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Caring for Confederate Women: A Commentary

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The three papers we have just heard today encompass three aspects of caring for Confederate women: a privately-organized state-operated home, state-funded pensions, and self-help economics in one locality.

Kelly McMichael details the struggle to build and maintain a Confederate Home for Women in Austin, Texas. We see the contrast between the easy establishment and state support of the men's home via a constitutional amendment in 1894 and the refusal of the voters to do the same for the women in 1907. The eight-year battle to gain parallel accommodations—but not equal funding—for women finally came to fruition in 1911. Through lobbying, persuasion, and implied threats women shamed the male voters into making the home a state institution. This struggle was typical for the time: men supported men's interests, and governments did not relish spending money. We must also acknowledge that the establishment of the women's Home came 44 years after the Civil War ended—a whole generation had time to forget the living participants,

especially the non-combatants, despite the United Daughters of the Confederacy's desire for memorial and remembrance.

At the periphery of, and hinted at within, the topic of this paper is the notion of the United Daughters of the Confederacy as a breeding ground for political activism. Is there a direct correlation between these women's activism to establish and secure the Confederate Women's Home under state control and later campaigning for women's suffrage? Other than Sophia Johnson and Annie Webb Blanton, how many other UDC members were suffragists or were these two anomalies?

The subtitle, "The Texas Confederate Woman's Home and the Movement of Conservative Women to Politics," led me to anticipate a more thorough discussion of how the activism for the Home blossomed into broader politicization of conservative women. However, focus on building the Home and gaining ongoing state support precluded an exploration into the movement. I would suppose that two assumptions must be made: that belonging to the UDC automatically conferred conservative status on women, and the nature of these women's relationships with men in power afforded them an entrée into the political world not open to other classes of women and thus more easily set the stage for effective lobbying for women's suffrage. In a longer version of this paper, I would hope to see more details about the makeup of the Home's board; were the men the same ones who served on the board for the men's home? Were they related to the women who created the home and managed it?

The dichotomy between being a genteel Southern lady and speaking out for your beliefs must have presented dilemmas to some of these women. In this light, McMichael makes an astute assessment of why Katie Daffin, the accommodationist, was chosen to

become Superintendent of the Home over the more outspoken Katie Howard.

McMichael's concludes that Texas men were insensitive to women's issues and as long as they alone held the power to create laws, social welfare and women's needs would remain inconsequential. I would agree and note that politics as practiced by Katie Daffin continues to be the acceptable route as long as the Katie Howards maintain the in-your-face approach.

While Kelly McMichael focused on building a home for Confederate women in Texas and the political struggle to get state funding when women did not have the vote, Mary L. Wilson looked at a broader picture of pensions for Confederate widows in three states—Texas, Georgia, and Virginia—again funded at the state level but administered by male county officials. Why choose these three states? Is there a geographic, economic, or social connection or contrast among them? Was the data not available for other states? An explanation would help us understand their significance.

We see here another thread in the pattern of women getting the short straw. Texas cut women's pensions to half that of men's in 1929; Georgia, while allocating the funds equally, changed its laws first to be stricter then more lenient and inclusive. Virginia revised its pension laws three times, making them stricter and not increasing widows' pensions. By comparing and contrasting three states' approaches to pensions, we can see the pervasive fear that somewhere some woman would try to cheat the government out of \$30-60 per year. A comparison to requirements for men's pensions would be useful for contrast and context. Were women singled out or was the general climate so against social welfare that everyone was suspected of cheating? The paper would be greatly

enhanced by more analysis of why Confederate women were shorted on pension funds in Virginia when Georgia's were equal between the genders.

Placing the issue of pensions in context of the time and place would strengthen the paper. In 1885 the Democratic Party ascended to dominance of Virginia politics for the next 75 years. The Democratic organization contained few reformers. Progressive reforms between 1900 and World War I laid the foundation for social services. Yet the 1902 Constitution curtailed suffrage for black men and Republicans, thereby reducing the number of Virginia's voters by more than half by 1904. Power consolidated among the white male elite with little inclination to spend money on such frivolities as pensions.

One point of clarification, in July 1989 there were seven **daughters** not widows of Confederate soldiers still receiving a pension in Virginia. In a longer version of this paper I would expect to see footnotes explaining the methodology for determining average ages of the widows. Were all of the pensions examined or were they sampled, and if so, how?

Jeffrey W. McClurken's paper has the most specific focus of the three—one town, Danville, Virginia, and the surrounding Pittsylvania County. He notes that the census data revealed short-term impact on veterans' women, particularly widows and wives of disabled soldiers, varied financial consequences, the changing family structure and how women reorganized households, and occupational categories of post-war women's work. It is no surprise that the burden of a disabled man in the household ranked just below a deceased one, and, in fact, might be more of a hindrance. He has compiled a remarkable resource—a database of county manuscript population census records from 1860 and

1870 from which he is able to analyze data and draw conclusions from individuals' lives rather than relying on aggregate compilations.

Wealth is relative. What percentage of Pittsylvania County and Danville residents were slaveholders in 1860? For the non-slaveholders, did these households experience the same drastic decrease in wealth after the Civil War? A comparison of the total wealth of slaveholders vs. non-slaveholders would add another variable to his Table 1. With slaves accounting for 46 percent of Pittsylvania County in 1860, tobacco planters focused on mono-agriculture with a crop that rapidly depleted the soil, and a "tottering structure of debt," how do these factors play into the economic woes of the county in 1870 compared to the absence of white male workers?

As for widows choosing not to remarry, we must remember that the patriarchal Southern society constrained the acceptable activities of women and exerted pressure on them to resume a life controlled by a man. McClurken lumps together all women in his study, not differentiating between the social classes. Do we know if the tobacco plantation widow descended to domestic service? One more source to consult would be the *Nonpopulation Census Schedules for Virginia: Agriculture* to trace these individuals in the population census database by land ownership so more specific analyses can be made about several variables' effects rather than extrapolating generalizations solely from changes in wealth.

These three papers give us much to think about in terms of the nature of women's work, entrée into politics, dependency on the patriarchy, and self-reliance. Please join me in thanking our panelists, and I invite you to direct your questions to them.