“BEYOND THE POWER OF FORTUNE”:
THE MIDDLETON FAMILY OF SOUTH CAROLINA, 1784 to 1877

By

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BEYOND THE POWER OF FORTUNE: THE MIDDLETON FAMILY, 1784 to 1877

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This dissertation offers an in-depth study of the Middleton family of South Carolina, one of the most prominent and powerful members of the Lowcountry planter aristocracy, from the revolutionary era through the Civil War and Reconstruction. There is a consensus among scholars of the family that during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the institution of family was revolutionized and that in the modern era the family became increasingly conjugal and less tied to extended family members. The experiences of the Middleton clan challenges this picture on several fronts. Throughout the antebellum era, they remained deeply embedded in a complex kinship network that shaped their social and economic lives. Virtually every major decision, every important event, played out against this backdrop. In part, the peculiarities of the Lowcounty rice culture made it possible, even necessary, for family members to rely heavily on one another. Unlike tobacco or cotton, rice did not exhaust the soil and encourage family
members to disperse to richer lands to the west. The Middletons’ rice plantations continued to support their privileged lifestyle and kept them tied to the land of their birth. The Middleton men retreated from political life with the rise of popular democracy, but they continued to hold considerable economic and social capital. They continued to move in elite nation and international circles—their marriage partners ranged from fellow members of the Lowcountry planter elite to northern elites, to European nobility. A few family members moved away from the Lowcountry or embarked on careers other than planting, but they did not escape the family’s complex web of kinship and friendship networks. As northern attacks on slavery intensified during the antebellum era, most family members supported secession and war. That war devastated the Lowcountry, left the family’s rice plantations in shambles, and destroyed their extended family networks. It was not until the collapse of the plantation complex that the Middletons retreated into the sort of inward-looking nuclear families that historians have identified. Their story highlights the importance of place and class in understanding the evolution of the family as an historical institution.
INTRODUCTION

In 1768, shortly after their marriage, Arthur Middleton and his wife, Mary Izard, left the Carolina Lowcountry for an extended stay in Europe. After spending nearly three years touring France, Italy, and England, the couple decided to return home. Before their departure, however, they commissioned a family portrait of themselves and their infant son, Henry, born in England in 1770. Anxious to have an image that reflected the grandeur of the Middleton and Izard clans, Arthur and Mary entrusted the task to Benjamin West. One of England’s most renowned portraitists, West served at the court of King George III and presided over the Royal Academy of Arts.\(^1\) Not only was West the artist to English royalty, he was a highly acclaimed eighteenth-century historical painter. His dramatic neoclassical style, evident in such works as The Death of General Wolfe (1770), conveyed traditional and conservative aristocratic values that appealed to members of the landed gentry.\(^2\) The Middleton and Izard families enjoyed a long-

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\(^2\) Simon Schama offers a detailed analysis of West’s portrait, *The Death of General Wolfe*, see Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 3-20. Other examples of West’s popular renditions of historical events include *William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians* (1771-1772) and *Death on the Pale Horse* (1796).
standing association with the London-based artist, and West happily obliged Mary and Arthur’s request. For the next two years, he worked diligently to create an idealized image of family life that would prove pleasing to his patrons.³

Defying the Enlightenment ideals of political and social egalitarianism, West created a domestic scene, ripe with religious undertones, that conjured a timeless image of an ancient aristocracy. [Figure 1] Dressed in “Vandyke” costume, a stylish attire reserved for the great ballrooms of Europe, Mary and Arthur appeared as members of what historian J.G.A. Pocock referred to as a “natural elite,” whose wealth, lineage, and social position demanded respect and deference.⁴ In West’s portrait, Arthur strikes a gallant pose, appearing as a commanding but benevolent patriarch. His wife Mary, a symbol of feminine virtue and grace, calls to mind a Renaissance master’s Madonna as

³ This was not the first time Arthur Middleton had appeared in a West portrait. When he was a student at Cambridge University, his uncle, Ralph Izard, commissioned The Cricketers, a conversational piece that included Arthur, his cousins, Ralph Izard, Jr. and Charles Manigault (also members of the plantocracy studying abroad), and the two sons of Chief Justice William Allen, reputedly Pennsylvania’s wealthiest resident. The Middletons’ wealth and social connections afforded the family access to the artist. Between 1769 and 1779, West painted at least four different portraits for members of this clan. For a detailed discussion of The Cricketers, see Helmut Von Erffa and Allen Staley, The Paintings of Benjamin West (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

Figure 1: Portrait of the Arthur Middleton Family c. 1772 (SCHS).
she sits with her child. Together, the couple protectively cradle and display their infant son, whose luminous, larger-than-life portrayal reinforces the idea of family as a divinely ordained institution. Aware of his progeny’s exalted destiny, the patriarch extends his arm in a gesture of presentation: he is handing on to the larger community his heir as a pledge of the continuation of the family’s dynastic rule.

West’s veneration of the enduring power of kinship and its legacy stood in stark contrast to the democratic tendencies that, by the closing decades of the eighteenth century, came to define American society. Throughout the Revolutionary era, citizens increasingly contemplated the meaning of liberty and equality, calling into question the values upon which European social orders relied. As plain folk became increasingly defiant of deference, the days of tipping one’s hat to local land barons seemed doomed.


6 West’s portrait of the Middleton family departed from the compositional canons of family portraiture. By 1770, according to Karen Calvert, such paintings increasingly portrayed a more private and intimate side of domesticity. For examples, see Calvert, “Children in American Family Portraiture, 1670-1810,” Williams and Mary Quarterly 39 (January 1982), 87-113, esp. 109; Stephen Brobeck, “Images of the Family: Portrait Paintings as Indices of American Family Culture, Structure and Behavior, 1730-1860,” Journal of Psychohistory 5 (June 1977), 81-106.

Heirs to vast ancestral estates of land and slaves, built and maintained through the consolidation of family fortunes, Mary and Arthur appear impervious to the monumental challenges to hereditary power that raged throughout the Atlantic world during the Age of Revolution.8

The Middletons rose to prominence in the early colonial era. Edward Middleton, a sugar planter from Barbados, and his brother, Arthur, arrived in South Carolina in 1678. They brought considerable experience in plantation agriculture and slavery with them from the Caribbean, and they received a grant to 1,780 acres of land about fifteen miles from Charleston.9 Within a few years time, Edward bought out his brother’s share of the estate, and he purchased an additional 3,130 acres, part of which served as the family seat, The Oaks, where he lived with his wife, Sarah Fowell, the widow of a Barbadian sugar planter, and their son, Arthur (1681-1737). Edward’s energies, however, were not dedicated solely to the acquisition of land. Well aware of the crucial link between personal wealth, slavery, and public power, he assumed an active role in the colony’s

8 Joyce Appleby argues that the ideology of the French Revolution radicalized American notions of democracy and encouraged a rejection of elite rule. The challenge to deference and hierarchy, according to Appleby, created a liberal society that was egalitarian and individualist. Appleby, Inheriting the Revolution. For a detailed discussion of reactions of ‘planter elites’ to the revolutionary ideology of the French and Haitian Revolutions, see Rachel N. Klein, Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760-1808 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), ch. 7; George C. Terry, “A Study of the Impact of the French Revolution and the Insurrections in Saint-Domingue Upon South Carolina, 1790-1805,” (Master’s thesis, University of South Carolina, 1975); James Oakes, “From Republicanism to Liberalism: Ideological Change and the Crisis of the Old South,” American Quarterly 37 (Fall 1985), 551-571.

political life. He served as the Lords Proprietors' deputy in 1678 and as the assistant justice in 1683. Yet, Edward did not live to enjoy the full fruits of his labor. He died in 1685, before his plantations showed high profits. It was not until the 1690s that Lowcountry planters learned the complex craft of tidal rice cultivation from their African bondspeople. However, he had laid the foundations of an empire that would soon make his decedents among the wealthiest residents in British America. By the 1720s, rice cultivation had become a profitable business, and the Middleton estate had grown to over 5,000 acres and over 100 slaves. Edward's son, Arthur, soon reaped the bounty of his father's efforts. It was during his proprietorship that England removed trade restrictions that had prevented direct trade between the colonies and Spain and Portugal. Arthur took full advantage of the boom, reinvesting a considerable amount of his profits into land and slaves. Under his tenure, the Middleton plantation complex expanded by another 8,469 acres. Arthur, however, received more than land from his father. He also inherited his

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11 Arthur also inherited Crowfield Hall, the Middletons' familial estate in Suffolk, England. According to Peter A. Coclanis, the early accumulation of land and slaves was more than just "a transition from drift to mastery," it was "an economically rational response to changing economic possibilities, a response overseen from the start by economically rational white men." Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 58.
understanding of the link between public office, slavery, and wealth. He, too, assumed an active role in political life, serving as Deputy on the Proprietary Council of Carolina, the President of the Council of Carolina, and Governor from 1730-1735. Arthur died in 1737 at the age of 56.

By the time of Arthur's death, the pattern of familial accumulation of wealth, power, and social prestige was well established. Arthur's son Henry (1717-1784) also assumed a prominent position among the plantocracy. He served as President of the First Continental Congress and his advantageous marriage to Mary Williams in 1741 considerably expanded the family's holdings. Sole heir to her father's estate, it was through her that Middleton Place plantation, the property that served as the family seat, came into the Middletons' hands. Henry's son Arthur (1742-1787) also assumed a prominent place in the plantocracy. When Henry died in 1784, Arthur inherited Middleton Place, the familial estate. However, he only survived his father by three years. This study begins an in-depth analysis of the family with his death.

Arthur's death came at a major turning point in American history. During the early national period, while the rest of the nation increasingly rejected the old social, political, and economic systems that celebrated deference, the Middletons, like other members of the plantocracy, consciously wedded themselves to the aristocratic values of

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12 Henry had three other sons. Henry died in infancy and Williams died at age six. His son Thomas, also a Lowcountry planter, died in 1784, the same year as his father.

pre-revolutionary Europe, which included the pre-modern structures of family life. Throughout the early colonial era, Lowcountry rice barons, a small homogeneous network of elite families related by blood and marriage, exercised almost unfettered control over the region.\textsuperscript{14} Through these intricate marriage alliances and kinship networks, they laid claim to eighty-six percent of the colony’s wealth and over ninety percent of its slaves. The generational accumulation of land and slaves made families like the Middletons among the richest residents in North America. As a result, no other southern regime, according to historian William Freehling, remained so wedded to eighteenth-century elitist values or so opposed to nineteenth-century egalitarian republicanism.\textsuperscript{15} It is especially fitting, then, that West’s portrayal of elite privilege took the form of an aristocratic family scene.

\textsuperscript{14} For an excellent discussion of the importance of kinship in the colonial era, see Lorri Glover, \textit{All Our Relations: Blood Ties and Emotional Bonds Among the Early South Carolina Gentry} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Jack P. Greene, \textit{Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 19; Allan Kulikoff, \textit{Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). The Middletons certainly used the strategies described above. Generation after generation, they married other members of the plantocracy forming what Jack P. Greene referred to as a “tangled cousinry.” Through marriage, the Middletons allied themselves with the wealthiest and most prestigious families in the Carolina Lowcountry including Draytons, the Rutledges, the Manigaults, the Pinckneys, the Herings, the Smiths, the Cheves, and the Reads.

Although the settlement of the Carolina Upcountry in the late colonial era meant that Lowcountry grandees would no longer fully control the political and economic life of South Carolina, the Middletons clung tenaciously to an elite identity that was defined by devotion to clan and to place. Advantageous marriages and the maintenance of elaborate kinship networks remained vital to the expansion and management of the family’s vast plantation complex. On the eve of the Civil War, the descendants of Henry Middleton owned more than a dozen large rice plantations totaling over 50,000 acres and a slave population over 1,500 strong, making them one of the largest slaveholding families in the entire South.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, the Middletons understood that their ancestry not only afforded them their wealth but also set them apart from their more provincial neighbors and from the commoners of the industrial North. As George Rogers argued in his study of Georgetown County, members of the elite “wore their names as a badge of distinction and of separation from ordinary mortals.” And rightly so. For the Middletons, social prominence at home and abroad was inextricably tied to the family name.\textsuperscript{17}

The experiences of the Middletons challenge, on several fronts, the interpretative synthesis that dominates our understanding of family life in the modern era. Since the publication of Lawrence Stone’s path-breaking work on the transformation of the English family, there has been a growing consensus that the Western family experienced a radical


transformation during the eighteenth century. This transformation, inspired by what Stone referred to as “affective individualism,” brought about a dramatic decline in the importance of the extended kin. By the 1750s, this modern conjugal household, was, according to Stone, more individualist, affectionate, private and less fettered by the economic and emotional entanglements that characterized the pre-modern household.¹⁸

Historians of the early American family found a similar and equally dramatic shift in family attitudes during the same period. Scholars such as Bernard Bailyn argued that through the course of the colonial era, “the ancient structure of family life, shaped by strong kinship networks and community ties, eroded and the family contracted toward its nuclear core.”¹⁹ While the scholarship on the American family initially focused on New England, other historians soon turned their attention to the Chesapeake. There, too, a consensus soon emerged that family life became increasingly defined by an inward-looking, affectionate domesticity. These changes, according to historians such as Jan


Lewis and Daniel Blake Smith, intensified in the early national period when nineteenth-century values of romantic love, and the idealization of marriage based on companionship, encouraged the development of autonomous households free from the obligations and constraints of kin.20

As compelling as this view of family history is, it does not hold true for the Middleton family—and perhaps many others in the upper ranks of southern society with strong ancestral legacies. For them, the importance of kinship did not wither in the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century. The rise of affectionate domesticity and the growing sense of individualism did not universally encourage the formation of small, more inward-looking families, at least not among the Carolina's old landed elite. They did not, and in many respects could not, retreat into the confines of a private world of domesticity. The social and economic advantages of broad kinship networks, the continued power of the family patriarchs in a slaveholding society, and the practical

advantages of shared management and resources, kept older family patterns alive. The Middleton's managed their estates, socialized, reared their children, spent their leisure time, and traveled within the larger context of kin.  

Despite the spirit of individualism that increasingly defined the nineteenth century, the adult children of Mary and Henry Middleton inherited and presided over a vast plantation empire that perpetuated familial and social cohesion. They continued to make a space in the world for themselves and their progeny that stretched far beyond the confines of the conjugal household, encompassing shared economic, political and social interests. Despite the rise of affectionate domesticity, strategic marriages alliances and carefully maintained kinship and friendship networks afforded this generation of elites their wealth, power, and prestige just as it had for earlier generations. Although notions

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of romantic love and personal fulfillment informed marriage choice, Mary and Henry expected their children to choose partners that would preserve and enhance the standing of the extended family. Individual desire remained tempered by concern for the larger clan. No less than previous generations they, too, worked collectively to protect their class interests and used family connections to enhance their social and economic position, precisely the sort of social economy that characterized the colonial period. While the family did, in fact, retreat from public life in the sense that they did not always take an active role in politics, their refusal to seek political office had more to do with their haughty rejection of democratic politics and South Carolina’s increasing political isolation than with a withdrawal into nuclear households.\(^{22}\)

The continuation of familial cooperation and interaction transcended material interests. Emotional bonds also united the family. It was within the larger context of kin that the Middletons experienced both the ordinary and extraordinary moments of their lives. As was the case for other members of the Lowcountry elite, siblings, cousins, parents, in-laws, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and friends formed an emotional circle that defined family life. Throughout the antebellum era, the Middletons chose their marriage partners and reared their children within a socially exclusive world that informed their notions of honor and refinement, and governed their leisure time, travel, and estate management. Within that charmed circle, balls, salons, teas, and grand

entertainments—hallmarks of the fashionable life—did the cultural work of the patrician caste by publically demonstrating its grandeur, power, and cultural superiority.

On the eve of the Civil War, the Middletons and their kinfolk stood at the pinnacle of South Carolina’s plantocracy. Lowcountry rice barons continued to prosper from slave labor and enjoyed the privileged lifestyles the profits from their plantations afforded. While tobacco and cotton exhausted the soil and encouraged plantation owners to abandon their homes and relocate to new and richer lands, the rice barons remained secure on their plantations and maintained their complex web of relations. Yet, even as slavery and the plantation system expanded, the South’s peculiar institution increasingly came under assault both at home and abroad. While some historians have argued that southern slaveowners felt guilt over slavery, there is no evidence that the Middletons shared those emotions. Perhaps evangelical slaveholders, newcomers to the institution,


or some planter women questioned slavery's morality, but these Lowcountry gradees had no such qualms. After all, the Middletons had been slaveowners for nearly two centuries; the institution was so deeply embedded in every aspect of their lives, and so informed their identity, that they certainly did not question it. They, in fact, resented anyone who did. Carefully nurtured to claim their place as masters of their world, more polished, cultivated and educated than almost any other Americans, their confidence in their way of life knew no bounds. As the political, economic, and cultural tides of the 1850s turned against them, the Middletons and their fellow planter elites refused to see the sea change occurring around them. Secure in their control of their plantations, their families, and the entire South, they refused to accept that the world, and their place in it, had changed. It is no coincidence, then, that under the leadership of the Middletons and their cohorts, South Carolina was the hotbed of southern radicalism and secessionism.

Few topics in American history have captured the popular imagination more than the Civil War. Not surprisingly, the politics of disunion and the military events that

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claimed the lives of nearly 700,000 soldiers have held the attention of scholars and
general readers alike. For generations, literally thousands of volumes detailing the lives
of political and military leaders, battles, and regiments have poured off the presses.
Despite the richness of these studies, the focus on battlefields and ballot boxes has until
recently obscured the experiences of civilians during this volatile era. In a concerted
effort to eradicate such omissions, more recent scholarship has dedicated itself to a better
understanding of the ways in which the war played itself out on the Confederate home
front. The relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, the decline in
planter patriarchy that accompanied defeat, as well as the burgeoning autonomy of many
southern women as a result of that decline are coming under greater scrutiny. This
paradigmatic shift has made significant contributions to an already rich historiography,
but, with few exceptions, this scholarship focuses almost exclusively on the changes that
occurred within the conjugal household. The focus on the nuclear family obscures the

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27 For an excellent overview of Civil War historiography, see James M. McPherson,
Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988);
McPherson and William J. Cooper, Jr., Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand
(Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

28 There is a rich historiography concerning the impact of the Civil War on Southern
women. For a discussion of the expanding roles of women in the postwar era, see Scott,
The Southern Lady, 80-103; George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of
Southern Nationalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Catherine Clinton and
Nina Silber, editors, Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1992); Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the
Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North
Carolina Press, 1995), esp. chs. 2-5; LeeAnn Whites, The Civil War as a Crisis in
Gender: Augusta Georgia, 1860-1890 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Jane
impact that Confederate defeat had on the kinship and friendship networks so central to
the lives of the planter elite.

For the Middletons, the dramatic changes that came during the turbulent years of
war weakened the once-sacred bonds of family, and permanently altered antebellum
patterns of domesticity. For the Middletons, war not only brought about the predictable
material losses that came with defeat, but also tore asunder the broad kinship and
friendship networks that had sustained the family for generations. These extensive
networks, so vital to the family’s survival, depended, as it turns out, upon the remarkably
fragile interdependence of a thriving plantation economy and slavery. The material
deprivations that attended defeat intertwined with the darker, and deeper, psychological
dynamics that flowed from the loss of long-established patterns of privilege and power.
For the Middletons, the ruin of the Confederacy left destitute and fragmented what had
once been a cohesive extended family. Consumed by the devastating consequences of
defeat, few members of this once proud and prosperous clan could look beyond their own
ruin.

The aching sense of tragedy ran deep, for the Union victory had, in fact, leveled
the foundations of the Old South’s social and economic order. Planters could no longer
assert their authority as they had in the past. Military defeat, economic ruin, and the loss
of political power eroded planters’ ability to hold sway over their former servants.
Reared in a gentry tradition, the Middletons proved ill-equipped to compete in a world in
which their traditional patterns of patronage and power had collapsed. The Middleton
patriarchs, like most planters, found themselves shamefully powerless to halt the changes
that came in the wake of war. They watched helplessly as their power, within the household and beyond it, dissipated. The privilege that once characterized the Middletons’ lives and supported a far-flung networks of kinship and friendship ties quickly vanished.29

Despite the generous terms of President Andrew Johnson’s peace settlement in 1865, which allowed the great majority of former Confederates to reclaim their confiscated property, the Middletons could not recapture the grandeur of their past. Their once valuable lands now bore the distinctive but destructive marks of war. The rice fields that had sustained the family for generations lay in ruins; expensive equipment, including thrashing mills and floodgates, along with most outbuildings, had been destroyed. Livestock, along with most moveable property, was lost forever. What little remained after nearly four years of war met is final destruction in the of 1864 when General William T. Sherman’s troops launched their final assault on the Carolina, torching what little remained of the Middleton plantations. Given these conditions, few of these former planters could turn a profit from their land or reconstruct a social order that resembled that of the antebellum era.

With their kinfolk dead and their plantations destroyed, Nathaniel Russell Middleton, Jr. determined that there had never been a war that more “completely disorganized and revolutionized the whole structure of society than did [the Civil War] to

The plantation economy had been the foundation upon which the Middletons' elaborate edifice of wealth, privilege, and status was constructed. In its absence, the family was thrown truly upon its own resources. The mobility and wealth that had made mutual assistance possible within the antebellum kinship network were gone, seemingly forever. Individual interests necessarily displaced the luxury of concern for the broader family. Planter patriarchs could no longer revel in their role of benefactors, they became increasingly dependent on others to provide for their needs. Ironically, the relationships that most closely mimicked antebellum patterns of familial mutuality and cooperation were with northern kin. Union victory afforded northern relatives precisely the financial stability and emotional stamina that had been wrenched from their southern brethren. For the first time, these planters could not secure the future of the next generation. Unable to halt the bewildering changes that came with disunion and defeat, the era of hereditary privilege, once so aptly depicted in West's portrait, had come to a dramatic end.

As the Middletons' former lifestyle faded like a memory of a distant past, financial ruin, personal unhappiness, and melancholy plagued both parents and children. Unable to halt or even substantially influence the political, social, and economic revolutions that came to define the Reconstruction South, the Middletons retreated further from public life. As the elaborate kinship and friendship networks that had sustained the family for generations disintegrated, the Middletons became increasingly reliant on their

own nuclear families. That reliance, however, was not a source of joy, and increasingly gave way to a melancholy and bitter inwardness. As the pursuit of individual interests superseded the relations of the collective clan, kinship interactions became marred by conflict and hostility. Unlike the antebellum era, there were no longer the economic and emotional ties to quell family conflicts. Overriding the motivations to maintain even a facade of familial tranquility, private battles played themselves out in the public realm. The family found themselves pitted against one another in litigation that would ensue long after the war came to an end. As the struggle to survive wore one, the strain between family members deepened.

No longer able to control the lives and labor of others, the paternalistic myth of slave loyalty vanished. The Middletons’ inability to recapture their former lives stood in sharp contrast to what seemed to them the monumental successes of their former servants as the world turned upside down. Blacks’ new-found freedom and self-empowerment increasingly became a distorted mirror that constantly reflected their own failures. Unable to resurrect a desirable future from the ruins of their former lives, the antebellum ethos of paternalism quickly faded from view. As former masters and former slaves refused to don the masks of paternalism and deference, a new racial order emerged. It was driven by shame and dishonor. Planter elites could not dictate post-emancipation race relations. Long tempered by the rhetoric of benign paternalism, racist ideology emerged with increasingly visceral and malevolent force. The disappearance of even the veneer of grace gave poignant evidence of the Middletons’ inability to adapt to the wrenching realities of post-emancipation society.
The experiences of the Middletons suggest that the broad, overly general framework that scholars of the family have constructed over the past two generations is in need of revision. While their generalizations may hold true in some times and places, the Middletons’ story suggest that it does not fit the realities of South Carolina’s rice barons. The structure of elite planter households in the Carolina Lowcountry offers an alternative trajectory for the growing primacy of the conjugal family. This study argues that salient aspects of the pre-modern family continued to be central to the lives of the planter aristocracy throughout the antebellum period. It was the loss of patriarchal authority and the collapse of the slavery that came as a consequence of the Confederate defeat that forced the Middletons to retreat into the private world of domesticity. The loss of inherited wealth, power, and prestige compelled members of this once extensive clan to abandon their colonial patterns of cooperation and mutuality. Barely able to provide for themselves and their immediate dependents, the Middletons could no longer sustain the expansive kinship networks that had nurtured the family for generations.
 CHAPTER 1
“A STATE OF INDEPENDENCE AND PROSPERITY”: MARRIAGE AND THE MAKING OF A NEW GENERATION

When Arthur Middleton had Benjamin West idealize his infant son Henry and capture on canvas his high aspirations for his family’s future, he had no idea how quickly his heir would be forced to assume his position as family patriarch. In many ways, Arthur had fulfilled his parents’ ambitions and followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. Like them, he made a very advantageous marriage that greatly enlarged the Middleton estate. His union with Mary Izard, the daughter of one of the Lowcountry’s richest rice planters, Walter Izard, increased the Middletons’ holding in land and slaves and added to their social prestige. In fact, Mary brought to the marriage what would eventually become the family’s most valuable plantation properties: Hobonny, Old Combahee, and Newport, all on the Combahee River. At the time of their marriage in 1764, these plantations totaled over 2,000 acres of land with at least 300 slaves. Like his father and grandfather, Arthur also embarked on a political career befitting his station. A strong supporter of the Revolutionary cause, he played a hero’s role in that struggle. He helped lead South Carolina into the Patriot camp, served in the First Continental Congress, and was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He rejected the position of governor of South Carolina offered to him by the legislature and was reelected to the Continental Congress, though he did not attend because of the growing British
military threat to his home state. In 1779 British troops invaded the Lowcountry and raided Middleton Place, but Arthur had managed to get his family to safety before the troops arrived. He served in the state militia during the siege of Charleston and was captured by the British and imprisoned in St. Augustine until 1781. After his release, he resumed his political career and returned to the Continental Congress where he served until 1782. He then returned to the family seat to try to repair the damages inflicted by the British and by years of war and neglect. But Arthur’s life was cut short on January 1, 1787, when he died of a fever, symbolically ushering in a new family era with the new year. He was laid the rest in the family’s handsome mausoleum in the gardens at Middleton Place.¹

On that New Year’s day, the patriarchal reins of authority passed from Arthur to Henry, then just sixteen years old. By all accounts, Henry was an “appealing boy with a sweet agreeable countenance” whose “very sensible [and] ardent look” gave him an air of confidence.² However, he was not yet ready to stand at the head of the Middleton clan.


His uncles, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Edward Rutledge, agreed that the inexperienced youth needed to mature. They persuaded his rather protective mother to let Henry leave the Lowcountry and acquaint himself with "his own country and his own Countrymen." They sent him off with letters of introduction to some of the nation's most important men including Thomas Jefferson. His family's connections opened the doors to the exclusive social circles of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and New Port, Rhode Island. After two years in the Northeast, Henry was ready to undertake a Grand Tour. In 1792, he set sail for England.

Henry's decision to go abroad was not unexpected. Since the early colonial era, the Middletons, like other Lowcountry aristocrats, had sent their sons to England for their education. Such polishing was considered essential for those, as one rice planter put it, who wished "to have all the Rights to rank, a distinction, which is to be claimed from Ancestry." Henry's father, for example, received the best English education money could buy; at the age of twelve he was sent to England where he attended Hackney

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4 Cheves, "Middleton of South Carolina," 245-247; Harrison, Best Companions, 3-4.


School, then Westminster School, and Trinity College at Cambridge University, from which he graduated before studying law in London. Henry’s departure from the Lowcountry, then, was in keeping with a family tradition. He was fulfilling an expectation that had been delayed by the events of the American Revolution. His sojourn in England was aimed at equipping him with the indispensable cultural broadening and sophistication that, at least according to the dictates of his social set, was necessary but difficult to achieve in America.

The Revolution may have brought political independence from Britain but not cultural independence, and nowhere were the ties between Britain and America stronger than in Charleston and the Lowcountry. Even after America’s split with England, such an education remained essential for members of the Lowcountry aristocracy. Indeed, historians have found that “Charlestonians were unique in the degree to which they adhered to English cultural precedents long after their political break with the mother country.” Although institutions of learning flourished in the early national era, Lowcountry elites continued to send their sons abroad for their education. There they acquired English manners, a taste for English luxury goods, and a model of genteel

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cultural refinement.10 After they returned home to America, they dined from English plate and ceramics, their clothes were cut in the latest London fashions, and the pastimes, included horse racing, followed English dictates. This colonial pattern continued into the nineteenth century, kept alive by elite families like the Middletons. The Charleston elite imported the latest English publications and even built a library, one of America’s first, to maintain that cultural connection. The Charleston Library Society, founded in 1748, was established by a group of elite Charlestonians determined, as one founding member put it “to save their descendants from sinking into savagery.”11 Clearly, as cultural historian Maury McInnis observed, “notions of European refinement became integral to the genteel life sought by Charlestonians traveling abroad and contributed to their ideal of civilized society at home in America.”12

Henry’s sojourn at Oxford and Cambridge was well spent. Much of his time there was taken up with the study of music, a passion fostered by his parents and encouraged by

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Charleston's active music scene that included one of the first opera houses in America, and the concerts sponsored by the elite St. Cecelia Society, established in 1735. A regular attendee of learned lectures, Henry absorbed the sensibilities of England's educated gentry. He was not alone. While in London, Henry kept company with the sons of other Lowcountry families including the Rutledges, Allstons, Cheves, and Pinckneys. Like Henry, they, too, were young men serving a sort of social apprenticeship to better prepare them to assume a prominent position in public life. The friendships forged abroad continued throughout the lives of these men. Their exclusive bonds carried over into the next generation when Henry's children and grandchildren married into these very families and reinforced long-standing alliances. Henry's stay in England also afforded him the opportunity to acquaint himself with the English branch of his own family.

By all accounts, Henry acquired all the polish that London afforded without picking up the vices that some young Americans did while there. Mrs. Mary Stead Pinckney, the second wife of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, was charmed by her nephew's gentlemanly refinement. She found him to be "modest without reserve and polite without affection. I think if I were a mother," Mrs. Pinckney reflected, "I should

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13 Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys*, 112.

14 Flavell, "'The School for Modesty and Humility: Colonial American Youth in London and Their Parents, 1755-1775,' *Historical Journal* 42 (Summer 1999), 389.

15 Cheves, "Middleton of South Carolina," 228-232; Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys*, 112.

16 For a detailed discussion of the temptations American students faced while in England, see Julie M. Flavell, "The 'School for Modesty and Humility,'" *Historical Journal* 42 (Summer 1999), 380, 382-395.
wish for just such a son.” Europe, she gladly determined, had “neither made him foppish nor assuming.”

Henry’s efforts at self-improvement and refinement, however, were not dedicated solely to cultural and intellectual endeavors. Shortly after his arrival in England, he made the acquaintance of twenty-one-year-old Mary Hering, the daughter of Julines Hering, an English aristocrat and slaveowner with profitable sugar plantations in Jamaica. Mary was intelligent and sophisticated, with a passion for literature and music. Not surprisingly, Mary found herself surrounded by a crowd of eligible suitors. Although initially put off by what she described to her brother Oliver as Henry’s “cold platonic Disposition,” Mary was smitten with her rather aloof beau, with whom she shared a love of music and Milton.

The couple had much in common. Mary was no less a product of the broader Atlantic World than Henry. Despite her self-designation as an Englishwoman, Mary was born on her father’s sugar plantation in Jamaica and spent her early years in Philadelphia, the birthplace of her mother, Mary Inglis, the daughter of a Scots merchant in Philadelphia. But for the American Revolution and her father’s Loyalist sympathies, Mary herself would have been a Philadelphian. Although a Carolinian, Henry had

17 Charles F. McComb, editor, Letter-Book of Mary Stead Pinckney (New York: Grolier Club, 1946), 26, 31. Mary Stead Pinckney was the second wife of Charleston Cotesworth Pinckney. His first wife, Sarah Middleton, died May 8, 1784; Harrison, Best Companions, 5.

18 Oliver Hering Middleton to Mary Helen Hering, June 15, 1794, Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina, hereafter SCHS).
familial ties to the England’s landed gentry and had also spent part of his early youth in Philadelphia. Much united the two, and it was clear that Henry’s interest in her was more than platonic. Mary’s brother Oliver advised her to accept Henry over her other suitors; he wrote, “The Carolinian, by your description seems better qualified to make you happy . . . [his] . . . pretended indifference to your Charms . . . Take him who has the ability to place you in a state of independence and prosperity. . . .”¹⁹ Perhaps she heeded her brother’s rather calculated advice, for when Henry proposed to her, she accepted.

On November 13, 1794, in the company of family and friends, Mary and Henry took their vows in Bath, England. Their marriage strengthened long-standing familial ties to elite circles in England and Philadelphia. The union of Mary and Henry, although not without romantic interest, marked the continuation of marital strategies long used by members of the creolized Atlantic elites to consolidate familial power and prestige, not only for the couple, but also for the larger network to which they belonged. The seemingly disparate environs of Cambridge, London, Barbados, Jamaica, Carolina, and Philadelphia were in fact only different facets of a single, intricately constructed Atlantic World; the marriage of Henry and Mary was not the melding of two worlds, but another ratification of the propriety of this larger reality. And while the couple had found one another and their marriage was not formally arranged, the guidance and consent of family

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¹⁹ Oliver Hering Middleton to Mary Helen Hering, June 15, 1794, Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS). For information concerning the rise of the Middleton family as members of South Carolina’s elite, see Cheves, “Middleton of South Carolina,” 228-262; Lane, “The Middletons of Eighteenth Century South Carolina,”; Harrison, Best Companions, 2-17. Before the conflict began, Julines Hering took his wife and daughter to the safety of his familial estate in England, Heybridge Hall.
members on both sides was important. As Mary’s correspondence with her brother indicates, she sought and followed her family’s advice where financial considerations carried equal weight with romantic ones. Since Henry’s father was dead, he sought his mother’s approval for the match. Alice Delancey, the wife of Ralph Izard, wrote to her son, Ralph, “Mr. Middleton is really engaged to Miss Hering and only waiting to receive his Mother’s consent in order to be married. She has given it, and seems now pleased with the match, as she has heard very pleasing accounts of the Lady.”

Henry’s cousin, Elizabeth Izard, offered one such account, describing Mary as a great beauty who was of a “very sociable[,] amiable[,] & agreeable” temperament.

The newlyweds did not return to the Lowcountry after their wedding. Still not satisfied that he had achieved the high degree of cultivation he so desired, Henry decided to remain in England. There, in the constant company of Mary’s kin and travelers making the Grand Tour, the couple partook of the cosmopolitan pleasures that abounded in London and Bath. The profits generated by Henry’s rice plantations afforded the couple ample income to enjoy all the privileges of the socially exclusive world his wife had long enjoyed. It was within the company of this larger circle of extended kin that the couple welcomed the birth of their first child, Arthur, in 1795. Whether attending the theater, lectures, worship services, parties, or visiting, the time the couple spent there not

20 Mrs. Ralph Izard to Ralph Izard, Jr., December 4, 1794, Izard Family Papers (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina).

21 Elizabeth Izard to Henrietta Drayton, October 13, 1799, Middleton Place Plantation Papers (MPPA).

22 Jeremy Black, The British Abroad, 3-10.
only added to their sophistication but also forged family bonds between the families; bonds that would endure for another generation.

In the summer of 1796, Henry moved his family to Paris. His uncle, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, had become the United States minister to France, and Henry was eager to introduce his family to his kin. Much to Henry’s relief, his aunt and uncle were pleased with their nephew’s bride, describing her as “sweet-temper’d and agreeable . . . very pretty and the dress she wears very well calculated to shew it to advantage.” The Pinckneys proved loyal companions to the Middletons during their time in Paris, and the women forged a friendship that lasted a lifetime. Under the Pinckneys’ guidance, the Middleton quickly acclimated to the city and settled into a comfortable routine that included concerts, lectures, shopping, and balls.

The couple’s days, however, were not dedicated entirely to leisurely pursuits. Henry, well aware that French culture and language were the hallmarks of gentility and still anxious to achieve the cultural sophistication of his station, continued his project of self-improvement with rabid determination. He hired a tutor to perfect his French and a pianist to further his musical talent. He also devoted a significant amount of his time to scholarly endeavors, immersing himself in the writings of Europe’s leading intellectuals and attending public lectures. Their family connections also gained them access to the most prestigious salons of Paris, including that of Madame Germaine Necker, Baronne de

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24 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Stead Pinckney, April 17, [1797], Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS).
Mary, conversant in French and a skilled harpist in her own right, often joined her husband in his lessons and accompanied him to lectures. She did not, however, share Henry’s dogged determination. She took a more active role in society than her husband and also devoted a good deal of time to her son Arthur, who she described as her “chief Amusement . . . full of spirit & fun.” In 1797, Mary gave birth to their second child, Henry (Harry). A beauty by all accounts with dark hair and dark grey eyes, he was his “Papa’s favorite” and seemed only to fuel Mary’s love of motherhood. The couple constantly boasted of their children’s beauty and showered them with love and affection. The years the couple spent in Europe marked a happy time in their marriage and represented their relentless dedication to the cultivation of refinement.

Yet, as time passed, Henry became increasingly anxious to claim his position as the reigning patriarch of his Lowcountry estates, a responsibility that could not be avoided indefinitely if the family fortunes were to be preserved. His years in Europe had

25 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Stead Pinckney, February 12, [1798], Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS). John Izard Middleton, Henry’s younger brother, was an artist who lived in Paris and enjoyed a close friendship with the writer Madame Germaine Necker, Baronne de Stael. For a detailed discussion of the life and career of John Izard Middleton, see Susan Ricci Stebbins, “John Izard Middleton: ‘Talent Enough to be One of the First Men in American,’” in McInnis, In Pursuit of Refinement, 68-69, 74.

26 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Stead Pinckney, April 17, [1797], Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS).

27 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Stead Pinckney, March 27, 1797, Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS).

given him, he believed, the cultivation and worldliness necessary to maintain his family's position among the upper ranks of his own society. Mary, however, dreaded the decision to live in the United States and tried her best to dissuade her husband from leaving Europe. Although Charleston was the fourth largest city in the United States and enjoyed a rich social and cultural life, it paled in comparison to London and Paris. But Henry's mind was made up. Confident that he had accomplished all he had sought to achieve, he was determined to go home. Besides, he could no longer ignore his inherited familial obligations. Despite Henry's resolve, the trip was postponed. Mary was too far along in her pregnancy to make the long sea voyage home and, much to her delight, she gave birth to yet another son, Oliver, named in honor of her brother. However, Henry insisted that once she and the baby were well enough to travel, they were going home. In 1799, with their three children, Arthur, Henry, and Oliver in tow, the couple boarded a ship bound for Charleston.

After seven long years, Henry delighted at the thought of returning to South Carolina, but Mary was not as enthusiastic. Given her background and her reluctance to

29 Rogers, Charleston in the Age, 122.

30 Letters between Mary and Mrs. Mary Stead Pinckney reveal the high degree of trepidation she felt about living in the Lowcountry. For examples, see Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Stead Pinckney, May 23, 1797, June 2, 1787, July 19, 1787, January 23, 1799, Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS).

31 In the colonial era, Charleston was the fourth largest city in British North America. However, its growth was easily outpaced in the opening decades of the nineteenth century and by 1860, it was only the twenty-second largest city.

32 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Stead Pinckney, April 17, 1797, October 1, 1799, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
leave Europe, she found it exceedingly difficult to adjust to the Lowcountry. Although she received a warm welcome from Henry's mother and sisters, she was exhausted, ill, and homesick after her long journey. In desperate letters to friends and family, she described the "tedious voyage of three months," complaining of the "disagreeableness of it & the anxiety & continual agitation of hope & fear which [she] experience, with every change of winds."\

By the time she arrived in the Lowcountry, Mary was "low in spirits" and could not hide her disappointment. The fact that she was five-months pregnant while attending to three active toddlers did nothing to help her situation, and her husband's lack of preparation for her arrival failed to improve her mood. Her fears about life on the plantations were increased by the fact that her new home, Middleton Place Plantation, was in a state of disrepair after several years of neglect. Mary complained bitterly to her about her new home. Mrs. Hering tried to comfort her daughter. While she agreed with Mary that "it was a pity Mr. M[iddleton] had not ordered his House to be repaired and cleaned before you went to it," she assured her that once she got the place "in order you will find it a charming habitation."\

33 Henry's sisters were all married to prominent rice barons. Emma Philadelphia married a distant cousin, Henry Izard; Anne, married Daniel Blake; Isabella married Daniel Elliott Huger; and Septima Sexta, married Henry Middleton Rutledge, also a relative by blood and marriage. They all resided in the Lowcountry. Mary was especially fond of Septima Sexta Middleton Rutledge.

34 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Hering, October 1, 1799, Mary Helen Hering Middleton Papers (SCHS).

35 Mary Hering to Mary Hering Middleton, January 13, 1800, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
Yet, the house was the least of Mary’s complaints. She was also disappointed in her country neighbors, whom she considered to be “an uncouth set of beings.” Having lived for some time on a Jamaica sugar plantation, Mrs. Hering certainly understood her daughter’s reaction. She herself had not found “the West Indians . . . the pleasantest people in the World or the best society.” However, she encouraged her daughter to “console [herself] with being connected most happily with those who are more polished” and to take pleasure in the “good and amiable friends” her husband’s family had to offer. Despite her mother’s pleas, Mary seemed poorly suited to be a plantation mistress. After her first visit to the Middleton’s working plantations on the Combahee River, she wrote her mother a litany of complaints. This time, however, she got little sympathy. Mary Hering scolded her daughter, “I have received your letter of the 21st of Febry on your return from visiting Mr. Middletons Plantation and negroes neither of which seem to have given you any pleasure . . . on the contrary . . . [they have] disgusted you and put you out of humour so much so that you will not partake of the few amusements that are offered to you.” Despite continued familial encouragement to take stock of her blessings, Mary did not become the model of grateful contentment. Tired by her daughter’s complaints, Mrs. Hering warned, “For God’s sake exert yourself to be satisfied and thankful . . .”36 Henry was not entirely indifferent to his wife’s discontent. He bought a house in Charleston

36 Mary Hering to Mary Hering Middleton, January 8, 1800, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS). Ibid.
where his wife could enjoy the benefits of urban living, and set himself to work improving the plantation his wife so detested.  

Despite Mary’s initial dislike of Middleton Place, the property was, by most accounts, an exceptionally beautiful place. It had been originally laid out by John Williams who in 1705 received a royal land grant of 1,600 acres on the Ashley River. From his plantation profits, he constructed a handsome, three-story brick mansion. Situated on an unusually high bluff above the river, the house offered a commanding view of the river and rice fields. The plantation came into the Middleton family in 1741 when Mary Williams, the sole heir to her father’s estate, married Henry Middleton, a wealthy planter with interests in the Lowcountry and Barbados.

In 1755, the couple made additions to the main house; they added two ornamental flanker buildings on each side, considered by all “superior [in] elegance” to the simplicity of the main house. These improvements no doubt represented the proprietors’ efforts to construct an edifice that served as a public manifestation of the family’s accomplishments and taste. They hired English landscape architects to lay out the terraces and formal gardens, reputedly the earliest landscaped gardens in America. When Arthur Middleton inherited the place in 1784, the Lowcountry’s rice economy was thriving once again.

37 Mary Hering to Mary Hering Middleton, April 21, 1801, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

38 The Charleston Courier, March 7, 1840, April 21, 1857; Anna Wells Rutledge, “Middleton Place and Middleton of South Carolina,” Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Alicia Hopton Middleton, Life in Carolina and New England During the Nineteenth Century, As Illustrated by Reminiscences and Letters of the Middleton Family of Charleston South Carolina and of the De Wolf Family of Bristol Rhode Island (Bristol, RI: Privately printed, 1929), 66.
Eager to profit off the booming economy, Arthur did more than his predecessors to expand rice cultivation on the property. He also added a rice mill. As his changes suggest, Middleton Place was a working plantation, not just a country retreat. While its beauty and style reflected the family’s gentility, it was also expected to make money. After three short years, Arthur died and the property then passed to his son, the younger Henry.

Driven perhaps by his wife’s dislike of the place, Henry surpassed all his forbears’ efforts to improve the plantation. Combining the symbols of mastery and gentility, Henry set fifty slaves to work for over ten years to create a setting befitting the couple’s cultural aspirations. New gardens and terraces were constructed, and the architects’ plans, implemented with the toil of slaves, “laid out the garden and grounds in a style of great beauty and elegance, with terraces, hot-houses, serpentine walks, campus, ponds and fish reserves, flowers native and exotic, flower trees and forest trees.” Drawing heavily on the tastes acquired in their travels in Europe and England, the couple contrived to make their rural domain match their ambitions of power and privilege. Between 1800 and 1838, several talented gardeners, including the famous French botanist Andre Michaux, experimented with over two hundred varieties of plants, turning the family seat into a paradise for those privileged to enjoy it. The gardens became as much a symbol of the


Middletons authority as the big house or the whip. Henry spared no expense, and his ledgers include carefully kept records of the exotic plants and the back-breaking labor that went into the enterprise. As one visitor remarked, the gardens included rare and exotic species including camellias and azaleas brought in from Japan long before "Perry opened its gates." Such efforts were driven by more than a passion for flowers and plants. They were meant to symbolize the family's refinement, taste, and wealth. No less than any other material item, the gardens served as a complement of style. The architectural and landscaping improvements were not wasted on visitors. As one walked from the semicircular portico and steps on the front of the house, a twenty- to thirty-foot wide walk, adorned with flowers on both sides, led to the terraces.

The visitor, as one relative observed, then followed a path bordered "with azaleas, rhododendrons, and other blossoming shrubs, then a group of laurels and fine forest trees, which form a secluded enclosure for the tomb where generations of Middletons sleep their last sleep." Curiosities, both animal and vegetable, abounded:

Farther on the walk, on the lotus pond, the famed flower of the Nile finds a friendly atmosphere and lifts its golden bloom a foot in diameter to a height of three feet or more above the water. Still farther on a heavy wire fence divides off


44 Ibid.

45 *The Charleston Courier*, March 7, 1840, April 21, 1857.
In stark contrast to the contemporary British fashion of laying out gardens in a very informal, natural manner, an aesthetic change that accompanied the Romantic movement, the Middletons sought to dominate nature and to create an image of strict formality once associated with the continental European aristocracy. The landscape, including the gardens, the artificial butterfly lakes, and the scaled terraces leading from the river to the main house, all gave the aesthetic effect of power, prestige, and control. These slaveholders, usually eager to ape the latest English fashion, ignored the changing English views concerning the natural environment inspired by both the growth of natural mysticism among intellectuals and by urban-dwellers' belief that the country provided clean and simple living. Henry Middleton and other rice planters continued to view the country as an environment to be manipulated and dominated, not romanticized. The family's livelihood came from utilizing the soil and water necessary for rice cultivation; the need for an elaborate and complex hydraulic system required planters to control the rivers, reshape the land, and maintain a large skilled labor force. Without control over land and labor, the plantation system would have collapsed.

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46 Middleton, Life In Carolina, 43-44.


48 Ibid.
Such zeal, however, was not reserved only for the gardens. The Middletons paid careful attention to their home, where their taste reflected the influence of their European visits. After spending several years in Europe, John Izard Middleton, a talent artist, returned to the Lowcountry and began “making great alterations and improvement” to Middleton Place and other family estates in the latest neoclassical style. While they departed from contemporary European tastes in the garden, they adopted them wholesale inside the house. One of the finest art collection’s in America lined the walls, and an impressive silver collection reflected their wealth and refinement. As one scholar observed, their collection “placed them at the vanguard of fashion and thoroughly in step with contemporary English aristocratic taste.”

In this secure and highly privileged environment, Mary began to adjust to her life in the Lowcountry. She took a prominent place in Charleston’s social scene, regularly attended the symphony, theatrical performances, and joined St. Philip’s Church, the city’s most aristocratic Episcopalian congregation. A spectacular family seat, a beautiful townhouse in Charleston, extended stays in Philadelphia, New York, and New Port, Rhode Island, all in the company of dear friends and family, afforded the couple and their children a privileged life complete with the cosmopolitan attributes Mary and Henry so admired. While traveling up and down the eastern coast, the Middletons moved in exclusive social circles in the nation’s most urbane cities.

The plantation economy and slavery afforded Mary and Henry much more than lives of power and privilege. Without the worries of the mundane aspects of daily life,

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the couple dedicated much of their attention to rearing their ever-expanding brood. By 1815, the couple had ten children: Arthur (b. 1795), Henry (b. 1797), Oliver Hering (b. 1798), John Izard (b. 1800), Maria (b. 1802), Eleanor (b. 1804), Williams (b. 1809), Edward (b. 1810), Catherine (b. 1812), Elizabeth (b. 1815). Although they lavished love and attention upon their children, they had high expectations of them. After all, the accomplishments and failures of their progeny reflected upon on the entire clan, and the couple paid careful attention to the education of their children. Their desire, of course, was to cultivate an intellect and a style that appropriately represented the family’s social status. For their sons and daughters, the couple encouraged the study of languages, *lettres*, geography, science, music, and singing taught by the best private tutors money could buy. Their efforts to rear sophisticated children paid off. As far as Mary’s mother could “judge [her children] will be very accomplished[,] equal if not superior to most they will meet with in this country.” The children received a broad education that included the refinement of both mind and manners. By arming them with these skills, Mary and Henry ensured their children a spot among the Atlantic elite.51

Despite the fact that Henry and Mary were doting parents, they also agreed that discipline mattered. As important as the children’s lessons in geography or history or science were lessons on “good and bad conduct.” As Mary explained to her daughters


Eliza and Catherine, “there are little inattentions to advise to which all children are more or less liable . . . all children require control. . . .” While Mary and Henry maintained the highest expectations concerning the conduct of all their children, it was particularly important, they believed, for girls. Again, as Mary explained, it was “not only children but young women,” who needed to be controlled; after all “it is what they will certainly experience when they marry, so that it is better they should be accustomed to it betimes.”

Although Henry shared with his wife the responsibility of educating his children, his time and energy took him far beyond the household. The patriarch, like his colonial predecessors, linked privilege to public power and refused to let the joys or demands of domesticity interfere with his political ambitions. Lowcountry elites held fast to the idea that public service was a hereditary obligation inherited from their revolutionary forefathers. Henry was no exception. Shortly after the family’s return to the Carolina Lowcountry, the planter patriarch began his political career. From 1801 to 1810 he served in the state’s House of Representatives and then its Senate. In 1810, the state legislature elected him governor. Although it was a position with less power than prestige, it served as a mechanism to further the family’s public position. Like his forefathers, Henry’s political life expanded beyond the confines of his native state. In

52 Mary Hering Middleton to Catherine and Eliza Middleton, December 1, 1826, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS). For information concerning the socialization and education of the planter elite, see Pease, Glover, All Our Relations, 95; Steven M. Stowe, Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Catherine Clinton, The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century (NY: Hill & Wang, 1984), esp. chs. 3, 8.
1815, he won his bid as the Democratic-Republican candidate for the United States Congress. He served a second term in beginning in 1817.53

The first two years in Washington were spent without the company of his wife and children. Mary, unconvinced that “comfortable accommodations” and good tutors could be found in the new city of Washington, decided to stay in the Lowcountry and devote her “time to the improvement of the minds and understanding of her children.” Her eldest son Arthur, a recent Harvard graduate also stayed behind, “acting,” as his grandmother affectionately teased, as “Master of the family during his Father’s Absences.” Henry lived in a Georgetown boarding house with other southern politicians including John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and Henry Clay of Kentucky. However, when Henry decided to serve a second term, he secured an elegant home for his wife and children in Georgetown. While Henry was considered an amiable colleague and “a gentleman of elegant manners and [a] cultivated mind,” by most of his fellow congressmen, the arrival of his family gained him considerable political favor. Mary was a gracious host. Her sense of humor, coupled with her endless hospitality, made her a favorite among the genteel folk in Washington. Mrs. John Quincy Adams, for example, declared the Middletons to be “the pleasantest [family] in Washington.” The eldest sons, Arthur and

Harry, were regulars at their parents' parties and enjoyed the gaieties that the nation's capital had to offer. The couple's years in the nation's capital were happy ones. The time there seemed particularly valued by Mary, for she found herself in the company of "respectable and sensible people, Ambassadors[,] Ladies of different countries as well as the Natives which all . . . together formed very pleasant company." Mary enjoyed lasting friendships with her husband's congressional colleagues and cabinet members, politicians, and diplomats and their wives. But her time in Washington was short. Henry failed in his third term bid for reelection, and the Middletons returned to the Lowcountry.

His defeat to Charles Pinckney did not, however, signal the end of his political career. During his four years in Washington, Henry had curried significant political favor with men of influence. In 1820, President James Monroe appointed Henry as Minister to Russia, a post he readily accepted. Henry was a logical choice for the post. Not only was he fluent in French, the language of the court, he was, according to Louisa Catherine Adams, the wife of John Adams, "conversant with the fashionable European manners." He also had the personal wealth necessary to "live as a Minister should live in Russia."

54 Mary Hering Middleton to Mary Hering, October 17, 1816, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Mary Hering to Mary Hering Middleton, February 12, 1815, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Harrison Gray Otis to Sophia Otis Ritchie, March 19, 1818, Harrison Gray Otis Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, as quoted in Harrison, Best Companions, 9; Norman E. Saul, Distant Friends: The United States and Russia, 1763-1867 (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 94.

55 Mary Hering to Mary Hering Middleton, June 23, 1827, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Harrison, Best Companions, 9.
Despite the notoriously low salaries of United States diplomats.\(^6\) Mary was pleased with her husband’s assignment. On the way to Russia, the Middletons would first travel to England where Mary would be reunited with her family for the first time in nearly twenty years. The move, however, was not without challenges. Mary and Henry had to make the difficult decision on what to do with their four youngest children.

The oldest children, Arthur, Harry, Oliver, and John Izard, were either on their European Grand Tours or at home in the Lowcountry. The real question was where to place the younger children. The two middle daughters, Maria and Eleanor, who were old enough to participate in the social life of the Court, accompanied them to St. Petersburg. The Imperial Court, in fact, provided the perfect opportunity for the girls to further enhance their sophistication and intellect. In this exclusive world of international diplomats, the girls adopted European standards of cultivation and style.\(^7\) In keeping with past tradition, they decided to put the younger children, Williams, Edward, Catherine, and Eliza, in school in England. Although the separation from her children proved difficult for Mary to bear, she took great consolation in the fact that her children would be under the loving care of her brother Oliver Hering and his family. The Herings acted as surrogate parents to their young charges and their estate, Heybridge Hall, served as gathering place for the children and for the steady stream of Middleton relatives who

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came to visit them from the Lowcountry. These Middletons, no less than previous
generations, were part of an Atlantic World that stretched far beyond the narrow confines
of the Lowcountry, and prolonged stays with European relatives helped further cement
their far-flung family network.  

Henry’s time in the Russian court was busy. He pursued the policies set by John
Quincy Adams, first Minister to Russia who served from 1809 to 1814. Primarily, Henry
was delegated to forge close ties with the Russian government and to protect American
trade interests. The major bone of contention between the two countries involved
trading and fishing rights in the Pacific Northwest, which the Russians had limited. He
negotiated favorable treaties regarding American trade interests in that region and in the
Black Sea.

As important as these diplomatic negotiations were, the Middletons spent far
more time in the social whirl surrounding the lavish court of Czar Nicholas I. Elegant

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58 For descriptions of the Middleton children’s time at Heybridge Hall, see Mary Hering
Middleton to Catherine, April 2, 1821, May 20, 1821, August 12, 1821, May 6, 1822,
August 24, 1822, February 5, 1823, October 28, 1823, March 1, 1825, September 10,
1825, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

59 For more information concerning the role of minister, see Consular Instructions, U.S.
Department of State, 1801-1834, National Archives and Records Service, RG 59; John
Quincy Adams to Henry Middleton, July 5, 1820, Diplomatic Instructions, Department of
State, RG 59 (M77, reel 9) as cited in David W. McFadden, “John Quincy Adams,
American Commercial Diplomacy, and Russia, 1809-1825,” The New England Quarterly
66 (December 1883), 614.

60 For a detailed discussion on U.S. Diplomacy, see John G. Hutchins, The American
Maritime Industries and Public Policy, 1789-1914 (Cambridge: Harvard University
Press, 1941); Norman Graebner, “New England and the World, 1783-1791,” in Conrad
Edick Wright, editor, Massachusetts and the New Nation (Boston: Massachusetts
balls, tournaments, teas, imperial receptions, concerts, weekend visits to the royal country estate, followed one another in a steady stream. As deep as Henry’s pockets were, they were no match for the Czar’s, and his time in Russia left him deeply in debt. His son, John Izard, wrote despairingly from the Lowcountry that “Father’s unmerciuel drafts have created a debt that will require years to pay off; years of economy and management.”

Henry hoped that a successful stint as minister to Russia would be a stepping stone to the Court of St. James. That outcome depended, however, on Adams’ winning the Election of 1828 against Andrew Jackson. Mary Middleton shared her husband’s desire to return to her native land, and wrote, “if he [Adams] does not succeed, adieu to all our hopes of going to England.” Adams’ crushing defeat did, in fact, end Henry’s diplomatic career. Jackson replaced Henry with the eccentric John Randolph of Roanoke, and Henry collected his family and made his way back to the Lowcountry in 1830.

After ten years in Russia, Henry resumed his life as a rice planter and continued his political career in South Carolina. By the time he returned, he had abandoned his old political allegiances and joined the opponents of John C. Calhoun. Henry became the

61 The best descriptions of the family’s social activities in Russia are found in the letters from Mary Hering Middleton to her daughters Eliza and Catherine in England dating from 1820 to 1827. For example, see Mary Hering Middleton to Catherine Middleton, Augustus 12, 1821, May 20, 1821, December 25, 1823, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

leader of the Unionist Party of South Carolina, which opposed nullification, and served as vice president of the Union Convention in 1833.

Henry worked to restore his plantations after years abroad, reintegrated himself into the political and social life of the Lowcountry, and devoted himself to the care and upbringing of his children. Now resettled in Carolina, the Middleton offspring came of age, and a new set of calculations was inevitably put into motion as the prospects of courtship and marriage loomed on the horizon. As their children matured, both Henry and Mary turned their attention to potential marriage partners for them.

Marriage choice for this generation was no less a family affair than it had been in the past. Aware that well-decided matches brought social and economic advantages, the Middletons took a keen interest in the romantic affairs of their kinfolk. Affection and romance aside, marriage represented a consolidation of power and prestige for the couple as well as for members of the larger clan. Like most members of their circle, the Middletons sought marriage partners from other Lowcountry planter families. The land and slaves brought into these marriages increased the family’s holdings and social capital. In marriage and courtship as nowhere else, one sees the intricate intertwining of the bonds of affection and the unsentimental interests of economic survival. Any potential match invited the widespread scrutiny, and earnest advice, of kinfolk near and far.\(^{63}\) Marriages, while seldom arranged, always took place within a realm that called for strategic alliances among Lowcountry kin, northern elites, or European nobility, all of whom were considered desirable prospects for the Middletons.

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Wedlock to distant relatives occurred easily in the Lowcountry where elite families had intermarried for generations and where the young men and women came together at a variety of social functions. But these marriages proved to be extremely advantageous for the Middletons. Kin-based marriages occurred in part as a natural consequence of familiarity, however, they were not simply matters of convenience. The uniting of family members helped prevent the fragmentation of estates while it bolstered the financial and political power of particular families. On March 24, 1828, John Izard wed Sarah McPherson Alston (Sally), the daughter of John Ashe Alston and Sarah McPherson, wealthy rice planters from the Georgetown District north of Charleston. Sally was the sole heir to her parents’ sizable fortune which included Bannockburn Plantation. It produced 750,000 pounds of rice annually and also brought with it 318 slaves. Oliver Middleton made a similar match to Sarah Chisolm (Susan), another distant relative, and heir to her family’s fortune. As the children of Mary and Henry began to marry, familial efforts to forge bonds with the newest additions to the clan began immediately. Reared in the same gentry tradition as their husbands, Sally and Susan quickly found themselves integrated into the Middleton clan.64

The extent of wider involvement in the romantic lives of kin is palpable in the Middletons’ correspondence. When Williams courted Julia Ward, daughter of the

wealthy and influential banker, Joshua Ward of New York, his family took notice. The families, neighbors in New Port, Rhode Island, moved in the same social circles and Julia was close friend of Williams’ sister Eliza. Although few details are known about the courtship, evidence suggests that her father, an abolitionist, opposed the romance because of the Middletons involvement in slavery, an outcome that bitterly disappointed the Middletons. Several years later, he courted the beautiful Susan Pringle Smith, the daughter of Robert and Elizabeth Mary Pringle Smith, and granddaughter of Robert Smith, the first Episcopal Bishop of South Carolina. Like Williams, Susan was a member of the Lowcountry plantocracy, and the Middleton and Smith families had been intertwined for generations through marriage. This time, the romance lasted. Such women were “prized,” in part, because of the rich doweries they brought with them. On the eve of Williams’ wedding to Susan Pringle Smith, his sister Eliza sent her a present “as a token of Sisterly affection. I am sure I shall feel for her for you’re your sake—when I know her better, she will I doubt not, claim it for her own.” Similarly, his mother expressed her enthusiasm not only for the couple but for the fact the union would give Mary a chance to rekindle the friendship she had enjoyed in her earlier youth with

Susan’s mother: “we used to be very intimate formerly & it will give me great pleasure to see her every day.”

Edward, Mary and Henry’s youngest son, was an officer in the United States Navy. In 1845, Edward found himself in port in Naples, Italy. Family members were appalled when they heard the news that shortly after his arrival in Naples, he had fallen in love, and intended to marry, a young woman named Edwardina de Normann. Though a member of the titled nobility, she had a dubious pedigree, and was said to be the illegitimate granddaughter of Edward, the Duke of Kent, the father of Queen Victoria. Although Edward’s brothers were of the opinion that “a Naval Officer ought not to think of taking a wife from whom he would be forced to be separated continually,” Edward did not care; he was under the spell of the seventeen-year-old beauty. Not all family members objected. Edward’s maternal uncle, Oliver Hering, was optimistic about his nephew’s chances for marital bliss. The news of Edward’s marriage gave him great pleasure, “not so much for the grandeur of the connection, but because I think so good a heart as his will be likely to choose well & form a proper match.” Eliza, on the other hand, like other family members, feared that Edward would “pay dearly for his

66 Eliza Middleton Fisher to Susan Pringle Smith, March 1, 1849, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Mary Hering Middleton to Williams Middleton, March 14, 1849, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

imprudence.” But there was little to be done. The match was made and, as Eliza reluctantly conceded, “we must try & make the best of it.”68

Over time, Edwardina managed to charm the Middletons, who, at least temporarily, overcame their doubts. Mary, writing to Eliza, confessed of her daughter-in-law, “the more I am acquainted with Edda the more I become attached to her, she is so affectionate & respectful to me, & as I mentioned before a very affectionate wife & to Paolina like a Sister.”69 Unfortunately, the subsequent history of Edward’s marriage, marred by Edda’s scandalous behavior, would prove the family’s original skepticism correct, and would mark the marriage as a dismal failure and public scandal.

Although Eliza did not choose a partner from the Lowcountry, her marriage to J. Francis Fisher of Philadelphia, affectionately referred to as Fisher by his closest friends and family, marked the continuation of a generational pattern of planter elites marrying into the commercial elite of the Northeast. Moreover, the Middletons had known Fisher for many years. He, too, was a regular at New Port, Rhode Island, and her choice in suitors was met with great pleasure. “This Mr. Fisher is already become such a [family] Favorite,” wrote Eliza’s Uncle Oliver Hering from England, “that I long to personally meet him. I truly rejoice to find that my Dear Niece’s choice so entirely meets yr approbation.”70


69 Mary Hering Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, June 18, 1845, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

As generation followed generation, the Middleton family followed the pattern laid down by Henry and Mary, who in their turn were only following the pattern that had built impressive elite kinship networks across the Atlantic World. Strategic marriages were seen as the coin of the realm in ensuring the continued strength of such networks. Buttressed by a slave economy that provided income, leisure, and the various accouterments of wealth and privilege, the Middletons and families like them had every reason to look forward to an unending dynastic succession.

In keeping with family tradition, the younger generation also made enviable matches with Lowcountry heiresses, northern elites or European nobility. These marriages enhanced the Middletons' fortunes, raised their social prestige, and enlarged their already extensive connections to other elite families in the Lowcountry, in the North, and in Europe. As this generation came of age they seemed poised to continue the pattern established by the previous generations and ready to take their place in the aristocratic world to which they had been so carefully bred.
On June 14, 1846, John Izard Middleton sat down to perform “the melancholy duty of informing” his sister Eliza that their beloved father was dead. With a heavy heart, he narrated the sad details of their patriarch’s long and painful final days. As Eliza knew, her father Henry had suffered for years from a “nervous malady.” This chronic problem, however, was compounded by a mysterious illness that plagued him for months. When John Izard arrived on May 5, his father’s health had so deteriorated that he “could scarcely be said to be alive.” But without mercy, the patriarch “lingered and languished” for another five long weeks. So slow and agonizing were Henry’s last hours, friends and family prayed not for his recovery but “for his release.” It was a great relief, John Izard assured his sister, when “our poor Father breathed his last this morning at 4 o’clock.”

News of Henry’s death spread in short time throughout the Lowcountry. In Charleston, city officials moved quickly to arrange ceremonial rites to mark the passing of one of its most prominent citizens. For a well-respected public figure and one of the region’s wealthiest planter patriarchs, the City honored him, summoning the state militia,

1 Eliza Middleton Fisher had been living in Philadelphia since her marriage to J. Francis Fisher in 1839.

to honor the passing of the former governor. After the public accolades ended, his children took "the remains of [their] beloved parent to Middleton Place" and laid him to rest in the handsome marble mausoleum set in the elegant gardens, in the peaceful company of his father Arthur Middleton and his grandmother, Mary Williams Middleton. Even in death Henry remained at the center of the Middleton plantation complex, surrounded by his rice fields and slaves, as a symbolic reminder of the vast sway of his patriarchal authority. It was as though three generations stood watch over the next, silent but insistent guardians of the dynastic succession.

Yet Henry's death and conspicuous entombment did not mark the end of his influence over his descendants. Through a carefully constructed will, Governor Middleton secured his position as the reigning patriarch even after his death, ensuring a hand in the lives of his dependents from beyond the grave. Henry's will, in many respects, represents a continuation of colonial patterns of inheritance in elite Lowcountry families that kept them bound by economic interests. The patriarch's most important

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4 John Izard Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, June 14, 1846, Cadwalader Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

objective was not providing equity, but rather making certain that his dependents would perpetually maintain the long-standing tradition of extended kinship networks that bound family members not only to one another but also to the plantation complex. Henry’s will prevented the fragmentation of his estate and ensured that patterns of familial mutuality and cooperation would continue much as they had in the past. The patriarch also ensured that the interest of the individual could not be separated from that of the larger clan.

That Henry would wish to bind the next generation to the ancestral estate is not surprising. For Lowcountry aristocrats, the plantation—and the labor system that supported it—defined their identity and buttressed their position as members of a national and international elite. Their patrimony bore within it vast stores of social and cultural capital, and any attempt to subdivide the paternal estate was haunted by the chilling possibility that the dynasty’s status might come to an end. Fidelity to the interests of the estate could be seen as an especially telling fulfillment of the commandment to honor father and mother, and the expectation to nourish the patriarchal estate seemed akin to an article of faith. This generation of Middletons were bound by honor and by the obligations of patriarchy to protect and perpetuate their paternal inheritance and to maintain the extended family complex. By preserving the familial estate from

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fragmentation, Henry hoped to preserve the family’s exalted economic and social position.\(^7\)

Just months before his death, Henry devised a complicated will intended to keep his children in a state of mutual dependency for the rest of their lives. He left his sons, Arthur, Henry, Oliver, John Izard, Edward, and Williams, each $2,000 per annum.

Arthur inherited Newport Plantation “with all the negroes attached to the same as cultivated and settled at the time of my decease & all the personal Estate of every kind belonging to or used with the said plantation to him and his heir,” but not outright. Arthur’s inheritance was subjected to the “‘condition that the said property be fairly valued and that he secure to his brother Harry . . . one half of the value of the said property the payment of said Moiety.” Williams inherited Hobonny plantation and its slaves, but also under the condition that he pay his brother Edward one half of the property’s value. Unlike their brothers, Oliver and John Izard inherited a third plantation, Old Combahee, jointly. Plantation management, therefore, would remain a joint venture for another generation.\(^8\)

Despite the fact that inheritance laws in the United States allowed women to inherit and hold property in their own right, Henry left his wife without any property of her own.\(^9\) In the mold of an eighteenth-century patriarch, Henry put Mary’s fate in the

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\(^9\) For a discussion of women’s property rights, see Marylyn Salmon, ‘Women and Property in South Carolina: The Evidence of Marriage Settlements, 1720-1830,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (October 1982), 655-685; Salmon, *Women and the Law of*
hands of their adult sons. She received an annuity of $4,000, and her sons were required to provide for the "comfort and enjoyment" of their mother. While this afforded Mary some degree of autonomy, she was dependent on the profits from the estate's plantations, which were firmly under her sons' control. Although he left her no property, he did ensure that his sea-side estate in New Port, Rhode Island, Mary's favorite summer retreat, could not be sold during her lifetime without her expressed consent. Similar provisions were made for his married daughter Eliza, who received an annuity of $1,200 "till the said principal Sum of thirty thousand dollars without interest shall be paid and satisfied."10 Securing the future of his other surviving daughter, Catherine, was more complicated. She suffered from a chronic psychological condition that rendered the possibility of marriage or independence impossible. There are only vague references to her illness in the Middletons' correspondence; however, at some point during her early


10 Middleton, "Will of Henry Middleton," Middleton Place Papers (SCHS). This income, although a welcomed addition to the Fisher household, was not vital to the financial stability of Eliza's family. Her husband, J. Francis Fisher (Fisher) was from a wealthy Philadelphian family and his annual allowances from his uncles, George Harrison and Charles Fisher combined with the income generated from Fisher's rental property was more than enough to live comfortably. For more information on J. Francis Fisher's financial security, see Nicholas B. Wainwright, editor, A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher Covering the Years 1834-1871 (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1867, hereafter Fisher Diary), December 31, 1851, 236; Harrison, Best Companions, 19.
adolescence she began exhibiting signs of mental illness. Once a bright, talented, and amiable child, Catherine became plagued by dramatic mood swings which were marked by extreme fits of rage, unpredictable behavior, and, on occasion, violence. Catherine was a source of embarrassment and frustration to her mother, who went to great lengths to keep her out of the public eye. However, when Henry was alive, he refused to have his daughter institutionalized and insisted that his wife Mary care for their daughter, a loathsome duty she passed on to her domestic slaves at Middleton Place. Over time, Mary’s relationship with her daughter became increasingly acrimonious. Aware that his wife struggled in her efforts with their troubled daughter, Henry entrusted Catherine to the care of her brothers. As the appointed executors of their father’s estate, Williams, Edward, and John Izard, were to provide their sister “a clear annuity of twelve hundred dollars per annum as long as she may live.” In this case, however, the brothers were given the additional power to make all decisions concerning their sister’s fate. In 1846, 

11 There is a rich collection of personal correspondence from Mary Hering Middleton to her daughter Catherine when she was in boarding school in England. These letters, dating from 1820-1827, indicate that in her early years, Catherine was an intelligent, sociable, and well-adjusted girl. Unfortunately, the letters do not provide insight into the origins of Catherine’s mental illness. See, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

12 Edward Middleton to Williams Middleton, August 1, 1846, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); John Izard Middleton to Eliza Middleton, August 18, 1846, Middleton Place Plantation Papers (Middleton Place Plantation Archives, Charleston, South Carolina. hereafter MPPA).


Williams and John Izard, in an effort to protect their "dear Mother from the disagreeable consequences of C[atherine]'s aversion for her," decided to institutionalize their sister.\textsuperscript{15} Both Edward and Arthur opposed any plan of placing their sister in the care of strangers, but since neither of the men was in a position to care for Catherine, they consented to the plan.

Aside from these very specific bequests, the executors also served as administrators of Henry's estate. It was their responsibility to "manage, cultivate and improve" all their father's agricultural property of every description. Each of the siblings stood to enjoy a generous income from their respective annuities and could anticipate inheriting a sizable fortune once the estate was settled. However, a major obstacle stood in their way: their father's expressed intention to "confine the enjoyment of the Estate while in debt, to one half the net annual income to pay the debts due & owing by me."\textsuperscript{16} This would prove no easy task. According to Sidney Fisher, "the old gentleman, left his estate much encumbered with debt." The total, he estimated, was $250,000, the near equivalent of $5,000,000 today, much of it incurred during Henry's stay in Russia. Even under ideal conditions, Sidney determined, it would take nearly a decade pay off the debt

\textsuperscript{15} John Izard Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, August 18, 1846, Middleton Place Plantation Papers (MPPA).

\textsuperscript{16} Middleton, "Will of Henry Middleton," Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Fisher Diary, October 11, 1846, 190-191.
and settle the estate. Henry's death ensured the continuation of mutuality and cooperation.\textsuperscript{17}

The problem of the debt was exacerbated by the boom and bust cycle of South Carolina's rice economy. Despite the volatility of South Carolina's rice economy, none of Henry's benefactors seemed particularly distressed by the amount of debt owed by the estate.\textsuperscript{18} Nor were they bothered by the condition that half the net profits go toward satisfying outstanding financial obligations. What did, however, cause family strife was the unequal distribution of Henry's assets. Indeed, after learning the details of their father's will, the six brothers quickly found themselves at odds. Their dissatisfaction came, in part, from the fact that Williams, the second to youngest son, was bequeathed "all the residue" of his father's estate which included the coveted Middleton Place plantation. Although not the most lucrative in terms of rice production and slaves, its value in personal property and prestige was priceless and naturally would have gone to the eldest son.\textsuperscript{19}

Many believed that Williams was his "father's favorite son, & was thus preferred before his elder brothers." Not surprisingly, this "produced great dissatisfaction among

\textsuperscript{17} Fisher Diary, October 11, 1846, 190-191; Harrison, Best Companions, 502.


those who had less than others. . ."20 Moreover, the three primary properties named in
their father's will, Hobonny, Old Combahee, and Newport, all on the Combahee River,
were not of equal value. John Izard and Oliver received the least valuable with Old
Combahee. However, in an effort to preserve the affectionate bonds that united the
siblings and alleviate family discord, Williams agreed with all his brothers "to make their
shares more nearly equal."21 In exchange for Old Combahee, he gave his brothers John
and Oliver his interest in the more valuable Hobonny plantation. With the consent of
their mother, Williams also agreed to sell the family's seaside mansion in New Port,
Rhode Island "for the payment of debts."22 Again, this was a generous concession on
Williams' part. The property sold for $20,000 which, in accordance to the will, was
Williams' since it "formed part of the residuary estate" left solely to his father's pet.23

In effect, Henry structured his estate in a fashion that ensured the continuation of a
kinship economy. However, its unequal distribution threatened the very network he
sought to encourage. Williams, in his demonstration of concern for family tranquility, as
well as for the economic well-being of his kin, sought to correct the situation, at no small
personal cost. Williams sacrificed an estimated $60,000 in the redistribution of the

20 Fisher Diary, October 11, 1846, 190-191.

21 Fisher Diary, June 14, 1847, 196.

22 Williams' brother-in-law, J. Francis Fisher (Fisher) was instrumental in negotiating the
sale of the Newport property. For more information, see J. Francis Fisher to Williams
Middleton, July 5, 13, 1850; Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, July 13, 20, 1850,
Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

23 Fisher Diary, June 14, 1847, 196.
estate. His willingness to make such a generous concession was a great relief to his mother, who knew all too well that “money . . . often causes sad disputes & disunites families.” Still, the complex nature of the initial bequest and the complications imposed by the heavy debt on the estate, as well as the informal reallocation of assets, made certain that the individual economic interest of the Middleton siblings would continue to be bound closely to one another. Like other large, prominent planter families, this generation of Middletons sat at the center of complex social economy.

With the matter of their inheritance settled to everyone’s satisfaction, the Middletons went to work managing their paternal inheritance. The business learned under the tutelage of their father was now performed as a “joint venture” among brothers. In the years following their father’s death, John Izard and Williams assumed primary responsibility for managing the familial estate, although Oliver assisted in the project. The brothers entrusted the daily operations of the properties to the care of overseers, but Williams and John Izard frequently visited the estate plantations, and, whenever possible,

24 Mary Hering Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, February 17, 1840, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).


26 John Izard Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, April 20, 1841, November 20, 1848, Middleton Place Plantation Papers (MPPA); Edward Middleton to Williams Middleton, August 17, 1846, July 23, 1846, August 1, 1846, February 23, 1847, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
they did so together. They regularly exchanged goods and services, traded slave labor when the need arose, and provided financial assistance to kinfolk. These shared managerial responsibilities also ensured that if one brother was unable or unwilling to perform his duties, another would readily step in. All major decisions concerning the operations, including management and maintenance of these plantations, were made in consultation with others. Clearly, they had an interest in seeing that everyone profited. When Oliver decided to expand rice production on Old Combahee, Williams loaned him $867 and supplied additional slave labor. He was happy to find later that his brother’s efforts “seem in a very prosperous condition; and full of promise.” Small loans of this sort were common place. However, the Middletons also relied on family members for larger loans. When the brothers wanted to expand their holdings on Combahee River, they borrowed 10,000 dollars from their cousin, Henry Augustus Middleton, Jr.

In between visits, the brothers corresponded regularly regarding their business affairs. These letters reveal the fears and frustrations that a complicated plantation

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27 Williams lived at Middleton Place, his plantation on the Ashley River, the John Izard Middletons lived on their Waccamaw River plantation, and Oliver and his family lived on their plantation at Edisto Island. When not on their respective properties, the men usually resided in Charleston.

28 For examples of small loans and the exchange of goods and labor, see John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, May 21, 1849; Williams Middleton to John Izard Middleton, April 26, 1854, October 8, 1856; Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, December 31, 1851; Williams Middleton to Mary Hering Middleton, February 26, 1849, October 17, 1850, February 5, 1851, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

29 Williams Middleton to Oliver Middleton, n.d., Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Oliver Middleton to Williams Middleton, September 14, 1849, Williams Middleton Collection (South Caroliniana, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina); Correspondence between John Izard and Williams was an important element in the
economy bred. For instance, in 1847 John Izard confessed to Williams that he “was quite mortified at the ill results which have so often attended our efforts to make a crop at Hobonny.” While he realized that “the season was a very bad one,” it was not “so bad as to justify a half crop.” Of all the brothers, Harry was the one who had the least interest in the management of the plantations. Years before he had “fully made up his mind that Phil[adelphia] is a more agreeable place than Combahee and . . . decided in his resolution never to set foot here again if he could possible avoid it.” Not surprisingly, he preferred to spend his time in polite society rather than on the plantation. Edward’s service in the U. S. Navy also meant that he was not involved in the daily operations of the plantations.

The Middletons, like most Lowcountry planters, relied on white overseers for the day-to-day management of their plantations. But finding competent managers was difficult. Here, however, the family had good fortune. For many years, they enjoyed the services of an excellent overseer, Mr. Doniphau, who managed with skill the family’s management of the estate. For numerous examples, see Middleton Place Papers (SCHS), especially between the years 1850 and 1863.

30 John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, March 1, 1847, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS)


Combahee River plantations. Unfortunately, Doniphau died unexpectedly from fever. His replacement, John Hicks, paled in comparison. Apparently, Hicks had little talent in the way of managing slaves, and his excessive drinking, accompanied by abusive rantings, proved problematic. After nearly two years, Williams fired Hicks, a decision his brothers applauded. John Izard was of the opinion that “it was the worst policy in the world” to keep a bad manager and determined that it “much better to have no overseer at all” than Hicks. In short time, they found his replacement, B.T. Sellers. Although the family was highly skeptical of Seller’s skills as a manager, he stayed in their employment throughout the Civil War.

Like most Lowcountry rice planters, the Middletons, utilized the task system of labor, which was particularly suited to rice cultivation, and which relied heavily on drivers. The drivers represented the highest degree of black authority on the plantation; they were responsible for the care and management of their respective gangs, for carrying out the orders and reporting to the masters or overseers, as well as for maintaining order within the slave community. The elevated position gave the drivers a measure of “white” authority, and they were highly trusted and competent men. On Newport and Hobonny plantations, the drivers lived in tabby cottages made from a combination of oyster shells,

33 Scarborough, Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth Century South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 163-164.

sand, lime, and brick. These houses, larger and studier than the wood frame cottages that most of the Middleton slaves lived in, represented their elevated position on the plantation. The Middletons also held their skilled slaves in high esteem. Responsible for providing the skilled services essential to the plantation or to the comfort of their owners, these slaves enjoyed a higher status and more mobility on and off the plantation. The slave women who cared for the Middleton children moved frequently, as did coachman, between Charleston and the plantations.

Rice, like other southern cash crops, was labor intensive. It required a large and constant work force to construct and maintain the complex system of dikes, canals, and embankments required to flood and drain the swampy fields. The labor involved in its production was arduous and posed serious health risks, especially in the summer months, when maladies such as yellow fever and malaria ravaged the Lowcountry. The Middletons took an active role in maintaining the health of their slaves. Physicians made regular and routine visits to the plantations, overseers kept their employers abreast of


illness, and, on some occasions, the Middletons administered medical remedies themselves. Health care, however, was not distributed equally, and the family’s domestic servants and skilled slaves received preferential treatment. When “good old Moro,” a domestic servant that the Middletons had known since their childhood, fell ill with pleurisy, the family went to great lengths to save him. Arthur, for example, stayed by his side for several days. Although they had a doctor attending him, Arthur also tried to bleed him. Despite these efforts, Moro died. The Middletons deemed his death a “great loss,” for Moro’s “attention to his business & his honesty can scarcely be equaled.”37 In a similar instance, Die, the nurse from Middleton Place, fell ill with cholera, Williams and Susan Middleton kept careful watch over the woman and put her under a doctor’s care. For several weeks, the couple kept a close watch over Die, and happily reported her recovery to other family members. Births, deaths, and illnesses of favored slaves were frequently reported through family correspondence. Such heartfelt expressions of concern, driven out of genuine emotion, were reserved for a small group of Middleton slaves with whom the Middleton family had strong emotional attachments.38 When Handy, a driver at Hobonny plantation died, Williams mourned the death of a man he considered to be “one of the best disposed Negroes on the place,” adding that he would “feel his loss very much.”39

37 Harrison, Best Companions, 227.

38 Susan Middleton to Williams Middleton, July 6, 1849, July 14, 1849, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Scarborough, Masters of the Big House, 188.

39 Williams Middleton to Susan Middleton, January 22, 1860, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
The Middletons did not confine health care to crisis situations. Doctors such as Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Perry made regular and routine visits to the plantations. They administered a variety of remedies, especially for the skin diseases that seemed to flourish in the wet, swampy climate of the Lowcountry. The Middletons also kept slave nurses on all of their plantations, which meant that their slaves frequently consulted with black and white health care providers, allowing them to combine African American folk medicine with the medicine of the white community. As a result, the Middletons’ slaves were healthier than those on many Lowcountry plantations. In 1855, Charles Eliot Norton, a noted man of letters, visited Oliver Middleton’s Edisto Island plantation. Although Norton believed that “slavery in its mildest form is yet very sad,” he reported that the slaves on Oliver’s place, “are all contented, and well cared for so far as their physical condition is concerned, where they are treated with the consideration due to human beings. . . .” The attention given to the physical needs of slaves was driven not only by paternalism but also by a more calculated interest to protect the value of their property.

While the Middleton slaves were certainly not content with enslavement, the tranquility observed by Norton may well have reflected a degree of satisfaction these men and women derived from family life. No less than their masters, the Middleton

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40 Inventories of Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Perry, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

slaves laid claim to a extended kinship network that was tied to the plantation. The size, age, and stability of the Middletons’ properties facilitated the formation of transgenerational families. For the bondspeople on these plantations, family served as a bulwark against the dehumanizing effects of the South’s “peculiar institution.” While it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully reconstruct the nature of slave family life on the Middleton plantations, there are some surviving slave lists that offer insight into the structure of slave families on the Middleton plantations.42

In 1854, on Horse Savannah, a relatively small Middleton plantation adjacent to Middleton Place Plantation, the slave community was comprised of twenty-one men, twenty seven women, and forty-one children. Of the adults, 62 percent of the men and 49 percent of the women were married and had, on average, two children. Another 23 percent of the women had children but no partner, at least not one living on Horse Savannah. On average, these women had 2.8 children. There are only two women, Venus and Old Cate, and two men, William and Samson, that are listed without spouses or children. This, however, does no indicate that they were without familial ties. Venus, for example, was born on Horse Savannah, and her father Bristol, and her two sisters, Celia

42 See the following slave lists, “List of Negroes at Middleton Place, January 1853,” “List of Negroes at Horse Savannah, December 1854,” “Children at Horse Savannah & Jerry Hill, 1859,” “Clothes given to children at M. Place, December 1859,” Middleton Place Plantation Papers (SCHS). For examples of rice plantations with extremely high death rates see Dusinberre, Them Dark Days.
and Chloe, also lived there. She was surrounded by a large circle of kin that included her nephews, Jack and Benjamin and her niece, Emma.\textsuperscript{43}

For the Middletons, the slave family represented opportunities for both paternalism and control. Correspondence suggests that the Middletons watched over these families with a paternalistic eye. For example, in a letter to his wife Susan, Williams reported the good news that their slave Rachel had given birth to a baby girl and that both mother and child were doing well. In the same letter, however, he also reported “the worst news” that another slave, Bella, “so long at deaths door” had died and expressed sympathy and concern for her grief-struck husband, Michael.\textsuperscript{44} The Middletons knew the families of their favorite slaves and frequently commented on the births, deaths, marriages, and illnesses that shaped their family lives. There is no evidence, for this generation of Middletons, that they sold any of their slaves. The greatest threat to the slave family separation on the Middleton plantations, therefore, came when their white owners married.

The Middletons understood the important ways that family life created stability on the plantations and it was cause of concern when they were disbanded. When Williams decided to move the thirty Smith family slaves who were part of Susan’s marriage contract to one of his plantations on the Combahee River, Susan worried about

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Williams Middleton to Susan Middleton, December 28, 1857, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
the effect of the move. She told her husband to order the overseer "to be kind to them & recollect that they have been very much indulged & not accustom to work hard & therefore require to be trained before they are forced to perform even the usual task." She was not only concerned with their adjustment to the work but for the community as well: "You will I am sure make their new home so comfortable that they will soon forget their old one." Rather than forgetting their old homes, these slaves probably expanded their kinship networks. The Smiths and Middletons frequently visited each others plantations which provided an opportunity for these slaves to visit their former home. Still, this example demonstrates the potential negative effects of permanently removing slaves from their communities.

The income afforded by the plantation economy and the labor provided by teams of slaves made possible a way of life ideally suited to nurturing a wide family network and to expressing familial affection and concern in concrete ways. The Middletons continued the habits of visiting, travel, and correspondence that had cemented the family's extensive kinship and friendship networks for generations. They, like their colonial forebears, maintained fashionable townhouses in Charleston. Removed from the potentially isolating effects of country living, the Middletons enjoyed the pleasures of city life in close proximity to their kin. While the Middleton men set about their business in

45 William Mason Smith to Williams Middleton, January 24/5, 1849.

46 Susan Middleton to Williams Middleton, February 14, 1849.
town, their wives and children entertained themselves visiting. Rarely a day passed in town without at least a brief visit from a relative or friend. At some point during the day, they were bound to see a parent, a sibling, a cousin, a niece, or an in-law, whose company and conversation they enjoyed. It was common, for example, for Williams’ wife Susan to spend the afternoons with her kinfolk. While in town, she regularly went for carriage rides along the Battery or strolled with her brothers in the afternoons. In fact, she complained bitterly if they were not there to receive her. The Middleton children played in the company of their cousins while their parents took tea. Regardless of the occasion, these visits provided the Middletons with an enjoyable outlet from the isolation of the country. Moreover, these short visits integrated elements of daily life into a web of connecting households, creating a sense of intimacy among kinfolk who were often apart.

While these activities were important in maintaining the affectionate and familiar bonds of family, they were also crucial in bolstering the family’s public image. As Lorri

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47 Eliza Middleton Fisher to Mary Hering Middleton, January 20, 1843, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS). Oliver Middleton, Henry Augustus Middleton, Nathaniel Russell Middleton, Susan Middleton’s mother, Mrs. Robert Smith as well as Susan’s brothers Williams Mason Smith, John Julius Pringle Smith, sisters Emma Heyward and Sarah Rutledge all kept houses in Charleston. Numerous other relatives including the Pringles, Heywards, Hugers, and Rutledges also had homes in the city.

48 For examples of daily visiting habits, see the Middleton family correspondence in the Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

Glover's study of the Lowcountry elite in the eighteenth century demonstrated, "Charleston's gentry wore their wealth like a badge of honor." They exhibited great sophistication and an unrivaled penchant for consumption. They dressed in the finest clothes, maintained majestic houses and gardens, threw lavish parties and balls. Their public image, carefully constructed by the clothes they wore, the houses they owned, and leisure activities they participated in, served as a powerful visual representation of elites' concern over gentility and status. Public displays of elegance and sophistication were of key importance to the family. The Middleton women were particularly important in this project. They, perhaps more than their men, stood as the representatives of refinement. The leisureed lifestyles of elite white women also distinguished them from other classes and races of women. Even in a city famous for its elegant and richly attired women, the Middletons made quite an impression. Williams' wife, Susan Pringle Smith Middleton, was considered to be one of the most finely attired women in town and like her "stately mother made a marked appearance in town." Strolls on the Battery, carriage rides, appearances at concerts and balls amounted to more than just pleasant excursions; they put the Middletons on public display and bolstered and maintained their elite image.

50 For a detailed discussion of the various ways that "this conscious construction of genteel culture throughout America," see Richard Bushman, Refinement of America; Walter J. Frazer, Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 129.

51 Alicia Hopton Middleton, for example, described Susan and her sister Emma (Mrs. Alston Pringle) as two of the most fashionable women in the Lowcountry, who in the company of their "stately" mother made quite an impression, Alicia Hopton Middleton, Life in Carolina and New England During the Nineteenth Century: As Illustrated by Reminiscences and Letters of the Middleton Family of Charleston South Carolina and of the De Wolf Family of Bristol, Rhode Island (Bristol, RI: Privately printed, 1929), 61.
While the family was frequently praised for their refinement and taste, the attention they received sparked jealously from other members of the Charleston elite. Jane North commented to a friend that "Miss Sally Middleton is the beauty of the season, but not the only beauty. The two Frasers," she insisted "are quite as handsome, but I tell you there is a great difference paid to a Middleton."\(^{52}\)

The family also made regular treks to the cooler climate of the Northeast. New Port, Rhode Island was a favorite vacation spot for the Middletons. There they spent leisurely summers in the company of kin. Riding, dining, and entertaining consumed their days. Williams, John Izard, Oliver, Harry, and Eliza all enjoyed New Port’s lively social scene and maintained close ties with the friends from their youth. Eliza, for example, remained dear friends with Sophie Thorndike and Julia Ward Howe for much of her life. It was at New Port that Eliza’s brothers forged bonds with members of her husband’s clan, the Fishers. Fisher’s cousin, Sidney, describe the pleasant summer passed in the company of Eliza’s kin. He rode everyday with Eliza and the Middletons, whom he found to be "well bred, agreeable people."\(^{53}\) However, their days were not spent exclusively in the company of northern elites, they also enjoyed the company of Lowcountry relatives including the Henry Augustus Middletons, the John Julius Pringles, the J. J. Pringle Smiths, and the Nathaniel Russell Middletons. Extended vacations in

\(^{52}\) Jane North to A.P. Allston, February 18, 1850, Allston Papers (SCHS).

\(^{53}\) Fisher Diary, August 30, 1830, 82.
New Port provided an intimate environment for maintaining old inherited social relationship and fostering new ones.  

By the 1840s, Philadelphia had also become an important hub for the Middletons. Like so many Lowcountry aristocrats, the family maintained long-standing kinship connections to the city’s commercial elite. While the family always enjoyed the city, it became a gathering spot after Henry’s death. Desperate to be close to her daughter and grandchildren, Mary Middleton spent much of her time there. With their mother and sister firmly established in the city, the other Middleton siblings often gathered there. Williams, John Izard, Edward, and Arthur, along with their wives and children, were all eager to enjoy the cosmopolitan pleasures of Philadelphia, and by the 1840s they became regulars in the city’s social scene. Although Oliver and Susan did not sojourn there as long as other family members, they did send their daughters to school under the watchful eyes of their Aunt Eliza and Uncle Fisher.

Despite the high degree of mobility the Middletons enjoyed, there was still a great distance that separated them from their loved ones. Correspondence was a crucial element in maintaining intimate bonds between family members and filling the emotional void so


often felt in one's absence. Through letters kinfolk shared both the ordinary and extraordinary details of their lives. Writing provided an opportunity for individuals to share with the larger clan their joys and sorrows, their hopes and aspirations, their fears and tribulations. Through these regular and detailed missives, family members maintained a sense of daily involvement in the lives of their loved ones. The birth of children, the successes and failures in business, the romantic interests of friends and families, the latest books read, music heard, and parties attended were all recounted in detail.

Such letters were not limited to the adult members of the clan. Indeed, correspondence was a highly ritualized and prized activity among nineteenth-century elites, and the Middletons introduced their offspring to the art of letter-writing at a young age. The children of Williams, John Izard, Eliza, and Oliver became devoted correspondents with their cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, ensuring that the emotional ties that had bound the family together would not unravel. As Williams wrote to Fisher, "I suppose that your little girls through their correspondence with John's daughters have as much or even more information with regard to family news than I have at the present." The interests of adolescents differed from those of adults, and provided them greater insight into the lives of the next generation. 57

So important was correspondence that failure to write could arise resentments. Such was the case with Williams, who rebuked his sister Eliza for her failure to write

57 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, February 17, 1853, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
frequently enough. “After waiting day after day & indeed week after week” to hear from Eliza, he could no longer refrain from letting “a portion of my indignation ooze out from my fingers ends in invectives against your abominable neglect and want of consideration for my state, both of solicitude and solitude.” ⁵⁸ No doubt the harshness of Williams’ expression arose from the profound loneliness of managing plantation affairs by himself at a considerable distance from the delights of familial companionship. He continued:

Why in the Devil did you promise to write to me if you had not made up your mind to keep your word: and why, if your mind was made up, have you not told me what is going on among & around you & those I take interest in? You expect me without other material than an entourage of black faces & rice stacks, to manufacture letters worth receiving, while you forsooth, with the whole society of Philadelphia & N[ew] York around you, scarcely vouchsafe a reply to my epistle; & expect more over three to one. To be very candid with you, I cannot hesitate to confess that I regard this as a bad bargain for me.⁵⁹

But such angry outbursts were rare. With few exceptions, the pages passed between kin were filled with heartfelt expressions of love and devotion.⁶⁰

In times of sorrow, correspondence between kin proved particularly important. Within the world of letters, family members gave voice to their deepest sorrows. After the unexpected death of John Izard’s son Henry (Hal), a college student in Columbia, South Carolina, letters of condolence passed between family members. Despite the high expectation that such losses should be met with courage and forbearance, John Izard


⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Johnson, “Planters Patriarchs,” 69.
could not contain his grief. He poured his pain onto the pages as he tried to cope with loss of his “precious boy.” The reality of Hal’s death hit him and his family with such “a crushing heaviness that we find it hard to bear. . . .” It was, he explained, “as if the Spring of my heart was broken.” Adding to his sorrow was his inability to “comfort and support” his wife; no matter what he did, John Izard could not “assuage her grief.” He only hoped that “time the great comforter will at length pour his balm upon our wounds.” Williams and Eliza, confident that a return to Waccamaw would only add to their sister-in-law’s sorrow, urged their brother to keep her away from home as long as possible.

John Izard’s mother arranged for Sally and her daughter go to New Port, Rhode Island. While kinship networks were sources of nurture, they were, just as importantly, sources of censure. In addition to providing opportunities to pursue the pleasures of connection, hospitality, and mutual joys, they served to monitor and control individual behavior, a function crucial to the maintenance of family honor. The family’s public image confirmed their elite status and linked the private family to the public sphere. The Middletons exercised a zealous, occasionally fierce, guardianship of that image. Aware that the actions of one family member could adversely affect the reputation of the entire clan, the Middletons worked collectively to ensure that all its members acted in a manner

61 John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, March 1, 1847, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., March 1, March 6, 1847, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Mary Hering Middleton to Williams, March 10, 1847, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
that best reflected the refinement and sophistication of the family. Those who did not were quickly admonished. Arthur Middleton’s panache for flamboyant fashion, for example, was a source of untold embarrassment to his family. After all, dress was a crucial indicator of social status, and Arthur’s flashy taste and “passion for dress” caused quite a stir. His peculiar sense of style included a “screaming check suit,” considered inappropriate by his manly southern relatives. Clothes, like all other external measures of refinement, mattered to the Middletons. In fact, Williams was so bothered by his brother’s dress that he “predict[ed] very serious consequences will ensure, should this ridiculous taste be adhered to in this country, & declared he anticipates his arrival with no degree of pleasure.”

Other problems were far more serious. The Middletons’ reservations concerning Edwardina, Edward’s Italian wife, had long faded. She easily won over the hearts of those family members who had remained aloof and suspicious. Few could resist her “kindly feelings & cheerful manners.” Naval duty called, and Edward, much to his displeasure, bid adieu to his young bride, leaving her in the attentive care of his family. As soon as Edward left, Edda’s behavior began to change. At first, according to relatives, her social transgressions were minor. Her rather dubious taste in literature created a few minor ripples. Her adoration for George Sand’s Indiana, for example, was frowned upon, but not nearly as much as her public accolades of the “shocking” text in polite society.

64 Mary Hering Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, June 19, 1841 (private collection) as quoted in Harrison, Best Companions, 226.

Initially, her kinfolk responded with gentle reprimands. Perhaps, they reasoned, her behavior was merely a result of a most unfortunate Neapolitan upbringing and certainly could be forgiven. But cultural difference could not explain more aggressive sins. Edda also took to venturing out in public unescorted and, the Middletons thought, spent too much time engaging in frivolity. According to her sister-in-law Paolina, Edda spent "so much of the day shopping and visiting, and going out to parties almost every night," that she could not possibility fulfill her duties as a wife, a mother, and a Middleton.\(^6\) In a single fortnight, according to kinfolk, Edda had purchased two very expensive party dresses, one of which cost $300, several silk dress and "various articles of dress which were superfluous such as embroidered handkerchiefs and collars costing $20 each."\(^7\)

However, this list of sundry shortcomings paled in comparison to the social sins she eventually committed. Edda’s ultimate transgression was a brief but all too public affair with Henry McCall of Philadelphia, a distant relative of the Middletons.\(^8\) Even before the rumors of an affair began to surface, Edda’s public behavior raised eyebrows. Among her many improprieties, Edward’s young bride seemed to fancy the attention of

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men. At dinners, parties, balls, almost any public gathering, Edda attracted considerable attention. Rather than politely ignoring the male overtures, Edda enjoyed them. As family and friends began noticing such indiscretions, Eliza Middleton Fisher deemed it necessary to talk with her sister-in-law about such behavior. Initially, according to Eliza, she simply explained to the foreign bride that “it was not our custom for a lady to separate herself from the rest of the company, and talk the whole evening to the same gentleman. . . .” The Middletons were “very much annoyed” when they realized that Edda ignored the sage advice “and continued to do it. . . .”

For her part, Edda seemed not to care that her kinfolk were displeased with her actions. At least, she made no evident effort to curb her rather unconventional behavior. In fact, it only escalated. In her husband’s absence, Edda began spending most of her time with Henry McCall. Their flirtatious behavior in public fueled the rumor that the two were having an affair. To make matters worse, they spent much of their time together in private. This, by any measure of the day, was considered scandalous.

Eventually Edda’s nanny and maid reported to the Middletons that Mr. McCall frequently made nocturnal visits to the Italian beauty, visits she supposedly accepted wearing

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nothing but her undergarments. Servants testified that the two would spend hours alone, in the dark, doing what exactly, no one knew. The Middletons imagined only the worst. Despite Edda’s ardent denials of any serious transgression, the prevailing belief was that she was indeed having an affair with McCall.

Because the family belonged to such a small social elite, the news of the affair spread through Philadelphia and the Carolina Lowcountry at breakneck speed. Interested parties were “shocked and grieved to hear of the deceit [Edda] had practiced, and the misery she had laid up for herself and her husband by her misconduct.” Paolina went to see Edda and scornfully told her once—favorite relation, “I would have rather have heard of your sudden death, than your disgrace.” Paolina’s outrage was shared by many others in the family. Maintaining family honor and respectability was part of a woman’s duty. Any sexual indiscretion injured not only the principals involved, but the entire family. Women were obliged to maintain both private and public morality and to enforce the moral standards and values which it represented. The unanimous condemnation of Edwardina’s improprieties signifies that the Middleton women accepted, reinforced, and indeed worked hard to perpetuate the patriarchal expectation of female virtue.72

Since Edda’s public disgrace shamed all the Middletons, they united in their efforts to restore the family’s honor. Williams and his brothers believed that Edward had

71 For additional information concerning the testimony of Hannah Fenney, Edda’s nanny, see, Fisher Diary, December 27, 1849, 230.

72 “Middleton Divorce Case” 42-47 (Library Company of Philadelphia); Clinton, The Other Civil War, 40-41.
no other choice than to challenge Mr. McCall to a duel. Though they were aware that the
age—old practice was falling out of favor, particularly in the North, and that Edward
himself was opposed to it, the brothers did not waver in their conviction. They assured
Edward that while they respected his “conscientious scruples on the subject” the situation
was so grave that he had no other choice. “Severe things,” they explained, “have been
said here [Philadelphia] & in Carolina about Middleton’s forbearance,” and therefore, the
brothers determined, he could not shirk the duty required by the family’s offended honor
without bringing further disgrace.73 Williams assured Edward that it would be impossible
for him to retain his position in the Navy or among Southern gentlemen if he did not kill,
or at least try to kill, the “destroyers of his domestic prospects.” To his brother John
Izard, the course of action was clear; he informed his brother that he had “two jobs to go
through with. He must get a divorce, and kill Mr. McCall.” But despite his brothers’
pleas, Edward refused. Dueling, it would seem, went against his moral scruples. After
two petitions to the Pennsylvania Legislature, he was granted a divorce in 1850.74

The family, so pleased to rid themselves of such “shame,” was horrified when, just before the divorce was to be granted, Edward “behaved with great weakness in
receiving her again after her infidelity had been fully proven.” Believing they had done
their “duty,” the Middletons had no regrets, except for their failure to “relieve their family

73 Fisher Diary, December 27, 1849, 230; Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 167, 350-356.

from dishonour [sic]."  

In fact, the family was so upset when Edward reconciled with his former wife, they had little contact with him as long as he remained in such a sullied union. Brother-in-law J. Francis Fisher was more conflicted in his feelings. On the one hand, he certainly thought it poor judgement of Edward to reunite with his unfaithful wife, but on the other hand he regretted that the series of events had strained his relationship with Edward. As he confessed to his wife, "I had no opportunity of particular enquiries about Edward & c but heard he is to leave New Port tomorrow. I cannot call on him and hope I may not meet him—for if he have any feeling for his wife—he can never forget or forgive what I said of her to him."  

During the next several years, they resented the continuous disgrace brought on by Edda's even more flagrant sexual indiscretions, and it was only after Edward once again brought divorce proceedings against his wife that his family was willing to receive him. As Williams observed:

Edward is striving hard to obtain a divorce & will probably succeed at the cost of a settlement of $1000 per annum upon the unworthy object of his choice & the renunciation of claims to the child until 14 years old. If this last condition be insisted on he is not likely to derive much comfort from his feelings of paternity, I fear, for few would be found to any or much good from any youth brought up

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75 Williams Middleton to John Izard Middleton, May 3, 1849, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

76 J. Francis Fisher to Eliza Middleton Fisher, September 6, 1853, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

77 "Middleton Divorce Case," (Library Company of Philadelphia); Fisher Diary, March 6, 1858.
under such auspices as he is likely to be. Other conditions of course include his payment of her debts to the amount of $20,000. What a winding up! Poor Ned!"  

Once again, the family worked together to resolve Edward’s debt. In this unfortunate affair, the Middleton family rallied to protect the threat to family honor. The incident also illustrates that women, as well as men, played a crucial role in maintaining family honor. The affair threatened to disrupt the tight family bonds, and for a time it did so, but ultimately the Middletons maintained their elaborately constructed networks of support and bonds of extended affection. Though Edward’s behavior strained relations to the breaking point, he was eventually welcomed back into the fold.

Through a complicated will, Henry Middleton kept his children in the tightly knit web of family relations that had helped nurture and sustain the Middleton family for generations. The favoritism that Henry showed to his favorite son, Williams, threatened that family accord, but Williams saw the danger that the unequal division of his father’s estate posed to the family bonds and made costly arrangements to rectify that situation and maintain close family ties. After their father’s death, the Middleton men settled down to a lifestyle familiar to the family since the colonial era. They managed their estates cooperatively, traveled together, visited together, and shared the ups and downs of family life virtually as one. They consciously labored to maintain the high status the family had long enjoyed, a project that both male and female family members understood and shouldered. Any threat to their position met a quick and united response, and family members who failed in that duty faced ostracism. As serious as those challenges were,

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they paled in comparison with what was to come as forces outside the family’s control threatened to tear their world apart. As the Civil War approached, the family was once again riven by divisions, and the Middletons learned firsthand that this was, indeed, a brothers’ war.
CHAPTER 3
“TO THE HEIGHTS OF HOPE, AND DEPTHS OF DESPAIR”:
THE BURDENS OF WAR AND THE BONDS OF FAMILY, 1861-1864

As staunch supporters of secession, the Middletons took great offense at the characterization of Confederates as hotheads and traitors. Irritated and defensive, they abandoned the polite decorum that once dictated patrician politics and fired back at the growing litany of criticisms their region now faced. Scoffing at charges that southerners acted in “rashness and haste,” the Middletons insisted that it was “illegal & irresponsible despotism” that drove them out of the Union. In their minds, the South was a victim of an abusive government, and secession, as one Middleton woman put it to her Yankee mother, was an act of “defense not aggression.” Their reaction was not surprising. Williams and John Izard were signers of South Carolina’s Ordinance of Secession, and their brother, Oliver, was also a fervent supporter of southern independence. For these southern slaveowning aristocrats, secure in their positions of power and prestige for over two centuries, no challenge to slavery and the South’s right to maintain it could be tolerated. On the eve of the Civil War, the Middletons stood at the pinnacle of South Carolina’s plantocracy. Collectively, the clan owned more than a dozen large rice plantations and, according to historian William Dusinberre, a slave population approximately 1,500 strong. The family’s wealth in land and slaves was matched only by a handful of other Lowcountry families—the Porchers, Allstons, Wards, Reads, Blakes,
Rutledges and Aikens—many of whom were related to the Middletons. They joined other members of the Lowcountry elite in making South Carolina the locus point of the South’s conservative revolution.¹

The Middletons accepted the secessionist argument that only by severing the once sacred bonds of national unity could the South ensure its economic prosperity, political autonomy, and moral integrity. Relying on the familiar ideological legacy of the American Revolution, an ideology that their ancestors had helped formulate to unite the country, the family joined other southerners in employing the rhetoric of republicanism to justify disunion. Honor, as historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown demonstrates, was at the center of “the revolutionary heritage of freedom,” and most of the Middletons agreed with Nathaniel Russell Middleton who observed that a refusal to fight “despotic power” meant the “surrender” of “honor and dignity and self-respect.” Without honor, Nathaniel Russell Middleton argued, there could be no “safety,” and the South would remain forever in an “imbecilic and dependent condition.” Unwilling to be shamed by the North, unable to conceive that slavery was any less than a sacred right, the Middletons ardently advocated disunion.²


On April 12, 1861, the threatening clouds of war finally broke. For nearly four months, the Middletons had eagerly waited for the "long-anticipated hostilities to erupt." The moment had finally arrived. At three o'clock in the morning, General P.G.T. Beauregard, the commander of the Confederate forces, called on Major Robert Anderson to surrender Fort Sumter. Although anxious "to avoid collision with the citizens of South Carolina," the Union officer regretfully informed Confederate officials that his sense of honor and obligation to the Federal Government prevented his compliance. The last effort to negotiate peace had failed. At half past four in the morning, South Carolina opened fire on the Federal fort, plunging the nation into war.

For the next thirty-two hours, Confederates, with what one reporter described as "intense zest and no little spite," poured an estimated 3,500 rounds of fire into the ill-protected fort. Thousands of men, women, and children thronged the city's streets to witness the monumental event. From their stately mansions overlooking Charleston's harbor, the Middletons watched as the relentless cannonade raged into the night. When they awoke the next morning, a deluge of Confederate shot continued to rain down on

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., April 22, 1876.

6 Ibid., August 15, 1863. For a detailed account of the events surrounding the firing on Fort Sumter see, Maury Klein, Days of Defiance: Sumter, Secession, and the Coming of the Civil War (New York: Knopf, 1997).

7 "The Bombardment of Fort Sumter!," The Charleston Mercury, April 13, 1861.
Fort Sumter. By noon, the Federal garrison burst into flames. Much to the Middletons' delight, the destruction of the beleaguered fortress was complete.⁸

As a cathartic breeze swept away the smoky remnants of battle, the Middletons rejoiced while the Confederate soldiers lowered the nation's tattered flag and took possession of their prize. For them, Major Anderson's surrender signaled an auspicious start to a war that promised to preserve the family's position of power and privilege. Confident that southern independence would protect the prized institution of slavery, and the wealth it afforded them, the Middletons looked to the future in eager anticipation.

"The spirit of the land," as Alicia Hopton Middleton reminisced, was "high with courage and hope."⁹

In the days following the attack, however, northern commentators predicted that South Carolinians' joy would soon turn to sorrow. From New York, to Philadelphia, to Boston, widely circulated stories portrayed the Rebel state as terrified and regretful, much like an impetuous and defiant child: afraid, but too stubborn to admit its errant ways. Convinced that Southerners "did not in the least appreciate the serious business they have undertaken," the New York Times compared their victory cry to "the senseless merriment

⁸ "The Bombardment of Fort Sumter!" Harper's Weekly, April 20, 1861; Monday, April 15, 1861. For the Middletons’ descriptions of the bombing of Fort Sumter, see Life in Carolina, 116-117, 150, 151.

of a child over a new toy."  

War fever, journalists contended, blinded Confederate enthusiasts to the fact that "the capture of a combustible fort, manned by 80 men, by a force of 8,000" was hardly a military feat worth boasting about. Certain that Fort Sumter was "an empty and useless prize," many Northerners predicted that the Confederates would soon "live to see their mistake." At least one Lowcountry resident agreed.

Convinced that South Carolina was "too small for a republic, and too large for a lunatic asylum," James L. Petigru, a revered Lowcountry lawyer and Unionist, wept over what he considered the "madness of his people."

The Middletons scoffed at such charges. "You can hardly imagine, dear Mama," Mrs. Nathaniel Russell Middleton wrote to her Yankee mother, "how laughable the misstatements of the Northern press appear to us who are on the spot . . . ." South Carolinians were neither tremulous nor contrite. As Williams Middleton put it with false modesty, "We think pretty well of ourselves" and continue to maintain the highest

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“estimate of our worth.”14 Opinions suggesting otherwise, they surmised, could “only be accounted for on the score of great ignorance.”15 As Williams confidently informed his brother-in-law J. Francis Fisher in Philadelphia, “we do not in the slightest degree regret our action, or dread its result.”16 Contrary to the predictions of “the Sumner-like reptiles of the North,” the Middletons believed that a quick and decisive victory would prove “to the really civilized world” that slave owners were “a singularly noble and polished race.” Here the Middleton family’s efforts over several generations to cultivate their children abroad, to provide them with the trappings of an international cultural refinement, came to full flower. Confirmed in their belief in their own cultural superiority, they appealed their case to those they considered their equals, and fully expected that the civilized world, by whom they meant primarily the British and the French, would rally to their cause.17

In the opening months of war, it was easy for the Middletons to maintain such unbridled confidence. The hardships that came to characterize the Confederate home front had not yet appeared. As Alicia Hopton Middleton recalled, “the daily life of study,

14 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, July 21, 1861, Middleton Place Papers (SCSH).

15 Susan Matilda Middleton Eliza Middleton Fisher, July 26, 1861, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS). For a brief discuss of Lowcountry elites’ desire for war and eagerness to protect the institution of slavery, see William Dusineberre, Them Dark Days, 355.

16 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, April 30, 1861, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

music, painting, etc., went on, as if no tragedy hung unrelenting over us." Lulled by a romantic rhetoric of war that promised great victories, the family thought of nothing but a "speedy triumph." Even the construction of fortifications and the mustering of soldiers could not conjure notions of defeat. On the contrary, the clamor of war seemed only to fuel the Middletons' thirst for war. Of course, as Mrs. Nathaniel Russell Middleton admitted to her mother, Ann DeWolf of Rhode Island, there were some unfortunate consequences of southern independence. Shopkeepers, for example, were "not selling as many expensive articles as usual." Yet, as this patriotic and myopic belle determined, "all seem[ed] cheerful and ready to put up with a little present inconvenience for the good of the future."

However, as the realities of disunion and war gradually seeped into the private world of domesticity, the Middletons found their family unity threatened as never before. Generations of kinship and friendship ties hung in the balance. As Sidney Fisher, the cousin of J. Francis Fisher, poignantly reflected in February 1861, one of "the evils of civil dissensions is that they produce discord between families & friends . . . ." He warned that "great care should be taken to avoid disputes which may cause ill feelings to arise." Yet, with ominous clouds of war on the horizon, heeding such prophetic advice

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was difficult. As members of a transatlantic elite, the Middletons maintained economic and emotional ties that stretched far beyond the boundaries of the Carolina Lowcountry. These connections necessarily influenced the political allegiances of those living outside the fevered environs of southern secessionism, and not all family members supported the Confederate cause.21

Edward Middleton, a Lieutenant in the United States Navy since 1843, found himself trapped in a web of conflicting loyalties. Having served his country for eighteen years, Edward watched in horror as the seams of the union frayed. Without a peaceful resolution that protected national unity, he faced the unenviable task of choosing between his career and his family. This was no easy decision for an officer torn between his professional obligations (including an oath to uphold the Federal Constitution), the partisan commitments of his secessionist kinfolk, the emotional ties of family and birthplace, and his own immediate self-interest. Paralyzed by indecision, Edward waited in painful suspense, "hoping that some event would decide the question" for him. But peace proved elusive, and Edward, like so many Southerners in the Federal army and navy, had to choose sides. Still conflicted, he turned to his family for advice.22


Aware that most of his kinfolk embraced southern nationalism, Edward dodged any political discussions concerning disunion. After all, he had hotly debated the validity of secession with family and friends for well over a decade, and time had done nothing to temper opinions. Unlike his brothers, Edward questioned the constitutionality of secession. Eschewing politics, Edward couched his indecision in more practical terms. While he assured all concerned that he had “no intention of serving any other government than that acknowledged by my native State,” he also expressed his sincere belief that war would not come. If the peace held, he insisted, it would be foolish “to give up a commission for which I have been working all my life.”

Such pragmatism meant little to his Confederate kin. That loyalty to family and region required sacrifice on his part was irrelevant to them. They themselves were willing to risk everything, and the family expected the same level of commitment from all its members. From their perspective, Edward should have resigned his post as soon as South Carolina quit the Union. Wholly unsympathetic to Edward’s plight, Williams, Oliver, and John Izard informed him that Unionism would make him a traitor. No longer would he be welcomed in his native state. Their reaction mortified Edward. He apparently believed that the affectionate bonds of family entailed unconditional support. Once again, Edward begged for empathy.

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23 Edward Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, April 1, 1861, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS); Edward Middleton to Williams Middleton, n.d. [1861], Edward Middleton Papers (Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.)
and assured his brothers, if he "had only to decide as any mere civilian unconnected with the memories of a glorious service, it would not be difficult."

Glorious memories of past service and the allure of future professional prospects proved too tempting. Edward broke rank with his family and remained in the U.S. Navy. In a last-ditch effort to placate southern kin and avoid any direct involvement in the ensuing conflict, Edward sought a commission in the Pacific. In his mind, this was a perfect solution to an impossible situation, one that protected both individual and familial interests. His Confederate kin disagreed. The stakes were too high for compromise. Family loyalty, honor, and economic interest hung in the balance, and the South Carolina Middletons would not be satisfied with anything other than Edward's resignation from the U.S. Navy.

To make matters worse, Edward's fateful decision jeopardized the Middleton plantation economy. In August 1861, the Confederate Congress passed the Act of Sequestration, which called for the confiscation of the "lands, tenements and hereditaments, goods and chattels, rights and credits . . . owned, possessed or enjoyed, by or for any alien enemy. . . ." Since Edward remained a U.S. citizen and Lieutenant in its Navy, the Confederate government confiscated Newport Plantation, one of the family's

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24 Edward Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, April 1, 1861, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).

most valuable properties, and the hundreds of slaves who lived there. Edward’s pursuit of individual interest forced Williams and John Izard as executors of the Middleton estate to confront Confederate officials. Shackled with the patriarchal obligation of protecting familial economic interests and desperate to save the property, they explained that their brother did not own the plantation in question. He, along with several other family members, had a shared monetary interest in the property that could be realized only after the settlement of their late father’s heavily indebted estate. Since their Unionist brother did not actually own the property, they explained, and the familial estate remained unsettled, and since his future monetary interest in the property secured outstanding loans to Oliver Middleton, a solid Confederate patriot, the property should not be confiscated. If it were, the executors charged, the government would seriously compromise the immediate and future interests Rebels loyal to the cause. Confederate officials agreed and restored the plantation to the family. However, the government’s decision did nothing to repair the frayed relationship between Edward and his southern kin. War, as Sidney Fisher had earlier predicted, severed the affectionate bonds of family. Except for Harry, none of Edward’s southern kin forgave him, and family lore has it that his brother Oliver vowed “never to speak to this Yankee Middleton again.”

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26 Petition for Sequestration of the Property of Edward Middleton, 20 January 1862; C. R. Miles, S. C. Dist. Atty, pro tem, In the Confederate Court, South Carolina District, Edward Middleton Papers (Southern Historical Collection); “To the Honorable A. G. Magrath, Judge of Confederate Court, South Carolina District, The Answer of Williams Middleton to the Petition for Sequestration of the Property of Edward Middleton, January 14, 1862,” Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

27 Mr. Spratt to John Izard Middleton, January 18, 1862, January 25, 1862, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Interview of Anna Rutledge by Robert Cuthbert.
It is surprising that Edward, or anyone with fire-eating Confederate kin, could have underestimated the hostility these southerners felt toward Unionists. Although some in the Lowcountry elite managed to separate the emotional ties of family from larger issues of war and disunion, the Middletons could not.28 For this family, dedication to the Rebel cause was not optional. Like so many planters, the Middletons invested everything they had, emotionally and materially, ideologically and spiritually, in the Confederate cause and had little tolerance for those who did not. Even those suspected of Unionist leanings faced complete ostracism. When rumors spread that cousin Rose Pinckney, then residing in New York, frequently lampooned the Confederacy, her reputation in the Lowcountry plummeted. Her mother, still in Charleston, tried desperately to quell the gossip, explaining that her daughter’s “way of speaking . . . was only a joke!” Anxious to avoid the shame associated with having a Yankee sympathizer in the family, she swore that Rose was “really a violent Secessionist” and solicited friends and family to defend her “whenever” they heard her name “abused!”—a request, it seems, few were willing to oblige.29

The Middletons’ demand that every family member embrace Confederate patriotism was not reserved for adults. Even the youngest of children understood the


importance of loyalty, and as the childhood memoirs of Alicia Hopton Middleton reveal, the politics of secession colored their lives:

Ignorant of all its horrors, we were full of eager interest in the possibility of war, and loyalty to our land was the subject uppermost, not only with our elders, but with the young people and even with the children in their play. I was the only one born in Rhode Island, and when any of the family wanted to tease me they would call me a Yankee, which was an overwhelming blow. On such an occasion when we were at play with our comrades on the Battery, and I must have shown how deep was my chagrin at the unhappy fact of my birthplace, a chivalrous little cousin came up to me saying, 'Never mind, Alicia, I was born in North Carolina.'

The clan took great pleasure in such youthful expressions of patriotism, and proudly boasted that its youngest members were "violent patriots . . . fully 'posted up' on political and military topics."  

With children and adults in agreement that southerners had to rally around the South, Eliza Middleton Fisher’s loyalty was also the subject of speculation. Of all the family members, it was she who had spent the least time in the Lowcountry. Eliza had resided in Philadelphia since her marriage to Joshua Francis Fisher in 1839. Even the formative years of her youth were spent outside the South. Yet, Eliza was in the Lowcountry when the war broke out, and witnessed first-hand the intense hatred her southern kin harbored toward Yankee sympathizers. She also knew the emotional costs her brother Edward paid for his allegiance to the Union and had no doubt that siding with the North meant severing ties with southern friends and relations. Unwilling to make

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30 Middleton, Life in Carolina, 43.

such a sacrifice, she cast her lot with the South, a choice that not only protected family unity (at least with her southern kin), but also reaffirmed her southern identity.\textsuperscript{32}

When Eliza returned to Philadelphia shortly after the war began, she soon realized that to be a Confederate in a crowd of Yankees would prove no easy task. For Eliza, it meant breaking rank with the prevailing sentiments of her environment, including those of her own husband and children. Initially, members of the Philadelphia elite expressed strong pro-southern sympathies, but their fellow feelings altered in the wake of early Union defeats. The Federal surrender at Fort Sumter, the Union defeat at Bull Run, and the prospect of a prolonged war with heavy causalities, encouraged a growing sense of nationalism. Philadelphians took to the streets by the thousands, according to one resident, swearing "'revenge on all disunionists.'"\textsuperscript{33} Others, including Sidney Fisher, noted the change and reported incidents where "several well-known persons, who had openly expressed secession opinions had been assaulted in the streets." According to Sidney, not only Southern sympathizers faced threats of "mob" violence, even "persons suspected" of such "opinions" needed protection.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Catherine Clinton, \textit{Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168; Pease and Pease, \textit{A Family of Women}, 143.

\textsuperscript{33} For a detailed discussion of Northern political ideology and the changes that occurred as the war progressed, see George Fredrickson, \textit{The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of Union} (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968). For details on the decline of pro-southern sentiments among the Philadelphia elite, see Kilbride, "Philadelphia and the Southern Elite," 352-390; Clinton, \textit{Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars}, 168.

\textsuperscript{34} Fisher Diary, April 18, 1861, 385; Clinton, \textit{Tara Revisited: Women, War, & the Plantation Legend} (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), 56-57.
At times, the burdens of disunion seemed too great for Eliza to bear. Friction with northern friends and family, isolation from southern kin, and the mounting toll of war threatened her support of southern independence. Fearful that a seemingly "impassable gulf" might permanently separate her from her southern kin, Eliza found herself praying "for a return of peace & tranquility."\(^{35}\) Although the Middletons shared her lament over the gulf that now divided the family, they recoiled at thoughts of reconciliation. "Extermination," they assured her, was preferable to the "reestablishment of the union." Family and friends seized every opportunity to strengthen her resolve. Her brother Williams, speaking to Eliza "of course, as a Carolinian," reminded her that "it was never regarded as a compliment to call a man a yankee," and "to purpose to us to assume it &, try to give it respectability among the nations of the earth, is nothing short of insanity."

While it pained Williams to speak "so plainly" to his beloved sister, he assured her "it is better to give you some pain than to leave you & others under delusions which might lead to worse consequences."\(^{36}\) Lifelong friends, such as Mrs. Allan Izard, joined the effort. She reminded Eliza that her Northern friends were "fighting for a despot who defies all law, & invading a people who only defend their own soil & rights." She, too, declared death a better fate than Yankee subjugation.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{35}\) Eliza Middleton Fisher to Susan Chisolm Middleton, December 21, 1861, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).

\(^{36}\) Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, December 19, 1862, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

\(^{37}\) Mrs. Allen Izard to Eliza Middleton Fisher, July 19, 1861, Cadwalader Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania) as quoted in Fisher Diary, August 20, 1861, 400, fn 30.
Such letters were not easy to send. Postal services between the North and South had slowed to a trickle during the war, and personal correspondence was subject to inspection by military officials. These partisan letters would not have made it past postal inspectors and had to be sent via blockade runners or hand delivered. The Middletons sent Eliza other missives, less overtly political, giving her the latest news of her friends and family in the war-torn South. All too often, however, the letters catalogued the painful misfortunes of those she loved. Cut off from her dearest friends and relations, Eliza endured painful notices of those who “joined the noble band of martyrs” and mourned alone. These letters, at the most basic level, provided information and helped maintain contact between family members divided by war, but more subtly, they also worked to reinforce Eliza’s southern identity. Before long, Eliza began to speak of “the Yankees . . . as ‘they’ and the Confederates as ‘we’ and Charleston as ‘home.’”

While Williams and John Izard, along with their wives and children, were well satisfied that Eliza was a loyal Confederate, not all kinfolk were convinced. Heartfelt expressions of support and sympathy were not enough for some skeptics. Even

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40 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, January 4, 1864, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS). For additional information concerning Eliza’s pro-Southern sentiments, see *Fisher Diary*, February 8, 1862, 416, July 13, 1862, 430.
testimonies of fellow Lowcountry residents who, after seeing Eliza in Philadelphia, reported her “very southern” and “joyful over the recent southern victories” made little difference. A cloak of suspicion hung over the Fisher household, and some Middletons refused to separate Eliza’s politics from those of her husband and children.41

Eliza’s daughters, who still declared it a “shame” that the South “destroyed the holy bond” of the Union, fueled growing antipathies. While the political opinions of Helen and Sophie infuriated the Middletons, others seemed equally bothered by the fact that fortune continued to shine on the Fisher household. That the Fishers still enjoyed the pleasures and frivolities of the privileged life while the Middletons, like most southerners, increasingly experienced the want and suffering that typified the Confederate home front, fed the enmity. Susan Middleton, for example, took no pleasure in hearing that her “very fashionable” Yankee cousins remained “the happiest of human beings eschewing politics,” and dedicating their time to “Croquet and conquests.” Although she confessed that her emotions were “very unchristian,” Susan would have “much rather” heard that her northern kin were “experiencing some of the want and suffering which nationally speaking they are bringing upon us, and those around us.” Even the Fishers’ generosity did little to assuage such feelings. After hearing of a parcel sent to the John Izard Middletons from their Philadelphia kin, she declared it better to lose one’s teeth than “use a toothbrush sent by the Fishers.”42

41 Harriott Middleton to Susan Middleton, June 19, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

Initially, Northern friends and family tried to respect Eliza’s rather precarious position. As one Philadelphian relation reflected, she was “a Carolinian and her brothers, relatives, & friends [were] all involved most unfortunately in this unhappy contest.” Her stance, many concluded, was “excusable,” and they broached the subject of war “with great forbearance.” Nevertheless, with each passing day, impassioned commentaries on the war dominated social events and tolerance for dissenting opinions wore thin. Not everyone sympathized with Eliza. On at least one occasion, Bet, the wife of Sidney Fisher, having held her tongue for far too long, could no longer refrain from voicing her opinions about the war. A “good deal excited,” she raved “about the outrages of the South,” offending her Confederate hostess, who, in turn, rose to the defense of the Confederacy. What began as a pleasant evening quickly soured. As people increasingly found themselves in what Sidney Fisher described as a “painful agitation and excitement about the war and its consequences,” the possibility of conflict grew.43

It was not until the Spring of 1863 that the doubts surrounding the Fishers dissipated. By then, all the Middleton clan was convinced that even the “most rabid” of that family were “now good Southerner[s].” For fire-eaters like the Middletons, a “good Southerner” meant one who supported the Confederate cause. Yet how the “great change of feeling” came about and at what cost deserves attention.44 Like many Philadelphians, Fisher opposed abolition and detested the aims and tactics of abolitionists. However, he

43 Fisher Diary, February 23, 1861, 379, August 20, 1861, 400.

44 Sophy Fisher to the Oliver Middletons, August 4, 1863, October 17, 1863; Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, September 9/10, 1863, Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, October 26, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
was firm in his belief that secession was unconstitutional. Fisher, a nationalist, and Williams, a secessionist, had carried on heated debates over secession and slavery since the 1850s. Fisher’s initial commitment to the Union’s war aims fueled the debate. Williams ridiculed his brother-in-law’s support of the national government, asking, “Why do you consent to do what you do not approve of & know to be wrong? Why lend your support to uphold evil deeds? Why refrain from denouncing that mad & malignant crew who have proposed themselves of absolute & unauthorized power at Washington?”

But no matter how unconstitutional Fisher thought secession and no matter how desirous he was to preserve national unity, the closer the tragedies of war came to those he and his wife loved, the more his support of the Union wavered. As early as the Federal occupation of Beaufort, South Carolina in November 1861, Fisher found himself torn between “his feelings and his convictions.” Fisher still held out hope “that the nation might yet be restored to the grandeur” of its past, but with several Middleton plantations “less than 20 miles from Beaufort,” he hardly knew “whether to rejoice or not.”

Fisher tried to explain the ambiguities of his Unionism to his son George, a student at Harvard. “I rejoice in the victories of the United States Army,” he stated, but if victory resulted in the “destruction of general confiscation and emancipation,” he judged “success almost as deplorable as defeat.” The role of the federal government, he

45 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, April 30, 1861, 18 May 1861, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

46 Fisher Diary February 8, 1862, 416.

47 Fisher Diary, November 11, 1861, 408.
reminded George, was to protect slavery and preserve the Union. “I hope,” he told George, “you will always assert that however much mistaken the South may be—however criminal according to our view of the Constitution . . . Our friends & relations are still honorable and high minded men— who never would have been driven to rebellion but for the attacks & abuse of the abolitionist of the North.” Disunion could not obliterate Fisher’s admiration for his wife’s family whose blood also flowed through his children’s veins.48

By 1864, Fisher was a “thorough partizan [sic] of the South denouncing with unmeasured bitterness, Mr. Lincoln, the government, and northern people.”49 The hardships his Southern kindred faced fostered his turnabout. As Sidney reflected, his wife was “a southern woman, with her friends & family & So[uth] Carolina exposed to every sort of danger and calamity.”50 Fisher sympathized “with her, feeling for her friends who are also his friends, dreading & hating war because of its effects on his property, & in his heart willing that peace should be made on any terms, however humiliating and disgraceful to the country . . .”51 Having always respected the “grandeur” of the Middleton family and their proud history, their precipitous decline distressed him. After all, Fisher had quite consciously married into this internationally

48 J. Francis Fisher to George Fisher, February 26, 1862, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

49 Fisher Diary, March 16, 1864, 468.

50 Fisher Diary, July 13, 1862, 430-431, February 23, 1861, 379.

51 Fisher Diary, July 13, 1862, 431.
prominent family, whose destruction could only adversely affect him and his children. The further the Middletons sank, the more Fisher rallied to their support. His sense of family identity almost required his solicitude for his southern kin. It was not just benevolence but pride that prompted his sympathy and assistance.

While the Fishers’ shift in political allegiances cemented their bonds with their southern kin, it seriously damaged their standing at home. Much to the dismay and embarrassment of many Philadelphians, the couple openly expressed their “hope & belief that the rebel[s]” would “eventually triumph.” In the most prestigious parlors of Philadelphia, they frequently referred to Lincoln as “an ignorant blackguard,” his government as “corrupt & tyrannical,” and Northerners as “a mere mob.” The North, they charged, had destroyed liberty and the sanctity of private property, making “refined & gentlemanlike life henceforward impossible.” Once, Fisher became so outraged he swore he would rather see “his children dead” than “live in such a country & under such a government.” A loving father and devoted family man; Fisher obviously did not mean this, however, those unfortunate enough to hear such wild utterances found his fury intolerable. Even Sidney and Bet, always willing to excuse their cousin’s “wild & extravagant” behavior, grew tired of it. Eliza and Fisher’s social circle narrowed, and “agreeable” company increasingly came to mean rebel “sympathizers” and “defenders of the South.” Sidney lamented the change, and even began to question Fisher’s “mental & bodily health.”

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52 Fisher Diary, March 16, 1864, 468, April 8, 1864, 470.
Much to the dismay of his friends and family, Fisher did not confine his opinions to the private world of domesticity. He put his views into print in a fiery pamphlet entitled *Cruelties of War*. After reading Fisher's essay, his cousin Sidney deemed it "weak & senseless" and "written with passionate advocacy of the South . . .". Not only did he disagree with Fisher's views, he believed it so "intemperate, one-sided, unfair and abusive of the northern people, army, government & cause" and "so very offensive in its language & spirit that it may get him into personal difficulty." His concerns made little difference, and Fisher published several other pamphlets in a similar vein. Considered "trash" by loyal Philadelphians, Fisher lost "the respect of his friends and all influence among sensible people." As Sidney sadly noted, "everyone laughs at him." Despite such ridicule, the Fishers remained steadfast in their support of the Rebel cause, a decision they never regretted.53

It was not just political and ideological differences that threatened to divide families. As the war escalated, the southern Middletons faced prolonged periods of separation that permanently altered their antebellum households and fractured their family networks. Changes in residential patterns, the decline in personal correspondence, the difficulties associated with travel, and a dwindling plantation economy disrupted the habits of planter elites. No longer did the Middletons have the money and freedom to

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53 Fisher Diary, August 1, 1864, July 31, 1864, 480. *Cruelties of War* was not the only controversial essay Fisher published. In 1863, he published *Degradation of Our Representative System and Its Reform*, which his cousin Sidney also consider "very extravagant & foolish . . ." Fisher's earlier essays on disunion, "Concessions & Compromises," published in 1860, were much more moderate and demonstrate the extreme shift in his political ideology.
travel as they pleased. No longer did they have the luxurious and spacious mansions in the Lowcountry to accommodate friends and family comfortably or the means to entertain them as before. Moreover, the emotional preoccupations that came with four years of war forced the Middletons to become increasingly insular. For them, the gay atmosphere that typified the antebellum era vanished, never to return.54

The changes took place piecemeal. During the initial days of the war, most Lowcountry residents remained at home, and relations among southern kin remained relatively stable. With little threat of immediate violence, the Middletons enjoyed a relatively peaceful life in the constant company of friends and relations.55 By the summer of 1861, however, the once placid Lowcountry landscape bore the marks of war. Federal gunboats hovered in Charleston’s harbor, and soldiers began to flood the region. Charleston clearly had every prospect of becoming a main theater of war, and planters fled the Lowcountry for safer locations. Of the Middleton clan, Harry and his wife Ellen were among the first to take flight, seeking refuge in Flat Rock, North Carolina. Delighted with their decision to leave shell-shocked Charleston, the couple gave glowing accounts of the gaieties their mountain refuge offered. Removed from the daily reminders of war and in the company of other Lowcountry sojourners, they remained confident in a speedy southern victory. Harry assured his brothers back home that “the reign of Terror is never a very long reign and usually ends [with] both the downfall and


55 For similar experiences, see Edward Ball, Slaves in the Family (New York: Ballantine Books), 329.
destruction of its principal ministers and most prominent agents.\textsuperscript{56} Worried about the vulnerability of their Waccamaw River plantation, the John Izard Middletons also made an early departure. They headed for nearby Summerville, once "the quietest of villages," turned into a lively "resort" by refugees. Less than thirty miles from Charleston, this wartime refuge, with its healthy atmosphere, offered its new residents proximity to home. As Nathaniel Russell Middleton recollected, amongst the company of friends and family, the early years at Summerville offered the "pretty side of war." Other members of the family, however, had not the heart to leave the Lowcountry and postponed their departure as long as possible. As a result, the Middleton extended family began to fray.\textsuperscript{57}

While refugees had expected their relocation in the Carolina Upcountry to be short, predictions of a quick southern victory proved false. Other family members were forced to flee. By the Spring of 1862, many Lowcountry residents, worried "that a descent upon our coast will be attempted," moved to "the greater safety of the upcountry."\textsuperscript{58} John Izard moved his family farther away from the coast to the more isolated town of Darlington. The Oliver Middletons left their beloved Edisto Island plantation for Alvarlamre, just outside Columbia, South Carolina. Before long, the Middletons scattered throughout the region. The most fortunate of them left early or had "a

\textsuperscript{56} Harry Middleton to Williams Middleton, September 17, 1861 Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Cote, \textit{Mary’s World}, 195-96.


\textsuperscript{58} Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, August 24, 1861, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Middleton, \textit{Life in Carolina}, 121.
comfortable home in a fine climate” ready for them. Within the first year of war, housing in the Carolina upcountry was at a premium. Even at the most “exorbitant” price, many complained, suitable places of “refuge” could not be found. The Oliver Middletons fumed of “the extortions . . . practised [sic] upon the low-country refugees, by the so-called ‘best people in Columbia.’” It was enough, they declared, “to disgrace the place forever.”

High prices were not their only complaint. As they encountered the traditional animosity between residents of the Lowcountry and upstate, some also carped at the chilly reception they received from their upcountry compatriots. According to Oliver’s daughter Susan, “this is certainly exile, altho we are in Carolina, but it is different, in every way.” The people, she found, were “so much more narrow, and self-centered than ours, and this miserable petty jealousy of the sea-coast is so very contemptible.” There was, perhaps, some truth to such perceptions. Various community leaders urged residents to welcome refuge seekers. The editor of the Confederate Baptist, for example, urged his fellow Christians “to use his heart, head and hands to serve his country and his neighbor as himself, and particularly those who had given up their homes for the honor and welfare of the State and the Confederacy.” Despite such pleas, many upcountry residents tried to profit from the presence of the desperate refugees.

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59 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, May 16, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, 75.

60 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, 9/10 (check month)1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); E. Barnwell Heyward to Nathaniel Russell Middleton, October 8, 1862 in Middleton, Life in Carolina, 161; The Confederate Baptist, July 13, 1862; Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 182-188.
Accustomed to lives of leisure and luxury, the Middletons, increasingly relied on their immediate families for companionship and support. War brought an end to the long, leisurely summers spent with friends and family in Newport, and European tours were out of the question. Even short family visits became difficult to manage, and the treasured custom of daily visiting was largely lost. Such habits were central elements in the lives of planter elites and saved them from the drudgeries and isolation associated with plantation life. Being “thrown almost entirely on one’s own resources” Susan Middleton deemed “trying and distasteful.” The Oliver Middletons, equally discontented with their new abode and lonely for home, trimmed their days in exile “off a good deal to be sure, at both ends, going to bed virtuously early, but getting up viciously late.” Even members of nuclear households faced prolonged periods of separation. Men like John Izard and Oliver could not always stay with their families in the upcountry, and not all children made the move. This was especially true for married children, who now found the needs of their own immediate families superseded the needs of their extended kin. The strains on the family left many feeling “very irritable,” and they shared the emotions expressed by Susan Middleton, who felt “like a nettle set down in a clay bank, without ever so faint a hope of being transplanted elsewhere.”

Faced with long periods of separation without the comforts of home or the company of kin, the Middletons found it difficult to adjust to their new homes.

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62 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, October 5, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS)
Refugeeing was particularly hard for women who became increasingly “restless under enforced and lengthened stay[s] . . .”\textsuperscript{63} Memories of the “soft days at home” and the “constant desire for friends” consumed many. Cramped in uncomfortable living conditions, worried about friends and family members, plagued by shortages and high prices, many women shared the view of Harriott Middleton who mourned, “The Low Country seems such a Paradise, after living elsewhere. . .”\textsuperscript{64}

Forced to become increasingly self-reliant, family members had to find new ways to entertain themselves and to occupy their time. Again, this was particularly true for the Middleton women. Some kept themselves “busy” doing whatever they could for local Aid Societies. Whether “making bed-socks” for wounded soldiers, “picking lint,” or helping destitute neighbors, whose “tillers of soil” were “away fighting,” benevolent activities gave the Middleton women an avenue for active participation in the male world of war. More than fair-weather patriots, the Middleton women got “great satisfaction” from “doing something – of even so little for those who have done and suffered so much for us.”\textsuperscript{65} They were not alone. Aid societies offered women a way to fulfill their patriotic obligation to the Confederate cause and assuage feelings of uselessness without

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{64} Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, August 2/3, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, October 16, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

\textsuperscript{65} Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, August 6, 1861, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
challenging, as historian Drew Faust argued, prescribed gender roles. These activities also offered companionship for the most isolated women.66

Female expressions of patriotism were not limited to volunteerism, and women’s wartime participation went beyond aid societies. Like many elite women, the Middletons expressed their support and enthusiasm for the Confederate cause by immersing themselves in the political and military affairs of the day. In Columbia, for example, the women of the Oliver Middletons were regular attendees at the state convention. Day after day, Susan and her daughters sat in the gallery, listening intently to the proceedings. Much to their own surprise, they found the convention “quite interesting,” and proudly ordained themselves “great politicians here!” They were always disappointed “when the gallery was ordered to be closed for a secret session.” Indeed, as wartime correspondence reveals, several Middleton women became experts in such matters and thought of “nothing but the war.” As Susan Middleton reflected, “it dwarfs one’s interest in all other things.” Even the birth of Ella Middleton Rutledge’s son did “not get as much notice” since it was hard for the family to “think much even of a new baby with the Army across the Potomac and threatening Pennsylvania!”67

Yet, not all of the Middleton women could be satisfied weaving homespun, darning socks for Confederate soldiers, or listening to political debates. Nor did all family members find the political and military events of the day riveting enough to

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67 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, September 14/16, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
mollify their feelings of loneliness and boredom. While all of the Middletons sorely missed the gaieties so associated with their former lives, none longed for those bygone days as much as the younger set of women. For them, the home front proved particularly oppressive. Often less consumed by the daily events of war and unable to surrender themselves completely to the idealized construct of the self-sacrificing Confederate woman, the Middleton girls desperately craved a livelier social scene. Unlike older family members, they were unaccustomed to the responsibilities and expectations of adulthood. They found it more difficult to put the needs of the Confederacy above all else. Had it not been for war, the young Middleton women would have enjoyed lives of unencumbered privilege. Travel, parties, fashion, education and romance should have been the order of the day. As one sympathetic relative observed, “this continual state of agitation and uncertainty is hard for them to bear.” With “rough breaking of their hopes and dreams,” families realized, “it is hard on the young to be forced to endure anxiety.”

With few distractions, days in exile passed slowly, and young ladies like Livy, Emma, Alice, Isabella, and Helen Middleton complained constantly of boredom. While their plight paled in comparison to the hardships that gripped so much of the South, the girls were not exaggerating. Their once exciting lives had become painfully dull. As Susan Middleton explained, her younger sisters Emma and Livy had little in the way of amusements, “they have neither new bonnets nor dresses . . . they are never invited

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68 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, February 27, 1862, February 23, 1862 Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

69 Livy (Olivia) and Emma were the daughters of Oliver and Susan Middleton and Alice and Isabella were the daughters of Henry Augustus and Harriott Middleton.
anywhere, and they have no lovers.” Cousin Harriott gave similar reports of her sisters Alice and Isabella in Flat Rock, whose new “recipe for happiness” included only ingredients beyond their reach: “lots of men, lots of money, and [to] be rid of your family.”

Although Charleston’s social scene certainly cooled during the war, it was notably more exciting than the Carolina upcountry. While the Middleton girls passed the time “reading novels to each other,” friends like Mrs. John Alston busied herself in the Lowcountry hosting weekly parties complete with men, music, and dancing. Fortunately for the young women, the Middleton clan was a large one, and some of its members remained in the Lowcountry throughout the war. For example, Mary Middleton Read, another daughter of Oliver’s, remained at home for much of the war. The Lowcountry afforded Mary proximity to her soldier husband and allowed her to help in the management of their Rice Hope plantation on the Cooper River. Still, with her husband occupied with the business of war and her parents and siblings in Columbia, Mary was lonely. She longed for companionship, and her vivacious sisters Livy and Emma provided a welcomed relief. Although disheartened to be separated from the

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71 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, January 4, 1864, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS). For other examples of parties in the Lowcountry, see Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, May 9/10, 1863; March 10/12, 1864, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

72 Mary Middleton Read to Susan Hering Middleton, June 9, 1863, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).
girls and sad to see their already reduced household become even smaller, the Middletons delighted at the thought "of those poor young girls again being within reach of some of the enjoyment belonging to their time of life."\textsuperscript{73}

Delight soon turned to worry as rumors of impropriety circulated. Once out of the watchful eye of patriarchal authority, many young members of the Lowcountry elite tested the boundaries of polite society. The talk implicated some of the region's finest families, and familial concern grew accordingly.\textsuperscript{74} Under ordinary circumstances, the Middletons had no doubt that their girls would behave honorably. But these were extraordinary times, and their children, now exposed to all sorts of outside influences, were too far away to control and protect. With so many of their acquaintances behaving questionably, the Middletons worried that some of their own children might follow suit. All the family had "heard of more than one young girl who have completely lost their heads and are in an excited agitated state with all their ideas of right and wrong getting very much confounded."\textsuperscript{75}

The permissiveness that engulfed the Lowcountry was alluring, and many young women found it difficult to resist the pleasures that abounded. Foremost among these


\textsuperscript{74} Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, March 10/12, 1864, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

\textsuperscript{75} Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, January 24, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
temptations was round-dancing, which several Middleton girls were “dying” to try. The dance had grown popular throughout 1850s, though many elders still considered it “very indecent,” and critics claimed that its almost frantic spinning induced a dangerous euphoria. It was, perhaps, an apt metaphor for the times, but it was the intimacy of the dance that most concerned the Middletons. The very idea that their daughters would “set aside propriety and delicacy” and go so willingly into the arms of soldiers, most of whom were strangers, deeply mortified planter patriarchs.\(^7^6\) Beyond the reach of parental authority, the girls paid little attention to such worries. Oliver, frustrated by his growing inability to control his daughters, relented. He sent word to Emma that “if she chooses to make a fool of herself, contrary to my wish and advice, I shall no longer oppose her doing so.” Unable to shame Emma into conformity, he hoped only that his daughter Livy would not be “led astray” by Emma’s “pernicious example.” Such hopes were soon dashed. She too became “entirely absorbed” in the balls and parties and on occasion stayed out “dancing until three o’clock” in the morning.\(^7^7\)

Such behavior caused quite a stir among the Middleton clan. While all of the family wanted its younger set to enjoy the pleasures of their youth, they believed that “unrestrained liberty always falls into license.” They feared that reputations might be permanently sullied. Moreover, antebellum expectations had been recast to fit the high demand for Confederate patriotism, and many people considered such zestful pursuit of

\(^7^6\) Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, January 10, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

\(^7^7\) Oliver Middleton, Jr. to Susan Matilda Middleton, April 17, 1864, Middleton Family Papers (SCHS).
frivolous entertainment amid torrents of death and destruction a dereliction of women’s patriotic duty. Susan Middleton lamented that “young women of the present day apparently consider pleasure first and duty afterwards.” The Middletons understood that without supervision, it was “very natural that girls should be giving into these practices,” but still thought it in very poor taste. Mrs. Oliver Middleton concurred with Susan’s judgement; “I think they are all a hard hearted set together to be dancing & making merry when the Country is in such trouble & misery.” They could only hope, as did Harriott Middleton, that their girls would “not be harshly judged.”

The widely held belief that a marriage mania gripped the Confederacy exasperated anxieties over wartime flirtations. From Richmond to Charleston, southern cities teemed with soldiers, and many of the men were desperate to “get a wife” before setting off to battle. For many southerners, this wartime development conjured vivid and unpleasant images of hasty, ill-advised unions. In the absence of patriarchal authority, “hands” were perhaps too “readily bestowed,” and many shared the feelings of Susan Middleton,

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78 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, June 5, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, April 22, 1860, Hering-Middleton Collection (SCHS).

79 Susan Chisolm Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, Jr., June 1863, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS); Harriott Middleton to Susan Middleton, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 244-245.

80 E. Susan Barber, “The White Wings of Eros: Courtship and Marriage in Confederate Richmond,” in Clinton, Southern Families at War, 119-132; 119-120.
who “with each new case” felt “like crying out— Who is safe?”\textsuperscript{81} Certainly not the young Middleton women, whose beauty, charm, and family name, made them among the most coveted. The Middleton patriarchs most feared men like South Carolina soldier Milton Leverett, who found that the Lowcountry offered “some first rate girls,” and advised his brother Fred to marry into “the best family” he possibly could, preferably a Middleton or a Rutledge. As for himself, Milton swore if he did not “pluck one of the best blossoms off one of the best trees” he “shan’t marry at all.” With men like this on the prowl, it was no wonder that families worried for their daughters.\textsuperscript{82}

This was certainly the case with Livy Middleton, whose romance with Frederic Blake blossomed during the war. It was no secret that Fred was smitten with the young beauty, but none of the Oliver Middletons believed that Livy requited her suitor’s feelings. Any doubt the gossip might have caused was put to rest by their daughter Mary, who assured the family that “Livy did not care at all about him.” Confident, the Oliver Middletons dismissed all rumors that pegged the young lovers as serious. Others, including cousin Harriott Middleton, disagreed with Mary’s assessment. She warned the family that “Freddy’s affair with Livy was serious,” and that “Mr. Oliver’s daughters

\textsuperscript{81} Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, December 6, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS). While the historian Drew Faust convincingly argues that the dearth of men in the rural south created a “world of femininity,” southern cities did not share the same experience, see Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 139-52. E. Susan Barber’s study of Richmond demonstrates that in urban areas there was an abundance of available men, see, Barber, ““The White Wings of Eros,””119-132.

have not taken him into their confidence about their lovers!” She was right, and shortly thereafter, the Middletons received a letter announcing Livy’s intention to marry Blake.\textsuperscript{83}

Having it “on good authority that an engagement was not to be ‘apprehended,’” the Oliver Middletons were an extremely “bothered” by the “startling news.”\textsuperscript{84} It was not, as Mrs. Susan Middleton mused, “what I expected or dreamt of,” and Livy’s engagement gave her “more concern even than the war.”\textsuperscript{85} Oliver shared her feelings. Their dissatisfaction was not with Livy’s choice. Having forgone the traditional customs of courtship, few in the immediate family knew Mr. Blake well enough “to approve or disapprove” of him. Oliver and Susan could only recall meeting their daughter’s fiancé twice “once in Philadelphia & at our ball 3 years ago.” They had no idea whether Freddy possessed the character and qualities their daughter “deserves & has a right to ask for.”\textsuperscript{86} Livy’s parents were not the only ones concerned over what appeared to be a hasty decision. The news equally shocked some of her siblings. While her sister Susan liked “the idea of Livy’s being engaged and married,” and considered her “one of the vast majority of women who are much happier married than single,” she could say nothing of


\textsuperscript{84}Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, April 18, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).


Livy’s choice. She had not seen Freddy Blake “since he was a boy.” Oliver Middleton went to Charleston immediately “to see what he had best do or say about the matter,” but it was too late. Livy had made up her mind, and Oliver reluctantly gave his consent. That this once very close family apparently had no idea that their daughter was contemplating marriage wounded them to the quick. “Oh! you dear children!,” Mrs. Oliver Middleton anguished, “How little you know the anxiety, & heartache parents endure for your welfare.” In the presence of a small circle of friends and family, Livy married her soldier beau.

While the Middleton girls faced dangers of a certain sort, nothing posed a greater threat to the family’s safety than military service. As their sons marched off to war, the Middletons faced the terrible prospect of sacrificing a son for southern independence. John Izard Middleton’s son Johnny served alongside several of his cousins. Although the Middletons embraced the ideal of the genteel southerner fighting for home and hearth, they anguished at the thought of their own children donning a soldier’s uniform. The romantic rhetoric surrounding military service and the stoic sense of obligation that characterized Confederate patriotism did little to quiet the fears of soldiers’ families. Not all of the Middletons could bear such a sacrifice, and fought hard to dissuade their own young men from serving in the military.

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87 Susan Hering Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, Jr., n.d., MBP (SCHS). The wedding took place on December 6, 1864. For a description of the evening, see C. Vann Woodward, editor, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), December 5, 1864, 685.
Such was the case with the Oliver Middletons. When the war began, the family had little to fear. Their only son, Oliver Jr, was only sixteen and too young to serve, and he remained safely at college in Columbia, South Carolina. However, by the winter of 1862, most of Oliver's classmates, over eighteen, had enlisted to avoid the draft, and the school closed. Oliver returned home eager to join his classmates in Confederate uniform. While his family realized that "it was only right and natural" for him "to wish to go," they feared that he was "neither old enough nor strong enough for camp life." As his sister Susan exclaimed, "if it were desirable to have boys of his age in the service they w[ou]ld scarcely have been exempted by the conscription act." Despite such arguments, Oliver could not be dissuaded, and his father reluctantly consented for him to enlist. In 1863, Oliver, Jr. became a proud member of the Charleston Light Dragoons, a prestigious Lowcountry regiment "entirely composed of the sons of the first families." There, the young soldier would be under the watchful eye of older kinfolk including several cousins and a brother-in-law. But this provided only a little comfort to his family, who remained "just as far as ever from approving of the arrangement." His mother and sisters prayed only that "before his boots are finished we shall have peace!"

Oliver was not the only young Middleton to defy patriarchal authority by enlisting. His cousin Benti, who had lived in Italy with his mother and sister since the death of his father in 1857, returned to the Lowcountry at the request of "his uncles just before the

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troubles began.” Despite such “hazardous times,” his mother, Mrs. Arthur Middleton (nee Countess Paolina Bentivoglio) consented to her only son’s return “to the land of his paternal forefathers.” When the war began, Benti was a cadet at The Citadel, South Carolina’s military college. Completely enchanted with the ideal of the chivalric soldier, he was desperate to join the ranks, but much to his chagrin, his uncles uniformly opposed the idea. They demanded that their young charge remain in school for “as long as he could.” But the allure of war proved too much, and nothing could dissuade him from joining the Rebel cause. The otherwise obedient Benti, “against all authority and riper judgement,” joined the Marion Artillery, a move that infuriated his uncles. But his enthusiasm could not be contained; he was absolutely elated to be a Confederate soldier. As one relative remarked, Benti “could not ‘enjoy’ himself more if he was in Paris!” Even camp life did not dampen his enthusiasm and Benti remained in a “gale of spirits” throughout the war.90

Although the elder Middletons were proud of the patriotism, bravery, and honor exhibited by the young Middletons in gray, escalating combat and mounting Confederate defeats left loved ones in a constant state of anxiety. All too often, the Middleton men returned home “thin and quite grey,” suffering from “fatigue and exposure.” Rarely were furloughs long enough to restore them to health. When Frank Middleton’s leave came to an end, his sister Harriott expressed the anxieties felt by many of his relatives; “He is the only man we have left to us, to depend on, and he looks so ill, that we feel as if a slight

90 Middleton, Life in Carolina, 120, 127-28; Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, February 26, 1862, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
exertion or wound would carry him from this world." It was only with great effort that she could reconcile herself enough to say, "but of course [he] cannot stay away at a time like this." The very thought of Frank returning to camp left his mother "pale and shadowy." Her son Henry, a volunteer in the Hampton Legion, was fatally wounded at the Battle of Manassas, July 21, 1861, and she was terrified at the thought of losing yet another son to the cause.91

The family was fortunate. Throughout much of the war, the Middleton men served safely in the Lowcountry. But once the war took their soldiers out of South Carolina, panic besieged family and friends. The distant battlefield of Manassas had already claimed the life of Henry A. Middleton, Jr., and the family feared the insatiable demands of the Virginia front might take away others. Sally Middleton, gripped with fear over her son Johnny's departure to Virginia, dared "not listen to the newspapers now... ."92 Likewise, the Oliver Middletons and the Henry A. Middletons were in an utter state of misery when Oliver Jr. and Frank left for Virginia. Oliver's mother wrote "I am trying to reconcile myself to what is beyond my controle & put my trust in a good & wise Providence who orders all things well & pray of the move is made it may be for the best... but Virginia is far away & I cannot help having a great deal of dread of it... ."93


92 Harriott Middleton to Susan Middleton, August 13, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

93 Susan Hering Middleton to Oliver Middleton, Jr., March 24, 1864, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).
In moments of such despair, the Middletons, especially the women, found solace in their spirituality and sought strength from the sermons of pro-Confederate ministers. Aware that a prolonged war and staggering death toll threatened the faith and patriotism of even the most dedicated Confederates, ministers like Dr. Benjamin M. Palmer, celebrated the virtues of the Confederate soldiers who fought for “right and truth.” With dedicated zeal, Palmer emphasized men’s obligation “to strike in defence [sic] of his property, his honour, his life – those precious trusts from God.” It was, he insisted “a sacred binding duty, to resist even unto blood those who would destroy” the Confederacy. Palmer ended his sermon by declaring “that a man can scarcely be a Christian who is not a patriot – he must love his country, if he truly loves his God.”

Such lofty sentiments proved cold comfort when death came to the Middleton family. This was certainly true of the Henry Augustus Middletons, who found it nearly impossible to recover after Henry, Jr. died. His sister Harriott explained the terrible toll Henry’s death took on his father, “so sad--so utterly ship-wrecked--no one out of the family can at all understand how entirely all our, not only hopes of happiness, but the support, which peacefulness requires, rested on Henry.” Henry’s mother, plagued with mental and physical illness after her son’s death, mourned “everything in our lives is at an

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94 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, October 26, 1863. Dr. Benjamin Palmer, a Presbyterian minister, was a influential force in South Carolina’s secession moment and die-hard supporter of southern independence. His sermons, notorious for their fire-eating rhetoric and thundery Old Testament imagery, were popular among the Middleton women. Wyatt-Brown, *Shaping of Southern Culture*, 169-70, 238, 241.
end.” Time did little to assuage the family’s sorrow, and Harriot lamented “we never as a
family can get over Henry’s loss.”  

As the family mourned Henry, Jr.’s death, they received word that their only
surviving son, Frank, joined his brother Henry in the long list of martyrs that sacrificed
their lives on the blood-soaked soil of Virginia. On May 28, 1864, he was mortally
wounded at the Battle of Hawes Shop. Rumors and false reports concerning Oliver’s fate
abounded. After hearing the news of Frank’s death, the Oliver Middletons were besieged
with panic. Their son, Oliver, Jr. was in the same company as his cousin Frank. Each
new day brought reports that he was wounded or taken prisoner, but the family remained
confident that their son would come home. As one family acquaintance noticed, Oliver’s
kinfolk, “so fearful of hearing that he is dead,” eagerly believed any report that had him
among the missing or captured. The Oliver Middletons tried desperately not to “dwell
upon the worst alternative,” and remained steadfast in their belief that the young Oliver
had escaped serious harm. Despite such efforts, the uncertainty took its toll. Gripped by
fear, his mother became plagued by “nervous attacks,” and his “poor” father, who had
been “so wrapped up” in Oliver, Jr. “ever since he was a boy” was barely “able to refrain
from tears.” Then, their worst fears were confirmed when they received “accurate and
authentic” intelligence that on May 30, 1864, in the gallant “discharge of his duty,” this

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95 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, January 26, 1862, March 5, 1862,
Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

96 Robert N. Gourdin to Oliver Middleton, June 4, 1864; Mary Middleton Read to Susan
Hering Middleton, July 30, 1864, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).
“tender youth was most cruelly marred” by enemy fire. It was true, “poor Oliver Middleton” was “really killed.”

Like so many parents, Oliver and Susan anguished at the thought of their only son dying at the hands of their enemy and in the company of strangers. Desperate to learn “the particulars concerning, the death, of [their] noble son,” his family used eye-witness accounts to piece together his final hours. According to witnesses, Oliver was hit by enemy fire on the battlefield of Matadequin Creek, near Cold Harbor. Henry W. Richardson, a fellow soldier, stayed by Oliver’s side as he lay bleeding for several hours. Aware that his wound was life-threatening, Oliver asked Henry to send a final message to his family: “Tell my father and Mother and my Sisters goodbye. Tell my father that I died like a Middleton and that if I could I would willing die the same death over again . . . Tell them I am not afraid to die.” The bravery of the young soldier and his chivalric final words impressed even his enemies who reportedly “looked on with perfect admiration to see one so pure so young and noble make such a confession and die so like a Hero.”

Eventually, Union soldiers brought the dying boy to the nearby Higgins house. “Very near speechless,” when he arrived, Martha Higgins removed Oliver’s bloody clothes, “bathed his wound, and washed his face and hands” in an effort to comfort the dying soldier.

97 Marcy Maxcy Leverett to Milton Maxcy Leverett, July 11, 1864; Williams Trinholm to Oliver Middleton, June 6, 1864, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).

98 Martha Higgins to Susan Matilda Middleton, August 1, 1864; Julian Porcher to William Porcher Miles, August 6, 1864, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).
His valiant end did little to comfort his parents, who were inconsolable. Family and friends anguished at their inability to relieve their grief, especially now that distance separated the once closely knit extended family members who would normally have rallied to the Oliver Middletons' side. Separated by war, ink and paper became the only means for family members to perform the highly ritualized practice of bereavement. Heartfelt letters were cold comfort; as Eliza Middleton Fisher wrote, "you must know how truly & deeply I grieve with you! but all words, especially written ones are inadequate to express what we feel, & wish to convey." Olive's sister Mary shared her aunt's sentiments. She mournfully informed her mother; "I shall ever regret not having been present & amongst you at this time of sorrow but, for many reasons, I am best here."

With their young men dead and their families scattered and divided by conflicting loyalties, the Civil War completely changed the Middletons' world. Family ties and loyalties had helped the Middletons maintain their position among the southern planter elite and even among a national and international elite. The war, however, ruptured those ties in ways no one could have imagined. It quite literally turned brother against brother, and created rifts in the family that never healed. The Middletons, like so many members of the planter elite, joined in a war to defend the institution of slavery that so fundamentally shaped their lives. Confident of a quick victory, they could not foresee the

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100 Mary Middleton Read to Mrs. Oliver Hering Middleton, August 27, 1864, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).
trials ahead. As the Confederacy crumbled, the Middleton patriarchs saw their positions weaken within the family and outside it. The losses of the war and the devastation that followed set in motion a train of events that would further weaken the bonds of family and deal a final blow to the antebellum patterns of family life.
CHAPTER 4
"DRINKING THE DREGS FROM THE CUP OF BITTERNESS": THE COLLAPSE OF THE PLANTATION ECONOMY, 1862-1865

By 1862, as the sanguineous war so earnestly sought by the South Carolina Middletons had begun to scourge the southern landscape, minor inconveniences turned into severe hardships. Before long, a stranglehold of want and suffering gripped the Confederate home front. The effects of the Union blockade, the wartime demand for food and supplies, the disruption of slave labor, and the inflation of Confederate currency wrought havoc on agricultural production. In response to these changes, most of the Middleton patriarchs sought safety for their families in the Carolina Upcountry. Yet, even from their places of refuge, the family felt the dramatic effects of a faltering plantation economy. Their lives, as Nathaniel Russell Middleton reminisced, became increasingly "characterized by hardships and deprivations of many kinds."^1

The conditions on the family's plantations, particularly their most valuable properties on the Combahee River, were, by all accounts, "deplorable." According to reports, "property [was] destroyed, and crops abandoned in every direction."^2 In the

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^2 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, July 28, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Collection (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina, hereafter SCHS).
absence of their employers, the Middleton overseers tried to combat the problems that plagued the family's estates. However, money was short, supplies were scarce, and raids by starving Confederate and Union soldiers were common. The war brought a host of new hardships to the Middleton estates. Not surprisingly, the overseers' efforts to maintain plantation production failed. Determined to halt the ravaging effects of economic decline and reduce the risk of slave flight, planters left their upcountry safe havens and made their way back to the coast. Confident in the potency of planter authority, the Middleton patriarchs believed that their presence on their plantations would restore order.3

With the dangers of war looming, the Middleton patriarchs dreaded leaving their families alone. They knew that their absence brought additional burdens to already fractured and angst-ridden households. Yet, the men folk had little choice. It was their patriarchal duty, as Henry Augustus Middleton reflected, to save for their families "as much of the property as possible." That obligation, he believed, outweighed all others. Although he too would have much preferred that his family "be together, in times of such calamity," he could not "sacrifice the future, to the comforts of the present." He hoped only that his wife and daughters found solace in the fact that his "whole energies . . . [were] employed" trying to secure the family's economic interests.4 Henry was not alone. Oliver Middleton agreed with his cousin that "hold[ing] on to his land and negroes" was

3 Middleton, Life in Carolina.

of the utmost importance. After all, had not the war, in large part, been instigated in order to preserve the institution of slavery and the plantation economy?\(^5\)

Yet, the social landscape of slavery had shifted during the war and protecting the South's "peculiar institution" would prove no easy task. In November 1861, federal troops, 12,000 strong, took control of Port Royal, South Carolina, placing the Lowcountry well within striking distance of the enemy. From there, they gained a stronghold over the rich plantation districts of Beaufort and Edisto Island. As Union troops established their presence along the Carolina coastline, servile unrest ensued. Not since the chaotic days of the American Revolution had slaves fled Lowcountry plantations in greater numbers.

After the Union victory at Antietam in September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln announced his Emancipation Proclamation. Although slaves associated freedom with the army of Lincoln long before this wartime measure, its official announcement inspired thousands of Lowcountry slaves to flee to Union camps.\(^6\) The Middleton family's wartime correspondence, filled with anxious complaints of slaves "stampeding to


Yankees by the 20s and 30s," reflected their fears concerning the erosion of patriarchal authority on their plantations. Like most Lowcountry planters, they became increasingly desperate to keep their slaves out of the enemy's reach.7

Despite the obvious signs of discontent, the Middletons refused to acknowledge black demands for freedom. Instead, they clung tenaciously to the myth of slave loyalty and tried to explain away the slave exodus. More often than not, they blamed the enemy. In some instances, they accused Union soldiers of luring otherwise loyal servants from their owners. According to Susan Middleton, Union troops at Hilton Head "display for sale handkerchiefs, sugar, molasses, and all things which negroes fancy, and then the negroes purchase with their wages!"8 The allure of trinkets and coins, not freedom, she apparently believed, was what enticed bondspeople to flee. In other cases, the Middletons referred to errant slaves as "stolen," alleging that Union soldiers dragged them away from their plantations "screaming and pleading to be left behind." Other explanations, just as unlikely, reported that Union soldiers used violence to separate devoted servants from their benevolent masters. Like most slave owners, the Middletons looked for any

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7 President Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation gave the Confederate states until January 1, 1863, to surrender. James McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 505, 557; Michael A. Ross, Justice of Shattered Dreams: Samuel Freeman Miller and the Supreme Court During the Civil War Era (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 81-83. Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, April 3, 1862, March 5, 1862; April 12, 1862; Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, August 2/3, 1862; October 5, 1862, October 9/10, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS). For the breakdown of discipline on southern plantations generally, see Armstead L. Robinson, Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

8 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, April 12, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Schwalm, A Hard Fight For We, 92.
explanation for the flight of their servants other than the most obvious one – their hatred of slavery and their determination to be free.9

First-hand reports from runaways themselves told quite a different story. While breakfasting at Hilton Head, Confederate Captain William Buist, a Lowcountry doctor and planter, “observed a fine-looking black fellow behind him brushing away the flies and said to him, ‘Boy who do you belong to?” No longer fearful of his master’s retribution, Isaac, in the bold voice of black autonomy, responded: “I used to belong to Williams Middleton who plants on the Ashley River but now I am a free man, Sir!”10 His defiant break for freedom cast the loss of patriarchal authority into high relief. Powerless to bring his errant slave home, Williams had little choice but to give up the effort.

Instead, the Middletons held fiercely to their paternalistic beliefs and treasured any news that backed up their fanciful explanations for their slaves’ flight. Friends and family exchanged "piteous description[s]" of the abuse runaways suffered at the hands of Yankee "liberators," evidence that vindicated their own benevolence and shamed their enemy. In one instance, a returning slave reported on the "conditions of nearly eight hundred" contraband slaves forced to live in “close quarters closely watched and badly fed. . . ." According to this account, guards kept close watch over their charges and fired

9 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, August 2/3, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS). In some instances, the arrival of fugitive slaves did present problems. Army camps were often ill equipped to accommodate their needs. Moreover, fugitive slaves were not always welcomed. This was particularly true in the case of women and children who, according to Leslie Schwalm, "did not fit well or easily into the pragmatic equation that a slave lost by the Confederacy became a military laborer or a soldier gained by the Union," Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We, 90, 88-97.

10 John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, October 11, 1864, Williams Middleton Collection (South Caroliniana, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.).
at those who tried to escape. The Middletons exulted that Lowcountry servants were "all . . . disappointed" with freedom behind enemy lines and would "gladly return to their masters," if only they were "allowed to do so." On some level, these reports salved the slave owners' wounded pride and legitimated, in their minds, the rhetoric of paternalism. Depictions of discontented contraband labor desirous to return to their masters reinforced the family's belief in the moral superiority of the South's slave system and the "savagery" of their enemy.

However, as conditions on Lowcountry plantations worsened and Union troops tightened their hold on the Carolina coast, such stories did little more than mask the Middletons' festering fears over slave flight. Efforts to sequester evidence of black discontent failed; the facade of paternalism could not mask wartime challenges to white mastery. Reports of slaves escaping en masse from escape on Lowcountry plantations added to their woes, leaving many family members in what Susan Matilda Middleton could only describe as "a perfect paroxysm of fright." Their concern was not exaggerated. The murky tidal creeks that cradled the banks of the Lowcountry's rice plantations had offered temporary refuge to fugitive slaves for nearly two centuries. But

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14 In the Lowcountry, such staggering losses were typically a result of the Union Navy launching plantation raids from the tidal creeks that cradled rice plantations. Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We, 84, 88-97, 104-07.
now, with the chance at permanent freedom close at hand, countless men, women, and children left the plantations fully determined never to return again. Yet, the white Middletons, as their servants soon discovered, were just as unwavering in their determination to keep them there. For these planters, it was not just a matter of money, it was a matter of pride.¹⁵

Unwilling to relinquish the privileges of mastery without a fight, the Middletons increasingly relied on increasingly draconian methods of slave management to thwart black challenges to white authority. Despite the Confederate government’s request that Lowcountry slave owners employ a judicious, if not lenient, hand when disciplining slaves, besieged planters refused to follow any directive that threatened to diminish their already waning influence. For example, when slave patrollers in the Georgetown District caught three fugitives who had returned to liberate their wives and children, local planters demanded swift and retributive justice. That the men belonged to Dr. Magill, a notoriously brutal and much hated planter, did not matter. With the Lowcountry under siege, Henry Augustus Middleton and other Georgetown planters believed that black challenges to slavery could not be tolerated. Anxious to avoid any intervention on the fugitives’ behalf, local officials brought the Magill men before a provost marshal’s court where they were found guilty. Ignoring the army’s call for judiciousness, the court sentenced them to death. The next day, a large crowd assembled at the Georgetown jail yard to witness the execution. Confident that the hangings would send a message “not

soon be forgotten," Henry applauded the use of such brutality. Much to the planters’ disappointment, however, the Magill episode, and others like it, did little to deter slave flight. For many bondspeople, the draw of freedom proved more powerful than the fear of white violence. Unable to command compliance as they had in the antebellum era, planters watched helplessly as their once “faithful” servants left the plantations for freedom.

As the Middletons struggled to protect their most prized possessions, the consequences of servile unrest seeped into the fabric of planter households. An almost unbearable sense of anxiety ensued from the knowledge that at any moment they might forever be deprived their slaves. With no consensus among kinfolk on how best to “protect” their bondspeople, conflict erupted within their ranks. Their battle to preserve the labor system that had sustained the family for generations created rifts between husbands and wives and fathers and children. More often than not the dispute revolved around whether it was best to try to move slaves away from the coast, which faced the brunt of the Union onslaught. Convinced that this was the surest way to protect their property, several family members, especially the Middleton women, begged their planter patriarchs to move their slaves out of the enemy’s reach.

16 Henry Augustus Middleton, Jr. to Harriott Middleton, November 5, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Scarborough, Masters of the Big House, 362; Schwalm, A Hard Fight For We, 96; William Dusinberre, Them Dark Days, 337, 422-424.

17 Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, 74.

18 In the context of moving slaves, the Middletons use the word “protect” only to connote their efforts to protect their material interest, not in any paternalistic manner that suggests caring for the emotional or material needs of their slaves.

19 Dusinberre, Them Dark Days, 337.
But this was no easy task. Moving hundreds or even thousands of slaves, as many Lowcountry planters discovered, was a risky venture. As Susan Matilda Middleton explained, "impenetrable swamps are near at hand, and the moment they suspect an intention to move them they are off at once."\textsuperscript{20} Having lived and labored on these lands for their entire lives, indeed the slave communities on the Middleton plantations were as old as the family itself, many of the Middleton slaves were reluctant to leave home and knew where to hide. No less than their white masters, they too were bound by familial ties and maintained generational kinship and friendship networks that a move to the Carolina Upcountry would have sorely disrupted.

Even when slaves did not resist, such moves were difficult to orchestrate. As planters and their slaves crowded into the region, land prices in the Upcountry reached a premium by 1862, and few in this clan could afford the expense. Convinced that the expense and risk of moving slaves was too great, most of the Middleton men could not bring themselves to take such drastic action. Instead, still confident in their patriarchal authority, they determined that their return to the plantations would quiet servile unrest.\textsuperscript{21}

Not all family members were pleased with this verdict. Susan Middleton (Mrs. Oliver Hering Middleton) and Harriott Middleton (Mrs. Henry Augustus Middleton) seemed most unwilling to accept their husbands' decisions. They worried that if

\textsuperscript{20} Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriot Middleton, April 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

\textsuperscript{21} Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, September 12, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS). The family was particularly concerned about Weehaw plantation, the family seat. The property had been in Mrs. Middleton's family for nearly two hundred year and the slaves had lived there for generations. Henry’s wife and children, by all accounts, were very attached to the place.
Charleston fell to Union forces, the entire coastal region would follow. If that occurred, the women realized that they too would be utterly ruined like their counterparts on the nearby Sea Islands when Union soldiers seized the plantations and redistributed the land to the slaves.\textsuperscript{22} The women pleaded with their men to remove the slaves from the plantations. Despite his wife’s urgent requests, Oliver waited. He was concerned that the expense of such a step might outweigh any benefit. But before he could make up his mind, Union troops launched a raid on the Combahee River, and several Middleton slaves escaped. Although they were not the Edisto Island slaves she was so concerned about, Susan was outraged just the same. “What next, Heaven only knows!,” she exclaimed. In a letter to her husband, she wrote: “to think of it in spite of all my hopes & prayers . . . you have not moved the negroes . . .” But it is was “too late” she bitterly remarked to “do anything” now.\textsuperscript{23} She could only hope “that fear of fever [would] keep the wretches,” on the plantation until the fall but after that she fully anticipated another “stampede” once the fever season passed. No longer confident that her husband could protect the family's plantation interests, she now found temporary solace in the debilitating effects of the Lowcountry summer.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} For the best discussion of the impact of Federal occupation in the Carolina Lowcountry, see Rose, \textit{Rehearsal for Reconstruction.}

\textsuperscript{23} Susan Hering Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, n.d., Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).

\textsuperscript{24} Susan Hering Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, n.d., Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS). The Middleton’s Edisto Island plantation was on the ocean and the sea breeze, it was believed, offered protection against disease.
Similar arguments broke out among the Henry Augustus Middletons with much greater acrimony. At the center of the dispute were the slaves at the family's Weehaw plantation estate, whose fate "weighed particularly heavy" on their mistress. For her, Weehaw and the people who worked it were part of a legacy entrusted to her. The place had been owned by her "family for two hundred years" and the "negroes ha[d] been at Weehaw for generations." It held for Harriott, not only her present and future but a much venerated past which she was desperate to protect. The thought of her prized possession falling into the hands of the enemy was almost more than she could bear. But despite his wife's emotional bond to the place and its people, Henry refused to move the slaves. Convinced of his ability to command mastery over his servants, he bid adieu to his wife and children in Flat Rock and returned to Weehaw. That Henry would once again take the reins of plantation management was cold comfort to his wife and daughters who considered their patriarch "a bad manager." In a flagrant disregard of parental and patriarchal authority that would have been unthinkable before the war, they sent scores of letters advising him on how best to handle the place. In the antebellum era, the Middleton wives and daughters did not concern themselves so directly in the


26 Ibid.

management of plantation affairs, but the war upset those traditional gender roles and weakened the authority of the patriarchs both within and outside the household.\textsuperscript{28}

Surprisingly, in some cases the women’s attempts to influence plantation management succeeded, and some of the Middleton patriarchs acquiesced to their wives. In an effort to alleviate some of his wife’s anxiety, Oliver rented a farm outside Columbia, South Carolina and moved as many of the Edisto Island plantation slaves as he could. Delighted with her husband’s decision, Susan’s anger vanished. Harriott, however, was not so fortunate. Unlike his cousin, Henry took great offense at his wife’s castigations. He seethed as he read the litany of unsolicited advice that filled the pages of his wife’s and daughters’ correspondence. “You all urge me as to my negroes,” Henry wrote to his family. “Should Charleston be taken, my effort will be to leave the seaboard, immediately,” however, he continued, “this may not be in my power.” Tired of the mounting pressure to provide and protect, he made it very clear to his family that “should I lose [the slaves] let me impress it upon my family to bear well that evil, which will be felt by thousands. If the country is conquered, the \textit{property} of all will be lost.”\textsuperscript{29}

In the antebellum era, planter patriarchs typically shielded their wives and children from the


\textsuperscript{29} Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, September 12, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
knowledge of any financial perils that threatened their families. But now Henry made no effort to protect his dependents from the reality that, in a very short time, they might lose everything.

Masters like Henry Middleton may have resisted the entreaties of their womenfolk to relocate slaves and disrupt the stable slave communities, but the demands of war ultimately overrode those sentiments. As the threats of destitution bore down on these once privileged planters, the ethos of paternalism faded. Desperate to protect their own economic interests, the Middletons increasingly ignored the material and emotional needs of their servants. The Middletons’ decision to separate, contract, impress, move, and volunteer slaves wrought havoc on slave families and their communities.

Although the vast majority of the Middleton slaves spent the war years laboring on the plantation as they always had, their lives were nothing like they had been in the past. The hardships that plagued the Middleton plantations during the war took a heavy toll on the slave communities. As the Confederate economy came crashing down, the white Middleton found it increasingly difficult to provide the rations of food and clothes that were so vital to their slaves’ survival. By 1862, the food shortages that plagued the Carolina Lowcountry made themselves felt on the Middleton plantations, and malnutrition was widespread. In 1863, the Confederate government’s food impressment policy compounded the problem of food supplies. The military’s forced provisioning devoured a sizable share of the Middletons’ supplies of rice, corn, and peas. That,


31 William Dusinberre, Them Dark Days, 410, esp. fn 61.
coupled with the pillaging of slaves’ provision gardens by ravenous Rebel soldiers, left the Middleton slaves with little to eat.32

The problems confronting the Middletons slaves only worsened as plantation production shifted. The Union embargo made it nearly impossible for Lowcountry planters to bring their crops to market.33 In an effort to raise money, they began efforts at producing for a local market. For example, the Middletons began selling timber to the Confederate government. Slaves, accustomed to working in rice fields, were now required to cut, carry, and haul timber.34 Similarly, the Middleton slaves were forced to work in salt production. After 1862, the Lowcountry was also almost entirely dependent on locally produced salt. Labor in the saltworks was onerous and took slave men away from their families.35 Yet there was little choice. Salt was necessary for their survival. In addition to salt, sugar was in short supply and dreadfully expensive when it could be bought. The Middletons planted sugar cane and hoped to generate income from the sale of syrup. Middleton overseer B. T. Seller obtained a sugar mill and set the slaves to

32 Schwalm, A Hard Fight For We, 79.


34 B. T. Seller to Williams Middleton, November 26, 1863; T. B. Bennett to Williams Middleton, September 24, 1864; “List of wood, straw, rice & stock sold, April 24, 1864,” D. G. Campell to T. B. Bennett, October 28, November 1, 1864; R. S. Lucas to Williams Middleton, November 26, 1864; James Welsman to Williams Middleton, November 7, 1864, August 13, 1864.

35 The salt shortage in the Lowcountry was so severe, permanent saltworks were constructed near Georgetown that required the labor of 20 to 30 slaves. For more information concerning salt production, see Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We, 80.
work cultivating this laborious and unfamiliar crop. Efforts at sugar production were hardly successful, and the various forms of labor diversification took their toll on the Middleton slave communities.\textsuperscript{36}

The separation of slave families during the war made these challenges much worse. In constant fear of Yankee raids and slave flight, but unable to move a sizable portion of their labor force to the Carolina Upcountry, the white Middletons began moving slaves to various plantations. This draconian measure proved most effective when planters separated husbands from wives and parents from children. Typically, they moved the most valuable slaves further inland, leaving the old, infirm, or young in the path of war. On one occasion, B. T. Sellers, fearing a raid, moved all the adults to Hobonny plantation but relocated their children to Newport plantation. He hoped that if Union troops arrived, parents would be less likely to run away without their offspring.

The disruptions of slave life were particularly hard on the children on the Middleton plantations. In June 1864, one group of black children who had been separated from their parents became seriously ill. Within a week's time, the mysterious ailment claimed the lives of three children and threatened the others with a similar fate. After receiving word that the children were sick, Williams ordered Sellers to remedy the situation at once. But Sellers found that "all the Bridges" leading to the remote property had been "washed away." While the war had strained the paternalistic obligations between the Middletons and their slaves, the masters were disturbed by the deaths of helpless children and demanded an explanation from the overseer. "In regard to the children," Sellers replied, "I can only say that they get the very best attention possible under the circumstances." With all the obstacles on the plantation, it was impossible, he

\textsuperscript{36} B.T. Sellers to Williams Middleton, July 21, 1864.
claimed "to see them more than once a week." Besides, he assured Williams that "the white women & old negro women seem to give them all the attention possible." And once he was able to get some vegetables, he had every intention of bringing the dying children soup "2 or 3 times a week."  

The separation of slaves in a declining economy proved an enormously potent form of control. However, despite the onerous changes, the Middleton slaves continued to demonstrate the highly ritualized expressions of deference. Even on the eve of freedom, they had little choice. Wartime separation, economic decline, and the erosion of paternalism by their masters made slave life more precarious than it had perhaps ever been in the long history of the Middleton slave community. Many slaves were more than willing to don the mask of deference if it meant that they might help their families.

Slave children were not the only members of the Middleton slave communities who suffered from such neglect. The old and the infirm suffered similar fates. For example, Oliver Middleton left twenty slaves, "nearly all old or infirm," on his Edisto Island plantation to save the expense of moving them to the Upcountry. After a Union raid on the Combahee River in June 1863, they were either "carried off, or left without provisions."  

Still struggling to generate income and secure their slaves, the Middletons began hiring out slaves, a practice they had rarely employed in the antebellum era. In October 1862, Williams and John Izard sent eighty men from various plantations to work on the

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37 B.T. Sellers to Williams Middleton, June 21, 1864, June 29, 1864, Williams Middleton Collection (South Carolinianana).

38 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, June 5, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
Piedmont Railroad in North Carolina, further fragmenting families. As they left, they asked Oliver Middleton to get a place in the Upcountry so that their families would be safe in their absence, and they assured him that they had "no intention of going to the Yankees." The men, in desperate need of warm clothes and shoes, were forced to work "from day break to dark," performing unfamiliar and back-breaking labor. Their new employer, Mr. Chafin, concerned only with getting as much labor out of the men as possible, subjected them to unfamiliar hardships. Indeed, the conditions were so bad that at least one man died, and others ran away. Yet, it was not only the men who suffered; so did the families they left behind. Lowcountry slaves typically worked on the task system rather than working from sun-up to sun-down. Many employers had little respect for the work ethic of Lowcountry slaves and treated them brutally. Mr. Chafin, for example, swore he would have preferred "twenty North Carolina Negroes than thirty" of these men, and treated them accordingly. As winter approached, another railroad employee sent word to Williams, informing him that if "something was not done and done soon," to improve their lot, more would die or run away.

As the traditional patterns of slavery collapsed, relationships among the Middleton brothers frayed. Consumed with his own suffering, Harry Middleton gave little thought to the managerial obstacles facing his brothers. Nearing sixty, with no career or prospects, Harry cared only that his annuity, which in the antebellum era afforded him a life of "luxury & abundance," was now shrinking at an alarming rate.

39 Ibid.

40 John Wilkes to Williams Middleton, November 8, 1862; January 26, 1863; J. M. Tahler, November 9, 1862; B.T. Sellers to Williams Middleton, November 9, 1862, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
“Even under the most economical management,” he complained that an annuity paid in depreciated currency was “utterly inadequate to provide even the barest maintenance.” As Harry contemplated the loss of past prosperity, a dark sense of anxiety ensued. He could see nothing “ahead but utter bankruptcy and ruin.” A less enthusiastic secessionist than many of his kinfolk, Harry resented sacrificing personal prosperity for the Confederate cause. Particularly angry over the executors’ investment in Confederate bonds, Harry insisted on receiving his annuity payments in sterling. Why, he demanded, should he have to buy molasses at “10 dollars a Gallon, in these debased notes,” when it could “be had for 50 cents the gallon, if paid for in Silver Coin!” Despite their best efforts, Williams and John Izard could not alleviate their brother’s want. Trapped in a crumbling plantation economy, they could hardly provide for their own families, much less Harry’s. And, as Confederate losses hit closer to home, Harry’s animosity escalated.

In the dark of night, on June 2, 1863, Harriet Tubman, the former slave turned abolitionist, guided three federal gunboats, manned by contraband soldiers, down the Combahee River. After landing more than three hundred men at Field’s Point, the

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41 Henry Middleton to Williams Middleton February 2, 1864, February 18, 1864, July 23, 1864; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, August 5, 1864, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

42 Ibid.

43 John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, November 16, 1864; November 24, 1864, Williams Middleton Papers (South Caroliniana).

44 Catherine Clinton’s biography of Tumban offers an excellent overview of the former slave’s wartime activities. Clinton, Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom (New York: Little Brown, 2004), esp. chs. 10 and 11.
expedition launched a devastating raid on the rich rice plantations that cradled the river's fertile banks, including the Middleton estate, Newport.45

Rumors quickly spread that everything at the family's plantation was gone, including nearly one hundred and eighty slaves. Private Oliver Hering Middleton, Jr. was stationed nearby. He reported that the troops "marched to the various plantations" burning and pillaging the neighborhood at will. On their plantation, Oliver announced devastating losses. He reported that former Lowcountry slaves turned Union soldiers "drove off all the negroes with the exception of one" and burned the "overseers house and [rice] mill[s]." It was, Oliver determined, "a most unfortunate affair" for the family, and "certainly most humiliating when we think of the people who did it." Although the property fared better than Oliver reported, it was a severe loss. After destroying two valuable rice mills, the troops left, taking with them nearly 130 slaves.46

Harry and his nephew Benti were the principal heirs of Newport plantation and the loss "fell heaviest upon them." As the family's material losses mounted, Harry's demands for redress reached a fevered pitch. Because Harry had, Susan Matilda Middleton remarked, "strongly urged that the estate's negroes . . . be removed to a place of safety, notwithstanding the expense and risk," he now became "more bitter than ever against his brothers."47 Williams and John Izard were not indifferent to the blow. They


46 Oliver Hering Middleton to Mrs. Susan Hering Middleton, June 4, 1863, Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS). The family managed to keep fifty slaves who were gone from the estate at the time of the raid, see Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

too “bemoaned bitterly the Newport loss,” but knew of no easy resolution. As Williams explained to his brother Oliver, he could not “move any more [slaves] not knowing where to carry them or how to feed them elsewhere.” While no one was pleased with the loss, most family members understood all too well the difficulties war brought to plantation management. Harry, however, did not. Maddened by the prospect of utter ruin, Harry threatened an “appeal to the law." Just as Edward’s unionism permanently affected his relationship with his siblings, the dispute between Harry and his brothers raged long after the war’s end.

Although Harry’s rage was unique, his deprivation was not. The collapse of the plantation complex during the war brought disastrous consequences to all the Middleton households and shattered the cooperative extensive family network that had supported them. When the war began, none of the Middletons imagined that the war for southern independence would last so long, or bring, in the words of Susan Middleton “such incalculable misery to an innocent people” As the foundations of slavery and the economy it supported collapsed, the hardships of war settled in and became increasingly acute. The position of privilege enjoyed by the family for generations was gone. It was not simply a question of losing the fineries that slavery once afforded the family; instead, they had to struggle against the general cloud of hardship and want that cast itself over the Confederacy. It was a far cry from what they expected when the war began. The Middletons increasingly found their lives defined by poverty, stripped more and more of the power and privilege that had defined the family for generations.

Mrs. Oliver Middleton to Oliver Hering Middleton, Jr., n.d., Middleton-Blake Papers (SCHS).
Harriott Middleton aptly expressed the sentiments of most family members when she mused upon these changes:

I wonder if your life seems to you as strangely inconsistent as mine sometimes seems to me. The realities of my life and the situations in which I have been placed have been so strangely different from what my character and the early promise of my life would have led one to expect.  

No longer able to count on their men to provide for them as they had in the past, the Middleton women bore the unexpected burdens of wartime domesticity. Providing food for the table was the first challenge the women faced, a harsh reality that their sheltered lives had never prepared them to face. For nearly all the Middletons, the delicacies and abundance that once graced their tables vanished, and "food for the next day," as Nathaniel Russell reminisced, "became increasingly uncertain." As supplies dwindled and the value of Confederate currency collapsed, these grandees became almost entirely dependent on their Upcountry provision gardens for their daily fare. Vegetables, especially tomatoes and okra, became the mainstay of their diets. The family's precipitous decline was not lost on others. As Mary Leverett, a fellow Lowcountry refugee, gossiped to her soldier son, "do you know that even the Middletons frequently (and generally I expect) go without meat." Little did Mrs. Leverett know that for the Oliver Middletons even potatoes had become, according to Susan "a first class luxury entirely beyond our reach." The mere suggestion that they eat this simple starch reminded her "of the French

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48 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, December 18, 1862Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).


50 Mary Maxcy Leverett to Milton Leverett, March 4, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
princess who wondered why the peasantry did not eat white bread when they could not get brown!"51

By the summer of 1863, food shortages had reached crisis proportions. And, as hungry soldiers on the move devoured everything in sight, the Middletons found it increasingly difficult to feed themselves. Although the Middletons, with few exceptions, were loyal patriots still willing to sacrifice for the Confederate cause, the high degree of destitution evoked feelings of fear and discomfort. "The soldiers passing by have eaten up every thing," cried Harriott Middleton, "and I don’t know what we are about to do . . . ." But, having "never heard of genteel people starving," she determined, "something will turn up."52 At times, however, the shortage of food created tensions within the household. This was certainly the case in Flat Rock, where Mrs. Henry August Middleton constantly complained about the lack of food. In a halfhearted effort to console her mother, Harriott professed her "firm belief that, in the case of failure in our ordinary supplies, we shall be fed by ravens, by miracles like Elijah, and the thousands in the New Testament!"53

By the end of the war, life had become "a struggle unto death," and few family members maintained much confidence in the future. After a war fought to protect the privilege of the South's planter elite, some of its most prominent members now longed

51 Susan Matilda Middleton to Harriott Middleton, June 7, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

52 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, September 22, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

53 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, June 8/10, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
only for “our own small sufficiency of wood, corn, and vegetable . . . .” Although the Oliver Middletons’ aspirations declined, their imaginations had not. “We have fallen, too, upon a new device,” Susan explained to her friend Mary Boykin Chestnut, “we keep a cookery book on the mantel piece, and when our dinner is deficient we just read a pudding or a crème.” Admittedly, it did not “entirely satisfy the appetite, this dessert in imagination, but perhaps it is as good for the digestion.”

Despite the high expectation that patriots would sacrifice all for the Confederate cause, not all family members resigned themselves so easily to the loss of past prosperity. Some family members, as Susan Matilda Middleton noticed, continued to build “universal calculations . . . upon that ‘good time coming.’” Her nephew, little Benjamin Middleton Read, for example, constantly spoke “of the tin soldiers, and carriages, and boats, and railcars he means to have when the War is over.” But such hopes were reserved only for the young or very naive. Most of the Middletons realized that the likelihood of being completely destitute grew with every Confederate defeat. Such was the case with Alice Middleton, who could not help but complain: "Oh! how I wish that peace and plenty were here once more," to which her sister Harriott responded, "peace you may have, but plenty you probably will never have again." Well, in that case, Alice declared, "I am for perpetual war!"

While other women certainly shared Alice’s feelings, some adhered more strictly to the rhetoric of female sacrifice and stifled their fears of destitution. After all, the

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54 Woodward, Mary Boykin Chestnut, 778-79.

55 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, November 17, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
dramatic material decline cast the failures of planter patriarchs into high relief, and some of the Middleton men were as short on patience as they were on cash. Harriott Middleton disclosed her darkest fears concerning poverty only with her closest confidants. After one such confession, she begged Susan: "don't allude to it, for the family, if they suspected such a thing, would think me the weak-minded, week-kneed creature that I am!" And she was right. Her stoic father made it perfectly clear that he "could submit, without a murmur, to a very simple state of living," and expected that his "family would do the same." After all, "the greater part of man kind live in miserable huts, & with scanty fair [sic]," and they should not "shrink from such a fate, if called upon to do so."

As the war came to its bloody conclusion, these once proud patriarchs watched helplessly as Union troops laid to waste the lands that had sustained their families for generations. Harboring a special hatred for South Carolina's prominent secessionists, General William T. Sherman's soldiers took a special pleasure in destroying the Middletons' prized plantations. Powerless to stop the destruction, the families watched as their enemy dealt them their final blow. When the 157th New York Volunteers arrived at Henry Augustus Middleton's Weehaw plantation, he seemed resigned to his fate. After ordering the slaves off the plantation, a Union soldier haughtily ordered the "damned old rebel" to "get out of your house this minute-- I mean to burn it down and set you afloat on the world." With Job-like resignation, Henry obliged the enemy's demand and watched as his beloved estate went up in flames. His experience was not unique. Not far away, his

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56 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, December 12, 1862, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS).

cousin John Izard, once a rabid secessionist, hid in a closet as Union soldiers pillaged and blazed his prized Waccamaw estate. Similar scenes played out on other Middleton estates, leaving their proprietors "homeless & penniless." It was a humiliating conclusion to a war they had assumed would preserve the traditions and rights of the planter elites.

As the war the Middletons and their fellow slaveholders launched to preserve slavery actually destroyed the South's peculiar institution, the family discovered just how completely their lives depended on the plantation economy. Clearly, for the Middletons, the plantation economy was as much a social and cultural system as an economic one. It provided not only the profits that sustained their lavish lifestyles, but also the infrastructure that kept their complex kinship system alive and flourishing, and the cultural trappings of gentility, family history, and honor that were fundamental to their identities. As the plantation system crumbled, the Middletons' family structure frayed and eventually snapped. Brother turned against brother, wives turned against husbands. Tables that had once groaned under the weight of crystal, china, silver and lavish meals now stood empty as hunger stalked the family. The men who once saw themselves as all-powerful, benevolent patriarchs watched helplessly as their control over their plantations and slaves evaporated. The mask of paternalism fell away as the increasingly frustrated "masters" resorted to harsher and harsher methods to hold onto the slaves that they could no longer adequately feed and clothe. And finally, as Union troops marched through the Lowcountry unopposed, they watched as their ancestral homes went up in flames, leaving behind little more than the cold ashes of their former lives.

58 Fisher Diary, May, 23, 1865; Pease and Pease, A Family of Women, 171.
On February 23, 1865, when Union troops arrived at Middleton Place plantation, slaves greeted them with “numerous demonstrations of joy.” After enjoying “their dinner comfortably” in Williams Middleton’s “old dining room,” the troops went to work pillaging and destroying the family seat. As the Union officers burned the main house and the flanker building that contained the library, along with numerous other outbuildings, some of the slaves chose a different but equally symbolic target. They ransacked the handsome marble mausoleum set in the midst of the elegant gardens, opened the caskets, and cast the “decayed remnants of humanity outside.”

The slaves’ desecration of the tomb is an apt metaphor for the rise and fall of the Middleton plantation complex. The vaults were the resting place for three generations of Middletons, including Mary Williams Middleton, who brought the plantation into the

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family in the early eighteenth century, her son, Arthur Middleton, the signer of the Declaration of Independence, and Williams’ father, Governor Henry Middleton. It was they who had planted the elegant gardens and built and maintained the Middleton plantation empire. They had bought and exploited the ancestors of the slaves who, in destroying the tombs and exercising their new freedom, took final revenge. Leaving the big house to the soldiers, former slaves made their strike at a more personal target. They attacked both their present and past masters who bore the responsibility for generations of bondage. After the flames died and the plantation fell in “a mass of ruins,” the freedpeople “seem[ed] happy [and made] ready to leave for town.”

Ironically, the Civil War, fought to preserve the plantation system and its patriarchal order, “took away” in the mournful words of Harriott Middleton “so much that was loved and prized.” Reared in a gentry tradition, some if not most members of the Lowcountry plantocracy proved ill-equipped to compete in a world where their traditional patterns of patronage and power had collapsed. As home front losses mounted, bonds between the various families, black and white, frayed. Kinship, the plantation economy, and slavery—the “century old institutions” which had shaped the lives of the Middletons and their slaves in the antebellum era—disintegrated. Now, confronted by a hostile world, few Lowcountry planters had the means necessary to lift themselves up from the wreckage of their lives. Unable to support themselves in their former lifestyle, both

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2 Marcy Diary, February 23-24, 1865 (SCHS); Fisher Diary, May 23, 1865, 498.

3 Harriott Middleton to Susan Middleton, October 19, 1863, Cheves-Middleton Papers, (SCHS).
parents and children were plagued with financial ruin, personal unhappiness, and chronic
depression. Individual interests and self-preservation became the chief concerns of
everyone, both black and white.⁴

The various ways in which southern planters and their former bondspeople
struggled to survive a radically new socio-economic order in the postwar period have
been an important topic in Reconstruction historiography. For decades, historians have
focused on the complexities surrounding the Confederate defeat and reorganization of
southern society that followed it. From politics, to race relations, to economic changes,
scholars have examined the upheavals of the period, usually focusing on the entire region
or on individual states. An in-depth study of a single planter family, though an
exceptional one in many respects, offers an opportunity to explore how the dramatic
changes of the period played themselves out on a diminutive level. The changes that
came with the war were enormous. Prior to 1865, the Middletons belonged to a national
and even international aristocracy. After Appomattox, however, their economic and
political fall from grace meant that the family lost its privileged position nationally and
even within the South. The sudden change of fortune matched the fate of the French
aristocracy after the Revolution and that of the Russian nobility in the overthrow of the
Czar.

⁴James McPherson, “Introduction,” in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, editors, Divided
Houses: Gender and the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xiii;
James Roark, Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and
Throughout the colonial and antebellum era, rice planters enjoyed a high place among the transatlantic elite. Despite the rise of anti-slavery sentiment in the 1840s and 1850s, slavery remained an acceptable institution for many conservative Northern and European elites. For them, a plantation mystique that implied wealth, power, valor, honor, and tasteful extravagance survived. After the Civil War, financial ruin, moral bankruptcy, and military defeat tainted this once romantic ideal. For many northerners, genteel planters were now considered little more than treasonous and oppressive brutes, a class of people whose values hung like an onerous yoke around the neck of progress and democracy. Men like Sidney Fisher of Philadelphia, the Unionist cousin of J. Francis Fisher, who once considered planters the very pillars of polite society, now believed genteel southerners were a class of “people who do not appreciate & cannot desire” the values of a “wise government & an intelligent people.”

A close friend of the Middleton family and cousin-in-law of Eliza Middleton Fisher, Sidney aptly expressed the sentiments of many northerners who remained hostile to the South and to white southerners when he wrote:

What to do with the South & the Negro seems as difficult a problem now as before the war. We have conquered the southern people, but they are still our

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6 *Fisher Diary*, February 16, 1866, 509. Nina Silber argues that “these ideas were primarily the creation of Northern men, mainly Republicans, of the middle and upper classes,” see Nina Silber, “Intemperate Men, Spiteful Women, and Jefferson Davis: Northern Views of the Defeated South,” *American Quarterly* 41 (December 1989), 616. Sidney Fisher, a Unionist, was the first cousin and close friend of J. Francis Fisher and Eliza Middleton Fisher. Their relationship however, was seriously strained as a result of Fisher’s growing sympathies for the Confederacy.
enemies. Shall we let them back as states & thus give them power over us, or shall we hold them indefinitely as conquered provinces and, in order to do so, invest our government with despotic power & keep their enmity alive forever? Either plan seems equally dangerous. 'I have caught a Tartar,' cried a soldier of an English regiment in the East, to his officer. 'Well bring him along,' said the officer. 'He wont come,' said the soldier. 'Then come along without him.' 'He wont let me.' So we have caught a Tartar.7

The affectionate feelings Sidney had once entertained for southerners like the Middletons, people he once considered "clever, cultivated, accomplished...well-bred" of "soft winning manners," were gone, extinguished by the torrents of Union blood.8

That former friends like Sidney Fisher considered the South a "Tartar" blocking the nation on its "an appointed path toward freedom, prosperity, & civilization" was insulting to the Middletons. They considered such admonishments one of the most contemptuous elements of what family members described as "this infernal Yank[ee] conquest." Proud of a lineage that included great patriarchs and Founding Fathers, the family found Yankee condemnation difficult to endure. It appeared, as John Izard explained, that their conquerors now took "a vile pleasure in annoying and humiliating" the South. Implicit in these assaults were Northern boasts of moral, economic, and political superiority, claims most Southerners were anxious to rebut. Harriott Middleton, livid over Yankee efforts to "humiliate and goad" the South, prayed that "a righteous retribution" might fall upon "their wicked heads!" The Middletons, either unwilling or unable to understand the role that slave owners played in their own demise, believed that

7 Fisher Diary, February 16, 1866, 509.
8 Fisher Diary, September 12, 1838, 59; Jane Turner Censer, "Reimagining the North-South ReUnion," Southern Cultures 5 (Summer 1999), 64-91.
only the reestablishment of the plantation complex, complete with its social and political hierarchies, would vindicate and legitimate the values of the antebellum South.9

Other planters and their families, perhaps sensing the futility of the situation, packed up what little they had and left. Of these migrants, many looked to the West as the most promising place to start anew. Others, unable to face “the crushing realities” wished to be “a great way off” and headed for Europe, Canada, Mexico, or South America. Yet such immigrants were rare, only a select few could afford so permanent a break with the past. The Middletons, nearly destitute, “regard[ed] . . . thrice blessed anyone who can leave this country now. . . .” For Williams, John Izard, and Oliver, flight was not an option.10

Whether by choice or by design, most rice planters resolved that their “place” was in the Lowcountry. They moved aggressively to hold onto the lands that had provided the foundation for their wealth and power for generations. In an effort to rebuild their lives, the Middletons swallowed their pride, sought pardons, and signed Oaths of Allegiance in order to reclaim their confiscated properties. The generous terms of President Andrew Johnson’s reconstruction plans offered some Lowcountry planters a glimmer of hope that

9 Fisher Diary, February 16, 1866, 509; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, May 14, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Harriott Middleton to Susan Middleton, 29, 1865, Cheves-Middleton Papers, (SCHS); Silber, “Intemperate Men, Spiteful Women, and Jefferson Davis,” 616-21.

10 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton, August 6, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Fisher Diary, May 23, 1865, 498; Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, August 19, 1865 Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Catherine Clinton, Tara Revisited: Women, War, & the Plantation Legend (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 168-169; Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 268.
much of what they had lost could be restored. But just as quickly as the ink had dried, the catastrophic consequences of defeat set in, and the Middleton family was challenged as never before. The first trial they faced was the recreation of their antebellum households. Now drawn into what Williams described as a “vortex of disaster & ruin,” the social, economic, and political revolutions that besieged the South would prove too powerful for most to overcome.\textsuperscript{11}

Indeed, Northern victory brought bewildering changes to a war-torn South, and the very thought of returning home left some completely despondent. The entire Lowcountry region of South Carolina sustained extensive damage, and almost all of the Middletons suffered substantial losses. When Susan Matilda Middleton, tired of refugeeing, expressed her eagerness to go home, her cousin Harriott was shocked; “My dear child,” she wrote, “I think you must be ignorant of the true position of affairs. Did you think of Charleston or the plantation when you spoke? From all accounts I should think the life in one most disagreeable and the other impossible.” With homes and plantations “lying in ashes,” only the naive or very brave could return home without trepidation.\textsuperscript{12}


Stories of misery and gloom abounded. When word circulated that Mary Middleton Read’s family, having lost virtually everything, was forced to live in a “miserable hovel w/out neighbour[s]” surrounded by only “negro population[s]” many feared a similar fate. Initially, friends and family tried to soothe the anxieties of those most unnerved. Such was the case with Williams’ wife, Susan. Kinfolk tried to assure the distraught former belle and plantation mistress that while the “return to our home[s] will indeed be far different, from what we hoped and expected,” there was no choice now but to “gather courage, & struggle on.” Sister-in-law Eliza Middleton also tried to buoy her spirits. While acknowledging that it was “hard, very hard & harder” for those “whose life has been one of untroubled sunshine,” she urged Susan to take comfort in “the blessings still left” to her and to concentrate on “a devoted husband, two fine & promising children.”13 These were no small assets in a war that claimed the lives of so many southern men. Aware that material concerns drove Susan’s anxieties, Eliza reminded her that “life is more than property, & you possess these dear living ones, while some have none, or bad ones . . . come cheer up. Work you must, it is true, but you will not fail because it is new to you to work.” Despite her best efforts, such words rang hollow, and few members of the planter elite could find relief in what threatened to be a very bleak future.14

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13 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, March 10, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Mrs. William Mason Smith to Susan Smith Middleton, September 28, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

14 Mrs. Williams Mason Smith to Susan Smith Middleton, September 28, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North
Not surprisingly, many Southerners, particularly women, relied on their religious faith to make sense of their miserable fate. The Middletons, like so many others, had enshrined the Confederate cause with heavenly virtue, and defeat sorely tested their spirituality. Some Southerners believed that Union victory was God’s punishment for slavery. Others believed that their downfall was a result of waver ing faith. Although different, these two strains of religious thought held white Southerners, with all their excesses, responsible for the tragedies that came with war and defeat. At least one of the Middleton women determined that the utter ruin they now faced was punishment for the past. “God has humbled us to the dust,” exclaimed Elizabeth Pringle Middleton Smith, and now we must now “bow in submission, to His will” no matter how “hard & terrible, as it may be to our hearts.” She warned her kinfolk not to “distrust” God, “for if we only try to serve Him, He will not forsake us.” Always remember, Elizabeth urged her kinfolk that “it is for our sins . . . that God has . . . punished us.” In her view, “The Yankee” was “nothing, but an instrument in God’s hand” and Southerners now had no choice but to surrender “in repentance, & submission.” She, like many Southerners believed that faith “will do us good in the end, if not in lands, & houses,” in “things


16 Mrs. Elizabeth Pringle Middleton Smith to Susan Middleton, September 28, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
eternal, for which, remember, we ought to be struggling.” However, few of her kinfolk shared her philosophy of spiritual condemnation and instead reveled in what the historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown referred to as “the easy habit of assailing scapegoats.”

With few exceptions, the family blamed the Yankees, the Freedmen’s Bureau, black politicians and their former slaves for their ruin: anyone and everyone but themselves. Most Middleton women refused to understand defeat as punishment. They believed, as did Harriott Middleton, that God’s “misconstrued silence” would be soon be unveiled delivering “heavy retribution” for the “long list of Yankee enormities.” While they did not abandon their Christian faith, they sometimes found religion to be cold comfort for their losses. Rage seemed to suit them better. As Isabel Middleton willingly admitted, thoughts of “Yankees lying in their blood” offered more solace than the rhetoric of religion. She was not alone. Neither faith nor rage could lighten the burdens of the household. Throughout the South, elite women echoed the feelings of Sally Middleton, who was “tired to death” of “scratching to keep ends together & doing our own work.” She spoke for many when she declared life under Reconstruction as “dreadful, universal misery.”

17 Mrs. Elizabeth Pringle Middleton Smith to Susan Middleton, September 28, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 243.


19 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, March 21, 1865, May 20, 1865, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 238-243.

20 Caroline Ravenel to Isabella Middleton Smith, May 18, 1865; Mrs. Allen Izard to Mrs. William Mason Smith, June 24, 1865, Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS); Edwards,
For the Middletons, such changes presented more than just new responsibilities that included cooking, cleaning, sewing and washing. The sad of fortune meant that their entire identity as members of the landed gentry had changed. "Separated from the staff & support" that slavery and the plantation economy once afforded, the Middletons no longer had the time or money to engage in the habits and customs of their former lives. That these once privileged elites had "to do the work of servants" transformed their lives in fundamental ways. Cultivation and refinement were now wasted on the "new occupation" of domestic labor, a change that most members of the Lowcountry plantocracy found necessary but degrading. Yet it was not simply the absence of luxuries that changed their lives. The freedom of the antebellum days, supported by the abundance of domestic servants under slavery, was crucial in maintaining the elaborate kinship and friendship networks that were so formative in maintaining their individual and collective identity. As time passed, the Middletons found themselves increasingly bound to the confines of an ever-shrinking household. Their new responsibilities left little time for socializing. Activities that were once part of the elites' every-day routine became rare pleasures. Teas, afternoon rides, and promenades with family and friends

Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore, 172-175.


22 Susan Smith Middleton to Hal Middleton, March 9, 1871, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

23 Edwards, Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore, 172.
became things of the past. As one husband noticed, "the new household duties which have befallen upon all the ladies of our acquaintance have almost entirely put an end to all visiting except" on "special" occasions. Forced to assume the responsibilities of their former slaves, the plantation mistress found herself tethered to the household.24

As domestic responsibilities mounted, it also became increasingly difficult for extended family networks to provide mutual assistance as they had in the antebellum period. Now, the demands of individual households left few planters or their wives with the time or patience to care for those who were not spouses or offspring. When the consequences of war left the Williams Middleton family temporarily homeless, his wife Susan and their two children, Lillie and Hal, stayed with relatives. Unlike the antebellum era, the absence of servants, cash, and comforts made the stay less than pleasant. As Susan's sister-in-law explained:

I cannot urge her to stay here for I am housekeeper, & you know she is not a helpful person, & I cannot take the additional burden. Her children too accustomed to consider only what they wish, in these time when one must have rules as to what one can give & what one can’t are not comfortable. They can’t bring themselves to submit to a certain allowance of biscuits & Molasses & mine must. Yet I feel as tho’ I were selfish & hard, but what can I do?25

Despite her feelings of guilt, the new realities of domesticity meant that "only a certain amount of work can be got out of a person," and she had reached her limit. With a hint of bitterness, she determined that until her kinfolk were pulled down to her level, they would

24 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, May 22, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 254-256.

25 Mrs. J.J. Pringle Smith to Mrs. William Mason Smith, July 23, 1865, Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS).
not "willingly wash dishes & clear tables." Resentment became more pronounced as people began to compare their ruin to that of others. In one such instance, Mrs. John Julius Pringle Smith, Susan Middleton's sister-in-law, expressed her frustration over what she considered Susan's endless self-pity. Mrs. Smith's sympathy was exhausted; as "far as I can discover" she fumed, "Sue is as well off . . . as most people, & better off than I am."[26]

At times, the unfamiliar pressures of domestic labor opened a floodgate of criticism and ridicule. Harriott Middleton, for example, had little sympathy for unhelpful kinfolk and never hesitated to mock their transgressions. On one such occasion she sarcastically reported to her cousin Susan Matilda Middleton: "you would admire your Aunt Sue could you see the dignity with which she bears her troubles--not a complaint . . . and today was actually helping with her white hands to cut the okra for the soup!"[27]

Burdened with unaccustomed labor and in want of comfort, tempers flared. Not all stays proved so acrimonious, but such episodes do suggest that the absence of domestic servants and grinding poverty created such stress that antebellum patterns of hospitality broke down. Unlike the antebellum era, time spent in the company of kin after the war was driven by necessity rather than desire, and such stays became more a trial than a joy.


The Middletons’ time together was now consumed by making ends meet rather than enjoying tea parties and leisure.28

The Middleton women assumed the greater share of domestic labor, but the changing dynamics within the planter household also brought sweeping changes for their men. Each of the brothers embraced the paternalistic responsibility to provide for their families. It was an obligation that, at least in the antebellum era, they assumed with pride. The economic and social realities of emancipation and defeat made this once cherished role almost impossible to perform. Nearly bankrupt, the Middleton men were overwhelmed by their inability to keep their families in the same style as they had once enjoyed. As Williams Middleton lamented, “We have only to stir out of our doors to see a number of instances of the best bred & cultivated among ourselves earning their livelihood in occupation but little suited to their condition in life.”29 Although the loss of power and authority embedded in this downward spiral proved unpleasant and humiliating for all family members, it paled in comparison to the pain felt by planter patriarchs who were “worried half to death” by the uncertainties of life. The loss of their elite status, and more importantly, their inability to get it back, left men like Williams consumed with “feeling[s] of helplessness.” Like so many Lowcountry planters, the Middletons were chagrined at their failure to keep up appearances. They constantly

28 Mrs. J. J. Pringle Smith to Mrs. William Mason Smith, June 5, 1865, Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS); Harriott Middleton to Susan Hering Middleton, July 12, 1865, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Faust, Mothers of Invention, 251-252.

29 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, December 14, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
bemoaned the fact that "the outward & visible signs of comfortable respectability have been in most instances sent to the auction table to buy bread."\(^{30}\)

When Williams Middleton lost the family’s Meeting Street mansion “under foreclosure of mortgage,” in 1869, he could hardly express the wretchedness he felt now that his family was “left without a home.” Throughout the colonial and antebellum era, display and conspicuous consumption were important symbols of status and power for the entire Middleton clan. Ostentatious display of wealth and social prestige were certainly the motive behind Williams’ and Susan’s purchase of the house in 1855.\(^{31}\) [Figure 4] One of the most elegant homes in Charleston, a four-story mansion, with elements of both Italianate and Greek Revival design, its three grand piazzas, provided a commanding view of the White Point Gardens and the harbor. The foreclosure was as symbolic as the original purchase, and to add insult to injury, Fisher had to send him $300 to make the family’s eviction less “embarrassing.”\(^{32}\)

Paradoxically, these once proud patriarchs found themselves increasingly dependent on other men to fulfill their paternalistic obligations. For the Middletons,  

\(^{30}\) Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, January 27, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

\(^{31}\) For information relating to the purchase of the house, see Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, June 9, 1855; Alonzo White to Williams Middleton, June 19, 1855; Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, July 8, 1855; Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, October 9, 1870, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Robert P. Stockton, “Perfection of Balance,” Charleston News and Courier, June 9, 1975.

\(^{32}\) Williams Middleton to Louis de Soussure, February 12, 1870; Susan Smith Middleton to Hal Middleton, September 1, 11, 13, 1870; Hal Middleton to Susan Smith Middleton, September 4, 1870; Elizabeth Pringle Smith to Hal Middleton, September 10, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
Fisher, a Yankee no less, assumed the role of family patriarch. He supported Russell Middleton’s son (a permanent resident of the Insane Asylum in Philadelphia), Catherine (Kitty) Middleton (his wife’s emotionally disturbed sister whom they also institutionalized in Philadelphia), Arthur Middleton’s widow Paolina and her two children Benti and Angelina, and Harry Middleton and his wife. Despite his apparent love of money, Fisher generously provided support to many other members of the Middleton clan. Moreover, he was the major source of income for Williams’ household, sending the family a steady flow of cash. As Williams shamefully admitted, his entire household depended on the Fishers “for almost every mouthful which has passed our lips. . .”

But the endless financial responsibilities and the collapse of paternalism took their toll. Fisher increasingly found himself “in a miserable state” of depression. The source of his unbearable anxiety was his own dwindling income. Fisher became consumed by the fear that he would no longer be able to provide for his destitute kin. The Fishers owned several storefronts on Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street. Changes in the commercial real estate market left at least one of the properties without a tenant. Dependent on the rent, Eliza explained the vacancy “will deprive us of a considerable part of our income . . . if the adjoining tenants sh[oul]d follow . . . it w[oul]d reduce us to one half of our present receipts.” The couple even contemplated selling their elegant townhouse, “a prospect that ma[de] Fisher unhappy to think of.” She warned her southern relatives that they could no longer rely on Fisher’s continued financial support. Perhaps sensing that

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33 Fisher Diary, May 23, 1865, 498.
her southern kin, consumed by the woes of their own ruin, might make light of Fisher’s debilitated emotional state, Eliza added, “I must do him justice to say that he is anxious, not on his own account, but for fear that he may not next year have the means of helping others as he has hitherto done.”

The Middletons could not adapt to their greatly reduced circumstances. The troubles initiated by postbellum plantation production and Reconstruction were exacerbated by the massive debt owed by the family, both individually and collectively. Antebellum Lowcountry planters operated within a complex system of agricultural finance that left them credit rich and cash poor. Before the collapse of the plantation complex, they easily put off outstanding financial obligations, and the high value of the Middletons’ vast holdings in land, townhouses, and slaves provided security for those loans. Creditors ordinarily were satisfied with mere promises of repayment or token service on the interest. Although the Middletons were never free of debt in the antebellum period, the success of their plantations, their extensive holdings, and their elite status enabled them to carry on in high style. In fact, outstanding financial obligations were passed from generation to generation without jeopardizing their economic standing or the honor of the family name.

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34 J. Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, February 17, 1871; Eliza Middleton Fisher to Williams Middleton, November 14, 1871, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

With the downfall of the Confederacy, however, the Middletons, like so many of their class, faced complete financial ruin. The generational investments in slaves and land were wiped out entirely, leaving nothing for themselves or future generations. It was under these circumstances that the family had to face their insatiable creditors to whom they owed an estimated $250,000 (the equivalent of approximately $5 million in today's currency). Unlike the antebellum period, creditors, too, were often in dire need. Nonpayment meant that many others suffered. Demands for repayment were serious, and the inability to honor such obligations had severe consequences including litigation, shame, loss of property, and family discord.36

By the late 1860s, numerous creditors dunned the Middletons, some with more patience than others. When Samuel Lord attempted to collect the overdue bond owed by Susan Middleton's sister-in-law, Mrs. Eliza Pringle Smith, he was quite kind and conformed to antebellum conventions. Although not a cent had been paid in over two years, he gently explained it would be "a great favor if" she made any "payment" since "some of the creditors . . . are pressing me for Settlement of their claims."37 The kindness of his request made Eliza particularly eager to pay whatever she could. At this point, her brother-in-law, John Julius Pringle Smith, persuaded her to do otherwise. Since it was likely that her main source of income, "rent made off the Ashepoo

36 Robert Sahr, "Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors to Convert to 1999 Dollars (Preliminary)," Political Science Department, Oregon State University (photocopy in the SCHS).

37 Samuel Lord to Mrs. Elizabeth P. Smith, October 26, 1869, Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS).
plantation,” would do “nothing more than service the interest on other outstanding debt,” he thought it unwise to pay “more than one year’s interest” because “most probably . . . other bond-holders will be pressing during the winter.”

Other creditors were not so generous or solicitous. By the fall of 1869, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Jr. lost all patience with Williams. Not some obsequious merchant like Lord, but a fellow member of the Lowcountry elite, a relative and a longtime friend, Pinckney’s desperation equaled the Middletons’ own. He warned his cousin Williams that over “two years and a half have now lapsed since the assignment of your Bond for $8600 to me individually” and “to my sister Mrs. Mitchell and her husband, half of the principal ($4,300).” He noted that the “bond was long overdue when the assignment was made, and there was also a large amount of interest” in arrears. Pinckney wearied of Williams’ hollow promises of payment. Confident that “upon . . . review of the facts” he would “agree . . . that all reasonable forbearance has been exercised” Charles added pointedly, “I now write to say to you frankly that the necessities of the parties forbid its continuance.” While the Pinckneys had “been anxious to avoid embarrassing” Williams, they were “in very great need of money” and could no longer consider the consequences. Williams had to pay $4,000 (about one third of the amount due) or face litigation. This type of financial arrangement between extended kin was common in the antebellum

38 John Julius Pringle Smith to Mrs. Eliza Smith, November 12, 1869, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

39 Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Jr. to Williams Middleton, September 28, 1869, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
period and served to bring extended family members closer together, bound by blood and honor. In the postbellum period, however, those old ties were severed.

Eventually, the Middletons’ inability to satisfy outstanding financial obligations drove a permanent wedge between family members. Resentment intensified with their growing economic hardship. Brothers Henry, Edward, Oliver, Arthur’s widow, and their heirs held Williams and John Izard responsible for their predicament. They argued that as executors of the family estates, Williams and John Izard failed to discharge the debt that resulted in the collapse of the family’s fortunes and their current state of destitution.40

Festering hostilities came to a head when word spread that Henry Augustus Middleton intended to “foreclose his mortgage on the New Port [Newport] Plantation.” The Middleton estate owed their cousin over $30,000. Williams and John Izard certainly did not have that kind of money, and thought the “relinquishment” of the property a necessary evil “to save the rest of the Estate.”41 Governor Henry Middleton had intended for his sons Arthur and Harry and their heirs to inherit Newport jointly. This arrangement was not unique; almost all of the Governor’s properties carried joint ownership, none of which could be separated until all debt owed by the estate was paid. The heirs were to receive allowances until that time. The complex nature of the will was intended to

40 For information on the Middletons legal battles over the estate, see, Edward Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, June 9, July 8, November 17, 1869; J. Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, October 16, November 19, 1868; Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, July 25, 1868; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, August 14, 1876, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Burr, “A Woman Made to Suffer and Be Strong,” 225-226.

41 J. Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, May 15, 1869, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
maintain and reinforce the long-standing pattern of complex kinship networks. As an aftermath of the war, clouded issues of ownership, which had been established to unite the family, did nothing but destroy it.42

In this battle between brothers, the northern relatives, Eliza and Fisher, found themselves caught in the middle. Both Harry and Edward enlisted the couple, who were presumably less self-interested than their needy southern relations, to convince Williams and John Izard to sell off property, particularly the phosphate-rich lands on the Ashley River, to save Newport from foreclosure. The hope was that the revenue from such sales might generate enough income so that they could pay all debts and settle the estate permanently.

Eliza and Fisher found the role of mediators decidedly distressing. The bonds between Eliza, Fisher, Williams, and John Izard could not have been closer, and the Fishers desperately wished to avoid choosing sides. “It is my earnest desire,” Fisher wrote, “not to be a party in any controversy which may arise on this or any other subject in your family.” He tried to assure Williams that “my friendship for you is only increased by my sympathy for your misfortunes.” He reminded him, however, that “to a certain degree,” the settlement of the estate “affects your Sisters interests and those of others of your family who are dependant upon me.” Much to Williams’ and John Izard’s disappointment, the Fishers seemed to side with Harry and Edward and echoed their

contention that Williams was “the only one in the family who has yet derived any considerable benefit from your ancestral inheritance. . . .”43

Fisher essentially called on his brother-in-law to honor the old system that united the extended family in a single economic unit. Williams had “20 years enjoyment” of Middleton Place and possessed “the only portion” of his father’s estate “from which any thing was likely to be made.” Thus, he suggested that Williams should “make an offer for sharing in some way, and at some time, what we believe and still have reason to hope will be the rich returns of treasures recently discovered.” The “treasures” referred to the phosphate deposits found at Middleton Place, a promising venture that never panned out. “Circumstances have now greatly changed,” Fisher wrote, and Williams had “to consider the needs of himself and other members of his family” as well as his “relative rights and duties.” Williams might well have reminded his siblings that he had already shared with them when he agreed to set aside the original terms of his father’s will allotting him the lion’s share of the estate.44

Fisher bravely commented on the more sensitive subject of past management. He agreed with Edward and Harry that Williams “might have sold some of the land near the Ashley River and a considerable number of supernumerous slaves” and “reduced the amount of debt.”45 Both Williams and John Izard, however, found it difficult to accept

43 Joshua Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, October 16, 1868, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

44 Joshua Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, November 19, 1868, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

45 Ibid.
the litany of criticisms they now faced. Neither one was accustomed to any remark that they had failed in their duties. From their perspective, their ruin was as complete as anyone else's. To look back over twenty years to question their performance as executors of the estate was more than the brothers could tolerate. While criticism from Eliza and Fisher certainly stung, John Izard and Williams knew that their motives were heartfelt. The Fishers had exceeded all expectations to help their southern kin, and any unintentional slight was forgivable. However, castigations from Edward and Harry, who had offered little assistance in the management of family's vast estate since their father's death, were particularly galling. That Edward and Harry would suggest that their brothers failed to maintain their inherited ancestral eminence was a deep insult. Williams was enraged by Edward's proposal "to put all the remaining real property of the estate together & share it alike," and even more disgusted that Edward thought it reasonable that he come back to the Lowcountry and plant. Implicit in their criticisms was the accusation that Williams and John Izard failed in their duties as executors of the familial estate. They insinuated that the men had reaped personal gain and deprived all other heirs of what was rightfully theirs.46

Edward maintained ties with the Fishers and his brother Harry Middleton. Yet the war had estranged him not only from Williams, but also from John Izard and Oliver as well as many members of his extended kin. In spring 1866, when Edward initiated a claim to the United States government for compensation for the damages sustained on the

46 Harry Middleton to Williams Middleton, July 15, 1868; Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, July 25, 1868, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 125.
Combahee property, his brothers had no reason to object. If the claim was successful, all the Middleton heirs would benefit. What they did not realize was that Edward’s renewed interest in plantation affairs went far beyond his petition. Edward planned to retire from the Navy and plant rice with his brothers. He grossly underestimated the hatred his southern kin had for all things and people they associated with their “Yankee conquerors.” In fact, most of his kinfolk still considered him a traitor because of his service in the United States Navy during the War.47

It was beyond “comprehension,” Williams fumed, that Edward “should wish to become an eye witness of the sufferings of his natural associates with whose enemies & oppressors he saw fit to cast his fortunes!!” Edward countered his brother’s rage. Witnessing the suffering “could not be more distressing than the constant & continual presence in my mind of all the anxiety, discomforts, & sufferings both mental & physical to which those who have always been dear to me have been & continue to be subjected.” He noted that “these evils, as well as the condition of the country, I most heartily deplore, but unfortunately it is not in my power to alleviate them as I certainly otherwise would, for I cannot be truthfully classed” as an “abettor of that hateful race who have brought such overwhelming ruin.” He claimed that he “never had any ambition to be regarded as one of the conquerors of the country. But it does seem strange to me that you should be surprised that I should desire to revisit my own native place under any circumstances.”48

47 Edward Middleton to Williams Middleton, September 18, October 3, November 22, 1866, May 7, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

48 Edward Middleton to Williams Middleton, November 17, 1869; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, January 3, 1870; Eliza Middleton Fisher to Williams Middleton,
Edward did not return to the Lowcountry, and his relationships with Williams and John Izard were clearly damaged beyond repair.

Sister-in-law Paolina, who had a very cordial relationship with all the Middletons both before and after her husband Arthur’s death in 1853, also thought Williams and John Izard negligent in their management of the familial estate. “You may well imagine,” she wrote to Williams from Rome, “our surprise & regret to have heard that our property was taken to pay the debt of all the family.” Never mind that some of Paolina’s financial woes stemmed from the fact that her husband had died intestate and had failed to secure his family’s future. She felt that they cheated her and her children out of a great fortune. Perhaps hoping to play on her brothers’-in-law paternalistic impulses, Paolina explained that she “had calculate[d]” her family’s “future upon our plantation. . . .” In some respects, Paolina’s criticisms were even harder to endure than those launched by their brothers. She was suggesting that the brothers acted dishonorably, for their own benefit, leaving a woman and her children in want. It was an affront they were unwilling to leave unanswered. Williams, John Izard, and Fisher were shocked at her claim to Newport, and they informed her in no uncertain terms that she did not own the plantation. At best, she had only a shared interest. The Middletons did not dispute Paolina’s assertion that “Arthur undertook the purchase” of the property and “put the title in his name.” What she apparently did not know was that he paid “for it with father’s money.” Moreover, when Old Henry found out what his son had done, he insisted that the “title should be in his name & refused to recognize Arthur’s proprietorship of it.” They further informed her

November 17, 1869, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
that in their father's will they treated the piece of land in question as part of Newport plantation & "we as executors have always managed it." It was not her plantation.  

Paolina was reluctant to accept that conclusion. More than any other asset, she "had spoken upon" Newport to secure her daughter Angelina's "proposal of Marriage." According to her mother, Angelina had already "lost several good part[ner]s for want of means." Poverty clearly threatened her family's elite status and jeopardized Angelina's future. Paolina's complaints fell on deaf ears. The Middletons could not provide for their own families, and Paolina's inability to make an aristocratic match for her daughter seemed completely inconsequential in comparison to their problems. John Izard had "little to say concerning the claims," and Williams, after years of being hounded, told Paolina that "the lapse of the last 5 or 6 years has done nothing to better the condition of the Estate" and Henry August Middleton, "by right of the mortgage on that plantation made to him by my father took possession of Newport & the available reminant[sic] of the Estate will do little if anything more than satisfy Eliza's & Fisher's claims. I exaggerated nothing when I wrote word that utter ruin had befallen us all." Fisher, the only person in a financial position to help, had already provided a generous allowance for Paolina and her children and secured her $60,000 from the sale of Arthur's property in

49 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, August 26, 1866; Paolina Middleton to Williams Middleton, September 19, 1871; Williams Middleton to Paolina Middleton, October 5, 1871; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, November 9, 1871; Eliza Middleton Fisher to Williams Middleton, November 14, 1871, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
Washington, D.C. He was no longer willing to support her and disentangled himself from any further obligations. Paolina was on her own.

The same sort of dispute eventually erupted over Hobonny Plantation. Harry, Edward, Paolina, and Oliver wanted the plantation, nearly seventeen hundred acres, taken out of the control of Williams and John Izard, and in an open breach of the antebellum code that bound the family together, they took the dispute into court. Time did not heal these wounds, and by mid-1870s various members of the family seriously contemplated legal action to settle the estate. In 1879, the Court of Common Pleas upheld their suit and barred all claims of Williams and John Izard to Hobonny. The wrangling and legal battles further alienated the brothers. Of course, nine years of back-biting rendered any peaceful settlement impossible. The heirs remained embittered for the rest of their lives. John Izard mourned over the fragmentation of the Middleton clan and confessed to

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50 Paolina Middleton to Williams Middleton, January 21, 1869; Williams Middleton to Paolina Middleton, October 5, 1871; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, November 9, 1871; J. Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, August 26, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS). During the war years, Fisher spent approximately $1,200 per year supporting Paolina and her daughter. With so many other family members in dire need, Fisher no longer felt obliged to support this branch of the family. Even his nephew Benti had exhausted Fisher’s generosity. Despite his nephew’s burning desire to remain in the United States after the war, Fisher made it very clear that if he chose to do so, he could “neither offer him a home nor support,” see, J. Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, December 22, 1865; Benti Middleton to Williams Middleton, September 19, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

Williams “for you alone I believe retain anything like fraternal regard for me, who formerly considered himself the brother of many who were so dear to him.”

With the collapse of the plantation complex, the Middletons were unable to provide for their families in the ways they did in better days. As Oliver Middleton lamented, their progeny, who came of age in the late 1850s and 1860s, were perhaps more than anyone else “set . . . aimlessly adrift on the world.” These young men and women, reared in a gentry tradition, found that the world they were bred to inherit was forever lost. The entire system, carefully built and handed down over four generations, vanished. No longer could they rely on the prestige of their family name or kinship connections to open the doors of economic security, social prominence, or public power. Williams, John Izard, Oliver, and Edward had no legacy to leave to their children; and could rarely do more than provide their still-dependent children with food, shelter, and clothing. Some fled the Lowcountry, desperately chasing any opportunity. Others followed in the footsteps of their ancestors and tried to make a go of planting. A small but fortunate few secured employment in the region. An unfortunate number of young men and women found it impossible to acquiesce to the realities of Reconstruction and lived out their lives in quiet obscurity. Blessed were those old enough to have established their careers before the war.

52 John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, February 25, 1873, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

53 Oliver Hering Middleton to Mary Middleton Rutledge, October 18, 1872, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS)
Leaving the Lowcountry proved difficult for everyone. For example, Benti Middleton, son of Arthur and Paolina, was inconsolable when he realized that he could not stay in South Carolina after the war. With his father Arthur dead nearly a decade and his mother and sister living in Rome, he had no means of support. Although Benti was quite a pet in the Middleton clan, his uncles, unable to support him or find him employment, thought it best he return to Italy. Fisher, again the only person in a position to provide for his nephew, was unwilling to do so. Benti returned to Italy. He would have been "happy as a lark" if "thoughts of those I left behind and, will probably never see again did not continually stare me in the face. America I left with a pang and many a tear—only to live now in the hope of returning once more." Benti laid his hope on cousin John Izard Middleton, Jr. "getting something for" him "in Baltimore," but the old connections no longer functioned as before. The pressures on John to secure employment for his southern kin were already overwhelming, and Benti was no longer a priority.

Besides caring for his own wife and children, John Izard Middleton, Jr., assumed the paternal obligations of his father and dedicated most of his energies to helping his parents, siblings, his uncle Williams and his cousin Hal. But this was no easy task, and often ended in failure. When Williams' son Hal decided to try his fortunes in Baltimore, he was confident that family connections and diligent labor would bring success. Williams did not share his son's confidence, and John tried hard to dissuade his young

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54 Benti Middleton to Williams Middleton, September 19, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
cousin from making the move. While “I will use every measure & effort, in my power to secure him employment,” John wrote, “it will be difficult for him to get anything,” and “bare subsistence is all that he will stand the least chance of securing.” John begged his uncle Williams, “Don’t let him take the step, unless his eyes are fully open to all that he will have to undergo.” He must “come prepared to rough it & begin life . . . at the bottom of the ladder.” Despite the warning, Hal went to Baltimore and was soon depressed by the lack of opportunities for him there. It was nearly a year before Hal secured a low-level position on the railroads.55 Unfortunately, Hal’s career did not last long, and for the next several years he was plagued by physical ailments and what was probably chronic depression.56 His parents and sister begged him to return home. Lillie, in a desperate attempt to lure her brother home, wrote, “I am the only one in the family who keeps up a decent show of calmness. Papa seems nearly distracted, and Mamma sighs and weeps all day long.” She begged Hal to return home before she became “a hopeless case of melancholy.”57 His parents felt the same, and often told their son that “a kind of gloom seems to have fallen upon us all since your departure & we do nothing but work, & sigh, 

55 John Izard Middleton, Jr. to Williams Middleton, November 13, February 17, 1870, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

56 It is possible that there was a genetic component to Hal’s depression. Hal’s grandfather, Henry Middleton was prone to bouts of melancholy and his paternal aunt, Catherine Middleton was struck with psychological disorders that eventually led to institutionalization. His cousin, Kiloch Middleton, the son of Henry Augustus Middleton, was also confined to a mental institution. Regardless of the nature of his illness, the economic realities of the post-war South certainly compounded the young man’s problems.

57 Lillie Middleton to Hal Middleton, September 19, 1870, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
& wish for & talk of Hal.” Hal, however, ignored their pleas and bounced rather aimlessly around Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York for nearly ten years. It was clear that his family in South Carolina had very little control over his life. Although he worked intermittently, Hal became completely dependent on the Fishers and his cousin John. Perhaps ashamed by their inability to provide opportunities for their son, Williams and Susan let Hal do as he pleased and sent money whenever they could.58

Some of the Middleton children were not so naive. Oliver Middleton Read, unable to find a career at home, decided to “go into Yankee land.” He assured his grandfather, Oliver Middleton, “that it is not from choice but merely a bread & butter affair,” and he hoped the decision would meet his family’s “approval.” However, he seemed to realize that the move was probably permanent, and “I can’t tell you how much I dislike having to do what I have done as it breaks up our happy family party” and “severs as it were all the friendships formed out side.”59

Even after years of separation, the Middletons found it exceedingly difficult to “be without” their children. Never did they expect their families to be permanently separated. Parents hopelessly clung to the fantasy that their children could go off, make their fortunes, and come back to their native South Carolina to live comfortably in the constant company of kin as they had before the War. As late as 1881 when rumors circulated that Hal Middleton was “dead gone on a very rich & charming young lady in New York,” his

58 Susan Smith Middleton to Hal Middleton, August 11, 1870, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

59 Oliver Middleton Read to Oliver Hering Middleton, August 17, 1872, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS).
mother rejoiced, telling her son she no longer cared if her son married a Yankee. As long as the woman in question was very rich and of “good birth” Susan would “not disapprove.” Aware that Hal could barely keep himself in room and board, his mother hoped he could find himself a wife willing to do so. Hal’s parents were not ashamed to share their hopes that Hal might bring a large infusion of Northern capital into the family: “My, my, how delightful it would be to rebuild & restore the ‘Old Place.’” They fantasized that their son “might spend winters at M[iddleton] Place surrounded by your books, your instruments, your experiments, your yacht, your horses & as much society as you chose to bid there, & your summers traveling.” But such dreams were not to be. After many years of failure, Hal left the country all together, went to England, where he lived in poverty with a woman not his wife, and their seven children. Family lore has it that he married her on his deathbed; he never came back to the Lowcountry.

For generations, the Middleton clan worked tirelessly in a spirit of cooperation to accumulate wealth and power. Carefully constructed kinship and friendship networks, combined with entangled economic interests inherited from Arthur Middleton, united the family in a collaborative effort to advance the social status and wealth of all its members. Since the colonial era, the bonds of blood secured the Middletons a privileged position among southern slaveholders, and even among the national and transatlantic elite. It was within these circles that individual members married, reared their children, and formed

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60 Susan Smith Middleton to Hal Middleton, October 10, 1881, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
the emotional bonds of friendship. Little time was spent outside this insular environment, and individual identity emerged within the large circle of kin.

But, as Wyatt-Brown noted, “families of distinguished lineage suffered . . . from the social and economic woes that unconditional Union victory had wrought,” and the Middletons proved inept at adapting to the changes that accompanied emancipation and the collapse of their complex plantation economy. The struggle simply to survive leveled the confidence of these once proud patriarchs. In a world where their old systems of patronage and power no longer worked, the facade of omnipotent power crumbled. Without slavery and the plantation economy, they were unable to halt their precipitous downward spiral. They could barely keep food on their tables and roofs over their families’ heads. The simple struggle for daily survival superceded everything else, including the needs of siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, and the like. The extended kin networks so essential to maintaining the antebellum position of the family collapsed as brother turned against brother. No longer could the family count on friendship and kinship networks to pull them out of financial difficulty. Consumed with feelings of disempowerment and bombarded by daily reminders of their inadequacies as providers, patriarchs retreated from public life. But the private world of domesticity did nothing to assuage feeling of despair, for nowhere was their impotence thrown into higher relief. Although their wives and children remained devoted, the power dynamics within the household shifted, and planter patriarchs no longer had the mastery necessary to dictate the lives of their dependents. Their wives were left with the responsibilities once deemed

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61 Wyatt-Brown, *Shaping of South Culture*, 259.
proper only for the enslaved, and the once bright futures promised to their children were lost in the smouldering rubble of defeat. Susan Middleton’s brother, J.J. Pringle Smith expressed the sentiments of many family members when he bemoaned the fact “that the only education” he could now offer his children was “that of being servants.”

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62 J. J. Pringle Smith to Eliza Middleton Smith, n.d., Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS); Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, September 25, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
 CHAPTER 6
"TO THREATEN US WITH DARKER FATES":
THE DECLINE OF PLANTER HEGEMONY DURING RECONSTRUCTION

Financial ruin and familial strife were not the only trials this once privileged and powerful clan faced. Beyond the household, larger threats loomed. From the ashes of slavery, the Middletons also tried to resurrect a system of labor complete with the inequalities of the antebellum past. Their former bondspeople, however, proved wholly unwilling to sacrifice the fruits of their newfound freedom for the benefit of their former masters. Any distance from slavery was hard to bear for their former masters. As Nathaniel Russell Middleton, Jr., bitterly mused, their servants were "under the impression that since they were now free, henceforward they were to live in luxury and never have to work again." Unwilling to submit to a social world where they no longer dictated the lives and labor of their servants, the white Middletons raged against black demands for autonomy. "Every relation in Society," was according to Benjamin Huger, another Middleton relation, "violated & destroyed..." Once cherished servants were now considered "licentious & ferocious Negroes" who conspired with federal authorities to insult and goad their former owners. Even on their own plantation, Benjamin fumed,

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1 Alice Hopton Middleton, Life in Carolina and New England During the Nineteenth Century: As Illustrated by Reminiscences and Letters of the Middleton Family of Charleston South Carolina and the De Wolf Family of Bristol Rhode Island (Bristol, RI: Privately printed, 1929), 124.

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"I can not [give an] order unless approved by an insolent negro." They were allowed, he insisted, to rob, plunder, and threaten at their discretion and planters, Benjamin complained, could do nothing to stop it.\(^2\)

The Middletons did not watch idly as their authority dissipated. Like so many other Lowcountry rice planters, they fought hard against the social and political revolutions that gripped the region. They tried vainly to reconstruct paternalistic relationships with former slaves, with almost no success. Military defeat, economic ruin, and political disempowerment stripped planters of the advantages that legitimated their power under slavery. When Union victory leveled the foundations of the Old South social order, planters could no longer control their former bondspeople as they had in the past. Their efforts to force the freedmen back into quasi-slavery and to restore themselves to political power ended with the advent of Congressional Reconstruction in 1866. With the assistance of their white Republican allies, former slaves mounted a challenge to planter domination that succeeded, at least for a time, in revolutionizing the power dynamics of race relations in the Carolina Lowcountry.

No longer willing to acquiesce to the authority of their former masters, they cast off the masks of docility, conformity, and obedience.\(^3\) The Middletons’ case supports local studies from other areas of the South that have found that the Civil War and


\(^3\) Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," \textit{American Historical Review} 93 (December 1988), 1228-1252, 1232, 1249, 1236.
emancipation radically reshaped the plantation economy and its ruling class. In the Lowcountry, as in the Natchez District of Mississippi, the war and its aftermath brought about a radically new social order, one where former slaves played a significant role in redefining what sort of political and cultural system would replace slavery.

As the Middletons’ experiences with plantation management during Reconstruction demonstrate, planters no longer dictated the rights and privileges of their former slaves. The Federal government played a central role in defining black citizenship. The expansion of black rights via federal authority, especially the right to vote, met fierce opposition in the Lowcountry. Initially, Black Codes, established immediately after the Civil War when southern planters retained control of the state government, worked to limit the full economic and political effects of emancipation. These codes were banned in South Carolina on January 1, 1866, by order of General Daniel Sickles, the military commander of South Carolina. Like so many planters, the Middletons, increasingly believed that the Freedmen’s Bureau, responsible for carrying out many of the policies of Reconstruction, intended to “legislate” freedmen “to the


5Wayne, Reshaping of Plantation Society, 111.
grade of superior human beings” at their expense.⁶ Planters understood such actions not as a necessary step toward equality, but rather as some sort of diabolical plot hatched between Yankees and freedmen. This coalition, according to Williams, did more than provide assistance to freedmen; it “paralyzes every attempt at” planter “enterprise.” Many planters were convinced that the Bureau’s ultimate objective in encouraging the politicization of ex-slaves was the destruction of the planter class.⁷

He was not alone. John Izard agreed with Williams’ negative assessment of the Bureau, but put more of the blame on the “Negro Gov[ernment],” that is the government established by former slaves and their white allies in the Republican party. In his estimation, it was black activists, with the assistance of the Bureau, that had “done everything” possible to thwart the restoration of the Lowcountry master class. Their intention was “to w/draw all labour from us . . . [,]” a fear that became a refrain among the planters. Like many of his peers, John Izard believed that black political activism, both formal and informal, encouraged black dissidence. If former slaves “were . . . not tampered with” he argued, they “would do well.”⁸ In the minds of white planters, doing well, of course, meant that blacks would return willingly to the relationship of “former times.” Barring black southerners from voting and limiting black office holding was the

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⁶ Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, May 22, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina, hereafter cited as SCHS).

⁷ Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, January 27, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

⁸ John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, February 15, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
only hope the Lowcountry’s white minority had to curtail black agency and reestablish their position as a ruling elite.⁹

In 1867, political changes at the national level dashed all hopes planters had of maintaining the antebellum racial status quo through public politics. The Reconstruction Act of that year obliged South Carolina, and any other noncompliant state, to create a new constitution. In order to maintain federal representation in Congress, all racial barriers to voting and office holding had to be lifted. To make matters worse for Lowcountry planters, the Act ordered that all delegates to state conventions be elected. All male citizens over twenty-one could vote, and given South Carolina’s white minority, black domination was almost a given.

The Middletons held little hope for their future. Williams explained to his sister Eliza the devastating consequences “of what is now in our midst & the designs in store for us in the future, but our eyes are fully open to the intentions with regard to us, however helpless we may be to prevent their being carried out.” He asked, “Do you not perceive that precisely the same trap is laid for our people in the suffrage question as in that of the emancipation of the negroes?” Despite the election process, Williams was convinced that “a few white men made to represent a convention of the state proclaimed emancipation & a handful of black men do the same w/ the suffrage declaring it the will

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⁹ Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, January 27, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
of the state & ending by voting themselves land & whatever else they want.” The prospects were so upsetting, few planters could “stand to think or write about it.”

By the summer of 1867, grass-roots political activism reached a fever pitch. The South Carolina Union Republican Party, an uneasy coalition of southern white unionists, northern emigrants (reviled by many white southerners as carpetbaggers), and former slaves, entered the elections, and planters watched helplessly as field workers laid down their hoes to attend political rallies. “Ordered by the emissaries throughout” the districts “to be present at all, political & all other sorts of gatherings day after day,” black laborers acted in their own interest rather than the interest of their employers. As they gazed over their empty fields, planters proclaimed once again, “we are all in” a “predicament . . . as to” our “crops.” In the months to come, greater angst ensued. As Williams explained to his sister Eliza, they could do nothing but take “comfort in the rapidity with which” the “closing scenes are crowding upon us.” Williams, Oliver, and John Izard waited “in helpless indifference” for “the tornado around us & threatening us every moment” to hit. Such a course, Williams explained, was “not the result of” their “philosophy but simply . . . apathy which ensues upon severe moral convulsion.” He could only compare their

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11 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, June 20, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
predicament to “that exhausted physical condition where a man refuses to make a last
effort to save himself.”\textsuperscript{12}

Still optimistic, John Izard hoped trouble might still be avoided. He urged friends
and family to do all they could to counter black political inclusion. “Do not surrender,”
he advised, “I trust that those of you not disfranchised by ‘mongrel Gov[ernmen]t at
Washington will register to vote & endorse NO Convention on your ballots.” He added,
“You certainly aren’t disfranchised & would take any oath the wretches propose to battle
them of their ‘foul intent.’ I am disfranchised & can’t do anything.” He begged Williams
and Oliver to register and to “exert” themselves “to prevent the district from being
completely ‘africanised.’”\textsuperscript{13}

Desperate efforts to block the Convention of 1868 failed, and a wave of black
political activism washed over the Lowcountry. Black delegates, a majority, worked
diligently to effect positive change for their constituents. Although numerous scholars
have pointed to the problems that plagued the Convention and shortcomings of the
subsequent Constitution, many of its members proved to be apt politicians. With the
exception of age and residency requirements, the new Constitution ensured universal
male suffrage. In terms of public education, landownership, homestead exemptions, and
legal rights, black South Carolinians advanced. Moreover, the successes here, no matter

\textsuperscript{12} Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, March 10, 1867, Middleton Place

\textsuperscript{13} John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, June 3, 1867, Middleton Place Papers
(SCHS).
how limited, ushered in an era of black political activism and representation on the municipal and state levels that took decades to reverse.14

AWARE that they could no longer dictate the time, movements, or activities of their former slaves, the Middletons stood aside and made few attempts to interfere with black political affairs. Men like Anthony, a former Middleton slave, who they now called “the Bishop,” became important political players and left their employment for weeks at a time to attend to politics. Anthony would simply inform his employers that he was off to Columbia “on business of importance,” and they could do nothing but “wait until it suits him to return.” Sometimes Anthony offered an explanation, typically “he says something about the church affairs,” but it was a thin disguise, for even the white Middletons understood the role of black churches in grassroots politics. On another occasion, Lillie wrote to Hal that the “The Bishop” was off to tend to church business “but we suspect strongly that he is going to attend the negro convention.” Where he went and what he did was now Anthony’s business, and all the Middletons could do, as his former mistress put it, was not “interfere with” his “arrangements & hope in that way to make myself

welcome.” Black political influence became yet another indication that the world had turned upside down.\textsuperscript{15}

Before the Civil War, domestic servants served as important symbols of planter mastery. They were typically well-dressed, well-mannered men and women, who exercised with perfection the prescribed deference demanded by their masters and mistresses. Household servants were typically prized by their white owners, and their service saved them from the drudgeries of domestic labor. For the Middletons, teams of domestic servants represented fine and cultured living that enhanced society’s perception of the family’s rank. Much like their other expensive material possessions, the Middletons’ slaves, set them apart from their social inferiors and furthered what one historian described as planters’ “quest for honor and distinction in the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{16}

After emancipation, few freed people were willing to play that role. As Lillie Middleton, Williams’ daughter remarked, “the free ‘gentlemen’ in this part of the world are too elegant for housework.”\textsuperscript{17} Even in situations where the Middletons could afford domestic

\textsuperscript{15} Lillie Middleton to Hal Middleton, November 7, 1871; Susan Middleton to Hal Middleton, November 25, 1871; Susan Middleton to Hal Middleton, November 28, 1871, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).


servants, the relationship was not as it had been under slavery. As one mistress explained, “Henney is still with me, but not the same person that she was.” Desperate to retain her services, Caroline would have done almost anything to keep her on, and Henney’s decision to stay was “a great relief” for her former owner. After all, her mother, Mrs. Robert Pringle Smith was “as dependent” on the woman “as a baby.”

Henney now did her negotiating. She agreed to stay through the fall but demanded that her former mistress provide for the care of her children Sarah and Johnie until she or her husband Adam “can get to them.” Freedwomen tried to the exploit postwar labor shortage and sought to profit from the desperation of former mistresses. Caroline, in no position to negotiate, readily agreed, and asked a friend “to keep Johnie & feed him. . . .” She also arranged for Sarah “to be clothed & cared for” in Henney’s absence. Fully determined to enjoy the fruits of her labor, Henney was unwilling to accommodate the needs of her white employers. Now free, work had to fit her needs and the needs of her own family.

The Middletons could no longer pretend that their domestic servants enjoyed being in their service or considered themselves dependent members of the planter household. In fact, most freedpeople refused to live in their former owners’ homes. Whenever possible, they determined when they worked and on what terms they worked, a change that frequently brought down the wrath of their white employers. The Middletons

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18 Mrs. Eliza Mason Smith to Mrs. Marie Cottenet, July 12, 1865, Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS).

19 Ibid.
were no exception. The paternalistic myth of the loyal and beloved servant, once considered part of the planter family, shattered under the realities of Reconstruction. It became common for the Middletons to refer to their hired help as lazy, dirty, horrid, and stupid. When the Middletons could afford to hire ex-slaves, they were usually very disgruntled with the results. For example, when Harriott Middleton employed a cook, she claimed the woman’s laziness forced her to spend all her “time in the kitchen to see after [the] horrid girl. . . .” Such complaints were common, and former slaves whose employment was not absolutely required or whose insolence was unbearable were unable to strike good deals. In some instances, former owners rejoiced that their “pet torments” were “on their own hook” and drew long sighs “of relief” at having them gone from their “daily life.”

The power to determine when, where, and on what terms a person worked was as important in the fields as it was in the home. And, as numerous scholars of slavery and emancipation in the Americas have demonstrated, nowhere was it more clear than on the plantations that the power dynamics that once characterized slave society had disappeared. The Middletons were shocked at the transformation that had taken place on their estates. Although armed with detailed reports cataloguing the destruction of the Carolina Lowcountry, nothing could have prepared them for the harsh realities they now experienced.

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20 Harriott Middleton to Susan Matilda Middleton, July 12, 1865, Cheves-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Mrs. Eliza Mason Smith to Mrs. Marie Cottenet, July 12, 1865, Mason Smith Family Papers (SCHS); Schwalm, A Hard Fight For We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1997), 187-232, esp. 207-209; Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, 174-75; Rable, Civil Wars, 259-262.
faced. In most instances, what they found far surpassed their worst expectations. As Williams Middleton lamented, "with the exception of existence . . . we have nothing more to lose." Yet, the future, he woefully mused, "seems only to threaten us with darker fates." The collapse of paternalism was readily discernible. Astounded by the deplorable conditions of the Carolina Lowcountry, Confederate General Roswell Sabine Ripley, swore "that if he owned both Charleston and Hell he would live in Hell and rent out Charleston." 21

None of the Middleton plantations escaped without serious damage. Their homes were destroyed, their livestock gone, the fields idle and overgrown, outbuildings and other plantation infrastructure burnt to ground, expensive thrashing mills ruined, and the complex systems of dikes and canals necessary for rice cultivation a wreck. Only a handful of the family's rice fields remained in production during the war. The vast majority of their property had either been seized by ex-slaves and planted for provision crops or deserted. Illness and starvation plagued the Combahee and Ashley River plantations and many of the former Middleton slaves were dead.

But what former patriarchs found even more disturbing than the physical losses sustained on the plantations were the radical changes they saw in the demeanor of their former servants. Reared in the myth of slave loyalty, a facade that briefly survived a disillusioning war, the Middletons imagined, at least on some level, that once the initial jubilations of freedom wore off, they might return to the plantations to find a permanent,

21 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, July 1, 1865, Hering-Middleton Papers (SCHS); Robert Pringle Smith to Mrs. Robert Smith, July 17, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
malleable, and loyal supply of workers. After only one visit to his family’s Ashepoo River plantation, Susan Middleton’s brother, J[ohn] J[ulius] Pringle Smith, was so horrified at what he saw, he staunchly announced that “even if I could plant, the prospect of a life [on the plantation] would be far too dreadful.” For generations, slavery had informed elite southerners’ sense of honor and to return to the plantation under these circumstances, filled Mr. Smith with shame.22

Despite such ominous signs, most Lowcountry planters were in dire need of money. All they had left was land. With few opportunities for employment, Williams, Oliver, and John Izard had no choice but “to work the land.” As one of their Lowcountry neighbors put it, planters now had to “present a united and determined front . . . get labour of some kind . . . out the negroes; and their ideas of proprietorship; secure armed protection” in order to resume rice production.23 But such determination was not


enough. Restoration, as the historian Leslie Schwalm argued, was “only an incremental concession” that marked “the beginning of a long process of negotiation on Lowcountry plantations.” Even after the Freedmen’s Bureau restored planter property, questions concerning land and labor were anything but settled. It would not take long for the Middletons to realize that their former slaves now laid claim to the plantation.²⁴

Initially, the Middletons convinced themselves that the problem really did not rest with the master/slave relationship but with the overseers or outside agitators. Williams and Fisher frequently discussed the problems with freedmen, particularly on the Combahee River. Far removed from the scene, Fisher was confident that the overseers were the source of black discontent. As he explained to Williams, regardless of the “ability & fidelity” of these managers, there “must now be ill will” between the two. Fisher thought it likely that freedpeople still had “respect and confidence in their hereditary masters,” but warned that the “petty despot who came between you & them will never be submitted to.”²⁵ If planters did not remove their overseers, he held out little hope for the restoration of plantation production. Fisher encouraged Williams “or some member of the family to visit the Estates on Combahee & have a direct communication with the Freedmen” so they could better gauge the “temper and feeling toward” held for former masters. What the Middletons quickly discovered was that while former slaves

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²⁴ Leslie Schwalm, A Hard Fight For We, 194.

²⁵ J. Francis Fisher to Williams Middleton, February 10, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
did indeed view white overseers as objects of contempt, most held their former masters in the same low esteem.  

When Williams went to visit Hobonny plantation, ex-slaves boldly informed him that they intended to “hold out” and “get all the land for themselves.” Further demonstrating their rejection of planter authority and the docility they once demanded, former slaves hurled threats at their former master. Defiant African Americans warned Williams that “if they did not get this land, and soon, blood would have to spill for it.”

The situation was no better on the family’s other Combahee River plantations. At Newport plantation, for example, freedmen and women simply refused to acknowledge the white Middletons as the rightful owners. With threats of bodily harm, they ordered their former masters off the plantation immediately. It was now clear, as Williams explained to his sister Eliza, that the entire “social fabric” that characterized the antebellum plantation had been “cast down.”

Like so many planters, the family grossly overestimated the bonds that bound masters and slaves. At the same time, they underestimated the deep connection many former slaves felt for the plantations, places that were central in the formation and maintenance of black kinship and friendship.

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27 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, December 11, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

28 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, March 10, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
networks. As was the case in virtually all post-emancipation societies, land ownership represented freedom and autonomy to former slaves.  

Black resistance began almost immediately. As one of the Middleton freedmen boldly explained "if we 'consent to work for/or under' our former owners, it will be 'like returning to slavery.'" When informed by their former masters that they would have to work or leave the plantation, many blacks simply refused to do either. In one such instance, an elderly freedman informed his "missis" that "he was going to die on this place," and she "was 'bliged to take care of him & he was not going to do any work either. . . .'" These "insolent" words fell heavy on the hearts of the members of the old planter class who wished to regain the authority and control they exerted before the War. Like so many of their friends and relations, the Middletons firmly believed that there could be "little or no improvement" in "Freedmen" until "they reach that condition of . . ."

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Mind!! & body which induces them to wish frankly to return to their former relations with their owners."³⁰

Convinced that the Freedmen's Bureau and former bondspeople worked collectively to elevate black South Carolinians at planters' expense, the Middletons thought that unoccupied and confiscated properties were "to be turned over to the subsistence Bureau" and the proceeds used to "buy rations for the unemployed freedmen consisting of such dainties as their former masters do not, now, at all events, think of indulging in." Even more maddening than the idea that former bondspeople might enjoy more than their former masters, according to Williams, was that "this policy is to deprive us entirely of all control over those freedmen who have hitherto remained with us partly . . . from fear of starvation. And indeed insuring pretty much this condition for their masters in the future."³¹

With such attitudes abroad, the Middletons found it difficult to induce freedmen to sign labor contracts. In fact, Williams, John Izard, and Oliver all complained that the "great difficulty is to get them to do anything but loiter." Even "with the prospect of starvation staring them in the face," Williams observed, the "poor devils" refused "to contract for work of any kind." For the first time in their lives, the Middletons felt completely helpless to control plantation labor. They realized that "the continuance" of

³⁰ Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, June 3, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, December 11, 1865, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Caroline Ravenel to D.E. Huger Smith, July 26, 1865 in Mason Smith Family Papers; Foner, Reconstruction, 62, 135, 170-4.

³¹ Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, n.d., Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Foner, Reconstruction, 70-71, 104-105; McPherson, Ordeal By Fire, 271.
such “determination” would “effectually render vain any attempts at planting.”

No longer could they mask their dependency on black labor under the guise of paternalism. Gazing over their barren rice fields, planters panicked and “call[ed] upon the authorities,” meaning their former enemies in the Freedmen’s Bureau, for help. That these once proud patriarchs needed help in managing their former slaves underscored the decline of white planter authority. Williams begged Federal authorities to “seize” the “eatables” off the plantations and “either appropriate them to their own benefit, or, to that of the Gov[ermen]t.” He was more than “willing to renounce all claims” to the provisions provided “they be carried off the plantations, and not left where they . . . encourage the negroes[sic] to remain in idleness. . . .” Better the food go to the hated Yankees than to rebellious former slaves! No longer willing to adhere to the paternalistic ethos that once governed the master-slave relationship, the Middletons tried to force freedpeople into contracts by threats of starvation and homelessness.

Throughout the Atlantic World, black resistance that came in the wake of freedom sent planters in search of alternative labor. Fatigued by the constant and often fruitless


negotiations with their former slaves, the Middletons relished the thought of abundant and tractable laborers. Lowcountry planters, together with merchants, held well-attended meetings “for the purpose of discussing the . . . introduction of Chinese labor into this State.” The idea was not new. Throughout the nineteenth century, agricultural journals, like De Bow’s Review, the largest circulating magazine in the South, carefully followed West Indian efforts to adapt Indian and Chinese labor to cash-crop agriculture. John Izard applauded the “considerable effort . . . made by many here to introduce Chinese labour,” and thought it the “most certain method of partially restoring something like prosperity.” However, support was not the same as optimism. Even though similar schemes brought thousands of Chinese laborers to Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, the Middletons remained skeptical. Unlike their “confreres in misfortune,” the family did not “rebuild their hopes on Coolie labour.” It was a wise decision. Federal authorities in the South, well aware that planters were looking for a servile labor force to exploit, were anxious to thwart such efforts. Even without federal opposition, the Middletons did not have the capital necessary to implement such a plan. They, like most planters, had no choice but to continue negotiations with their former slaves.

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Eventually, the needs of food and shelter along with the support of Federal authorities compelled many freedmen to enter into contracts with the Middletons. This did not mean, however, that they acquiesced to white authority. While some Lowcountry planters managed to work well under the new system of free labor, the Middletons still found it exceedingly difficult to force their laborers to work as they wanted. If they tried to plant on shares, the “negros[sic] share is very small so they are furious.” When they tried to work on wages they had “trouble in procuring the means to pay. . . .” Moreover, laborers demanded advances, and “many would then leave before harvest.” When Williams first began to use the wage system, John Izard warned him that “only ½ wages can be paid until crop can be sent to market otherwise you have no hold on the Chimps” and “they leave you at a critical time or strike for an advance.” Year after year the Middleton plantations failed to make any significant profit from planting, and the men found themselves “surrounded by problems that can’t be solved.” After five years of “wretched” crops, John Izard was distraught; he told his brother Williams that if his crop was not “better than its been in 4 yrs . . . the sooner I shoot myself the better.”

Seething from the catastrophic effects of defeat, a forbidding fury gripped former members of the planter elite. With astounding rage, the Middletons now blamed “the chimpanzees” for their failure to resume plantation production. Unable to control their

*The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1982).

36 John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, June 3, 1867, October 10, 1870, November 9, 1871, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

37 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, June 3, 1866; John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, December 21, 1866, February 15, 1867; B. T. Sellers to Williams
dismay, they railed against their former slaves with a litany of racial slurs. War eroded the antebellum codes of paternalism and the Middletons expressed their frustration bitter abandon. It was a sharp ideological break with the past. The constant reference to their former slaves as “Chimps,” “Nigs,” “Monkeys” and “Darkies” violated the idealized codes of benevolent paternalism that dictated the master/slave relationship in the antebellum era. These sentiments were a consequence of slavery’s demise, and a result of the consequent complete and utter unraveling of the Middletons’ status after the war. The loss of planter authority and black challenges to racial hierarchy fueled such outward expressions of white supremacy.38

The Middletons’ loss of mastery over their slaves left them shackled to the plantations. As John Izard bitterly complained, “the conduct of freedpeople varied so much at times & in localities” that there was no assurance that work would be done in their absence. If the Middletons were going to try to plant, they could no longer entrust the daily operations of the plantation to others. Removed from the means necessary to travel, “the new system of planting” left them at what John Izard referred to as the “mercy of the wretched caricatures of humanity. . . .” They now had to see to the daily operations of plantation management as never before. Freedmen, whether intentionally or


38 For examples of the Middletons’ use of racial epithets, see, John Izard Middleton to Williams Middleton, November 28, 1866, December 21, 1866, February 15, 1867, November 28, 1866, October 10, 1870; Susan Smith Middleton to Hal Middleton, November 16, 1871, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
unintentionally, now exerted enormous control over their former masters' movements. To men like Williams and John Izard, it seemed as though their former slaves enjoyed a mobility that they did not. Resolutely contemptuous of African Americans, the Middletons fumed that their entire existence depended on the "conduct of the chimpanzees." John Izard, so distraught, was sure he would never again have the time or means to ever leave his plantation.  

While the Middletons did not starve, their loss of mastery fundamentally altered their identities as genteel aristocrats. Every moment spent in the country served as a constant reminder that they were no longer members of the urban beau monde. When ex-slaves "Abraham & Anthony, each in his buggy," paid a visit to their former master, Williams was humiliated. Without a carriage of his own, he could not "return the civility in the same style." Abraham and Anthony, in flaunting their newly obtained finery, were challenging antebellum codes of honor and civility. As historians such as Jane Daily and Robin Kelly have demonstrated, such episodes were more than chance encounters, but rather highly ritualized interactions. On some level, all parties understood that this display of "civility" represented a challenge to white Southerners' notions of hierarchy

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39 Williams Middleton to J. Francis Fisher, June 3, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

40 Robin D. G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of Southern History* 80 (June 1993), 75, 84-87; Jane Dailey, "Deference and Violence in the Postbellum Urban South," *Journal of Southern History* 63 (August 1997), 589.
and deference. But this affront paled in comparison to other episodes. In the spring of 1867, Eliza Fisher's sons, George and Hal, came to visit their southern kin. During their stay, the young men begged their Uncle Williams for a visit to Middleton Place. Deciding that the boys might benefit from "some relaxation & change of scenery," Williams took them for a weekend of "country sport." At first glance, the trip seems to mimic antebellum patterns of child rearing: an uncle grooming his nephews in the habits and sports of the gentry class. In reality, the trip bore no resemblance to the past.

The journey began with an inauspicious row across the Ashley River. Unlike the antebellum days when guests' arrival would have been met with decorum and deference, Williams and his nephews had only "a negro in an old buggy & horse & mule" who promptly refused to carry any of their bags. Not reduced into poverty like their southern kin, the young men bristled at having to carry their own baggage. The insult "cast shades" on their glowing spirits. As their uncle Williams noticed, "the desolation all around them was too much—apparently worse" than the young men expected. To make matters worse, they spent most of their time at Middleton Place performing "unpleasant tasks" without the assistance of the freedmen. For three "weary days" they dug "with their own hands" for "the remains of china & c which had not been stolen." When not at work, the party slept. Perhaps expecting some taste of the past, the Fishers must have


42 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, April 14, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 327-29, 333.
been shocked to stay in a “negro house” whose entire contents included “1 table and 3 chairs.” The latter item Williams had to borrow from a former slave. Needless to say, the boys were “glad enough” to leave the “Old Wreck.” It is a “curse,” Williams lamented, to deal with “free men.” Again, Williams was chagrined by the lack of deference shown by his former slaves and embarrassed by his poverty.\textsuperscript{43} Throughout the Americas, planter elites used symbolic representations of refinement as public expressions of planter domination inherent in the master/slave relationship. During Reconstruction, ex-slaves used material possessions, once out of their reach, to flaunt the eroding authority of their former masters’ and mistresses’ and claim their own dignity.\textsuperscript{44}

Time did not favor the planter class. Despite all efforts, without capital the Middletons were unable to make their plantations productive. The dramatic decline of the family’s Hobonny plantation, once so valuable and so bitterly fought over, not only epitomized the Middletons’ permanent economic decline but also their inability to regain control over their former bondspeople. Located on the Combahee River, a hotbed of labor unrest, Hobonny had been plagued with problems since the Civil War ended. Black demands for land, higher wages and autonomy were loudest there. Strikes were commonplace. As Reconstruction neared its end, labor unrest reached a fevered pitch. In August 1876, black workers demanded a wage increase. As one freedman explained, “We are a poor people have home nor contry nor money eder. Do tell me how we ar to do for a lively hood.” Experts in rice cultivation, the former slaves waited until the crop

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Saville, “Rites and Power,” 83-96; Dailey, “Defence and Violence,” 556-558.
was "ready for shipment to New York," and then, as the Charleston *News and Courier* reported, they prevented anyone from "handl[ing] it, and allowed no one to cross the ferry." While the leaders were able to prevent black laborers from touching the rice, they could not stop the white proprietors, who, with the assistance of their neighbors, gathered as much as they could and sent it by wagon to Charleston.45

Although planters managed to salvage a portion of their crop, labor protests escalated. Republican Governor Daniel Chamberlain, acting in the interest of local planters, called in law enforcement officials to arrest the leaders of the movement. The rest of the crop eventually made it to market. To the delight of the planters like the Middletons, the authorities made it clear that such actions would not be tolerated, and "directed that the law be enforced at all hazards." Despite these thinly veiled threats, black agrarian workers continued to protest. On September 12, freedmen, women and children, once again blocked crops on the way to market. Only with the threat of armed violence from white authorities and the concession of a wage increase did the work resume.46 By 1879, the Middletons had lost complete control over their once prized plantation. Hobonny became home to a black proto-peasant community based on subsistence farming.47


Struggles to define freedom were not restricted to the plantations, nor were they confined to the realm of labor relations. Change was just as overt and sweeping in Charleston. Ex-slaves clamored to enjoy the urban landscape and the social, political, and economic opportunities it offered. Year after year, the white Middletons watched as former slaves staked their claims to public space. Anxious to enjoy the fruits of freedom, black South Carolinians exercised the right to go where they pleased at a time when the Middletons themselves found that pleasure more and more denied to them. However, these black men, women and children were not naive and knew that whites desperately wanted to preserve the power to tell them where they could and could not go. Throughout the Lowcountry, the boundaries were constantly tested and challenged.48

No spot in the Lowcountry provided a more symbolic battleground than Charleston’s famed Battery at the tip of the peninsula on which the city was built. Before emancipation, the Battery was almost exclusively the domain of the white elite. Attired in latest fashions, the Lowcountry’s finest passed the sultry days enjoying the gentle Atlantic sea breeze either from the comfort of the lavish homes lining Bay Street or under the shade of the live oaks that sheltered the walkways of White Point Garden [Battery Park]. It was a prime site for antebellum display of wealth and leisure. The Battery was more than just a pleasant place to take a stroll or go for a carriage ride, it served as an important arena for maintaining extensive kinship and friendship networks. To the dismay of white Charlestonians, this space became a favorite gathering spot for African

48 Foner, Reconstruction, 81-82.
Americans after the war. Their demands to share in the small pleasure of an afternoon “promenade” struck many white residents as unreasonable.49

The battle over this coveted spot raged for years, and on occasion even escalated to violence. Such episodes were not trivial. Charlestonians, both black and white, followed the contest over the Battery closely. The Middletons frequently mentioned the growing black presence at the Battery and clearly understood that the dramatic “open fights w[ith] former slaves” over the city’s sea wall were symbolic of much larger and important issues of power. As Williams explained to his sister Eliza, such incidents of violence were “supposed to be accident[s],” but were “really about possession of the battery.” Ironically, people like the Middletons welcomed such conflicts and seemed comfortable with their conviction that “it will start again on larger scale.” Violence, they believed, was the only way to “furnish proof positive” to the hated Freedmen’s Bureau that if former slaves were given the full benefits of citizenship white Southerners could not “live without . . . protection & benefit.”50 By 1870, the Battery was “almost entirely deserted” by white Charlestonians, and on Saturday evenings “the children of Israel,” according to Williams, took “possession of it.” But the Battery was not just for socializing. The site where the first shots of the Civil War blasted became a hotspot of

49 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, April 14, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).

50 Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, June 29, 1866, April 14, 1867, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).
black political activism, an irony lost on no one. Such contests were not unique to Charleston. Urban landscapes throughout the South bore the marks of such contests over the control of symbolic real estate.

Indeed, in Charleston, more than one public space in the city was similarly contested. After the war, a street car system was created in Charleston, a welcome addition considering that so many people had lost their horses and carriages. Initially, the Middletons raved about the efficiency and convenience of street cars and were thoroughly impressed that “they come right to the door” and were “amply patronized.” However, their enthusiasm quickly waned once black Charlestonians demanded equal access to them. According to Williams, the cars were “invaded forcibly by negroes[sic]” and “two or three fights have ensued.” This violence should have come as no surprise. Public transportation systems were favorite spots to contest racial oppression and challenge the limited boundaries of black citizenship throughout the South. As usual, Williams attributed such activism to “the instigation of white men,” the scalawags and carpetbaggers he so despised. The street car riots ended in a legal battle. He noted that “the question has been brought before the courts as to the rights to exclude ‘colored citizens’ from the delights & conveniences” of the street cars. The Middletons had little doubt that the Courts would “deprive the decent people of the city . . . use of the cars.”

51 Williams Middleton to Hal Middleton, September 15, 1870, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS); Holt, Black Over White, 105.

52 Brown and Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” 337; Saville, Work of Reconstruction, 143-51; Foner, Reconstruction, 283-84; Rebecca Scott, “Stubborn and Disposed to Stand their Ground,” 103-126.

It was not simply the struggle to redefine public space that enraged former planters. More abstract claims to citizenship, including participation in national holidays and celebrations, proved equally frustrating to the Middletons. “How would you have liked to see,” Williams asked his sister Eliza, “the 4\textsuperscript{th} July celebrated solely & entirely by our negroe [sic] population? With scarcely a white man’s face to be seen in the streets? Such was the spectacle which blessed our eyes here some days ago.” Like the battles over the Battery and the street cars, he attributed the public celebration of the nation’s independence as just another morbid outcome of the “Great & final consequences of this gigantic failure incidental to the destruction of our glorious & admirably constituted system of labour.”\footnote{Williams Middleton to Eliza Middleton Fisher, July 21, 1866, Middleton Place Papers (SCHS).} Whether in Charleston, Richmond, Atlanta, Memphis, or New Orleans, white southerners throughout the region shared the Middletons’ repulsion over black participation in civic holidays.
The presence of ex-slaves in these public celebrations represented not only the destruction of black deference, but also a new social order that threatened to push the former ruling elite to the margins of public life. Moreover, black appropriation of holidays such as Independence Day and George Washington’s birthday did more than underscore white disempowerment. It publicly demonstrated, as historians including Robin Kelley, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Jane Dailey aptly argue, the growing insistence for political inclusion and a claim to a shared national past. Former slaves now laid claim to the same political heritage as heirs of men like Arthur Middleton and Governor Henry Middleton. Reared to venerate family, it was as if the white Middletons failed not only to live up to the accomplishments of their forefathers, but also failed to protect these inherited traditions from people they considered their inferiors. Much to the chagrin of the Middletons, black Charlestonians did not stop there. They expanded publicly celebrated political traditions and took to the streets on Liberian Independence Day, Crispus Attucks Day, Emancipation Day as well as the anniversary of the Fifteenth Amendment.

The Middletons clearly resented the way that the influx of African Americans changed the urban landscape of Charleston. While black people had always lived, worked, and socialized in the city, the power of masters and the antebellum assumption that included slaves as part of the planters’ conception of the extended family had once made their presence acceptable to people like the Middletons. Indeed, that was because before the war, black urban presence was associated with service, not citizenship.

Now, blacks' new-found freedom and self-empowerment increasingly became a mirror which constantly reflected the failures of the white Middletons. The ethos of deference and hierarchy that shaped antebellum race relations dissipated, and, with it, Middleton paternalism, replaced now with an overt racism that stood in sharp contrast to the former assumptions of settled status. After the Civil War, whites like the Middletons realized that their days of supremacy had passed. However, their bitterness over emancipation, defeat, and federal authority, so boldly embodied in the cult of the Lost Cause, would became the mainstay of southern conservatism. This reactionary—one might say counter-revolution against Reconstruction--would prompt the rise of Redemption politics and the racial violence that ensued.\(^5^6\) By then, the Middletons were no longer in positions of power, wealth, and respect. And so they disappeared, for all intents and purposes, from the public sphere.

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\(^{5^6}\) W. Scott Poole, "Religion, Gender and the Lost Cause in South Carolina’s 1876 Governor’s Race: ‘Hampton or Hell!’" *Journal of Southern History* 68 (August 2002), 573-99; Wyatt-Brown, *Shaping of Southern Culture*, 269, 278-279; 294-295; Dailey, “Deference and Violence,” 553-590.
CONCLUSION

The story of the rise and fall of the Middleton family began in colonial South Carolina when the family's founder, Edward Middleton, who parlayed his own business savvy and a promising marriage to plant his family in the rich soil of the Lowcountry. In that fertile environment, one of the fastest-growing and richest British colonies, the family grew, branched out, and prospered. From their baronial seat at Middleton Place, still one of the most impressive and beautiful plantations in the Lowcountry, the Middletons rose to positions of wealth and influence and stamped their presence on the land. In 1741, the same year that Arthur Middleton wed Mary Williams, another prominent Lowcountry planter surveyed his homeland and marveled that its founders had "improved and cultivated the colony to so great maturity, that it became the land of plenty, as well as of liberty, and fruitful like the land of Egypt." Of course, slave labor built that land of liberty and produced the crops that made South Carolina so fruitful. The Middletons, like other colonial patriarchs, built their wealth on servile labor and became on of the largest slaveholding families in the entire South.

These colonial patriarchs, men of great ability and ruthless ambition, occupied a privileged place in the social structure of a slave society. As the term patriarchy suggests,

colonial planters extended the model of parental authority from the family to encompass virtually all social relationships including the master-slave relationship. But their mastery extended far beyond the bounds of their plantations to include their domination of the colony's larger social, political, and economic life. Members of the Middleton family moved easily in these exclusive circles and took their places among the colony's ruling elite. They used extended kin networks to expand and solidify their social and economic position throughout the colonial period and across the British Atlantic World. As the Revolutionary War loomed on the horizon, the Middletons cast their lot with the revolutionaries, and the family patriarch, Arthur Middleton, was among the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In a sense, it was a conservative revolution, in that men like Arthur Middleton fought not to remake their world, but to continue their domination of it. In that, they succeeded.

In the years following the Revolution, the Middletons carried on in familiar fashion, still ruling the little kingdoms that were their plantations, still relying on their family networks to maintain their positions, still playing leading roles on the state and national stage. Henry Middleton took a post as ambassador to Russia, a position of honor but not of profit. In his absence, the plantations did not prosper as they might have done with closer supervision, and his determination to keep pace with the luxuries of the Russian court left his estate deeply in debt. In and of itself, debt was not so worrisome. They had extensive and profitable holding that provided security for outstanding financial obligations and rice continued to bring in enough money to maintain the Middletons in the style to which they were accustomed. When all else failed, credit was still readily
available to the members of such a powerful and prominent family. Henry’s reach extended from beyond the grave, and through his will he bound his descendants together in an intricate web of economic relations. In keeping with familiar patterns, those economic ties mirrored the close social bonds that bound members of the extended family.

While historians of the family have found that the large extended families common before the nineteenth century gave way to nuclear households less reliant on kinfolk, such was not the case with the Middletons. The demands of the plantation economy and the benefits of close extended family kept the old patterns of domestic life alive. Throughout the antebellum period these Lowcountry grandees continued to live in high style, and even though they retreated from national politics, they still moved in prominent circles in the United States and abroad. Summers in New Port, Rhode Island and visits to Philadelphia, New York, and Europe brought them friends and even marriage partners from far outside their home state. A look at the marriage patterns of this generation of the family shows that they married prominent members of the Lowcountry aristocracy, comparable members of elite northern families, and even minor European nobility. A study of their extensive correspondence demonstrates how closely the members of the family worked together to maintain their economic and social status, a duty that occupied the Middleton women as much as the men.

Despite their cosmopolitan lifestyle, most members of the family remained closely tied to the Lowcountry and to its mores. As slavery came under increasing attack during the antebellum period, most of the Middletons rose to its defense. They saw themselves
as ideal slaveholders and as part of a national and international ruling class. Cultivated and cultured, they bristled at any criticism of the system which undergirded their lives. As the political debates over slavery grew more heated and as secession loomed on the horizon, family members found themselves on different sides of the issues, and the affectionate bonds of family began to fray. For the Middletons, the Civil War was truly a brother’s war, though most family members adamantly defended the institution slavery that so defined their lives and supported their fortunes. Edward Middleton served in the United States Navy while his brother Williams was one of the signers of South Carolina’s Ordinance of Secession. When Edward Middleton refused to leave the U. S. Navy and cast his lot with the Confederate cause, his decision not only outraged members of his family, it jeopardized their financial well-being. Their sister Eliza, though married to a prominent Philadelphian, remained a staunch Rebel.

The Civil War brought more dramatic changes to their lives than the Middletons could ever have imagined. Ravages of war disrupted old routines, and South Carolina’s role as the birthplace of secession made it a special target for the Union forces and put their plantations at risk. While the Middletons went to war “high on hope and courage,” neither was sufficient to stave off disaster. The Confederate economy began to falter, and the Middletons suffered its effects. They could no longer travel together, they could not afford to maintain themselves as luxuriously as before, and the plantation economy that had supported them for so long began to fall apart. The family members fled the Lowcountry to escape Union troops, and they increasingly turned inward to immediate family members for support. Patterns of deference broke down as younger members of
the family challenged their elders and, more ominously, slaves resisted or even ran away from their owners. Young members of the clan died on bloody battlefields, the extended family was scattered, impoverished, and divided by conflicting loyalties. The plantation economy soon collapsed, and though the Middletons tried desperately to deny that reality, their days as slave holders were numbered.

The Middleton men worked to hold onto their plantations, and more importantly, to the slaves that made them profitable, but deteriorating conditions caused divisions within the family ranks. Brother argues with brother over how best to run the estate in wartime and how to protect the family’s assets. Middleton women argued with the men over whether or not to remove slaves from Lowcountry plantations and were forced to assume unfamiliar roles and to endure unfamiliar deprivations. The long-stable slave communities on the Middleton plantations also suffered. Provisions were scarce and dear, and as more and more slaves ran away to the protection of the nearby Union forces and as the Middletons relocated slaves or hired them out in an attempt to avoid capture or flight, the slave communities also fractured. As the plantation economy collapsed, so did the Middleton fortunes. The final insult came when Union forces burned Middleton Place and slaves desecrated the family tomb—only smoke and ashes remained.

Kinship ties, the plantation economy, and slavery, the stable tripod that had supported Middleton fortunes since the seventeenth century, all collapsed with the Confederacy. Unable to cope with the new realities, some family members succumbed to depression and illness. Old patterns no longer fit the new realities of their lives, though the Middletons did not immediately grasp that reality. Once the war was over, they
attempted to regain their property and rebuild their lives. They did hold onto much of their land with the help of northern relatives, but without slaves they could not make it profit them. While some former Middleton slaves returned, many others did not, and those who did refused to follow antebellum conventions of deference. The former belles found themselves laboring in the sweltering kitchens and scrubbing floors, a change in fortunes that they blamed squarely on the men who once provided for them but could no longer do so. Constant labor left them little time to visit with kin or write the long letters that once helped knit the family together. Desperately the family members called on one another for help. In times past assistance would have been forthcoming, but men who could not provide for their own nuclear families had nothing to send to relatives no matter what the need. Matters went from bad to worse as family members lost property to foreclosure and as they had to rely increasingly on their northern relatives, whose fortunes had survived the war unscathed, for support. While the family’s fortune in land and slaves had largely vanished, the mountain of debt inherited from their father had not. Creditors once satisfied with a smile and a handshake were no longer so obeisant, and relations between the brothers further eroded. Indeed, the constant battles over money between the siblings created deep rifts that never healed, and the younger generation found themselves alone in the world and without the close family network and fortune that would have been theirs in earlier days.

The impact of war on the slave communities on the Middleton plantations was equally dramatic. In existence for two centuries, closely tied to one another by bonds of blood and friendship, these communities also fell apart as a result of the war. Some
slaves essentially took over the plantations as the patriarchs lost their authority. The old paternalistic ethos vanished under such circumstances only to be replaced by a virulent racism. So long as the Middletons held their land, however, they enjoyed some leverage over former slaves who needed plots of land to farm. Formal contracts replaced slavery and put former masters and slaves on a very different footing. Like other Lowcountry planters, the Middletons were unable to revive rice cultivation. With the complex system of dikes destroyed or damaged and with former slaves refusing antebellum patterns of labor, the crop that had been called “Carolina gold” quickly faded. The old hierarchical system received a further blow when blacks gained political rights, and the former master class was thrown unceremoniously out of political power. From the plantations to the ballot box, from the Charleston Battery to the street cars, blacks asserted themselves in ways never before contemplated. The success of the former slaves only highlighted white failures, and the Middletons retreated to a sullen conservatism as they looked back with a bitter longing for their glory days.
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