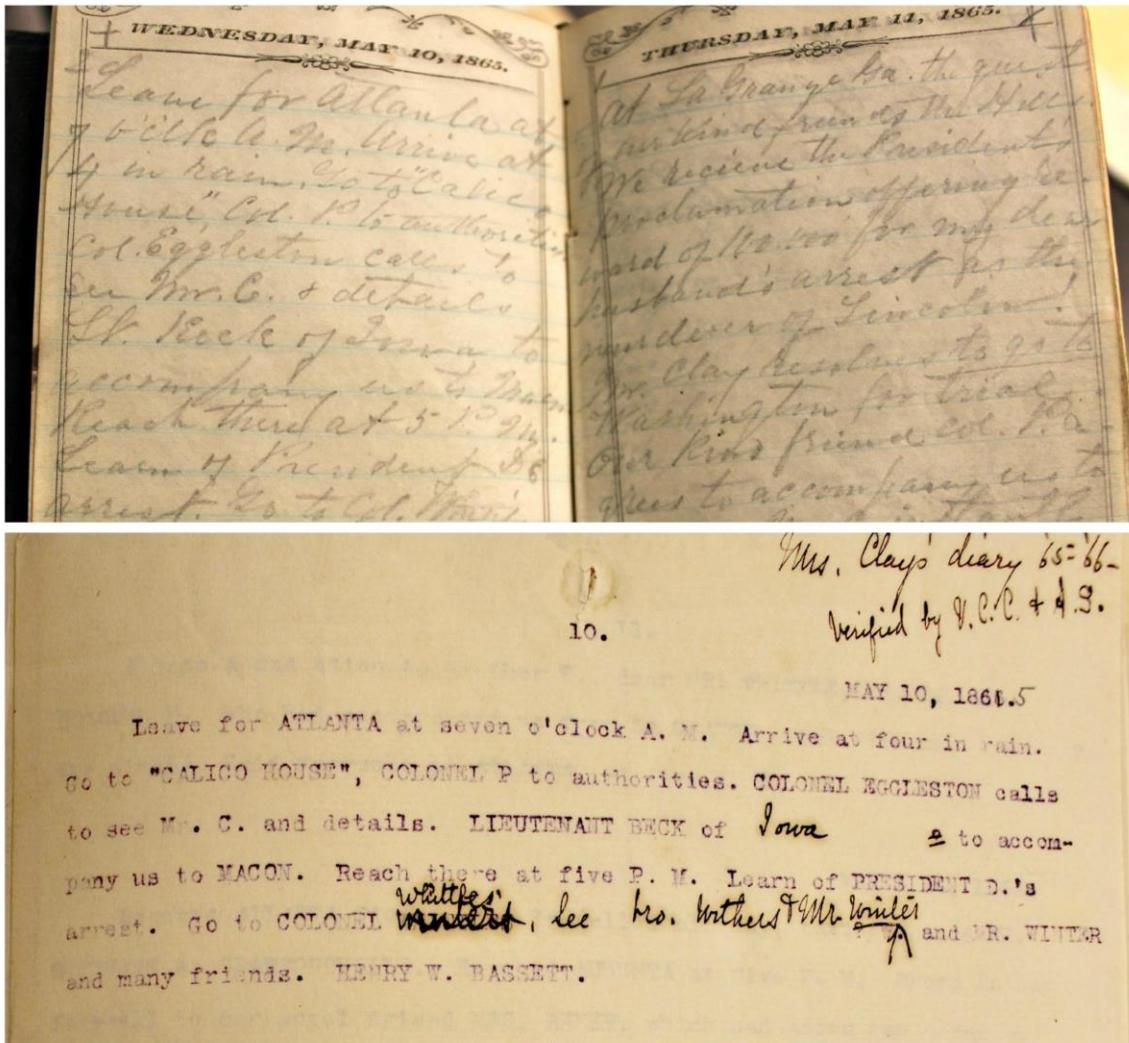


Figure 5. Virginia's 1865-1866 diary (top); the corresponding transcription created and edited by Ada Sterling (bottom), in the C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

Clement Clay's troubles began shortly after his return from Canada in 1865. While in the north, his role in plotting against the United States, particularly in executing the St. Albans raid, had left him vulnerable to false testimony from other Confederate conspirators and spies. After Abraham Lincoln's assassination, testimony from the assassins' trials implicated him as an active participant in the plot. President Andrew Johnson issued a proclamation for his arrest, along with Confederate President Jefferson Davis and several

other Confederates, on May 10, 1865. Whereas Jefferson Davis tried to flee and was arrested, Clement voluntarily surrendered to Union officials, offering the defense that “I never saw or heard of Booth before he killed Lincoln, unless he had an assumed name, & never suggested or heard any one suggest the killing of L. Not a shadow of truthful evidence can be offered to implicate me with his murder.”²⁰⁵ The party of prisoners, consisting of the Davises, including their four children; the Clays; Alexander Stephens; Joseph Wheeler; and several other Confederate officers, sailed under guard to Fortress Monroe, Virginia, in the Chesapeake Bay. Once there, the men were taken to various jails. After a thorough search, the women and children were returned to Savannah where they were released from custody. For the next year, Virginia petitioned and pleaded with numerous allies and government officials seeking her husband’s release. She spent a significant portion of that time in Washington, D.C., essentially harassing the President Johnson over Clement’s case. Her activism on Clement’s behalf won her many friends and admirers; her charm eventually won over the president himself. The United States held Clement for nearly a year before officials determined that the Lincoln conspirators’ testimony was false. Johnson finally pardoned Clement Clay on April 18, 1866, and the couple returned to Alabama.²⁰⁶ *Belle* contained several chapters detailing Virginia’s efforts to free her husband from jail. After finally obtaining freedom, however, the memoir quickly concluded with Clement’s peaceful death, and Virginia somberly reflecting that “at last I was left alone.”²⁰⁷

Clement’s long imprisonment and Virginia’s struggle to have him freed established the Clays as martyrs and heroes to the Confederate cause. As one 1887 newspaper proclaimed, for example, “her story of her trouble in securing [her husband’s freedom] is one of the most graphic tales yet untold in our history.”²⁰⁸ Virginia’s persistence was viewed by

²⁰⁵ Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 266.

²⁰⁶ Clement Clay and Jefferson Davis were arrested at the same time, but the government treated them differently. Both were held in solitary confinement for several months. Clement Clay was never charged. Jefferson Davis was indicted on treason charges in May 1866, but was eventually granted amnesty and freed on \$100,000 bail in 1867.

²⁰⁷ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 378.

²⁰⁸ “A Notable Wedding,” *New York World*, Nov. 1887. Scrapbook II (Vol. L-719), 1. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

both Southern and Northern presses as a laudable example of feminine heroism. Scrapbooks in the C.C. Clay Papers attest to Virginia's local fame. Several volumes include clippings, saved and annotated by her, which relayed the story of Clement's hardships and her active role in acquiring his freedom. "The Hon. C. C. Clay was discharged from imprisonment in Fortress Monroe, mainly through the instrumentality of his wife. Few such ladies as Mrs. Clay live in our day," reported one 1866 account.²⁰⁹ "The future of the country that can boast of such women is safe," asserted another newspaper, already embracing the Lost Cause mission of remembrance. "Their sons will not degenerate nor be less 'loyal' to freedom and constitutional government than their fathers."²¹⁰ "The long and severe imprisonment to which Mr. Clay was subjected must be fresh in the recollection of our readers," read another of Virginia's scrapbook clippings from 1867, "as well as the heroic devotion of his wife who, with a noble persistence that was ultimately crowned with success, labored to obtain his freedom."²¹¹ She "had a more than ordinary influence in the annals of a time rendered sacred by suffering and patient heroism," surmised another newspaper.²¹² These newspapers admired Virginia's "instrumentality," "heroic devotion," "labor," and "more than ordinary influence," singling her out as newsworthy and retelling her story years after it happened. They essentially celebrated her for being a perfect Southern woman, combining an antebellum conception of devoted womanhood with a post-war acceptance of her public visibility. Despite the fact that she had no children of her own, Virginia embraced her role as a symbolic mother, responsible for imparting the legacy of the Confederacy to future generations. The publication of her memoir served as the epitome of this post-war acclaim.

²⁰⁹ Untitled, *Constitutional Union*, May 25, 1866. Scrapbook IV (Vol. L-702). C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²¹⁰ "Mrs. Clement C. Clay," *Metropolitan Record* (New York), March 1867. Scrapbook IV (Vol. L-702), 58. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²¹¹ "Mrs. Clement C. Clay," *Metropolitan Record* (New York), March 1867. Scrapbook IV (Vol. L-702), 58. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²¹² "Clopton-Clay, Tuesday, Nov. 29, 1887." Scrapbook II, (Vol. L-719), 1. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

A Prisoner of the Union

Act III of *Belle* began in the usual form for Confederate women's memoirs, with Virginia's husband celebrated as a Southern patriot while she watched and supported him. In May 1865, Virginia discovered that her husband was wanted by the Federal Government on suspicions of treason; the Union offered a reward of 25,000 dollars for his capture. Although she "begged him hysterically to fly," Clement calmly decided to turn himself in. "As I am conscious of my innocence," she quoted Clement as saying, "my judgment is that I should at once surrender to the nearest Federal authorities!"²¹³ In *Belle*, Virginia took elaborate pains to explain that her husband had voluntarily surrendered, had willingly gone with the Federal troops, and had honorably and bravely faced what she considered to be certain death.²¹⁴ Each stage of the journey offered further vindication of his moral righteousness and his innocence – perfectly in line with the depictions of the honorable soldier featured so prominently in Lost Cause literature. And initially, Virginia assumed the role of the traditional Southern lady: she followed her husband, cried over his bravery, and quietly submitted to his decision to turn himself over to authorities. Furthermore, *Belle* described how she insisted on accompanying Clement, even after being warned that "the trip before us would be a rough and disagreeable one."²¹⁵

The diary presented a far less dramatic version of events. It included none of *Belle*'s hysterics; instead, Virginia noted on 11 May 1865, "We receive the President's proclamation offering one hundred thousand dollars for my dear husband's arrest for the murder of Lincoln! Mr. Clay resolves to go to Washington for trial."²¹⁶ The diary's relatively formal tone suggests its likely purpose was as a daybook or memo book, rather than as a diary in the traditional sense. Virginia only occasionally revealed her private thoughts. In this case, however, her distress was unmistakably present. "A sad day, my husband sick," she recorded

²¹³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 250.

²¹⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 253-254.

²¹⁵ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 255.

²¹⁶ Virginia Clay diary, 11 May 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

on 12 May. “Am tortured by suspense as to my darling’s destination.”²¹⁷ As the party made its way to Savannah, both the diary and *Belle* commented on the “wretched little craft” used to transport them down the river.²¹⁸ The “miserable little river boat,” as Virginia referred to it in her diary, had no “chair or bench or stool for even Mr. D[avis]. Am thankful ‘tis no worse.”²¹⁹ Once transferred to the steamer *William P. Clyde*, the trip north to the state of Virginia as recorded in the diary was copied almost exactly into *Belle*; as Virginia explained in the memoir, the journey “may best be pictured by reference to my pocket-diary, carried throughout those momentous weeks.”²²⁰ The main stress of the trip appeared to stem from uncertainty over Clement’s final destination. “Anchored at Fort Monroe awaiting orders,” read one entry. “I sadly fear they will land my darling at this fort. God forbid!”²²¹ The prisoners were finally taken ashore on 22 May 1865; Virginia noted in her diary that the men “wave their last adieu, and we are alone!”²²² *Belle* elaborated that their departure was “unspeakably distressful.”²²³

Once Clement Clay and Jefferson Davis were imprisoned in Fortress Monroe, *Belle* departed from the diary’s text, transforming Virginia’s role from a passive prisoner to active rebel. She gleefully described outsmarting and insulting her Federal captors. At one point in *Belle*, she recalled tormenting the Union women responsible for searching her for treasonous papers. “Is it possible,” Virginia asked the interrogator, “that the United States Government thinks we are such simpletons as to have carried treasonable papers aboard this ship?” Never mind that her diary entry from that day noted that “letters to British Ship found.”²²⁴ In the memoir, when a Union woman came across her pistol, Virginia claimed that she took it “in my hand; and, a spirit of mischief seizing me (it has often been my salvation), I twirled the

²¹⁷ Virginia Clay diary, 12 May 1865, Clay Papers.

²¹⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 259.

²¹⁹ Virginia Clay diary, 14-15 May 1865, Clay Papers.

²²⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 260.

²²¹ Virginia Clay diary, 20 May 1865, Clay Papers; Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 260-261.

²²² Virginia Clay diary, 22 May 1865, Clay Papers.

²²³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 262.

²²⁴ Virginia Clay diary, 22 May 1865, Clay Papers. What they discussed and where they were found were not explained.

alarming firearm in the air, taking care that the barrel should fall pointing toward her.” The interrogator then asked that Virginia remove her dress, to which Virginia responded, ““I will not! If you wish it taken off, you may disrobe me!” And I added, in my indignation, ‘I’ve heard white maids are as good as black ones!’” When the search eventually ended, Virginia was reunited with Varina Davis, who was described as “in tears” over the “humiliating” episode. “I would die before they should see me shed tears!” Virginia announced. ““Ah, you haven’t four little children about you!” said Mrs. Davis.”²²⁵

Belle’s detailed dialogues and anecdotes appear to have no supporting evidence in the Clay Papers, although Virginia’s diary did mention the shipboard search and the “‘comico-serio-tragico’ scene” that followed.²²⁶ The memoir’s representations of Virginia’s behavior aboard the *Clyde* played perfectly into her public presentation of herself as a woman easily amused, rarely rattled, and boldly defiant in the face of Northern aggression. Varina Davis served as a pitiable counterpoint, worthy of the readers’ sympathy instead of admiration. Varina’s allusion to Virginia’s childlessness highlighted the ever-present difference between Virginia and the traditional Southern woman -- a detail she willingly included in the memoir, probably as a point of pride. Once again, she subtly yet publicly portrayed herself as liberated by her lack of children. Furthermore, with Clement imprisoned, Virginia assumed the lead role in her memoir – stepping into the place normally occupied by her husband. She began to make decisions on the couple’s behalf, whereas before she had been bound by her dependence on his political and social status. In many ways, Clement’s arrest was the best thing that could have happened to Virginia: thanks to her family’s unusual circumstances, she was able to speak and act independently and publicly without fear of societal repercussions.

A Victim of Reconstruction

It appears from the Clay Papers that Virginia and Ada Sterling used the pocket diary

²²⁵ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 264-265.

²²⁶ Virginia Clay diary, 23 May 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

as a launching point for *Belle*'s chapter on "Return from Fortress Monroe." Short notes in the diary, such as, "Arrive [in Savannah] at 5 p.m. No one to meet us and unable to get a carriage!" were refashioned in *Belle* to read, "We heard at once, upon stepping ashore at Savannah, that the Federal authorities had prohibited our party the use of carriages, and the absence of friendly faces at the wharf told us that the date of our arrival had also been kept a secret."²²⁷ Virginia's narrative about her return to the Deep South provided an opportunity for her to launch into the standard Lost Cause criticisms of Reconstruction. In describing her time in Savannah, for example, she wrote that "the air rang with sounds of fifes and drums of Federal soldiers....Drills were constant and innumerable, and fully as unpleasant to our eyes as our conquerors could wish; but, to my Southern mind, no sight was so sad, and none presented so awful a travesty on the supposed dignity of arms, as the manoeuvres of a regiment of negroes in full dress!"²²⁸ Though *Belle*'s carefully crafted language consistently remarked on the indignities white Southerners suffered under their Northern "conquerors," Virginia's diary confirmed that at least some of her experiences and feelings had roots in reality. "Hot day. Drills innumerable," read her entry for June 2, 1865. "See a negro regiment drill full dress. My God what a sight."²²⁹ Virginia was especially critical in her impressions of the Federal officials, such as the men in charge of the Freedmen's Bureau who had taken up residence in her family's property. "Looking back upon those frightful years," she recalled in *Belle*, "I am convinced that these agents, far more than our enemies who strove with our heroes upon the field, are responsible for a transmitted resentment that was founded upon the unspeakable horrors of 'Reconstruction days.'"²³⁰

In general, Virginia's return to the South appears to have left her exhausted, demoralized, and worried for her husband. News of Clement could only be gathered through newspapers or gossip, so Virginia often recorded her anxiety over his health and safety, even as she mentioned the many friends and acquaintances she rediscovered in Savannah.

²²⁷ Virginia Clay diary, 29 May 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke; Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 274.

²²⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 274-275.

²²⁹ Virginia Clay diary, 2 June 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²³⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 283.

“Everybody kind,” she admitted at one point in her diary, “but I am nearly dead in body and mind.”²³¹ “A lovely radiant day,” lead another entry, “but black in bondage. No light, no joy for us! Am impatient to go home. Can hear nothing of my darling, and oh! what tortures! When will it end?”²³² Further complicating the situation, she found herself again at the mercy of kind gentlemen, as it was unseemly and unsafe for her to travel throughout the South without a proper male escort. Her journey home from Savannah to Huntsville took over a month.

Unfortunately, the diary does not include specifics on Virginia’s return to Alabama, which the memoir detailed in the chapter “Reconstruction Days Begin.” This chapter in particular bemoaned the Yankees’ horrible treatment of Huntsville, which Virginia presented from the perspective of her mother-in-law, Susanna Clay. “Servants and all other of their former possessions were scattered,” Virginia wrote, as if the Union had driven their former slaves away. “Mother Clay, whose beautiful patrician hands had never known the soil of labour, who throughout her long life of piety and gentle surroundings, had been shielded as tenderly as some rare blossom, now, an aged woman, within but a few months of the tomb, bereft of even her children, was compelled to perform all necessary household labour.”²³³ As mentioned earlier, this part of the memoir sought to present Virginia as an independent, strong, brave woman. Susanna Clay, however, stood in for the idealized antebellum Southern Woman, an essential component of Lost Cause literature. Post-war readers, regardless of political sentiment, could universally agree that Susanna had needlessly suffered as a result of both the Civil War, and as Virginia explained, Clement’s imprisonment. “The last and bitterest pain, that of my husband’s incarceration, fell crushingly upon her,” claimed Virginia. “The knowledge came to her as a very death-dealing blow, the climax of years of unintermitting anxiety, deprivations, and the small tyrannies practised by our many invaders during the investment of Huntsville.”²³⁴

²³¹ Virginia Clay diary, 1 June 1865. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²³² Virginia Clay diary, 4 June 1865. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²³³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 282.

²³⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 282.

We know from Chapter 2 that the Clays had struggled to manage their slaves for several years, and that the desertion alluded to in *Belle* had begun long before both emancipation and the formal Yankee occupation of Huntsville. But Virginia never publicly admitted that her family's slaves willingly left their masters. Instead, her post-war writings and UDC speeches were full of romanticized language about slave loyalty. In one post-war essay describing her slaves' behavior during the war, Virginia wrote, "My personal experience of this period was that of thousands of women, whose husbands, brothers, and sons were in the battlefield. ... Such was the unswerving fidelity of conduct in the race, that I never felt a sensation of fear. Never did I receive one look or word of disrespect, on the contrary, only the kindest consideration."²³⁵ Any public comparison she made between the pre-war and post-war periods included a lament over the fallen condition of former slaves. Her attitudes matched the views of many other elite Southern women, as explained by historian Drew Gilpin Faust. For the white Confederate woman, "black freedom seemed to pose an immediate and dangerous threat to the lady's status and to her long cherished privileges."²³⁶ The nostalgic view of the Old South ignored any discontent between slave or mistress, and instead remembered only the devotion between them; this was another way for whites to advocate the return to traditional Confederate values during the tumultuous post-war period. Virginia's commitment to this version of events extended beyond *Belle* and into her other post-war activities on behalf of the UDC. "Mrs. Clopton referred to the days of slavery and the devotion of the negroes to their masters," read one post-war account of an appearance in her scrapbook, adding that she "paid high tribute to the black mammies."²³⁷

It is worth noting that Virginia's nostalgic portrayal of the relationship between black slaves and their white mistresses occasionally conflicted with her descriptions of the post-war social upheaval experienced throughout the South. Former slaves "were wont to gather on the sidewalks of the main thoroughfares," she wrote in *Belle*, "compelling their former masters and mistresses who happened to be approaching to take the street" in a complete disregard

²³⁵ Virginia Clay Clopton, "Plantation Life In Wartime," undated. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²³⁶ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 253.

²³⁷ Untitled clipping, undated. In Scrapbook II (Vol. L-719), 6. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

for white authority.²³⁸ She regularly repressed her contradictory experience as a way of justifying the Lost Cause movement. Of course her own token slave, Emily, was excluded from the majority of *Belle*'s post-war story; Virginia explained that Emily took ill shortly before Clement's return and was left in the care of family friends for the duration of the war.²³⁹ Emily did not reappear for the remainder of the book. The nostalgic view of the Old South ignored any discontent between slave or mistress, and instead remembered only the devotion between them; this was another way for whites to advocate the return to traditional Confederate values during the tumultuous post-war period.

The Proactive Pardon-Seeker

Although she spent several pages in *Belle* describing the terrible stresses faced by her in-laws under Reconstruction, Virginia left them and her family's plantation for Washington as soon as she could. She admitted in *Belle* that the Clays disapproved of her actions. "Two months dragged by," she explained, "ere I could complete arrangements for the journey and detach myself from our clinging parents, who, deprived of all their other children, now placed their dependence upon me."²⁴⁰ The unspoken assumption was that Virginia, as a childless and now husband-less woman, should have happily and willingly taken over the care of her in-laws in their old age. It was inappropriate for her to leave town, but Virginia justified it to her readers by emphasizing her allegiance to her husband, writing in her memoir that while apart from him, "every moment anxiety was consuming me."²⁴¹ Her departure was not without consequences, however; shortly after her return to Washington, Susanna Clay died. Still, Virginia refused to return to Alabama. Clement's brother's family was forced to move into the elder Clays' plantation home to care for C.C. Clay, Sr., a circumstance that suited no one. A revealing letter from Virginia's sister-in-law, Mary Lewis

²³⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 282-283.

²³⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 242.

²⁴⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 300.

²⁴¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 302.

Clay, expressed hope for Clement's release from prison, and meanwhile stressed her disappointment in Virginia's continued absence. "We are very happy to be with Father and to devote ourselves to his comfort but we are too independent to live on him in his old age," Mary wrote in April 1866. "I endeavor to wait on Father and so do my husband and children, and he is very happy and contented with the willing service. Still I have no doubt that you could conduce greatly to his comfort if here as you would not be so constantly occupied in work as I am."²⁴² Mary felt her role as a mother to her own children should have excluded her from also caring for her in-laws, especially when Virginia had no outstanding obligations. Virginia's unconventional choice was, for some relatives, an unpopular one.

Virginia avoided mentioning the family drama in *Belle*, instead aligning herself with other soldiers' wives. "The reports that reached us of the treatment accorded to those Southerners who had already proceeded to the capital, even allowing for the prejudice of editors unfriendly to us, were not of a kind to encourage a hope for clemency or justice there," she confessed in *Belle*.²⁴³ The presence of soldiers' wives in the political arena was tolerated during the war, but the Northern press harshly criticized post-war activities of women in Washington, particularly those seeking pardons for Southern men. *Harper's Weekly*, for example, condemned the "professional sisterhood" of pardon brokers who assaulted "the susceptibilities" of President Johnson.²⁴⁴ President Johnson himself publicly denounced Varina Davis's pleas for her husband's freedom, calling her an "angry woman" – and Clement was in the jail cell next door.²⁴⁵ Such women had crossed the border of acceptable behavior, and were too bold and too unfeminine in the eyes of the Northern public. Virginia remained unmoved, however, and "resolved to act while I had the

²⁴² Mary Lewis Clay to Virginia Clay, April 7, 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁴³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 301.

²⁴⁴ Jonathon Truman Dorris, *Pardon and Amnesty under Lincoln and Johnson: The Restoration of the Confederates to Their Rights and Privileges, 1861-1898* (1953; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 147.

²⁴⁵ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 301, and Joan E. Cashin, *First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006), 166.

strength.”²⁴⁶ Six months into her husband’s imprisonment, she arrived in Washington and installed herself in the Willard’s Hotel.

Virginia referred to her return to Washington as a homecoming of sorts. “The list of callers noted in my small diary necessarily was but partial, yet even that is wonderfully long,” she exclaimed in *Belle*. “Their friendliness amazed me!”²⁴⁷ But this was no longer the 1850s, and parties and fashion did not dominate her descriptions of Washington. The next few chapters of the memoir reverted again to a much more matter-of-fact tone as she discussed Clement’s imprisonment and her work to free him. Just as Virginia had copied her diary entries about the couple’s journey to Fortress Monroe, *Belle* included nearly a full chapter of quoted and transcribed letters from various friends and Northern officials responding to her pleas for help and counsel in the summer and fall of 1865.²⁴⁸ These letters remain in the family’s papers today, confirming *Belle*’s claims of general support and private outrage among a variety of important and powerful people upon hearing of Clement’s circumstances. “I hasten to assure you that I will do all that is in me lies to secure justice in Mr. Clay’s case,” read one letter from Judge Jeremiah Black. “I have written the President, Sec. of War, and Mr. Davis.”²⁴⁹ “Your letter, dated 27th May last, was about ten days ago, handed to me by Mr. Wood. Believe me, Madam, the reading of it very sensibly affected me, and I most cheerfully acquiesced in [Wood’s] desire that I should volunteer to do all that I can professionally and otherwise if proper, to secure to Mr. Clay ‘a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury,’ or in default of trial to have him duly discharged for want of prosecution,” claimed George Shea. “Among persons whose opinions are of value, and even in the Republican Party, I have not met one nor have heard of there being any of influence, who have expressed a belief in the charge that Mr. Clay was implicated in the indefensible and unpardonable murder of President Lincoln. Mr. Horace Greeley has frequently expressed to

²⁴⁶ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 302.

²⁴⁷ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 307.

²⁴⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 286-299.

²⁴⁹ J.S. Black to Virginia Clay, 3 July 1865. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. Judge Jeremiah S. Black was an ex-Attorney General and Secretary of State under President James Buchanan.

me his want of belief in such a charge.”²⁵⁰

Belle's recounting of the “numbers of brilliant men who had volunteered their aid to Mr. Clay” served the political purpose of ensuring the reader would sympathize with the Clays as unfortunate victims of a ruthless Reconstruction regime.²⁵¹ Virginia's depictions of Northerners throughout her memoir typically followed an established script—characters were presented either as inept or corrupt Yankee villains, like the Freedmen's Bureau agents terrorizing Huntsville; or as merciful souls, such as the Northern attorneys who, though misguided in their abolitionist politics, were still considered honorable men. Occasionally, Virginia described her encounters with well-known Union leaders and Republican politicians who blocked Clement's release. Her brushes with power in *Belle* all correlated to her diary or letters, further evidence that Ada Sterling used the family papers extensively in compiling this portion of the memoir. But, Virginia's diary never contained the same emotional or dramatic suspense found in *Belle*. “Have my interview with the President and Secretary of War,” she wrote in November 1865. “The first very warm, last very cold.”²⁵² Descriptions of these meetings in *Belle* were expanded to include extensive evaluations on each man's character and personality. President Johnson, “a political accident,” annoyed her with his “non-committal responses to my reasons why I should have access to my husband.”²⁵³ Portraying him as weak, even feminine (“his hands were small and soft,” she remarked), Virginia concluded that “I had no reason to respect the Tennessean before me.”²⁵⁴ She found Secretary of War Edwin Stanton “inflexibly austere and pitiless.”²⁵⁵ Neither man horribly mistreated her, however, and she gradually developed a grudging friendship with Johnson, even though she continued to find him frustratingly timid. “It was not long ere I was given

²⁵⁰ George Shea to Virginia Clay, 3 July 1865. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. Shea was New York City's Corporation Attorney, and later served as Chief Justice of the Marine Court. “Mr. Wood” refers to Benjamin Wood, editor of the New York *Daily News*. Horace Greeley was also a newspaper editor and outspoken abolitionist.

²⁵¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 305.

²⁵² Virginia Clay diary, 22 November 1865, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁵³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 311.

²⁵⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 311.

²⁵⁵ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 316.

reason to feel that he, personally, sincerely wished to serve me," she explained in *Belle*, "though often appearing to be but an instrument in the hands of more forceful men, whom he lacked the courage to oppose, and who were directly responsible for my husband's detention."²⁵⁶ Her descriptions of leading politicians and officials largely avoided any statements that would have been seen as politically incorrect—her discussions of Johnson and Stanton generally conformed to the popular opinion of the day, and furthermore both had died long before *Belle*'s publication in 1904. Virginia's piling-on would hardly have been controversial for her readers, even to those with Union sympathies.

A notable exception to this approach appeared in *Belle*'s extremely critical assessment of Judge Advocate Joseph Holt, one of the Clays' former friends who served as a federal government prosecutor in the post-war period. While Virginia saw Johnson and Stanton as ignorant and misguided, she portrayed Holt in every sense as a malicious villain. She felt personally betrayed and persecuted by Holt's behavior, especially after his main witnesses against Clement were discredited. *Belle* referred to his allegations "as the outspurting of venomous malice, or of a mind rendered incapable of either logic or truth be reason of an excessive fanaticism."²⁵⁷ Virginia carefully addressed and repudiated each of Holt's charges against her husband, and moreover mocked Holt's published "Vindication," in which he had publicly excused himself from any wrongdoing after his witnesses were found to be faulty. "It is improbable that any parallel to this snarl of defiance was ever sent out by a weak, but, by no means, an apologetic offender in high office," she spat.²⁵⁸ Virginia's descriptions of Holt went far beyond her standard criticisms of men she opposed politically or socially. *Belle* included extensive personal attacks on the man's character, calling him "mean," "unscrupulous," "ambitious," "heartless," and "repugnant."²⁵⁹ In doing so, Virginia pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior on a number of levels. First, the idea of publicly denouncing a Union official, repeatedly and by name, was inherently unladylike and

²⁵⁶ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 319.

²⁵⁷ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 322.

²⁵⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 326.

²⁵⁹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 338.

politically incorrect for a Southern woman whose husband, despite his eventual pardon, was nevertheless a Confederate politician jailed for treason. Furthermore, Virginia's unconcealed attacks in her memoir were contrary to the period's trend of pro-reconciliation accounts of the war. Publishing houses such as *Century Magazine* sought reminiscences on the war with a "non-political point of view." "Why the war came and how it had transformed America were not the subjects of this prolonged soldiers' symposium," concluded historian David Blight. "There was glory aplenty on both sides."²⁶⁰ Along with adding a dramatic flair to her memoir's conclusion, Virginia's attack on Judge Holt represented a relatively unusual departure from Confederate women's memoirs. Virginia likely saw *Belle* as an opportunity to finally, publicly shame her enemy. She had been powerless to do so at the time of Clement's imprisonment; by the 1900s, however, the Clays were vindicated and revenge was sweet.

Including such personal grievances clearly worried Ada Sterling, and Virginia's insistence that they remain in the text likely explain the increased citation and quotation of sources in the final third of *Belle*. Virginia refused to adopt a reconciliationist position, even when *Belle*'s chances for publication were at stake. Although historical documents confirmed Virginia's version of events, several publishers turned down the memoir. Finding a publisher took nearly a year. "The sectional feeling," Ada explained in a 1903 letter to Virginia, "or rather the chief point, that of strong reference to Joseph Holt, will probably prevent the 'Century' people from handling the MS."²⁶¹ Other publishers also declined, including Harper and Brothers and A.S. Barnes Co., before Doubleday, Page, and Co. finally offered a contract in 1904. The inclusion of the attack on Judge Holt further proves Virginia's active participation in composing and producing *Belle*; it is doubtful that Ada would have made such a controversial choice on her own. Ada knew that in order to convince prospective publishers to take a chance on *Belle*, the memoir needed to "compete boldly ... with the most authoritative and permanent of historians." Including extensive transcriptions from and references to the Clay Papers allowed Ada to confidently put together a memoir that she felt

²⁶⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 175.

²⁶¹ Ada Sterling to Virginia Clay Clopton, 24 June 1903. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

would “saunter forth to meet the eye of critics panoplied with all the armor against attack.”²⁶²

The Politician’s Wife, Again

Over the next several months, Virginia worked to charm the president, and in doing so demonstrated the potential for a post-war woman to have political influence without completely abandoning her femininity and manners. “Go home, woman” – the president’s command first mentioned at the start of this chapter – was followed by an exchange of letters between the two parties in which Virginia reverted to the role of dutiful wife in an attempt to appeal to Johnson’s sensitivities as a gentleman. “Mr. President, my husband is my world, my all, and ‘dear to me as are the ruddy drops that visit this sad heart,’” Virginia wrote in a letter to the Cabinet. “Give him to me for a little while … and he shall return to you, on his honour and my life, at any moment called for by the Government.”²⁶³ Her approach was well-received; a note back from Johnson admitted that “it does your heart and head credit. It is a powerful appeal.” And yet, Clement remained imprisoned throughout the spring of 1866. Growing impatient, Virginia wrote again, describing the poor health of her father-in-law, and “begging Mr. Clay’s release on his parole, to visit his home, to see his aged and honored father, and comfort and cheer him for the brief span of life yet allotted him.”²⁶⁴ Her letters and diary also mention near-daily trips to the White House throughout the spring. Even though her own relatives appeared disappointed in her absence from home, Virginia referred to family obligations, and occasionally with a hint of her own past misfortune, in a bid for the president’s sympathy. “I am robbed and unjustly, of all left me now in this world - and I will not cease to cry for Justice while wrong maintains and you are President,” she demanded.²⁶⁵ Private letters revealed her fear that Clement’s father would die before seeing his son, a dreaded prospect considering that Susanna Clay had died already. “Mr. Clay wd. himself die

²⁶² Ada Sterling to Virginia Clay Clopton, 14 July 1903. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁶³ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 343.

²⁶⁴ Virginia Clay to Andrew Johnson, 12 March 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁶⁵ Virginia Clay to Andrew Johnson, 12 March 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

I do believe if he shd. find his parents dead on returning home," she worried in a letter to Celeste that April.²⁶⁶

Besides appealing in person to the president's sense of mercy, Virginia continued to actively consult with her many powerful friends. Her correspondence and diary often mentioned her appointments with various contacts, who she undoubtedly pumped for information while she simultaneously pressured them for assistance. "Mrs. Admiral Stevens is here – her husband will be out in a day or two," Virginia mentioned in one letter to a friend. "Alex. Stephens spent an hour with me yest. – he afterwards had an interview with the President."²⁶⁷ Both *Belle* and the Clay Papers include letters of sympathetic support she gathered from leading Republican politicians such as Representative Thaddeus Stevens, General Ulysses S. Grant, and Senator Henry Wilson.²⁶⁸ Recalling her prominent role as a senator's wife in the 1850s, correspondence from 1865 and 1866 suggest that Virginia reestablished herself as a gatekeeper, translator, and secretary on Clement's behalf, seeing as how he was unable to advocate for himself while in prison. Her correspondence to her allies revealed a practical, straightforward style. "I am now urging the Presid't to release [Clement] on parole to go and see his dying father (his mother having lately died) and feel confident he desires to grant my request. I believe he wd. be glad to see an expression of concurrent feeling from you. I beg a line to that effect at your earliest leisure," Virginia wrote to Senator Wilson, concluding, "I shall be greatly obliged."²⁶⁹ Wilson proceeded to follow her directions explicitly, sending a copy to Virginia. Virginia also served as Clement's spokeswoman to the outside world, even among their friends and family. "I really must trouble you to drop me a few lines and let know something of yourself and C.," began a letter from Clement's cousin, Thomas Withers. "Where are you? What have you done? What prospect of success? When did you hear from C. and how is he? ... You are in

²⁶⁶ Virginia Clay to Celeste Clay, 14 April 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁶⁷ Virginia Clay to Elva Cooper, 6 April 1866, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke. Alexander Stephens was the former Vice President of the Confederacy.

²⁶⁸ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 356-357, 361.

²⁶⁹ Virginia Clay to Senator Wilson, draft, 1 March 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

communication with him and I rely on you to give me information on him.”²⁷⁰

By March 1866, it became clear that since Johnson opposed prosecution, and all of Holt’s purported witnesses had been disgraced, Clement would soon be freed by the Federal government. Virginia’s correspondence in early April became nearly frantic as each day passed with no word on her husband’s release. “Release must soon occur, all say so,” she wrote to a friend on April 6.²⁷¹ A letter to Celeste the following week began with the complaint, “Again am I under the necessity of writing without announcing my husband’s release! Nor can I give you any definite information, save what I mean to do, and wish others to do.”²⁷² Finally, a series of letters from April 17 and 18 detailed Virginia’s last stand with President Johnson: she essentially waited him out in the library of the White House until near midnight, when he finally brought her Clement’s release papers.²⁷³ *Belle* recounted the dramatic finale, wherein Virginia stood over the president and exclaimed, “Give me the paper, Mr. Johnson! I am resolved to have it!”²⁷⁴ Johnson finally agreed, handing her the pardon and then telegraphing Fortress Monroe. Within a couple of days, Virginia and Clement were reunited in Petersburg, Virginia, and began their journey back to Alabama.

Conclusions

Once it was finally printed, Virginia’s memoir was warmly received by Southern audiences; as one Alabaman reviewer praised, “Mrs. Clay Clopton’s personal charm and magnetism makes this book of utmost importance. Rarely has the world known so delightful a personality, never has any personality of charming womanhood been so delightfully depicted.”²⁷⁵ UDC-approved texts sold well in the South, despite the overflooding of the literary market in the early 1900s. Although not universally positive, the Northern press

²⁷⁰ Thomas Withers to Virginia Clay, 6 March 1866, C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁷¹ Virginia Clay to Elva Cooper, 6 April 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁷² Virginia Clay to Celeste Clay, 14 April 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁷³ Virginia Clay to C.C. Clay Jr., 17 April, 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

²⁷⁴ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 373.

²⁷⁵ Martha Young, “New Book News,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, Sept. 11, 1904, 13-14.

reviews of *Belle* were generally favorable as well: the *New York Times* claimed that the book “will throw new light upon events, men, and measures of the days immediately following the close of our civil war.”²⁷⁶ Ada’s ability to rein in the account of Clement’s imprisonment resulted in a memoir that was less flippant and gossipy, but also more reliable and authentic. Virginia’s reflections in *Belle* demonstrated her dual attempt to both conform with Lost Cause ideology while still seizing her chance to broadly share her own post-war adventure – a political mission of mercy that brought her into sustained contact with powerful players from both the North and the South. Although both her private archives and her public memoir included accounts of the stress and fear she faced during Clement’s imprisonment, she was clearly also in awe of the exciting encounters she experienced during this eventful period. By rejecting what would have been her traditional role -- waiting in Alabama and helping the Clay family -- she demonstrated her embracement of a more public, socially involved role for Southern women.

Clement’s post-war illness and death, as well as the short duration of her second marriage to David Clopton, allowed Virginia a greater degree of independence than most elite women—a situation, as we have seen, that made her quite comfortable. As the editors of her 1999 memoir commented, “Virginia lived as she pleased,” due to being a childless widow for most of her post-war life, and was “much less selfless than women were supposed to be.”²⁷⁷ Just as Virginia had avoided commenting on troublesome topics like slave management and infertility, her memoir’s abrupt conclusion selectively ignored the massive debts and overwhelming struggles she and Clement faced in the years following his release. She conveniently skipped detailing the Clays’ financial struggles during the late 1860s and throughout the 1870s, lest they detract from the upbeat tone and heroism emphasized in the memoir’s final chapters. In reality, Nuernberger’s profile of the Clay family reveals that Clement owed tens of thousands of dollars following the end of the war. He briefly pursued a career in insurance and tried to run the couple’s plantation, but continued to suffer from

²⁷⁶“Introduction,” *Belle*, xxii.

²⁷⁷“Introduction,” *Belle*, xix.

depression and asthma which made physical labor a challenge. Following his death from pneumonia, Virginia was left with only the plantation as a source of income until she remarried David Clopton in 1887.²⁷⁸ Her decision to avoid this sort of story in her memoir likely stemmed from her own disillusionment with the state of the Confederacy and its men, including her husband, following the war. It was much better, publicity-wise, to craft Clement's story as one of ultimate victory over the Yankees' injustice.

Despite the Clays' financial hardships, Virginia refused to settle for an isolated life on the plantation. She left Clement to manage the land as much as possible, only returning to the plantation when he was ill or had died. Instead, she capitalized on her freedom from familial and societal constraints throughout the late nineteenth century. Her public presence and regular participation in local UDC events kept her story fresh in the minds of Southerners, and as a result, Virginia was seen as a sort of royalty by her contemporaries. As a Confederate martyr, she was seen as "one of the most remarkable women the south has ever produced, celebrated both in Europe and America as a most brilliant queen of society of the 'old regime.'"²⁷⁹ She was a living contradiction, representing Old Southern womanhood in the New South. Her promotion of a nostalgic view of traditional Confederate values only succeeded because that tradition, in reality, was over: she would never have been in the position to assume such a public presence had the Civil War not destroyed the culture she so fondly (and vocally) advocated and remembered.

²⁷⁸ Nuernberger, *The Clays of Alabama*, 308-316.

²⁷⁹ "Mrs. Clement Clay Clopton: Incidents in the Life of a Famous Woman Brought to Mind by Her Marriage," undated, Scrapbook II (Vol. L-719), 1. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

CONCLUSION

Any lingering doubts about Virginia's intentions in writing *Belle* should be put to rest after reading her memoir's abrupt conclusion. With the couple reunited, Virginia ended *Belle* back on their Alabama plantation, where her husband could finally retire in peace, shielded from "the world which to his broken heart appeared so cruel and hollow."²⁸⁰ She implied that he died shortly thereafter--in reality he lived until 1882--and the memoir ended with quoted tributes from Clement's friends. "Life seemed very full of promise to him in those days," opined the couple's minister, Henry Lay. "It was a sad change, when the storm arose, with its exile, imprisonment, disappointed hopes, retirement into seclusion and inaction! Truly your life, with its opposite poles in Washington and Alabama, has been a varied one!"²⁸¹ *Belle*'s conclusion abided by the expectations of any literature celebrating the Lost Cause: it offered a tribute to the fallen Confederate soldier--despite the fact that Clement never fought for the South--and simultaneously recalled better days, before the "storm arose." After all of her amusing anecdotes about antebellum Washington characters, her stories of hardships during the Civil War, and her heroic persistence in achieving her husband's release, Virginia reverted to a formulaic depiction of herself as a traditional Southern woman devoted to her family. As many historians have already concluded, *Belle* became another tome in the library of UDC-approved literature designed to spread the mission of the Lost Cause.

This thesis analyzes Virginia's post-war public persona through the lens of her private nineteenth-century archives. Studying her personal papers alongside her memoir paints a more nuanced portrait of Virginia Clay than most historians have previously encountered or acknowledged. Through her microhistory, we can question and challenge our understandings of Southern womanhood both during the Civil War period and as part of the larger the Lost Cause movement. Virginia's adoption of the Lost Cause and her participation in UDC activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries afforded her an opportunity to influence public policy in a socially acceptable way. Her reminiscences and her personal

²⁸⁰ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 378.

²⁸¹ Clay Clopton, *Belle*, 379.

papers, however, revealed that her work with the UDC was only her latest attempt to command the public's attention. Her fascination with public life began with her arrival in Washington back in 1853. Virginia genuinely loved being a Washington socialite, and her papers and memoir attested to the many parties and gatherings she attended as a darling of the city. Her love of activity and excitement extended throughout her life. One of the great tragedies of the Civil War, in Virginia's eyes, was her forced separation from her husband during his journey to Canada--she desperately wanted to be where the action was, and not shut away on a plantation like most women of her class. When Clement was arrested following the war, Virginia refused to stay at home, and instead seized her chance to return to Washington and again assume a prominent role in society. This time she justified her actions by capitalizing on her husband's situation, seeking regular audiences with powerful figures and tirelessly networking on his behalf. Her later return to public prominence through UDC offices, therefore, served both the mission of the Lost Cause along with her own lively personality and tendency for dramatic flair. Recalling her past adventures in *Belle* gave her yet another opportunity to reclaim the spotlight and dazzle an audience.

As we have seen, Virginia attempted to present herself as an idealized version of a traditional Southern woman for the majority of *Belle*. Chapter 1 demonstrates how Virginia repressed the pieces of her past that would have contradicted her post-war depiction of her antebellum status as a perfect Southern lady. Recall her portrayal of herself as a devoted politician's wife in antebellum Washington: she blamed the approaching war on Northern aggression and the abuse of states' rights, despite the fact that the Clay Papers indicated her family and friends were having ongoing discussions about the importance of defending slavery. She downplayed her participation and interest in Clement's politics, even as the family's papers revealed that his constituents regularly sought her help to influence him. *Belle* ignored the reality that her very presence in the city resulted from a tragic miscarriage that shaped her life and opportunities dramatically. Virginia's personal papers offer a far more nuanced account of her ongoing grief and the impact of her barrenness on her public persona. Despite what she wrote in *Belle*, and despite what appears to have been genuine

support from her husband, her stillbirth had lasting repercussions on how she was perceived by her family and friends. Women without children were an anomaly in white upper-class Southern culture--even when they sympathized with her condition, her acquaintances expected her to fulfill a set of societal obligations.

Chapter 2 includes a close reading of Virginia's wartime diary and compares it to the Civil War episodes she highlighted in *Belle*. Personal fear, isolation, and vulnerability, along with questions over appropriate ladylike behavior, appear frequently in the family's papers but are totally bypassed in the memoir. Virginia often worried about finances, her loved ones' health, her husband's whereabouts, slave behavior, and her personal safety; although she was better situated than many Southerners, she still faced the war's final months drained of energy and filled with fear. When writing *Belle*, however, she focused on her wartime socializing, amusing anecdotes, and her confidence in the Confederacy's eventual victory. Virginia recast her Civil War experience into one more palatable for post-war audience. In doing so, however, she painted herself as a silly, gossipy, selfish woman--a perception that lingers today among historians unable to take her seriously. It would be more fair to view Virginia's memoir as an exercise in the power of hindsight; writing about the war in a more positive way allowed her to repress her negative experiences and still conform to the patriotism and sacrifice demanded by the Lost Cause.

Chapter 3 analyzes Virginia's comprehension of Reconstruction and her transition from an antebellum to a post-bellum representation of Southern womanhood. Clement's arrest empowered Virginia to step forward and assume a role equivalent to Head of Household--a decision made partly from necessity, since clearly Clement was unable to act on his own behalf while in prison, but which also stemmed from her desire to actively agitate for his freedom from the clutches of Yankee mistreatment. As we have seen, leaving her home to return to Washington was not a universally supported decision. *Belle*'s depiction of the situation, however, focused more on the Clays' abuse at the hands of the North than on Virginia's abandonment of her familial responsibilities. When we compare *Belle*'s depiction of Virginia in 1850s Washington with its depiction of Virginia in 1866 Washington, we find

that post-war Virginia assumed a more politically powerful position in her efforts to publicly advocate for Clement's release. It appears that during the Reconstruction period, Virginia's charm and her powerful friends excused her from the public censure that many Southern women faced when trying to broker their husbands' pardons. By the time of *Belle's* publication, however, women's organizations had long occupied a public role in Southern society. Virginia's audience saw her behavior as courageous and persistent, rather than negligent and socially inappropriate. Furthermore, her success in rescuing her husband and enabling him to return to his Southern homeland fit perfectly into the UDC mission of defending and caring for Confederate soldiers.

A final component of this thesis revolves around the creation and manipulation of memory. We have discussed at length Virginia's choices in highlighting and downplaying different parts of her life in an effort to shape and convey her public persona for her Lost Cause audience. It is also important to recognize the important role played by Ada Sterling and Virginia in using the family's papers to uncover and compile their memoir. Many archival collections are saved only by fate or chance, but the Clays deliberately kept their letters, annotated them, and eventually sold and donated them to libraries, therefore ensuring their preservation. Even as early as 1866, Virginia demonstrated her comprehension that her private papers and memories were important and worth documenting. A draft of a letter to her friend, Judge Black, still held in the Clay Papers, reads as follows:

"Your beautiful and eloquent farewell has this moment reached me. How shall I thank you for it! To be so tenderly remembered by one whose great mind has so many great subjects to occupy it, overwhelmed me with confusion and gratitude. If ever I write that book, I will immortalize myself by [including] this rare and graceful tribute from my honored friend to adorn its pages."²⁸²

This letter shows that Virginia's plans for her memoir pre-dated the end of Reconstruction, the rise of the Lost Cause, and the creation of the UDC. It also reiterates the important role played by the Clay Papers as scholars seek to understand the distinction between Virginia's

²⁸² Virginia Clay to Judge Black, draft, 21 April 1866. C.C. Clay Papers, Duke.

public portrayal of her history and her private understanding of her experiences. The writings and reminiscences of Virginia Clay reveal her ongoing reshaping of her identity as a Southern woman; her relentless commitment to the Confederacy and the Lost Cause; and her constant pursuit of adventure and excitement. Her memoir, diaries, and letters, although occasionally contradicting each other, also demonstrate the power and authority that the real Virginia Clay exercised over her audiences, her readers, and her life.

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